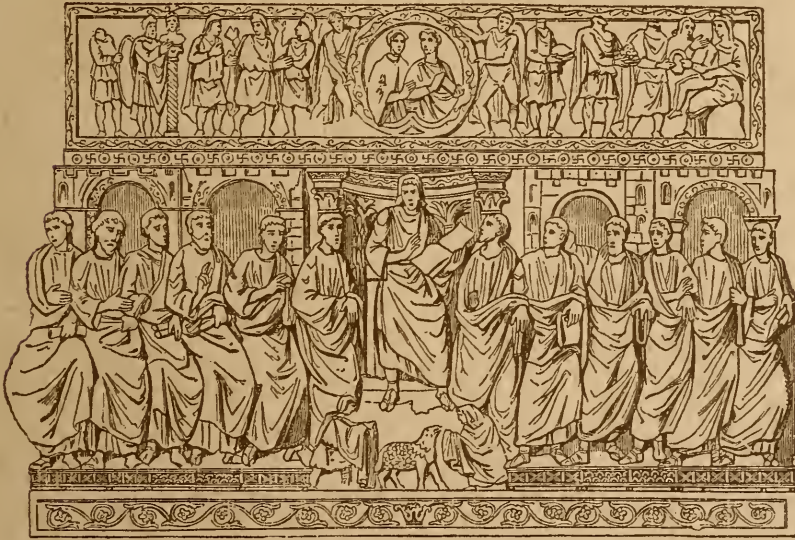


# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER



CHRIST ENTHRONED.

From a sarcophagus in St. Ambrosius, Milan. (See page 27.)

## The Open Court Publishing Company

CHICAGO

Per copy, 10 cents (sixpence). Yearly, \$1.00 (in the U.P.U., 5s. 6d.).

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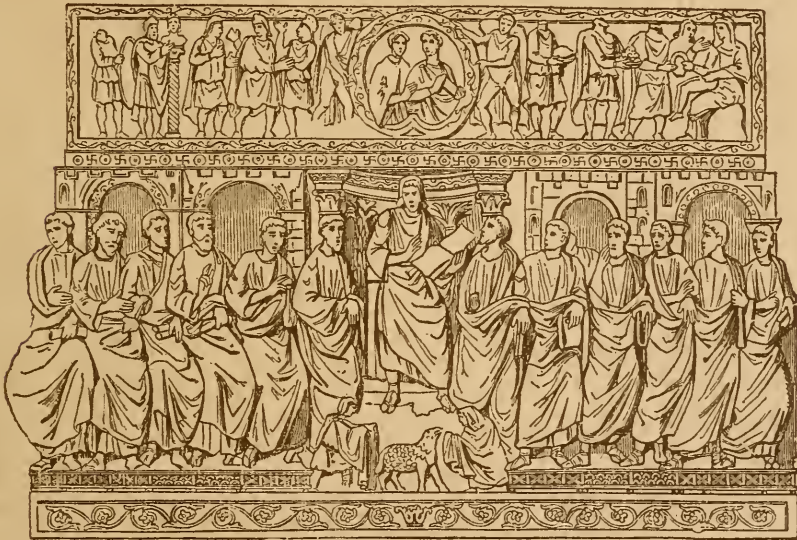
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CHRIST THE JUDGE.

Detail from Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel.  
*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## TOLSTOY'S RELIGION.

BY EDWARD A. THURBER.

A MAN'S creeds provide such an inadequate road-book to his religious experiences, that, like a conscientious traveler who wishes to get certain things over with, I shall begin this sketch by quoting three statements made by Tolstoy concerning his beliefs. The first occurs at the opening of the twelfth chapter of his tractate, *My Religion*, and bears the date 1884 or thereabouts, Tolstoy being at the time in his fifty-seventh year.

"I believe in Christ's teaching, and this is my faith:

"I believe that my happiness is possible on earth only when all men fulfil Christ's teaching.

