

TOLSTOY AND THE CULT OF SIMPLICITY

The whole world is certainly heading for a great simplicity, not deliberately, but rather inevitably. It is not a mere fashion of false innocence, like that of the French aristocrats before the Revolution, who built an altar to Pan, and who taxed the peasantry for the enormous expenditure which is needed in order to live the simple life of peasants. The simplicity towards which the world is driving is the necessary outcome of all our systems and speculations and of our deep and continuous contemplation of things. For the universe is like everything in it; we have to look at it repeatedly and habitually before we see it. It is only when we have seen it for the hundredth time that we see it for the first time. The more consistently things are contemplated, the more they tend to unify themselves and therefore to simplify themselves. The simplification of anything is always sensational. Thus monotheism is the most sensational of things: it is as if we gazed long at a design full of disconnected objects, and, suddenly, with a stunning thrill, they came together into a huge and staring face.

Few people will dispute that all the typical movements of our time are upon this road towards simplification. Each system seeks to be more fundamental than the other; each seeks, in the literal sense, to undermine the other. In art, for example, the old conception of man, classic as the Apollo Belvedere, has first been attacked by the realist, who asserts that man, as a fact of natural history, is a creature with colourless hair and a freckled face. Then comes the Impressionist, going yet deeper, who asserts that to his physical eye, which alone is certain, man is a creature with purple hair and a grey face. Then comes the Symbolist, and says that to his soul, which alone is certain, man is a creature with green hair and a blue face. And all the great writers of our time represent in one form or another this attempt to re-establish communication with the elemental, or, as it is sometimes more roughly and fallaciously expressed, to return to nature. Some think that the return to nature consists in drinking no wine; some think that it consists in drinking a great deal more than is good for them. Some think that the return to nature is achieved by beating swords into ploughshares; some think it is achieved by turning ploughshares into very ineffectual British War Office bayonets. It is natural, according to the Jingo, for a man to kill other people with gunpowder and himself with gin. It is natural, according to the humanitarian revolutionist, to kill other people with dynamite and himself with vegetarianism. It would be too obviously Philistine a sentiment, perhaps, to suggest that the claim of either of these persons to be obeying the voice of nature is interesting when we consider that they require huge volumes of paradoxical argument to persuade themselves or anyone else of the truth of their conclusions. But the giants of our time are undoubtedly alike in that they approach by very different roads this

conception of the return to simplicity. Ibsen returns to nature by the angular exterior of fact, Maeterlinck by the eternal tendencies of fable. Whitman returns to nature by seeing how much he can accept, Tolstoy by seeing how much he can reject.

Now, this heroic desire to return to nature is, of course, in some respects, rather like the heroic desire of a kitten to return to its own tail. A tail is a simple and beautiful object, rhythmic in curve and soothing in texture; but it is certainly one of the minor but characteristic qualities of a tail that it should hang behind. It is impossible to deny that it would in some degree lose its character if attached to any other part of the anatomy. Now, nature is like a tail in the sense that it is vitally important if it is to discharge its real duty that it should be always behind. To imagine that we can see nature, especially our own nature, face to face is a folly; it is even a blasphemy. It is like the conduct of a cat in some mad fairy-tale, who should set out on his travels with the firm conviction that he would find his tail growing like a tree in the meadows at the end of the world. And the actual effect of the travels of the philosopher in search of nature when seen from the outside looks very like the gyrations of the tail-pursuing kitten, exhibiting much enthusiasm but little dignity, much cry and very little tail. The grandeur of nature is that she is omnipotent and unseen, that she is perhaps ruling us most when we think that she is heeding us least. 'Thou art a God that hidest Thyself,' said the Hebrew poet. It may be said with all reverence that it is behind a man's back that the spirit of nature hides.

It is this consideration that lends a certain air of futility even to all the inspired simplicities and thunderous veracities of Tolstoy. We feel that a man cannot make himself simple merely by warring on complexity; we feel, indeed, in our saner moments that a man cannot make himself simple at all. A self-conscious simplicity may well be far more intrinsically ornate than luxury itself. Indeed, a great deal of the pomp and sumptuousness of the world's history was simple in the truest sense. It was born of an almost babyish receptiveness; it was the work of men who had eyes to wonder and men who had ears to hear.

