

CHAPTER X

“Does it ever happen to you,” said Natásha to her brother, when they settled down in the sitting room, “does it ever happen to you to feel as if there were nothing more to come—nothing; that everything good is past? And to feel not exactly dull, but sad?”

“I should think so!” he replied. “I have felt like that when everything was all right and everyone was cheerful. The thought has come into my mind that I was already tired of it all, and that we must all die. Once in the regiment I had not gone to some merrymaking where there was music... and suddenly I felt so depressed...”

“Oh yes, I know, I know, I know!” Natásha interrupted him. “When I was quite little that used to be so with me. Do you remember when I was punished once about some plums? You were all dancing, and I sat sobbing in the schoolroom? I shall never forget it: I felt sad and sorry for everyone, for myself, and for everyone. And I was innocent—that was the chief thing,” said Natásha. “Do you remember?”

“I remember,” answered Nicholas. “I remember that I came to you afterwards and wanted to comfort you, but do you know, I felt ashamed to. We were terribly absurd. I had a funny doll then and wanted to give it to you. Do you remember?”

“And do you remember,” Natásha asked with a pensive smile, “how once, long, long ago, when we were quite little, Uncle called us into the study—that was in the old house—and it was dark—we went in and suddenly there stood...”

“A Negro,” chimed in Nicholas with a smile of delight. “Of course I remember. Even now I don’t know whether there really was a Negro, or if we only dreamed it or were told about him.”

“He was gray, you remember, and had white teeth, and stood and looked at us...”

“Sónya, do you remember?” asked Nicholas.

“Yes, yes, I do remember something too,” Sónya answered timidly.

“You know I have asked Papa and Mamma about that Negro,” said Natásha, “and they say there was no Negro at all. But you see, you remember!”

“Of course I do, I remember his teeth as if I had just seen them.”

“How strange it is! It’s as if it were a dream! I like that.”

“And do you remember how we rolled hard-boiled eggs in the ballroom, and suddenly two old women began spinning round on the carpet? Was that real or not? Do you remember what fun it was?”

“Yes, and you remember how Papa in his blue overcoat fired a gun in the porch?”

So they went through their memories, smiling with pleasure: not the sad memories of old age, but poetic, youthful ones—those impressions of one’s most distant past in which dreams and realities blend—and they laughed with quiet enjoyment.

Sónya, as always, did not quite keep pace with them, though they shared the same reminiscences.

Much that they remembered had slipped from her mind, and what she recalled did not arouse the same poetic feeling as they experienced. She simply enjoyed their pleasure and tried to fit in with it.

She only really took part when they recalled Sónya’s first arrival. She told them how afraid she had been of Nicholas because he had on a corded jacket and her nurse had told her that she, too, would be sewn up with cords.

“And I remember their telling me that you had been born under a cabbage,” said Natásha, “and I remember that I dared not disbelieve it then, but knew that it was not true, and I felt so uncomfortable.”

While they were talking a maid thrust her head in at the other door of the sitting room.

“They have brought the cock, Miss,” she said in a whisper.

“It isn’t wanted, Pólya. Tell them to take it away,” replied Natásha.

In the middle of their talk in the sitting room, Dimmler came in and went up to the harp that stood there in a corner. He took off its cloth covering, and the harp gave out a jarring sound.

“Mr. Dimmler, please play my favorite nocturne by Field,” came the old countess’ voice from the drawing room.

Dimmler struck a chord and, turning to Natásha, Nicholas, and Sónya, remarked: “How quiet you young people are!”

“Yes, we’re philosophizing,” said Natásha, glancing round for a moment and then continuing the conversation. They were now discussing dreams.

Dimmler began to play; Natásha went on tiptoe noiselessly to the table, took up a candle, carried it out, and returned, seating herself quietly in her former place. It was dark in the room especially where they were sitting on the sofa, but through the big windows the silvery light of the full moon fell on the floor. Dimmler had finished the piece but still sat softly running his fingers over the strings, evidently uncertain whether to stop or to play something else.

“Do you know,” said Natásha in a whisper, moving closer to Nicholas and Sónya, “that when one goes on and on recalling memories, one at last begins to remember what happened before one was in the world....”

“That is metempsychosis,” said Sónya, who had always learned well, and remembered everything. “The Egyptians believed that our souls have lived in animals, and will go back into animals again.”

“No, I don’t believe we ever were in animals,” said Natásha, still in a whisper though the music had ceased. “But I am certain that we were angels somewhere there, and have been here, and that is why we remember....”

“May I join you?” said Dimmler who had come up quietly, and he sat down by them.

“If we have been angels, why have we fallen lower?” said Nicholas. “No, that can’t be!”

“Not lower, who said we were lower?... How do I know what I was before?” Natásha rejoined with conviction. “The soul is immortal—well then, if I shall always live I must have lived before, lived for a whole eternity.”

“Yes, but it is hard for us to imagine eternity,” remarked Dimmler, who had joined the young folk with a mildly condescending smile but now spoke as quietly and seriously as they.

“Why is it hard to imagine eternity?” said Natásha. “It is now today, and it will be tomorrow, and always; and there was yesterday, and the day before....”

