

CHAPTER VI

It was long since the Rostóvs had news of Nicholas. Not till midwinter was the count at last handed a letter addressed in his son's handwriting. On receiving it, he ran on tiptoe to his study in alarm and haste, trying to escape notice, closed the door, and began to read the letter.

Anna Mikháylovna, who always knew everything that passed in the house, on hearing of the arrival of the letter went softly into the room and found the count with it in his hand, sobbing and laughing at the same time.

Anna Mikháylovna, though her circumstances had improved, was still living with the Rostóvs.

"My dear friend?" said she, in a tone of pathetic inquiry, prepared to sympathize in any way.

The count sobbed yet more.

"Nikólenka... a letter... wa... a... s... wounded... my darling boy... the countess... promoted to be an officer... thank God... How tell the little countess!"

Anna Mikháylovna sat down beside him, with her own handkerchief wiped the tears from his eyes and from the letter, then having dried her own eyes she comforted the count, and decided that at dinner and till teatime she would prepare the countess, and after tea, with God's help, would inform her.

At dinner Anna Mikháylovna talked the whole time about the war news and about Nikólenka, twice asked when the last letter had been received from him, though she knew that already, and remarked that they might very likely be getting a letter from him that day. Each time that these hints began to make the countess anxious and she glanced uneasily at the count and at Anna Mikháylovna, the latter very adroitly turned the conversation to insignificant matters. Natásha, who, of the whole family, was the most gifted with a capacity to feel any shades of intonation, look, and expression, pricked up her ears from the beginning of the meal and was certain that there was some secret between her father and Anna Mikháylovna, that it had something to do with her brother, and that Anna Mikháylovna was preparing them for it. Bold as she was, Natásha, who knew how sensitive her mother was to anything relating to Nikólenka, did not venture to ask any questions at dinner, but she was too excited to eat anything and kept wriggling about on her chair regardless of her governess' remarks. After dinner, she rushed headlong after Anna Mikháylovna and, dashing at her, flung herself on her neck as soon as she overtook her in the sitting room.

"Auntie, darling, do tell me what it is!"

"Nothing, my dear."

“No, dearest, sweet one, honey, I won’t give up—I know you know something.”

Anna Mikháylovna shook her head.

“You are a little slyboots,” she said.

“A letter from Nikólenka! I’m sure of it!” exclaimed Natásha, reading confirmation in Anna Mikháylovna’s face.

“But for God’s sake, be careful, you know how it may affect your mamma.”

“I will, I will, only tell me! You won’t? Then I will go and tell at once.”

Anna Mikháylovna, in a few words, told her the contents of the letter, on condition that she should tell no one.

“No, on my true word of honor,” said Natásha, crossing herself, “I won’t tell anyone!” and she ran off at once to Sónya.

“Nikólenka... wounded... a letter,” she announced in gleeful triumph.

“Nicholas!” was all Sónya said, instantly turning white.

Natásha, seeing the impression the news of her brother’s wound produced on Sónya, felt for the first time the sorrowful side of the news.

She rushed to Sónya, hugged her, and began to cry.

“A little wound, but he has been made an officer; he is well now, he wrote himself,” said she through her tears.

“There now! It’s true that all you women are crybabies,” remarked Pétya, pacing the room with large, resolute strides. “Now I’m very glad, very glad indeed, that my brother has distinguished himself so. You are all blubberers and understand nothing.”

Natásha smiled through her tears.

“You haven’t read the letter?” asked Sónya.

“No, but she said that it was all over and that he’s now an officer.”

“Thank God!” said Sónya, crossing herself. “But perhaps she deceived you. Let us go to Mamma.”

Pétya paced the room in silence for a time.

“If I’d been in Nikólenka’s place I would have killed even more of those Frenchmen,” he said. “What nasty brutes they are! I’d have killed so many that there’d have been a heap of them.”

“Hold your tongue, Pétya, what a goose you are!”

“I’m not a goose, but they are who cry about trifles,” said Pétya.

“Do you remember him?” Natásha suddenly asked, after a moment’s silence.

Sónya smiled.

“Do I remember Nicholas?”

“No, Sónya, but do you remember so that you remember him perfectly, remember everything?” said Natásha, with an expressive gesture, evidently wishing to give her words a very definite meaning. “I remember Nikólenka too, I remember him well,” she said. “But I don’t remember Borís. I don’t remember him a bit.”

“What! You don’t remember Borís?” asked Sónya in surprise.

“It’s not that I don’t remember—I know what he is like, but not as I remember Nikólenka. Him—I just shut my eyes and remember, but Borís... No!” (She shut her eyes.) “No! there’s nothing at all.”

“Oh, Natásha!” said Sónya, looking ecstatically and earnestly at her friend as if she did not consider her worthy to hear what she meant to say and as if she were saying it to someone else, with whom joking was out of the question, “I am in love with your brother once for all and, whatever may happen to him or to me, shall never cease to love him as long as I live.”

Natásha looked at Sónya with wondering and inquisitive eyes, and said nothing. She felt that Sónya was speaking the truth, that there was such love as Sónya was speaking of. But Natásha had not yet felt anything like it. She believed it could be, but did not understand it.

“Shall you write to him?” she asked.

Sónya became thoughtful. The question of how to write to Nicholas, and whether she ought to write, tormented her. Now that he was already an officer and a wounded hero, would it be right to remind him of herself and, as it might seem, of the obligations to her he had taken on himself?

