

THE FORGED COUPON
And Other Stories

By Leo Tolstoy

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INTRODUCTION

IN an age of materialism like our own the phenomenon of spiritual power is as significant and inspiring as it is rare. No longer associated with the “divine right” of kings, it has survived the downfall of feudal and theocratic systems as a mystic personal emanation in place of a coercive weapon of statecraft.

Freed from its ancient shackles of dogma and despotism it eludes analysis. We know not how to gauge its effect on others, nor even upon ourselves. Like the wind, it permeates the atmosphere we breathe, and baffles while it stimulates the mind with its intangible but compelling force.

This psychic power, which the dead weight of materialism is impotent to suppress, is revealed in the lives and writings of men of the most diverse creeds and nationalities. Apart from those who, like Buddha and Mahomet, have been raised to the height of demi-gods by worshipping millions, there are names which leap inevitably to the mind—such names as Savonarola, Luther, Calvin, Rousseau—which stand for types and exemplars of spiritual aspiration. To this high priesthood of the quick among the dead, who can doubt that time will admit Leo Tolstoy—a genius whose greatness has been obscured from us rather than enhanced by his duality; a realist who strove to demolish the mysticism of Christianity, and became himself a mystic in the contemplation of Nature; a man of ardent temperament and robust physique, keenly susceptible to human passions and desires, who battled with himself from early manhood until the spirit, gathering strength with years, inexorably subdued the flesh.

Tolstoy the realist steps without cavil into the front rank of modern writers; Tolstoy the idealist has been constantly derided and scorned by men of like birth and education with himself—his altruism denounced as impracticable, his preaching compared with his mode of life to prove him inconsistent, if not insincere. This is the prevailing attitude of politicians and literary men.

Must one conclude that the mass of mankind has lost touch with idealism? On the contrary, in spite of modern materialism, or even because of it, many leaders of spiritual thought have arisen in our times, and have won the ear of vast audiences. Their message is a call to a simpler life, to a recognition of the responsibilities of wealth, to the avoidance of war by arbitration, and sinking of class hatred in a deep sense of universal brotherhood.

Unhappily, when an idealistic creed is formulated in precise and dogmatic language, it invariably loses something of its pristine beauty in the process of transmutation. Hence the Positivist philosophy of Comte, though embodying noble aspirations, has had but a limited influence. Again, the poetry of Robert Browning, though less frankly altruistic than that of Cowper or Wordsworth, is inherently ethical, and reveals strong sympathy with sinning and suffering humanity, but it is masked by a manner that is sometimes uncouth and frequently obscure. Owing to these, and other instances, idealism suggests to the world at large a vague sentimentality peculiar to the poets, a bloodless abstraction toyed with by philosophers, which must remain a closed book to struggling humanity.

Yet Tolstoy found true idealism in the toiling peasant who believed in God, rather than in his intellectual superior who believed in himself in the first place, and gave a conventional assent to the

existence of a deity in the second. For the peasant was still religious at heart with a naive unquestioning faith—more characteristic of the fourteenth or fifteenth century than of to-day—and still fervently aspired to God although sunk in superstition and held down by the despotism of the Greek Church. It was the cumbrous ritual and dogma of the orthodox state religion which roused Tolstoy to impassioned protests, and led him step by step to separate the core of Christianity from its sacerdotal shell, thus bringing upon himself the ban of excommunication.

The signal mark of the reprobation of “Holy Synod” was slow in coming—it did not, in fact, become absolute until a couple of years after the publication of “Resurrection,” in 1901, in spite of the attitude of fierce hostility to Church and State which Tolstoy had maintained for so long. This hostility, of which the seeds were primarily sown by the closing of his school and inquisition of his private papers in the summer of 1862, soon grew to proportions far greater than those arising from a personal wrong. The dumb and submissive moujik found in Tolstoy a living voice to express his sufferings.

Tolstoy was well fitted by nature and circumstances to be the peasant’s spokesman. He had been brought into intimate contact with him in the varying conditions of peace and war, and he knew him at his worst and best. The old home of the family, Yasnaya Polyana, where Tolstoy, his brothers and sister, spent their early years in charge of two guardian aunts, was not only a halting-place for pilgrims journeying to and from the great monastic shrines, but gave shelter to a number of persons of enfeebled minds belonging to the peasant class, with whom the devout and kindly Aunt Alexandra spent many hours daily in religious conversation and prayer.

