

## CHAPTER XV

Natasha had not had a moment free since early morning and had not once had time to think of what lay before her.

In the damp chill air and crowded closeness of the swaying carriage, she for the first time vividly imagined what was in store for her there at the ball, in those brightly lighted rooms—with music, flowers, dances, the Emperor, and all the brilliant young people of Petersburg. The prospect was so splendid that she hardly believed it would come true, so out of keeping was it with the chill darkness and closeness of the carriage. She understood all that awaited her only when, after stepping over the red baize at the entrance, she entered the hall, took off her fur cloak, and, beside Sonya and in front of her mother, mounted the brightly illuminated stairs between the flowers. Only then did she remember how she must behave at a ball, and tried to assume the majestic air she considered indispensable for a girl on such an occasion. But, fortunately for her, she felt her eyes growing misty, she saw nothing clearly, her pulse beat a hundred to the minute, and the blood throbbed at her heart. She could not assume that pose, which would have made her ridiculous, and she moved on almost fainting from excitement and trying with all her might to conceal it. And this was the very attitude that became her best. Before and behind them other visitors were entering, also talking in low tones and wearing ball dresses. The mirrors on the landing reflected ladies in white, pale-blue, and pink dresses, with diamonds and pearls on their bare necks and arms.

Natasha looked in the mirrors and could not distinguish her reflection from the others. All was blended into one brilliant procession. On entering the ballroom the regular hum of voices, footsteps, and greetings deafened Natasha, and the light and glitter dazzled her still more. The host and hostess, who had already been standing at the door for half an hour repeating the same words to the various arrivals, “*Charmé de vous voir,*” \* greeted the Rostóvs and Perónskaya in the same manner.

\* “Delighted to see you.”

The two girls in their white dresses, each with a rose in her black hair, both curtsied in the same way, but the hostess’ eye involuntarily rested longer on the slim Natasha. She looked at her and gave her alone a special smile in addition to her usual smile as hostess. Looking at her she may have recalled the golden, irrecoverable days of her own girlhood and her own first ball. The host also followed Natasha with his eyes and asked the count which was his daughter.

“Charming!” said he, kissing the tips of his fingers.

In the ballroom guests stood crowding at the entrance doors awaiting the Emperor. The countess took up a position in one of the front rows of that crowd. Natasha heard and felt that several people were asking about her and looking at her. She realized that those noticing her liked

her, and this observation helped to calm her.

“There are some like ourselves and some worse,” she thought.

Perónskaya was pointing out to the countess the most important people at the ball.

“That is the Dutch ambassador, do you see? That gray-haired man,” she said, indicating an old man with a profusion of silver-gray curly hair, who was surrounded by ladies laughing at something he said.

“Ah, here she is, the Queen of Petersburg, Countess Bezúkhova,” said Perónskaya, indicating Hélène who had just entered. “How lovely! She is quite equal to Márya Antónovna. See how the men, young and old, pay court to her. Beautiful and clever... they say Prince — is quite mad about her. But see, those two, though not good-looking, are even more run after.”

She pointed to a lady who was crossing the room followed by a very plain daughter.

“She is a splendid match, a millionairess,” said Perónskaya. “And look, here come her suitors.”

“That is Bezúkhova’s brother, Anatole Kurágin,” she said, indicating a handsome officer of the Horse Guards who passed by them with head erect, looking at something over the heads of the ladies. “He’s handsome, isn’t he? I hear they will marry him to that rich girl. But your cousin, Drubetskóy, is also very attentive to her. They say she has millions. Oh yes, that’s the French ambassador himself!” she replied to the countess’ inquiry about Caulaincourt. “Looks as if he were a king! All the same, the French are charming, very charming. No one more charming in society. Ah, here she is! Yes, she is still the most beautiful of them all, our Márya Antónovna! And how simply she is dressed! Lovely! And that stout one in spectacles is the universal Freemason,” she went on, indicating Pierre. “Put him beside his wife and he looks a regular buffoon!”

Pierre, swaying his stout body, advanced, making way through the crowd and nodding to right and left as casually and good-naturedly as if he were passing through a crowd at a fair. He pushed through, evidently looking for someone.

Natásha looked joyfully at the familiar face of Pierre, “the buffoon,” as Perónskaya had called him, and knew he was looking for them, and for her in particular. He had promised to be at the ball and introduce partners to her.

But before he reached them Pierre stopped beside a very handsome, dark man of middle height, and in a white uniform, who stood by a window talking to a tall man wearing stars and a ribbon. Natásha at once recognized the shorter and younger man in the white uniform: it was Bolkónski, who seemed to her to have grown much younger, happier, and better-looking.

“There’s someone else we know—Bolkónski, do you see, Mamma?” said Natásha, pointing out Prince Andrew. “You remember, he stayed a night with us at Otrádnœ.”

“Oh, you know him?” said Perónskaya. “I can’t bear him. Il fait à présent la pluie et le beau temps. \* He’s too proud for anything. Takes after his father. And he’s hand in glove with Speránski, writing some project or other. Just look how he treats the ladies! There’s one talking to him and he has turned away,” she said, pointing at him. “I’d give it to him if he treated me as he does those ladies.”

\* “He is all the rage just now.”