

CHAPTER XIII

When Natásha ran out of the drawing room she only went as far as the conservatory. There she paused and stood listening to the conversation in the drawing room, waiting for Borís to come out. She was already growing impatient, and stamped her foot, ready to cry at his not coming at once, when she heard the young man's discreet steps approaching neither quickly nor slowly. At this Natásha dashed swiftly among the flower tubs and hid there.

Borís paused in the middle of the room, looked round, brushed a little dust from the sleeve of his uniform, and going up to a mirror examined his handsome face. Natásha, very still, peered out from her ambush, waiting to see what he would do. He stood a little while before the glass, smiled, and walked toward the other door. Natásha was about to call him but changed her mind. "Let him look for me," thought she. Hardly had Borís gone than Sónya, flushed, in tears, and muttering angrily, came in at the other door. Natásha checked her first impulse to run out to her, and remained in her hiding place, watching—as under an invisible cap—to see what went on in the world. She was experiencing a new and peculiar pleasure. Sónya, muttering to herself, kept looking round toward the drawing room door. It opened and Nicholas came in.

"Sónya, what is the matter with you? How can you?" said he, running up to her.

"It's nothing, nothing; leave me alone!" sobbed Sónya.

"Ah, I know what it is."

"Well, if you do, so much the better, and you can go back to her!"

"Só-o-onya! Look here! How can you torture me and yourself like that, for a mere fancy?" said Nicholas taking her hand.

Sónya did not pull it away, and left off crying. Natásha, not stirring and scarcely breathing, watched from her ambush with sparkling eyes. "What will happen now?" thought she.

"Sónya! What is anyone in the world to me? You alone are everything!" said Nicholas. "And I will prove it to you."

"I don't like you to talk like that."

"Well, then, I won't; only forgive me, Sónya!" He drew her to him and kissed her.

"Oh, how nice," thought Natásha; and when Sónya and Nicholas had gone out of the conservatory she followed and called Borís to her.

"Borís, come here," said she with a sly and significant look. "I have something to tell you. Here, here!" and she led him into the

conservatory to the place among the tubs where she had been hiding.

Borís followed her, smiling.

“What is the something?” asked he.

She grew confused, glanced round, and, seeing the doll she had thrown down on one of the tubs, picked it up.

“Kiss the doll,” said she.

Borís looked attentively and kindly at her eager face, but did not reply.

“Don’t you want to? Well, then, come here,” said she, and went further in among the plants and threw down the doll. “Closer, closer!” she whispered.

She caught the young officer by his cuffs, and a look of solemnity and fear appeared on her flushed face.

“And me? Would you like to kiss me?” she whispered almost inaudibly, glancing up at him from under her brows, smiling, and almost crying from excitement.

Borís blushed.

“How funny you are!” he said, bending down to her and blushing still more, but he waited and did nothing.

Suddenly she jumped up onto a tub to be higher than he, embraced him so that both her slender bare arms clasped him above his neck, and, tossing back her hair, kissed him full on the lips.

Then she slipped down among the flowerpots on the other side of the tubs and stood, hanging her head.

“Natásha,” he said, “you know that I love you, but....”

“You are in love with me?” Natásha broke in.

“Yes, I am, but please don’t let us do like that... In another four years ... then I will ask for your hand.”

Natásha considered.

“Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen,” she counted on her slender little fingers. “All right! Then it’s settled?”

A smile of joy and satisfaction lit up her eager face.

“Settled!” replied Borís.

“Forever?” said the little girl. “Till death itself?”

She took his arm and with a happy face went with him into the adjoining sitting room.