In "Childhood" Tolstoy apostrophises with feeling one of those "innocents," a man named Grisha, "whose faith was so strong that you felt the nearness of God, your love so ardent that the words flowed from your lips uncontrolled by your reason. And how did you celebrate his Majesty when, words failing you, you prostrated yourself on the ground, bathed in tears" This picture of humble religious faith was amongst Tolstoy's earliest memories, and it returned to comfort him and uplift his soul when it was tossed and engulfed by seas of doubt. But the affection he felt in boyhood towards the moujiks became tinged with contempt when his attempts to improve their condition—some of which are described in "Anna Karenina" and in the "Landlord's Morning"—ended in failure, owing to the ignorance and obstinacy of the people. It was not till he passed through the ordeal of war in Turkey and the Crimea that he discovered in the common soldier who fought by his side an unconscious heroism, an unquestioning faith in God, a kindness and simplicity of heart rarely possessed by his commanding officer.

The impressions made upon Tolstoy during this period of active service gave vivid reality to the battle-scenes in "War and Peace," and are traceable in the reflections and conversation of the two heroes, Prince Andre and Pierre Besukhov. On the eve of the battle of Borodino, Prince Andre, talking with Pierre in the presence of his devoted soldier-servant Timokhine, says,—“Success cannot possibly be, nor has it ever been, the result of strategy or fire-arms or numbers.’

“Then what does it result from?’ said Pierre.

“From the feeling that is in me, that is in him’—pointing to Timokhine—‘and that is in each individual soldier.’”

He then contrasts the different spirit animating the officers and the men.

“‘The former,’ he says, ‘have nothing in view but their personal interests. The critical moment for them is the moment at which they are able to supplant a rival, to win a cross or a new order. I see only one thing. To-morrow one hundred thousand Russians and one hundred thousand Frenchmen will meet to fight; they who fight the hardest and spare themselves the least will win the day.’

“‘There’s the truth, your Excellency, the real truth,’ murmurs Timokhine; ‘it is not a time to spare oneself. Would you believe it, the men of my battalion have not tasted brandy? ‘It’s not a day for that,’ they said.’”

During the momentous battle which followed, Pierre was struck by the steadfastness under fire which has always distinguished the Russian soldier.

“The fall of each man acted as an increasing stimulus. The faces of the soldiers brightened more and more, as if challenging the storm let loose on them.”

In contrast with this picture of fine “morale” is that of the young white-faced officer, looking nervously about him as he walks backwards with lowered sword.

In other places Tolstoy does full justice to the courage and patriotism of all grades in the Russian army, but it is constantly evident that his sympathies are most heartily with the rank and file. What genuine feeling and affection rings in this sketch of Plato, a common soldier, in “War and Peace!”

“Plato Karataev was about fifty, judging by the number of campaigns in which he had served; he could not have told his exact age himself, and when he laughed, as he often did, he showed two rows of strong, white teeth. There was not a grey hair on his head or in his beard, and his bearing wore the stamp of activity, resolution, and above all, stoicism. His face, though much lined, had a touching expression of simplicity, youth, and innocence. When he spoke, in his soft sing-song voice, his speech flowed as from a well-spring. He never thought about what he had said or was going to say next, and the vivacity and the rhythmical inflections of his voice gave it a penetrating persuasiveness. Night and morning, when going to rest or getting up, he said, ‘O God, let me sleep like a stone and rise up like a loaf.’ And, sure enough, he had no sooner lain down than he slept like a lump of lead, and in the morning on waking he was bright and lively, and ready for any work. He could do anything, just not very well nor very ill; he cooked, sewed, planed wood, cobbled his boots, and was always occupied with some job or other, only allowing himself to chat and sing at night. He sang, not like a singer who knows he has listeners, but as the birds sing to God, the Father of all, feeling it as necessary as walking or stretching himself. His singing was tender, sweet, plaintive, almost feminine, in keeping with his serious countenance. When, after some weeks of captivity his beard had grown again, he seemed to have got rid of all that was not his true self, the borrowed face which his soldiering life had given him, and to have become, as before, a peasant and a man of the people. In the eyes of the other prisoners Plato was just a common soldier, whom they chaffed at times and sent on all manner of errands; but to Pierre he remained ever after the personification of simplicity and truth, such as he had divined him to be since the first night spent by his side.”

