

TOLSTOY'S PHILOSOPHY.¹

BY JOHANNES WENDLAND.

GOETHE spoke of his works as only details of a great general confession. Tolstoy could even more justly have so qualified what he has written. The leading figures of his great novels *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Resurrection*, always wear the author's

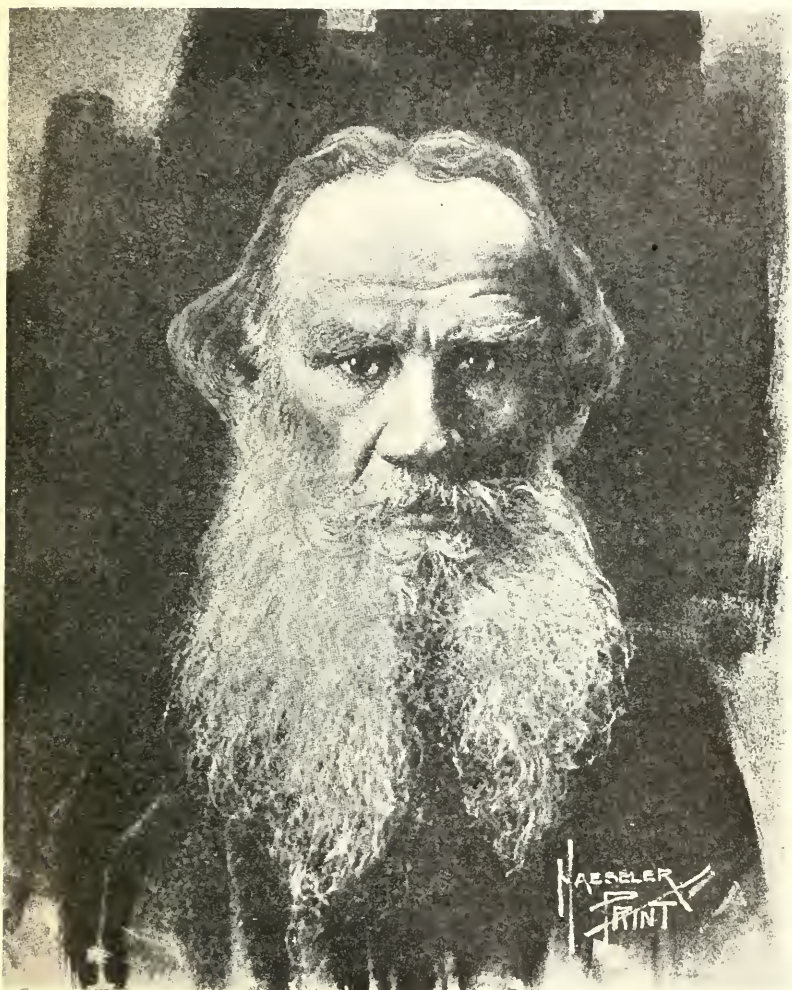


COUNT TOLSTOY AT WORK.

own features. It was in 1879 that the document entitled "My Confession" began the series of his philosophical writings, and these writings are but records of his soul-struggles with the problem: "What is the meaning of life?"

¹A summary of the article "Die Gedankenwelt Leo Tolstojs," in *Die Deutsche Rundschau*, Berlin, March, 1910, edited and translated by R. T. House.

Born in 1827 of a noble family, he early grew weary of a life of purposeless ease while the great mass of his countrymen were suffering about him. He undertook the management of his paternal

