

CHAPTER XV

The conversation at supper was not about politics or societies, but turned on the subject Nicholas liked best—recollections of 1812. Denisov started these and Pierre was particularly agreeable and amusing about them. The family separated on the most friendly terms.

After supper Nicholas, having undressed in his study and given instructions to the steward who had been waiting for him, went to the bedroom in his dressing gown, where he found his wife still at her table, writing.

“What are you writing, Mary?” Nicholas asked.

Countess Mary blushed. She was afraid that what she was writing would not be understood or approved by her husband.

She had wanted to conceal what she was writing from him, but at the same time was glad he had surprised her at it and that she would now have to tell him.

“A diary, Nicholas,” she replied, handing him a blue exercise book filled with her firm, bold writing.

“A diary?” Nicholas repeated with a shade of irony, and he took up the book.

It was in French.

December 4. Today when Andrúsha (her eldest boy) woke up he did not wish to dress and Mademoiselle Louise sent for me. He was naughty and obstinate. I tried threats, but he only grew angrier. Then I took the matter in hand: I left him alone and began with nurse’s help to get the other children up, telling him that I did not love him. For a long time he was silent, as if astonished, then he jumped out of bed, ran to me in his shirt, and sobbed so that I could not calm him for a long time. It was plain that what troubled him most was that he had grieved me. Afterwards in the evening when I gave him his ticket, he again began crying piteously and kissing me. One can do anything with him by tenderness.

“What is a ‘ticket’?” Nicholas inquired.

“I have begun giving the elder ones marks every evening, showing how they have behaved.”

Nicholas looked into the radiant eyes that were gazing at him, and continued to turn over the pages and read. In the diary was set down everything in the children’s lives that seemed noteworthy to their mother as showing their characters or suggesting general reflections on educational methods. They were for the most part quite insignificant

trifles, but did not seem so to the mother or to the father either, now that he read this diary about his children for the first time.

Under the date “5” was entered:

Mitya was naughty at table. Papa said he was to have no pudding. He had none, but looked so unhappily and greedily at the others while they were eating! I think that punishment by depriving children of sweets only develops their greediness. Must tell Nicholas this.

Nicholas put down the book and looked at his wife. The radiant eyes gazed at him questioningly: would he approve or disapprove of her diary? There could be no doubt not only of his approval but also of his admiration for his wife.

Perhaps it need not be done so pedantically, thought Nicholas, or even done at all, but this untiring, continual spiritual effort of which the sole aim was the children’s moral welfare delighted him. Had Nicholas been able to analyze his feelings he would have found that his steady, tender, and proud love of his wife rested on his feeling of wonder at her spirituality and at the lofty moral world, almost beyond his reach, in which she had her being.

He was proud of her intelligence and goodness, recognized his own insignificance beside her in the spiritual world, and rejoiced all the more that she with such a soul not only belonged to him but was part of himself.

“I quite, quite approve, my dearest!” said he with a significant look, and after a short pause he added: “And I behaved badly today. You weren’t in the study. We began disputing—Pierre and I—and I lost my temper. But he is impossible: such a child! I don’t know what would become of him if Natásha didn’t keep him in hand.... Have you any idea why he went to Petersburg? They have formed...”

“Yes, I know,” said Countess Mary. “Natásha told me.”

“Well, then, you know,” Nicholas went on, growing hot at the mere recollection of their discussion, “he wanted to convince me that it is every honest man’s duty to go against the government, and that the oath of allegiance and duty... I am sorry you weren’t there. They all fell on me—Denísov and Natásha... Natásha is absurd. How she rules over him! And yet there need only be a discussion and she has no words of her own but only repeats his sayings...” added Nicholas, yielding to that irresistible inclination which tempts us to judge those nearest and dearest to us. He forgot that what he was saying about Natásha could have been applied word for word to himself in relation to his wife.

“Yes, I have noticed that,” said Countess Mary.

“When I told him that duty and the oath were above everything, he started proving goodness knows what! A pity you were not there—what would you have said?”

