

## CHAPTER VII

Toward evening Ilágin took leave of Nicholas, who found that they were so far from home that he accepted “Uncle’s” offer that the hunting party should spend the night in his little village of Mikháylovna.

“And if you put up at my house that will be better still. That’s it, come on!” said “Uncle.” “You see it’s damp weather, and you could rest, and the little countess could be driven home in a trap.”

“Uncle’s” offer was accepted. A huntsman was sent to Otrádnœ for a trap, while Nicholas rode with Natásha and Pétya to “Uncle’s” house.

Some five male domestic serfs, big and little, rushed out to the front porch to meet their master. A score of women serfs, old and young, as well as children, popped out from the back entrance to have a look at the hunters who were arriving. The presence of Natásha—a woman, a lady, and on horseback—raised the curiosity of the serfs to such a degree that many of them came up to her, stared her in the face, and unabashed by her presence made remarks about her as though she were some prodigy on show and not a human being able to hear or understand what was said about her.

“Arínka! Look, she sits sideways! There she sits and her skirt dangles.... See, she’s got a little hunting horn!”

“Goodness gracious! See her knife?...”

“Isn’t she a Tartar!”

“How is it you didn’t go head over heels?” asked the boldest of all, addressing Natásha directly.

“Uncle” dismounted at the porch of his little wooden house which stood in the midst of an overgrown garden and, after a glance at his retainers, shouted authoritatively that the superfluous ones should take themselves off and that all necessary preparations should be made to receive the guests and the visitors.

The serfs all dispersed. “Uncle” lifted Natásha off her horse and taking her hand led her up the rickety wooden steps of the porch. The house, with its bare, unplastered log walls, was not overclean—it did not seem that those living in it aimed at keeping it spotless—but neither was it noticeably neglected. In the entry there was a smell of fresh apples, and wolf and fox skins hung about.

“Uncle” led the visitors through the anteroom into a small hall with a folding table and red chairs, then into the drawing room with a round birchwood table and a sofa, and finally into his private room where there was a tattered sofa, a worn carpet, and portraits of Suvórov, of the host’s father and mother, and of himself in military uniform. The study smelt strongly of tobacco and dogs. “Uncle” asked his visitors

to sit down and make themselves at home, and then went out of the room. Rugáy, his back still muddy, came into the room and lay down on the sofa, cleaning himself with his tongue and teeth. Leading from the study was a passage in which a partition with ragged curtains could be seen. From behind this came women's laughter and whispers. Natásha, Nicholas, and Pétya took off their wraps and sat down on the sofa. Pétya, leaning on his elbow, fell asleep at once. Natásha and Nicholas were silent. Their faces glowed, they were hungry and very cheerful. They looked at one another (now that the hunt was over and they were in the house, Nicholas no longer considered it necessary to show his manly superiority over his sister), Natásha gave him a wink, and neither refrained long from bursting into a peal of ringing laughter even before they had a pretext ready to account for it.

After a while "Uncle" came in, in a Cossack coat, blue trousers, and small top boots. And Natásha felt that this costume, the very one she had regarded with surprise and amusement at Otrádnœ, was just the right thing and not at all worse than a swallow-tail or frock coat. "Uncle" too was in high spirits and far from being offended by the brother's and sister's laughter (it could never enter his head that they might be laughing at his way of life) he himself joined in the merriment.

"That's right, young countess, that's it, come on! I never saw anyone like her!" said he, offering Nicholas a pipe with a long stem and, with a practiced motion of three fingers, taking down another that had been cut short. "She's ridden all day like a man, and is as fresh as ever!"

