

THE MISINTERPRETATION OF TOLSTOY.

BY AYLMER MAUDE.

THE July number of *The Open Court* contains an article fatuously entitled "A Nearer View of Count Leo Tolstoi" (with the name spelt wrong) by Mrs. Evans, founded on a German book by Frau Anna Seuron.

Nobody who knows and understands Tolstoy has ever, I think, taken Frau Seuron's book seriously; but as this is not the first time a magazine of good standing¹ has admitted an article based on her work, a short explanation may not be out of place.

The fact is first to be remembered that Frau Seuron was summarily dismissed by the Countess for disgraceful conduct, and that her unsupported testimony is contradicted by all the Tolstoy family and by every one else who knows Tolstoy well enough to be a competent witness.

One of the people referred to by Frau Seuron once asked one of Tolstoy's daughters to mark in the book the statements she personally knew to be untrue. I am told that they numbered *sixty*, and as they only represented the misstatements *one* person happened to be able to detect, the total number is probably very much larger.

As to the letter from Tolstoy which Frau Seuron parades as evidence of her competence to speak, the fact is that she was naïve enough to send part of her manuscript to Tolstoy for his correction—and he being much too busy to read and re-write all the nonsense that is sent him returned the manuscript with a good-natured note saying, in effect, that she might write whatever she liked and that he felt sure she would not write what should not be written. That, in the event she did not come up to his estimation of her, can hardly be put to his debit.

¹ G. Calderon's article in *The Monthly Review* of May, 1901, for instance.

Frau Seuron's book, and the articles concocted out of it, are not worth many pages of refutation, and I will therefore confine myself to passages reproduced in the article now under review.

Almost at the start we are told that Tolstoy published his first writing "when he was only twenty years old. He was then an ensign in the army, engaged on active service," etc. Now Tolstoy was born in 1828, entered the army in 1851, and his first work, *Childhood*, appeared in 1852, when he was twenty-four. What are we to think of the accuracy of a work that begins so carelessly? But no careful reader, after perusing a few pages, will expect accuracy from Frau Seuron; she tries merely to be sarcastic and smart.

Mrs. Evans, from whose article I take my quotations, remarks: "Her narrative, divested of its fantastic setting and subjected to chronological order and to condensation of form, *displays various salient aspects of Tolstoy's character which constitute sufficient explanation of his course!*" And she has other remarks which all tend to show that she has read Frau Seuron's book and made use of it, without in the least suspecting its real character.

Frau Seuron was a German governess in the Countess Tolstoy's employ, but Mrs. Evans should tell us what reason she has for supposing that she had Tolstoy under "daily and *hourly*" observation, was a "trusted companion," and "apparently" assisted the Countess in publishing his works.

We are not likely to get "sufficient explanation" of Tolstoy's course from information such as the following: "A school was opened in which members of his family gave regular lessons, also an A-B-C book for the people was prepared and published; but the proceeds were small, and the whole enterprise was allowed to dwindle and fall into disuse."

Now, the fact is that Tolstoy organised *several* schools in his neighborhood, devoted much time and attention to them, engaged masters to assist him in the work, wrote articles on the theory of education, and gave himself up largely to educational work for several years. The schools were not abandoned until one generation of children of a school-going age in the neighborhood had learned pretty well as much as they and their parents thought necessary, nor until the Government by vexatious restrictions had begun to make it almost impossible to continue the work, and Tolstoy's own health had broken down so that he needed a complete change and rest.

The undertaking, besides being an expense to Tolstoy, was a

tax on his time and strength which, had it continued, would have deprived the world of works we could ill spare. The A-B-C book has had, and still has, a very large circulation.

Now for a specimen of Frau Seuron's profound reflections.

"He (Tolstoy) is first and above all a *man of moods*; . . . because he has a mind that is continually growing, and *growth implies change*." This is as true as that $2 + 2 = 4$; all who do not stagnate are "men of moods," if one pleases to use the words in that unusual way. But what are we to think of a woman who, like Mrs. Evans, supposes that such remarks help us to "a sufficient explanation" of Tolstoy's course? Mrs. Evans kindly assures us that "it is greatly to Tolstoy's (I correct her orthography) credit that . . . this *unprejudiced and severe critic* admired and revered him and was able to retain her faith in his entire honesty of purpose." But really if anything could shake one's assurance of Tolstoy's sincerity it would be this unsolicited testimonial from Frau Seuron,—for she is so frequently wrong, and so seldom right, that anything she says is open to suspicion for the very fact of her having said it.

We are asked to believe that Tolstoy's whole movement is "confusion, mystical dogma, disease," out of which some "pearl of truth may be developed," but "not in this century."