“As I see it you were quite right, and I told Natásha so. Pierre says everybody is suffering, tortured, and being corrupted, and that it is our duty to help our neighbor. Of course he is right there,” said Countess Mary, “but he forgets that we have other duties nearer to us, duties indicated to us by God Himself, and that though we might expose ourselves to risks we must not risk our children.”

“Yes, that’s it! That’s just what I said to him,” put in Nicholas, who fancied he really had said it. “But they insisted on their own view: love of one’s neighbor and Christianity—and all this in the presence of young Nicholas, who had gone into my study and broke all my things.”

“Ah, Nicholas, do you know I am often troubled about little Nicholas,” said Countess Mary. “He is such an exceptional boy. I am afraid I neglect him in favor of my own: we all have children and relations while he has no one. He is constantly alone with his thoughts.”

“Well, I don’t think you need reproach yourself on his account. All that the fondest mother could do for her son you have done and are doing for him, and of course I am glad of it. He is a fine lad, a fine lad! This evening he listened to Pierre in a sort of trance, and fancy—as we were going in to supper I looked and he had broken everything on my table to bits, and he told me of it himself at once! I never knew him to tell an untruth. A fine lad, a fine lad!” repeated Nicholas, who at heart was not fond of Nicholas Bolkónski but was always anxious to recognize that he was a fine lad.

“Still, I am not the same as his own mother,” said Countess Mary. “I feel I am not the same and it troubles me. A wonderful boy, but I am dreadfully afraid for him. It would be good for him to have companions.”

“Well it won’t be for long. Next summer I’ll take him to Petersburg,” said Nicholas. “Yes, Pierre always was a dreamer and always will be,” he continued, returning to the talk in the study which had evidently disturbed him. “Well, what business is it of mine what goes on there—whether Arakchéev is bad, and all that? What business was it of mine when I married and was so deep in debt that I was threatened with prison, and had a mother who could not see or understand it? And then there are you and the children and our affairs. Is it for my own pleasure that I am at the farm or in the office from morning to night? No, but I know I must work to comfort my mother, to repay you, and not to leave the children such beggars as I was.”

Countess Mary wanted to tell him that man does not live by bread alone and that he attached too much importance to these matters. But she knew she must not say this and that it would be useless to do so. She only took his hand and kissed it. He took this as a sign of approval and a confirmation of his thoughts, and after a few minutes’ reflection continued to think aloud.

“You know, Mary, today Elias Mitrofánych” (this was his overseer) “came back from the Tambóv estate and told me they are already offering eighty thousand rubles for the forest.”

And with an eager face Nicholas began to speak of the possibility of repurchasing Otrádnoc before long, and added: "Another ten years of life and I shall leave the children... in an excellent position."

Countess Mary listened to her husband and understood all that he told her. She knew that when he thought aloud in this way he would sometimes ask her what he had been saying, and be vexed if he noticed that she had been thinking about something else. But she had to force herself to attend, for what he was saying did not interest her at all. She looked at him and did not think, but felt, about something different. She felt a submissive tender love for this man who would never understand all that she understood, and this seemed to make her love for him still stronger and added a touch of passionate tenderness. Besides this feeling which absorbed her altogether and hindered her from following the details of her husband's plans, thoughts that had no connection with what he was saying flitted through her mind. She thought of her nephew. Her husband's account of the boy's agitation while Pierre was speaking struck her forcibly, and various traits of his gentle, sensitive character recurred to her mind; and while thinking of her nephew she thought also of her own children. She did not compare them with him, but compared her feeling for them with her feeling for him, and felt with regret that there was something lacking in her feeling for young Nicholas.

Sometimes it seemed to her that this difference arose from the difference in their ages, but she felt herself to blame toward him and promised in her heart to do better and to accomplish the impossible—in this life to love her husband, her children, little Nicholas, and all her neighbors, as Christ loved mankind. Countess Mary's soul always strove toward the infinite, the eternal, and the absolute, and could therefore never be at peace. A stern expression of the lofty, secret suffering of a soul burdened by the body appeared on her face. Nicholas gazed at her. "O God! What will become of us if she dies, as I always fear when her face is like that?" thought he, and placing himself before the icon he began to say his evening prayers.