

## CHAPTER XX

### NOTE UPON TOLSTOY'S "RESURRECTION"

BEFORE commencing another lecture on texts of any kind, we may relieve the monotony by a little talk about a wonderful book which all the world is talking about at the present time. Besides giving you special lectures on individual authors, I believe that it is also the lecturer's duty to talk to you occasionally about the great literary events of our own day—at least about such of them as appear to have any important moral or social signification. It is well that you should accustom yourselves during your university career to watch such literary events, and to make fairly correct estimates and judgments in regard to them, remembering that the thought of the future is made by the events of the present—in literary circles, at least.

In a preceding lecture on a book by Meredith, I insisted at some length upon the difficulty to be faced by every reformer—one might have added, by any man with a novel idea. Men of new ideas usually get into trouble. It is also possible to get into trouble by returning to ideas which are very old, but which being true, may be in antagonism to the notions of the time or to the existing tendencies in society. Count Tolstoy is an example of the latter fact. I spoke of him in a former lecture, regarding his great power as a novelist, but I was then referring to the work of his youth particularly. I want now to speak of the work of his old age. You will do well to remember that next to Turgueniev, he represents the highest literary art of Russia; and I am not sure but that he will eventually be judged even greater than Turgueniev. And speaking of Russian prose literature, remember that although small in quantity, its quality has not been surpassed by any other literature,

not even by the French. I do not mean to say that the Russian writers are masters of form as the French are; they cannot be that. But in the art of picturing human life, so as to bestir the best emotions of the reader, they really stand almost alone.

In his later years you know that the Count became very religious in his own way. He made a sort of Christianity of his own—a poetical kind of Christianity, which consisted in applying the teachings of Christ to the conduct of actual life. Perhaps you have read or heard that there are now in Russia a great many strange sects of Christians, who are giving the Government more trouble than the English and American Quakers gave to their respective governments in former centuries. You know what the Russian government is, and you know what it means there for a man to say, I am an anti-militarist. But there are thousands of men who persist in saying that to their government in Russia, year after year, and welcoming the punishment which follows. They believe that it is not Christian to declare war, to destroy life, and to wound others. And really the government cannot do anything with these men except to punish them. Thousands have been driven out of the country, but the number of sects continues to grow. This will give you an idea, but only a very small idea, regarding the new kind of Christianity existing in Russia. The brave author I am speaking of does not belong to the particular sects mentioned, though he has sympathy with them. He is a sect in himself. He has given away all his property to help the peasants who were formerly slaves upon his father's estate, and he has even written books of late years in order to devote the money obtained from their sale to charitable purposes. When he first began to abandon literature, many years ago, the great Turgueniev wrote to him and begged him, for the sake of Russian literature, to go back to fiction. For he has this one faculty to a greater extent than Turgueniev had, than almost any modern writer had—the dramatic faculty, the power to make hundreds of

different characters really think and move and speak in the pages of a book. But he did not give any heed to this generous advice at the time. Afterwards he wrote chiefly little short stories intended to illustrate moral facts. But now he has certainly returned to fiction, because he discovered that he had something new to say; and the result is really very astonishing. I should not declare that his last book is a greater piece of literary work than the novels of his young days; I should simply say that it is one of the most terrible and touching books ever written. Nothing else at all resembling it appeared during the century. In one sense you may call it a religious novel, but actually it is not a religious novel at all in relation to dogma or doctrine of any kind. It is simply the story of the influence of generous ideas upon the mind of a man who has done something wrong. The word "religious" concerns it only in the sense that moral feeling is religion. The result of writing that book is that Count Tolstoy has been excommunicated by the Orthodox Church as a blasphemmer and an infidel, as one who is not to be allowed the privilege of religious believers after his death, and as one for whose soul men are hereafter forbidden to pray. You will see that in Russia, at least, literature is not by any means free from religious interference as well as secular censorship. But really the offence of Count Tolstoy's book only happens to be that it is more Christian than Christianity. To try to improve a religious conception may be quite as dangerous socially as to attack it.

What is the subject of the novel? A young Russian nobleman, while still a university student, thoughtlessly seduces a servant girl in the house of his mother. He gives her a child. Afterwards he thinks that, as he is a nobleman, it is quite sufficient compensation for him to give her a present of one hundred rubles. Then he loses sight of her for a number of years, during which time he enjoys all the pleasures of life as much as possible and becomes as selfish and as hard as any other man of the world. Later

on he is summoned one day to the criminal court as a jurymen in order to decide upon the guilt or innocence of a prostitute who has been accused of murdering a man, or at least of poisoning him, for purposes of robbery. The woman is very beautiful; and her face immediately attracts the young nobleman's attention. Then what is his surprise to find that this is the same girl whom he had seduced years before in his mother's house. It was his fault that instead of becoming a happy wife she had become what he now saw before him. The accusation brought against her happened to be false, and he knows from positive evidence that it is a false charge, but the machinery of the Russian criminal court is still very imperfect, and he cannot obtain the acquittal of the woman. Although she is innocent, she is sentenced to Siberia.

Then as he heard the sentence he began to understand what the result of his own moral injustice to the girl had been—the total ruin of a life, the destruction of body and soul. And why had he done this? For mere selfish pleasure. Can he possibly atone for the wrong?

In one way he can partly atone to her. His moral duty now is, notwithstanding that he is a high nobleman and that she has become a public prostitute, convicted of murder—it is now his duty, he thinks, to go with her to Siberia, and to marry her, and to devote the rest of his life to the work of trying to make her a good woman.