This clearly is a study from life, a leaf from Tolstoy's "Crimean Journal." It harmonises with the point of view revealed in the "Letters from Sebastopol" (especially in the second and third series), and shows, like them, the change effected by the realities of war in the intolerant young aristocrat, who previously excluded all but the *comme-il-faut* from his consideration. With widened outlook and new ideals he returned to St. Petersburg at the close of the Crimean campaign, to be welcomed by the elite of letters and courted by society. A few years before he would have been delighted with such a reception. Now it jarred on his awakened sense of the tragedy of existence. He found himself entirely out of sympathy with the group of literary men who gathered round him, with Turgenev at their head. In Tolstoy's eyes they were false, paltry, and immoral, and he was at no pains to disguise his opinions. Dissension, leading to violent scenes, soon broke out between Turgenev and Tolstoy; and the latter, completely disillusioned both in regard to his great contemporary and to the literary world of St. Petersburg, shook off the dust of the capital, and, after resigning his commission in the army, went abroad on a tour through Germany, Switzerland, and France.

In France his growing aversion from capital punishment became intensified by his witnessing a public execution, and the painful thoughts aroused by the scene of the guillotine haunted his sensitive spirit for long. He left France for Switzerland, and there, among beautiful natural surroundings, and in the society of friends, he enjoyed a respite from mental strain.

"A fresh, sweet-scented flower seemed to have blossomed in my spirit; to the weariness and indifference to all things which before possessed me had succeeded, without apparent transition, a thirst

for love, a confident hope, an inexplicable joy to feel myself alive.”

Those halcyon days ushered in the dawn of an intimate friendship between himself and a lady who in the correspondence which ensued usually styled herself his aunt, but was in fact a second cousin. This lady, the Countess Alexandra A. Tolstoy, a Maid of Honour of the Bedchamber, moved exclusively in Court circles. She was intelligent and sympathetic, but strictly orthodox and mondaine, so that, while Tolstoy’s view of life gradually shifted from that of an aristocrat to that of a social reformer, her own remained unaltered; with the result that at the end of some forty years of frank and affectionate interchange of ideas, they awoke to the painful consciousness that the last link of mutual understanding had snapped and that their friendship was at an end.

But the letters remain as a valuable and interesting record of one of Tolstoy’s rare friendships with women, revealing in his unguarded confidences fine shades of his many-sided nature, and throwing light on the impression he made both on his intimates and on those to whom he was only known as a writer, while his moral philosophy was yet in embryo. They are now about to appear in book form under the auspices of M. Stakhovich, to whose kindness in giving me free access to the originals I am indebted for the extracts which follow. From one of the countess’s first letters we learn that the feelings of affection, hope, and happiness which possessed Tolstoy in Switzerland irresistibly communicated themselves to those about him.

“You are good in a very uncommon way,” she writes, “and that is why it is difficult to feel unhappy in your company. I have never seen you without wishing to be a better creature. Your presence is

a consoling idea . . . know all the elements in you that revive one's heart, possibly without your being even aware of it.”

A few years later she gives him an amusing account of the impression his writings had already made on an eminent statesman.

“I owe you a small episode. Not long ago, when lunching with the Emperor, I sat next our little Bismarck, and in a spirit of mischief I began sounding him about you. But I had hardly uttered your name when he went off at a gallop with the greatest enthusiasm, firing off the list of your perfections left and right, and so long as he declaimed your praises with gesticulations, cut and thrust, powder and shot, it was all very well and quite in character; but seeing that I listened with interest and attention my man took the bit in his teeth, and flung himself into a psychic apotheosis. On reaching full pitch he began to get muddled, and floundered so helplessly in his own phrases! all the while chewing an excellent cutlet to the bone, that at last I realised nothing but the tips of his ears—those two great ears of his. What a pity I can't repeat it verbatim! but how? There was nothing left but a jumble of confused sounds and broken words.”

Tolstoy on his side is equally expansive, and in the early stages of the correspondence falls occasionally into the vein of self-analysis which in later days became habitual.

“As a child I believed with passion and without any thought. Then at the age of fourteen I began to think about life and preoccupied myself with religion, but it did not adjust itself to my theories and so I broke with it. Without it I was able to live quite contentedly for ten years . . . everything in my life was evenly distributed, and there was no room for religion. Then came a time when everything

grew intelligible; there were no more secrets in life, but life itself had lost its significance.”

