

CHAPTER IX

The little princess lay supported by pillows, with a white cap on her head (the pains had just left her). Strands of her black hair lay round her inflamed and perspiring cheeks, her charming rosy mouth with its downy lip was open and she was smiling joyfully. Prince Andrew entered and paused facing her at the foot of the sofa on which she was lying. Her glittering eyes, filled with childlike fear and excitement, rested on him without changing their expression. "I love you all and have done no harm to anyone; why must I suffer so? Help me!" her look seemed to say. She saw her husband, but did not realize the significance of his appearance before her now. Prince Andrew went round the sofa and kissed her forehead.

"My darling!" he said—a word he had never used to her before. "God is merciful...."

She looked at him inquiringly and with childlike reproach.

"I expected help from you and I get none, none from you either!" said her eyes. She was not surprised at his having come; she did not realize that he had come. His coming had nothing to do with her sufferings or with their relief. The pangs began again and Mary Bogdánovna advised Prince Andrew to leave the room.

The doctor entered. Prince Andrew went out and, meeting Princess Mary, again joined her. They began talking in whispers, but their talk broke off at every moment. They waited and listened.

"Go, dear," said Princess Mary.

Prince Andrew went again to his wife and sat waiting in the room next to hers. A woman came from the bedroom with a frightened face and became confused when she saw Prince Andrew. He covered his face with his hands and remained so for some minutes. Piteous, helpless, animal moans came through the door. Prince Andrew got up, went to the door, and tried to open it. Someone was holding it shut.

"You can't come in! You can't!" said a terrified voice from within.

He began pacing the room. The screaming ceased, and a few more seconds went by. Then suddenly a terrible shriek—it could not be hers, she could not scream like that—came from the bedroom. Prince Andrew ran to the door; the scream ceased and he heard the wail of an infant.

"What have they taken a baby in there for?" thought Prince Andrew in the first second. "A baby? What baby...? Why is there a baby there? Or is the baby born?"

Then suddenly he realized the joyful significance of that wail; tears choked him, and leaning his elbows on the window sill he began to cry, sobbing like a child. The door opened. The doctor with his shirt sleeves

tucked up, without a coat, pale and with a trembling jaw, came out of the room. Prince Andrew turned to him, but the doctor gave him a bewildered look and passed by without a word. A woman rushed out and seeing Prince Andrew stopped, hesitating on the threshold. He went into his wife's room. She was lying dead, in the same position he had seen her in five minutes before and, despite the fixed eyes and the pallor of the cheeks, the same expression was on her charming childlike face with its upper lip covered with tiny black hair.

"I love you all, and have done no harm to anyone; and what have you done to me?"—said her charming, pathetic, dead face.

In a corner of the room something red and tiny gave a grunt and squealed in Mary Bogdánovna's trembling white hands.

Two hours later Prince Andrew, stepping softly, went into his father's room. The old man already knew everything. He was standing close to the door and as soon as it opened his rough old arms closed like a vise round his son's neck, and without a word he began to sob like a child.

Three days later the little princess was buried, and Prince Andrew went up the steps to where the coffin stood, to give her the farewell kiss. And there in the coffin was the same face, though with closed eyes. "Ah, what have you done to me?" it still seemed to say, and Prince Andrew felt that something gave way in his soul and that he was guilty of a sin he could neither remedy nor forget. He could not weep. The old man too came up and kissed the waxen little hands that lay quietly crossed one on the other on her breast, and to him, too, her face seemed to say: "Ah, what have you done to me, and why?" And at the sight the old man turned angrily away.

Another five days passed, and then the young Prince Nicholas Andréevich was baptized. The wet nurse supported the coverlet with her chin, while the priest with a goose feather anointed the boy's little red and wrinkled soles and palms.

His grandfather, who was his godfather, trembling and afraid of dropping him, carried the infant round the battered tin font and handed him over to the godmother, Princess Mary. Prince Andrew sat in another room, faint with fear lest the baby should be drowned in the font, and awaited the termination of the ceremony. He looked up joyfully at the baby when the nurse brought it to him and nodded approval when she told him that the wax with the baby's hair had not sunk in the font but had floated.