Soon after "Uncle's" reappearance the door was opened, evidently from the sound by a barefooted girl, and a stout, rosy, good-looking woman of about forty, with a double chin and full red lips, entered carrying a large loaded tray. With hospitable dignity and cordiality in her glance and in every motion, she looked at the visitors and, with a pleasant smile, bowed respectfully. In spite of her exceptional stoutness, which caused her to protrude her chest and stomach and throw back her head, this woman (who was "Uncle's" housekeeper) trod very lightly. She went to the table, set down the tray, and with her plump white hands deftly took from it the bottles and various hors d'œuvres and dishes and arranged them on the table. When she had finished, she stepped aside and stopped at the door with a smile on her face. "Here I am. I am she! Now do you understand 'Uncle'?" her expression said to Rostóv. How could one help understanding? Not only Nicholas, but even Natásha understood the meaning of his puckered brow and the happy complacent smile that slightly puckered his lips when Anísya Fëdorovna entered. On the tray was a bottle of herb wine, different kinds of vodka, pickled mushrooms, rye cakes made with buttermilk, honey in the comb, still mead and sparkling mead, apples, nuts (raw and roasted), and nut-and-honey sweets. Afterwards she brought a freshly roasted chicken, ham, preserves made with honey, and preserves made with sugar.

All this was the fruit of Anísya Fëdorovna's housekeeping, gathered and prepared by her. The smell and taste of it all had a smack

of Anísyá Fëdorovna herself: a savor of juiciness, cleanliness, whiteness, and pleasant smiles.

“Take this, little Lady-Countess!” she kept saying, as she offered Natásha first one thing and then another.

Natásha ate of everything and thought she had never seen or eaten such buttermilk cakes, such aromatic jam, such honey-and-nut sweets, or such a chicken anywhere. Anísyá Fëdorovna left the room.

After supper, over their cherry brandy, Rostóv and “Uncle” talked of past and future hunts, of Rugáy and Ilágin’s dogs, while Natásha sat upright on the sofa and listened with sparkling eyes. She tried several times to wake Pétya that he might eat something, but he only muttered incoherent words without waking up. Natásha felt so lighthearted and happy in these novel surroundings that she only feared the trap would come for her too soon. After a casual pause, such as often occurs when receiving friends for the first time in one’s own house, “Uncle,” answering a thought that was in his visitors’ minds, said:

“This, you see, is how I am finishing my days... Death will come. That’s it, come on! Nothing will remain. Then why harm anyone?”

“Uncle’s” face was very significant and even handsome as he said this. Involuntarily Rostóv recalled all the good he had heard about him from his father and the neighbors. Throughout the whole province “Uncle” had the reputation of being the most honorable and disinterested of cranks. They called him in to decide family disputes, chose him as executor, confided secrets to him, elected him to be a justice and to other posts; but he always persistently refused public appointments, passing the autumn and spring in the fields on his bay gelding, sitting at home in winter, and lying in his overgrown garden in summer.

“Why don’t you enter the service, Uncle?”

“I did once, but gave it up. I am not fit for it. That’s it, come on! I can’t make head or tail of it. That’s for you—I haven’t brains enough. Now, hunting is another matter—that’s it, come on! Open the door, there!” he shouted. “Why have you shut it?”

The door at the end of the passage led to the huntsmen’s room, as they called the room for the hunt servants.

There was a rapid patter of bare feet, and an unseen hand opened the door into the huntsmen’s room, from which came the clear sounds of a balaláyka on which someone, who was evidently a master of the art, was playing. Natásha had been listening to those strains for some time and now went out into the passage to hear better.

“That’s Mítka, my coachman.... I have got him a good balaláyka. I’m fond of it,” said “Uncle.”

It was the custom for Mítka to play the balaláyka in the huntsmen's room when "Uncle" returned from the chase. "Uncle" was fond of such music.

"How good! Really very good!" said Nicholas with some unintentional superciliousness, as if ashamed to confess that the sounds pleased him very much.

"Very good?" said Natásha reproachfully, noticing her brother's tone. "Not 'very good'--it's simply delicious!"

Just as "Uncle's" pickled mushrooms, honey, and cherry brandy had seemed to her the best in the world, so also that song, at that moment, seemed to her the acme of musical delight.

"More, please, more!" cried Natásha at the door as soon as the balaláyka ceased. Mítka tuned up afresh, and recommenced thrumming the balaláyka to the air of My Lady, with trills and variations.