'King Solomon brought merchant men Because of his desire With
peacocks, apes and ivory, From Tarshish unto Tyre.'

But this proceeding was not a part of the wisdom of Solomon; it was a part of his folly--I had almost said of his innocence. Tolstoy, we feel, would not be content with hurling satire and denunciation at 'Solomon in all his glory.' With fierce and unimpeachable logic he would go a step further. He would spend days and nights in the meadows stripping the shameless crimson coronals off the lilies of the field.

The new collection of 'Tales from Tolstoy,' translated and edited by Mr R. Nisbet

Bain, is calculated to draw particular attention to this ethical and ascetic side of Tolstoy's work. In one sense, and that the deepest sense, the work of Tolstoy is, of course, a genuine and noble appeal to simplicity. The narrow notion that an artist may not teach is pretty well exploded by now. But the truth of the matter is, that an artist teaches far more by his mere background and properties, his landscape, his costume, his idiom and technique--all the part of his work, in short, of which he is probably entirely unconscious, than by the elaborate and pompous moral dicta which he fondly imagines to be his opinions. The real distinction between the ethics of high art and the ethics of manufactured and didactic art lies in the simple fact that the bad fable has a moral, while the good fable is a moral. And the real moral of Tolstoy comes out constantly in these stories, the great moral which lies at the heart of all his work, of which he is probably unconscious, and of which it is quite likely that he would vehemently disapprove. The curious cold white light of morning that shines over all the tales, the folklore simplicity with which 'a man or a woman' are spoken of without further identification, the love--one might almost say the lust--for the qualities of brute materials, the hardness of wood, and the softness of mud, the ingrained belief in a certain ancient kindness sitting beside the very cradle of the race of man--these influences are truly moral. When we put beside them the trumpeting and tearing nonsense of the didactic Tolstoy, screaming for an obscene purity, shouting for an inhuman peace, hacking up human life into small sins with a chopper, sneering at men, women, and children out of respect to humanity, combining in one chaos of contradictions an unmanly Puritan and an uncivilised prig, then, indeed, we scarcely know whither Tolstoy has vanished. We know not what to do with this small and noisy moralist who is inhabiting one corner of a great and good man.

It is difficult in every case to reconcile Tolstoy the great artist with Tolstoy the almost venomous reformer. It is difficult to believe that a man who draws in such noble outlines the dignity of the daily life of humanity regards as evil that divine act of procreation by which that dignity is renewed from age to age. It is difficult to believe that a man who has painted with so frightful an honesty the heartrending emptiness of the life of the poor can really grudge them every one of their pitiful pleasures, from courtship to tobacco. It is difficult to believe that a poet in prose who has so powerfully exhibited the earth-born air of man, the essential kinship of a human being, with the landscape in which he lives, can deny so elemental a virtue as that which attaches a man to his own ancestors and his own land. It is difficult to believe that the man who feels so poignantly the detestable insolence of oppression would not actually, if he had the chance, lay the oppressor flat with his fist. All, however, arises from the search after a false simplicity, the aim of being, if I may so express it, more natural than it is natural to be. It would not only be more human, it would be more humble of us to be content to be complex. The truest kinship with humanity would lie in doing as humanity has always done, accepting with a sportsmanlike relish the estate to

which we are called, the star of our happiness, and the fortunes of the land of our birth.

