

TOLSTOY

I

One of the comic features of the political campaign last fall was the letter which Count Tolstoy wrote on behalf of Mr. Bryan. In this letter Count Tolstoy advocated the election of Mr. Bryan on the ground that he was the representative of the party of peace, of anti-militarism. From the point of view of American politics, the incident possessed no importance beyond furnishing material for the humorous columns of the newspapers. But it had a certain real interest as indicating Count Tolstoy's worth as a moral guide. He advocated Mr. Bryan on the theory that Mr. Bryan represented peace and anti-militarism. Now there was but one point in the platform of either political party in 1908 which contained any element of menace to the peace of the world. This was the plank in the Bryanite platform which demanded the immediate exclusion by law of all Asiatic laborers, and therefore of the Japanese. Coupled with it was the utterly meaningless plank about the Navy, which was, however, intended to convey the impression that we ought to have a navy only for the defense of our coasts—that is, a merely "defensive" navy, or, in other words, a quite worthless navy. Now I have shown in a preceding editorial that at this present time there is neither justification nor excuse for such a law—and this wholly without regard to what the future may show. The exclusion plank in Mr. Bryan's platform represented merely an idle threat, a wanton insult, and it was coupled with what was intended to be a declaration that the policy of upbuilding the Navy, which has been so successfully carried on during the past dozen years, would be abandoned. Any man of common sense, therefore, ought to perceive the self-evident fact that the only menace to peace which was contained in any possible action by the American Republic was that contained in the election of Mr. Bryan and the attempt to put into effect his platform. That Count Tolstoy did not see this affords a curious illustration of his complete inability to face facts; of his readiness to turn aside from the truth in the pursuit of any phantom, how-

ever foolish; and of the utter fatuity of those who treat him as a philosopher, whose philosophy should be, or could be, translated into action.

Count Tolstoy is a man of genius, a great novelist. "War and Peace," "Anna Karénina," "The Cossacks," "Sebastopol," are great books. As a novelist he has added materially to the sum of production of his generation. As a professional philosopher and moralist I doubt if his influence has really been very extensive among men of action; of course it has a certain weight among men who live only in the closet, in the library; and among the high-minded men of this type, who, because of their sheltered lives, naturally reject what is immoral, and do not have to deal with what is fantastic, in Tolstoy's teachings, it is probable that the really lofty side of these teachings gives them a certain sense of spiritual exaltation. But I have no question that whatever little influence Tolstoy has exerted among men of action has told, on the whole, for evil. I do not think his influence over men of action has been great, for I think he has swayed or dominated only the feeble folk and the fantastic folk. No man who possesses both robust common sense and high ideals, and who strives to apply both in actual living, is affected by Tolstoy's teachings, save as he is affected by the teachings of hundreds of other men in whose writings there are occasional truths mixed with masses of what is commonplace or erroneous. Strong men may gain something from Tolstoy's moral teachings, but only on condition that they are strong enough and sane enough to be repelled by those parts of his teachings which are foolish or immoral. Weak persons are hurt by the teachings. Still, I think that the mere fact that these weak persons are influenced sufficiently to be marred means that there was not in them a very great quantity of potential usefulness to mar. In the United States we suffer from grave moral dangers; but they are for the most part dangers which Tolstoy would neither perceive nor know how to combat. Moreover, the real and dreadful evils which do in fact share in his denunciation of and attack upon both good and evil are usually not evils which are of much moment among us. On the other

hand, we are not liable to certain kinds of wickedness which there is real danger of his writings inculcating; for it is a lamentable fact that, as is so often the case with a certain type of mystical zealot, there is in him a dark streak which tells of moral perversion. That side of his teachings which is partially manifested in the revolting "Kreutzer Sonata" can do exceedingly little damage in America, for it would appeal only to decadents; exactly as it could have come only from a man who, however high he may stand in certain respects, has in him certain dreadful qualities of the moral pervert.

