

The Life Story of Count Leo Tolstoy

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Of all the writers of the present day and of all the philosophers of the present hour, Tolstoy occupies a position so unique and so different from anyone in the past or present, that to compare him with others is utterly impossible. He stands in a class of his own.

There is no biography of Tolstoy written by himself. We gather about his early life, about the formation of his character and his literary genius, only from his own writings as they appeared from time to time. So we find a reflection of his early childhood and youth in his first publication, called "Childhood and Boyhood," which, by the way, were so beautifully portrayed that Tolstoy at once attracted universal attention and took a place alongside of such renowned writers as Turgenieff and Contcharoff.

The reason for the success of his first publication, "Childhood and Boyhood," is that the life of the child is described from its own point of view with its own feelings, and not from the point of view and feelings of an adult, hence the realism of the child's life in all its development and coloring is given by Tolstoy in such a manner as no other writer has succeeded in giving, and has but few rivals.

From other writers and historians we learn that Tolstoy was born in 1828 on the estate of Yasnaja Poljana and for the first fifteen years of his life, with a few interruptions, he lived on his estate. About his father, mother and grandparents we learn from his book, "War and Peace." They are portrayed as characters under fictitious names. He lost his mother at the age of two, and his father at the age of nine.

His preliminary education he received in Yasnaja Poljana by a tutor. He entered the University of Kazan at the age of fifteen, spending two years in the Oriental faculty and two more years in the faculty of law. He left the university at the age of nineteen, returning to Yasnaja Poljana with intentions of improving the conditions of his peasant serfs. His plans and intentions are described in his subsequent book, "The Morning of a Landlord."

The next few years we find Tolstoy spending in idleness, leading the life of a rich, good-for-nothing aristocrat. Such a life did not satisfy young Tolstoy, and his nature rebelled against it, craving activity and usefulness, so he followed his brother to Caucasus and entered military service as a non-commissioned officer in a Cossack village on the River Terek. The influence of that beautiful spot with its glorious nature and superb scenery on his new life, are reflected in his new book, "The Cossack." The new surroundings, with all their beauty and splendor, had the same inspiration and effect on young Tolstoy that they had on Pushkin and Lermontoff when they lived there, and helped to make a poet of Tolstoy as it laid the foundation for the wonderful poetic creations of Pushkin and Lermontoff. But one has to be a Russian to appreciate the wonderful music in the rhythm of Russian poetry, as the very make-up of the Russian language is such as to make Russian poetry superb and heart-rending. Every line is a world of emotion, caresses, depth of feeling, such as no other language is capable of reproducing.

A year after Tolstoy's enlistment in the army, the Crimean war broke out. Craving for activity, he transferred himself to the Danube army, and soon plunged himself into the thickest of the fight. He took part in the siege of Silistra in the battle of Balaklava, and for a year in the siege of Sevastopol, where he was constantly on the firing line defending the fortress. His sketch, "Sevastopol," written in December, 1854, and others, created a profound impression in Russia for their realistic originality and truthfulness, portraying the real life of a besieged fortress with such bold strokes and with such poetic coloring that the sketches were soon recognized as masterpieces of a profound genius.

While Tolstoy never wrote in verse, yet in "Sevastopol" he composed "Soldiers' Songs," which soon became very popular and the rage of the whole land.

At the conclusion of the war in 1856, Tolstoy returned to Yasnaja Poljana; but before settling on his estate he spent a short time in St. Petersburg, where he was lionized as the hero of Sevastopol and recognized as the coming writer of the day. His short stay in the capital, where he lived rather a gay life, soon tired and dis-

gusted him, and he left the turmoils and gaiety of St. Petersburg for the quiet and peaceful Yasnaja Poljana.

His neighbor, Turgenieff, was engaged at that time in co-editing with Herzen the renowned revolutionary paper, "The Bell." While Tolstoy and Turgenieff became fast friends, the revolutionary work of Turgenieff never appealed nor did it interest Tolstoy, nor did he take any part or interest in the famous "Contemporary," a publication which was championing the cause of the liberation of the serfs, and he never even became friendly with the leaders of that movement, such men as Tchervishevsky, Dobroluboff and Michaloff.

The great awakening of the Russian intellect and activity after the Crimean war, which manifested itself in all sorts of reform movements, never found any sympathy in Tolstoy's heart. He would not identify himself with the Nihilists, whom Turgenieff so beautifully portrayed in his successful creation, "Fathers and Sons," nor would he join the ranks of the "will of the people" party, which played such prominent part in the revolutionary movement of the '70s with its battle cry "Among the people."

Why Tolstoy should always be out of joint with any modern movement or idea, or why he should be a straggler in the rear and about twenty years behind time on every burning question of the day, is incomprehensible. It is possible that his aristocratic blood and nature would not allow him to assimilate modern ideas or theories; and the fact remains that when certain ideas were abandoned and discarded as obsolete, he would just begin to take them up and digest them, thus being always behind and a straggler in the onward march of progress. It is also possible that while new ideas were advocated by fiery young Russia, Tolstoy had already reached the mature age of the deliberator.

