

CHAPTER II

Besides a feeling of aloofness from everybody Natásha was feeling a special estrangement from the members of her own family. All of them—her father, mother, and Sónya—were so near to her, so familiar, so commonplace, that all their words and feelings seemed an insult to the world in which she had been living of late, and she felt not merely indifferent to them but regarded them with hostility. She heard Dunyásha's words about Peter Ilýnich and a misfortune, but did not grasp them.

“What misfortune? What misfortune can happen to them? They just live their own old, quiet, and commonplace life,” thought Natásha.

As she entered the ballroom her father was hurriedly coming out of her mother's room. His face was puckered up and wet with tears. He had evidently run out of that room to give vent to the sobs that were choking him. When he saw Natásha he waved his arms despairingly and burst into convulsively painful sobs that distorted his soft round face.

“Pe... Pétya... Go, go, she... is calling...” and weeping like a child and quickly shuffling on his feeble legs to a chair, he almost fell into it, covering his face with his hands.

Suddenly an electric shock seemed to run through Natásha's whole being. Terrible anguish struck her heart, she felt a dreadful ache as if something was being torn inside her and she were dying. But the pain was immediately followed by a feeling of release from the oppressive constraint that had prevented her taking part in life. The sight of her father, the terribly wild cries of her mother that she heard through the door, made her immediately forget herself and her own grief.

She ran to her father, but he feebly waved his arm, pointing to her mother's door. Princess Mary, pale and with quivering chin, came out from that room and taking Natásha by the arm said something to her. Natásha neither saw nor heard her. She went in with rapid steps, pausing at the door for an instant as if struggling with herself, and then ran to her mother.

The countess was lying in an armchair in a strange and awkward position, stretching out and beating her head against the wall. Sónya and the maids were holding her arms.

“Natásha! Natásha!...” cried the countess. “It's not true... it's not true... He's lying... Natásha!” she shrieked, pushing those around her away. “Go away, all of you; it's not true! Killed!... ha, ha, ha!... It's not true!”

Natásha put one knee on the armchair, stooped over her mother, embraced her, and with unexpected strength raised her, turned her face toward herself, and clung to her.

“Mummy!... darling!... I am here, my dearest Mummy,” she kept on

whispering, not pausing an instant.

She did not let go of her mother but struggled tenderly with her, demanded a pillow and hot water, and unfastened and tore open her mother's dress.

"My dearest darling... Mummy, my precious!..." she whispered incessantly, kissing her head, her hands, her face, and feeling her own irrepressible and streaming tears tickling her nose and cheeks.

The countess pressed her daughter's hand, closed her eyes, and became quiet for a moment. Suddenly she sat up with unaccustomed swiftness, glanced vacantly around her, and seeing Natásha began to press her daughter's head with all her strength. Then she turned toward her daughter's face which was wincing with pain and gazed long at it.

"Natásha, you love me?" she said in a soft trustful whisper. "Natásha, you would not deceive me? You'll tell me the whole truth?"

Natásha looked at her with eyes full of tears and in her look there was nothing but love and an entreaty for forgiveness.

"My darling Mummy!" she repeated, straining all the power of her love to find some way of taking on herself the excess of grief that crushed her mother.

And again in a futile struggle with reality her mother, refusing to believe that she could live when her beloved boy was killed in the bloom of life, escaped from reality into a world of delirium.

Natásha did not remember how that day passed nor that night, nor the next day and night. She did not sleep and did not leave her mother. Her persevering and patient love seemed completely to surround the countess every moment, not explaining or consoling, but recalling her to life.

During the third night the countess kept very quiet for a few minutes, and Natásha rested her head on the arm of her chair and closed her eyes, but opened them again on hearing the bedstead creak. The countess was sitting up in bed and speaking softly.

"How glad I am you have come. You are tired. Won't you have some tea?" Natásha went up to her. "You have improved in looks and grown more manly," continued the countess, taking her daughter's hand.

"Mamma! What are you saying..."

"Natásha, he is no more, no more!"

And embracing her daughter, the countess began to weep for the first time.