Highlights of *War and Peace*, Volume II (from Part 1, Chap. 7 to Part 3, Chapter 17)

**Part One**

**Chapter 7-9:** General Kutuzov writes to his old friend Nikolai Bolkonsky that he saw, “with his own eyes,” Prince Andrei fall while heroically carrying the standard at Austerlitz. Although Andrei’s name has not appeared on the lists of those killed, wounded, or captured, his family has to assume he is dead, though no one has the heart to tell “the Little Princess.” Prince Andrei does indeed return, though, but just in time for his wife to die in childbirth, but Andrei’s son, Prince Nikolai, is safely delivered. Andrei is left feeling that “he was to blame for something that he could neither set right nor forget.”

**Chapter 10-16:** To protect his son, who was Dolohkov’s second, Count Ilya Rostov uses his influence to have the duel between Pierre and Dolohkov “hushed up,” so that no one is demoted or otherwise punished. Nikolai Rostov becomes friends with Dolohkov, and both Dolohkov and Denisov become “regulars” at the Rostov house. Both men make unsuccessful proposals: Dolohkov to Sonya, and Denisov to Natasha. Dolohkov revenges himself on Nikolai and the whole Rostov family by fleecing Nikolai of 43,000 rubles at what is clearly a crooked card game.

**Part Two**

**Chapters 1-4:** Pierre suffers an “existential crisis” over the trauma of the duel and the ensuing separation from his wife. He has only questions about the meaning of life, and no answers. At a posting station on the way to Petersburg after leaving his wife, Pierre meets Osip Alexeevich Bazdeev, a prominent Freemason. Inspired by his conversation with Bazdeev, Pierre seizes upon freemasonry as a philosophical way to gain a faith in God, “purify himself,” and do good works. He joins the St. Petersburg Masonic Lodge.

**Chapter 5-7:** Feeling more confident after joining the Masons, Pierre rejects his father-in-law’s attempts to effect a reconciliation with his wife; he then sets out to visit his estates and start “doing good” for his peasants. Meanwhile, Helene gains the full support of St. Petersburg society, which sees her as the injured party in the separation. Boris Drubetskoy, whose social climbing career continues to prosper, is introduced to Helene and becomes “an intimate of Countess Bezukhov’s house.”

**Chapter 8-9:** Prince Andrei has decided not to return to the army, so when war with Napoleon breaks out again, he does his compulsory service by helping his father recruit militia. His father deeds him an estate called Bogucharovo, which he is in the process of renovating and managing. When his father is away on recruiting duties, he returns home to Bald Hills to help his sister with his baby son. A letter from the diplomat Bilibin about the (discouraging) course of the war tempts his interest, but he is still wracked with grief and guilt: the reproach he sees in his deceased wife’s portrait torments him, and he fears for the health and well-being of his son.

**Chapters 10-14:** After initiating his well-intentioned but naively futile reforms on his estates, Pierre decides to visit his old friend Prince Andrei, whom he has not seen for two years. After some initial
awkwardness, Pierre manages to draw Andrei into a conversation in which Andrei admits his overwhelming guilt over his failed grasp for glory and his wife’s ensuing death. Pierre expounds his new faith to a skeptical Andrei, who has determined that he will try to live out his life as harmlessly as possible “for himself alone.” Andrei’s outlook at this point is very close to what would become known as existentialism in the twentieth century, but Pierre’s good-humored encouragement derived from his excitement about the new meaning for life he has discovered in freemasonry does start to “draw out” Prince Andrei. Andrei finally confesses his guilt over Liza to Pierre, and even though he will not accept Pierre’s spiritual idealism, he is touched by his friend’s sincere affection and concern, which re-awakens “something that was best in him . . . joyful and young in his soul.”

Pierre visits Bald Hills with Prince Andrei, and he makes an unexpectedly good impression on both Princess Marya and the Old Prince.

**Chapters 15-21:** Nikolai Rostov returns to his hussar regiment and is reassured by the order, discipline, and lack of opportunity for bad choices in military life. He re-establishes his firm bond with Captain Denisov, but Denisov gets into trouble by seizing supplies for his starving men. A court-martial looms, but Denisov is wounded, and goes to the hospital to put off the consequences. Rostov goes to visit him, is horrified by the stinking hospital environment, ravaged by typhus. He finds Denisov and then takes a petition to the Tsar begging clemency for Denisov. Meanwhile, Tsar Alexander and Napoleon have concluded a truce and an alliance, much to the displeasure of the Russian army. Rostov tries his best to keep his old idolatry of the Tsar, but Alexander’s refusal of the petition, along with an alliance with the hated enemy, forces him to drink away his doubts.

**Part Three**

**Chapters 1-3:** Without any fuss, Prince Andrei has managed to carry all the reforms Pierre had planned but had been unable to bring to fruition on his estates. His capacity for positive action has definitely returned. On business a trip to Ryazan, where he is trustee of his son’s estates, he goes by the Rostov country estate to see Count Ilya, also on business. While there, he sees Natasha, and is intrigued by her beauty and sensitivity to nature. His own sensitivity to the spiritual influence of nature is expressed through his inner response to an old oak on his property—the blooming of the oak on his way back is clearly symbolic of the re-invigoration of his spirit.

**Chapters 4-6:** Prince Andrei goes the St. Petersburg and re-engages himself in government service. He meets Speransky, who has become Tsar Alexander’s most influential minister. Speransky intends to adopt European ideas of “meritocracy” and “human rights” to the Russian state. Speransky is impressed with Andrei’s success as a “liberal” landlord, and soon Andrei has important government posts on the Committee on Military Regulations and the Legislative Commission.

**Chapter 7:** After a visit to Europe, Pierre embarks on a reform plan of his own for the Masons, advocating that their order work “behind the scenes” of government and other institutions, in pursuit of rational policy and humane behavior. The brothers, however, see his approach as illuminism—the idea that a secret cabal of insiders (the “Illuminati”) would wield power invisibly, making governments merely “fronts.” The “Illuminati” have been major characters in innumerable conspiracy theories ever since, so once again Pierre runs aground through naive idealism.
**Chapters 8-10:** Once again in doubt and confusion, Pierre accepts the advice of Bazdeez to “purify himself” by reconciling with Helene, who has become the “toast of the town,” as St. Petersburg’s leading society woman. Her soirees are considered “the place to be,” and she has become the center of the new, pro-French clique in the capital. Pierre, who has returned to his marriage in name only, is seen by society as a fool and buffoon.

Pierre, to his disgust, accepts Boris, Helene’s lover, as a lodge member, even though he knows that Boris only wants the social contacts that he can obtain through membership. Pierre also knows, but cannot admit to himself, that Boris is sleeping with his wife.

**Chapter 11: Captain Berg** is engaged to Vera Rostov, and the old count’s money problems are further exacerbated by Berg’s demand for an 80,000 ruble dowry. Count Ilya decides to go to Petersburg to look for a government appointment to gain money, and to offer the family a final “fling” before they must cut back expenses drastically.

**Chapters 12-13:** Boris begins paying court to Natasha again, but Natasha, though flattered by his attentions, realizes that she does not really love him, especially when she compares him unfavorably to Pierre.

**Chapter 14-17:** The Rostovs attend a grand New Year’s Eve ball, with the Tsar in attendance. Prince Andrei and Pierre are there, and Pierre encourages Andrei to dance with Natasha, whom he recognizes from his Ryazan trip. They dance a waltz, which begins their relationship. Natasha’s skill as dancer is also revealed, and she gets to be “the belle of the ball.” Prince Andrei realizes that he is falling in love with her, and Natasha is the happiest that she will be in her entire life.