

## CHAPTER IX

It was the eve of St. Nicholas, the fifth of December, 1820. Natásha had been staying at her brother's with her husband and children since early autumn. Pierre had gone to Petersburg on business of his own for three weeks as he said, but had remained there nearly seven weeks and was expected back every minute.

Besides the Bezúkhov family, Nicholas' old friend the retired General Vasíli Dmítrich Denísov was staying with the Rostóvs this fifth of December.

On the sixth, which was his name day when the house would be full of visitors, Nicholas knew he would have to exchange his Tartar tunic for a tail coat, and put on narrow boots with pointed toes, and drive to the new church he had built, and then receive visitors who would come to congratulate him, offer them refreshments, and talk about the elections of the nobility; but he considered himself entitled to spend the eve of that day in his usual way. He examined the bailiff's accounts of the village in Ryazán which belonged to his wife's nephew, wrote two business letters, and walked over to the granaries, cattle yards and stables before dinner. Having taken precautions against the general drunkenness to be expected on the morrow because it was a great saint's day, he returned to dinner, and without having time for a private talk with his wife sat down at the long table laid for twenty persons, at which the whole household had assembled. At that table were his mother, his mother's old lady companion Belóva, his wife, their three children with their governess and tutor, his wife's nephew with his tutor, Sónya, Denísov, Natásha, her three children, their governess, and old Michael Ivánovich, the late prince's architect, who was living on in retirement at Bald Hills.

Countess Mary sat at the other end of the table. When her husband took his place she concluded, from the rapid manner in which after taking up his table napkin he pushed back the tumbler and wineglass standing before him, that he was out of humor, as was sometimes the case when he came in to dinner straight from the farm—especially before the soup. Countess Mary well knew that mood of his, and when she herself was in a good frame of mind quietly waited till he had had his soup and then began to talk to him and make him admit that there was no cause for his ill-humor. But today she quite forgot that and was hurt that he should be angry with her without any reason, and she felt unhappy. She asked him where he had been. He replied. She again inquired whether everything was going well on the farm. Her unnatural tone made him wince unpleasantly and he replied hastily.

“Then I'm not mistaken,” thought Countess Mary. “Why is he cross with me?” She concluded from his tone that he was vexed with her and wished to end the conversation. She knew her remarks sounded unnatural, but could not refrain from asking some more questions.

Thanks to Denísov the conversation at table soon became general and lively, and she did not talk to her husband. When they left the table

and went as usual to thank the old countess, Countess Mary held out her hand and kissed her husband, and asked him why he was angry with her.

“You always have such strange fancies! I didn’t even think of being angry,” he replied.

But the word always seemed to her to imply: “Yes, I am angry but I won’t tell you why.”

Nicholas and his wife lived together so happily that even Sónya and the old countess, who felt jealous and would have liked them to disagree, could find nothing to reproach them with; but even they had their moments of antagonism. Occasionally, and it was always just after they had been happiest together, they suddenly had a feeling of estrangement and hostility, which occurred most frequently during Countess Mary’s pregnancies, and this was such a time.

“Well, messieurs et mesdames,” said Nicholas loudly and with apparent cheerfulness (it seemed to Countess Mary that he did it on purpose to vex her), “I have been on my feet since six this morning. Tomorrow I shall have to suffer, so today I’ll go and rest.”

And without a word to his wife he went to the little sitting room and lay down on the sofa.

“That’s always the way,” thought Countess Mary. “He talks to everyone except me. I see... I see that I am repulsive to him, especially when I am in this condition.” She looked down at her expanded figure and in the glass at her pale, sallow, emaciated face in which her eyes now looked larger than ever.

And everything annoyed her—Denísov’s shouting and laughter, Natásha’s talk, and especially a quick glance Sónya gave her.

Sónya was always the first excuse Countess Mary found for feeling irritated.

Having sat awhile with her visitors without understanding anything of what they were saying, she softly left the room and went to the nursery.

The children were playing at “going to Moscow” in a carriage made of chairs and invited her to go with them. She sat down and played with them a little, but the thought of her husband and his unreasonable crossness worried her. She got up and, walking on tiptoe with difficulty, went to the small sitting room.

“Perhaps he is not asleep; I’ll have an explanation with him,” she said to herself. Little Andrew, her eldest boy, imitating his mother, followed her on tiptoe. She did not notice him.

“Mary, dear, I think he is asleep—he was so tired,” said Sónya, meeting her in the large sitting room (it seemed to Countess Mary that she crossed her path everywhere). “Andrew may wake him.”