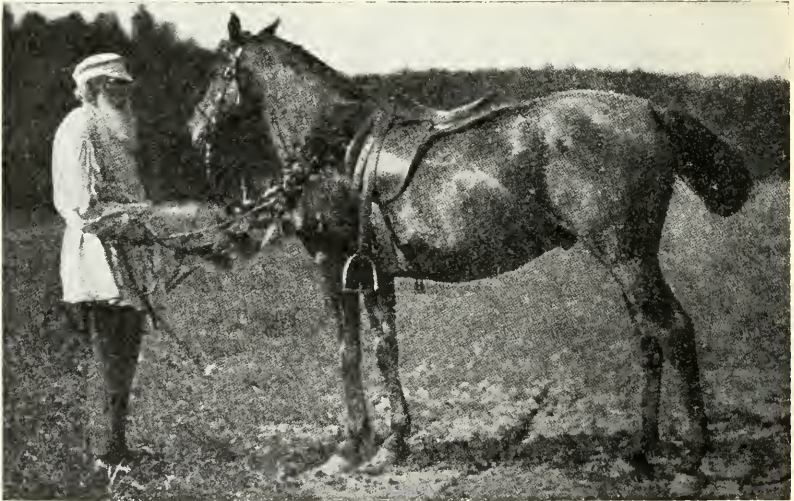


TOLSTOY IN THE LAST YEAR OF HIS LIFE.

estate; he went systematically to work to help the neighboring peasants in every possible manner; he established schools and himself taught in them. His pedagogical theories were of course his own, as always. There must be no compulsion. The child must

study when and what he pleases. Thus early appears the fundamental assumption of his whole philosophy.

A happy marriage, the care of a promising family, material prosperity and literary fame left him still unsatisfied. The question, "Why am I here on earth?" tormented him till he found the answer. He studied Kant and Schopenhauer, and the latter exercised a powerful influence over him. The conclusion that life is all evil, the relapse into nothingness the only real happiness, took hold of him for a time with terrible vigor. Strange that this healthy, prosperous, popular man should have been troubled with thoughts of suicide.

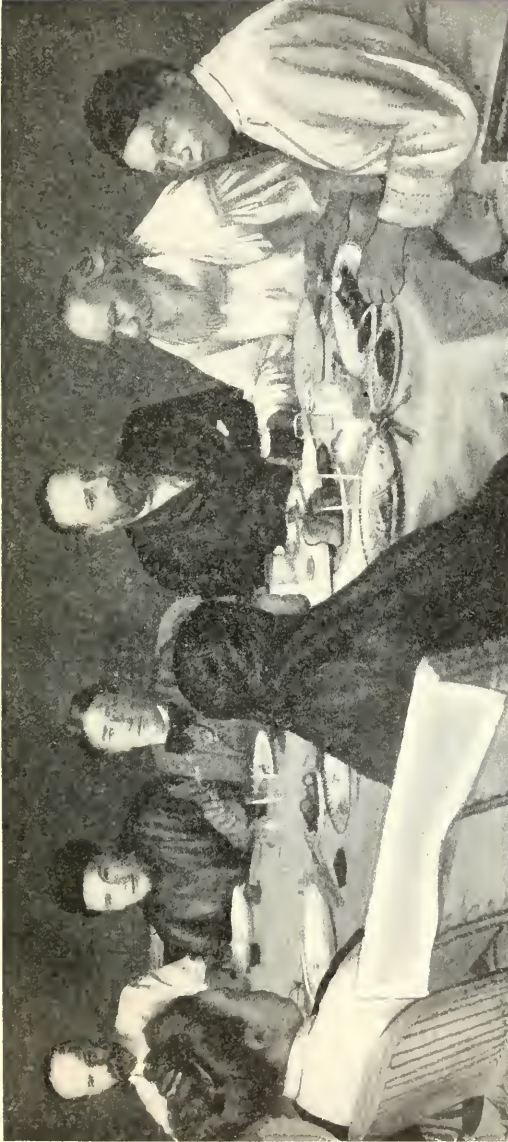


TOLSTOY WITH HIS HORSE.

For a long time he dared not go hunting with a gun for fear he might be impelled to turn the weapon against himself.

He seemed to see in the determined, satisfied lives of pious men evidence that they had found an answer to his question. But he saw no help in the orthodox church. Here were only formalism, hypocrisy, ignorance. He left the church and renounced its doctrines. He retained a belief in individual and universal progress and perfectibility, but still yearned for something more definite. We are moving; good!—but whither?

Many years later he wrote of his period of illumination: "In the year 1877 I became a new man. I count only the time from then. What lies before is vanity and selfishness." Critics fail to



AT DINNER WITH COUNT TOLSTOY.

"A meal at the Tolstoy table was a memorable experience.... There never was a home like it before, nor will be again. Prince and peasant were welcome alike and every guest shared with all the family." Kellogg Durland in *The Independent*.

