



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Russian Christmas Party

Leo Tolstoy

Count Rostow's affairs were going from bad to worse. He was of a warm, generous nature, with unlimited faith in his servants, and hence was blind to the mismanagement and dishonesty which had sapped his fortune. The possessor of a handsome establishment at the Russian capital, Moscow, the owner of rich provincial estates, and the inheritor of a noble name and wealth, he was nevertheless on the verge of ruin. He had given up his appointment as _Marechal de la Noblesse_, which he had gone to his seat of Otradnoe to assume, because it entailed too many expenses; and yet there was no improvement in the state of his finances.

Nicolas and Natacha, his son and daughter, often found their father and mother in anxious consultation, talking in low tones of the sale of their Moscow house or of their property in the neighborhood. Having thus retired into private life, the count now gave neither fetes nor entertainments. Life at Otradnoe was much less gay than in past years; still, the house and domain were as full of servants as ever, and twenty persons or more sat down to dinner daily. These were dependants, friends, and intimates, who were regarded almost as part of the family, or at any rate seemed unable to tear themselves away from it: among them a musician named Dimmler and his wife, Loghel the dancing-master and his family, and old Mlle. Below, former governess of Natacha and Sonia, the count's niece and adopted child, and now the tutor of Petia, his younger son; besides others who found it simpler to live at the count's expense than at their own. Thus, though there were no more festivities, life was carried on almost as expensively as of old, and neither the master nor the mistress ever imagined any change possible. Nicolas, again, had added to the hunting establishment; there were still fifty horses in the stables, still fifteen drivers; handsome presents were given on all birthdays and fete days, which invariably wound up as of old with a grand dinner to all the neighborhood; the count still played whist or boston, invariably letting his cards be seen by his friends, who were always ready to make up his table, and relieve him without hesitation of the few hundred roubles which constituted their principal income. The old man marched on blindfold through the tangle of his pecuniary difficulties, trying to conceal them, and only succeeding in augmenting them; having neither the courage nor the patience to untie the knots one by one.

The loving heart by his side foresaw their children's ruin, but she could not

accuse her husband, who was, alas! too old for amendment; she could only seek some remedy for the disaster. From her woman's point of view there was but one: Nicolas's marriage, namely, with some rich heiress. She clung desperately to this last chance of salvation; but if her son should refuse the wife she should propose to him, every hope of reinstating their fortune would vanish. The young lady whom she had in view was the daughter of people of the highest respectability, whom the Rostows had known from her infancy: Julie Karaguine, who, by the death of her second brother, had suddenly come into great wealth.

The countess herself wrote to Mme. Karaguine to ask her whether she could regard the match with favor, and received a most flattering answer. Indeed, Mme. Karaguine invited Nicolas to her house at Moscow, to give her daughter an opportunity of deciding for herself.

Nicolas had often heard his mother say, with tears in her eyes, that her dearest wish was to see him married. The fulfilment of this wish would sweeten her remaining days, she would say, adding covert hints as to a charming girl who would exactly suit him. One day she took the opportunity of speaking plainly to him of Julie's charms and merits, and urged him to spend a short time in Moscow before Christmas. Nicolas, who had no difficulty in guessing what she was aiming at, persuaded her to be explicit on the matter, and she owned frankly that her hope was to see their sinking fortunes restored by his marriage with her dear Julie!

"Then, mother, if I loved a penniless girl, you would desire me to sacrifice my feelings and my honor--to marry solely for money?"

"Nay, nay; you have misunderstood me," she said, not knowing how to excuse her mercenary hopes. "I wish only for your happiness!" And then, conscious that this was not her sole aim, and that she was not perfectly honest, she burst into tears.

"Do not cry, mamma; you have only to say that you really and truly desire it, and you know I would give my life to see you happy; that I would sacrifice everything, even my feelings."

But this was not his mother's notion. She asked no sacrifice, she would have none; she would sooner have sacrificed herself, if it had been possible.

"Say no more about it; you do not understand," she said, drying away her tears.

"How could she think of such a marriage?" thought Nicolas. "Does she think that because Sonia is poor I do not love her? And yet I should be a thousand times happier with her than with a doll like Julie."

He stayed in the country, and his mother did not revert to the subject. Still, as she saw the growing intimacy between Nicolas and Sonia, she could not help

worrying Sonia about every little thing, and speaking to her with colder formality. Sometimes she reproached herself for these continual pin-pricks of annoyance, and was quite vexed with the poor girl for submitting to them with such wonderful humility and sweetness, for taking every opportunity of showing her devoted gratitude, and for loving Nicolas with a faithful and disinterested affection which commanded her admiration.

Just about this time a letter came from Prince Andre, dated from Rome, whither he had gone to pass the year of probation demanded by his father as a condition to giving consent to his son's marriage with the Countess Natacha. It was the fourth the Prince had written since his departure. He ought long since to have been on his way home, he said, but the heat of the summer had caused the wound he had received at Austerlitz to reopen, and this compelled him to postpone his return till early in January.

Natacha, though she was so much in love that her very passion for Prince Andre had made her day-dreams happy, had hitherto been open to all the bright influences of her young life; but now, after nearly four months of parting, she fell into a state of extreme melancholy, and gave way to it completely. She bewailed her hard fate, she bewailed the time that was slipping away and lost to her, while her heart ached with the dull craving to love and be loved. Nicolas, too, had nearly spent his leave from his regiment, and the anticipation of his departure added gloom to the saddened household.

Christmas came; but, excepting the pompous high Mass and the other religious ceremonies, the endless string of neighbors and servants with the regular compliments of the season, and the new gowns which made their first appearance on the occasion, nothing more than usual happened on that day, or more extraordinary than twenty degrees of frost, with brilliant sunshine, a still atmosphere, and at night a glorious starry sky.

After dinner, on the third day of Christmas-tide, when every one had settled into his own corner once more, ennui reigned supreme throughout the house. Nicolas, who had been paying a round of visits in the neighborhood, was fast asleep in the drawing-room. The old count had followed his example in his room. Sonia, seated at a table in the sitting-room, was copying a drawing. The countess was playing out a "patience," and Nastacia Ivanovna, the old buffoon, with his peevish face, sitting in a window with two old women, did not say a word.

Natacha came into the room, and, after leaning over Sonia for a minute or two to examine her work, went over to her mother and stood still in front of her.

The countess looked up. "Why are you wandering about like a soul in torment? What do you want?" she said.

"Want! I want him!" replied Natacha, shortly, and her eyes glowed. "Now, here--at once!"

Her mother gazed at her anxiously.

"Do not look at me like that; you will make me cry."

"Sit down here."

"Mamma, I want him, I want him! Why must I die of weariness?" Her voice broke and tears started from her eyes. She hastily quitted the drawing-room and went to the housekeeper's room, where an old servant was scolding one of the girls who had just come in breathless from out-of-doors.

"There is a time for all things," growled the old woman. "You have had time enough for play."

"Oh, leave her in peace, Kondratievna," said Natacha. "Run away, Mavroucha--go."

Pursuing her wandering, Natacha went into the hall; an old man-servant was playing cards with two of the boys. Her entrance stopped their game and they rose. "And what am I to say to these?" thought she.

"Nikita, would you please go--what on earth can I ask for?--go and find me a cock; and you, Micha, a handful of corn."

"A handful of corn?" said Micha, laughing.

"Go, go at once," said the old man.

"And you, Fedor, can you give me a piece of chalk?"

Then she went on to the servants' hall and ordered the samovar to be got ready, though it was not yet tea-time; she wanted to try her power over Foka, the old butler, the most morose and disobliging of all the servants. He could not believe his ears, and asked her if she really meant it. "What next will our young lady want?" muttered Foka, affecting to be very cross.

No one gave so many orders as Natacha, no one sent them on so many errands at once. As soon as a servant came in sight she seemed to invent some want or message; she could not help it. It seemed as though she wanted to try her power over them; to see whether, some fine day, one or another would not rebel against her tyranny; but, on the contrary, they always flew to obey her more readily than any one else.

"And now what shall I do, where can I go?" thought she, as she slowly went along the corridor, where she presently met the buffoon.

"Nastacia Ivanovna," said she, "if I ever have children, what will they be?"

"You! Fleas and grasshoppers, you may depend upon it!"

Natacha went on. "Good God! have mercy, have mercy!" she said to herself. "Wherever I go it is always, always the same. I am so weary; what shall I do?"

Skipping lightly from step to step, she went to the upper story and dropped in on the Loghels. Two governesses were sitting chatting with M. and Mme. Loghel; dessert, consisting of dried fruit, was on the table, and they were eagerly discussing the cost of living at Moscow and Odessa. Natacha took a seat for a moment, listened with pensive attention, and then jumped up again. "The island of Madagascar!" she murmured, "Ma-da-gas-car!" and she separated the syllables. Then she left the room without answering Mme. Schoss, who was utterly mystified by her strange exclamation.

She next met Petia and a companion, both very full of some fireworks which were to be let off that evening. "Petia!" she exclaimed, "carry me down-stairs!" And she sprang upon his back, throwing her arms round his neck; and, laughing and galloping, they thus scrambled along to the head of the stairs.

