

Chapter 1

The final message

*A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country,
and among his own kin, and in his own house.*
Jesus Christ (Mark 6, iv)

WHEN an eighty-two year old man, such as Count Leo Tolstoy was in October 1910, runs away from the home where he was born and has lived most of his life, deserting in the process the wife to whom he has been married for forty-eight years, one would rightly presume some fundamental and irremediable cleavage of ideas that makes any other course of action inconceivable. The average man of eighty-two, having few and relatively insignificant ideas, might indeed decide that it was too late to start a new life, and accordingly resolve to stay where he was and endure the short remainder of his present one. But then, Count Leo Tolstoy was not an average man.

Most people know that he was the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, two of the world's greatest novels; but this is about all they do know. Few realise, for example, that he also put his genius for social observation, which, together with his literary artistry, made him a great story-teller, to a more practical use. He was one of the few men in the nineteenth century who clearly saw the flaws in the social fabric that would lead to the catastrophes of the twentieth. Moreover, he had some definite proposals on what to do about them. It was to the exposition and attempted living-out of these proposals that he devoted the remaining thirty-three years of his life after completing *Anna Karenina*. Even his last full-length work of fiction, *Resurrection* (1899), was an obvious *roman à thèse*, and not only one thesis, but several related ones that perpetually occupied his mind.

In all this he was totally opposed by his arch-conservative wife; and, of their children, some took his part and some hers. This was his tragic dilemma. The strength of conviction that finally drove him, on the night of the 27th/28th October 1910, to make the final break may be assessed initially by the strength of the ties that bound him to his childhood home, Yasnaya Polyana, about one hundred miles south of Moscow, with all its cherished associations. The word 'home' is used advisedly; for, at one time during his wild youth, his gambling debts had led him to sell the old wooden building in which he had been born. So it had been bought, dismantled, carted away, and re-erected on the estate of a certain Gorokhov, where it went into terminal decay.

A home, however, consists of contents as well as of a shell. Its centre was and still is an eight-legged oak couch, probably made on the spot by household serf carpenters. It has three drawers, no back, but curved upholstered sides, fitted with sliding book-rests. Originally it was covered with green Russian leather; but this was later replaced with black oilcloth. It was the centre of the home, because on it had been born, not only Tolstoy himself, on the 28th August 1828, but also his brothers and most of his own children. The drawers were full of those manuscripts that he wished to keep secret from his beloved but inquisitive family.

The couch was the piece of furniture of which Tolstoy was most fond; but, in the room that he left more than eighty years ago, which is part of a new wing, his small writing desk is still to be seen. Here he kept, not, as one might expect, the materials of the writer's craft, but a set of tools, testifying to his devotion to manual labour. Tacked to the wall of the same room are some photographs and a print of the Sistine Madonna. Across this print for some reason are nailed rough bookshelves, on which stand the volumes of the *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedia*, still in pristine condition; for Tolstoy was careful with his books, and, when he made marginal notes, made them lightly in pencil. In addition to these items, there are more tables, an ordinary paraffin lamp and three armchairs of dark and light oak. Under the lining of one of these he kept letters to his wife,

Sofya Andreyevna, née Behrs, to whom he had been married in 1862, to be handed to her after his death, and the manuscript of *Devil*, which he did not want her to see.

The contents of the rest of the house are similarly miscellaneous, consisting of odd pieces of furniture, old mirrors, two grand pianos, amateurish paintings by local serfs alongside a professional one of Tolstoy, bedsteads with brass knobs, and many small photographs and drawings. It is the usual array of ill-assorted articles among which people lived in the late Victorian era. Tolstoy's personal needs were far fewer than one would imagine to be appropriate to a man of his social status; but then, social status had long since ceased to interest him very much. Even bed linen was not particularly plentiful; and what there was had come there as part of Sofya's not very expensive trousseau. Before her time, Tolstoy had slept under a simple quilt with no sheets; and even before that, when there was a family gathering at Yasnaya Polyana, he and his brothers had slept on straw.

The house is situated in a park of two hundred and seventy acres, all that remains of the groves and plantations as they were in the days before Tolstoy sold off much of the estate to pay the expenses of his profligate youth. As much as a hundred and sixty-seven acres of this park are occupied by the apple orchard, which is one of the largest in Europe. The surrounding forests were once adapted, by the old rural craft of hedging on a large scale, to form an *abatis* or defensive system to protect the local inhabitants against raids by the Mongols at a time when they still ruled the Crimea. Through all this runs the main highway south, once a thoroughfare for armies, imperial retinues, stage coaches and pilgrims. Altogether, the house and park must have contained hundreds of memories for the aged writer. The strong force of attraction that bound him to them would not have been overcome save by an even stronger force of repulsion. This had taken a long time to build up.

From 1850 onwards, some early stirrings of social conscience had been overlaid by the creative impulse to transform his personal experiences into works of semi-fiction or fiction, so giving his readers a more than usually vivid impression of re-

living them in their own imagination. In this way, he enjoyed for many years a literary gift possessed by only a few, first on his own, then with the co-operation as amanuensis of a loving wife, and reached a peak of fictional achievement in his two great masterpieces. He then sickened of it, and entered a mental wilderness from which at times it seemed to him that suicide offered the only means of escape.