From 1856 to 1862, Tolstoy wrote many novels, among them "Youth," "The Morning of a Landed Proprietor," and "Lucerne," being the most conspicuous. In "The Morning of a Landed Proprietor" the idea of the liberation of the serfs just began to dawn on Tolstoy, while, as a matter of fact, the agitation was at its height, uppermost in the minds of every thinking Russian and in the heart of every champion of liberty. The papers of Russian literature were burning up with the propaganda, and the air was ringing with the heart-rending sobs and cries of the enslaved peasants.

The years from 1856 to 1862 seem to have been the most prolific in Tolstoy's literary work. Besides the work mentioned above, he wrote several novels, such as "The Snow Storm," "Two Hussars," "Three Deaths," and "The Cossacks." They are all gems of art, but the "Three Deaths" is a masterpiece that can compare favorably with any of Goethe's poetic best. "The Cossacks" is a piece of autobiography of Tolstoy when he lived in Caucasus among the squatters. Its appearance rather shocked Russia. It was expected to find in that novel, reflections of the effects of the freedom of the serfs, the abolition of the rotten state of society following it, and it was also expected to find inspirations from western civilization. Instead of that, Tolstoy, like Rousseau, preached the return to nature and to life as it is found in the obscure mountainous country of Caucasus.

During the time that Tolstoy spent with his brother in southern France, who died of consumption, he was in close touch and communication with Auerbach and the exile Proudon. He had ample time to observe the failure of western civilization to give relief to the people who were struggling for equality and betterment.

Upon his return to Russia, Tolstoy accepted the position as an arbitrator of the peace to adjust matters between the landlords and the freed serfs and opened a school for children on his estate, Yasnaja Poljana on altogether different lines from any other school in existence. There was no set curriculum or program laid out for his pupils and no disposition whatever was made to enforce any discipline, in fact none was required. He argued that a teacher must find out from the pupils the course of study to be applied to them, and the nature, character and the taste of the child must be ascertained, and then a course of study applied accordingly. They say he achieved wonderful

results with this method in his school, but the innovation never found any approbation with the pedagogues, not for the present at least. It may be taken up in the future and developed, the same as the methods of Pestalozzi and Froebel were not accepted right off, but were adopted later on. But such an innovation was too much for the barbaric Russian government, and Tolstoy's school was raided by gendarmes and other hounds of the secret police, and his papers, writings and all his private documents were poured over and ridiculed by the government spies. Tolstoy was so disgusted with the intrusion that he threatened to emigrate to London and leave Russia forever. He, however, warned Alexander II. through Countess Tolstoy that if a repetition of this disgraceful raid was attempted, he would shoot down any police officer who would try to break into his private school, but the school was closed and never opened again.

In the year 1862 Tolstoy married the daughter of a Moscow doctor, Bers, and for the next fifteen years he devoted his entire time to the books, "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina." It would be impossible for me to give you a comprehensive analysis or a review of that gigantic work which absorbed fifteen years of Tolstoy's life in a short article like this; but, briefly stated, he dwelt chiefly with the war of 1812, the downfall of Napoleon and with the events that led up to that colossal drama. He arraigned the war in most powerful fashion, and condemned it. Napoleon himself comes under the scathing ridicule of his masterful pen. On the whole, the creation of "War and Peace" is a great epopee and has no parallel in any literature.

"Anna Karenina" is the most popular and the most read novel of all Tolstoy's writings. It is translated into every language and it must be universally admitted that it is a work of art and a masterpiece. But, in spite of that, Tolstoy was severely criticised by young Russia for the tragic end of Anna Karenina.

The gist of the novel is, as you all know, that Anna, as a young girl, married an unattractive old man, not knowing what she was doing, and never knew what love meant until she met Vronsky, with whom she fell desperately in love, and the same was reciprocated. She separated from her husband and united her fortunes with Vronsky, but public opinion was too much for Anna and she committed suicide.

The question of marriage and divorce has been strongly agitated and discussed in Russia, and opinions widely differed as to the right to dissolve marriage if the parties to the same are mismatched, or if a new love has sprung up. Of course, deceit and levity in marriage and new love affinity has no ground for divorce, and the latter was severely condemned by all shades of society. Men and women should not allow themselves to be carried away by new infatuations and should resist all temptations. They should continue in their original married life. But there are cases where new love after marriage does come; for instance, when a girl is married against her will or when the proper understanding between the participants is lacking, or when one of the two is retarding the progress or self-development, when one is content with the routine of life and its drudgery and becomes stagnant, while the other keeps apace with the development of higher ideals of life. Of course, in such cases, separation is inevitable for the benefit of both, but especially for the sake of the offspring.

To this last opinion the best element of the Russian progressive writers and thinkers came to the conclusion, and now comes Tolstoy with the fate of Anna Karenina. There was no levity or deceit in her first marriage. She did not love her husband when she married him. She formed a pure and true infatuation for Vronsky, and to keep up the conventional life with her husband would not be of any benefit to her and her husband or to their only child. Separation was the only solution from the predicament in which she found herself. But that meant defiance of public opinion with all the horrible consequences, and Anna Karenina and Vronsky could not defy public opinion, did not have the courage to break with society. Mother Grundy scorned Anna and Vronsky, frowned and pointed her finger at them until Anna was driven to suicide. This was the solution that Tolstoy meted out for Anna for her sins, wanting to live and for that solution of the burning question, Tolstoy was severely criticised and condemned by his critics, and rightfully so.

A profound change took place in Tolstoy's fundamental views on life in the years 1875 to

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