

Leo Tolstoy

A RUSSIAN CHRISTMAS PARTY

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 dependents, 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 robes 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 Rostovs 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