Perhaps the element of the improbable will seem to some of you who have not read the book, to obtrude itself in this relation. Is it not a little absurd to imagine a nobleman thus willing to disgrace himself for a moral purpose which the nineteenth century can have no sympathy with, so far as society is concerned? In this country, perhaps the story seems almost unnatural; but it is not in the least unnatural to European readers. In fact, the eccentricities of English noblemen have furnished parallels in points of strangeness within the memory of living men. A generous nature, profoundly sympathetic, moved to remorse by the fullest recog-

niton of the consequences of a fault, and, moreover, religious in the best sense, would certainly be capable of attempting what the novelist describes. A good heart is capable of any sacrifice. But when you read the story, especially if you read it in the French translation, which is much superior in many respects to the English, you will have another reason to feel that the story is not improbable. I mean the recognition of the fact that it is not simply a story, but the record of a personal experience. The man who wrote that book did not imagine it; he saw and felt all that he narrates; he is telling us the history of his own faults and of his own efforts to atone for them.

One of the fine things said in an early chapter of the book, is that nobody who injures another human being can possibly learn the extent of that injury until he attempts to make compensation. The young nobleman of the novel encounters this truth from the start, learns with surprise the force and depth of it. It is all very well to be willing to do what is right, but the doing is not nearly so easy a matter as might be supposed. It looks a very simple thing to go to the woman, and to say to her, "Forgive me; be my wife; I am rich and influential, I can protect and make you happy." But when the man actually does this, he discovers that he is fighting against all society, all laws. He has, as a wrong-doer, been, without knowing it, working as a part of the great social machinery that crushes the weak for the benefit of the strong. Every seducer really helps the cruel and brutal forces of society by his treacheries. He is working for all that is selfish and bad in society. Society helps him to do the wrong, and afterwards it helps him to crush the victim into the silence and the obscurity of hopeless misery. But it will not help him to undo the wrong. Not at all. When he tries to do that, society turns upon him in the name of morality and in the name of common sense. He becomes then, for society, an enemy, a fool, a person no longer worthy of common respect.

So when the nobleman tries to rescue the woman from

her unhappy position, the world simply laughs at him, the law opposes him, and his friends regard him with scorn as one who would shamelessly disgrace the society to which he belongs. Even those officials who might be willing to help him, do not at all understand his motives. His only sympathizers are those who imagine that he is actuated by sensual passion; and it requires no little courage on his part to bear this variety of misapprehensions. And he has to bear it in extraordinary places under the most extraordinary circumstances. He is obliged to go to the officials of the prison and to explain to them that he wants to marry that woman who has been accused of murder; he must tell them also who he is—a prince, disgracing the race from which he sprang. He must associate with convicts and felons in the prisons, and submit to the horrible conditions there prevailing. He must bear every variety of insult. And, after all, the woman for whose sake he bears all this, utterly despises him—reproaches him, mocks him, refuses his help. All that he can hope for is to soften her resentment by patience and kindness. So he follows her to Siberia. He actually succeeds in having her sentence remitted, and sets her free from the prison. But then she refuses to marry him, and marries another man. That is the whole of the story in brief. The wonderful art is the analysis of the emotions of its characters, and the strange illustration which it affords of the possible result of a single selfish act, and of the tremendous difficulty in the way of repairing that act. There are several hundred figures in the story—real living figures—which must have been studies from life, and which are so very human that the reader forgets that he is reading about Russia. Characters are of the very same kind in every land. One cannot help thinking what a great dramatist Tolstoy might have been had he taken to that branch of literature.

So much for the literary facts of the book. That which has given offence is not concerned with the art of those pages. The offensive fact is that the author has dared to

preach essentially the Christian doctrine—the doctrine of human love as held by the ancient Christians, and after a manner antagonistic to the modern doctrinal and political Christianity of Russia. The censors who could find in such a book a reason for his excommunication must have been, nevertheless, determined from the first upon that course. For the alleged chief cause of the sentence is that Tolstoy spoke of Jesus Christ as being “only a man.” But though such be the doctrinal reason given, the resentment must have been caused by something else. And that something else was indeed a much more serious matter. It was nothing else than the manner in which the author shows that the great machinery of the Church is quite as often used to uphold injustice as to make for justice; and that there is, even among the aristocracy of the Church, a kind of political indifference to the essential duties of that Church. After all, the author has really effected his object better by getting excommunicated than he could have done in any other possible way.

In calling your attention to this very terrible and wonderful book, however, it is my duty as a follower of Spencer, to tell you that some of its social theories will not bear scientific consideration. In this respect the work is certainly defective. It is not true, for example, that the practice of perfect brotherly love throughout all classes of society—the abolishing of prisons, the abolition of criminal law—it is not true that any of these things are possible in the present state of humanity. Everywhere throughout the book we meet doubtful and startling half-truths—for example, the statement that most of the unhappiness of life is caused by approaching men for motives of interest only, without sympathy and without love. If you can really love men and deal with them only in the loving spirit, the author tells us, you will not be unhappy; but if you mingle with men, and do not love them, if you do business with them without love, then the most frightful misfortunes will result. This sounds beautiful, and there is a good deal of truth in

it, but by no means all the truth. The existing characters of men cannot be so changed, either by religious teaching or by education or law or by any other means, as to render such a policy of life even thinkable. And the book is full of utterances quite as remarkable and quite as illusive. But the defects which I have specified are after all, on the noble side; they do not really spoil the work in the least; and they make even men who cannot accept such teaching, who cannot help smiling at it, think in a generous way about matters which deserve the most careful consideration.