

## CHAPTER XI

Pelagéya Danílovna Melyukóva, a broadly built, energetic woman wearing spectacles, sat in the drawing room in a loose dress, surrounded by her daughters whom she was trying to keep from feeling dull. They were quietly dropping melted wax into snow and looking at the shadows the wax figures would throw on the wall, when they heard the steps and voices of new arrivals in the vestibule.

Hussars, ladies, witches, clowns, and bears, after clearing their throats and wiping the hoarfrost from their faces in the vestibule, came into the ballroom where candles were hurriedly lighted. The clown—Dimmler—and the lady—Nicholas—started a dance. Surrounded by the screaming children the mummers, covering their faces and disguising their voices, bowed to their hostess and arranged themselves about the room.

“Dear me! there’s no recognizing them! And Natásha! See whom she looks like! She really reminds me of somebody. But Herr Dimmler—isn’t he good! I didn’t know him! And how he dances. Dear me, there’s a Circassian. Really, how becoming it is to dear Sónya. And who is that? Well, you have cheered us up! Nikíta and Vanya—clear away the tables! And we were sitting so quietly. Ha, ha, ha!... The hussar, the hussar! Just like a boy! And the legs!... I can’t look at him...” different voices were saying.

Natásha, the young Melyukóvs’ favorite, disappeared with them into the back rooms where a cork and various dressing gowns and male garments were called for and received from the footman by bare girlish arms from behind the door. Ten minutes later, all the young Melyukóvs joined the mummers.

Pelagéya Danílovna, having given orders to clear the rooms for the visitors and arranged about refreshments for the gentry and the serfs, went about among the mummers without removing her spectacles, peering into their faces with a suppressed smile and failing to recognize any of them. It was not merely Dimmler and the Rostóvs she failed to recognize, she did not even recognize her own daughters, or her late husband’s, dressing gowns and uniforms, which they had put on.

“And who is this?” she asked her governess, peering into the face of her own daughter dressed up as a Kazán-Tartar. “I suppose it is one of the Rostóvs! Well, Mr. Hussar, and what regiment do you serve in?” she asked Natásha. “Here, hand some fruit jelly to the Turk!” she ordered the butler who was handing things round. “That’s not forbidden by his law.”

Sometimes, as she looked at the strange but amusing capers cut by the dancers, who—having decided once for all that being disguised, no one would recognize them—were not at all shy, Pelagéya Danílovna hid her face in her handkerchief, and her whole stout body shook with irrepressible, kindly, elderly laughter.

“My little Sáscha! Look at Sáscha!” she said.

After Russian country dances and chorus dances, Pelagéya Danílovna made the serfs and gentry join in one large circle: a ring, a string, and a silver ruble were fetched and they all played games together.

In an hour, all the costumes were crumpled and disordered. The corked eyebrows and mustaches were smeared over the perspiring, flushed, and merry faces. Pelagéya Danílovna began to recognize the mummers, admired their cleverly contrived costumes, and particularly how they suited the young ladies, and she thanked them all for having entertained her so well. The visitors were invited to supper in the drawing room, and the serfs had something served to them in the ballroom.

“Now to tell one’s fortune in the empty bathhouse is frightening!” said an old maid who lived with the Melyukóvs, during supper.

“Why?” said the eldest Melyukóv girl.

“You wouldn’t go, it takes courage....”

“I’ll go,” said Sónya.

“Tell what happened to the young lady!” said the second Melyukóv girl.

“Well,” began the old maid, “a young lady once went out, took a cock, laid the table for two, all properly, and sat down. After sitting a while, she suddenly hears someone coming... a sleigh drives up with harness bells; she hears him coming! He comes in, just in the shape of a man, like an officer—comes in and sits down to table with her.”

“Ah! ah!” screamed Natáscha, rolling her eyes with horror.

“Yes? And how... did he speak?”

“Yes, like a man. Everything quite all right, and he began persuading her; and she should have kept him talking till cockcrow, but she got frightened, just got frightened and hid her face in her hands. Then he caught her up. It was lucky the maids ran in just then....”

“Now, why frighten them?” said Pelagéya Danílovna.

“Mamma, you used to try your fate yourself...” said her daughter.

“And how does one do it in a barn?” inquired Sónya.

“Well, say you went to the barn now, and listened. It depends on what you hear; hammering and knocking—that’s bad; but a sound of shifting grain is good and one sometimes hears that, too.”

“Mamma, tell us what happened to you in the barn.”

Pelagéya Danílovna smiled.

“Oh, I’ve forgotten...” she replied. “But none of you would go?”

“Yes, I will; Pelagéya Danílovna, let me! I’ll go,” said Sónya.

“Well, why not, if you’re not afraid?”

“Louisa Ivánovna, may I?” asked Sónya.

Whether they were playing the ring and string game or the ruble game or talking as now, Nicholas did not leave Sónya’s side, and gazed at her with quite new eyes. It seemed to him that it was only today, thanks to that burnt-cork mustache, that he had fully learned to know her. And really, that evening, Sónya was brighter, more animated, and prettier than Nicholas had ever seen her before.

“So that’s what she is like; what a fool I have been!” he thought gazing at her sparkling eyes, and under the mustache a happy rapturous smile dimpled her cheeks, a smile he had never seen before.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” said Sónya. “May I go at once?” She got up.

They told her where the barn was and how she should stand and listen, and they handed her a fur cloak. She threw this over her head and shoulders and glanced at Nicholas.

“What a darling that girl is!” thought he. “And what have I been thinking of till now?”

Sónya went out into the passage to go to the barn. Nicholas went hastily to the front porch, saying he felt too hot. The crowd of people really had made the house stuffy.

Outside, there was the same cold stillness and the same moon, but even brighter than before. The light was so strong and the snow sparkled with so many stars that one did not wish to look up at the sky and the real stars were unnoticed. The sky was black and dreary, while the earth was gay.

“I am a fool, a fool! what have I been waiting for?” thought Nicholas, and running out from the porch he went round the corner of the house and along the path that led to the back porch. He knew Sónya would pass that way. Halfway lay some snow-covered piles of firewood and across and along them a network of shadows from the bare old lime trees fell on the snow and on the path. This path led to the barn. The log walls of the barn and its snow-covered roof, that looked as if hewn out of some precious stone, sparkled in the moonlight. A tree in the garden snapped with the frost, and then all was again perfectly silent. His bosom seemed to inhale not air but the strength of eternal youth and gladness.

From the back porch came the sound of feet descending the steps, the

bottom step upon which snow had fallen gave a ringing creak and he heard the voice of an old maidservant saying, "Straight, straight, along the path, Miss. Only, don't look back."

"I am not afraid," answered Sónya's voice, and along the path toward Nicholas came the crunching, whistling sound of Sónya's feet in her thin shoes.

Sónya came along, wrapped in her cloak. She was only a couple of paces away when she saw him, and to her too he was not the Nicholas she had known and always slightly feared. He was in a woman's dress, with tousled hair and a happy smile new to Sónya. She ran rapidly toward him.

"Quite different and yet the same," thought Nicholas, looking at her face all lit up by the moonlight. He slipped his arms under the cloak that covered her head, embraced her, pressed her to him, and kissed her on the lips that wore a mustache and had a smell of burnt cork. Sónya kissed him full on the lips, and disengaging her little hands pressed them to his cheeks.

"Sónya!... Nicholas!"... was all they said. They ran to the barn and then back again, re-entering, he by the front and she by the back porch.