"Thank you, that will do. Madagascar!" she repeated; and, jumping down, she ran down the flight.

After thus inspecting her dominions, testing her power, and convincing herself that her subjects were docile, and that there was no novelty to be got out of them, Natacha settled herself in the darkest corner of the music-room with her guitar, striking the bass strings, and trying to make an accompaniment to an air from an opera that she and Prince Andre had once heard together at St. Petersburg. The uncertain chords which her unpractised fingers sketched out would have struck the least experienced ear as wanting in harmony and musical accuracy, while to her excited imagination they brought a whole train of memories. Leaning against the wall and half hidden by a cabinet, with her eyes fixed on a thread of light that came under the door from the rooms beyond, she listened in ecstasy and dreamed of the past.

Sonia crossed the room with a glass in her hand. Natacha glanced round at her and again fixed her eyes on the streak of light. She had the strange feeling of having once before gone through the same experience--sat in the same place, surrounded by the same details, and watching Sonia pass carrying a tumbler. "Yes, it was exactly the same," she thought.

"Sonia, what is this tune?" she said, playing a few notes.

"What, are you there?" said Sonia, startled. "I do not know," she said, coming closer to listen, "unless it is from 'La Tempete';" but she spoke doubtfully.

"It was exactly so," thought Natacha. "She started as she came forward, smiling so gently; and I thought then, as I think now, that there is something in her

which is quite lacking in me. No," she said aloud, "you are quite out; it is the chorus from the 'Porteur d'Eau'--listen," and she hummed the air. "Where are you going?"

"For some fresh water to finish my drawing."

"You are always busy and I never. Where is Nicolas?"

"Asleep, I think."

"Go and wake him, Sonia. Tell him to come and sing."

Sonia went, and Natacha relapsed into dreaming and wondering how it had all happened. Not being able to solve the puzzle, she drifted into reminiscence once more. She could see him--_him_--and feel his impassioned eyes fixed on her face. "Oh, make haste back! I am so afraid he will not come yet! Besides, it is all very well, but I am growing old; I shall be quite different from what I am now! Who knows? Perhaps he will come to-day! Perhaps he is here already! Here in the drawing-room. Perhaps he came yesterday and I have forgotten."

She rose, laid down the guitar, and went into the next room. All the household party were seated round the tea-table,--the professors, the governesses, the guests; the servants were waiting on one and another--but there was no Prince Andre.

"Ah, here she is," said her father. "Come and sit down here." But Natacha stopped by her mother without heeding his bidding.

"Oh, mamma, bring him to me, give him to me soon, very soon," she murmured, swallowing down a sob. Then she sat down and listened to the others. "Good God! always the same people! always the same thing! Papa holds his cup as he always does, and blows his tea to cool it as he did yesterday, and as he will to-morrow."

She felt a sort of dull rebellion against them all; she hated them for always being the same.

After tea Sonia, Natacha, and Nicolas huddled together in their favorite, snug corner of the drawing-room; that was where they talked freely to each other.

"Do you ever feel," Natacha asked her brother, "as if there was nothing left to look forward to; as if you had had all your share of happiness, and were not so much weary as utterly dull?"

"Of course I have. Very often I have seen my friends and fellow-officers in the highest spirits and been just as jolly myself, and suddenly have been struck so dull and dismal, have so hated life, that I have wondered whether we were not all to die at once. I remember one day, for instance, when I was with the

regiment; the band was playing, and I had such a fit of melancholy that I never even thought of going to the promenade."

"How well I understand that! I recollect once," Natacha went on, "once when I was a little girl, I was punished for having eaten some plums, I think. I had not done it, and you were all dancing, and I was left alone in the school-room. How I cried! cried because I was so sorry for myself, and so vexed with you all for making me so unhappy."

"I remember; and I went to comfort you and did not know how; we were funny children then; I had a toy with bells that jingled, and I made you a present of it."

"Do you remember," said Natacha, "long before that, when we were no bigger than my hand, my uncle called us into his room, where it was quite dark, and suddenly we saw----"

"A negro!" interrupted Nicolas, smiling at her recollection. "To be sure. I can see him now; and to this day I wonder whether it was a dream or a reality, or mere fancy invented afterwards."

"He had white teeth and stared at us with his black eyes."

"Do you remember him, Sonia?"

"Yes, yes--but very dimly."

"But papa and mamma have always declared that no negro ever came to the house. And the eggs; do you remember the eggs we used to roll up at Easter; and one day how two little grinning old women came up through the floor and began to spin round the table?"

"Of course. And how papa used to put on his fur coat and fire off his gun from the balcony. And don't you remember----?" And so they went on recalling, one after the other, not the bitter memories of old age, but the bright pictures of early childhood, which float and fade on a distant horizon of poetic vagueness, midway between reality and dreams. Sonia remembered being frightened once at the sight of Nicolas in his braided jacket, and her nurse promising her that she should some day have a frock trimmed from top to bottom.

"And they told me you had been found in the garden under a cabbage," said Natacha. "I dared not say it was not true, but it puzzled me tremendously."

A door opened, and a woman put in her head, exclaiming, "Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, they have fetched the cock!"

"I do not want it now; send it away again, Polia," said Natacha.

Dimmler, who had meanwhile come into the room, went up to the harp, which stood in a corner, and in taking off the cover made the strings ring discordantly.

"Edward Karlovitch, play my favorite nocturne--Field's," cried the countess, from the adjoining room.

Dimmler struck a chord. "How quiet you young people are," he said, addressing them.

"Yes, we are studying philosophy," said Natacha, and they went on talking of their dreams.

Dimmler had no sooner begun his nocturne than Natacha, crossing the room on tiptoe, seized the wax-light that was burning on the table and carried it into the next room; then she stole back to her seat, it was now quite dark in the larger room, especially in their corner, but the silvery moonbeams came in at the wide windows and lay in broad sheets on the floor.

"Do you know," whispered Natacha, while Dimmler, after playing the nocturne, let his fingers wander over the strings, uncertain what to play next, "when I go on remembering one thing beyond another, I go back so far, so far, that at last I remember things that happened before I was born, and----"

"That is metempsychosis," interrupted Sonia, with a reminiscence of her early lessons. "The Egyptians believed that our souls had once inhabited the bodies of animals, and would return to animals again after our death."

"I do not believe that," said Natacha, still in a low voice, though the music had ceased. "But I am quite sure that we were angels once, somewhere there beyond, or, perhaps, even here; and that is the reason we remember a previous existence."

"May I join the party?" asked Dimmler, coming towards them.

"If we were once angels, how is it that we have fallen lower?"

"Lower? Who says that it is lower? Who knows what I was?" Natacha retorted with full conviction. "Since the soul is immortal, and I am to live forever in the future, I must have existed in the past, so I have eternity behind me, too."

"Yes; but it is very difficult to conceive of that eternity," said Dimmler, whose ironical smile had died away.

"Why?" asked Natacha. "After to-day comes to-morrow, and then the day after, and so on forever; yesterday has been, to-morrow will be----"

"Natacha, now it is your turn; sing me something," said her mother. "What are you doing in that corner like a party of conspirators?"

"I am not at all in the humor, mamma," said she; nevertheless she rose. Nicolas sat down to the piano; and standing, as usual, in the middle of the room, where the voice sounded best, she sang her mother's favorite ballad.

Though she had said she was not in the humor, it was long since Natacha had sung so well as she did that evening, and long before she sang so well again. Her father, who was talking over business with Mitenka in his room, hurriedly gave him some final instructions as soon as he heard the first note, as a schoolboy scrambles through his tasks to get to his play; but as the steward did not go, he sat in silence, listening, while Mitenka, too, standing in his presence, listened with evident satisfaction. Nicolas did not take his eyes off his sister's face, and only breathed when she took breath. Sonia was under the spell of that exquisite voice and thinking of the gulf of difference that lay between her and her friend, full conscious that she could never exercise such fascination. The old countess had paused in her "patience,"--a sad, fond smile played on her lips, her eyes were full of tears, and she shook her head, remembering her own youth, looking forward to her daughter's future and reflecting on her strange prospects of marriage.

Dimmler, sitting by her side, listened with rapture, his eyes half closed.

"She really has a marvellous gift!" he exclaimed. "She has nothing to learn,--such power, such sweetness, such roundness!"

"And how much I fear for her happiness!" replied the countess, who in her mother's heart could feel the flame that must some day be fatal to her child's peace.

Natacha was still singing when Petia dashed noisily into the room to announce, in triumphant tones, that a party of mummers had come.

"Idiot!" exclaimed Natacha, stopping short, and, dropping into a chair, she began to sob so violently that it was some time before she could recover herself. "It is nothing, mamma, really nothing at all," she declared, trying to smile. "Only Petia frightened me; nothing more." And her tears flowed afresh.

All the servants had dressed up, some as bears, Turks, tavern-keepers, or fine ladies; others as mongrel monsters. Bringing with them the chill of the night outside, they did not at first venture any farther than the hall; by degrees, however, they took courage; pushing each other forward for self-protection, they all soon came into the music-room. Once there, their shyness thawed; they became expansively merry, and singing, dancing, and sports were soon the order of the day. The countess, after looking at them and identifying them all, went back into the sitting-room, leaving her husband, whose jovial face encouraged them to enjoy themselves.