"Uncle" sat listening, slightly smiling, with his head on one side. The air was repeated a hundred times. The balaláyka was retuned several times and the same notes were thrummed again, but the listeners did not grow weary of it and wished to hear it again and again. Anísya Fëdorovna came in and leaned her portly person against the doorpost.

"You like listening?" she said to Natásha, with a smile extremely like "Uncle's." "That's a good player of ours," she added.

"He doesn't play that part right!" said "Uncle" suddenly, with an energetic gesture. "Here he ought to burst out—that's it, come on!—ought to burst out."

"Do you play then?" asked Natásha.

"Uncle" did not answer, but smiled.

"Anísya, go and see if the strings of my guitar are all right. I haven't touched it for a long time. That's it—come on! I've given it up."

Anísya Fëdorovna, with her light step, willingly went to fulfill her errand and brought back the guitar.

Without looking at anyone, "Uncle" blew the dust off it and, tapping the case with his bony fingers, tuned the guitar and settled himself in his armchair. He took the guitar a little above the fingerboard, arching his left elbow with a somewhat theatrical gesture, and, with a wink at Anísya Fëdorovna, struck a single chord, pure and sonorous, and then quietly, smoothly, and confidently began playing in very slow time, not My Lady, but the well-known song: Came a maiden down the street. The tune, played with precision and in exact time, began to thrill in the hearts of Nicholas and Natásha, arousing in them the same kind of sober mirth as radiated from Anísya Fëdorovna's whole being. Anísya Fëdorovna flushed, and drawing her kerchief over her face went laughing out of the room. "Uncle" continued to play correctly, carefully,

with energetic firmness, looking with a changed and inspired expression at the spot where Anísyá Fëdorovna had just stood. Something seemed to be laughing a little on one side of his face under his gray mustaches, especially as the song grew brisker and the time quicker and when, here and there, as he ran his fingers over the strings, something seemed to snap.

“Lovely, lovely! Go on, Uncle, go on!” shouted Natásha as soon as he had finished. She jumped up and hugged and kissed him. “Nicholas, Nicholas!” she said, turning to her brother, as if asking him: “What is it moves me so?”

Nicholas too was greatly pleased by “Uncle’s” playing, and “Uncle” played the piece over again. Anísyá Fëdorovna’s smiling face reappeared in the doorway and behind hers other faces...

Fetching water clear and sweet,  
Stop, dear maiden, I entreat—

played “Uncle” once more, running his fingers skillfully over the strings, and then he stopped short and jerked his shoulders.

“Go on, Uncle dear,” Natásha wailed in an imploring tone as if her life depended on it.

“Uncle” rose, and it was as if there were two men in him: one of them smiled seriously at the merry fellow, while the merry fellow struck a naïve and precise attitude preparatory to a folk dance.

“Now then, niece!” he exclaimed, waving to Natásha the hand that had just struck a chord.

Natásha threw off the shawl from her shoulders, ran forward to face “Uncle,” and setting her arms akimbo also made a motion with her shoulders and struck an attitude.

Where, how, and when had this young countess, educated by an émigrée French governess, imbibed from the Russian air she breathed that spirit and obtained that manner which the *pas de châte* \* would, one would have supposed, long ago have effaced? But the spirit and the movements were those inimitable and unteachable Russian ones that “Uncle” had expected of her. As soon as she had struck her pose, and smiled triumphantly, proudly, and with sly merriment, the fear that had at first seized Nicholas and the others that she might not do the right thing was at an end, and they were already admiring her.

\* The French shawl dance.

She did the right thing with such precision, such complete precision, that Anísyá Fëdorovna, who had at once handed her the handkerchief she needed for the dance, had tears in her eyes, though she laughed as she watched this slim, graceful countess, reared in silks and velvets and so different from herself, who yet was able to understand all that was in Anísyá and in Anísyá’s father and mother and aunt, and in every

Russian man and woman.

“Well, little countess; that’s it—come on!” cried “Uncle,” with a joyous laugh, having finished the dance. “Well done, niece! Now a fine young fellow must be found as husband for you. That’s it—come on!”

“He’s chosen already,” said Nicholas smiling.