The usual effect of prolonged and excessive indulgence in Tolstoyism on American disciples is comic rather than serious. One of these disciples, for instance, not long ago wrote a book on American municipal problems, which ascribed our ethical and social shortcomings in municipal matters in part to the sin of "militarism." Now the mind of this particular writer in making such a statement was influenced not in the least by what had actually occurred or was occurring in our cities, but by one of Tolstoy's theories which has no possible bearing upon American life. Militarism is a real factor for good or for evil in most European countries. In America it has not the smallest effect one way or the other; it is a negligible quantity. There are undoubtedly states of society where militarism is a grave evil, and there are plenty of circumstances in which the prime duty of man may be to strive against it. But it is not righteous war, not even war itself, which is the absolute evil, the evil which is evil always and under all circumstances. Militarism which takes the form of a police force, municipal or national, may be the prime factor for upholding peace and righteousness. Militarism is to be condemned or not purely according to the conditions. So eating horse meat is in itself a mere matter of taste; but the early Christian missionaries in Scandinavia found that serious evil sprang from the custom of eating horse meat in honor of Odin. It is literally true that our very grave municipal problems in New York or Chicago have no more to do with militarism than with eating the meat of horses that have been

sacrificed to pagan deities; and a crusade against one habit, as an element in municipal reform, is just about as rational as would be a crusade against the other. Oliver Wendell Holmes said that it had taken a century to remove the lark from American literature; because the poets insisted upon writing, not about the birds they saw, but about the birds they had read of in the writings of other poets. Militarism as an evil in our social life is as purely a figment of the imagination as the skylark in our literature. Moreover, the fact that in spite of this total absence of militarism there is so much that is evil in our life, so much need for reform, ought to show persons who think that the destruction of militarism would bring about the millennium how completely they lack the sense of perspective.

Another disciple used to write poetry in defense of the Mahdi, apparently under the vague impression that this also was a protest against militarism and therefore in line with Tolstoy's teachings—as very possibly it was. Now, Mahdism was as hideous an exhibition of bloodthirsty cruelty, governmental tyranny, corruption and inefficiency, and homicidal religious fanaticism as the world has ever seen. Its immediate result was to destroy over half the population in the area where it held sway, and to bring the most dreadful degradation and suffering to the remainder. It represented in the aggregate more wickedness, more wrong-doing, more human suffering, than all the wickedness, wrong-doing, and human suffering in all the Christian communities put together during the same period. It was characteristic of the fantastic perversion of morality which naturally results from the serious acceptance of Tolstoy as a moral teacher that one manifestation of this acceptance should have been a defense of Mahdism. Of course when the Anglo-Egyptian army overthrew Mahdism it conferred a boon upon all mankind, and most of all upon the wretched inhabitants of the Sudan.

So much for Tolstoyism in America, the only place where I have studied it in action, and where its effect, although insignificant for good, has been not much more significant for evil, being absurd rather than serious. As to the effect in

Russia itself, I am not competent to speak. But the history of the Duma proved in the most emphatic way that the greatest danger to liberalism in Russia sprang from the fact that the liberals were saturated with just such folly as that taught by Tolstoy. The flat contradiction between his theory and practice in such matters as his preaching concerning the relations of the sexes, and also concerning private property—for of course it is an unlovely thing to profit by the private property of one's wife and children, while affecting to cast it aside—is explicable only by one of two very sad hypotheses, neither of which it is necessary here to discuss. The important point is that his preaching is compounded of some very beautiful and lofty sentiments, with much that is utterly fantastic, and with some things that are grossly immoral. The Duma fell far short of what its friends in other lands hoped for, just because it showed these very same traits, and because it failed to develop the power for practical common-sense work. There were plenty of members who could utter the loftiest moral sentiments, sentiments quite as lofty as those once uttered by Robespierre; but there was an insufficiency of members able and willing to go to work in practical fashion, able and willing to try to make society measurably better by cutting out the abuses that could be cut out, and by starting things on the right road, instead of insisting upon doing nothing unless they could immediately introduce the millennium and reform all the abuses of society out of hand with a jump. What was needed was a body of men like those who made our Constitution; men accustomed to work with their fellows, accustomed to compromise; men who clung to high ideals, but who were imbued with the philosophy which Abraham Lincoln afterwards so strikingly exemplified, and were content to take the best possible where the best absolute could not be secured. This was the spirit of Washington and his associates in one great crisis of our National life, of Lincoln and his associates in the other great crisis. It is the only spirit from which it will ever be possible to secure good results in a free country; and it is the direct negation of Tolstoyism.

To minimize the chance of anything

but willful misunderstanding, let me repeat that Tolstoy is a great writer, a great novelist; that the unconscious influence of his novels is probably, on the whole, good, even disregarding their standing as works of art; that even as a professional moralist and philosophical adviser of mankind in religious matters he has some excellent theories and on some points develops a noble and elevating teaching; but that taken as a whole, and if generally diffused, his moral and philosophical teachings, so far as they had any influence at all, would have an influence for bad; partly because on certain points they teach downright immorality, but much more because they tend to be both foolish and fantastic, and if logically applied would mean the extinction of humanity in a generation.

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