

## CHAPTER XVII

Pierre was shown into the large, brightly lit dining room; a few minutes later he heard footsteps and Princess Mary entered with Natásha. Natásha was calm, though a severe and grave expression had again settled on her face. They all three of them now experienced that feeling of awkwardness which usually follows after a serious and heartfelt talk. It is impossible to go back to the same conversation, to talk of trifles is awkward, and yet the desire to speak is there and silence seems like affectation. They went silently to table. The footmen drew back the chairs and pushed them up again. Pierre unfolded his cold table napkin and, resolving to break the silence, looked at Natásha and at Princess Mary. They had evidently both formed the same resolution; the eyes of both shone with satisfaction and a confession that besides sorrow life also has joy.

“Do you take vodka, Count?” asked Princess Mary, and those words suddenly banished the shadows of the past. “Now tell us about yourself,” said she. “One hears such improbable wonders about you.”

“Yes,” replied Pierre with the smile of mild irony now habitual to him. “They even tell me wonders I myself never dreamed of! Mary Abrámovna invited me to her house and kept telling me what had happened, or ought to have happened, to me. Stepán Stepánych also instructed me how I ought to tell of my experiences. In general I have noticed that it is very easy to be an interesting man (I am an interesting man now); people invite me out and tell me all about myself.”

Natásha smiled and was on the point of speaking.

“We have been told,” Princess Mary interrupted her, “that you lost two millions in Moscow. Is that true?”

“But I am three times as rich as before,” returned Pierre.

Though the position was now altered by his decision to pay his wife’s debts and to rebuild his houses, Pierre still maintained that he had become three times as rich as before.

“What I have certainly gained is freedom,” he began seriously, but did not continue, noticing that this theme was too egotistic.

“And are you building?”

“Yes. Savélich says I must!”

“Tell me, you did not know of the countess’ death when you decided to remain in Moscow?” asked Princess Mary and immediately blushed, noticing that her question, following his mention of freedom, ascribed to his words a meaning he had perhaps not intended.

“No,” answered Pierre, evidently not considering awkward the meaning Princess Mary had given to his words. “I heard of it in Orël and you

cannot imagine how it shocked me. We were not an exemplary couple,” he added quickly, glancing at Natásha and noticing on her face curiosity as to how he would speak of his wife, “but her death shocked me terribly. When two people quarrel they are always both in fault, and one’s own guilt suddenly becomes terribly serious when the other is no longer alive. And then such a death... without friends and without consolation! I am very, very sorry for her,” he concluded, and was pleased to notice a look of glad approval on Natásha’s face.

“Yes, and so you are once more an eligible bachelor,” said Princess Mary.

Pierre suddenly flushed crimson and for a long time tried not to look at Natásha. When he ventured to glance her way again her face was cold, stern, and he fancied even contemptuous.

“And did you really see and speak to Napoleon, as we have been told?” said Princess Mary.

Pierre laughed.

“No, not once! Everybody seems to imagine that being taken prisoner means being Napoleon’s guest. Not only did I never see him but I heard nothing about him—I was in much lower company!”

Supper was over, and Pierre who at first declined to speak about his captivity was gradually led on to do so.

“But it’s true that you remained in Moscow to kill Napoleon?” Natásha asked with a slight smile. “I guessed it then when we met at the Súkharev tower, do you remember?”

Pierre admitted that it was true, and from that was gradually led by Princess Mary’s questions and especially by Natásha’s into giving a detailed account of his adventures.

At first he spoke with the amused and mild irony now customary with him toward everybody and especially toward himself, but when he came to describe the horrors and sufferings he had witnessed he was unconsciously carried away and began speaking with the suppressed emotion of a man re-experiencing in recollection strong impressions he has lived through.

Princess Mary with a gentle smile looked now at Pierre and now at Natásha. In the whole narrative she saw only Pierre and his goodness. Natásha, leaning on her elbow, the expression of her face constantly changing with the narrative, watched Pierre with an attention that never wandered—evidently herself experiencing all that he described. Not only her look, but her exclamations and the brief questions she put, showed Pierre that she understood just what he wished to convey. It was clear that she understood not only what he said but also what he wished to, but could not, express in words. The account Pierre gave of the incident with the child and the woman for protecting whom he was arrested was this: “It was an awful sight—children abandoned, some in the flames...

One was snatched out before my eyes... and there were women who had their things snatched off and their earrings torn out..." he flushed and grew confused. "Then a patrol arrived and all the men—all those who were not looting, that is—were arrested, and I among them."