“Natásha! Now it’s your turn. Sing me something,” they heard the countess say. “Why are you sitting there like conspirators?”

“Mamma, I don’t at all want to,” replied Natásha, but all the same she rose.

None of them, not even the middle-aged Dimmler, wanted to break off their conversation and quit that corner in the sitting room, but Natásha got up and Nicholas sat down at the clavichord. Standing as usual in the middle of the hall and choosing the place where the resonance was best, Natásha began to sing her mother’s favorite song.

She had said she did not want to sing, but it was long since she had sung, and long before she again sang, as she did that evening. The count, from his study where he was talking to Míténka, heard her and, like a schoolboy in a hurry to run out to play, blundered in his talk while giving orders to the steward, and at last stopped, while Míténka stood in front of him also listening and smiling. Nicholas did not take his eyes off his sister and drew breath in time with her. Sónya, as she listened, thought of the immense difference there was between herself and her friend, and how impossible it was for her to be anything like as bewitching as her cousin. The old countess sat with a blissful yet sad

smile and with tears in her eyes, occasionally shaking her head. She thought of Natásha and of her own youth, and of how there was something unnatural and dreadful in this impending marriage of Natásha and Prince Andrew.

Dimmler, who had seated himself beside the countess, listened with closed eyes.

“Ah, Countess,” he said at last, “that’s a European talent, she has nothing to learn—what softness, tenderness, and strength....”

“Ah, how afraid I am for her, how afraid I am!” said the countess, not realizing to whom she was speaking. Her maternal instinct told her that Natásha had too much of something, and that because of this she would not be happy. Before Natásha had finished singing, fourteen-year-old Pétya rushed in delightedly, to say that some mummers had arrived.

Natásha stopped abruptly.

“Idiot!” she screamed at her brother and, running to a chair, threw herself on it, sobbing so violently that she could not stop for a long time.

“It’s nothing, Mamma, really it’s nothing; only Pétya startled me,” she said, trying to smile, but her tears still flowed and sobs still choked her.

The mummers (some of the house serfs) dressed up as bears, Turks, innkeepers, and ladies—frightening and funny—bringing in with them the cold from outside and a feeling of gaiety, crowded, at first timidly, into the anteroom, then hiding behind one another they pushed into the ballroom where, shyly at first and then more and more merrily and heartily, they started singing, dancing, and playing Christmas games. The countess, when she had identified them and laughed at their costumes, went into the drawing room. The count sat in the ballroom, smiling radiantly and applauding the players. The young people had disappeared.

Half an hour later there appeared among the other mummers in the ballroom an old lady in a hooped skirt—this was Nicholas. A Turkish girl was Pétya. A clown was Dimmler. An hussar was Natásha, and a Circassian was Sónya with burnt-cork mustache and eyebrows.

After the condescending surprise, nonrecognition, and praise, from those who were not themselves dressed up, the young people decided that their costumes were so good that they ought to be shown elsewhere.

Nicholas, who, as the roads were in splendid condition, wanted to take them all for a drive in his troyka, proposed to take with them about a dozen of the serf mummers and drive to “Uncle’s.”

“No, why disturb the old fellow?” said the countess. “Besides, you wouldn’t have room to turn round there. If you must go, go to the

Melyukóvs’.”

Melyukóva was a widow, who, with her family and their tutors and governesses, lived three miles from the Rostóvs.

“That’s right, my dear,” chimed in the old count, thoroughly aroused. “I’ll dress up at once and go with them. I’ll make Pashette open her eyes.”

But the countess would not agree to his going; he had had a bad leg all these last days. It was decided that the count must not go, but that if Louisa Ivánovna (Madame Schoss) would go with them, the young ladies might go to the Melyukóvs’, Sónya, generally so timid and shy, more urgently than anyone begging Louisa Ivánovna not to refuse.

Sónya’s costume was the best of all. Her mustache and eyebrows were extraordinarily becoming. Everyone told her she looked very handsome, and she was in a spirited and energetic mood unusual with her. Some inner voice told her that now or never her fate would be decided, and in her male attire she seemed quite a different person. Louisa Ivánovna consented to go, and in half an hour four troyka sleighs with large and small bells, their runners squeaking and whistling over the frozen snow, drove up to the porch.

Natásha was foremost in setting a merry holiday tone, which, passing from one to another, grew stronger and reached its climax when they all came out into the frost and got into the sleighs, talking, calling to one another, laughing, and shouting.

Two of the troykas were the usual household sleighs, the third was the old count’s with a trotter from the Orlóv stud as shaft horse, the fourth was Nicholas’ own with a short shaggy black shaft horse. Nicholas, in his old lady’s dress over which he had belted his hussar overcoat, stood in the middle of the sleigh, reins in hand.

It was so light that he could see the moonlight reflected from the metal harness disks and from the eyes of the horses, who looked round in alarm at the noisy party under the shadow of the porch roof.

Natásha, Sónya, Madame Schoss, and two maids got into Nicholas’ sleigh; Dimmler, his wife, and Pétya, into the old count’s, and the rest of the mummies seated themselves in the other two sleighs.