The work of Tolstoy has another and more special significance. It represents the re-assertion of a certain awful common-sense which characterised the most extreme utterances of Christ. It is true that we cannot turn the cheek to the smiter; it is true that we cannot give our cloak to the robber; civilisation is too complicated, too vainglorious, too emotional. The robber would brag, and we should blush; in other words, the robber and we are alike sentimentalists. The command of Christ is impossible, but it is not insane; it is rather sanity preached to a planet of lunatics. If the whole world was suddenly stricken with a sense of humour it would find itself mechanically fulfilling the Sermon on the Mount. It is not the plain facts of the world which stand in the way of that consummation, but its passions of vanity and self-advertisement and morbid sensibility. It is true that we cannot turn the cheek to the smiter, and the sole and sufficient reason is that we have not the pluck. Tolstoy and his followers have shown that they have the pluck, and even if we think they are mistaken, by this sign they conquer. Their theory has the strength of an utterly consistent thing. It represents that doctrine of mildness and non-resistance which is the last and most audacious of all the forms of resistance to every existing authority. It is the great strike of the Quakers which is more formidable than many sanguinary revolutions. If human beings could only succeed in achieving a real passive resistance they would be strong with the appalling strength of inanimate things, they would be calm with the maddening calm of oak or iron, which conquer without vengeance and are conquered without humiliation. The theory of Christian duty enunciated by them is that we should never conquer by force, but always, if we can, conquer by persuasion. In their mythology St George did not conquer the dragon: he tied a pink ribbon round its neck and gave it a saucer of milk. According to them, a course of consistent kindness to Nero would have turned him into something only faintly represented by Alfred the Great. In fact, the policy recommended by this school for dealing with the bovine stupidity and bovine fury of this world is accurately summed up in the celebrated verse of Mr Edward Lear:

There was an old man who said, "How Shall I flee from this terrible cow? I
will sit on a stile and continue to smile, Till I soften the heart of this cow."

Their confidence in human nature is really honourable and magnificent; it takes the form of refusing to believe the overwhelming majority of mankind, even when they set out to explain their own motives. But although most of us would in all probability tend at first sight to consider this new sect of Christians as little less outrageous than some brawling and absurd sect in the Reformation, yet we should fall into a singular error in doing so. The Christianity of Tolstoy is, when we come to consider it, one of the most thrilling and dramatic incidents in our

modern civilisation. It represents a tribute to the Christian religion more sensational than the breaking of seals or the falling of stars.

From the point of view of a rationalist, the whole world is rendered almost irrational by the single phenomenon of Christian Socialism. It turns the scientific universe topsy-turvy, and makes it essentially possible that the key of all social evolution may be found in the dusty casket of some discredited creed. It cannot be amiss to consider this phenomenon as it really is.

The religion of Christ has, like many true things, been disproved an extraordinary number of times. It was disproved by the Neo-Platonist philosophers at the very moment when it was first starting forth upon its startling and universal career. It was disproved again by many of the sceptics of the Renaissance only a few years before its second and supremely striking embodiment, the religion of Puritanism, was about to triumph over many kings, and civilise many continents. We all agree that these schools of negation were only interludes in its history; but we all believe naturally and inevitably that the negation of our own day is really a breaking up of the theological cosmos, an Armageddon, a Ragnarok, a twilight of the gods. The man of the nineteenth century, like a schoolboy of sixteen, believes that his doubt and depression are symbols of the end of the world. In our day the great irreligionists who did nothing but dethrone God and drive angels before them have been outstripped, distanced, and made to look orthodox and humdrum. A newer race of sceptics has found something infinitely more exciting to do than nailing down the lids upon a million coffins, and the body upon a single cross. They have disputed not only the elementary creeds, but the elementary laws of mankind, property, patriotism, civil obedience. They have arraigned civilisation as openly as the materialists have arraigned theology; they have damned all the philosophers even lower than they have damned the saints. Thousands of modern men move quietly and conventionally among their fellows while holding views of national limitation or landed property that would have made Voltaire shudder like a nun listening to blasphemies. And the last and wildest phase of this saturnalia of scepticism, the school that goes furthest among thousands who go so far, the school that denies the moral validity of those ideals of courage or obedience which are recognised even among pirates, this school bases itself upon the literal words of Christ, like Dr Watts or Messrs Moody and Sankey. Never in the whole history of the world was such a tremendous tribute paid to the vitality of an ancient creed. Compared with this, it would be a small thing if the Red Sea were cloven asunder, or the sun did stand still at mid-day. We are faced with the phenomenon that a set of revolutionists whose contempt for all the ideals of family and nation would evoke horror in a thieves' kitchen, who can rid themselves of those elementary instincts of the man and the gentleman which cling to the very bones of our civilisation, cannot rid themselves of the influence of two or three remote Oriental anecdotes written in

corrupt Greek. The fact, when realised, has about it something stunning and hypnotic. The most convinced rationalist is in its presence suddenly stricken with a strange and ancient vision, sees the immense sceptical cosmogonies of this age as dreams going the way of a thousand forgotten heresies, and believes for a moment that the dark sayings handed down through eighteen centuries may, indeed, contain in themselves the revolutions of which we have only begun to dream.