“Oh?” said “Uncle” in surprise, looking inquiringly at Natásha, who nodded her head with a happy smile.

“And such a one!” she said. But as soon as she had said it a new train of thoughts and feelings arose in her. “What did Nicholas’ smile mean when he said ‘chosen already’? Is he glad of it or not? It is as if he thought my Bolkónski would not approve of or understand our gaiety. But he would understand it all. Where is he now?” she thought, and her face suddenly became serious. But this lasted only a second. “Don’t dare to think about it,” she said to herself, and sat down again smilingly beside “Uncle,” begging him to play something more.

“Uncle” played another song and a valse; then after a pause he cleared his throat and sang his favorite hunting song:

As ‘twas growing dark last night  
Fell the snow so soft and light...

“Uncle” sang as peasants sing, with full and naïve conviction that the whole meaning of a song lies in the words and that the tune comes of itself, and that apart from the words there is no tune, which exists only to give measure to the words. As a result of this the unconsidered tune, like the song of a bird, was extraordinarily good. Natásha was in ecstasies over “Uncle’s” singing. She resolved to give up learning the harp and to play only the guitar. She asked “Uncle” for his guitar and at once found the chords of the song.

After nine o’clock two traps and three mounted men, who had been sent to look for them, arrived to fetch Natásha and Pétya. The count and countess did not know where they were and were very anxious, said one of the men.

Pétya was carried out like a log and laid in the larger of the two traps. Natásha and Nicholas got into the other. “Uncle” wrapped Natásha up warmly and took leave of her with quite a new tenderness. He accompanied them on foot as far as the bridge that could not be crossed, so that they had to go round by the ford, and he sent huntsmen to ride in front with lanterns.

“Good-by, dear niece,” his voice called out of the darkness—not the voice Natásha had known previously, but the one that had sung As ‘twas growing dark last night.

In the village through which they passed there were red lights and a

cheerful smell of smoke.

“What a darling Uncle is!” said Natáša, when they had come out onto the highroad.

“Yes,” returned Nicholas. “You’re not cold?”

“No. I’m quite, quite all right. I feel so comfortable!” answered Natáša, almost perplexed by her feelings. They remained silent a long while. The night was dark and damp. They could not see the horses, but only heard them splashing through the unseen mud.

What was passing in that receptive childlike soul that so eagerly caught and assimilated all the diverse impressions of life? How did they all find place in her? But she was very happy. As they were nearing home she suddenly struck up the air of As ‘twas growing dark last night—the tune of which she had all the way been trying to get and had at last caught.

“Got it?” said Nicholas.

“What were you thinking about just now, Nicholas?” inquired Natáša.

They were fond of asking one another that question.

“I?” said Nicholas, trying to remember. “Well, you see, first I thought that Rugáy, the red hound, was like Uncle, and that if he were a man he would always keep Uncle near him, if not for his riding, then for his manner. What a good fellow Uncle is! Don’t you think so?... Well, and you?”

“I? Wait a bit, wait.... Yes, first I thought that we are driving along and imagining that we are going home, but that heaven knows where we are really going in the darkness, and that we shall arrive and suddenly find that we are not in Otrádnœ, but in Fairyland. And then I thought... No, nothing else.”

“I know, I expect you thought of him,” said Nicholas, smiling as Natáša knew by the sound of his voice.

“No,” said Natáša, though she had in reality been thinking about Prince Andrew at the same time as of the rest, and of how he would have liked “Uncle.” “And then I was saying to myself all the way, ‘How well Anísya carried herself, how well!’” And Nicholas heard her spontaneous, happy, ringing laughter. “And do you know,” she suddenly said, “I know that I shall never again be as happy and tranquil as I am now.”

“Rubbish, nonsense, humbug!” exclaimed Nicholas, and he thought: “How charming this Natáša of mine is! I have no other friend like her and never shall have. Why should she marry? We might always drive about together!”

“What a darling this Nicholas of mine is!” thought Natásha.

“Ah, there are still lights in the drawing room!” she said, pointing to the windows of the house that gleamed invitingly in the moist velvety darkness of the night.