Tolstoy is easily recognized in this picture, and the Countess is at his left at the end of the table. She is facing Tolstoy's sister, a Carmelite nun, at whose left sits Mme. Iqunnowa. Next to Tolstoy is his literary agent, Count Vladimir Tchertkoff, and then the Princess Obolenskaja, Alexandra Tolstoy, the daughter who shares Tolstoy's views, and at the end Dr. Lugovitsky.

find as definite a break as he himself describes, but at least his peculiar views come out more sharply after the date mentioned.

From his observation of those who professed religion he remained convinced that it contains a profound fundamental truth. He studied Greek and Hebrew, the writings of the old Church Fathers and modern Russian theologians. He cultivated the society of godly peasants, to learn if possible the secret of their unlearned faith. He made pilgrimages, he consulted hermits, monks, bishops, leaders of the smaller fanatic sects,—he even resumed attendance at the services of the orthodox church and observed the prescribed fasts.

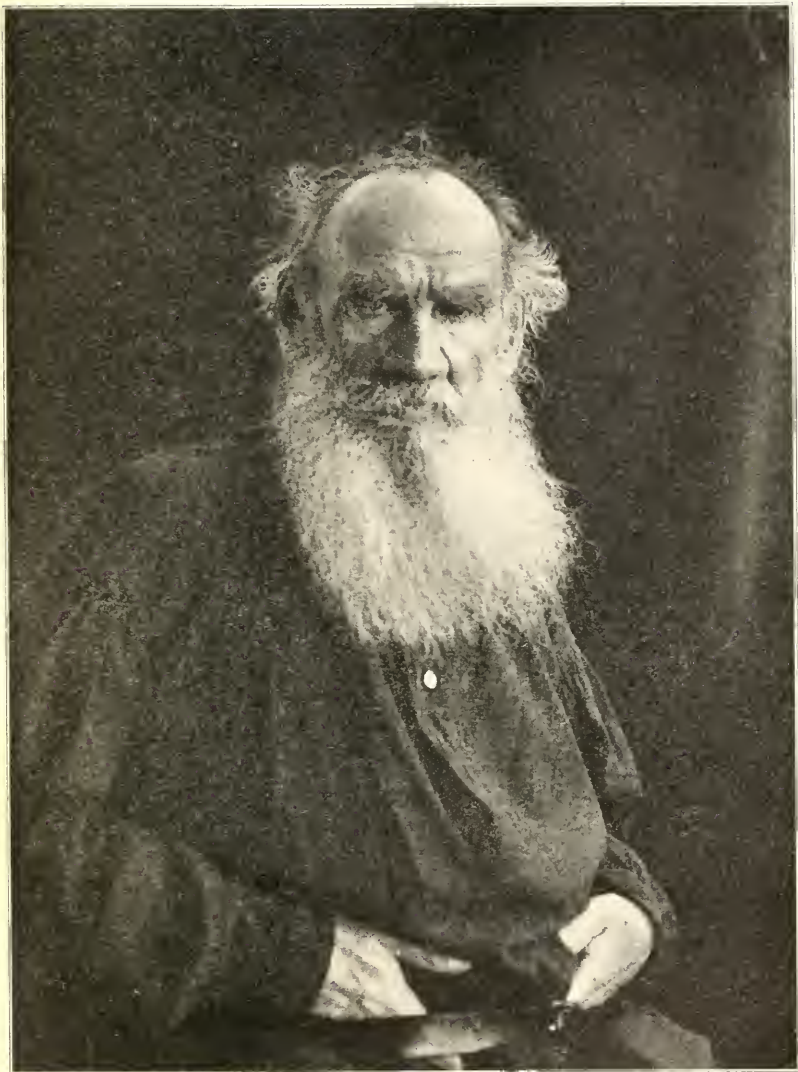
At last the conviction fixed itself—how far it was the result of these religious theories and practices is not clear—“In all my inner struggles and doubts I am overwhelmed by the senselessness of existence and am sunk into despair when I deny God. But the glorious joy of living comes over me as soon as I affirm God.” And the thought streamed through him: “Why seek longer? God is life. To know God and to live are one and the same thing.”

