

CHAPTER IV

The old count, who had always kept up an enormous hunting establishment but had now handed it all completely over to his son's care, being in very good spirits on this fifteenth of September, prepared to go out with the others.

In an hour's time the whole hunting party was at the porch. Nicholas, with a stern and serious air which showed that now was no time for attending to trifles, went past Natásha and Pétya who were trying to tell him something. He had a look at all the details of the hunt, sent a pack of hounds and huntsmen on ahead to find the quarry, mounted his chestnut Donéts, and whistling to his own leash of borzois, set off across the threshing ground to a field leading to the Otrádnoe wood. The old count's horse, a sorrel gelding called Viflyánka, was led by the groom in attendance on him, while the count himself was to drive in a small trap straight to a spot reserved for him.

They were taking fifty-four hounds, with six hunt attendants and whippers-in. Besides the family, there were eight borzoi kennelmen and more than forty borzois, so that, with the borzois on the leash belonging to members of the family, there were about a hundred and thirty dogs and twenty horsemen.

Each dog knew its master and its call. Each man in the hunt knew his business, his place, what he had to do. As soon as they had passed the fence they all spread out evenly and quietly, without noise or talk, along the road and field leading to the Otrádnoe covert.

The horses stepped over the field as over a thick carpet, now and then splashing into puddles as they crossed a road. The misty sky still seemed to descend evenly and imperceptibly toward the earth, the air was still, warm, and silent. Occasionally the whistle of a huntsman, the snort of a horse, the crack of a whip, or the whine of a straggling hound could be heard.

When they had gone a little less than a mile, five more riders with dogs appeared out of the mist, approaching the Rostóvs. In front rode a fresh-looking, handsome old man with a large gray mustache.

"Good morning, Uncle!" said Nicholas, when the old man drew near.

"That's it. Come on!... I was sure of it," began "Uncle." (He was a distant relative of the Rostóvs', a man of small means, and their neighbor.) "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist it and it's a good thing you're going. That's it! Come on!" (This was "Uncle's" favorite expression.) "Take the covert at once, for my Gírchik says the Ilábins are at Kornikí with their hounds. That's it. Come on!... They'll take the cubs from under your very nose."

"That's where I'm going. Shall we join up our packs?" asked Nicholas.

The hounds were joined into one pack, and “Uncle” and Nicholas rode on side by side. Natásha, muffled up in shawls which did not hide her eager face and shining eyes, galloped up to them. She was followed by Pétya who always kept close to her, by Michael, a huntsman, and by a groom appointed to look after her. Pétya, who was laughing, whipped and pulled at his horse. Natásha sat easily and confidently on her black Arábchik and reined him in without effort with a firm hand.

“Uncle” looked round disapprovingly at Pétya and Natásha. He did not like to combine frivolity with the serious business of hunting.

“Good morning, Uncle! We are going too!” shouted Pétya.

“Good morning, good morning! But don’t go overriding the hounds,” said “Uncle” sternly.

“Nicholas, what a fine dog Truníla is! He knew me,” said Natásha, referring to her favorite hound.

“In the first place, Truníla is not a ‘dog,’ but a harrier,” thought Nicholas, and looked sternly at his sister, trying to make her feel the distance that ought to separate them at that moment. Natásha understood it.

“You mustn’t think we’ll be in anyone’s way, Uncle,” she said. “We’ll go to our places and won’t budge.”

“A good thing too, little countess,” said “Uncle,” “only mind you don’t fall off your horse,” he added, “because—that’s it, come on!—you’ve nothing to hold on to.”

The oasis of the Otrádnœ covert came in sight a few hundred yards off, the huntsmen were already nearing it. Rostóv, having finally settled with “Uncle” where they should set on the hounds, and having shown Natásha where she was to stand—a spot where nothing could possibly run out—went round above the ravine.

“Well, nephew, you’re going for a big wolf,” said “Uncle.” “Mind and don’t let her slip!”

“That’s as may happen,” answered Rostóv. “Karáy, here!” he shouted, answering “Uncle’s” remark by this call to his borzoi. Karáy was a shaggy old dog with a hanging jowl, famous for having tackled a big wolf unaided. They all took up their places.

The old count, knowing his son’s ardor in the hunt, hurried so as not to be late, and the huntsmen had not yet reached their places when Count Ilyá Rostóv, cheerful, flushed, and with quivering cheeks, drove up with his black horses over the winter rye to the place reserved for him, where a wolf might come out. Having straightened his coat and fastened on his hunting knives and horn, he mounted his good, sleek, well-fed, and comfortable horse, Viflyánka, which was turning gray, like himself. His horses and trap were sent home. Count Ilyá Rostóv, though not at heart a keen sportsman, knew the rules of the hunt well, and rode to

the bushy edge of the road where he was to stand, arranged his reins, settled himself in the saddle, and, feeling that he was ready, looked about with a smile.

Beside him was Simon Chekmár, his personal attendant, an old horseman now somewhat stiff in the saddle. Chekmár held in leash three formidable wolfhounds, who had, however, grown fat like their master and his horse. Two wise old dogs lay down unleashed. Some hundred paces farther along the edge of the wood stood Mítka, the count's other groom, a daring horseman and keen rider to hounds. Before the hunt, by old custom, the count had drunk a silver cupful of mulled brandy, taken a snack, and washed it down with half a bottle of his favorite Bordeaux.

