

CHAPTER XII

As in every large household, there were at Bald Hills several perfectly distinct worlds which merged into one harmonious whole, though each retained its own peculiarities and made concessions to the others. Every event, joyful or sad, that took place in that house was important to all these worlds, but each had its own special reasons to rejoice or grieve over that occurrence independently of the others.

For instance, Pierre's return was a joyful and important event and they all felt it to be so.

The servants—the most reliable judges of their masters because they judge not by their conversation or expressions of feeling but by their acts and way of life—were glad of Pierre's return because they knew that when he was there Count Nicholas would cease going every day to attend to the estate, and would be in better spirits and temper, and also because they would all receive handsome presents for the holidays.

The children and their governesses were glad of Pierre's return because no one else drew them into the social life of the household as he did. He alone could play on the clavichord that *écossaise* (his only piece) to which, as he said, all possible dances could be danced, and they felt sure he had brought presents for them all.

Young Nicholas, now a slim lad of fifteen, delicate and intelligent, with curly light-brown hair and beautiful eyes, was delighted because Uncle Pierre as he called him was the object of his rapturous and passionate affection. No one had instilled into him this love for Pierre whom he saw only occasionally. Countess Mary who had brought him up had done her utmost to make him love her husband as she loved him, and little Nicholas did love his uncle, but loved him with just a shade of contempt. Pierre, however, he adored. He did not want to be an hussar or a Knight of St. George like his uncle Nicholas; he wanted to be learned, wise, and kind like Pierre. In Pierre's presence his face always shone with pleasure and he flushed and was breathless when Pierre spoke to him. He did not miss a single word he uttered, and would afterwards, with Dessalles or by himself, recall and reconsider the meaning of everything Pierre had said. Pierre's past life and his unhappiness prior to 1812 (of which young Nicholas had formed a vague poetic picture from some words he had overheard), his adventures in Moscow, his captivity, Platón Karatáev (of whom he had heard from Pierre), his love for Natásha (of whom the lad was also particularly fond), and especially Pierre's friendship with the father whom Nicholas could not remember—all this made Pierre in his eyes a hero and a saint.

From broken remarks about Natásha and his father, from the emotion with which Pierre spoke of that dead father, and from the careful, reverent tenderness with which Natásha spoke of him, the boy, who was only just beginning to guess what love is, derived the notion that his father had loved Natásha and when dying had left her to his friend. But the father whom the boy did not remember appeared to him a divinity who could not be pictured, and of whom he never thought without a swelling heart and

tears of sadness and rapture. So the boy also was happy that Pierre had arrived.

The guests welcomed Pierre because he always helped to enliven and unite any company he was in.

The grown-up members of the family, not to mention his wife, were pleased to have back a friend whose presence made life run more smoothly and peacefully.

The old ladies were pleased with the presents he brought them, and especially that Natásha would now be herself again.

Pierre felt the different outlooks of these various worlds and made haste to satisfy all their expectations.

Though the most absent-minded and forgetful of men, Pierre, with the aid of a list his wife drew up, had now bought everything, not forgetting his mother—and brother-in-law's commissions, nor the dress material for a present to Belóva, nor toys for his wife's nephews. In the early days of his marriage it had seemed strange to him that his wife should expect him not to forget to procure all the things he undertook to buy, and he had been taken aback by her serious annoyance when on his first trip he forgot everything. But in time he grew used to this demand. Knowing that Natásha asked nothing for herself, and gave him commissions for others only when he himself had offered to undertake them, he now found an unexpected and childlike pleasure in this purchase of presents for everyone in the house, and never forgot anything. If he now incurred Natásha's censure it was only for buying too many and too expensive things. To her other defects (as most people thought them, but which to Pierre were qualities) of untidiness and neglect of herself, she now added stinginess.

From the time that Pierre began life as a family man on a footing entailing heavy expenditure, he had noticed to his surprise that he spent only half as much as before, and that his affairs—which had been in disorder of late, chiefly because of his first wife's debts—had begun to improve.