The young people had all vanished; but half an hour later an old marquise with patches appeared on the scene--none other than Nicolas; Petia as a Turk; a clown--Dimmler; a hussar--Natacha; and a Circassian--Sonia. Both the girls had blackened their eyebrows and given themselves mustaches with burned cork.

After being received with well-feigned surprise, and recognized more or less quickly, the children, who were very proud of their costumes, unanimously declared that they must go and display them elsewhere. Nicolas, who was dying to take them all for a long drive _en troika_, [C] proposed that, as the roads were in splendid order, they should go, a party of ten, to the Little Uncle's.

[C] A team of three horses harnessed abreast.

"You will disturb the old man, and that will be all," said the countess. "Why, he has not even room for you all to get into the house! If you must go out, you had better go to the Melukows'."

Mme. Melukow was a widow living in the neighborhood; her house, full of children of all ages, with tutors and governesses, was distant only four versts from Otradnoe.

"A capital idea, my dear," cried the count, enchanted. "I will dress up in costume and go, too. I will wake them up, I warrant you!"

But this did not at all meet his wife's views. Perfect madness! For him to go out with his gouty feet in such cold weather was sheer folly! The count gave way, and Mme. Schoss volunteered to chaperon the girls. Sonia's was by far the most successful disguise; her fierce eyebrows and mustache were wonderfully becoming, her pretty features gained expression, and she wore the dress of a man with unexpected swagger and smartness. Something in her inmost soul told her that this evening would seal her fate.

In a few minutes four sleighs with three horses abreast to each, their harness jingling with bells, drew up in a line before the steps, the runners creaking and crunching over the frozen snow. Natacha was the foremost, and the first to tune her spirits to the pitch of this carnival freak. This mirth, in fact, proved highly infectious, and reached its height of tumult and excitement when the party went down the steps and packed themselves into the sleighs, laughing and shouting to each other at the top of their voices. Two of the sleighs were drawn by light cart-horses, to the third the count's carriage horses were harnessed, and one of these was reputed a famous trotter from Orlov's stable; the fourth sleigh, with its rough-coated, black shaft-horse, was Nicolas's private property. In his marquis costume, over which he had thrown his hussar's cloak, fastened with a belt round the waist, he stood gathering up the reins. The moon was shining brightly, reflected in the plating of the harness and in the horses' anxious eyes as they turned their heads in uneasy amazement at the noisy group that clustered under the dark porch. Natacha, Sonia, and Mme. Schoss, with two women servants, got into Nicolas's sleigh; Dimmler and his wife, with Petia, into the count's; the rest of the mummers packed into the other sleighs.

"Lead the way, Zakhare!" cried Nicolas, to his father's coachman, promising

himself the pleasure of outstripping him presently; the count's sleigh swayed and strained, the runners, which the frost had already glued to the ground, creaked, the bells rang out, the horses closed up for a pull, and off they went over the glittering, hard snow, flinging it up right and left like spray of powdered sugar. Nicolas started next, and the others followed along the narrow way, with no less jingling and creaking. While they drove under the wall of the park the shadows of the tall, skeleton trees lay on the road, checkering the broad moonlight; but as soon as they had left it behind them, the wide and spotless plain spread on all sides, its whiteness broken by myriads of flashing sparks and spangles of reflected light. Suddenly a rut caused the foremost sleigh to jolt violently, and then the others in succession; they fell away a little, their intrusive clatter breaking the supreme and solemn silence of the night.

"A hare's tracks!" exclaimed Natacha, and her voice pierced the frozen air like an arrow.

"How light it is, Nicolas," said Sonia. Nicolas turned round to look at the pretty face with its black mustache, under the sable hood, looking at once so far away and so close in the moonshine. "It is not Sonia at all," he said, smiling.

"Why, what is the matter?"

"Nothing," said he, returning to his former position.

When they got out on the high-road, beaten and ploughed by horses' hoofs and polished with the tracks of sleighs, his steeds began to pull and go at a great pace. The near horse, turning away his head, was galloping rather wildly, while the horse in the shafts pricked his ears and still seemed to doubt whether the moment for a dash had come. Zakhare's sleigh, lost in the distance, was no more than a black spot on the white snow, and as he drew farther away the ringing of the bells was fainter and fainter; only the shouts and songs of the maskers rang through the calm, clear night.

"On you go, my beauties!" cried Nicolas, shaking the reins and raising his whip. The sleigh seemed to leap forward, but the sharp air that cut their faces and the flying pace of the two outer horses alone gave them any idea of the speed they were making. Nicolas glanced back at the other two drivers; they were shouting and urging their shaft-horses with cries and cracking of whips, so as not to be quite left behind; Nicolas's middle horse, swinging steadily along under the shaft-bow, kept up his regular pace, quite ready to go twice as fast the moment he should be called upon.

They soon overtook the first troika, and after going down a slope they came upon a wide cross-road running by the side of a meadow.

"Where are we, I wonder," thought Nicolas; "this must be the field and slope by

the river. No--I do not know where we are! This is all new and unfamiliar to me! God only knows where we are! But no matter!" And smacking his whip with a will, he went straight ahead. Zakhare held in his beasts for an instant, and turned his face, all fringed with frost, to look at Nicolas, who came flying onward.

"Steady there, sir!" cried the coachman, and leaning forward, with a click of his tongue he urged his horses in their turn to their utmost speed. For a few minutes the sleighs ran equal, but before long, in spite of all Zakhare could do, Nicolas gained on him and at last flew past him like a lightning flash; a cloud of fine snow, kicked up by the horses, came showering down on the rival sleigh; the women squeaked, and the two teams had a struggle for the precedence, their shadows crossing and mingling on the snow.

Then Nicolas, moderating his speed, looked about him; before, behind, and on each side of him stretched the fairy scene; a plain strewn with stars and flooded with light.

"To the left, Zakhare says. Why to the left?" thought he. "We were going to the Melukows'. But we are going where fate directs or as Heaven may guide us. It is all very strange and most delightful, is it not?" he said, turning to the others.

"Oh! look at his eyelashes and beard; they are quite white!" exclaimed one of the sweet young men, with pencilled mustache and arched eyebrows.

"That I believe is Natacha?" said Nicolas. "And that little Circassian--who is he? I do not know him, but I like his looks uncommonly! Are you not frozen?" Their answer was a shout of laughter.

Dimmler was talking himself hoarse, and he must be saying very funny things, for the party in his sleigh were in fits of laughing.

"Better and better," said Nicolas to himself; "now we are in an enchanted forest--the black shadows lie across a flooring of diamonds and mix with the sparkling of gems. That might be a fairy palace, out there, built of large blocks of marble and jewelled tiles? Did I not hear the howl of wild beasts in the distance? Supposing it were only Melukovka that I am coming to after all! On my word, it would be no less miraculous to have reached port after steering so completely at random!"

It was, in fact, Melukovka, for he could see the house servants coming out on the balcony with lights, and then down to meet them, only too glad of this unexpected diversion.

"Who is there?" a voice asked within.

"The mummers from Count Rostow's; they are his teams," replied the servants.

* * * * *

Pelagueia Danilovna Melukow, a stout and commanding personality, in spectacles and a flowing dressing-gown, was sitting in her drawing-room surrounded by her children, whom she was doing her best to amuse by modelling heads in wax and tracing the shadows they cast on the wall, when steps and voices were heard in the ante-room. Hussars, witches, clowns, and bears were rubbing their faces, which were scorched by the cold and covered with rime, or shaking the snow off their clothes. As soon as they had cast off their furs they rushed into the large drawing-room, which was hastily lighted up. Dimmler, the clown, and Nicolas, the marquise, performed a dance, while the others stood close along the wall, the children shouting and jumping about them with glee.

"It is impossible to know who is who--can that really be Natacha? Look at her; does not she remind you of some one? Edward, before Karlovitch, how fine you are! and how beautifully you dance! Oh! and that splendid Circassian--why, it is Sonia! What a kind and delightful surprise; we were so desperately dull. Ha, ha! what a beautiful hussar! A real hussar, or a real monkey of a boy--which is he, I wonder? I cannot look at you without laughing." They all shouted and laughed and talked at once, at the top of their voices.

Natacha, to whom the Melukows were devoted, soon vanished with them to their own room, where corks and various articles of men's clothing were brought to them, and clutched by bare arms through a half-open door. Ten minutes later all the young people of the house rejoined the company, equally unrecognizable. Pelagueia Danilovna, going and coming among them all, with her spectacles on her nose and a quiet smile, had seats arranged and a supper laid out for the visitors, masters and servants alike. She looked straight in the face of each in turn, recognizing no one of the motley crew--neither the Rostows, nor Dimmler, nor even her own children, nor any of the clothes they figured in.

"That one, who is she?" she asked the governess, stopping a Kazan Tartar, who was, in fact, her own daughter. "One of the Rostows, is it not? And you, gallant hussar, what regiment do you belong to?" she went on, addressing Natacha. "Give some _pastila_ to this Turkish lady," she cried to the butler; "it is not forbidden by her religion, I believe."