We have often been told by hostile critics that, except as a novelist, Tolstoy had little influence in Russia until almost the time of his excommunication last year: let us hear, however, what this German governess, who lived at the Tolstoy house from about 1882 to 1888 has to say on that subject.

"Many young noblemen deserted their rightful places in society and married peasant women, or lived with them unmarried, descending to their level and finally drinking themselves to death. Others . . . devoted themselves so ardently to menial work . . . that they lost their health and strength and perished by the way . . . It was no unusual sight to see nobly born ladies going out in the early morning . . . to fill dung carts and spread manure upon the dewy fields. In short, there were abundant instances of . . . disaster . . ." And she tells us of "aristocratic families who by this means had lost promising sons or been socially disgraced by the eccentric behavior of sisters and daughters."

That certainly does not sound as if Tolstoy had no influence, but it does not seem to occur to Frau Seuron that Russian noblemen ever drank themselves to death before Tolstoy denounced the use of stimulants! Tolstoy writes books, and noblemen die of excess: both things happen at the same time and in the same coun-

try, and as that is the extent of Frau Seuron's knowledge, and it is impossible to maintain that Tolstoy wrote because other people drank, there is, it seems, nothing left but to assert that the people drank because Tolstoy wrote! Frau Seuron's thoughts are delightfully simple. There is never any complexity or hesitation: when she dislikes anything (and she dislikes very much indeed the views she attributes to Tolstoy), she never hesitates to assert that every misfortune she hears of is the direct result of the things she dislikes.

The lapse of time since Frau Seuron had Tolstoy under her "daily and hourly observation" has played havoc with some of her pet theories, and it is a little hard on her that Mrs. Evans should drag them into further publicity at this time of day. For instance, we are told that: "*Once* he made trial with the vegetarian system. For more than a year he followed the rule, yielding only now and then so far as to partake of bouillon. His health suffered from the change, and he was persuaded to include poultry in his bill of fare." Then follows a delightful touch, thoroughly characteristic of Frau Seuron and her methods of "hourly observation": "Often, too, the roast beef... was found to have been well eaten into during the night, and the Count *was suspected of being* the eater, *although he never would acknowledge the deed!*"

The real fun of this passage, to those who know Tolstoy's open nature and readiness to tell a good story at his own expense, lies in the fact that Frau Seuron does not notice that this record of suspicions reveals, not Tolstoy's character, but her own.

But let us hear her further on the same subject: "This plan of living soon lost its force, and the Count returned gladly to the fleshpots... A few years later he made another attempt... also the daughters of the house resolved to try, but in less than a year the girls grew thin and pale, and the whole company of converts went back to their former mode of living."

It is not wonderful that Tolstoy, who was then well over fifty, and whose wife was opposed to the change, should not have succeeded with a vegetarian diet at the first attempt. When I knew them in 1894-97, his two eldest daughters were vegetarians and Tolstoy himself was a very strict vegetarian. He had then been so for some years and has not altered since. He was also a remarkably vigorous man for his age.

With reference to the use of tobacco the case is similar. Anna Seuron's evidence, if we accept it, merely goes to show that he did not break the habit easily or at the first attempt. Subsequent

events show how entirely mistaken she was in supposing that what Tolstoy could not do easily he would never succeed in doing at all.

Frau Anna Seuron has a curious trick, common to loquacious people who have never taken pains to think correctly, of mixing up into one sentence a number of heterogeneous errors, so that while one fallacy is being elucidated the others have a chance to escape. It would need several large volumes completely to expose the sophistries she has packed into her one small book. Let us take, however, as a fair average specimen, a single paragraph and submit it to analysis :

“His whimsical industries, such as lighting his own fire, blacking his own boots, working as a shoemaker, digging in the fields, driving the plough, carting manure, were so many ways of refreshing his mental energies through bodily exercise.”

That is just what Tolstoy had said in his writings: he found he could do better mental work when he varied it with a large amount of manual labor. But the particular point Tolstoy insists on, viz., that it is better to do useful rather than useless work, Frau Seuron carefully avoids. The work he approves of seems to her “whimsical,” and the paragraph proceeds: “He gave up riding after being obliged to sell his favorite horse; he gave up hunting after adopting vegetarian principles,—he says too that he dared not go out alone with a gun, for fear he should be tempted to shoot himself,—and so he turned to more plebeian methods of letting off steam, so to speak, for the health and safety of his spiritual as well as physical nature.”