"I believe that the fulfilment of this teaching is possible, easy and pleasant.

"I believe that even now, when this teaching is not fulfilled, if I should be the only one among all those that do not fulfill it, there is, nevertheless, nothing else for me to do for the salvation of my life from the certainty of eternal loss but to fulfil this teaching, just as a man in a burning house, if he find a door of safety, must go out.

"I believe that my life according to the teaching of the world has been a torment, and that a life according to Christ's teaching can alone give me in this world the happiness for which I was destined by the Father of Life.

"I believe that this teaching will give welfare to all humanity, will save me from inevitable destruction and will give me in this world the greatest happiness. Consequently, I cannot help fulfilling it."

The second statement which I shall quote was written some seventeen years later when Tolstoy was seventy-three. It was occasioned by the act of excommunication directed against him by the Holy Synod on account of a chapter in his great book, *Resurrection*, relative to mass and the eucharist.

"I believe in God, who is to me the Spirit, Love, the Principle of all things. I believe that he is in me and I in him. I believe that the will of God has never been more clearly expressed than in the teaching of the man, Christ, but we may not think of Christ as God and address him in prayer without committing the greatest sacrilege. I believe that the true happiness of man consists in the accomplishment of the will of God. I believe that the will of God is that every man should love his neighbor and do unto him as he would be done by; herein is contained, as the Bible says, all the law and the prophets. I believe that the meaning of life for each one of us is solely to increase this love within us; I believe that the increase of our power to love will bring about in this life a joy which will grow day by day, and in the other world will become a more perfect happiness. I believe that the growth of love will contribute more than any other force to establish on this earth the kingdom of God, that is, will replace an order of life in which division, guile and violence are all powerful by another order in which concord, truth and brotherhood will reign. I believe that for the increase of love there is but one means—prayer. Not the public prayer in temples, which Christ expressly reprov'd but the kind of prayer of which he himself gave an example, solitary prayer, which reaffirms in us a consciousness of the meaning of life and the knowledge that we depend absolutely on the will of God. I believe in life eternal. I believe that we are rewarded according to our acts here and everywhere, now and forever. I believe all this so firmly that at my age—on the borders of the grave—I ought often to make an effort to think of the death of my body as merely the birth of a new life."

My third quotation is taken from a letter written by Tolstoy the year before he died, that is, in 1909, when he was eighty-one.

"The teaching of Jesus is to me but one of the beautiful religious teachings which we have received from Egyptian, Jewish, Hindu, Chinese, Greek, antiquity. The two great principles of Jesus: the love of God, that is, absolute perfection, and the love of one's neighbor, the love of all men without any distinction whatsoever, have been preached by all the sages of the world,—Krishna, Buddha, Lao-tze, Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius,



and among the moderns, Rousseau, Pascal, Kant, Emerson, Channing, and many others. Religious and moral truth is everywhere and always the same. I have no predilection for Christianity. If I have been especially interested in the teachings of Jesus, it is, first, because I was born and have lived among Christian people; second, because I have found a great intellectual pleasure in disengaging the pure teaching from the surprising falsifications affixed to it by churches."

These professions I do not intend to dwell upon except to note that Tolstoy, in his very old age, seemed inclined on occasion not to realize that his religion was after all profoundly Christian. In the crisis of it or at the time of what we might call his final conversion, he was drawing very little inspiration from Krishna, Confucius, Epictetus; the fountain of his religious experiences was the Scriptures and their teaching, as it culminated, to him, in the character of Jesus. But ignoring his dogmas for the moment, I wish simply to present in brief outline the life and makeup of this remarkable man as a sort of background for the conclusions he came to, and also to his multifarious and powerful influence.