He goes on to tell of the two years that he spent in the Caucasus before the Crimean War, when his mind, jaded by youthful excesses, gradually regained its freshness, and he awoke to a sense of communion with Nature which he retained to his life’s end.

“I have my notes of that time, and now reading them over I am not able to understand how a man could attain to the state of mental exaltation which I arrived at. It was a torturing but a happy time.”

Further on he writes,—“In those two years of intellectual work, I discovered a truth which is ancient and simple, but which yet I know better than others do. I found out that immortal life is a reality, that love is a reality, and that one must live for others if one would be unceasingly happy.”

At this point one realises the gulf which divides the Slavonic from the English temperament. No average Englishman of seven-and-twenty (as Tolstoy was then) would pursue reflections of this kind, or if he did, he would in all probability keep them sedulously to himself.

To Tolstoy and his aunt, on the contrary, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to indulge in egoistic abstractions and to expatiate on them; for a Russian feels none of the Anglo-Saxon’s *mauvaise honte* in describing his spiritual condition, and is no more daunted by metaphysics than the latter is by arguments on politics and sport.

To attune the Anglo-Saxon reader’s mind to sympathy with a mentality so alien to his own, requires that Tolstoy’s environment

should be described more fully than most of his biographers have cared to do. This prefatory note aims, therefore, at being less strictly biographical than illustrative of the contributory elements and circumstances which sub-consciously influenced Tolstoy's spiritual evolution, since it is apparent that in order to judge a man's actions justly one must be able to appreciate the motives from which they spring; those motives in turn requiring the key which lies in his temperament, his associations, his nationality. Such a key is peculiarly necessary to English or American students of Tolstoy, because of the marked contrast existing between the Russian and the Englishman or American in these respects, a contrast by which Tolstoy himself was forcibly struck during the visit to Switzerland, of which mention has been already made. It is difficult to restrain a smile at the poignant mental discomfort endured by the sensitive Slav in the company of the frigid and silent English frequenters of the Schweitzerhof ("Journal of Prince D. Nekhludov," Lucerne, 1857), whose reserve, he realised, was "not based on pride, but on the absence of any desire to draw nearer to each other"; while he looked back regretfully to the pension in Paris where the table d' hote was a scene of spontaneous gaiety. The problem of British taciturnity passed his comprehension; but for us the enigma of Tolstoy's temperament is half solved if we see him not harshly silhouetted against a blank wall, but suffused with his native atmosphere, amid his native surroundings. Not till we understand the main outlines of the Russian temperament can we realise the individuality of Tolstoy himself: the personality that made him lovable, the universality that made him great.

So vast an agglomeration of races as that which constitutes the Russian empire cannot obviously be represented by a single type,

but it will suffice for our purposes to note the characteristics of the inhabitants of Great Russia among whom Tolstoy spent the greater part of his lifetime and to whom he belonged by birth and natural affinities.

It may be said of the average Russian that in exchange for a precocious childhood he retains much of a child's lightness of heart throughout his later years, alternating with attacks of morbid despondency. He is usually very susceptible to feminine charm, an ardent but unstable lover, whose passions are apt to be as shortlived as they are violent. Story-telling and long-winded discussions give him keen enjoyment, for he is garrulous, metaphysical, and argumentative. In money matters careless and extravagant, dilatory and venal in affairs; fond, especially in the peasant class, of singing, dancing, and carousing; but his irresponsible gaiety and heedlessness of consequences balanced by a fatalistic courage and endurance in the face of suffering and danger. Capable, besides, of high flights of idealism, which result in epics, but rarely in actions, owing to the Slavonic inaptitude for sustained and organised effort. The Englishman by contrast appears cold and calculating, incapable of rising above questions of practical utility; neither interested in other men's antecedents and experiences nor willing to retail his own. The catechism which Plato puts Pierre through on their first encounter ("War and Peace") as to his family, possessions, and what not, are precisely similar to those to which I have been subjected over and over again by chance acquaintances in country-houses or by fellow travellers on journeys by boat or train. The naivete and kindness of the questioner makes it impossible to resent, though one may feebly try to parry his probing. On the other hand he offers you free access to the inmost recesses of his own soul, and stupefies you

with the candour of his revelations. This, of course, relates more to the landed and professional classes than to the peasant, who is slower to express himself, and combines in a curious way a firm belief in the omnipotence and wisdom of his social superiors with a rooted distrust of their intentions regarding himself. He is like a beast of burden who flinches from every approach, expecting always a kick or a blow. On the other hand, his affection for the animals who share his daily work is one of the most attractive points in his character, and one which Tolstoy never wearied of emphasising—describing, with the simple pathos of which he was master, the moujik inured to his own privations but pitiful to his horse, shielding him from the storm with his own coat, or saving him from starvation with his own meagre ration; and mindful of him even in his prayers, invoking, like Plato, the blessings of Florus and Laura, patron saints of horses, because “one mustn’t forget the animals.”