At the sight of some of the reckless dancing which the mummers performed under the shelter of their disguise, Pelagueia Danilovna could not help hiding her face in her handkerchief, while her huge person shook with uncontrollable laughter--the laugh of a kindly matron, frankly jovial and gay.

When they had danced all the national dances, ending with the _Horovody_, she placed every one, both masters and servants, in a large circle, holding a cord with a ring and a rouble, and for a while they played games. An hour after, when the finery was the worse for wear and heat and laughter had removed much of

the charcoal, Pelagueia Danilovna could recognize them, compliment the girls on the success of their disguise, and thank the whole party for the amusement they had given her. Supper was served for the company in the drawing-room, and for the servants in the large dining-room.

"You should try your fortune in the bathroom over there; that is enough to frighten you!" said an old maid who lived with the Melukows.

"Why?" said the eldest girl.

"Oh! you would never dare to do it; you must be very brave."

"Well, I will go," said Sonia.

"Tell us what happened to that young girl, you know," said the youngest Melukow.

"Once a young girl went to the bath, taking with her a cock and two plates with knives and forks, which is what you must do; and she waited. Suddenly she heard horses' bells--some one was coming; he stopped, came up-stairs, and she saw an officer walk into the room; a real live officer--at least so he seemed--who sat down opposite to her where the second cover was laid."

"Oh! how horrible!" exclaimed Natacha, wide-eyed. "And he spoke to her--really spoke?"

"Yes, just as if he had really been a man. He begged and prayed her to listen to him, and all she had to do was to refuse him and hold out till the cock crowed; but she was too much frightened. She covered her face with her hands, and he clasped her in his arms; luckily some girls who were on the watch rushed in when she screamed."

"Why do you terrify them with such nonsense?" said Pelagueia Danilovna.

"But, mamma, you know you wanted to try your fortune too."

"And if you try your fortune in a barn, what do you do?" asked Sonia.

"That is quite simple. You must go to the barn--now, for instance--and listen. If you hear thrashing, it is for ill-luck; if you hear grain dropping, that is good."

"Tell us, mother, what happened to you in the barn."

"It is so long ago," said the mother, with a smile, "that I have quite forgotten; besides, not one of you is brave enough to try it."

"Yes, I will go," said Sonia. "Let me go."

"Go by all means if you are not afraid."

"May I, Madame Schoss?" said Sonia to the governess.

Now, whether playing games or sitting quietly and chatting, Nicolas had not left Sonia's side the whole evening; he felt as if he had seen her for the first time, and only just now appreciated all her merits. Bright, bewitchingly pretty in her quaint costume, and excited as she very rarely was, she had completely fascinated him.

"What a simpleton I must have been!" thought he, responding in thought to those sparkling eyes and that triumphant smile which had revealed to him a little dimple at the tip of her mustache that he had never observed before.

"I am afraid of nothing," she declared. She rose, asked her way, precisely, to the barn, and every detail as to what she was to expect, waiting there in total silence; then she threw a fur cloak over her shoulders, glanced at Nicolas, and went on.

She went along the corridor and down the back-stairs; while Nicolas, saying that the heat of the room was too much for him, slipped out by the front entrance. It was as cold as ever, and the moon seemed to be shining even more brightly than before. The snow at her feet was strewn with stars, while their sisters overhead twinkled in the deep gloom of the sky, and she soon looked away from them, back to the gleaming earth in its radiant mantle of ermine.

Nicolas hurried across the hall, turned the corner of the house, and went past the side door where Sonia was to come out. Half-way to the barn stacks of wood, in the full moonlight, threw their shadows on the path, and beyond, an alley of lime-trees traced a tangled pattern on the snow with the fine crossed lines of their leafless twigs. The beams of the house and its snow-laden roof looked as if they had been hewn out of a block of opal, with iridescent lights where the facets caught the silvery moonlight. Suddenly a bough fell crashing off a tree in the garden; then all was still again. Sonia's heart beat high with gladness; as if she were drinking in not common air, but some life-giving elixir of eternal youth and joy.

"Straight on, if you please, miss, and on no account look behind you."

"I am not afraid," said Sonia, her little shoes tapping the stone steps and then crunching the carpet of snow as she ran to meet Nicolas, who was within a couple of yards of her. And yet not the Nicolas of every-day life. What had transfigured him so completely? Was it his woman's costume with frizzed-out hair, or was it that radiant smile which he so rarely wore, and which at this moment illumined his face?

"But Sonia is quite unlike herself, and yet she is herself," thought Nicolas on his side, looking down at the sweet little face in the moonlight. He slipped his arms under the fur cloak that wrapped her, and drew her to him, and he kissed her lips, which still tasted of the burned cork that had blackened her mustache.

"Nicolas--Sonia," they whispered; and Sonia put her little hands round his face. Then, hand in hand, they ran to the barn and back, and each went in by the different doors they had come out of.

Natacha, who had noted everything, managed so that she, Mme. Schoss, and Dimmler should return in one sleigh, while the maids went with Nicolas and Sonia in another. Nicolas was in no hurry to get home; he could not help looking at Sonia and trying to find under her disguise the true Sonia--his Sonia, from whom nothing now could ever part him. The magical effects of moonlight, the remembrance of that kiss on her sweet lips, the dizzy flight of the snow-clad ground under the horses' hoofs, the black sky, studded with diamonds, that bent over their heads, the icy air that seemed to give vigor to his lungs--all was enough to make him fancy that they were transported to a land of magic.

"Sonia, are you not cold?"

"No; and you?"

Nicolas pulled up, and giving the reins to a man to drive, he ran back to the sleigh in which Natacha was sitting.

"Listen," he said, in a whisper and in French; "I have made up my mind to tell Sonia."

"And you have spoken to her?" exclaimed Natacha, radiant with joy.

"Oh, Natacha, how queer that mustache makes you look! Are you glad?"

"Glad! I am delighted. I did not say anything, you know, but I have been so vexed with you. She is a jewel, a heart of gold. I--I am often naughty, and I have no right to have all the happiness to myself now. Go, go back to her."

"No. Wait one minute. Mercy, how funny you look!" he repeated, examining her closely and discovering in her face, too, an unwonted tenderness and emotion that struck him deeply. "Natacha, is there not some magic at the bottom of it all, heh?"

"You have acted very wisely. Go."

"If I had ever seen Natacha look as she does at this moment I should have asked her advice and have obeyed her, whatever she had bid me do; and all would have gone well. So you are glad?" he said, aloud. "I have done right?"

"Yes, yes, of course you have! I was quite angry with mamma the other day about you two. Mamma would have it that Sonia was running after you. I will not allow any one to say--no, nor even to think--any evil of her, for she is sweetness and truth itself."

"So much the better." Nicolas jumped down and in a few long strides overtook

his own sleigh, where the little Circassian received him with a smile from under the fur hood; and the Circassian was Sonia, and Sonia beyond a doubt would be his beloved little wife!

When they got home the two girls went into the countess's room and gave her an account of their expedition; then they went to bed. Without stopping to wipe off their mustaches they stood chattering as they undressed; they had so much to say of their happiness, their future prospects, the friendship between their husbands:

"But, oh! when will it all be? I am so afraid it will never come to pass," said Natacha, as she went toward a table on which two looking-glasses stood.

"Sit down," said Sonia, "and look in the glass; perhaps you will see something about it." Natacha lighted two pairs of candles and seated herself. "I certainly see a pair of mustaches," she said, laughing.

"You should not laugh," said the maid, very gravely.

Natacha settled herself to gaze without blinking into the mirror; she put on a solemn face and sat in silence for some time, wondering what she should see. Would a coffin rise before her, or would Prince Andre presently stand revealed against the confused background in the shining glass? Her eyes were weary and could hardly distinguish even the flickering light of the candles. But with the best will in the world she could see nothing; not a spot to suggest the image either of a coffin or of a human form. She rose.

"Why do other people see things and I never see anything at all? Take my place, Sonia; you must look for yourself and for me, too. I am so frightened; if I could but know!"

Sonia sat down and fixed her eyes on the mirror.

"Sofia Alexandrovna will be sure to see something," whispered Douniacha; "but you always are laughing at such things." Sonia heard the remark and Natacha's whispered reply: "Yes, she is sure to see something; she did last year." Three minutes they waited in total silence. "She is sure to see something," Natacha repeated, trembling.

Sonia started back, covered her face with one hand, and cried out:

"Natacha!"

"You saw something? What did you see?" And Natacha rushed forward to hold up the glass.

But Sonia had seen nothing; her eyes were getting dim, and she was on the point of giving it up when Natacha's exclamation had stopped her; she did not

want to disappoint them; but there is nothing so tiring as sitting motionless. She did not know why she had called out and hidden her face.

"Did you see him?" asked Natacha.

"Yes; stop a minute. I saw him," said Sonia, not quite sure whether "him" was to mean Nicolas or Prince Andre. "Why not make them believe that I saw something?" she thought. "A great many people have done so before, and no one can prove the contrary. Yes, I saw him," she repeated.

"How? standing up or lying down?"

"I saw him--at first there was nothing; then suddenly I saw him lying down."

"Andre, lying down? Then he is ill!" And Natacha gazed horror-stricken at her companion.

"Not at all; he seemed quite cheerful, on the contrary," said she, beginning to believe in her own inventions.