“You go ahead, Zakhár!” shouted Nicholas to his father’s coachman, wishing for a chance to race past him.

The old count’s troyka, with Dimmler and his party, started forward, squeaking on its runners as though freezing to the snow, its deep-toned bell clanging. The side horses, pressing against the shafts of the middle horse, sank in the snow, which was dry and glittered like sugar, and threw it up.

Nicholas set off, following the first sleigh; behind him the others moved noisily, their runners squeaking. At first they drove at a steady

trot along the narrow road. While they drove past the garden the shadows of the bare trees often fell across the road and hid the brilliant moonlight, but as soon as they were past the fence, the snowy plain bathed in moonlight and motionless spread out before them glittering like diamonds and dappled with bluish shadows. Bang, bang! went the first sleigh over a cradle hole in the snow of the road, and each of the other sleighs jolted in the same way, and rudely breaking the frost-bound stillness, the troykas began to speed along the road, one after the other.

“A hare’s track, a lot of tracks!” rang out Natásha’s voice through the frost-bound air.

“How light it is, Nicholas!” came Sónya’s voice.

Nicholas glanced round at Sónya, and bent down to see her face closer. Quite a new, sweet face with black eyebrows and mustaches peeped up at him from her sable furs—so close and yet so distant—in the moonlight.

“That used to be Sónya,” thought he, and looked at her closer and smiled.

“What is it, Nicholas?”

“Nothing,” said he and turned again to the horses.

When they came out onto the beaten highroad—polished by sleigh runners and cut up by rough-shod hoofs, the marks of which were visible in the moonlight—the horses began to tug at the reins of their own accord and increased their pace. The near side horse, arching his head and breaking into a short canter, tugged at his traces. The shaft horse swayed from side to side, moving his ears as if asking: “Isn’t it time to begin now?” In front, already far ahead the deep bell of the sleigh ringing farther and farther off, the black horses driven by Zakhár could be clearly seen against the white snow. From that sleigh one could hear the shouts, laughter, and voices of the mummers.

“Gee up, my darlings!” shouted Nicholas, pulling the reins to one side and flourishing the whip.

It was only by the keener wind that met them and the jerks given by the side horses who pulled harder—ever increasing their gallop—that one noticed how fast the troyka was flying. Nicholas looked back. With screams, squeals, and waving of whips that caused even the shaft horses to gallop—the other sleighs followed. The shaft horse swung steadily beneath the bow over its head, with no thought of slackening pace and ready to put on speed when required.

Nicholas overtook the first sleigh. They were driving downhill and coming out upon a broad trodden track across a meadow, near a river.

“Where are we?” thought he. “It’s the Kosóy meadow, I suppose. But no—this is something new I’ve never seen before. This isn’t

the Kosóy meadow nor the Dëmkin hill, and heaven only knows what it is! It is something new and enchanted. Well, whatever it may be..." And shouting to his horses, he began to pass the first sleigh.

Zakhár held back his horses and turned his face, which was already covered with hoarfrost to his eyebrows.

Nicholas gave the horses the rein, and Zakhár, stretching out his arms, clucked his tongue and let his horses go.

"Now, look out, master!" he cried.

Faster still the two troykas flew side by side, and faster moved the feet of the galloping side horses. Nicholas began to draw ahead. Zakhár, while still keeping his arms extended, raised one hand with the reins.

"No you won't, master!" he shouted.

Nicholas put all his horses to a gallop and passed Zakhár. The horses showered the fine dry snow on the faces of those in the sleigh—beside them sounded quick ringing bells and they caught confused glimpses of swiftly moving legs and the shadows of the troyka they were passing. The whistling sound of the runners on the snow and the voices of girls shrieking were heard from different sides.

Again checking his horses, Nicholas looked around him. They were still surrounded by the magic plain bathed in moonlight and spangled with stars.

"Zakhár is shouting that I should turn to the left, but why to the left?" thought Nicholas. "Are we getting to the Melyukóvs'? Is this Melyukóvka? Heaven only knows where we are going, and heaven knows what is happening to us—but it is very strange and pleasant whatever it is." And he looked round in the sleigh.

"Look, his mustache and eyelashes are all white!" said one of the strange, pretty, unfamiliar people—the one with fine eyebrows and mustache.

"I think this used to be Natásha," thought Nicholas, "and that was Madame Schoss, but perhaps it's not, and this Circassian with the mustache I don't know, but I love her."

"Aren't you cold?" he asked.

They did not answer but began to laugh. Dimmler from the sleigh behind shouted something—probably something funny—but they could not make out what he said.

"Yes, yes!" some voices answered, laughing.

"But here was a fairy forest with black moving shadows, and a glitter of diamonds and a flight of marble steps and the silver roofs of fairy

buildings and the shrill yells of some animals. And if this is really Melyukóvka, it is still stranger that we drove heaven knows where and have come to Melyukóvka," thought Nicholas.

It really was Melyukóvka, and maids and footmen with merry faces came running, out to the porch carrying candles.

"Who is it?" asked someone in the porch.

"The mummers from the count's. I know by the horses," replied some voices.