Of our primary, our animal passions, Tolstoy had more than his share, and also of those other more human passions, expressed most unequivocally perhaps in that sharp conflict between fact and dream in violent, tumultuous natures. He possessed the cruelty of a confirmed and eager hunter; indeed, hunting was the last pleasure of all vicious and cruel pleasures, as he called them, which he sacrificed. After giving an account of the slow death of a wolf which he had killed by hitting it with a club on the root of the nose, he adds, "I fairly revelled as I contemplated the tortures of that dying animal." Nor to jealousy, as well as to cruelty, was he a stranger, as many a story of his boyhood testifies. In a fit of jealousy he once pushed from a balcony a little playmate of his, a girl. She was lame for a long time afterward.

Here is an early note in his journal concerning the three demons that were tormenting him: "1. Gambling. Can possibly be overcome. 2. Sensuality. Very hard struggle. 3. Vanity. Most terrible of all." Gambling was one of the routine pastimes of young men born in Tolstoy's social environment. As late as the year before his marriage, a night's high play cost him the manuscript of *The Cossacks*, which he sold to an editor for \$500 to pay his debts of honor.

Vanity, pride, conceit and self-pity were companions of his early years. Mention of them crops out constantly in his half auto-

biographical books, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*. "I imagined there could be no happiness on earth for a man with so big a nose as I had, such thick lips and little eyes." He speaks disconsolately of "this face without expression. These feeble, soft, characterless features remind me of peasants' features—these great hands and feet." "I wanted everybody to know me and love me," he writes, "I wished that merely on hearing my name all would be struck with admiration and thank me." From his journal again, "My great fault, pride. A self-love immense. I am so ambitious that if I had to choose between glory and virtue (which I love), I am ready to believe that I should choose the former." Turgenev spoke at one time of Tolstoy's stupid, nobleman's pride, his blustering and braggadocio. Those who have read his book *Childhood*, will recall the tears that Tolstoy poured forth, tears of self-pity, Werther tears, expressive of the sorrows that were engulfing him; they were the tears of a self-conscious, imaginative, sentimental boy. At five years of age, he felt (he says) that life was not a game, but a long, hard travail.

If it is part of the office of genius to marshal and direct vehement passions, then Tolstoy was rich in his endowment. His quiver was full of the arrows of wrath—more akin to Milton, I should say, than to any other figure of his rank in letters I can think of—to Milton whom one has called the most emotional of our English poets. Tolstoy's path was blazed with zeal, rage, indignation—boisterous, uncontrolled, calm even, satisfying. "I get drunk," he says, "with this seething madness of indignation which I love to experience, which I even excite when I feel it coming because it throws me into a sort of calm and gives me, for some moments at least, an extraordinary elasticity, the energy and fire of all physical and moral capacities." This riotous temperament was housed, as we know, in a superb body; it was employed ultimately in a great passion to serve mankind. This is why one likes to dwell upon the wrath of Tolstoy.

Tolstoy divides his life into three periods which he calls, characteristically, the period in which he lived for himself; the period in which he lived for mankind; and the period in which he lived for God. Though such a division is somewhat arbitrary, I shall adopt it, as it emphasizes rather conveniently certain crises in his life. The first period came to an end at the time of his marriage; it had lasted thirty-four years. He was brought up like a good Russian in the Greek church, and as a boy accepted frankly its ritual and its

<sup>1</sup> From the journal of Prince Nukludov, 1857.

dogma. Many pious and simple-hearted people were about him, some of them relatives, some servants in the house, and others peasants of the estate. They and he were instinctively drawn to one another. He admired, he could not help admiring, their poverty of spirit, their loyalty, their unquestioning self-sacrifice. He used to watch old men at prayer in silent reverence. And naturally with his own frankness and sympathy and love of truth, he was just the sort of boy to win the confidence of these great-hearted people. Tolstoy owes them much both on account of their real wisdom of character and on account of the stories they used to tell him, those embodiments of joys and sorrows, actual, undefiled.

