

Reading Notes on
War and Peace

Volume One/ Part One

1/ We meet two characters — Anna Pavlovna Scherer and Prince Vassily. The Prince is the first arrival at a small party Anna Pavlovna is having and they have a brief conversation, first about politics (Napoleon and the Russian emperor Alexander and Austria). Eventually the conversation turns to personal interests and Anna Pavlovna agrees to arrange a marriage for the Prince's (wayward) son Anatole.

2/ More people arrive at Anna Pavlovna's soirée. The two most important seem to be the young Princess Bolkonsky (Liza, who is pregnant) and Pierre ("a massive, fat young man"), who has just come from studying abroad. He is uncomfortable in the party (his first time in society) and Anna Pavlovna frets about him fitting in as she manages the various conversations in the room.

3/ The party continues. The attendees are separated into three groups, but Anna Pavlovna manages to join them to hear a story by the Viscount (a Frenchman). We meet some new characters here — Hélène (Prince Vassily's daughter, a striking beauty) and Prince Andrei Bolkonsky (the pregnant princess's husband). The Prince, who seems bored with everyone (esp. his wife), is enlisting in the army. However he does welcome Pierre warmly. They both remark on the beauty of Hélène.

4/ The party continues. Prince Vassily and his daughter prepare to leave for another engagement. They are stopped by an older lady, Princess Drubetskoy, who makes a request for him to get her son, Boris, a certain appointment to the guards. He initially refuses, but after her entreaty decides to help her (he was helped by her father years before).

We return to the party where the conversation turns to Napoleon. It centers around the Frenchman, who is a royalist and detests Napoleon, and Pierre, who praises him as a good man. Anna Pavlovna attempts to steer Pierre away from the topic but fails. Pierre is overmatched in the argument, but Prince Andrei eventually enters to aid him. The Princess Bolkonsky's brother, Prince Ippolit, tells a ridiculous story that turns everyone's thoughts away from the debate.

5/ The party ends and everyone leaves. Liza and Anna Pavlovna have come to an agreement about arranging the marriage of Prince Vassily's son. They share knowing whispers. Prince Ippolit makes a big show about saying goodbye to his sister, irritating Prince Andrei in the process. He then gets into a carriage with the Viscount. They talk about seducing Russian women (alluding to his sister).

The scene moves to Prince Andrei's apartments where he and Pierre talk. The Prince asks his guest if he has chosen a profession yet (between being a horse guard or a diplomat). Pierre has decided nothing. The Prince says he is going to war because he cannot stand the life he's currently leading.

6/ Liza joins her husband and Pierre. She immediately takes over the conversation and it turns to why Prince Andrei wants to go to the war. Liza complains bitterly about it because she will have to leave her friends and journey to the Prince's family's country estate. An argument ensues (Liza tells Andrei that he is changed toward her), which makes Pierre uncomfortable. He starts to leave, but Liza retires for the evening instead.

Andrei and Pierre then have dinner. Andrei tells his friend to never be married. They then discuss Pierre's life and Andrei urges him not to join his friend Anatole in their now usual night of drinking and gambling. Pierre gives his word he will not.

However, after leaving Andrei's, Pierre does go to Anatole's. Anatole makes him get drunk (not a difficult persuasion). We meet a new character named Dolokhov who bets an Englishman that he can drink an entire bottle of rum while sitting on a sloping window ledge without falling off or holding on to anything. He performs the feat and wins the bet. They leave the house at dawn to...

7/ We find out that the prince has fulfilled his promise to Princess Drubetskoy, and her son Boris is now appointed to the Semyonovsky guards. She is staying with relations in Moscow with her wealthy relations, the Rostovs.

Guests arrive at the Rostov's for the name-day party for the Natalyas, the mother and younger daughter. The guests have come to pay their respects, and in the conversation we discover what happened after the drinking party at Anatole's: they steal a bear and harass some actresses; when the police arrive, they take one and tie him to the bear and then throw them both in the river; the policeman only just was saved. The stunt got all three—Anatole, Pierre, and Dolokhov—banned from Petersburg. Pierre's father took ill after the scandal and is apparently on his deathbed. He is fond of Pierre, although he is illegitimate, and has tried to make him his heir. However, Prince Vassily is the legal heir. Either stands to inherit a substantial fortune if their claim is approved.

