Boyhood

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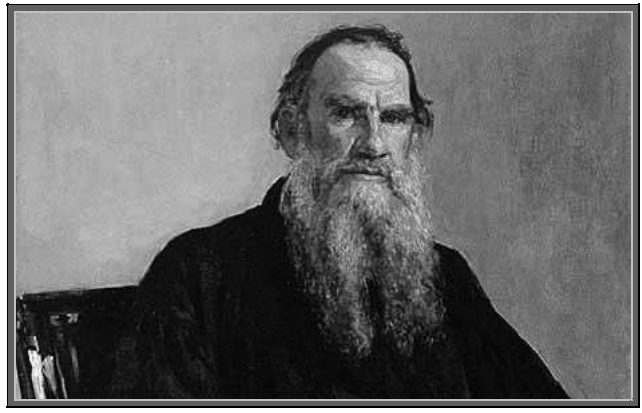
About Author:



Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, commonly referred to in English as Leo Tolstoy, was a Russian novelist, writer, essayist, philosopher, Christian anarchist, pacifist, educational reformer, moral thinker, and an influential member of the Tolstoy family. As a fiction writer Tolstoy is widely regarded as one of the greatest of all novelists, particularly noted for his masterpieces War and Peace and Anna Karenina; in their scope, breadth and realistic depiction of Russian life, the two books stand at the peak of realistic fiction. As a moral philosopher he was notable for his ideas on nonviolent resistance through his work The Kingdom of God is Within You, which in turn influenced such twentieth-century figures as Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Chapter 1

A SLOW JOURNEY



Again two carriages stood at the front door of the house at Petrovskoe. In one of them sat Mimi, the two girls, and their maid, with the bailiff, Jakoff, on the box, while in the other—a britchka—sat Woloda, myself, and our servant Vassili. Papa, who was to follow us to Moscow in a few days, was standing bareheaded on the

entrance-steps. He made the sign of the cross at the windows of the carriages, and said:

"Christ go with you! Good-bye."

Jakoff and our coachman (for we had our own horses) lifted their caps in answer, and also made the sign of the cross.

"Amen. God go with us!"

The carriages began to roll away, and the birch-trees of the great avenue filed out of sight.

I was not in the least depressed on this occasion, for my mind was not so much turned upon what I had left as upon what was awaiting me. In proportion as the various objects connected with the sad recollections which had recently filled my imagination receded behind me, those recollections lost their power, and gave place to a consolatory feeling of life, youthful vigour, freshness, and hope.

Seldom have I spent four days more—well, I will not say gaily, since I should still have shrunk from appearing gay—but more agreeably and pleasantly than those occupied by our journey.

No longer were my eyes confronted with the closed door of Mamma's room (which I had never been able to pass without a pang), nor with the covered piano (which nobody opened now, and at which I could never look without trembling), nor with mourning dresses (we had each of us on our ordinary travelling clothes), nor with all

those other objects which recalled to me so vividly our irreparable loss, and forced me to abstain from any manifestation of merriment lest I should unwittingly offend against HER memory.

On the contrary, a continual succession of new and exciting objects and places now caught and held my attention, and the charms of spring awakened in my soul a soothing sense of satisfaction with the present and of blissful hope for the future.

Very early next morning the merciless Vassili (who had only just entered our service, and was therefore, like most people in such a position, zealous to a fault) came and stripped off my counterpane, affirming that it was time for me to get up, since everything was in readiness for us to continue our journey. Though I felt inclined to stretch myself and rebel—though I would gladly have spent another quarter of an hour in sweet enjoyment of my morning slumber—Vassili's inexorable face showed that he would grant me no respite, but that he was ready to tear away the counterpane twenty times more if necessary. Accordingly I submitted myself to the inevitable and ran down into the courtyard to wash myself at the fountain.

In the coffee-room, a tea-kettle was already surmounting the fire which Milka the ostler, as red in the face as a crab, was blowing with a pair of bellows. All was grey and misty in the courtyard, like steam from a smoking dunghill, but in the eastern sky the sun was diffusing a clear, cheerful radiance, and making the straw roofs of the

sheds around the courtyard sparkle with the night dew. Beneath them stood our horses, tied to mangers, and I could hear the ceaseless sound of their chewing. A curly-haired dog which had been spending the night on a dry dunghill now rose in lazy fashion and, wagging its tail, walked slowly across the courtyard.

The bustling landlady opened the creaking gates, turned her meditative cows into the street (whence came the lowing and bellowing of other cattle), and exchanged a word or two with a sleepy neighbour. Philip, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was working the windlass of a draw-well, and sending sparkling fresh water coursing into an oaken trough, while in the pool beneath it some early-rising ducks were taking a bath. It gave me pleasure to watch his strongly-marked, bearded face, and the veins and muscles as they stood out upon his great powerful hands whenever he made an extra effort. In the room behind the partition-wall where Mimi and the girls had slept (yet so near to ourselves that we had exchanged confidences overnight) movements now became audible, their maid kept passing in and out with clothes, and, at last the door opened and we were summoned to breakfast. Woloda, however, remained in a state of bustle throughout as he ran to fetch first one article and then another and urged the maid to hasten her preparations.

