

CHAPTER IX

Christmas came and except for the ceremonial Mass, the solemn and wearisome Christmas congratulations from neighbors and servants, and the new dresses everyone put on, there were no special festivities, though the calm frost of twenty degrees Réaumur, the dazzling sunshine by day, and the starlight of the winter nights seemed to call for some special celebration of the season.

On the third day of Christmas week, after the midday dinner, all the inmates of the house dispersed to various rooms. It was the dullest time of the day. Nicholas, who had been visiting some neighbors that morning, was asleep on the sitting-room sofa. The old count was resting in his study. Sónya sat in the drawing room at the round table, copying a design for embroidery. The countess was playing patience. Nastásya Ivánovna the buffoon sat with a sad face at the window with two old ladies. Natásha came into the room, went up to Sónya, glanced at what she was doing, and then went up to her mother and stood without speaking.

“Why are you wandering about like an outcast?” asked her mother.
“What do you want?”

“Him... I want him... now, this minute! I want him!” said Natásha, with glittering eyes and no sign of a smile.

The countess lifted her head and looked attentively at her daughter.

“Don’t look at me, Mamma! Don’t look; I shall cry directly.”

“Sit down with me a little,” said the countess.

“Mamma, I want him. Why should I be wasted like this, Mamma?”

Her voice broke, tears gushed from her eyes, and she turned quickly to hide them and left the room.

She passed into the sitting room, stood there thinking awhile, and then went into the maids’ room. There an old maidservant was grumbling at a young girl who stood panting, having just run in through the cold from the serfs’ quarters.

“Stop playing—there’s a time for everything,” said the old woman.

“Let her alone, Kondrátevna,” said Natásha. “Go, Mavrúshka, go.”

Having released Mavrúshka, Natásha crossed the dancing hall and went to the vestibule. There an old footman and two young ones were playing cards. They broke off and rose as she entered.

“What can I do with them?” thought Natásha.

“Oh, Nikíta, please go... where can I send him?... Yes, go to the yard and fetch a fowl, please, a cock, and you, Misha, bring me some oats.”

“Just a few oats?” said Misha, cheerfully and readily.

“Go, go quickly,” the old man urged him.

“And you, Theodore, get me a piece of chalk.”

On her way past the butler’s pantry she told them to set a samovar, though it was not at all the time for tea.

Fóka, the butler, was the most ill-tempered person in the house. Natásha liked to test her power over him. He distrusted the order and asked whether the samovar was really wanted.

“Oh dear, what a young lady!” said Fóka, pretending to frown at Natásha.

No one in the house sent people about or gave them as much trouble as Natásha did. She could not see people unconcernedly, but had to send them on some errand. She seemed to be trying whether any of them would get angry or sulky with her; but the serfs fulfilled no one’s orders so readily as they did hers. “What can I do, where can I go?” thought she, as she went slowly along the passage.

“Nastásya Ivánovna, what sort of children shall I have?” she asked the buffoon, who was coming toward her in a woman’s jacket.

“Why, fleas, crickets, grasshoppers,” answered the buffoon.

“O Lord, O Lord, it’s always the same! Oh, where am I to go? What am I to do with myself?” And tapping with her heels, she ran quickly upstairs to see Vogel and his wife who lived on the upper story.

Two governesses were sitting with the Vogels at a table, on which were plates of raisins, walnuts, and almonds. The governesses were discussing whether it was cheaper to live in Moscow or Odessa. Natásha sat down, listened to their talk with a serious and thoughtful air, and then got up again.

“The island of Madagascar,” she said, “Ma-da-gas-car,” she repeated, articulating each syllable distinctly, and, not replying to Madame Schoss who asked her what she was saying, she went out of the room.

Her brother Pétya was upstairs too; with the man in attendance on him he was preparing fireworks to let off that night.

“Pétya! Pétya!” she called to him. “Carry me downstairs.”

Pétya ran up and offered her his back. She jumped on it, putting her

arms round his neck, and he pranced along with her.

“No, don’t... the island of Madagascar!” she said, and jumping off his back she went downstairs.

Having as it were reviewed her kingdom, tested her power, and made sure that everyone was submissive, but that all the same it was dull, Natásha betook herself to the ballroom, picked up her guitar, sat down in a dark corner behind a bookcase, and began to run her fingers over the strings in the bass, picking out a passage she recalled from an opera she had heard in Petersburg with Prince Andrew. What she drew from the guitar would have had no meaning for other listeners, but in her imagination a whole series of reminiscences arose from those sounds. She sat behind the bookcase with her eyes fixed on a streak of light escaping from the pantry door and listened to herself and pondered. She was in a mood for brooding on the past.

Sónya passed to the pantry with a glass in her hand. Natásha glanced at her and at the crack in the pantry door, and it seemed to her that she remembered the light falling through that crack once before and Sónya passing with a glass in her hand. “Yes it was exactly the same,” thought Natásha.

“Sónya, what is this?” she cried, twanging a thick string.

“Oh, you are there!” said Sónya with a start, and came near and listened. “I don’t know. A storm?” she ventured timidly, afraid of being wrong.

“There! That’s just how she started and just how she came up smiling timidly when all this happened before,” thought Natásha, “and in just the same way I thought there was something lacking in her.”

“No, it’s the chorus from The Water-Carrier, listen!” and Natásha sang the air of the chorus so that Sónya should catch it. “Where were you going?” she asked.

“To change the water in this glass. I am just finishing the design.”

“You always find something to do, but I can’t,” said Natásha.

“And where’s Nicholas?”

“Asleep, I think.”

“Sónya, go and wake him,” said Natásha. “Tell him I want him to come and sing.”

She sat awhile, wondering what the meaning of it all having happened before could be, and without solving this problem, or at all regretting not having done so, she again passed in fancy to the time when she was with him and he was looking at her with a lover’s eyes.

“Oh, if only he would come quicker! I am so afraid it will never be! And, worst of all, I am growing old—that’s the thing! There won’t

then be in me what there is now. But perhaps he'll come today, will come immediately. Perhaps he has come and is sitting in the drawing room. Perhaps he came yesterday and I have forgotten it." She rose, put down the guitar, and went to the drawing room.

All the domestic circle, tutors, governesses, and guests, were already at the tea table. The servants stood round the table—but Prince Andrew was not there and life was going on as before.

"Ah, here she is!" said the old count, when he saw Natásha enter. "Well, sit down by me." But Natásha stayed by her mother and glanced round as if looking for something.

"Mamma!" she muttered, "give him to me, give him, Mamma, quickly, quickly!" and she again had difficulty in repressing her sobs.

She sat down at the table and listened to the conversation between the elders and Nicholas, who had also come to the table. "My God, my God! The same faces, the same talk, Papa holding his cup and blowing in the same way!" thought Natásha, feeling with horror a sense of repulsion rising up in her for the whole household, because they were always the same.

After tea, Nicholas, Sónya, and Natásha went to the sitting room, to their favorite corner where their most intimate talks always began.