But why not tell us what “obliged” him “to sell his favorite horse”? And why jumble that up with the fact that when he felt it wrong to take life he abstained both from eating flesh and from hunting? And why, again, mix all these up with a totally different matter: the fact that *several years previously* Tolstoy had, as he tells us in *My Confession* (1879), been so baffled and perplexed in his efforts to discern the meaning of life (quite clear to him in the years Frau Seuron is writing about) that he had been tempted to commit suicide? Perhaps Frau Seuron cannot help writing in this way—it may be due to something peculiar in the formation of her brain—but if she does it on purpose she is a most accomplished sophist.

Here is another specimen of her critical methods :

“He (Tolstoy) was naturally inclined to be superstitious, and this habit of mind, together with a lack of thorough education, in-

terfered with the ability to form just conclusions respecting the social problems which he was trying to solve."

What she means is that she disagrees with his opinions and wishes to discredit them. She first says (what is probably untrue) that he is "naturally superstitious"; she then assumes (what is ridiculously and evidently untrue) that superstition is his present "habit of mind," and, finally, she asserts that he suffers from "a lack of thorough education," which is a safe assertion, for no one knows what a "thorough" education is. If the possession of a university diploma be the test, then poor Tolstoy stands condemned as incompetent "to form just conclusions respecting the social problems." But before we brush him and his works quite aside as valueless, let us recall the fact that he has shown some capacity for expressing himself in his own language, and has also written an article or two in French; that he can converse in four languages, and reads at least seven (not counting Hebrew, in which tongue he, with the aid of the Moscow Rabbi, read much of the Old Testament); that he made a prolonged and ardent study of Russian history, as a preparation for three historical novels (of which only one, *War and Peace*, was ever written); that he has been an omnivorous reader of Russian and of foreign literature; that he has studied the problems of education for years, both practically and theoretically; that he is a keen lover of music, and used to be an admirable accompanist on the piano; that the problems of art, in all its branches, have received his careful attention; that he has analysed the dogmas of the Church and written a very able work on the subject; that his knowledge of comparative religions—Eastern and Western—is considerable, and that he has devoted earnest and unremitting labors to the translation and interpretation of the Gospels. To the investigation of social and economic problems, therefore, he brings a mind neither unexercised nor over-specialised, and if he still lacks the "thorough education" which would enable Frau Seuron to feel confidence in his conclusions, he has at least gone through a fairly extensive preliminary course: a fact which may, perhaps, be pleaded in mitigation of her sentence that the mind he possesses is "not a highly cultivated mind; hence his conclusions are necessarily empirical."

But enough! Frau Seuron is not the only silly woman in the world. Instead of exposing any more of her nonsense, let us rather ask what gave her her bias and shut her out from all comprehension of Tolstoy's meaning.

She almost answers the question herself. She lets us see,

plainly enough, that she was a very narrow-minded German woman of strong class-prejudices, mentally and morally incapable of escaping from the social superstitions in which she had been brought up, and also that she did not at all understand the Russian life that went on around her. For instance: fires are very frequent in Russian villages; the houses are of wood, and the peasants are careless. A fire occurred in the village of Yásnaya Polyána, and Frau Seuron wondered, "Why did he (Tolstoy) not *ensure safety by the purchase* of a fire-engine?"—quite oblivious of the fact that buying a fire-engine does not ensure the safety of a Russian village! The peasants have their own way of doing, or not doing, things; and a fire-engine in a Russian village would be pretty sure to be entirely neglected and to be unusable by the time it was wanted. Tolstoy knows what he is talking about when he says that the economic distress in Russia is caused by the superstitions of the Church. What is wanted, even to prevent fires, is, primarily, not the purchase of fire-engines, but the growth of a different spirit among the peasants.

In some places it is difficult to understand what Frau Seuron wants us to believe, e. g., we are told: "There was a gathering place for poor people seeking advice or assistance. . . . It came generally; but not from the head of the family. The Countess dealt out medicine and lint; other members of the family gave clothing and money; but the Count remained invisible, or *passed through the waiting group unrecognised, with a scythe over his shoulder, or an axe in his belt.*"

The suggestion that Tolstoy is to blame for not doing everything and being everywhere, is quite characteristic of Frau Seuron; but does she seriously wish us to believe that when he took his scythe over his shoulder he ceased to be recognisable by the peasants who had known him almost all his life and among whom he frequently worked in the fields?

She has some funny stories about Tolstoy's dislike of using money: and we need not doubt that the inclination to avoid the use of money did, with a man of his strength of will and tenacity of purpose, give rise to strange scenes—even though he never made a hard and fast rule for himself on the subject. She tells us of a poor boy to whom the Count promised, but failed to give, fifty kopéykas (equal, by the bye, to twenty-five cents, and not "about thirty-two cents"). Frau Seuron herself gave the boy "what she could spare," but he went away and never came back again, and "died not long afterwards of consumption in the hospital," but

whether because Frau Seuron's gift fell too far short of Tolstoy's promise, is not expressly mentioned.