But Tolstoy's world was after all not this peasant world, but the world of the landed proprietor. As a young man at college he threw off all beliefs of the church and became an out and out nihilist,—he believed in nothing at all. This indeed was the correct attitude of the young blades of his day. It was the exaltation, one might say, and in his case a perfectly honest exaltation, of the intellect. A man must submit the beliefs of the world to the scrutiny of his reason, and if his reason says "reject," rejected they must be. It is a pure matter of logic, the cruel, uncompromising logic of youth.

This, I presume was the most unhappy period of Tolstoy's life and it lasted a good many years. Here was a man who earnestly desired to make a signal contribution, to impress a glowing personality, upon the life of his time, and his intellectual philosophy was negation. He looked about him and discovered that many who believed as he did—the great majority of them, he averred—were plain rascals; gain was the key to their conduct. They were greedy, sensual and quarrelsome; they sneered at piety and were themselves master hypocrites. And yet the creed or lack of creed of these nihilists was unimpeachable. Tolstoy put all this down in the journal; he weighed the problem, analyzed himself scathingly, and yet could come to no other conclusion. Here, then, was an *impasse*. There was, indeed, one way out of it; that was to kill himself. The demon of suicide kept Tolstoy pretty close company for many a day. Just why he did not put an end to his life is a little hard to explain, if he has given us absolutely just data of his experiences. Why did not St. Augustine kill himself? They are comparable characters; both were miserably unhappy. The demon of suicide appears to have been superseded at critical moments by a divinity that was shaping his ends. Perhaps, too, he exaggerated.

Men like this always overstate ; they also in their fury fail to account for the hidden influences that transcend their logic.

There was in his case, to be sure, an alleviation other than suicide—story writing. In the distribution of talents that goes on in this world, Tolstoy was invested with an almost uncanny creative imagination. He could put himself definitely in the place of other people. And so intense and of so wide a range were his experiences and his sympathies that this talent of his allowed him to ignore momentarily his philosophy. I shall not dwell upon his early stories. They were received with immediate applause, and placed him at once in the front rank of Russia's writers. Later, in his religious zeal, he rejected them almost entire as examples of perverted art. A vain disclaimer! They were uneven, of course ; of a hundred stories not all can be supreme. Yet I am not aware that one could honestly call any one of them feeble ; many are masterly—none artistically untrue ; nor was Tolstoy capable of writing an impure story. His intuitions belied his reason. These stories express the sort of man Tolstoy was, and Tolstoy the man, Tolstoy as he appeared in his creative work, was, I am inclined to believe, a finer personality than Tolstoy the thinker.

I do not mean by this statement, of course, that an imaginative writer should not possess a philosophy of life. The truth lies in the opposite direction. Great poets are seers ; their wisdom is the wisdom of the searching minds. The poems of Homer epitomize Greek wisdom of the heroic age ; Don Quixote, the plays of Moliere and of Shakespeare stand for definite views of life, unexpressed, to be sure, in the language of philosophy, but still there, and there, I assume, consciously. A poet should not be deprived of his humanity. This view was realized most clearly, I imagine, by the Greeks in their attitude toward their great dramatists. The Greeks expected from their dramatists distinct and tangible interpretations, and they were not disappointed. Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes analyzed for them the principles of moral and religious conduct.

With such a conception of art no one could have been in greater sympathy than Tolstoy, and nowhere did he practice it on a greater scale than in the two great novels of his maturity, *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karenina*. The former of these novels comes as near being a cosmos as any single work of the nineteenth century. It soon forced itself into translation, and was received the civilized world over with astonishment. That one man could know so much of life! And yet this book bears evidence of a troubled, discordant mind. That may not be a misfortune in a great work of art ; it is,

however, likely to be. For those later pages of dialogue in *Paradise Lost* justifying the ways of God to man are no more surely an artistic blemish than are the chapters of preaching in Tolstoy's great novel. The lessons in a work of art follow a far different lead from the lessons in a sermon. In the former case you gather them as you may, you are somewhat loath to restate them; an appeal to the imagination can never be logically restated. But a sermon is statement; the preacher is at pains to tell you precisely in terms of reason what he means. These two methods will not combine. That Tolstoy should have been a preacher is, I think, to our great advantage, but he might have spared us his philosophical discussions in his novels.