"And then--Sonia, what then?"

"Then I saw only confusion--red and blue."

"And when will he come back, Sonia? When shall I see him again? O God! I am afraid for him--afraid of everything."

And, without listening to Sonia's attempts at comfort, Natacha slipped into bed, and, long after the lights were out, she lay motionless but awake, her eyes fixed on the moonshine that came dimly through the frost-embroidered windows. Life, the count now gave neither fêtes nor entertainments. Life at Otradnoë was much less gay than in past years; still, the house and domain were as full of servants as ever, and twenty persons or more sat down to dinner daily. These were dependants, friends, and intimates, who were regarded almost as part of the family, or at any rate seemed unable to tear themselves away from it: among them a musician named Dimmler and his wife, Ioghel the dancing-master and his family, and old Mlle. Bélow, former governess of Natacha and Sonia, the count's niece and adopted child, and now the tutor of Pétia, his younger son; besides others who found it simpler to live at the count's expense than at their own. Thus, though there were no more festivities, life was carried on almost as expensively as of old, and neither the master nor the mistress ever imagined any change possible. Nicolas, again, had added to the hunting establishment; there were still fifty horses in the stables, still fifteen drivers; handsome presents were given on all birthdays and fête days, which invariably wound up as of old with a grand dinner to all the neighborhood; the count still played whist or boston, invariably letting his cards be seen by his friends, who were always ready to make up his table, and relieve him without hesitation of the few

hundred roubles which constituted their principal income. The old man marched on blindfold through the tangle of his pecuniary difficulties, trying to conceal them, and only succeeding in augmenting them; having neither the courage nor the patience to untie the knots one by one.

The loving heart by his side foresaw their children's ruin, but she could not accuse her husband, who was, alas! too old for amendment; she could only seek some remedy for the disaster. From her woman's point of view there was but one: Nicolas's marriage, namely, with some rich heiress. She clung desperately to this last chance of salvation; but if her son should refuse the wife she should propose to him, every hope of reinstating their fortune would vanish. The young lady whom she had in view was the daughter of people of the highest respectability, whom the Rostows had known from her infancy: Julie Karaguine, who, by the death of her second brother, had suddenly come into great wealth.

The countess herself wrote to Mme. Karaguine to ask her whether she could regard the match with favor, and received a most flattering answer. Indeed, Mme. Karaguine invited Nicolas to her house at Moscow, to give her daughter an opportunity of deciding for herself.

Nicolas had often heard his mother say, with tears in her eyes, that her dearest wish was to see him married. The fulfilment of this wish would sweeten her remaining days, she would say, adding covert hints as to a charming girl who would exactly suit him. One day she took the opportunity of speaking plainly to him of Julie's charms and merits, and urged him to spend a short time in Moscow before Christmas. Nicolas, who had no difficulty in guessing what she was aiming at, persuaded her to be explicit on the matter, and she owned frankly that her hope was to see their sinking fortunes restored by his marriage with her dear Julie!

"Then, mother, if I loved a penniless girl, you would desire me to sacrifice my feelings and my honor—to marry solely for money?"

"Nay, nay; you have misunderstood me," she said, not knowing how to excuse her mercenary hopes. "I wish only for your happiness!" And then, conscious that this was not her sole aim, and that she was not perfectly honest, she burst into tears.

"Do not cry, mamma; you have only to say that you really and truly desire it, and you know I would give my life to see you happy; that I would sacrifice everything, even my feelings."

But this was not his mother's notion. She asked no sacrifice, she would have none; she would sooner have sacrificed herself, if it had been possible.

"Say no more about it; you do not understand," she said, drying away her tears.

"How could she think of such a marriage?" thought Nicolas. "Does she think that because Sonia is poor I do not love her? And yet I should be a thousand times happier with her than with a doll like Julie."

He stayed in the country, and his mother did not revert to the subject. Still, as she saw the growing intimacy between Nicolas and Sonia, she could not help worrying Sonia about every little thing, and speaking to her with colder formality. Sometimes she reproached herself for these continual pin-pricks of annoyance, and was quite vexed with the poor girl for submitting to them with such wonderful humility and sweetness, for taking every opportunity of showing her devoted gratitude, and for loving Nicolas with a faithful and disinterested affection which commanded her admiration.

Just about this time a letter came from Prince André, dated from Rome, whither he had gone to pass the year of probation demanded by his father as a condition to giving consent to his son's marriage with the Countess Natacha. It was the fourth the Prince had written since his departure. He ought long since to have been on his way home, he said, but the heat of the summer had caused the wound he had received at Austerlitz to reopen, and this compelled him to postpone his return till early in January.

Natacha, though she was so much in love that her very passion for Prince André had made her day-dreams happy, had hitherto been open to all the bright influences of her young life; but now, after nearly four months of parting, she fell into a state of extreme melancholy, and gave way to it completely. She bewailed her hard fate, she bewailed the time that was slipping away and lost to her, while her heart ached with the dull craving to love and be loved. Nicolas, too, had nearly spent his leave from his regiment, and the anticipation of his departure added gloom to the saddened household.

Christmas came; but, excepting the pompous high Mass and the other religious ceremonies, the endless string of neighbors and servants with the regular compliments of the season, and the new gowns which made their first appearance on the occasion, nothing more than usual happened on that day, or more extraordinary than twenty degrees of frost, with brilliant sunshine, a still atmosphere, and at night a glorious starry sky.

After dinner, on the third day of Christmas-tide, when every one had settled into his own corner once more, ennui reigned supreme throughout the house. Nicolas, who had been paying a round of visits in the neighborhood, was fast asleep in the drawing-room. The old count had followed his example in his room. Sonia, seated at a table in the sitting-room, was copying a drawing. The countess was playing out a "patience," and Nastacia Ivanovna, the old buffoon, with his peevish face, sitting in a window with two old women, did not say a word.

Natacha came into the room, and, after leaning over Sonia for a minute or two to examine her work, went over to her mother and stood still in front of her.

The countess looked up. "Why are you wandering about like a soul in torment? What do you want?" she said.

"Want! I want him!" replied Natacha, shortly, and her eyes glowed. "Now, here—at once!"

Her mother gazed at her anxiously.

"Do not look at me like that; you will make me cry."

"Sit down here."

"Mamma, I want him, I want him! Why must I die of weariness?" Her voice broke and tears started from her eyes. She hastily quitted the drawing-room and went to the housekeeper's room, where an old servant was scolding one of the girls who had just come in breathless from out-of-doors.

"There is a time for all things," growled the old woman. "You have had time enough for play."

"Oh, leave her in peace, Kondratievna," said Natacha. "Run away, Mavroucha—go."

Pursuing her wandering, Natacha went into the hall; an old man-servant was playing cards with two of the boys. Her entrance stopped their game and they rose. "And what am I to say to these?" thought she.

"Nikita, would you please go—what on earth can I ask for?—go and find me a cock; and you, Micha, a handful of corn."

"A handful of corn?" said Micha, laughing.

"Go, go at once," said the old man.

"And you, Fédor, can you give me a piece of chalk?"

Then she went on to the servants' hall and ordered the samovar to be got ready, though it was not yet tea-time; she wanted to try her power over Foka, the old butler, the most morose and disobliging of all the servants. He could not believe his ears, and asked her if she really meant it. "What next will our young lady want?" muttered Foka, affecting to be very cross.

No one gave so many orders as Natacha, no one sent them on so many errands at once. As soon as a servant came in sight she seemed to invent some want or message; she could not help it. It seemed as though she wanted to try her power over them; to see whether, some fine day, one or another would not rebel against her tyranny; but, on the contrary, they always flew to obey her more

readily than any one else.

"And now what shall I do, where can I go?" thought she, as she slowly went along the corridor, where she presently met the buffoon.

"Nastacia Ivanovna," said she, "if I ever have children, what will they be?"

"You! Fleas and grasshoppers, you may depend upon it!"

Natacha went on. "Good God! have mercy, have mercy!" she said to herself. "Wherever I go it is always, always the same. I am so weary; what shall I do?"

Skipping lightly from step to step, she went to the upper story and dropped in on the loghels. Two governesses were sitting chatting with M. and Mme. loghel; dessert, consisting of dried fruit, was on the table, and they were eagerly discussing the cost of living at Moscow and Odessa. Natacha took a seat for a moment, listened with pensive attention, and then jumped up again. "The island of Madagascar!" she murmured, "Ma-da-gas-car!" and she separated the syllables. Then she left the room without answering Mme. Schoss, who was utterly mystified by her strange exclamation.



She next met Pétia and a companion, both very full of some fireworks which were to be let off that evening. "Pétia!" she exclaimed, "carry me down-stairs!" And she sprang upon his back, throwing her arms round his neck; and, laughing and galloping, they thus scrambled along to the head of the stairs.

"Thank you, that will do. Madagascar!" she repeated; and, jumping down, she ran down the flight.

After thus inspecting her dominions, testing her power, and convincing herself that her subjects were docile, and that there was no novelty to be got out of them, Natacha settled herself in the darkest corner of the music-room with her guitar, striking the bass strings, and trying to make an accompaniment to an air from an opera that she and Prince André had once heard together at St. Petersburg. The uncertain chords which her unpractised fingers sketched out would have struck the least experienced ear as wanting in harmony and musical accuracy, while to her excited imagination they brought a whole train of memories. Leaning against the wall and half hidden by a cabinet, with her eyes fixed on a thread of light that came under the door from the rooms beyond, she listened in ecstasy and dreamed of the past.

