

CHAPTER VIII

Sónya's letter written from Tróitsa, which had come as an answer to Nicholas' prayer, was prompted by this: the thought of getting Nicholas married to an heiress occupied the old countess' mind more and more. She knew that Sónya was the chief obstacle to this happening, and Sónya's life in the countess' house had grown harder and harder, especially after they had received a letter from Nicholas telling of his meeting with Princess Mary in Boguchárovo. The countess let no occasion slip of making humiliating or cruel allusions to Sónya.

But a few days before they left Moscow, moved and excited by all that was going on, she called Sónya to her and, instead of reproaching and making demands on her, tearfully implored her to sacrifice herself and repay all that the family had done for her by breaking off her engagement with Nicholas.

"I shall not be at peace till you promise me this."

Sónya burst into hysterical tears and replied through her sobs that she would do anything and was prepared for anything, but gave no actual promise and could not bring herself to decide to do what was demanded of her. She must sacrifice herself for the family that had reared and brought her up. To sacrifice herself for others was Sónya's habit. Her position in the house was such that only by sacrifice could she show her worth, and she was accustomed to this and loved doing it. But in all her former acts of self-sacrifice she had been happily conscious that they raised her in her own esteem and in that of others, and so made her more worthy of Nicholas whom she loved more than anything in the world. But now they wanted her to sacrifice the very thing that constituted the whole reward for her self-sacrifice and the whole meaning of her life. And for the first time she felt bitterness against those who had been her benefactors only to torture her the more painfully; she felt jealous of Natásha who had never experienced anything of this sort, had never needed to sacrifice herself, but made others sacrifice themselves for her and yet was beloved by everybody. And for the first time Sónya felt that out of her pure, quiet love for Nicholas a passionate feeling was beginning to grow up which was stronger than principle, virtue, or religion. Under the influence of this feeling Sónya, whose life of dependence had taught her involuntarily to be secretive, having answered the countess in vague general terms, avoided talking with her and resolved to wait till she should see Nicholas, not in order to set him free but on the contrary at that meeting to bind him to her forever.

The bustle and terror of the Rostóvs' last days in Moscow stifled the gloomy thoughts that oppressed Sónya. She was glad to find escape from them in practical activity. But when she heard of Prince Andrew's presence in their house, despite her sincere pity for him and for Natásha, she was seized by a joyful and superstitious feeling that God did not intend her to be separated from Nicholas. She knew that Natásha loved no one but Prince Andrew and had never ceased to love him. She knew that being thrown together again under such terrible circumstances they would again fall in love with one another, and that Nicholas would

then not be able to marry Princess Mary as they would be within the prohibited degrees of affinity. Despite all the terror of what had happened during those last days and during the first days of their journey, this feeling that Providence was intervening in her personal affairs cheered Sónya.

At the Tróitsa monastery the Rostóvs first broke their journey for a whole day.

Three large rooms were assigned to them in the monastery hostelry, one of which was occupied by Prince Andrew. The wounded man was much better that day and Natásha was sitting with him. In the next room sat the count and countess respectfully conversing with the prior, who was calling on them as old acquaintances and benefactors of the monastery. Sónya was there too, tormented by curiosity as to what Prince Andrew and Natásha were talking about. She heard the sound of their voices through the door. That door opened and Natásha came out, looking excited. Not noticing the monk, who had risen to greet her and was drawing back the wide sleeve on his right arm, she went up to Sónya and took her hand.

“Natásha, what are you about? Come here!” said the countess.

Natásha went up to the monk for his blessing, and he advised her to pray for aid to God and His saint.

As soon as the prior withdrew, Natásha took her friend by the hand and went with her into the unoccupied room.

“Sónya, will he live?” she asked. “Sónya, how happy I am, and how unhappy!... Sónya, dovey, everything is as it used to be. If only he lives! He cannot... because... because... of...” and Natásha burst into tears.

“Yes! I knew it! Thank God!” murmured Sónya. “He will live.”

Sónya was not less agitated than her friend by the latter’s fear and grief and by her own personal feelings which she shared with no one. Sobbing, she kissed and comforted Natásha. “If only he lives!” she thought. Having wept, talked, and wiped away their tears, the two friends went together to Prince Andrew’s door. Natásha opened it cautiously and glanced into the room, Sónya standing beside her at the half-open door.

Prince Andrew was lying raised high on three pillows. His pale face was calm, his eyes closed, and they could see his regular breathing.

“O, Natásha!” Sónya suddenly almost screamed, catching her companion’s arm and stepping back from the door.

“What? What is it?” asked Natásha.

“It’s that, that...” said Sónya, with a white face and trembling lips.

Natásha softly closed the door and went with Sónya to the window, not

yet understanding what the latter was telling her.

“You remember,” said Sónya with a solemn and frightened expression. “You remember when I looked in the mirror for you... at Otrádnoe at Christmas? Do you remember what I saw?”

“Yes, yes!” cried Natásha opening her eyes wide, and vaguely recalling that Sónya had told her something about Prince Andrew whom she had seen lying down.

“You remember?” Sónya went on. “I saw it then and told everybody, you and Dunyásha. I saw him lying on a bed,” said she, making a gesture with her hand and a lifted finger at each detail, “and that he had his eyes closed and was covered just with a pink quilt, and that his hands were folded,” she concluded, convincing herself that the details she had just seen were exactly what she had seen in the mirror.

She had in fact seen nothing then but had mentioned the first thing that came into her head, but what she had invented then seemed to her now as real as any other recollection. She not only remembered what she had then said—that he turned to look at her and smiled and was covered with something red—but was firmly convinced that she had then seen and said that he was covered with a pink quilt and that his eyes were closed.

“Yes, yes, it really was pink!” cried Natásha, who now thought she too remembered the word pink being used, and saw in this the most extraordinary and mysterious part of the prediction.

“But what does it mean?” she added meditatively.

“Oh, I don’t know, it is all so strange,” replied Sónya, clutching at her head.

A few minutes later Prince Andrew rang and Natásha went to him, but Sónya, feeling unusually excited and touched, remained at the window thinking about the strangeness of what had occurred.

They had an opportunity that day to send letters to the army, and the countess was writing to her son.

“Sónya!” said the countess, raising her eyes from her letter as her niece passed, “Sónya, won’t you write to Nicholas?” She spoke in a soft, tremulous voice, and in the weary eyes that looked over her spectacles Sónya read all that the countess meant to convey with these words. Those eyes expressed entreaty, shame at having to ask, fear of a refusal, and readiness for relentless hatred in case of such refusal.

Sónya went up to the countess and, kneeling down, kissed her hand.

“Yes, Mamma, I will write,” said she.

Sónya was softened, excited, and touched by all that had occurred that day, especially by the mysterious fulfillment she had just seen of her

vision. Now that she knew that the renewal of Natásha's relations with Prince Andrew would prevent Nicholas from marrying Princess Mary, she was joyfully conscious of a return of that self-sacrificing spirit in which she was accustomed to live and loved to live. So with a joyful consciousness of performing a magnanimous deed—interrupted several times by the tears that dimmed her velvety black eyes—she wrote that touching letter the arrival of which had so amazed Nicholas.