This distinction of mind is thrown into relief by a couple of sentences taken from his correspondence. "At this moment," he writes, "I am yoking myself anew to that tiresome and vulgar *Anna Karenina*, with the sole desire of getting rid of it with all possible speed." Tolstoy was not bored merely with *Anna Karenina*; he was weary of art. The life of this modern St. Augustine had been a prolonged agony of religious doubt; the salvation of his soul, his personal responsibility, was its chief concern. How he ultimately came to see the light, he has told us in *My Confession*. From that tractate, begun in 1879, I shall quote a few passages to mark the stages of his progress from his first period of denial to his final period of faith.

"I began," he says, "to draw nearer to the believers among the poor, the simple, and the ignorant; the pilgrims, the monks, the peasants. The doctrines of these men of the people like those of the pretended believers of my own class, were Christian. Here also much that was superstitious was mingled with the truths of Christianity, but with this difference, that the superstition of the believers of our class was entirely unnecessary to them, and never influenced their lives beyond serving as a kind of Epicurean distraction; while the superstition of the believing laboring class was so interwoven with their lives that it was impossible to conceive them without it—it was a necessary condition of their living at all. The whole life of the believers of our class was in flat contradiction with their faith, and the whole life of the believers of the people was a confirmation of the meaning of life which their faith gave them."

And so he began to study the lives and the doctrines of the "people." He returned, as it were, to the past, to his childhood and youth. "I united myself," he says, "to my ancestors—to those I loved, my father, mother, and grandparents. I joined the millions

of the people whom I respect. Moreover there was nothing bad in all this, for bad with me meant the indulgence of the lusts of the flesh. When I got up early to attend divine service, I knew that I was doing well, if it were only because I tamed my intellectual pride for the sake of a closer union with my ancestors and contemporaries, and, in order to seek for a meaning in life, sacrificed my bodily comfort."

It was the same with preparing for the communion, the daily reading of prayers, with genuflections, and the observance of all the fasts. "However insignificant the sacrifices were," he says, "they were made in a good cause." He prepared for the communion, fasted, and observed regular hours for prayer both at home and at church.

Such is the picture of Tolstoy, a communicant of the orthodox church—as we shall see, a somewhat uncertain figure.

"I shall never forget," he goes on, "the painful feeling I experienced when I took communion for the first time after many years. . . . It was such happiness for me to humble myself with a quiet heart before the confessor, a simple and mild priest, and, repenting of my sins, to lay bare all the mire of my soul; it was such happiness to be united in spirit with the meek fathers of the church who composed these prayers; such happiness to be one with all who have believed and who do believe, that I could not feel my explanation was artificial" . . . "But," he adds, "when I drew near to the 'holy gates' and the priest called on me to repeat that I believed that what I was about to swallow was the real body and blood, it cut me to the heart; it was a false note, though small; it was no unconsidered word; it was the cruel demand of one who had evidently never known what faith was."

In this condition Tolstoy lived for three years; it was while he was writing *Anna Karenina*. The ideals of his own class, represented by the chief characters in that book, had become odious to him, he was turning for religious guidance to the people. They only were on the right track; they only had grasped the teachings of Jesus. Yet a searcher must make distinctions. "The people," he affirms, "as a whole had a knowledge of truth; this was incontestable, for otherwise they could not live. Moreover, this knowledge of truth was open to me; I was already living by it, and felt all its force; but in that same knowledge there was also error. Of that again I could not doubt. All, however, that formerly repelled me now presented itself in a vivid light. Although I saw that there was less of what had repelled me as false among the people than among the

representatives of the church, I also saw that in the belief of the people what was false was mingled with what was true."

