

CHAPTER XII

Natásha was sixteen and it was the year 1809, the very year to which she had counted on her fingers with Borís after they had kissed four years ago. Since then she had not seen him. Before Sónya and her mother, if Borís happened to be mentioned, she spoke quite freely of that episode as of some childish, long-forgotten matter that was not worth mentioning. But in the secret depths of her soul the question whether her engagement to Borís was a jest or an important, binding promise tormented her.

Since Borís left Moscow in 1805 to join the army he had not seen the Rostóvs. He had been in Moscow several times, and had passed near Otrádnœ, but had never been to see them.

Sometimes it occurred to Natásha that he did not wish to see her, and this conjecture was confirmed by the sad tone in which her elders spoke of him.

“Nowadays old friends are not remembered,” the countess would say when Borís was mentioned.

Anna Mikháylovna also had of late visited them less frequently, seemed to hold herself with particular dignity, and always spoke rapturously and gratefully of the merits of her son and the brilliant career on which he had entered. When the Rostóvs came to Petersburg Borís called on them.

He drove to their house in some agitation. The memory of Natásha was his most poetic recollection. But he went with the firm intention of letting her and her parents feel that the childish relations between himself and Natásha could not be binding either on her or on him. He had a brilliant position in society thanks to his intimacy with Countess Bezúkhova, a brilliant position in the service thanks to the patronage of an important personage whose complete confidence he enjoyed, and he was beginning to make plans for marrying one of the richest heiresses in Petersburg, plans which might very easily be realized. When he entered the Rostóvs’ drawing room Natásha was in her own room. When she heard of his arrival she almost ran into the drawing room, flushed and beaming with a more than cordial smile.

Borís remembered Natásha in a short dress, with dark eyes shining from under her curls and boisterous, childish laughter, as he had known her four years before; and so he was taken aback when quite a different Natásha entered, and his face expressed rapturous astonishment. This expression on his face pleased Natásha.

“Well, do you recognize your little madcap playmate?” asked the countess.

Borís kissed Natásha’s hand and said that he was astonished at the change in her.

“How handsome you have grown!”

“I should think so!” replied Natásha’s laughing eyes.

“And is Papa older?” she asked.

Natásha sat down and, without joining in Borís’ conversation with the countess, silently and minutely studied her childhood’s suitor. He felt the weight of that resolute and affectionate scrutiny and glanced at her occasionally.

Borís’ uniform, spurs, tie, and the way his hair was brushed were all *comme il faut* and in the latest fashion. This Natásha noticed at once. He sat rather sideways in the armchair next to the countess, arranging with his right hand the cleanest of gloves that fitted his left hand like a skin, and he spoke with a particularly refined compression of his lips about the amusements of the highest Petersburg society, recalling with mild irony old times in Moscow and Moscow acquaintances. It was not accidentally, Natásha felt, that he alluded, when speaking of the highest aristocracy, to an ambassador’s ball he had attended, and to invitations he had received from N.N. and S.S.

All this time Natásha sat silent, glancing up at him from under her brows. This gaze disturbed and confused Borís more and more. He looked round more frequently toward her, and broke off in what he was saying. He did not stay more than ten minutes, then rose and took his leave. The same inquisitive, challenging, and rather mocking eyes still looked at him. After his first visit Borís said to himself that Natásha attracted him just as much as ever, but that he must not yield to that feeling, because to marry her, a girl almost without fortune, would mean ruin to his career, while to renew their former relations without intending to marry her would be dishonorable. Borís made up his mind to avoid meeting Natásha, but despite that resolution he called again a few days later and began calling often and spending whole days at the Rostóvs’. It seemed to him that he ought to have an explanation with Natásha and tell her that the old times must be forgotten, that in spite of everything... she could not be his wife, that he had no means, and they would never let her marry him. But he failed to do so and felt awkward about entering on such an explanation. From day to day he became more and more entangled. It seemed to her mother and Sónya that Natásha was in love with Borís as of old. She sang him his favorite songs, showed him her album, making him write in it, did not allow him to allude to the past, letting it be understood how delightful was the present; and every day he went away in a fog, without having said what he meant to, and not knowing what he was doing or why he came, or how it would all end. He left off visiting Héléne and received reproachful notes from her every day, and yet he continued to spend whole days with the Rostóvs.