CHAPTER I

“Well, Prince, so Genoa and Lucca are now just family estates of the

Buonapartes. But I warn you, if you don’t tell me that this means war,

if you still try to defend the infamies and horrors perpetrated by that

Antichrist—I really believe he is Antichrist—I will have nothing

more to do with you and you are no longer my friend, no longer my

‘faithful slave,’ as you call yourself! But how do you do? I see I

have frightened you—sit down and tell me all the news.”

It was in July, 1805, and the speaker was the well-known Anna Pávlovna

Schérer, maid of honor and favorite of the Empress Márya Fëdorovna.

With these words she greeted Prince Vasíli Kurágin, a man of high

rank and importance, who was the first to arrive at her reception. Anna

Pávlovna had had a cough for some days. She was, as she said, suffering

from la grippe; grippe being then a new word in St. Petersburg, used

only by the elite.

All her invitations without exception, written in French, and delivered

by a scarlet-liveried footman that morning, ran as follows:

“If you have nothing better to do, Count (or Prince), and if the

prospect of spending an evening with a poor invalid is not too terrible,

I shall be very charmed to see you tonight between 7 and 10—Annette

Schérer.”

“Heavens! what a virulent attack!” replied the prince, not in the

least disconcerted by this reception. He had just entered, wearing an

embroidered court uniform, knee breeches, and shoes, and had stars on

his breast and a serene expression on his flat face. He spoke in that

refined French in which our grandfathers not only spoke but thought, and

with the gentle, patronizing intonation natural to a man of importance

who had grown old in society and at court. He went up to Anna Pávlovna,

kissed her hand, presenting to her his bald, scented, and shining head,

and complacently seated himself on the sofa.

“First of all, dear friend, tell me how you are. Set your friend’s

mind at rest,” said he without altering his tone, beneath the

politeness and affected sympathy of which indifference and even irony

could be discerned.

“Can one be well while suffering morally? Can one be calm in times

like these if one has any feeling?” said Anna Pávlovna. “You are

staying the whole evening, I hope?”

“And the fete at the English ambassador’s? Today is Wednesday. I

must put in an appearance there,” said the prince. “My daughter is

coming for me to take me there.”

“I thought today’s fete had been canceled. I confess all these

festivities and fireworks are becoming wearisome.”

“If they had known that you wished it, the entertainment would have

been put off,” said the prince, who, like a wound-up clock, by force

of habit said things he did not even wish to be believed.

“Don’t tease! Well, and what has been decided about Novosíltsev’s

dispatch? You know everything.”

“What can one say about it?” replied the prince in a cold, listless

tone. “What has been decided? They have decided that Buonaparte has

burnt his boats, and I believe that we are ready to burn ours.”

Prince Vasíli always spoke languidly, like an actor repeating a stale

part. Anna Pávlovna Schérer on the contrary, despite her forty years,

overflowed with animation and impulsiveness. To be an enthusiast had

become her social vocation and, sometimes even when she did not

feel like it, she became enthusiastic in order not to disappoint the

expectations of those who knew her. The subdued smile which, though it

did not suit her faded features, always played round her lips expressed,

as in a spoiled child, a continual consciousness of her charming defect,

which she neither wished, nor could, nor considered it necessary, to

correct.

In the midst of a conversation on political matters Anna Pávlovna burst

out:

“Oh, don’t speak to me of Austria. Perhaps I don’t understand

things, but Austria never has wished, and does not wish, for war. She

is betraying us! Russia alone must save Europe. Our gracious sovereign

recognizes his high vocation and will be true to it. That is the one

thing I have faith in! Our good and wonderful sovereign has to perform

the noblest role on earth, and he is so virtuous and noble that God will

not forsake him. He will fulfill his vocation and crush the hydra of

revolution, which has become more terrible than ever in the person of

this murderer and villain! We alone must avenge the blood of the just

one.... Whom, I ask you, can we rely on?... England with her commercial

spirit will not and cannot understand the Emperor Alexander’s

loftiness of soul. She has refused to evacuate Malta. She wanted to

find, and still seeks, some secret motive in our actions. What answer

did Novosíltsev get? None. The English have not understood and cannot

understand the self-abnegation of our Emperor who wants nothing for

himself, but only desires the good of mankind. And what have they

promised? Nothing! And what little they have promised they will not

perform! Prussia has always declared that Buonaparte is invincible, and

that all Europe is powerless before him.... And I don’t believe a

word that Hardenburg says, or Haugwitz either. This famous Prussian

neutrality is just a trap. I have faith only in God and the lofty

destiny of our adored monarch. He will save Europe!”

She suddenly paused, smiling at her own impetuosity.