

KATIA

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Katia by Léon Tolstói

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LÉON TOLSTOÏ

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BY

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KATIA.

CHAPTER I.

WE were in mourning for our mother, who had died the preceding autumn, and we had spent all the winter alone in the country — Macha, Sonia and I.

Macha was an old family friend, who had been our governess and had brought us all up, and my memories of her, like my love for her, went as far back as my memories of myself.

Sonia was my younger sister.

The winter had dragged by, sad and sombre, in our old country-house of Pokrovski. The weather had been cold, and so windy that the snow was often piled high above our windows; the panes were almost always cloudy with a coating of ice; and throughout the whole season we

were shut in, rarely finding it possible to go out of the house.

It was very seldom that any one came to see us, and our few visitors brought neither joy nor cheerfulness to our house. They all had mournful faces, spoke low, as if they were afraid of waking some one, were careful not to laugh, sighed and often shed tears when they looked at me, and above all at the sight of my poor Sonia in her little black frock. Everything in the house still savored of death; the affliction, the horror of the last agony yet reigned in the air. Mamma's chamber was shut up, and I felt a painful dread and yet an irresistible longing to peep furtively into the chill, desolate place as I passed it every night on my way to bed.

I was at this time seventeen years old, and the very year of her death Mamma had intended to remove to the city, in order to introduce me into society. The loss of my mother had been a great sorrow to me; but I must confess that to this grief had been added another, that of seeing myself—young, beautiful as I heard from every

one that I was, — condemned to vegetate during a second winter in the country, in a barren solitude. Even before the end of this winter, the feeling of regret, of isolation, and, to speak plainly, of ennui, had so gained upon me that I scarcely ever left my own room, never opened my piano, and never even took a book in my hand. If Macha urged me to occupy myself with something I would reply: "I do not wish to, I cannot," and far down in my soul a voice kept asking: "What is the use? Why 'do something' — no matter what — when the best of my life is wearing away so in pure loss? Why?" And to this "Why?" I had no answer except tears.

I was told that I was growing thin and losing my beauty, but this gave me not the slightest concern. Why, and for whom, should I take interest in it? It seemed to me that my entire life was to drift slowly away in this desert, borne down by this hopeless suffering, from which, given up to my own resources alone, I had no longer the strength, nor even the wish, to set myself free.

Towards the end of the winter Macha became

seriously uneasy about me, and determined come what might to take me abroad. But for this, money was essential, and as yet we knew little of our resources beyond the fact that we were to succeed to our mother's inheritance; however, we were in daily expectation of a visit from our guardian, who was to examine the condition of our affairs.

He came at last, late in March.

"Thank Heaven!" said Macha to me one day, when I was wandering like a shadow from one corner to another, perfectly idle, without a thought in my head or a wish in my heart: "Sergius Mikailovitch has sent word that he will be here before dinner. — You must rouse yourself, my little Katia," she added; "what will he think of you? He loves you both so much!"

Sergius Mikailovitch was our nearest neighbor, and though much his junior had been the friend of our dead father. Besides the pleasant change which his arrival might cause in our life, by making it possible for us to leave the country, I had been too much accustomed, from my child-

hood, to love and respect him, for Macha not to divine while urging me to rouse myself, that still another change might be worked and that, of all my acquaintances, he was the one before whom I would be most unwilling to appear in an unfavorable light. Not only did I feel the old attachment for Sergius Mikailovitch which was shared by every one in the house, from Sonia, who was his god-daughter, down to the under-coachman, but this attachment had derived a peculiar character from a few words Mamma had once let fall before me. She had said that he was just the husband that she would have wished for me. At the moment such an idea had appeared to me very extraordinary and even somewhat disagreeable; the hero of my imagination was totally different. My own hero was to be slender, delicate, pale, and melancholy. Sergius Mikailovitch, on the contrary, was no longer young, he was tall and large, full of vigor, and, so far as I could judge, had an extremely pleasant temper; nevertheless my mother's remark had made a strong impression on my imagination. This had happened six years