He was somewhat flushed with the wine and the drive. His eyes were rather moist and glittered more than usual, and as he sat in his saddle, wrapped up in his fur coat, he looked like a child taken out for an outing.

The thin, hollow-cheeked Chekmár, having got everything ready, kept glancing at his master with whom he had lived on the best of terms for thirty years, and understanding the mood he was in expected a pleasant chat. A third person rode up circumspectly through the wood (it was plain that he had had a lesson) and stopped behind the count. This person was a gray-bearded old man in a woman's cloak, with a tall peaked cap on his head. He was the buffoon, who went by a woman's name, Nastásya Ivánovna.

"Well, Nastásya Ivánovna!" whispered the count, winking at him. "If you scare away the beast, Daniel'll give it you!"

"I know a thing or two myself!" said Nastásya Ivánovna.

"Hush!" whispered the count and turned to Simon. "Have you seen the young countess?" he asked. "Where is she?"

"With young Count Peter, by the Zhárov rank grass," answered Simon, smiling. "Though she's a lady, she's very fond of hunting."

"And you're surprised at the way she rides, Simon, eh?" said the count. "She's as good as many a man!"

"Of course! It's marvelous. So bold, so easy!"

"And Nicholas? Where is he? By the Lyádov upland, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir. He knows where to stand. He understands the matter so well that Daniel and I are often quite astounded," said Simon, well knowing what would please his master.

"Rides well, eh? And how well he looks on his horse, eh?"

"A perfect picture! How he chased a fox out of the rank grass by the Zavárzinsk thicket the other day! Leaped a fearful place; what a sight when they rushed from the covert... the horse worth a thousand rubles

and the rider beyond all price! Yes, one would have to search far to find another as smart.”

“To search far...” repeated the count, evidently sorry Simon had not said more. “To search far,” he said, turning back the skirt of his coat to get at his snuffbox.

“The other day when he came out from Mass in full uniform, Michael Sidórych...” Simon did not finish, for on the still air he had distinctly caught the music of the hunt with only two or three hounds giving tongue. He bent down his head and listened, shaking a warning finger at his master. “They are on the scent of the cubs...” he whispered, “straight to the Lyádov uplands.”

The count, forgetting to smooth out the smile on his face, looked into the distance straight before him, down the narrow open space, holding the snuffbox in his hand but not taking any. After the cry of the hounds came the deep tones of the wolf call from Daniel’s hunting horn; the pack joined the first three hounds and they could be heard in full cry, with that peculiar lift in the note that indicates that they are after a wolf. The whippers-in no longer set on the hounds, but changed to the cry of ulyulyu, and above the others rose Daniel’s voice, now a deep bass, now piercingly shrill. His voice seemed to fill the whole wood and carried far beyond out into the open field.

After listening a few moments in silence, the count and his attendant convinced themselves that the hounds had separated into two packs: the sound of the larger pack, eagerly giving tongue, began to die away in the distance, the other pack rushed by the wood past the count, and it was with this that Daniel’s voice was heard calling ulyulyu. The sounds of both packs mingled and broke apart again, but both were becoming more distant.

Simon sighed and stooped to straighten the leash a young borzoi had entangled; the count too sighed and, noticing the snuffbox in his hand, opened it and took a pinch. “Back!” cried Simon to a borzoi that was pushing forward out of the wood. The count started and dropped the snuffbox. Nastásya Ivánovna dismounted to pick it up. The count and Simon were looking at him.

Then, unexpectedly, as often happens, the sound of the hunt suddenly approached, as if the hounds in full cry and Daniel ulyulyuing were just in front of them.

The count turned and saw on his right Mítka staring at him with eyes starting out of his head, raising his cap and pointing before him to the other side.

“Look out!” he shouted, in a voice plainly showing that he had long fretted to utter that word, and letting the borzois slip he galloped toward the count.

The count and Simon galloped out of the wood and saw on their left a wolf which, softly swaying from side to side, was coming at a quiet

lope farther to the left to the very place where they were standing. The angry borzois whined and getting free of the leash rushed past the horses' feet at the wolf.

The wolf paused, turned its heavy forehead toward the dogs awkwardly, like a man suffering from the quinsy, and, still slightly swaying from side to side, gave a couple of leaps and with a swish of its tail disappeared into the skirt of the wood. At the same instant, with a cry like a wail, first one hound, then another, and then another, sprang helter-skelter from the wood opposite and the whole pack rushed across the field toward the very spot where the wolf had disappeared. The hazel bushes parted behind the hounds and Daniel's chestnut horse appeared, dark with sweat. On its long back sat Daniel, hunched forward, capless, his disheveled gray hair hanging over his flushed, perspiring face.

"Ulyulyulyu! ulyulyu!..." he cried. When he caught sight of the count his eyes flashed lightning.

"Blast you!" he shouted, holding up his whip threateningly at the count.

"You've let the wolf go!... What sportsmen!" and as if scorning to say more to the frightened and shamefaced count, he lashed the heaving flanks of his sweating chestnut gelding with all the anger the count had aroused and flew off after the hounds. The count, like a punished schoolboy, looked round, trying by a smile to win Simon's sympathy for his plight. But Simon was no longer there. He was galloping round by the bushes while the field was coming up on both sides, all trying to head the wolf, but it vanished into the wood before they could do so.