8/ Three new characters are introduced (they interrupt the gossip of their parents and guests): The young Natasha Rostov, a girl 13-years old, "dark-eyed, big-mouthed, not beautiful, but lively"; her brother Nikolai, a young man whose face "expressed impetuosity and rapturousness"; and the young Boris, the officer, and son of Princess Drubetskoy (also known as Anna Mikhailovna), who seems very in control of himself.

9/ We discover that Nikolai has also enlisted in the army. He says that he's not good for anything else. In conversation we discover that his cousin Sonya and he are romantically interested (he drives her into jealousy by speaking to another girl in the room). And we discover that the young Natasha is in love with Boris. The conversation turns to the subject of raising children and we meet the Rostov's older daughter, Vera: "good-looking, far from stupid, an excellent student, well brought-up, had a pleasant voice,..." but no one seems to like her.

10/ Natasha spies upon Boris and the young couple of Nikolai & Sonya. After seeing them kiss, she goes in search of Boris and brings him to her hiding place. She then kisses him impetuously. He protests, but does express his love for her. He promises to ask for her hand in four years time, when she is sixteen.

11/ Natasha, the mother, wants to have a private talk with Anna Mikhailovna and dismisses her daughter Vera. Vera leaves the room and happens upon the two young couples in the sitting room. She self-righteously judges their actions and flirtings, and they all get up and leave, throwing insults at her as they go (which apparently have no effect upon her). We do discover that she is romantically linked with someone named Berg.

Meanwhile, Anna Mikhailovna confesses to her friend that she is almost penniless (although there is an allusion to a lawsuit she has filed that isn't settled yet). She cannot afford to buy Boris's supplies for the guards. But, Pierre's father, the rich old dying man Count Kirill Vladimirovich Bezukhov, is also Boris's godfather. She is going to go see him to ask him to outfit her son for military duty.

12/ Anna Mikhailovna takes Boris in the Rostov's carriage to see Count Bezukhov. She encourages him to be nice, but he feels the attempt will only bring humiliation.

They compel the porter to allow them inside the Count's residence and soon run into Prince Vassily speaking with the doctor. The prognosis is apparently very bad. The Prince is, I guess, confused to see them there (he gives them "questioning looks"... "to the point of bewilderment"). They engage in small talk about Boris's appointment to the guards (he thanks Vassily for that) and the unemptiness of the Count Rostov. Finally, Anna Mikhailovna gets around to mentioning that Boris is Bezukhov's godson (calling him "Uncle"). She pretends (I think) to be concerned over the state of his soul in order to gain entrance to his room, but the Prince will not allow her to come in. One of the Count's nieces exits his room and complains of the noise. Anna Mikhailovna offers her help, but the princess leaves without responding. But Anna insists on seeing him. She sends Boris off to see Pierre while she is with the Count.

13/ We temporarily travel back to when Pierre arrived back in Moscow after his "riotous behavior". He returned to his father's and immediately meets the nieces (three of them) represented in the previous chapter. They are caring for the Count and won't admit Pierre to see him. One of them laughs every time she looks at him. Pierre retires to his room.

Back in the present, Boris enters Pierre's room to find him gesticulating wildly and speaking to himself. Pierre had known Boris years before, but now could not recall his name. Boris invites Pierre to the Rostov's for dinner, at which time Pierre thinks he is young Count Rostov. Boris corrects him, and they have an awkward conversation. Boris finally tells Pierre that he is not interested in his father's money and will not accept it. At this, Pierre seems confused, and then warmly greets Boris and looks forward to getting to know him better. However there is still awkwardness as Boris is summoned back to his mother.

She has seen the Count and seems distraught over his condition. She alludes to the will and that their fate hangs on what the Count has done with Pierre in it.

14/ While Anna Mikhailovna is away, Natasha is upset. She sends for her husband and begs him for 500 roubles. He sends his assistant, Mitenka, to get 700. When Anna returns, Natasha begs her to take the money as a gift to buy Boris's things for the army. They embrace and cry together.

