

## CHAPTER VII

In the winter of 1813 Nicholas married Princess Mary and moved to Bald Hills with his wife, his mother, and Sónya.

Within four years he had paid off all his remaining debts without selling any of his wife's property, and having received a small inheritance on the death of a cousin he paid his debt to Pierre as well.

In another three years, by 1820, he had so managed his affairs that he was able to buy a small estate adjoining Bald Hills and was negotiating to buy back Otrádnœ—that being his pet dream.

Having started farming from necessity, he soon grew so devoted to it that it became his favorite and almost his sole occupation. Nicholas was a plain farmer: he did not like innovations, especially the English ones then coming into vogue. He laughed at theoretical treatises on estate management, disliked factories, the raising of expensive products, and the buying of expensive seed corn, and did not make a hobby of any particular part of the work on his estate. He always had before his mind's eye the estate as a whole and not any particular part of it. The chief thing in his eyes was not the nitrogen in the soil, nor the oxygen in the air, nor manures, nor special plows, but that most important agent by which nitrogen, oxygen, manure, and plow were made effective—the peasant laborer. When Nicholas first began farming and began to understand its different branches, it was the serf who especially attracted his attention. The peasant seemed to him not merely a tool, but also a judge of farming and an end in himself. At first he watched the serfs, trying to understand their aims and what they considered good and bad, and only pretended to direct them and give orders while in reality learning from them their methods, their manner of speech, and their judgment of what was good and bad. Only when he had understood the peasants' tastes and aspirations, had learned to talk their language, to grasp the hidden meaning of their words, and felt akin to them did he begin boldly to manage his serfs, that is, to perform toward them the duties demanded of him. And Nicholas' management produced very brilliant results.

Guided by some gift of insight, on taking up the management of the estates he at once unerringly appointed as bailiff, village elder, and delegate, the very men the serfs would themselves have chosen had they had the right to choose, and these posts never changed hands. Before analyzing the properties of manure, before entering into the debit and credit (as he ironically called it), he found out how many cattle the peasants had and increased the number by all possible means. He kept the peasant families together in the largest groups possible, not allowing the family groups to divide into separate households. He was hard alike on the lazy, the depraved, and the weak, and tried to get them expelled from the commune.

He was as careful of the sowing and reaping of the peasants' hay and corn as of his own, and few landowners had their crops sown and harvested so early and so well, or got so good a return, as did

Nicholas.

He disliked having anything to do with the domestic serfs—the “drones” as he called them—and everyone said he spoiled them by his laxity. When a decision had to be taken regarding a domestic serf, especially if one had to be punished, he always felt undecided and consulted everybody in the house; but when it was possible to have a domestic serf conscripted instead of a land worker he did so without the least hesitation. He never felt any hesitation in dealing with the peasants. He knew that his every decision would be approved by them all with very few exceptions.

He did not allow himself either to be hard on or punish a man, or to make things easy for or reward anyone, merely because he felt inclined to do so. He could not have said by what standard he judged what he should or should not do, but the standard was quite firm and definite in his own mind.

Often, speaking with vexation of some failure or irregularity, he would say: “What can one do with our Russian peasants?” and imagined that he could not bear them.

Yet he loved “our Russian peasants” and their way of life with his whole soul, and for that very reason had understood and assimilated the one way and manner of farming which produced good results.

Countess Mary was jealous of this passion of her husband’s and regretted that she could not share it; but she could not understand the joys and vexations he derived from that world, to her so remote and alien. She could not understand why he was so particularly animated and happy when, after getting up at daybreak and spending the whole morning in the fields or on the threshing floor, he returned from the sowing or mowing or reaping to have tea with her. She did not understand why he spoke with such admiration and delight of the farming of the thrifty and well-to-do peasant Matthew Ermíshin, who with his family had carted corn all night; or of the fact that his (Nicholas’) sheaves were already stacked before anyone else had his harvest in. She did not understand why he stepped out from the window to the veranda and smiled under his mustache and winked so joyfully, when warm steady rain began to fall on the dry and thirsty shoots of the young oats, or why when the wind carried away a threatening cloud during the hay harvest he would return from the barn, flushed, sunburned, and perspiring, with a smell of wormwood and gentian in his hair and, gleefully rubbing his hands, would say: “Well, one more day and my grain and the peasants’ will all be under cover.”

Still less did she understand why he, kindhearted and always ready to anticipate her wishes, should become almost desperate when she brought him a petition from some peasant men or women who had appealed to her to be excused some work; why he, that kind Nicholas, should obstinately refuse her, angrily asking her not to interfere in what was not her business. She felt he had a world apart, which he loved passionately and which had laws she had not fathomed.

Sometimes when, trying to understand him, she spoke of the good work he

was doing for his serfs, he would be vexed and reply: “Not in the least; it never entered my head and I wouldn’t do that for their good! That’s all poetry and old wives’ talk—all that doing good to one’s neighbor! What I want is that our children should not have to go begging. I must put our affairs in order while I am alive, that’s all. And to do that, order and strictness are essential.... That’s all about it!” said he, clenching his vigorous fist. “And fairness, of course,” he added, “for if the peasant is naked and hungry and has only one miserable horse, he can do no good either for himself or for me.”

And all Nicholas did was fruitful—probably just because he refused to allow himself to think that he was doing good to others for virtue’s sake. His means increased rapidly; serfs from neighboring estates came to beg him to buy them, and long after his death the memory of his administration was devoutly preserved among the serfs. “He was a master... the peasants’ affairs first and then his own. Of course he was not to be trifled with either—in a word, he was a real master!”