CHAPTER XXIV

No betrothal ceremony took place and Natásha's engagement to Bolkónski was not announced; Prince Andrew insisted on that. He said that as he was responsible for the delay he ought to bear the whole burden of it; that he had given his word and bound himself forever, but that he did not wish to bind Natásha and gave her perfect freedom. If after six months she felt that she did not love him she would have full right to reject him. Naturally neither Natásha nor her parents wished to hear of this, but Prince Andrew was firm. He came every day to the Rostóvs', but did not behave to Natásha as an affianced lover: he did not use the familiar thou, but said you to her, and kissed only her hand. After their engagement, quite different, intimate, and natural relations sprang up between them. It was as if they had not known each other till now. Both liked to recall how they had regarded each other when as yet they were nothing to one another; they felt themselves now quite different beings: then they were artificial, now natural and sincere. At first the family felt some constraint in intercourse with Prince Andrew; he seemed a man from another world, and for a long time Natásha trained the family to get used to him, proudly assuring them all that he only appeared to be different, but was really just like all of them, and that she was not afraid of him and no one else ought to be. After a few days they grew accustomed to him, and without restraint in his presence pursued their usual way of life, in which he took his part. He could talk about rural economy with the count, fashions with the countess and Natásha, and about albums and fancywork with Sónya. Sometimes the household both among themselves and in his presence expressed their wonder at how it had all happened, and at the evident omens there had been of it: Prince Andrew's coming to Otrádnoe and their coming to Petersburg, and the likeness between Natásha and Prince Andrew which her nurse had noticed on his first visit, and Andrew's encounter with Nicholas in 1805, and many other incidents betokening that it had to be.

In the house that poetic dullness and quiet reigned which always accompanies the presence of a betrothed couple. Often when all sitting together everyone kept silent. Sometimes the others would get up and go away and the couple, left alone, still remained silent. They rarely spoke of their future life. Prince Andrew was afraid and ashamed to speak of it. Natásha shared this as she did all his feelings, which she constantly divined. Once she began questioning him about his son. Prince Andrew blushed, as he often did now—Natásha particularly liked it in him—and said that his son would not live with them.

"Why not?" asked Natásha in a frightened tone.

"I cannot take him away from his grandfather, and besides..."

"How I should have loved him!" said Natásha, immediately guessing his thought; "but I know you wish to avoid any pretext for finding fault with us."

Sometimes the old count would come up, kiss Prince Andrew, and ask

his advice about Pétya's education or Nicholas' service. The old countess sighed as she looked at them; Sónya was always getting frightened lest she should be in the way and tried to find excuses for leaving them alone, even when they did not wish it. When Prince Andrew spoke (he could tell a story very well), Natásha listened to him with pride; when she spoke she noticed with fear and joy that he gazed attentively and scrutinizingly at her. She asked herself in perplexity: "What does he look for in me? He is trying to discover something by looking at me! What if what he seeks in me is not there?" Sometimes she fell into one of the mad, merry moods characteristic of her, and then she particularly loved to hear and see how Prince Andrew laughed. He seldom laughed, but when he did he abandoned himself entirely to his laughter, and after such a laugh she always felt nearer to him. Natásha would have been completely happy if the thought of the separation awaiting her and drawing near had not terrified her, just as the mere thought of it made him turn pale and cold.

On the eve of his departure from Petersburg Prince Andrew brought with him Pierre, who had not been to the Rostóvs' once since the ball. Pierre seemed disconcerted and embarrassed. He was talking to the countess, and Natásha sat down beside a little chess table with Sónya, thereby inviting Prince Andrew to come too. He did so.

"You have known Bezúkhov a long time?" he asked. "Do you like him?"

"Yes, he's a dear, but very absurd."

And as usual when speaking of Pierre, she began to tell anecdotes of his absent-mindedness, some of which had even been invented about him.

"Do you know I have entrusted him with our secret? I have known him from childhood. He has a heart of gold. I beg you, Natalie," Prince Andrew said with sudden seriousness—"I am going away and heaven knows what may happen. You may cease to... all right, I know I am not to say that. Only this, then: whatever may happen to you when I am not here..."

"What can happen?"

"Whatever trouble may come," Prince Andrew continued, "I beg you, Mademoiselle Sophie, whatever may happen, to turn to him alone for advice and help! He is a most absent-minded and absurd fellow, but he has a heart of gold."

Neither her father, nor her mother, nor Sónya, nor Prince Andrew himself could have foreseen how the separation from her lover would act on Natásha. Flushed and agitated she went about the house all that day, dry-eyed, occupied with most trivial matters as if not understanding what awaited her. She did not even cry when, on taking leave, he kissed her hand for the last time. "Don't go!" she said in a tone that made him wonder whether he really ought not to stay and which he remembered long afterwards. Nor did she cry when he was gone; but for several days she sat in her room dry-eyed, taking no interest in

anything and only saying now and then, “Oh, why did he go away?”

But a fortnight after his departure, to the surprise of those around her, she recovered from her mental sickness just as suddenly and became her old self again, but with a change in her moral physiognomy, as a child gets up after a long illness with a changed expression of face.