

MY RELIGION

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My Religion by Leo Tolstoy & Huntington Smith

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LEO TOLSTOY & HUNTINGTON SMITH

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BY
COUNT LEO TOLSTOI.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH.

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13 ASTOR PLACE.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

TO one not familiar with the Russian language the accessible data relative to the external life of Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoi, the author of this book, are, to say the least, not voluminous. His name does not appear in that heterogeneous record of celebrities known as *The Men of the Time*, nor is it to be found in M. Vapereau's comprehensive *Dictionnaire des Contemporains*. And yet Count Leo Tolstoi is acknowledged by competent critics to be a man of extraordinary genius, who, certainly in one instance, has produced a masterpiece of literature which will continue to rank with the great artistic productions of this age.

Perhaps it is enough for us to know that he was born on his father's estate in the Russian province of Tula, in the year 1828; that he received a good home education and studied the oriental languages at the University of Kasan; that he was for a time in the army, which he entered at the age of twenty-three as an officer of artillery, serving later on the staff of Prince Gortschakof; and that subsequently he alternated between St. Petersburg and Moscow, leading the existence of super-refined barbarism

and excessive luxury, characteristic of the Russian aristocracy. He saw life in country and city, in camp and court. He was numbered among the defenders of Sebastopol in the Crimean War, and the impressions then gathered he used as material for a series of *War Sketches* that attracted attention in the pages of the magazine where they first appeared; and when, a little later, they were published in book form, their author, then twenty-eight years of age, acquired at once a wide popularity. Popularity became fame with the publication, also in 1856, of *Childhood and Youth*, remarkable alike for its artless revelations concerning the genesis and growth of ideas and emotions in the minds of the young, for its idyllic pictures of domestic life, and for its graceful descriptions of nature. This was followed by *The Cossacks*, a wild romance of the steppes, vigorously realistic in details, and, like all of Count Tolstoi's works, poetic in conception and inspired with a dramatic intensity. In 1860 appeared *War and Peace*, an historical romance in many volumes, dealing with the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 and the events that immediately followed the retreat from Moscow. According to M. C. Courrière,¹ it was seized upon with avidity and produced a profound sensation.

“The stage is immense and the actors are innumerable; among them three emperors with their ministers, their marshals, and their generals, and then a countless retinue of minor officers, sol-

¹ *Histoire de la littérature contemporaine en Russie.*

diers, nobles, and peasants. We are transported by turns from the salons of St. Petersburg to the camps of war, from Moscow to the country. And all these diverse and varied scenes are joined together with a controlling purpose that brings everything into harmony. Each one of the prolonged series of constantly changing tableaux is of remarkable beauty and palpitating with life."

Pierre Besushkof, one of the three heroes of *War and Peace*, has, rightly or wrongly, long been regarded as in some respects an autobiographical study, but the personal note is always clearly perceptible in Count Tolstoi's writings, if we are to believe the reports of the enthusiastic purveyors of literary information who have made known some of their many attractive qualities. It is plain also that a common purpose runs through them all, a purpose which only in the author's latest production finds full expression. There are hints of it in *Childhood and Youth*; in *War and Peace*, and in a subsequent romance, *Anna Karenin*, it becomes very distinct. In the two works last named Count Tolstoi is pitiless in his portrayal of the vices and follies of the wealthy, aristocratic class, and warm in his praise of simplicity and unpretending virtue. Pierre Besushkof is represented as the product of a transition period, one who sees clearly that the future must be different from the past, but unable to interpret the prophecies of its coming. M. Courrière speaks of him very happily as "an overgrown child who seems to be lost in a wholly unfamiliar world." For a

time Pierre finds mental tranquillity in the tenets of freemasonry, and the author gives us a vivid account, humorous and pathetic by turns, of the young man's efforts to carry the newly acquired doctrines into practice. He determines to better the condition of the peasants on his estates; but instead of looking after the affair himself, he leaves the consummation of his plans to his stewards, with the result that "the cleverest among them listened with attention, but considered one thing only, — how to carry out their own private ends under the pretence of executing his commands." Later on we are shown Pierre wandering aimlessly about the streets of burning Moscow, until taken into custody by the French. Then he learns the true meaning of life from a simple soldier, a fellow-prisoner, and thereby realizes that safety for the future is to be obtained only by bringing life to the standard of rude simplicity adopted by the common people, by recognizing, in act as well as in deed, the brotherhood of man.

We cannot here enter into the question as to whether this mental attitude, by no means unusual among Russians of cultivation and liberality, arises from the lack of social gradation between the noble and the peasant, which forces the social philosopher of rank to accept an existence of pure worldliness and empty show, or to adopt the primitive aspirations and humble toil of the tillers of the soil. At any rate, it is plain that Count Tolstoi sides with the latter. The doctrine of simplification has many

adherents in Russia, and when, some time ago, it was announced that the author of *War and Peace* had retired to the country and was leading a life of frugality and unaffected toil in the cultivation of his estates, the surprise to his own countrymen could not have been very great. In this book he tells us how the decision was formed. He bases his conclusions on a direct and literal interpretation of the teachings of Jesus as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.

The interpretation is not new in theory, but never before has it been carried out with so much zeal, so much determination, so much sincerity, and, granting the premises, with logic so unanswerable, as in this beautiful confession of faith. How movingly does he depict the doubts and fears of the searcher after the better life; how impressive his earnest inquiry for truth; how inspiring his confidence in the natural goodness, as opposed to the natural depravity of man; how convincing his argument that the doctrine of Jesus is simple, practicable, and conducive to the highest happiness; how terrifying his enumeration of the sufferings of "the martyrs to the doctrine of the world"; how pitiless his arraignment of the Church for its complacent indifference to the welfare of humanity here in this present stage of existence; how sublime his prophecy of the golden age when men shall dwell together in the bonds of love, and sin and suffering shall be no more the common lot of mankind! We read, and are thrilled with a divine emotion; but which

of us is willing to accept the truth here unfolded as the veritable secret of life?

Shall we take seriously this eloquent enunciation of faith in humility, in self-denial, in fraternal love, or shall we regard it only as a beautiful and peaceful phase in the career of a man of genius who, after the storm and stress of a life of sin and suffering, has turned back to the ideals of youth and innocence, and sought to make them once more the objects of desire? Fanaticism, do you say? Ah, yes; but did not Jesus and his disciples practise just such fanaticism as this? Does any one deny that all that is best in this modern world (and there is so much of the best, after all), that all that is best has come from the great moral impulse generated by a little group of fanatics in an obscure corner of Asia eighteen centuries ago? That impulse we still feel, in spite of all the obstructions that have been put in its way to nullify its action; and if any would seek for strength from the primary source of power, who shall say him nay? And so although we may smile at the artlessness of this Russian evangelist in his determination to find in the gospels the categorical imperative of self-renunciation, although we may regard with wonder the magnificent audacity of his exegetical speculations, we cannot refuse to admire a faith so sincere, so intense, and, in many respects, so elevating and so noble.

HUNTINGTON SMITH.

DORCHESTER, MASS.,
Nov. 19, 1885.