“I don’t know. I think if he writes, I will write too,” she said, blushing.

“And you won’t feel ashamed to write to him?”

Sónya smiled.

“No.”

“And I should be ashamed to write to Borís. I’m not going to.”

“Why should you be ashamed?”

“Well, I don’t know. It’s awkward and would make me ashamed.”

“And I know why she’d be ashamed,” said Pétya, offended by Natásha’s previous remark. “It’s because she was in love with that fat one in spectacles” (that was how Pétya described his namesake, the new Count Bezúkhov) “and now she’s in love with that singer” (he meant Natásha’s Italian singing master), “that’s why she’s ashamed!”

“Pétya, you’re stupid!” said Natásha.

“Not more stupid than you, madam,” said the nine-year-old Pétya, with the air of an old brigadier.

The countess had been prepared by Anna Mikháylovna’s hints at dinner. On retiring to her own room, she sat in an armchair, her eyes fixed on a miniature portrait of her son on the lid of a snuffbox, while the tears kept coming into her eyes. Anna Mikháylovna, with the letter, came on tiptoe to the countess’ door and paused.

“Don’t come in,” she said to the old count who was following her. “Come later.” And she went in, closing the door behind her.

The count put his ear to the keyhole and listened.

At first he heard the sound of indifferent voices, then Anna Mikháylovna’s voice alone in a long speech, then a cry, then silence, then both voices together with glad intonations, and then footsteps. Anna Mikháylovna opened the door. Her face wore the proud expression of a surgeon who has just performed a difficult operation and admits the public to appreciate his skill.

“It is done!” she said to the count, pointing triumphantly to the countess, who sat holding in one hand the snuffbox with its portrait and in the other the letter, and pressing them alternately to her lips.

When she saw the count, she stretched out her arms to him, embraced his bald head, over which she again looked at the letter and the portrait, and in order to press them again to her lips, she slightly pushed away the bald head. Véra, Natásha, Sónya, and Pétya now entered the room, and the reading of the letter began. After a brief description of the campaign and the two battles in which he had taken part, and his promotion, Nicholas said that he kissed his father’s and mother’s hands asking for their blessing, and that he kissed Véra, Natásha, and Pétya. Besides that, he sent greetings to Monsieur Schelling, Madame Schoss, and his old nurse, and asked them to kiss for him “dear

Sónya, whom he loved and thought of just the same as ever.” When she heard this Sónya blushed so that tears came into her eyes and, unable to bear the looks turned upon her, ran away into the dancing hall, whirled round it at full speed with her dress puffed out like a balloon, and, flushed and smiling, plumped down on the floor. The countess was crying.

“Why are you crying, Mamma?” asked Véra. “From all he says one should be glad and not cry.”

This was quite true, but the count, the countess, and Natásha looked at her reproachfully. “And who is it she takes after?” thought the countess.

Nicholas’ letter was read over hundreds of times, and those who were considered worthy to hear it had to come to the countess, for she did not let it out of her hands. The tutors came, and the nurses, and Dmítri, and several acquaintances, and the countess reread the letter each time with fresh pleasure and each time discovered in it fresh proofs of Nikólenka’s virtues. How strange, how extraordinary, how joyful it seemed, that her son, the scarcely perceptible motion of whose tiny limbs she had felt twenty years ago within her, that son about whom she used to have quarrels with the too indulgent count, that son who had first learned to say “pear” and then “granny,” that this son should now be away in a foreign land amid strange surroundings, a manly warrior doing some kind of man’s work of his own, without help or guidance. The universal experience of ages, showing that children do grow imperceptibly from the cradle to manhood, did not exist for the countess. Her son’s growth toward manhood, at each of its stages, had seemed as extraordinary to her as if there had never existed the millions of human beings who grew up in the same way. As twenty years before, it seemed impossible that the little creature who lived somewhere under her heart would ever cry, suck her breast, and begin to speak, so now she could not believe that that little creature could be this strong, brave man, this model son and officer that, judging by this letter, he now was.

“What a style! How charmingly he describes!” said she, reading the descriptive part of the letter. “And what a soul! Not a word about himself.... Not a word! About some Denísov or other, though he himself, I dare say, is braver than any of them. He says nothing about his sufferings. What a heart! How like him it is! And how he has remembered everybody! Not forgetting anyone. I always said when he was only so high—I always said....”

For more than a week preparations were being made, rough drafts of letters to Nicholas from all the household were written and copied out, while under the supervision of the countess and the solicitude of the count, money and all things necessary for the uniform and equipment of the newly commissioned officer were collected. Anna Mikháylovna, practical woman that she was, had even managed by favor with army authorities to secure advantageous means of communication for herself and her son. She had opportunities of sending her letters to the Grand Duke Constantine Pávlovich, who commanded the Guards. The Rostóvs

supposed that The Russian Guards, Abroad, was quite a definite address, and that if a letter reached the Grand Duke in command of the Guards there was no reason why it should not reach the Pávlograd regiment, which was presumably somewhere in the same neighborhood. And so it was decided to send the letters and money by the Grand Duke's courier to Borís and Borís was to forward them to Nicholas. The letters were from the old count, the countess, Pétya, Véra, Natásha, and Sónya, and finally there were six thousand rubles for his outfit and various other things the old count sent to his son.