

## CHAPTER XIV

On the thirty-first of December, New Year's Eve, 1809 - 10 an old grandee of Catherine's day was giving a ball and midnight supper. The diplomatic corps and the Emperor himself were to be present.

The grandee's well-known mansion on the English Quay glittered with innumerable lights. Police were stationed at the brightly lit entrance which was carpeted with red baize, and not only gendarmes but dozens of police officers and even the police master himself stood at the porch. Carriages kept driving away and fresh ones arriving, with red-liveried footmen and footmen in plumed hats. From the carriages emerged men wearing uniforms, stars, and ribbons, while ladies in satin and ermine cautiously descended the carriage steps which were let down for them with a clatter, and then walked hurriedly and noiselessly over the baize at the entrance.

Almost every time a new carriage drove up a whisper ran through the crowd and caps were doffed.

"The Emperor?... No, a minister... prince... ambassador. Don't you see the plumes?..." was whispered among the crowd.

One person, better dressed than the rest, seemed to know everyone and mentioned by name the greatest dignitaries of the day.

A third of the visitors had already arrived, but the Rostóvs, who were to be present, were still hurrying to get dressed.

There had been many discussions and preparations for this ball in the Rostóv family, many fears that the invitation would not arrive, that the dresses would not be ready, or that something would not be arranged as it should be.

Márya Ignátevna Perónskaya, a thin and shallow maid of honor at the court of the Dowager Empress, who was a friend and relation of the countess and piloted the provincial Rostóvs in Petersburg high society, was to accompany them to the ball.

They were to call for her at her house in the Taurida Gardens at ten o'clock, but it was already five minutes to ten, and the girls were not yet dressed.

Natásha was going to her first grand ball. She had got up at eight that morning and had been in a fever of excitement and activity all day. All her powers since morning had been concentrated on ensuring that they all—she herself, Mamma, and Sónya—should be as well dressed as possible. Sónya and her mother put themselves entirely in her hands. The countess was to wear a claret-colored velvet dress, and the two girls white gauze over pink silk slips, with roses on their bodices and their hair dressed à la grecque.

Everything essential had already been done; feet, hands, necks, and

ears washed, perfumed, and powdered, as befits a ball; the openwork silk stockings and white satin shoes with ribbons were already on; the hairdressing was almost done. Sónya was finishing dressing and so was the countess, but Natásha, who had bustled about helping them all, was behindhand. She was still sitting before a looking-glass with a dressing jacket thrown over her slender shoulders. Sónya stood ready dressed in the middle of the room and, pressing the head of a pin till it hurt her dainty finger, was fixing on a last ribbon that squeaked as the pin went through it.

“That’s not the way, that’s not the way, Sónya!” cried Natásha turning her head and clutching with both hands at her hair which the maid who was dressing it had not time to release. “That bow is not right. Come here!”

Sónya sat down and Natásha pinned the ribbon on differently.

“Allow me, Miss! I can’t do it like that,” said the maid who was holding Natásha’s hair.

“Oh, dear! Well then, wait. That’s right, Sónya.”

“Aren’t you ready? It is nearly ten,” came the countess’ voice.

“Directly! Directly! And you, Mamma?”

“I have only my cap to pin on.”

“Don’t do it without me!” called Natásha. “You won’t do it right.”

“But it’s already ten.”

They had decided to be at the ball by half-past ten, and Natásha had still to get dressed and they had to call at the Taurida Gardens.

When her hair was done, Natásha, in her short petticoat from under which her dancing shoes showed, and in her mother’s dressing jacket, ran up to Sónya, scrutinized her, and then ran to her mother. Turning her mother’s head this way and that, she fastened on the cap and, hurriedly kissing her gray hair, ran back to the maids who were turning up the hem of her skirt.

The cause of the delay was Natásha’s skirt, which was too long. Two maids were turning up the hem and hurriedly biting off the ends of thread. A third with pins in her mouth was running about between the countess and Sónya, and a fourth held the whole of the gossamer garment up high on one uplifted hand.

“Mávra, quicker, darling!”

“Give me my thimble, Miss, from there...”

“Whenever will you be ready?” asked the count coming to the door.

“Here is some scent. Perónskaya must be tired of waiting.”

“It’s ready, Miss,” said the maid, holding up the shortened gauze dress with two fingers, and blowing and shaking something off it, as if by this to express a consciousness of the airiness and purity of what she held.

Natásha began putting on the dress.

“In a minute! In a minute! Don’t come in, Papa!” she cried to her father as he opened the door—speaking from under the filmy skirt which still covered her whole face.

Sónya slammed the door to. A minute later they let the count in. He was wearing a blue swallow-tail coat, shoes and stockings, and was perfumed and his hair pomaded.

“Oh, Papa! how nice you look! Charming!” cried Natásha, as she stood in the middle of the room smoothing out the folds of the gauze.

“If you please, Miss! allow me,” said the maid, who on her knees was pulling the skirt straight and shifting the pins from one side of her mouth to the other with her tongue.

“Say what you like,” exclaimed Sónya, in a despairing voice as she looked at Natásha, “say what you like, it’s still too long.”

Natásha stepped back to look at herself in the pier glass. The dress was too long.

“Really, madam, it is not at all too long,” said Mávra, crawling on her knees after her young lady.

“Well, if it’s too long we’ll tack it up... we’ll tack it up in one minute,” said the resolute Dunyásha taking a needle that was stuck on the front of her little shawl and, still kneeling on the floor, set to work once more.

At that moment, with soft steps, the countess came in shyly, in her cap and velvet gown.

“Oo-oo, my beauty!” exclaimed the count, “she looks better than any of you!”

He would have embraced her but, blushing, she stepped aside fearing to be ruffled.

“Mamma, your cap, more to this side,” said Natásha. “I’ll arrange it,” and she rushed forward so that the maids who were tacking up her skirt could not move fast enough and a piece of gauze was torn off.

“Oh goodness! What has happened? Really it was not my fault!”

“Never mind, I’ll run it up, it won’t show,” said Dunyásha.

“What a beauty—a very queen!” said the nurse as she came to the door. “And Sónya! They are lovely!”

At a quarter past ten they at last got into their carriages and started. But they had still to call at the Taurida Gardens.

Perónskaya was quite ready. In spite of her age and plainness she had gone through the same process as the Rostóvs, but with less flurry—for to her it was a matter of routine. Her ugly old body was washed, perfumed, and powdered in just the same way. She had washed behind her ears just as carefully, and when she entered her drawing room in her yellow dress, wearing her badge as maid of honor, her old lady’s maid was as full of rapturous admiration as the Rostóvs’ servants had been.

She praised the Rostóvs’ toilets. They praised her taste and toilet, and at eleven o’clock, careful of their coiffures and dresses, they settled themselves in their carriages and drove off.