Sonia crossed the room with a glass in her hand. Natacha glanced round at her

and again fixed her eyes on the streak of light. She had the strange feeling of having once before gone through the same experience—sat in the same place, surrounded by the same details, and watching Sonia pass carrying a tumbler. "Yes, it was exactly the same," she thought.

"Sonia, what is this tune?" she said, playing a few notes.

"What, are you there?" said Sonia, startled. "I do not know," she said, coming closer to listen, "unless it is from 'La Tempête';" but she spoke doubtfully.

"It was exactly so," thought Natacha. "She started as she came forward, smiling so gently; and I thought then, as I think now, that there is something in her which is quite lacking in me. No," she said aloud, "you are quite out; it is the chorus from the 'Porteur d'Eau'—listen," and she hummed the air. "Where are you going?"

"For some fresh water to finish my drawing."

"You are always busy and I never. Where is Nicolas?"

"Asleep, I think."

"Go and wake him, Sonia. Tell him to come and sing."

Sonia went, and Natacha relapsed into dreaming and wondering how it had all happened. Not being able to solve the puzzle, she drifted into reminiscence once more. She could see him—*him*—and feel his impassioned eyes fixed on her face. "Oh, make haste back! I am so afraid he will not come yet! Besides, it is all very well, but I am growing old; I shall be quite different from what I am now! Who knows? Perhaps he will come to-day! Perhaps he is here already! Here in the drawing-room. Perhaps he came yesterday and I have forgotten."

She rose, laid down the guitar, and went into the next room. All the household party were seated round the tea-table,—the professors, the governesses, the guests; the servants were waiting on one and another—but there was no Prince André.

"Ah, here she is," said her father. "Come and sit down here." But Natacha stopped by her mother without heeding his bidding.

"Oh, mamma, bring him to me, give him to me soon, very soon," she murmured, swallowing down a sob. Then she sat down and listened to the others. "Good God! always the same people! always the same thing! Papa holds his cup as he always does, and blows his tea to cool it as he did yesterday, and as he will to-morrow."

She felt a sort of dull rebellion against them all; she hated them for always being the same.

After tea Sonia, Natacha, and Nicolas huddled together in their favorite, snug corner of the drawing-room; that was where they talked freely to each other.

"Do you ever feel," Natacha asked her brother, "as if there was nothing left to look forward to; as if you had had all your share of happiness, and were not so much weary as utterly dull?"

"Of course I have. Very often I have seen my friends and fellow-officers in the highest spirits and been just as jolly myself, and suddenly have been struck so dull and dismal, have so hated life, that I have wondered whether we were not all to die at once. I remember one day, for instance, when I was with the regiment; the band was playing, and I had such a fit of melancholy that I never even thought of going to the promenade."

"How well I understand that! I recollect once," Natacha went on, "once when I was a little girl, I was punished for having eaten some plums, I think. I had not done it, and you were all dancing, and I was left alone in the school-room. How I cried! cried because I was so sorry for myself, and so vexed with you all for making me so unhappy."

"I remember; and I went to comfort you and did not know how; we were funny children then; I had a toy with bells that jingled, and I made you a present of it."

"Do you remember," said Natacha, "long before that, when we were no bigger than my hand, my uncle called us into his room, where it was quite dark, and suddenly we saw——"

"A negro!" interrupted Nicolas, smiling at her recollection. "To be sure. I can see him now; and to this day I wonder whether it was a dream or a reality, or mere fancy invented afterwards."

"He had white teeth and stared at us with his black eyes."

"Do you remember him, Sonia?"

"Yes, yes—but very dimly."

"But papa and mamma have always declared that no negro ever came to the house. And the eggs; do you remember the eggs we used to roll up at Easter; and one day how two little grinning old women came up through the floor and began to spin round the table?"

"Of course. And how papa used to put on his fur coat and fire off his gun from the balcony. And don't you remember——?" And so they went on recalling, one after the other, not the bitter memories of old age, but the bright pictures of early childhood, which float and fade on a distant horizon of poetic vagueness, midway between reality and dreams. Sonia remembered being frightened once at the sight of Nicolas in his braided jacket, and her nurse promising her that she

should some day have a frock trimmed from top to bottom.

"And they told me you had been found in the garden under a cabbage," said Natacha. "I dared not say it was not true, but it puzzled me tremendously."

A door opened, and a woman put in her head, exclaiming, "Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, they have fetched the cock!"

"I do not want it now; send it away again, Polia." said Natacha.

Dimmler, who had meanwhile come into the room, went up to the harp, which stood in a corner, and in taking off the cover made the strings ring discordantly.

"Edward Karlovitch, play my favorite nocturne—Field's," cried the countess, from the adjoining room.

Dimmler struck a chord. "How quiet you young people are," he said, addressing them.

"Yes, we are studying philosophy," said Natacha, and they went on talking of their dreams.

Dimmler had no sooner begun his nocturne than Natacha, crossing the room on tiptoe, seized the wax-light that was burning on the table and carried it into the next room; then she stole back to her seat, it was now quite dark in the larger room, especially in their corner, but the silvery moonbeams came in at the wide windows and lay in broad sheets on the floor.

"Do you know," whispered Natacha, while Dimmler, after playing the nocturne, let his fingers wander over the strings, uncertain what to play next, "when I go on remembering one thing beyond another, I go back so far, so far, that at last I remember things that happened before I was born, and——"

"That is metempsychosis," interrupted Sonia, with a reminiscence of her early lessons. "The Egyptians believed that our souls had once inhabited the bodies of animals, and would return to animals again after our death."

"I do not believe that," said Natacha, still in a low voice, though the music had ceased. "But I am quite sure that we were angels once, somewhere there beyond, or, perhaps, even here; and that is the reason we remember a previous existence."

"May I join the party?" asked Dimmler, coming towards them.

"If we were once angels, how is it that we have fallen lower?"

"Lower? Who says that it is lower? Who knows what I was?" Natacha retorted with full conviction. "Since the soul is immortal, and I am to live forever in the future, I must have existed in the past, so I have eternity behind me, too."

"Yes; but it is very difficult to conceive of that eternity," said Dimmler, whose ironical smile had died away.

"Why?" asked Natacha. "After to-day comes to-morrow, and then the day after, and so on forever; yesterday has been, to-morrow will be——"

"Natacha, now it is your turn; sing me something," said her mother. "What are you doing in that corner like a party of conspirators?"

"I am not at all in the humor, mamma," said she; nevertheless she rose. Nicolas sat down to the piano; and standing, as usual, in the middle of the room, where the voice sounded best, she sang her mother's favorite ballad.

Though she had said she was not in the humor, it was long since Natacha had sung so well as she did that evening, and long before she sang so well again. Her father, who was talking over business with Mitenka in his room, hurriedly gave him some final instructions as soon as he heard the first note, as a schoolboy scrambles through his tasks to get to his play; but as the steward did not go, he sat in silence, listening, while Mitenka, too, standing in his presence, listened with evident satisfaction. Nicolas did not take his eyes off his sister's face, and only breathed when she took breath. Sonia was under the spell of that exquisite voice and thinking of the gulf of difference that lay between her and her friend, full conscious that she could never exercise such fascination. The old countess had paused in her "patience,"—a sad, fond smile played on her lips, her eyes were full of tears, and she shook her head, remembering her own youth, looking forward to her daughter's future and reflecting on her strange prospects of marriage.

Dimmler, sitting by her side, listened with rapture, his eyes half closed.

"She really has a marvellous gift!" he exclaimed. "She has nothing to learn,—such power, such sweetness, such roundness!"

"And how much I fear for her happiness!" replied the countess, who in her mother's heart could feel the flame that must some day be fatal to her child's peace.

Natacha was still singing when Pétia dashed noisily into the room to announce, in triumphant tones, that a party of mummers had come.

"Idiot!" exclaimed Natacha, stopping short, and, dropping into a chair, she began to sob so violently that it was some time before she could recover herself. "It is nothing, mamma, really nothing at all," she declared, trying to smile. "Only Pétia frightened me; nothing more." And her tears flowed afresh.

All the servants had dressed up, some as bears, Turks, tavern-keepers, or fine ladies; others as mongrel monsters. Bringing with them the chill of the night

outside, they did not at first venture any farther than the hall; by degrees, however, they took courage; pushing each other forward for self-protection, they all soon came into the music-room. Once there, their shyness thawed; they became expansively merry, and singing, dancing, and sports were soon the order of the day. The countess, after looking at them and identifying them all, went back into the sitting-room, leaving her husband, whose jovial face encouraged them to enjoy themselves.

The young people had all vanished; but half an hour later an old marquise with patches appeared on the scene—none other than Nicolas; Pétia as a Turk; a clown—Dimmler; a hussar—Natacha; and a Circassian—Sonia. Both the girls had blackened their eyebrows and given themselves mustaches with burned cork.