15/ The name day dinner party for the Natashas (mother and daughter) gets underway. We meet several new characters — Shinshin, an old bachelor in Moscow reputed to have "a wicked tongue"; Lieutenant Berg, an officer of the Semyonovsky regiment and "fiancé" of Vera; and Marya Dmitrievna Akhrosimov, also called *le terrible dragon*, known for her bluntness in conversation.

Count Rostov has the men in his study before the party and sets Shinshin against Berg in conversation. Shinshin mocks Berg, although the latter doesn't realize it. When Marya arrives she turns her rude attention to Pierre and remarks about his farce with the bear. They all sit down to eat.

16/ More of the dinner table chatter. The men and women are sitting at opposite ends of long table and are having different conversations. The men's talk turns to the war with Napoleon and a manifesto that has just been published declaring war. They are disputing about it — with Shinshin implying that they should keep their troops close to home, and an old German hussar giving a (drunk) "glory in battle or death" speech. The Count's son Nikolai is asked his opinion and says that he agrees with the hussar.

Young Natasha, meanwhile, acts mischievously by standing up on her chair and shouting down the table at her mother "What's for dessert?". It's pineapple ice cream, and she is not flustered at her mother's or Marya Dmitrievna's rebuke.

17/ The dinner finishes and the guests withdraw to various rooms — some for cards and some for music and dancing. Sonya has disappeared and young Natasha goes to look for her. She finds her weeping in one of the bedrooms. She begins weeping also, and Sonya confesses her anxieties about being able to marry Nikolai (they're second cousins and require the approval of the bishop, Vera has been teasing her and threatening her, she doesn't think her mother will approve, and she is jealous of Nikolai's attention to Julie). Natasha reassures her and eases her mind, and they both go back to the party (as if nothing had happened).

The young people sing a song and then Nikolai sings a solo. Young Natasha finds Pierre and says that her mother sent her to ask him to dance (she employs a fan and strikes "a most worldly pose"). After their dance the old Count comes in and dances a vigorous round with Marya. They are the center of attention (especially of young Natasha) — he is comic enthusiasm and she in her own, corpulent way.

18/ During the party, Count Bezukhov had his sixth stroke. The prognosis is very bad for him. And the commander of Moscow comes for a final visit.

In the meantime, Prince Vassily sits down for a private talk with Count Bezukhov's niece, the Princess Katerina Semyonovna (Catiche for short). He attempts to discuss with her issues surrounding the Count's estate — Prince Vassily and herself (along with her sisters) are the Count's only direct heirs. However, the Count has written a letter which indicates his desire to adopt Pierre as his son (he is his son, but illegitimate). If this request is granted then the inheritance will pass to him and not to the nieces or Prince Vassily. However, the letter has not been mailed. Prince Vassily wants to find the letter and destroy it before it can be mailed. He finally convinces her that this is a real threat, and she discloses that the letter and the will are in an inlaid portfolio. She also reveals that the letter was occasioned after a visit from Anna Mikhailovna, where she believes lies were told about her and her sisters that turned the Count away from them. She avows to get even with Anna.

19/ Before his last stroke, Count Bezukhov had sent for Pierre. He arrives by coach with Anna Mikhailovna (who "found it necessary to go with him."). They enter by the back entrance and surprise Prince Vassily and Catiche in their conversation. They continue to the waiting room, Anna assuring Pierre that she will look out for his interests, although he really doesn't understand what she is talking about. He seems clueless as to the customs during this time and resolves just to follow the advice of his guide. She leaves him in the waiting room and enters the Count's chamber. Shortly afterward the Prince and Catiche also enter. Finally, they send for Pierre and prepare to perform the sacrament of extreme unction.

20/ The rite of extreme unction is performed on Count Bezukhov with everyone in the house in attendance. Pierre is very uncomfortable. And Anna Mikhailovna takes a prominent place. In the middle of the ceremony Prince Vassily and Catiche leave the room momentarily and then return. After the ceremony they move the Count from his chair to his bed. He does not show any real recognition of his son.