Tolstoy once wanted an overseer for his Samára estate and Frau Seuron "came to the rescue" by trying to get him to engage a German, whom she introduced. The man came three or four times from some place about fifteen miles distant, but did not secure the post, having roused Tolstoy's suspicions by wanting money in advance. Frau Seuron makes the most of her compatriot's disappointment, and tells us that though he "had long been in charge of an important estate in another part of Russia" and "was furnished with abundant testimonials, . . . it was two years before he secured a situation for the support of his family. From which one is tempted, in spite of Frau Seuron's testimony, to conclude that, in other people besides Tolstoy, the man failed to inspire confidence. Indeed, Frau Seuron's own ideas of honor are somewhat peculiar, as one gathers from a little story she tells:

"A stranger came to see Tolstoy and to offer him his immense fortune for benevolent purposes." A friend of Frau Seuron had a large forest to sell and was willing to pay a commission of five thousand dollars if a purchaser could be found. So Frau Seuron calmly requested Tolstoy to "mention the matter to his visitor." "But the Count only laughed, and said: 'Are you trying to make money?' and did not say a word to the man. . . . And so the opportunity was lost," and in due course Frau Seuron's memoirs were written and the world was told how strongly she disapproves of the Count's ideas and practices. But as the man came to consult Tolstoy—whom he trusted—it would have been outrageous to hand him over to the tender mercies of Frau Seuron.

But Frau Seuron, in her condemnation of Tolstoy is strengthened, she lets us see, by the support of people in the best society. Her son wished to be engaged as a tutor for the sons of "a Prince, occupying an influential position at Court," but when this Prince "heard that the young man had lived several years in Tolstoy's house he broke off the negotiations immediately." Now, after a Prince, "influential at Court" had disapproved of Tolstoy, and Frau Seuron herself had seen him doing "plebeian" work in the fields, what respect could she be expected to feel for his books or his opinions? And what better use could she make of her opportunities than to write a spiteful book about him, thereby perhaps recovering a little of the five thousand dollars to which he might so easily have helped her?

But there are few things in this world so bad that one can find no good in them if one looks for it. Even Frau Seuron's book—poor stuff as it is—is not altogether valueless. In the first place it rightly contradicts the hasty conclusion some people jump to, that all the practices Tolstoy commends in any of his books have been thoroughly tested in practice by him and have completely succeeded. She overshoots her mark, but when she says that visitors "found a luxurious home, a generous table, servants, equipages, in short, the usual surroundings of a wealthy and titled landed proprietor," she is only exaggerating somewhat. The property belongs, now-a-days, not to the Count but to the Countess and to the children, but it has neither been distributed broadcast nor allowed to go to ruin. Even such a sentence as this: "What did it matter if Tolstoy wore a blouse, and made his own shoes and drove a plough, when he had only to return home to find himself surrounded by all that makes life enjoyed by the rich and envied by the poor?" serves at least to contradict the common misconception referred to above; though it might have occurred to a more intelligent woman that when a man spends little on himself, eats and dresses with great simplicity, and tries, without coercion, to influence his own family and others in the same direction, devoting, moreover, his time and talent, quite freely to the service of others,—it does matter a great deal! In fact, the more conspicuous external changes that are, from time to time, accomplished in society would not come about were it not for the moral efforts of those who persevere in spite of partial failure, and many discouragements, and of much misunderstanding at the hands of those who do not discriminate between the externalities that surround a man and the spirit that animates him in his work.

Another merit of the book is that Frau Seuron tells some good stories; though these she too often spoils by thrusting in remarks of her own which have neither wit nor sense. For instance: Tolstoy "went once to the Institute where her son was a pupil in order to escort the boy to his mother, who was ill." Frau Seuron "telegraphed . . . that the Count would arrive at a certain hour, and, accordingly, the Director and the whole corps of teachers waited at the main entrance to receive the distinguished guest. But nobody came, excepting an old man in a sheepskin jacket, who was told to sit down on a bench in the hall, while the teachers passed up and down, wondering why the Count did not appear." Not till the boy turned up and, exchanging greetings in French with the man in the sheepskin coat, went away with him, did it dawn on the minds

of the Faculty that the bearded man in the sheepskin was Tolstoy himself! "The Count added the story to several other similar incidents for the amusement of the home circle, deducing the conclusion that rank is not written on the face." And then followed Frau Seuron's own comment, "by way of a hit at Tolstoy's peasant costume,—'No, but on the back!'"

