

CHAPTER XVII

Natasha was calmer but no happier. She not merely avoided all external forms of pleasure—balls, promenades, concerts, and theaters—but she never laughed without a sound of tears in her laughter. She could not sing. As soon as she began to laugh, or tried to sing by herself, tears choked her: tears of remorse, tears at the recollection of those pure times which could never return, tears of vexation that she should so uselessly have ruined her young life which might have been so happy. Laughter and singing in particular seemed to her like a blasphemy, in face of her sorrow. Without any need of self-restraint, no wish to coquet ever entered her head. She said and felt at that time that no man was more to her than Nastasya Ivánovna, the buffoon. Something stood sentinel within her and forbade her every joy. Besides, she had lost all the old interests of her carefree girlish life that had been so full of hope. The previous autumn, the hunting, “Uncle,” and the Christmas holidays spent with Nicholas at Otrádnœ were what she recalled oftenest and most painfully. What would she not have given to bring back even a single day of that time! But it was gone forever. Her presentiment at the time had not deceived her—that that state of freedom and readiness for any enjoyment would not return again. Yet it was necessary to live on.

It comforted her to reflect that she was not better as she had formerly imagined, but worse, much worse, than anybody else in the world. But this was not enough. She knew that, and asked herself, “What next?” But there was nothing to come. There was no joy in life, yet life was passing. Natasha apparently tried not to be a burden or a hindrance to anyone, but wanted nothing for herself. She kept away from everyone in the house and felt at ease only with her brother Petya. She liked to be with him better than with the others, and when alone with him she sometimes laughed. She hardly ever left the house and of those who came to see them was glad to see only one person, Pierre. It would have been impossible to treat her with more delicacy, greater care, and at the same time more seriously than did Count Bezúkhov. Natasha unconsciously felt this delicacy and so found great pleasure in his society. But she was not even grateful to him for it; nothing good on Pierre’s part seemed to her to be an effort, it seemed so natural for him to be kind to everyone that there was no merit in his kindness. Sometimes Natasha noticed embarrassment and awkwardness on his part in her presence, especially when he wanted to do something to please her, or feared that something they spoke of would awaken memories distressing to her. She noticed this and attributed it to his general kindness and shyness, which she imagined must be the same toward everyone as it was to her. After those involuntary words—that if he were free he would have asked on his knees for her hand and her love—uttered at a moment when she was so strongly agitated, Pierre never spoke to Natasha of his feelings; and it seemed plain to her that those words, which had then so comforted her, were spoken as all sorts of meaningless words are spoken to comfort a crying child. It was not because Pierre was a married man, but because Natasha felt very strongly with him that moral barrier the absence of which she had experienced with Kurágin that it never entered her head that the relations between him and herself could lead to love on her

part, still less on his, or even to the kind of tender, self-conscious, romantic friendship between a man and a woman of which she had known several instances.

Before the end of the fast of St. Peter, Agraféna Ivánovna Belóva, a country neighbor of the Rostóvs, came to Moscow to pay her devotions at the shrines of the Moscow saints. She suggested that Natásha should fast and prepare for Holy Communion, and Natásha gladly welcomed the idea. Despite the doctor's orders that she should not go out early in the morning, Natásha insisted on fasting and preparing for the sacrament, not as they generally prepared for it in the Rostóv family by attending three services in their own house, but as Agraféna Ivánovna did, by going to church every day for a week and not once missing Vespers, Matins, or Mass.

The countess was pleased with Natásha's zeal; after the poor results of the medical treatment, in the depths of her heart she hoped that prayer might help her daughter more than medicines and, though not without fear and concealing it from the doctor, she agreed to Natásha's wish and entrusted her to Belóva. Agraféna Ivánovna used to come to wake Natásha at three in the morning, but generally found her already awake. She was afraid of being late for Matins. Hastily washing, and meekly putting on her shabbiest dress and an old mantilla, Natásha, shivering in the fresh air, went out into the deserted streets lit by the clear light of dawn. By Agraféna Ivánovna's advice Natásha prepared herself not in their own parish, but at a church where, according to the devout Agraféna Ivánovna, the priest was a man of very severe and lofty life. There were never many people in the church; Natásha always stood beside Belóva in the customary place before an icon of the Blessed Virgin, let into the screen before the choir on the left side, and a feeling, new to her, of humility before something great and incomprehensible, seized her when at that unusual morning hour, gazing at the dark face of the Virgin illuminated by the candles burning before it and by the morning light falling from the window, she listened to the words of the service which she tried to follow with understanding. When she understood them her personal feeling became interwoven in the prayers with shades of its own. When she did not understand, it was sweeter still to think that the wish to understand everything is pride, that it is impossible to understand all, that it is only necessary to believe and to commit oneself to God, whom she felt guiding her soul at those moments. She crossed herself, bowed low, and when she did not understand, in horror at her own vileness, simply asked God to forgive her everything, everything, to have mercy upon her. The prayers to which she surrendered herself most of all were those of repentance. On her way home at an early hour when she met no one but bricklayers going to work or men sweeping the street, and everybody within the houses was still asleep, Natásha experienced a feeling new to her, a sense of the possibility of correcting her faults, the possibility of a new, clean life, and of happiness.

During the whole week she spent in this way, that feeling grew every day. And the happiness of taking communion, or "communing" as Agraféna Ivánovna, joyously playing with the word, called it, seemed to Natásha so great that she felt she should never live till that blessed Sunday.

But the happy day came, and on that memorable Sunday, when, dressed in white muslin, she returned home after communion, for the first time for many months she felt calm and not oppressed by the thought of the life that lay before her.

The doctor who came to see her that day ordered her to continue the powders he had prescribed a fortnight previously.

“She must certainly go on taking them morning and evening,” said he, evidently sincerely satisfied with his success. “Only, please be particular about it.

“Be quite easy,” he continued playfully, as he adroitly took the gold coin in his palm. “She will soon be singing and frolicking about. The last medicine has done her a very great deal of good. She has freshened up very much.”

The countess, with a cheerful expression on her face, looked down at her nails and spat a little for luck as she returned to the drawing room.