The horses were put to, and showed their impatience by tinkling their bells. Parcels, trunks, dressing-cases, and boxes were replaced, and we set about taking our seats. Yet, every time that we got in, the mountain of luggage in

the britchka seemed to have grown larger than before, and we had much ado to understand how things had been arranged yesterday, and how we should sit now. A tea-chest, in particular, greatly inconvenienced me, but Vassili declared that "things will soon right themselves," and I had no choice but to believe him.

The sun was just rising, covered with dense white clouds, and every object around us was standing out in a cheerful, calm sort of radiance. The whole was beautiful to look at, and I felt comfortable and light of heart.

Before us the road ran like a broad, sinuous ribbon through cornfields glittering with dew. Here and there a dark bush or young birch-tree cast a long shadow over the ruts and scattered grass-tufts of the track. Yet even the monotonous din of our carriage-wheels and collar-bells could not drown the joyous song of soaring larks, nor the combined odour of moth-eaten cloth, dust, and sourness peculiar to our britchka overpower the fresh scents of the morning. I felt in my heart that delightful impulse to be up and doing which is a sign of sincere enjoyment.

As I had not been able to say my prayers in the courtyard of the inn, but had nevertheless been assured once that on the very first day when I omitted to perform that ceremony some misfortune would overtake me, I now hastened to rectify the omission. Taking off my cap, and stooping down in a corner of the britchka, I duly recited my orisons, and unobtrusively signed the sign of the cross beneath my coat. Yet all the while a thousand different

objects were distracting my attention, and more than once I inadvertently repeated a prayer twice over.

Soon on the little footpath beside the road became visible some slowly moving figures. They were pilgrims. On their heads they had dirty handkerchiefs, on their backs wallets of birch-bark, and on their feet bundles of soiled rags and heavy bast shoes. Moving their staffs in regular rhythm, and scarcely throwing us a glance, they pressed onwards with heavy tread and in single file.

"Where have they come from?" I wondered to myself, "and whither are they bound? Is it a long pilgrimage they are making?" But soon the shadows they cast on the road became indistinguishable from the shadows of the bushes which they passed.

Next a carriage-and-four could be seen approaching us. In two seconds the faces which looked out at us from it with smiling curiosity had vanished. How strange it seemed that those faces should have nothing in common with me, and that in all probability they would never meet my eyes again!

Next came a pair of post-horses, with the traces looped up to their collars. On one of them a young postillion-his lamb's wool cap cocked to one side-was negligently kicking his booted legs against the flanks of his steed as he sang a melancholy ditty. Yet his face and attitude seemed to me to express such perfect carelessness and indolent ease that I imagined it to be the height of happiness to be a postillion and to sing melancholy songs.

Far off, through a cutting in the road, there soon stood out against the light-blue sky, the green roof of a village church. Presently the village itself became visible, together with the roof of the manor-house and the garden attached to it. Who lived in that house? Children, parents, teachers? Why should we not call there and make the acquaintance of its inmates?

Next we overtook a file of loaded waggons—a procession to which our vehicles had to yield the road.

"What have you got in there?" asked Vassili of one waggoner who was dangling his legs lazily over the splashboard of his conveyance and flicking his whip about as he gazed at us with a stolid, vacant look; but he only made answer when we were too far off to catch what he said.

"And what have YOU got?" asked Vassili of a second waggoner who was lying at full length under a new rug on the driving-seat of his vehicle. The red poll and red face beneath it lifted themselves up for a second from the folds of the rug, measured our britchka with a cold, contemptuous look, and lay down again; whereupon I concluded that the driver was wondering to himself who we were, whence we had come, and whither we were going.

These various objects of interest had absorbed so much of my time that, as yet, I had paid no attention to the crooked figures on the verst posts as we passed them in rapid succession; but in time the sun began to burn my

head and back, the road to become increasingly dusty, the impedimenta in the carriage to grow more and more uncomfortable, and myself to feel more and more cramped. Consequently, I relapsed into devoting my whole faculties to the distance-posts and their numerals, and to solving difficult mathematical problems for reckoning the time when we should arrive at the next posting-house.

"Twelve versts are a third of thirty-six, and in all there are forty-one to Lipetz. We have done a third and how much, then?", and so forth, and so forth.

"Vassili," was my next remark, on observing that he was beginning to nod on the box-seat, "suppose we change seats? Will you?" Vassili agreed, and had no sooner stretched himself out in the body of the vehicle than he began to snore. To me on my new perch, however, a most interesting spectacle now became visible— namely, our horses, all of which were familiar to me down to the smallest detail.

"Why is Diashak on the right today, Philip, not on the left?" I asked knowingly. "And Nerusinka is not doing her proper share of the pulling."

"One could not put Diashak on the left," replied Philip, altogether ignoring my last remark. "He is not the kind of horse to put there at all. A horse like the one on the left now is the right kind of one for the job."

After this fragment of eloquence, Philip turned towards Diashak and began to do his best to worry the poor animal