

CHAPTER XI

Two months previously when Pierre was already staying with the Rostóvs he had received a letter from Prince Theodore, asking him to come to Petersburg to confer on some important questions that were being discussed there by a society of which Pierre was one of the principal founders.

On reading that letter (she always read her husband's letters) Natásha herself suggested that he should go to Petersburg, though she would feel his absence very acutely. She attributed immense importance to all her husband's intellectual and abstract interests though she did not understand them, and she always dreaded being a hindrance to him in such matters. To Pierre's timid look of inquiry after reading the letter she replied by asking him to go, but to fix a definite date for his return. He was given four weeks' leave of absence.

Ever since that leave of absence had expired, more than a fortnight before, Natásha had been in a constant state of alarm, depression, and irritability.

Denísov, now a general on the retired list and much dissatisfied with the present state of affairs, had arrived during that fortnight. He looked at Natásha with sorrow and surprise as at a bad likeness of a person once dear. A dull, dejected look, random replies, and talk about the nursery was all he saw and heard from his former enchantress.

Natásha was sad and irritable all that time, especially when her mother, her brother, Sónya, or Countess Mary in their efforts to console her tried to excuse Pierre and suggested reasons for his delay in returning.

"It's all nonsense, all rubbish—those discussions which lead to nothing and all those idiotic societies!" Natásha declared of the very affairs in the immense importance of which she firmly believed.

And she would go to the nursery to nurse Pétya, her only boy. No one else could tell her anything so comforting or so reasonable as this little three-month-old creature when he lay at her breast and she was conscious of the movement of his lips and the snuffling of his little nose. That creature said: "You are angry, you are jealous, you would like to pay him out, you are afraid—but here am I! And I am he..." and that was unanswerable. It was more than true.

During that fortnight of anxiety Natásha resorted to the baby for comfort so often, and fussed over him so much, that she overfed him and he fell ill. She was terrified by his illness, and yet that was just what she needed. While attending to him she bore the anxiety about her husband more easily.

She was nursing her boy when the sound of Pierre's sleigh was heard at the front door, and the old nurse—knowing how to please her mistress—entered the room inaudibly but hurriedly and with a beaming face.

“Has he come?” Natásha asked quickly in a whisper, afraid to move lest she should rouse the dozing baby.

“He’s come, ma’am,” whispered the nurse.

The blood rushed to Natásha’s face and her feet involuntarily moved, but she could not jump up and run out. The baby again opened his eyes and looked at her. “You’re here?” he seemed to be saying, and again lazily smacked his lips.

Cautiously withdrawing her breast, Natásha rocked him a little, handed him to the nurse, and went with rapid steps toward the door. But at the door she stopped as if her conscience reproached her for having in her joy left the child too soon, and she glanced round. The nurse with raised elbows was lifting the infant over the rail of his cot.

“Go, ma’am! Don’t worry, go!” she whispered, smiling, with the kind of familiarity that grows up between a nurse and her mistress.

Natásha ran with light footsteps to the anteroom.

Denísov, who had come out of the study into the dancing room with his pipe, now for the first time recognized the old Natásha. A flood of brilliant, joyful light poured from her transfigured face.

“He’s come!” she exclaimed as she ran past, and Denísov felt that he too was delighted that Pierre, whom he did not much care for, had returned.

On reaching the vestibule Natásha saw a tall figure in a fur coat unwinding his scarf. “It’s he! It’s really he! He has come!” she said to herself, and rushing at him embraced him, pressed his head to her breast, and then pushed him back and gazed at his ruddy, happy face, covered with hoarfrost. “Yes, it is he, happy and contented....”

Then all at once she remembered the tortures of suspense she had experienced for the last fortnight, and the joy that had lit up her face vanished; she frowned and overwhelmed Pierre with a torrent of reproaches and angry words.

“Yes, it’s all very well for you. You are pleased, you’ve had a good time.... But what about me? You might at least have shown consideration for the children. I am nursing and my milk was spoiled.... Pétya was at death’s door. But you were enjoying yourself. Yes, enjoying...”

Pierre knew he was not to blame, for he could not have come sooner; he knew this outburst was unseemly and would blow over in a minute or two; above all he knew that he himself was bright and happy. He wanted to smile but dared not even think of doing so. He made a piteous, frightened face and bent down.

“I could not, on my honor. But how is Pétya?”

“All right now. Come along! I wonder you’re not ashamed! If only you

could see what I was like without you, how I suffered!”

“You are well?”

“Come, come!” she said, not letting go of his arm. And they went to their rooms.

When Nicholas and his wife came to look for Pierre he was in the nursery holding his baby son, who was again awake, on his huge right palm and dandling him. A blissful bright smile was fixed on the baby’s broad face with its toothless open mouth. The storm was long since over and there was bright, joyous sunshine on Natásha’s face as she gazed tenderly at her husband and child.

“And have you talked everything well over with Prince Theodore?” she asked.

“Yes, capitally.”

“You see, he holds it up.” (She meant the baby’s head.) “But how he did frighten me... You’ve seen the princess? Is it true she’s in love with that...”

“Yes, just fancy...”

At that moment Nicholas and Countess Mary came in. Pierre with the baby on his hand stooped, kissed them, and replied to their inquiries. But in spite of much that was interesting and had to be discussed, the baby with the little cap on its unsteady head evidently absorbed all his attention.

“How sweet!” said Countess Mary, looking at and playing with the baby. “Now, Nicholas,” she added, turning to her husband, “I can’t understand how it is you don’t see the charm of these delicious marvels.”

“I don’t and can’t,” replied Nicholas, looking coldly at the baby. “A lump of flesh. Come along, Pierre!”

“And yet he’s such an affectionate father,” said Countess Mary, vindicating her husband, “but only after they are a year old or so...”

“Now, Pierre nurses them splendidly,” said Natásha. “He says his hand is just made for a baby’s seat. Just look!”

“Only not for this...” Pierre suddenly exclaimed with a laugh, and shifting the baby he gave him to the nurse.