Tolstoy is now passing into his third period—as he puts it, the period in which he lived for God. The immediate occasion of his break with the church was the Turko-Russian war of 1877. "At this time," he says, "Russia was engaged in war; and in the name of Christian love, Russians were engaged in slaying their brethren. Not to think of this was impossible. But at the same time in the churches men were praying for the success of our arms, and the teachers of religion were accepting these murders as acts which were the consequence of faith. Not only murder in actual warfare was approved, but, during the troubles which ensued, I saw members of the church, her teachers, monks and ascetics, approving of the murder of erring and helpless youths. I looked round on all that was done by men who professed to be Christians, and I was horrified."

The Tolstoy who now emerges, Tolstoy at the age of fifty, is the man we know best. "Leon is always working," his wife writes. "Alas! he is writing some sort of religious treatises. He lies and reflects until his head splits, and all to prove that the church is not in accord with the teaching of the Gospels. I doubt if his efforts interest a dozen people in Russia. But there is nothing to do for it. I only hope that it will be over with quickly, and pass away like a disease." To him she wrote: "That you should waste such extraordinary intellectual force in chopping wood, heating the samovar and in cobbling shoes, saddens me." And later: "Well, I take comfort in the Russian proverb, 'Let the child have his way, provided he doesn't cry.'"

This is expert testimony; yet the views of Mme. Tolstoy concerning her husband do not coincide fully, I imagine, with our own. A prophet, to be sure, is likely to be troublesome about the house. And Tolstoy, we must know, was what William James calls a twice-born man. His mother gave birth to him in 1828; but one birth is never enough for a saint. The Isaiahs and the Pascals and the Bunyans always have to be born again; otherwise, like most of us, they die. No Greek that I know of, and no Roman, was ever born more than once; they were, as Carlyle says, the best of them, terribly at ease in Zion. But the Hebrews and the Christians, the prophets and the saints among them, were never satisfied—are never satisfied—with but one birth. Tolstoy had several of them, and the latest was always prone to be a little more painful than the one

before. Such profusion is undomestic. Let us now turn to one or two other considerations.

If you recall the statements I quoted at the beginning of this sketch, you noted one spirited denial, the denial of the divinity of Christ. Tolstoy was excommunicated from one church and could have joined no other, Catholic or Evangelical; nor could he have become an active member of the Y. M. C. A. All connections of such a nature would have entailed an intellectual compromise as abhorrent to him as it was impossible. To Tolstoy's imperious, Russian mind, creeds could not be "restated," and yet he was as far removed from a mere moralist as was a medieval saint. His religion was a religion of faith, it rested not at all on "good works." The first article in the creed of a man of religion is to get himself right with his God. This becomes his passion and until that matter is settled, the world about him counts for nothing. The words, "benevolence," "philanthropy," "horse-sense," while the struggle is on, bring no comfort to such a man. They appear rather as mere babblings, a cheap way out of it. Tolstoy is not at home with the moralists; his place is among that rarer, more positive company of men of religion, whose good works are simply an inevitable offshoot of their faith. Thus, in spite of the denial I have mentioned, Tolstoy ranks with the great religious leaders.

A question naturally arises, Can a man be at once both a prophet and an artist? And the answer is, I take it, Yes, religion and art may lie down together like the tiger and the lamb, but the lamb must always lie inside the tiger. Tolstoy remained a great artist, but during his later life his art always served his religion. In his book, *What is Art?* published in 1898, Tolstoy being at the time 70 years of age, he denies to art the quality of beauty, a quality which the Greeks insisted upon. To his mind the artistic activity is simply the evoking in oneself feelings one has once experienced and then having evoked them, consciously handing them on, by means of certain external signs, so that others may be infected by these feelings and also experience them. His definition proper goes no further than this; but the definition is not the most significant part of that book. Distinctions between good and bad art do not interest Tolstoy, although he uses those words constantly; his distinctions, as a man of religion, are between art "worth while" and art perverted. Art worth while, he affirms, should in the first place express those primary emotions—love, hatred, jealousy, fear—in such terms that all people, the peasant as well as the philosopher, may understand them. Ibsen's "The Master Builder" is intelligible only



