

CHAPTER I

Prince Andrew had spent two years continuously in the country.

All the plans Pierre had attempted on his estates—and constantly changing from one thing to another had never accomplished—were carried out by Prince Andrew without display and without perceptible difficulty.

He had in the highest degree a practical tenacity which Pierre lacked, and without fuss or strain on his part this set things going.

On one of his estates the three hundred serfs were liberated and became free agricultural laborers—this being one of the first examples of the kind in Russia. On other estates the serfs' compulsory labor was commuted for a quitrent. A trained midwife was engaged for Boguchárovo at his expense, and a priest was paid to teach reading and writing to the children of the peasants and household serfs.

Prince Andrew spent half his time at Bald Hills with his father and his son, who was still in the care of nurses. The other half he spent in "Boguchárovo Cloister," as his father called Prince Andrew's estate. Despite the indifference to the affairs of the world he had expressed to Pierre, he diligently followed all that went on, received many books, and to his surprise noticed that when he or his father had visitors from Petersburg, the very vortex of life, these people lagged behind himself—who never left the country—in knowledge of what was happening in home and foreign affairs.

Besides being occupied with his estates and reading a great variety of books, Prince Andrew was at this time busy with a critical survey of our last two unfortunate campaigns, and with drawing up a proposal for a reform of the army rules and regulations.

In the spring of 1809 he went to visit the Ryazán estates which had been inherited by his son, whose guardian he was.

Warmed by the spring sunshine he sat in the calèche looking at the new grass, the first leaves on the birches, and the first puffs of white spring clouds floating across the clear blue sky. He was not thinking of anything, but looked absent-mindedly and cheerfully from side to side.

They crossed the ferry where he had talked with Pierre the year before. They went through the muddy village, past threshing floors and green fields of winter rye, downhill where snow still lodged near the bridge, uphill where the clay had been liquefied by the rain, past strips of stubble land and bushes touched with green here and there, and into a birch forest growing on both sides of the road. In the forest it was almost hot, no wind could be felt. The birches with their sticky green leaves were motionless, and lilac-colored flowers and the first blades of green grass were pushing up and lifting last year's leaves. The coarse evergreen color of the small fir trees scattered here and there among the birches was an unpleasant reminder of winter. On entering the forest the horses began to snort and sweated visibly.

Peter the footman made some remark to the coachman; the latter assented. But apparently the coachman's sympathy was not enough for Peter, and he turned on the box toward his master.

"How pleasant it is, your excellency!" he said with a respectful smile.

"What?"

"It's pleasant, your excellency!"

"What is he talking about?" thought Prince Andrew. "Oh, the spring, I suppose," he thought as he turned round. "Yes, really everything is green already.... How early! The birches and cherry and alders too are coming out.... But the oaks show no sign yet. Ah, here is one oak!"

At the edge of the road stood an oak. Probably ten times the age of the birches that formed the forest, it was ten times as thick and twice as tall as they. It was an enormous tree, its girth twice as great as a man could embrace, and evidently long ago some of its branches had been broken off and its bark scarred. With its huge ungainly limbs sprawling unsymmetrically, and its gnarled hands and fingers, it stood an aged, stern, and scornful monster among the smiling birch trees. Only the dead-looking evergreen firs dotted about in the forest, and this oak, refused to yield to the charm of spring or notice either the spring or the sunshine.

"Spring, love, happiness!" this oak seemed to say. "Are you not weary of that stupid, meaningless, constantly repeated fraud? Always the same and always a fraud? There is no spring, no sun, no happiness! Look at those cramped dead firs, ever the same, and at me too, sticking out my broken and barked fingers just where they have grown, whether from my back or my sides: as they have grown so I stand, and I do not believe in your hopes and your lies."

As he passed through the forest Prince Andrew turned several times to look at that oak, as if expecting something from it. Under the oak, too, were flowers and grass, but it stood among them scowling, rigid, misshapen, and grim as ever.

"Yes, the oak is right, a thousand times right," thought Prince Andrew. "Let others—the young—yield afresh to that fraud, but we know life, our life is finished!"

A whole sequence of new thoughts, hopeless but mournfully pleasant, rose in his soul in connection with that tree. During this journey he, as it were, considered his life afresh and arrived at his old conclusion, restful in its hopelessness: that it was not for him to begin anything anew—but that he must live out his life, content to do no harm, and not disturbing himself or desiring anything.