He had some reason for not being pleased with himself. At the impressionable age of six, he had listened to his brother Nicholas telling him and the other boys, Sergey and Dmitri, that he knew a secret, and that, when the secret was revealed, all ills would disappear from the earth, and universal love prevail. The secret, said Nicholas, was carved on a green stick, which was buried on the edge of a ravine in the Zakaz Forest. The symbol of the quest for the green stick stayed at the back of Tolstoy's mind through a youth of broken resolutions and dissoluteness, an army life of decreasing commitment, and a literary career that in the end seemed to him mere self-indulgence.

What, he thought in 1879, two years after completing *Anna Karenina*, could be the possible justification for his idle and aimless life, supported by the labour of the wretchedly poor peasants on his estates, and protected by the forces of the State? For the next thirty years, he thought and wrote most of all about Christian ethics, the nature of the State, and the iniquity of private property in land. He also saw clearly that here were not three separate subjects, but a consistent political philosophy, in that the State acted mainly in defence of the landed interest, and was in turn supported by a Church founded on a false concept of Christ's significance for humanity. On the whole, he sought for solutions in the inner life of the individual; but, for a solution to the land question and concomitant social problems, he embraced a practical philosophy that was to achieve worldwide favour by the turn of the century. He gained thereby a popular following, but the enmity of the authorities and of half his family.

The enmity to make itself most felt was that of his wife, who had devoted endless time and trouble to copying and re-copying his earlier and politically neutral work. The fact was that, while

the major part of his time and attention was devoted to the ills of the world and how they could be remedied in the future, hers was occupied with the problems of everyday life as it had to be lived there and then. She had planned the internal arrangements of the house, and devised the layout of the park. She supervised the domestic staff. She, above all, was the one to worry about financial provision for herself and the children, when this conflicted with her husband's ideals. She hated Tolstoy's ardent advocacy of a scheme for replacing taxation with ground rent as the source of public revenue, which would, if applied in Russia, have deprived the family of their traditional source of income. More personally, she hated Tolstoy's friend and literary agent V.G. Chertkov, whom she rightly suspected of influencing him to deprive her of the royalties from his pre-1881 novels and stories.

If Tolstoy had not suffered from an oversensitive conscience, it is possible that he and Sofya could have decided on a compromise; for, though his distaste for living off the unearned increment of land was perfectly reasonable, he need not have troubled himself about allowing her to continue to accept the royalties. A little more thought should have convinced him that labour is not exclusively manual, but that its wages are due also to non-manual workers, including those whose works of literary art contribute to the mental well-being of their fellow-creatures. As things were, however, the matter of the royalties was a cause of constant acrimonious quarrelling between them.

Nor did she ever allow him to forget about it. Whenever he retired for the night, he would hear her roaming round the house, searching among his papers for evidence of the conspiracy against her. It was the end. All he wanted was an opportunity to escape unobserved. It came at 5 a.m. on the 28th October, when there was an unusually prolonged silence. Only an hour before, Sofya had come into his room with a lighted candle, held it over his face, and asked him how he was; but now all was still. Rising quietly from his bed, he tiptoed to her door and listened. Not a sound. At last she was asleep.

Rapidly he dressed, went to waken his resident doctor friend Makovitsky and told him to pack any necessary medicines and

come away with him. Then, while a maid packed some clothing for him, he woke his daughter Alexandra, told her he was leaving, and committed a few manuscripts to her care. His diaries he was going to take with him. An hour later, accompanied by the doctor, he left the house, like a desperate eighty-two year old King Lear, and made his way to the stables to order the coach to be prepared. Having said goodbye to Alexandra and another daughter, Varvara Feokritov, he drove to Shchyokino station to catch a train for Kazëlsk, twelve miles from the Shamordin Convent, to visit his sister Marya.

On the morning of the 31st, he set off with the doctor to catch the early train for Rostov-on-Don, having in the meantime caught a bad cold. In the circumstances, one might have expected him either to remain silent or to join in the usual conversational trivialities. But he knew that his time was short, and that inessentials must be laid aside in favour of matters of supreme importance. So, doubtless to the surprise of the young peasant who was sitting beside him, he began to lecture him, and before long all the occupants of the compartment, on the subject of the proposal of the American economist Henry George to achieve economic and social justice by replacing taxes on industry and trade with a single tax on the value of land.

Thus would be put into effect the twin principles that the fruits of a man's labour belong to himself alone, and that we all have an equal right of access to the resources of the Earth. Such a measure would also eliminate the power of one man to exploit another, either directly or by means of the machinery of State.

This was to be Tolstoy's last message for mankind; for his time was shorter than he knew. He never reached Rostov, but was so ill by the time the train drew in at Astapovo that he was taken off and put to bed in the stationmaster's house. On the 9th November 1910, he died there of pneumonia.