to a class; it is therefore an example of perverted art. The *Odyssey* is an example of art worth while. In the second place, great art, supreme art, should have as its fundamental theme the Christian gospel of brotherly love. That is art most worth while. *Adam Bede*, *The Christmas Carol*, the works of Dostoyevsky, the story of Joseph and his brethren, are a few examples of art on the theme of brotherly love.

Those who have familiarized themselves with the sequence of Tolstoy's imaginative writing have noticed the effect of these theories upon it. His art undergoes a renewal. No longer are his stories mere transcripts of life; in fact, most of them, his assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, were never quite that. But now they serve much more consciously his religious ideals. Among them appear what might be called parables, *Two Old Men*, *The Death of Ivan Iliitch*, *Master and Man*—with this distinction: The characters in Tolstoy's finest parables, unlike those in the parables we are most familiar with, are never types; they are always individualized. The stories wear their rue of sermonizing with a difference. I seem to see the lamb of art lying down most trustfully very near but yet outside the tiger of religion. *Resurrection*, the great novel of his old age, is a Pilgrim's Progress through a *real* world. Perhaps the main characters are not so sharply defined as in *Anna Karenina*: Tolstoy did not know them quite so well. He is an old man now, and the turmoil and contradictions of youth have in part escaped him. But the critic approaches *Resurrection* softly, for it stands among the fairest and most authentic "poems of human compassion."

Tolstoy's character takes on much of the complexity of the modern age, yet so sharp are its main features that it seems at times almost simple. It was a brutal act, perhaps, for him to thrust his diary into the hands of his betrothed, knowing that she would read it in tears; the act may have been brutal; to him it was a gage to sheer honesty. On the evening of his return from a visit to the slums of Moscow, he began to argue with a friend, but with such warmth and so angrily that his wife rushed in from an adjoining room to ask what had happened. "It appeared,"<sup>2</sup> he says, "that I had, without being aware of it, shouted out in an agonized voice, gesticulating wildly, 'We should not go on living in this way! We must not live so! We have no right!'" He was rebuked for his unnecessary excitement, was told that he could not talk quietly upon any question, that he was irritable, and it was pointed out to him that the existence of such misery as he had witnessed should in no way be

<sup>2</sup>From *What Shall We Do?*

a reason for embittering the life of the home circle. Simple-minded Tolstoy! "I felt," he adds naively, "that this was perfectly just, and held my tongue; but in the depth of my soul I knew that I was right, and I could not quiet my conscience." It was this unquiet conscience that sent him off finally to die alone.

In the morning papers of December 8, 1912, there appeared among the headlines the announcement of the printing of Tolstoy's diary. The appended article gave a few extracts, evidently from a preface. From this, in closing, I shall quote briefly, allowing Tolstoy the ultimate word. "After all," he wrote, "let my diaries remain as they are. It may be seen from them that in spite of the misery of my youth, God did not abandon me and that as I grew older I learned, however little, to understand and to love Him." "I have had moments," he continues, "when I have sometimes been so impure and so subject to personal passions that the light of this truth has been obscured by my own obscurity; but in spite of all, I have served at times as the intermediary for His truth, and those have been the happiest moments of my life." What a change here from that head-long Tolstoy who one day came from the Caucasus to ally himself with the devotees of art! And what a contrast too, between the fine renunciation of these words and the arrogance of that other confessor of a century before—Rousseau! "May God will that, passing through me, these truths have not been sullied, and may mankind find in them its pasture. It is only in that that my writings have importance." Finally, "If the people of the world wish to read my writing, let them dwell on those passages where I know the Divine power has spoken through me, and let them profit from them throughout their lives."