Life was cheaper because it was circumscribed: that most expensive luxury, the kind of life that can be changed at any moment, was no longer his nor did he wish for it. He felt that his way of life had now been settled once for all till death and that to change it was not in his power, and so that way of life proved economical.

With a merry, smiling face Pierre was sorting his purchases.

“What do you think of this?” said he, unrolling a piece of stuff like a shopman.

Natásha, who was sitting opposite to him with her eldest daughter on her lap, turned her sparkling eyes swiftly from her husband to the things he showed her.

“That’s for Belóva? Excellent!” She felt the quality of the material.

“It was a ruble an arshin, I suppose?”

Pierre told her the price.

“Too dear!” Natásha remarked. “How pleased the children will be and Mamma too! Only you need not have bought me this,” she added, unable to suppress a smile as she gazed admiringly at a gold comb set with pearls, of a kind then just coming into fashion.

“Adèle tempted me: she kept on telling me to buy it,” returned Pierre.

“When am I to wear it?” and Natásha stuck it in her coil of hair. “When I take little Másha into society? Perhaps they will be fashionable again by then. Well, let’s go now.”

And collecting the presents they went first to the nursery and then to the old countess’ rooms.

The countess was sitting with her companion Belóva, playing grand-patience as usual, when Pierre and Natásha came into the drawing room with parcels under their arms.

The countess was now over sixty, was quite gray, and wore a cap with a frill that surrounded her face. Her face had shriveled, her upper lip had sunk in, and her eyes were dim.

After the deaths of her son and husband in such rapid succession, she felt herself a being accidentally forgotten in this world and left without aim or object for her existence. She ate, drank, slept, or kept awake, but did not live. Life gave her no new impressions. She wanted nothing from life but tranquillity, and that tranquillity only death could give her. But until death came she had to go on living, that is, to use her vital forces. A peculiarity one sees in very young children and very old people was particularly evident in her. Her life had no external aims—only a need to exercise her various functions and inclinations was apparent. She had to eat, sleep, think, speak, weep, work, give vent to her anger, and so on, merely because she had a stomach, a brain, muscles, nerves, and a liver. She did these things not under any external impulse as people in the full vigor of life do, when behind the purpose for which they strive that of exercising their functions remains unnoticed. She talked only because she physically needed to exercise her tongue and lungs. She cried as a child does, because her nose had to be cleared, and so on. What for people in their full vigor is an aim was for her evidently merely a pretext.

Thus in the morning—especially if she had eaten anything rich the day before—she felt a need of being angry and would choose as the handiest pretext Belóva’s deafness.

She would begin to say something to her in a low tone from the other end of the room.

“It seems a little warmer today, my dear,” she would murmur.

And when Belóva replied: “Oh yes, they’ve come,” she would mutter angrily: “O Lord! How stupid and deaf she is!”

Another pretext would be her snuff, which would seem too dry or too damp or not rubbed fine enough. After these fits of irritability her face would grow yellow, and her maids knew by infallible symptoms when Belóva would again be deaf, the snuff damp, and the countess’ face yellow. Just as she needed to work off her spleen so she had sometimes to exercise her still-existing faculty of thinking—and the pretext for that was a game of patience. When she needed to cry, the deceased count would be the pretext. When she wanted to be agitated, Nicholas and his health would be the pretext, and when she felt a need to speak spitefully, the pretext would be Countess Mary. When her vocal organs needed exercise, which was usually toward seven o’clock when she had had an after-dinner rest in a darkened room, the pretext would be the retelling of the same stories over and over again to the same audience.

The old lady’s condition was understood by the whole household though no one ever spoke of it, and they all made every possible effort to satisfy her needs. Only by a rare glance exchanged with a sad smile between Nicholas, Pierre, Natásha, and Countess Mary was the common understanding of her condition expressed.

But those glances expressed something more: they said that she had played her part in life, that what they now saw was not her whole self, that we must all become like her, and that they were glad to yield to her, to restrain themselves for this once precious being formerly as full of life as themselves, but now so much to be pitied. “Memento mori,” said these glances.

Only the really heartless, the stupid ones of that household, and the little children failed to understand this and avoided her.