After being received with well-feigned surprise, and recognized more or less quickly, the children, who were very proud of their costumes, unanimously declared that they must go and display them elsewhere. Nicolas, who was dying to take them all for a long drive *en troïka*, proposed that, as the roads were in splendid order, they should go, a party of ten, to the Little Uncle's.

A team of three horses harnessed abreast.

"You will disturb the old man, and that will be all," said the countess. "Why, he has not even room for you all to get into the house! If you must go out, you had better go to the Mélukows'."

Mme. Mélukow was a widow living in the neighborhood; her house, full of children of all ages, with tutors and governesses, was distant only four versts from Otradnoë.

"A capital idea, my dear," cried the count, enchanted. "I will dress up in costume and go, too. I will wake them up, I warrant you!"

But this did not at all meet his wife's views. Perfect madness! For him to go out with his gouty feet in such cold weather was sheer folly! The count gave way, and Mme. Schoss volunteered to chaperon the girls. Sonia's was by far the most successful disguise; her fierce eyebrows and mustache were wonderfully becoming, her pretty features gained expression, and she wore the dress of a man with unexpected swagger and smartness. Something in her inmost soul told her that this evening would seal her fate.

Sonia

In a few minutes four sleighs with three horses abreast to each, their harness jingling with bells, drew up in a line before the steps, the runners creaking and crunching over the frozen snow. Natacha was the foremost, and the first to tune her spirits to the pitch of this carnival freak. This mirth, in fact, proved highly infectious, and reached its height of tumult and excitement when the party went

down the steps and packed themselves into the sleighs, laughing and shouting to each other at the top of their voices. Two of the sleighs were drawn by light cart-horses, to the third the count's carriage horses were harnessed, and one of these was reputed a famous trotter from Orlov's stable; the fourth sleigh, with its rough-coated, black shaft-horse, was Nicolas's private property. In his marquis costume, over which he had thrown his hussar's cloak, fastened with a belt round the waist, he stood gathering up the reins. The moon was shining brightly, reflected in the plating of the harness and in the horses' anxious eyes as they turned their heads in uneasy amazement at the noisy group that clustered under the dark porch. Natacha, Sonia, and Mme. Schoss, with two women servants, got into Nicolas's sleigh; Dimmler and his wife, with Pétia, into the count's; the rest of the mummers packed into the other sleighs.

"Lead the way, Zakhare!" cried Nicolas, to his father's coachman, promising himself the pleasure of outstripping him presently; the count's sleigh swayed and strained, the runners, which the frost had already glued to the ground, creaked, the bells rang out, the horses closed up for a pull, and off they went over the glittering, hard snow, flinging it up right and left like spray of powdered sugar. Nicolas started next, and the others followed along the narrow way, with no less jingling and creaking. While they drove under the wall of the park the shadows of the tall, skeleton trees lay on the road, checkering the broad moonlight; but as soon as they had left it behind them, the wide and spotless plain spread on all sides, its whiteness broken by myriads of flashing sparks and spangles of reflected light. Suddenly a rut caused the foremost sleigh to jolt violently, and then the others in succession; they fell away a little, their intrusive clatter breaking the supreme and solemn silence of the night.

"A hare's tracks!" exclaimed Natacha, and her voice pierced the frozen air like an arrow.

"How light it is, Nicolas," said Sonia. Nicolas turned round to look at the pretty face with its black mustache, under the sable hood, looking at once so far away and so close in the moonshine. "It is not Sonia at all," he said, smiling.

"Why, what is the matter?"

"Nothing," said he, returning to his former position.

When they got out on the high-road, beaten and ploughed by horses' hoofs and polished with the tracks of sleighs, his steeds began to pull and go at a great pace. The near horse, turning away his head, was galloping rather wildly, while the horse in the shafts pricked his ears and still seemed to doubt whether the moment for a dash had come. Zakhare's sleigh, lost in the distance, was no more than a black spot on the white snow, and as he drew farther away the ringing of the bells was fainter and fainter; only the shouts and songs of the

maskers rang through the calm, clear night.

"On you go, my beauties!" cried Nicolas, shaking the reins and raising his whip. The sleigh seemed to leap forward, but the sharp air that cut their faces and the flying pace of the two outer horses alone gave them any idea of the speed they were making. Nicolas glanced back at the other two drivers; they were shouting and urging their shaft-horses with cries and cracking of whips, so as not to be quite left behind; Nicolas's middle horse, swinging steadily along under the shaft-bow, kept up his regular pace, quite ready to go twice as fast the moment he should be called upon.

They soon overtook the first troïka, and after going down a slope they came upon a wide cross-road running by the side of a meadow.

"Where are we, I wonder," thought Nicolas; "this must be the field and slope by the river. No—I do not know where we are! This is all new and unfamiliar to me! God only knows where we are! But no matter!" And smacking his whip with a will, he went straight ahead. Zakhare held in his beasts for an instant, and turned his face, all fringed with frost, to look at Nicolas, who came flying onward.

"Steady there, sir!" cried the coachman, and leaning forward, with a click of his tongue he urged his horses in their turn to their utmost speed. For a few minutes the sleighs ran equal, but before long, in spite of all Zakhare could do, Nicolas gained on him and at last flew past him like a lightning flash; a cloud of fine snow, kicked up by the horses, came showering down on the rival sleigh; the women squeaked, and the two teams had a struggle for the precedence, their shadows crossing and mingling on the snow.

Then Nicolas, moderating his speed, looked about him; before, behind, and on each side of him stretched the fairy scene; a plain strewn with stars and flooded with light.

"To the left, Zakhare says. Why to the left?" thought he. "We were going to the Mélukows'. But we are going where fate directs or as Heaven may guide us. It is all very strange and most delightful, is it not?" he said, turning to the others.

"Oh! look at his eyelashes and beard; they are quite white!" exclaimed one of the sweet young men, with pencilled mustache and arched eyebrows.

"That I believe is Natacha?" said Nicolas. "And that little Circassian—who is he? I do not know him, but I like his looks uncommonly! Are you not frozen?" Their answer was a shout of laughter.

Dimmler was talking himself hoarse, and he must be saying very funny things, for the party in his sleigh were in fits of laughing.

"Better and better," said Nicolas to himself; "now we are in an enchanted

forest—the black shadows lie across a flooring of diamonds and mix with the sparkling of gems. That might be a fairy palace, out there, built of large blocks of marble and jewelled tiles? Did I not hear the howl of wild beasts in the distance? Supposing it were only Mélukovka that I am coming to after all! On my word, it would be no less miraculous to have reached port after steering so completely at random!"

It was, in fact, Mélukovka, for he could see the house servants coming out on the balcony with lights, and then down to meet them, only too glad of this unexpected diversion.

"Who is there?" a voice asked within.

"The mummers from Count Rostow's; they are his teams," replied the servants.

Pélaguěia Danilovna Mélukow, a stout and commanding personality, in spectacles and a flowing dressing-gown, was sitting in her drawing-room surrounded by her children, whom she was doing her best to amuse by modelling heads in wax and tracing the shadows they cast on the wall, when steps and voices were heard in the ante-room. Hussars, witches, clowns, and bears were rubbing their faces, which were scorched by the cold and covered with rime, or shaking the snow off their clothes. As soon as they had cast off their furs they rushed into the large drawing-room, which was hastily lighted up. Dimmler, the clown, and Nicolas, the marquise, performed a dance, while the others stood close along the wall, the children shouting and jumping about them with glee.

"It is impossible to know who is who—can that really be Natacha? Look at her; does not she remind you of some one? Edward, before Karlovitch, how fine you are! and how beautifully you dance! Oh! and that splendid Circassian—why, it is Sonia! What a kind and delightful surprise; we were so desperately dull. Ha, ha! what a beautiful hussar! A real hussar, or a real monkey of a boy—which is he, I wonder? I cannot look at you without laughing." They all shouted and laughed and talked at once, at the top of their voices.

Natacha, to whom the Mélukows were devoted, soon vanished with them to their own room, where corks and various articles of men's clothing were brought to them, and clutched by bare arms through a half-open door. Ten minutes later all the young people of the house rejoined the company, equally unrecognizable. Pélaguěia Danilovna, going and coming among them all, with her spectacles on her nose and a quiet smile, had seats arranged and a supper laid out for the visitors, masters and servants alike. She looked straight in the face of each in turn, recognizing no one of the motley crew—neither the Rostows, nor Dimmler, nor even her own children, nor any of the clothes they figured in.

"That one, who is she?" she asked the governess, stopping a Kazan Tartar, who was, in fact, her own daughter. "One of the Rostows, is it not? And you, gallant hussar, what regiment do you belong to?" she went on, addressing Natacha. "Give some *pastila* to this Turkish lady," she cried to the butler; "it is not forbidden by her religion, I believe."

At the sight of some of the reckless dancing which the mummers performed under the shelter of their disguise, Pélaguëïa Danilovna could not help hiding her face in her handkerchief, while her huge person shook with uncontrollable laughter—the laugh of a kindly matron, frankly jovial and gay.

When they had danced all the national dances, ending with the *Horovody*, she placed every one, both masters and servants, in a large circle, holding a cord with a ring and a rouble, and for a while they played games. An hour after, when the finery was the worse for wear and heat and laughter had removed much of the charcoal, Pélaguëïa Danilovna could recognize them, compliment the girls on the success of their disguise, and thank the whole party for the amusement they had given her. Supper was served for the company in the drawing-room, and for the servants in the large dining-room.