Countess Mary looked round, saw little Andrew following her, felt that Sónya was right, and for that very reason flushed and with evident difficulty refrained from saying something harsh. She made no reply, but to avoid obeying Sónya beckoned to Andrew to follow her quietly and went to the door. Sónya went away by another door. From the room in which Nicholas was sleeping came the sound of his even breathing, every slightest tone of which was familiar to his wife. As she listened to it she saw before her his smooth handsome forehead, his mustache, and his whole face, as she had so often seen it in the stillness of the night when he slept. Nicholas suddenly moved and cleared his throat. And at that moment little Andrew shouted from outside the door: "Papa! Mamma's standing here!" Countess Mary turned pale with fright and made signs to the boy. He grew silent, and quiet ensued for a moment, terrible to Countess Mary. She knew how Nicholas disliked being waked. Then through the door she heard Nicholas clearing his throat again and stirring, and his voice said crossly:

"I can't get a moment's peace.... Mary, is that you? Why did you bring him here?"

"I only came in to look and did not notice... forgive me...."

Nicholas coughed and said no more. Countess Mary moved away from the door and took the boy back to the nursery. Five minutes later little black-eyed three-year-old Natásha, her father's pet, having learned from her brother that Papa was asleep and Mamma was in the sitting room, ran to her father unobserved by her mother. The dark-eyed little girl boldly opened the creaking door, went up to the sofa with energetic steps of her sturdy little legs, and having examined the position of her father, who was asleep with his back to her, rose on tiptoe and kissed the hand which lay under his head. Nicholas turned with a tender smile on his face.

"Natásha, Natásha!" came Countess Mary's frightened whisper from the door. "Papa wants to sleep."

"No, Mamma, he doesn't want to sleep," said little Natásha with conviction. "He's laughing."

Nicholas lowered his legs, rose, and took his daughter in his arms.

"Come in, Mary," he said to his wife.

She went in and sat down by her husband.

"I did not notice him following me," she said timidly. "I just looked in."

Holding his little girl with one arm, Nicholas glanced at his wife and, seeing her guilty expression, put his other arm around her and kissed her hair.

"May I kiss Mamma?" he asked Natásha.

Natásha smiled bashfully.

“Again!” she commanded, pointing with a peremptory gesture to the spot where Nicholas had placed the kiss.

“I don’t know why you think I am cross,” said Nicholas, replying to the question he knew was in his wife’s mind.

“You have no idea how unhappy, how lonely, I feel when you are like that. It always seems to me...”

“Mary, don’t talk nonsense. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” he said gaily.

“It seems to be that you can’t love me, that I am so plain... always... and now... in this cond...”

“Oh, how absurd you are! It is not beauty that endears, it’s love that makes us see beauty. It is only Malvínas and women of that kind who are loved for their beauty. But do I love my wife? I don’t love her, but... I don’t know how to put it. Without you, or when something comes between us like this, I seem lost and can’t do anything. Now do I love my finger? I don’t love it, but just try to cut it off!”

“I’m not like that myself, but I understand. So you’re not angry with me?”

“Awfully angry!” he said, smiling and getting up. And smoothing his hair he began to pace the room.

“Do you know, Mary, what I’ve been thinking?” he began, immediately thinking aloud in his wife’s presence now that they had made it up.

He did not ask if she was ready to listen to him. He did not care. A thought had occurred to him and so it belonged to her also. And he told her of his intention to persuade Pierre to stay with them till spring.

Countess Mary listened till he had finished, made some remark, and in her turn began thinking aloud. Her thoughts were about the children.

“You can see the woman in her already,” she said in French, pointing to little Natásha. “You reproach us women with being illogical. Here is our logic. I say: ‘Papa wants to sleep!’ but she says, ‘No, he’s laughing.’ And she was right,” said Countess Mary with a happy smile.

“Yes, yes.” And Nicholas, taking his little daughter in his strong hand, lifted her high, placed her on his shoulder, held her by the legs, and paced the room with her. There was an expression of carefree happiness on the faces of both father and daughter.

“But you know you may be unfair. You are too fond of this one,” his wife whispered in French.

“Yes, but what am I to do?... I try not to show...”

At that moment they heard the sound of the door pulley and footsteps in the hall and anteroom, as if someone had arrived.

“Somebody has come.”

“I am sure it is Pierre. I will go and see,” said Countess Mary and left the room.

In her absence Nicholas allowed himself to give his little daughter a gallop round the room. Out of breath, he took the laughing child quickly from his shoulder and pressed her to his heart. His capers reminded him of dancing, and looking at the child’s round happy little face he thought of what she would be like when he was an old man, taking her into society and dancing the mazurka with her as his old father had danced Daniel Cooper with his daughter.

“It is he, it is he, Nicholas!” said Countess Mary, re-entering the room a few minutes later. “Now our Natásha has come to life. You should have seen her ecstasy, and how he caught it for having stayed away so long. Well, come along now, quick, quick! It’s time you two were parted,” she added, looking smilingly at the little girl who clung to her father.

Nicholas went out holding the child by the hand.

Countess Mary remained in the sitting room.

“I should never, never have believed that one could be so happy,” she whispered to herself. A smile lit up her face but at the same time she sighed, and her deep eyes expressed a quiet sadness as though she felt, through her happiness, that there is another sort of happiness unattainable in this life and of which she involuntarily thought at that instant.