

CHAPTER VIII

“Dearest,” said the little princess after breakfast on the morning of the nineteenth March, and her downy little lip rose from old habit, but as sorrow was manifest in every smile, the sound of every word, and even every footstep in that house since the terrible news had come, so now the smile of the little princess—influenced by the general mood though without knowing its cause—was such as to remind one still more of the general sorrow.

“Dearest, I’m afraid this morning’s fruschtique *—as Fóka the cook calls it—has disagreed with me.”

* Frühstück: breakfast.

“What is the matter with you, my darling? You look pale. Oh, you are very pale!” said Princess Mary in alarm, running with her soft, ponderous steps up to her sister-in-law.

“Your excellency, should not Mary Bogdánovna be sent for?” said one of the maids who was present. (Mary Bogdánovna was a midwife from the neighboring town, who had been at Bald Hills for the last fortnight.)

“Oh yes,” assented Princess Mary, “perhaps that’s it. I’ll go. Courage, my angel.” She kissed Lise and was about to leave the room.

“Oh, no, no!” And besides the pallor and the physical suffering on the little princess’ face, an expression of childish fear of inevitable pain showed itself.

“No, it’s only indigestion?... Say it’s only indigestion, say so, Mary! Say...” And the little princess began to cry capriciously like a suffering child and to wring her little hands even with some affectation. Princess Mary ran out of the room to fetch Mary Bogdánovna.

“Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Oh!” she heard as she left the room.

The midwife was already on her way to meet her, rubbing her small, plump white hands with an air of calm importance.

“Mary Bogdánovna, I think it’s beginning!” said Princess Mary looking at the midwife with wide-open eyes of alarm.

“Well, the Lord be thanked, Princess,” said Mary Bogdánovna, not hastening her steps. “You young ladies should not know anything about it.”

“But how is it the doctor from Moscow is not here yet?” said the princess. (In accordance with Lise’s and Prince Andrew’s wishes they had sent in good time to Moscow for a doctor and were expecting him at any moment.)

“No matter, Princess, don’t be alarmed,” said Mary Bogdánovna.
“We’ll manage very well without a doctor.”

Five minutes later Princess Mary from her room heard something heavy being carried by. She looked out. The men servants were carrying the large leather sofa from Prince Andrew’s study into the bedroom. On their faces was a quiet and solemn look.

Princess Mary sat alone in her room listening to the sounds in the house, now and then opening her door when someone passed and watching what was going on in the passage. Some women passing with quiet steps in and out of the bedroom glanced at the princess and turned away. She did not venture to ask any questions, and shut the door again, now sitting down in her easy chair, now taking her prayer book, now kneeling before the icon stand. To her surprise and distress she found that her prayers did not calm her excitement. Suddenly her door opened softly and her old nurse, Praskóvya Sávisna, who hardly ever came to that room as the old prince had forbidden it, appeared on the threshold with a shawl round her head.

“I’ve come to sit with you a bit, Másha,” said the nurse, “and here I’ve brought the prince’s wedding candles to light before his saint, my angel,” she said with a sigh.

“Oh, nurse, I’m so glad!”

“God is merciful, birdie.”

The nurse lit the gilt candles before the icons and sat down by the door with her knitting. Princess Mary took a book and began reading. Only when footsteps or voices were heard did they look at one another, the princess anxious and inquiring, the nurse encouraging. Everyone in the house was dominated by the same feeling that Princess Mary experienced as she sat in her room. But owing to the superstition that the fewer the people who know of it the less a woman in travail suffers, everyone tried to pretend not to know; no one spoke of it, but apart from the ordinary staid and respectful good manners habitual in the prince’s household, a common anxiety, a softening of the heart, and a consciousness that something great and mysterious was being accomplished at that moment made itself felt.

There was no laughter in the maids’ large hall. In the men servants’ hall all sat waiting, silently and alert. In the outlying serfs’ quarters torches and candles were burning and no one slept. The old prince, stepping on his heels, paced up and down his study and sent Tíkhon to ask Mary Bogdánovna what news.—“Say only that ‘the prince told me to ask,’ and come and tell me her answer.”

“Inform the prince that labor has begun,” said Mary Bogdánovna, giving the messenger a significant look.

Tíkhon went and told the prince.

“Very good!” said the prince closing the door behind him, and

Tikhon did not hear the slightest sound from the study after that.

After a while he re-entered it as if to snuff the candles, and, seeing the prince was lying on the sofa, looked at him, noticed his perturbed face, shook his head, and going up to him silently kissed him on the shoulder and left the room without snuffing the candles or saying why he had entered. The most solemn mystery in the world continued its course. Evening passed, night came, and the feeling of suspense and softening of heart in the presence of the unfathomable did not lessen but increased. No one slept.

It was one of those March nights when winter seems to wish to resume its sway and scatters its last snows and storms with desperate fury. A relay of horses had been sent up the highroad to meet the German doctor from Moscow who was expected every moment, and men on horseback with lanterns were sent to the crossroads to guide him over the country road with its hollows and snow-covered pools of water.

Princess Mary had long since put aside her book: she sat silent, her luminous eyes fixed on her nurse's wrinkled face (every line of which she knew so well), on the lock of gray hair that escaped from under the kerchief, and the loose skin that hung under her chin.

Nurse Sávishna, knitting in hand, was telling in low tones, scarcely hearing or understanding her own words, what she had told hundreds of times before: how the late princess had given birth to Princess Mary in Kishenëv with only a Moldavian peasant woman to help instead of a midwife.

"God is merciful, doctors are never needed," she said.

Suddenly a gust of wind beat violently against the casement of the window, from which the double frame had been removed (by order of the prince, one window frame was removed in each room as soon as the larks returned), and, forcing open a loosely closed latch, set the damask curtain flapping and blew out the candle with its chill, snowy draft. Princess Mary shuddered; her nurse, putting down the stocking she was knitting, went to the window and leaning out tried to catch the open casement. The cold wind flapped the ends of her kerchief and her loose locks of gray hair.

"Princess, my dear, there's someone driving up the avenue!" she said, holding the casement and not closing it. "With lanterns. Most likely the doctor."

"Oh, my God! thank God!" said Princess Mary. "I must go and meet him, he does not know Russian."

Princess Mary threw a shawl over her head and ran to meet the newcomer. As she was crossing the anteroom she saw through the window a carriage with lanterns, standing at the entrance. She went out on the stairs. On a banister post stood a tallow candle which guttered in the draft. On the landing below, Philip, the footman, stood looking scared and holding another candle. Still lower, beyond the turn of the staircase, one

could hear the footstep of someone in thick felt boots, and a voice that seemed familiar to Princess Mary was saying something.

“Thank God!” said the voice. “And Father?”

“Gone to bed,” replied the voice of Demyán the house steward, who was downstairs.

Then the voice said something more, Demyán replied, and the steps in the felt boots approached the unseen bend of the staircase more rapidly.

“It’s Andrew!” thought Princess Mary. “No it can’t be, that would be too extraordinary,” and at the very moment she thought this, the face and figure of Prince Andrew, in a fur cloak the deep collar of which covered with snow, appeared on the landing where the footman stood with the candle. Yes, it was he, pale, thin, with a changed and strangely softened but agitated expression on his face. He came up the stairs and embraced his sister.

“You did not get my letter?” he asked, and not waiting for a reply—which he would not have received, for the princess was unable to speak—he turned back, rapidly mounted the stairs again with the doctor who had entered the hall after him (they had met at the last post station), and again embraced his sister.

“What a strange fate, Másha darling!” And having taken off his cloak and felt boots, he went to the little princess’ apartment.