Now and then she makes a remark worth making, as when she speaks of the keen glance of Tolstoy's grey eyes, and says that his manner of scrutinising people reminded her of "a photographic apparatus"; nor does she omit from time to time to testify to his kindness and keen sense of humor, as well as to his sincerity and desire to do good.

If one were tied down to give a short, simple, clear report on Frau Seuron's book, one would have to say it was a very worthless production, grossly inaccurate, and written by a woman evidently quite incapable of appreciating Tolstoy's view of life. But, looking more closely at the matter, I have tried to show that there are some crumbs and scraps of digestible matter to be found in it. And so strangely complex is human nature that it is possible Frau Seuron, together with the prejudices and personal motives that influenced her, may have been, to some extent, moved, in her attacks on Tolstoy, by a desire that right (as she saw it) should triumph.

Let me try to make this complex supposition plain. Frau Seuron, I take it, saw that many people read Tolstoy and were moved by what they read. Whether it was by the force of the arguments, or by the spiritual fervor of his appeals, or by the artist's gift of compelling the readers to share his feelings, certain it is that Tolstoy stirred many men and women as no other writer stirred them. Further than this, Frau Seuron saw that the people who yielded to his influence did not usually become more amiable, more reasonable, or easier to coöperate with. She saw, in Tolstoy's own family as well as elsewhere, that the new movement caused strife, misunderstandings, and distress. She probably saw also (what any one may see who cares to look) that the movement—like any strong intellectual or spiritual movement—seemed sometimes to tear people from their roots, to rush them along, and then to leave them stranded in some backwater, uprooted and out of place. And with that lack of discrimination which is so common a failing: that eagerness to consider things absolutely good or bad,—white or black,—which so hinders us from getting at the real truth of things, she seems to have made up her mind that Tolstoy's teaching was harmful. His arguments did not appeal to her, and the

test of experience seemed to her decisively against him. So she has,—perhaps,—told her fibs with a moral purpose. She has done what harm she could to Tolstoy's reputation as a thinker, in order to prevent people from coming under his sway, and marrying beneath them or drinking themselves to death!

But her end does not justify her means. We do not want the pendulum swung violently backwards and forwards; but would rather see where it will finally hang in equilibrium.

Still,—putting Frau Seuron aside,—now that some twenty years have passed since Tolstoy began to expound his system of Christian Anarchism, experience—that great verifier of theories—does not show us that, in the qualities of cohesion, tolerance, capacity to coöperate, and mutual helpfulness, his most ardent followers are superior to other men. And those of us who are not mere partisans, but are honestly and primarily in search of *truth*, have to ask themselves how it is that the practical result of so great a teaching is, in our own case, not better.

We do not get any satisfactory reply from our friends, the extremists: the people who, like Frau Seuron, try scornfully to laugh Tolstoy off the scene, or those fervent disciples who would still seek to extract from Tolstoy's works some rigid *external* code of rules and tests, by urging which upon mankind they would inaugurate the millennium. We have, I think, rather to look for a sane criticism which, while gladly recognising the immense value of Tolstoy's colossal work (which amounts to nothing less than the elucidation of the relation in which the various sides of our modern life stand to one another and to true progress) will not be afraid to discriminate between the first, second, and third quality flour that comes from his mill, or to remove the grit which prevents the mill from grinding smoothly.

It is as though we had a wonderful new machine that works with much friction and has caused sad accidents. Quite a number of hysterical people denounce it, and say (like Frau Seuron) that it will certainly do no good until it has been left to rust for a hundred years. Others are in such ecstasies over the machine that their one and only idea is to get up more steam and to drive it harder and faster. What is really wanted is, to get practical mechanics carefully to overhaul the machine, to test the parts, to see they are well adjusted, to lubricate the bearings, and to see that the friction is minimised.

Mrs. Evans, who wrote the article in *The Open Court*, apparently knows nothing about Russia and nothing about Tolstoy. She tells

us that Rs. 150 equal about \$100. They really equal about \$75 and never, since the Russo-Turkish war of 1877, have equalled the amount she names. There is no excuse for this blunder now that the value has for some years been fixed on a gold basis of a trifle over 50 cents for 1 ruble.

She adds a couple of pages of her own criticism of Tolstoy's opinion, and she succeeds in making it abundantly evident that she either has not read his later works, or has failed to understand them.

Tolstoy does not, as Mrs. Evans erroneously states, decline to recognise evolution, but he says that the upward evolution in human conceptions of duty is not—like the heel of certain rubber goloshes—"self-acting," but is one in which we should all play the part, not of automata, but of conscious and willing co-workers with the Eternal.