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."