

PART ONE

I

'*Eh bien, mon prince*, so Genoa and Lucca are now no more than private estates of the Bonaparte family. No, I warn you – if you are not telling me that this means war, if you again allow yourself to condone all the infamies and atrocities perpetrated by that Antichrist (upon my word I believe he is Antichrist), I don't know you in future. You will no longer be a friend of mine, or my "faithful slave", as you call yourself! But how do you do, how do you do? I see I'm scaring you. Sit down and talk to me.'

It was on a July evening in 1805 and the speaker was the well-known Anna Pavlovna Scherer, maid of honour and confidante of the Empress Maria Fiodorovna. With these words she greeted the influential statesman Prince Vasili, who was the first to arrive at her *soirée*.

Anna Pavlovna had been coughing for some days. She was suffering from an attack of *la grippe* as she said – *grippe* being then a new word only used by a few people. That morning a footman in scarlet livery had delivered a number of little notes all written in French and couched in the same terms:

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 alarming, I shall be charmed to see you at my house between 7 and 10.

ANNETTE SCHERER.

'Mercy on us, what a violent attack!' replied the prince, as he came forward in his embroidered court uniform with silk stockings and buckled shoes. He wore orders on his breast and an expression of serenity on his flat face; he was not in the least disconcerted by such a reception. He spoke in the elegant French in which our forefathers not only spoke but also thought, and his voice had the quiet, patronizing intonations of a distinguished man who has spent a long life in