The characteristics of a people so embedded in the soil bear a closer relation to their native landscape than our own migratory populations, and patriotism with them has a deep and vital meaning, which is expressed unconsciously in their lives.

This spirit of patriotism which Tolstoy repudiated is none the less the animating power of the noble epic, “War and Peace,” and of his peasant-tales, of his rare gift of reproducing the expressive Slav vernacular, and of his magical art of infusing his pictures of Russian scenery not merely with beauty, but with spiritual significance. I can think of no prose writer, unless it be Thoreau, so wholly under the spell of Nature as Tolstoy; and while Thoreau was preoccupied with the normal phenomena of plant and animal life, Tolstoy, coming near to Pantheism, found responses to his moods in trees, and gained spiritual expansion from the illimitable

skies and plains. He frequently brings his heroes into touch with Nature, and endows them with all the innate mysticism of his own temperament, for to him Nature was “a guide to God.” So in the two-fold incident of Prince Andre and the oak tree (“War and Peace”) the Prince, though a man of action rather than of sentiment and habitually cynical, is ready to find in the aged oak by the roadside, in early spring, an animate embodiment of his own despondency.

“‘Springtime, love, happiness?—are you still cherishing those deceptive illusions?’ the old oak seemed to say. ‘Isn’t it the same fiction ever? There is neither spring, nor love, nor happiness! Look at those poor weather-beaten firs, always the same . . . look at the knotty arms issuing from all up my poor mutilated trunk—here I am, such as they have made me, and I do not believe either in your hopes or in your illusions.’”

And after thus exercising his imagination, Prince Andre still casts backward glances as he passes by, “but the oak maintained its obstinate and sullen immovability in the midst of the flowers and grass growing at its feet. ‘Yes, that oak is right, right a thousand times over. One must leave illusions to youth. But the rest of us know what life is worth; it has nothing left to offer us.’”

Six weeks later he returns homeward the same way, roused from his melancholy torpor by his recent meeting with Natasha.

“The day was hot, there was storm in the air; a slight shower watered the dust on the road and the grass in the ditch; the left side of the wood remained in the shade; the right side, lightly stirred by the wind, glittered all wet in the sun; everything was in flower, and from near and far the nightingales poured forth their song. ‘I fancy

there was an oak here that understood me,' said Prince Andre to himself, looking to the left and attracted unawares by the beauty of the very tree he sought. The transformed old oak spread out in a dome of deep, luxuriant, blooming verdure, which swayed in a light breeze in the rays of the setting sun. There were no longer cloven branches nor rents to be seen; its former aspect of bitter defiance and sullen grief had disappeared; there were only the young leaves, full of sap that had pierced through the centenarian bark, making the beholder question with surprise if this patriarch had really given birth to them. 'Yes, it is he, indeed!' cried Prince Andre, and he felt his heart suffused by the intense joy which the springtime and this new life gave him . . . 'No, my life cannot end at thirty-one! . . . It is not enough myself to feel what is within me, others must know it too! Pierre and that "slip" of a girl, who would have fled into cloudland, must learn to know me! My life must colour theirs, and their lives must mingle with mine!'"

In letters to his wife, to intimate friends, and in his diary, Tolstoy's love of Nature is often-times expressed. The hair shirt of the ascetic and the prophet's mantle fall from his shoulders, and all the poet in him wakes when, "with a feeling akin to ecstasy," he looks up from his smooth-running sledge at "the enchanting, starry winter sky overhead," or in early spring feels on a ramble "intoxicated by the beauty of the morning," while he notes that the buds are swelling on the lilacs, and "the birds no longer sing at random," but have begun to converse.

But though such allusions abound in his diary and private correspondence, we must turn to "The Cossacks," and "Conjugal Happiness" for the exquisitely elaborated rural studies, which give those early romances their fresh idyllic charm.

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