This value which we have above suggested, unquestionably belongs to the Tolstoians, who may roughly be described as the new Quakers. With their strange optimism, and their almost appalling logical courage, they offer a tribute to Christianity which no orthodoxies could offer. It cannot but be remarkable to watch a revolution in which both the rulers and the rebels march under the same symbol. But the actual theory of non-resistance itself, with all its kindred theories, is not, I think, characterised by that intellectual obviousness and necessity which its supporters claim for it. A pamphlet before us shows us an extraordinary number of statements about the New Testament, of which the accuracy is by no means so striking as the confidence. To begin with, we must protest against a habit of quoting and paraphrasing at the same time. When a man is discussing what Jesus meant, let him state first of all what He said, not what the man thinks He would have said if he had expressed Himself more clearly. Here is an instance of question and answer:

Q. 'How did our Master Himself sum up the law in a few words?'

A. 'Be ye merciful, be ye perfect even as your Father; your Father in the spirit world is merciful, is perfect.'

There is nothing in this, perhaps, which Christ might not have said except the abominable metaphysical modernism of 'the spirit world'; but to say that it is recorded that He did say it, is like saying it is recorded that He preferred palm trees to sycamores. It is a simple and unadulterated untruth. The author should know that these words have meant a thousand things to a thousand people, and that if more ancient sects had paraphrased them as cheerfully as he, he would never have had the text upon which he founds his theory. In a pamphlet in which plain printed words cannot be left alone, it is not surprising if there are mis-statements upon larger matters. Here is a statement clearly and philosophically laid down which we can only content ourselves with flatly denying: 'The fifth rule of our Lord is that we should take special pains to cultivate the same kind of regard for people of foreign countries, and for those generally who do not belong to us, or even have an antipathy to us, which we already entertain towards our own people, and those who are in sympathy with us.' I should very much like to know where in the whole of the New Testament the author finds this violent,

unnatural, and immoral proposition. Christ did not have the same kind of regard for one person as for another. We are specifically told that there were certain persons whom He specially loved. It is most improbable that He thought of other nations as He thought of His own. The sight of His national city moved Him to tears, and the highest compliment He paid was, 'Behold an Israelite indeed.' The author has simply confused two entirely distinct things. Christ commanded us to have love for all men, but even if we had equal love for all men, to speak of having the same love for all men is merely bewildering nonsense. If we love a man at all, the impression he produces on us must be vitally different to the impression produced by another man whom we love. To speak of having the same kind of regard for both is about as sensible as asking a man whether he prefers chrysanthemums or billiards. Christ did not love humanity; He never said He loved humanity: He loved men. Neither He nor anyone else can love humanity; it is like loving a gigantic centipede. And the reason that the Tolstoians can even endure to think of an equally distributed affection is that their love of humanity is a logical love, a love into which they are coerced by their own theories, a love which would be an insult to a tom-cat.

But the greatest error of all lies in the mere act of cutting up the teaching of the New Testament into five rules. It precisely and ingeniously misses the most dominant characteristic of the teaching--its absolute spontaneity. The abyss between Christ and all His modern interpreters is that we have no record that He ever wrote a word, except with His finger in the sand. The whole is the history of one continuous and sublime conversation. Thousands of rules have been deduced from it before these Tolstoian rules were made, and thousands will be deduced afterwards. It was not for any pompous proclamation, it was not for any elaborate output of printed volumes; it was for a few splendid and idle words that the cross was set up on Calvary, and the earth gaped, and the sun was darkened at noonday.