"I am sure you're not telling us everything; I am sure you did something..." said Natásha and pausing added, "something fine?"

Pierre continued. When he spoke of the execution he wanted to pass over the horrible details, but Natásha insisted that he should not omit anything.

Pierre began to tell about Karatáev, but paused. By this time he had risen from the table and was pacing the room, Natásha following him with her eyes. Then he added:

"No, you can't understand what I learned from that illiterate man—that simple fellow."

"Yes, yes, go on!" said Natásha. "Where is he?"

"They killed him almost before my eyes."

And Pierre, his voice trembling continually, went on to tell of the last days of their retreat, of Karatáev's illness and his death.

He told of his adventures as he had never yet recalled them. He now, as it were, saw a new meaning in all he had gone through. Now that he was telling it all to Natásha he experienced that pleasure which a man has when women listen to him—not clever women who when listening either try to remember what they hear to enrich their minds and when opportunity offers to retell it, or who wish to adopt it to some thought of their own and promptly contribute their own clever comments prepared in their little mental workshop—but the pleasure given by real women gifted with a capacity to select and absorb the very best a man shows of himself. Natásha without knowing it was all attention: she did not lose a word, no single quiver in Pierre's voice, no look, no twitch of a muscle in his face, nor a single gesture. She caught the unfinished word in its flight and took it straight into her open heart, divining the secret meaning of all Pierre's mental travail.

Princess Mary understood his story and sympathized with him, but she now saw something else that absorbed all her attention. She saw the possibility of love and happiness between Natásha and Pierre, and the first thought of this filled her heart with gladness.

It was three o'clock in the morning. The footmen came in with sad and stern faces to change the candles, but no one noticed them.

Pierre finished his story. Natásha continued to look at him intently with bright, attentive, and animated eyes, as if trying to understand something more which he had perhaps left untold. Pierre in shamefaced and happy confusion glanced occasionally at her, and tried to think what to say next to introduce a fresh subject. Princess Mary was silent. It

occurred to none of them that it was three o'clock and time to go to bed.

"People speak of misfortunes and sufferings," remarked Pierre, "but if at this moment I were asked: 'Would you rather be what you were before you were taken prisoner, or go through all this again?' then for heaven's sake let me again have captivity and horseflesh! We imagine that when we are thrown out of our usual ruts all is lost, but it is only then that what is new and good begins. While there is life there is happiness. There is much, much before us. I say this to you," he added, turning to Natásha.

"Yes, yes," she said, answering something quite different. "I too should wish nothing but to relive it all from the beginning."

Pierre looked intently at her.

"Yes, and nothing more," said Natásha.

"It's not true, not true!" cried Pierre. "I am not to blame for being alive and wishing to live—nor you either."

Suddenly Natásha bent her head, covered her face with her hands, and began to cry.

"What is it, Natásha?" said Princess Mary.

"Nothing, nothing." She smiled at Pierre through her tears. "Good night! It is time for bed."

Pierre rose and took his leave.

Princess Mary and Natásha met as usual in the bedroom. They talked of what Pierre had told them. Princess Mary did not express her opinion of Pierre nor did Natásha speak of him.

"Well, good night, Mary!" said Natásha. "Do you know, I am often afraid that by not speaking of him" (she meant Prince Andrew) "for fear of not doing justice to our feelings, we forget him."

Princess Mary sighed deeply and thereby acknowledged the justice of Natásha's remark, but she did not express agreement in words.

"Is it possible to forget?" said she.

"It did me so much good to tell all about it today. It was hard and painful, but good, very good!" said Natásha. "I am sure he really loved him. That is why I told him... Was it all right?" she added, suddenly blushing.

"To tell Pierre? Oh, yes. What a splendid man he is!" said Princess Mary.

“Do you know, Mary...” Natásha suddenly said with a mischievous smile such as Princess Mary had not seen on her face for a long time, “he has somehow grown so clean, smooth, and fresh—as if he had just come out of a Russian bath; do you understand? Out of a moral bath. Isn’t it true?”

“Yes,” replied Princess Mary. “He has greatly improved.”

“With a short coat and his hair cropped; just as if, well, just as if he had come straight from the bath... Papa used to...”

“I understand why he” (Prince Andrew) “liked no one so much as him,” said Princess Mary.

“Yes, and yet he is quite different. They say men are friends when they are quite different. That must be true. Really he is quite unlike him—in everything.”

“Yes, but he’s wonderful.”

“Well, good night,” said Natásha.

And the same mischievous smile lingered for a long time on her face as if it had been forgotten there.