"You should try your fortune in the bathroom over there; that is enough to frighten you!" said an old maid who lived with the Mélukows.

"Why?" said the eldest girl.

"Oh! you would never dare to do it; you must be very brave."

"Well, I will go," said Sonia.

"Tell us what happened to that young girl, you know," said the youngest Mélukow.

"Once a young girl went to the bath, taking with her a cock and two plates with knives and forks, which is what you must do; and she waited. Suddenly she heard horses' bells—some one was coming; he stopped, came up-stairs, and she saw an officer walk into the room; a real live officer—at least so he seemed—who sat down opposite to her where the second cover was laid."

"Oh! how horrible!" exclaimed Natacha, wide-eyed. "And he spoke to her—really spoke?"

"Yes, just as if he had really been a man. He begged and prayed her to listen to him, and all she had to do was to refuse him and hold out till the cock crowed; but she was too much frightened. She covered her face with her hands, and he clasped her in his arms; luckily some girls who were on the watch rushed in when she screamed."

"Why do you terrify them with such nonsense?" said Pélaguëïa Danilovna.

"But, mamma, you know you wanted to try your fortune too."

"And if you try your fortune in a barn, what do you do?" asked Sonia.

"That is quite simple. You must go to the barn—now, for instance—and listen. If you hear thrashing, it is for ill-luck; if you hear grain dropping, that is good."

"Tell us, mother, what happened to you in the barn."

"It is so long ago," said the mother, with a smile, "that I have quite forgotten; besides, not one of you is brave enough to try it."

"Yes, I will go," said Sonia. "Let me go."

"Go by all means if you are not afraid."

"May I, Madame Schoss?" said Sonia to the governess.

Now, whether playing games or sitting quietly and chatting, Nicolas had not left Sonia's side the whole evening; he felt as if he had seen her for the first time, and only just now appreciated all her merits. Bright, bewitchingly pretty in her quaint costume, and excited as she very rarely was, she had completely fascinated him.

"What a simpleton I must have been!" thought he, responding in thought to those sparkling eyes and that triumphant smile which had revealed to him a little dimple at the tip of her mustache that he had never observed before.

"I am afraid of nothing," she declared. She rose, asked her way, precisely, to the barn, and every detail as to what she was to expect, waiting there in total silence; then she threw a fur cloak over her shoulders, glanced at Nicolas, and went on.

She went along the corridor and down the back-stairs; while Nicolas, saying that the heat of the room was too much for him, slipped out by the front entrance. It was as cold as ever, and the moon seemed to be shining even more brightly than before. The snow at her feet was strewn with stars, while their sisters overhead twinkled in the deep gloom of the sky, and she soon looked away from them, back to the gleaming earth in its radiant mantle of ermine.

Nicolas hurried across the hall, turned the corner of the house, and went past the side door where Sonia was to come out. Half-way to the barn stacks of wood, in the full moonlight, threw their shadows on the path, and beyond, an alley of lime-trees traced a tangled pattern on the snow with the fine crossed lines of their leafless twigs. The beams of the house and its snow-laden roof looked as if they had been hewn out of a block of opal, with iridescent lights where the facets caught the silvery moonlight. Suddenly a bough fell crashing off a tree in the garden; then all was still again. Sonia's heart beat high with gladness; as if

she were drinking in not common air, but some life-giving elixir of eternal youth and joy.

"Straight on, if you please, miss, and on no account look behind you."

"I am not afraid," said Sonia, her little shoes tapping the stone steps and then crunching the carpet of snow as she ran to meet Nicolas, who was within a couple of yards of her. And yet not the Nicolas of every-day life. What had transfigured him so completely? Was it his woman's costume with frizzed-out hair, or was it that radiant smile which he so rarely wore, and which at this moment illumined his face?

"But Sonia is quite unlike herself, and yet she is herself," thought Nicolas on his side, looking down at the sweet little face in the moonlight. He slipped his arms under the fur cloak that wrapped her, and drew her to him, and he kissed her lips, which still tasted of the burned cork that had blackened her mustache.

"Nicolas—Sonia," they whispered; and Sonia put her little hands round his face. Then, hand in hand, they ran to the barn and back, and each went in by the different doors they had come out of.

Natacha, who had noted everything, managed so that she, Mme. Schoss, and Dimmler should return in one sleigh, while the maids went with Nicolas and Sonia in another. Nicolas was in no hurry to get home; he could not help looking at Sonia and trying to find under her disguise the true Sonia—his Sonia, from whom nothing now could ever part him. The magical effects of moonlight, the remembrance of that kiss on her sweet lips, the dizzy flight of the snow-clad ground under the horses' hoofs, the black sky, studded with diamonds, that bent over their heads, the icy air that seemed to give vigor to his lungs—all was enough to make him fancy that they were transported to a land of magic.

"Sonia, are you not cold?"

"No; and you?"

Nicolas pulled up, and giving the reins to a man to drive, he ran back to the sleigh in which Natacha was sitting.

"Listen," he said, in a whisper and in French; "I have made up my mind to tell Sonia."

"And you have spoken to her?" exclaimed Natacha, radiant with joy.

"Oh, Natacha, how queer that mustache makes you look! Are you glad?"

"Glad! I am delighted. I did not say anything, you know, but I have been so vexed with you. She is a jewel, a heart of gold. I—I am often naughty, and I have no right to have all the happiness to myself now. Go, go back to her."

"No. Wait one minute. Mercy, how funny you look!" he repeated, examining her closely and discovering in her face, too, an unwonted tenderness and emotion that struck him deeply. "Natacha, is there not some magic at the bottom of it all, heh?"

"You have acted very wisely. Go."

"If I had ever seen Natacha look as she does at this moment I should have asked her advice and have obeyed her, whatever she had bid me do; and all would have gone well. So you are glad?" he said, aloud. "I have done right?"

"Yes, yes, of course you have! I was quite angry with mamma the other day about you two. Mamma would have it that Sonia was running after you. I will not allow any one to say—no, nor even to think—any evil of her, for she is sweetness and truth itself."

"So much the better." Nicolas jumped down and in a few long strides overtook his own sleigh, where the little Circassian received him with a smile from under the fur hood; and the Circassian was Sonia, and Sonia beyond a doubt would be his beloved little wife!

When they got home the two girls went into the countess's room and gave her an account of their expedition; then they went to bed. Without stopping to wipe off their mustaches they stood chattering as they undressed; they had so much to say of their happiness, their future prospects, the friendship between their husbands:

"But, oh! when will it all be? I am so afraid it will never come to pass," said Natacha, as she went toward a table on which two looking-glasses stood.

"Sit down," said Sonia, "and look in the glass; perhaps you will see something about it." Natacha lighted two pairs of candles and seated herself. "I certainly see a pair of mustaches," she said, laughing.

"You should not laugh," said the maid, very gravely.

Natacha settled herself to gaze without blinking into the mirror; she put on a solemn face and sat in silence for some time, wondering what she should see. Would a coffin rise before her, or would Prince André presently stand revealed against the confused background in the shining glass? Her eyes were weary and could hardly distinguish even the flickering light of the candles. But with the best will in the world she could see nothing; not a spot to suggest the image either of a coffin or of a human form. She rose.

"Why do other people see things and I never see anything at all? Take my place, Sonia; you must look for yourself and for me, too. I am so frightened; if I could but know!"

Sonia sat down and fixed her eyes on the mirror.

"Sofia Alexandrovna will be sure to see something," whispered Douniacha; "but you always are laughing at such things." Sonia heard the remark and Natacha's whispered reply: "Yes, she is sure to see something; she did last year." Three minutes they waited in total silence. "She is sure to see something," Natacha repeated, trembling.

Sonia started back, covered her face with one hand, and cried out:

"Natacha!"

"You saw something? What did you see?" And Natacha rushed forward to hold up the glass.

But Sonia had seen nothing; her eyes were getting dim, and she was on the point of giving it up when Natacha's exclamation had stopped her; she did not want to disappoint them; but there is nothing so tiring as sitting motionless. She did not know why she had called out and hidden her face.

"Did you see him?" asked Natacha.

"Yes; stop a minute. I saw him," said Sonia, not quite sure whether "him" was to mean Nicolas or Prince André. "Why not make them believe that I saw something?" she thought. "A great many people have done so before, and no one can prove the contrary. Yes, I saw him," she repeated.

"How? standing up or lying down?"

"I saw him—at first there was nothing; then suddenly I saw him lying down."

"André, lying down? Then he is ill!" And Natacha gazed horror-stricken at her companion.

"Not at all; he seemed quite cheerful, on the contrary," said she, beginning to believe in her own inventions.

"And then—Sonia, what then?"

"Then I saw only confusion—red and blue."

"And when will he come back, Sonia? When shall I see him again? O God! I am afraid for him—afraid of everything."

And, without listening to Sonia's attempts at comfort, Natacha slipped into bed, and, long after the lights were out, she lay motionless but awake, her eyes fixed on the moonshine that came dimly through the frost-embroidered windows.

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