21/ Tea is served and Pierre and Anna join the others for it. Prince Vassily and Catiche remain in the sitting room talking. Catiche is about to reenter the Count's chamber when she is blocked by Anna Mikhailovna. They struggle over the inlaid portfolio with raised voices and Anna ends up with it and retreats to the Count's bedroom. Some moments later she returns and tells Pierre that his father is dead. She implies that he is now going to be the head of a great fortune and implores him not to forget her and her son (she also implies that the count had wished as much). Afterwards she returns to the Rostovs' and tells them about the death scene, adding extra details.

22/ The setting changes to the country, 100 miles outside Moscow, at Bald Hills, the home of Prince Bolkonsky (the father of Andrei, who we met earlier and whose wife Liza is pregnant). The Prince is described as keeping an extremely ordered and regimented house. However, the chapter centers around the old Prince's daughter Marya. She reports to her father's study daily for geometry lessons (which she finds impossible).

On this particular day Marya is expecting a visit from her brother and sister-in-law (he is leaving her there and going to the war). However in the morning she receives a letter from Julie Karagin, who had been staying with the Rostov's and who was the cause of much of Sonya's jealousy. The letter contains some news — her liking of Nikolai (although she disavows any expectation of romance with him); a rumor that she is to be the Countess Bezukhov, marrying Pierre after he has inherited his father's estate (she discredits this also); and the news that a marriage will be arranged for Marya with Prince Vassily's son Anatole. Julie also sends a mystical book that is very popular in Moscow at the time. Marya replies to Julie's letter and responds to each of these items of news from a very religious perspective.

23/ Andrei and Liza arrive while his father is taking his pre-dinner nap. So they go to Marya as she is practicing on the clavichord. Liza and Marya fall into each others arms, kissing and crying at being reunited, even though they've only met once for a brief time. Liza talks nonstop while Marya looks at Andrei. She finally asks him if he is still going to the war. He answers affirmatively and says he is going the very next day (which upsets Liza again).

Andrei then goes to meet his father and talks with him while he is dressing for dinner. His father immediately begins questioning him about the plans for the war and makes him recount the strategy for the campaign. At the end of the chapter, Andrei's father repeats a refrain from a song which translates "God knows when he'll come back."

24/ The family sits down to dinner, along with two other persons: Mlle Bourienne (an orphan taken in by the Prince, I think) and the Prince's architect, Mikhail Ivanovich. When the Prince finally arrives for dinner he begins questioning Liza. She's apprehensive at first, but then begins talking nonstop (as usual). Finally the Prince shifts his attention from her to Buonaparte and the war. He thinks very little of him and thinks he doesn't compare well with soldiers of the past. Andrei seems to have respect for him as a general. The refrain is repeated, "God knows when he'll come back."

25/ Prince Andrei prepares to leave and is very thoughtful. He is visited in his room by Marya. She tries to get Andrei to feel some sympathy towards his wife. Their talk turns to life in the country and living with the old Prince. Marya insists that she venerates her father. However, she says that the one thing that makes her unhappy is his rejection of religion. She requests Andrei to wear an icon of Jesus as a promise to her. It seems he is not religious like his sister. But he agrees. She tells him, "Against your will He will save you and have mercy on you and turn you to Him, because in Him alone there is truth and peace."

Their talk turns back to Liza and Marya begs him to be sympathetic towards her. In her conversation with Liza, Marya has heard of their marital difficulties. Andrei sends Marya to awaken Liza and then goes to join them. On the way, he "met the sweetly smiling Mlle Bourienne, who three times that day had already run into him with her rapturous and naïve smile in secluded passages." He looks at her sternly and then proceeds to meet his wife (where he overhears a story he's already heard five times previously, told in the same way with the same laugh).

He says goodbye to his father in the study. Andrei asks his father to send for a male midwife from Moscow when it is time for Liza to give birth (there have been premonitions of a difficult delivery). His father promises to do it, and he reveals he knows about the difficulties Andrei and Liza are having. Then the old Prince shows him some journals and books that he wants him to have if he dies before his son and things he wants sent to the sovereign. Andrei promises to do everything he's asked. Finally, Andrei asks him, that if he dies in battle and his child is a son, that the old Prince will keep him and not allow Liza to take him away.

Andrei quickly says goodbye to his wife and sister and leaves.