He was no nearer the church than before. But the Gospels offered him a full and satisfying answer to the question, “What is the meaning of my life?” Self-seeking and the pursuit of pleasure are unreasonable, because they bring warfare and satiety. The reasonable life is a life of love and sacrifice. Confucius, Lao-tze, Buddha, Epictetus, Jesus, all saw the great and necessary truth that the only way to real happiness lies through love to God and man.

There was no mysticism in Tolstoy’s religion. He was as insistent that the message be clear and reasonable as were the deists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as were Herbert of Cherbury, Chubb, Reimarius. He had no sympathy with Paul’s learned complications, no patience with the miraculous “plan of salvation.”

Tolstoy’s teaching was a flat contradiction of the proud individualism of Nietzsche. The mid-point of his doctrine was the command, “Resist not evil!” He followed the prohibition to its extremest consequences. If I find a robber in the act of murdering a child, I must offer no violent opposition; for I have no means of knowing what may become of the child if I save its life, or of the robber if I allow him to escape. “Yes, if the Zulus came to roast my children, the only thing I could do would be to endeavor to convince them that such a procedure would be useless or positively harmful to them.”

All war, then, is wrong, and all military service of every sort is to be denounced. Tolstoy opposed all acts of violence toward criminals, all imprisonment. The novel *Resurrection* contains a



Leo Tolstoy.
1908, 14 August

bitter arraignment of judges who condemn their equals or their betters to restraint or suffering. "Judge not that ye be not judged." How can men who know themselves to be full of sin and weakness, presume to punish others who are no worse than they? "I say unto you, Swear not at all." And yet in Russia millions take the oath while a priest holds the Gospels before them, open perhaps at the very page where the oath is forbidden. Here are the principal reasons for his criticism of the church. She sanctions the taking of oaths, she blesses the banners of murderous armies, she persecutes those of a different faith, she refuses to suffer in silence.

More and more radical grew Tolstoy's criticism. "Love your enemies." The command deals a death-blow at what is termed patriotism. The man who has room in his heart for a feeling of animosity toward the citizens of another country is no Christian.

There is no question that Tolstoy meant all he said to the deepest depths of his being. In 1882 Moscow suffered the, for her, unusual experience of a census enumeration. Tolstoy was one of two thousand volunteer enumerators, and his tract, "What shall we do then?" describes his experiences. He distributed large sums of money among the proletariat, and influenced others to do the same. He organized a systematic effort at moral education of the lower orders. But he found a fundamental error in the present constitution of society. It is wrong that a hundred thousand men should suffer in order that one thousand may live in luxury. The reasonable life is that in which each individual labors to supply his own physical needs, and accepts no help from others; and this reasonable life can be lived only in the pure air and unhampered freedom of the country.

"What then of art, science, culture, music, theaters?" Tolstoy evades nothing. Our over-refined culture is in the main unsound. Let all these things go if necessary. We can get along without them.

Then Tolstoy donned the peasant frock. He no longer lived in Moscow. He worked like a peasant, and peasants are his constant associates. But he had his library; he remained a very wealthy man; he carried his theories only half way to their logical outcome. This is due in part to the resistance of his family, who were by no means unqualified converts to his philosophy, and with whom he had been forced to effect a compromise. Still, without their influence, it would have been hard for even this courageous reformer to become absolutely consistent.

Years ago he abandoned the writing of romances. True art, for him, must be "an agency for human progress." In 1883 Turgenev

jeff wrote to him from his death-bed: "Go back to your literary work! How happy I should be if I could think that my entreaty would have an effect on you. My friend, great writer of the Russian people, listen to my prayer!" But Tolstoy could be nothing else than moralist and reformer. "Art for art's sake" was to him blasphemy. Rhymed poetry is folly, because language can have no other purpose than to express thought in the simplest and clearest possible manner, and his application of his literary theory continued to bring forth vigorous and beautiful fruit.

If Tolstoy had a valid message for the old world of convention it is this: Our highly-prized modern culture is not the last word of human accomplishment. We are not yet able to measure values by the ultimate, eternal standards. We must continue our efforts to prove all things, to let unessentials pass and hold fast that which is good.