11. Resurrection

From *Introduction To Tolstoy's Writings* by Ernest J Simmons (1968)

During the second half of 1899 the atmosphere of the Tolstoy household was tense over the mighty effort to complete '*Resurrection*' which was then appearing serially in a magazine. Racing against time in the face of pressing telegrams from the editor for next week's copy, the seventy-one-year old author, deserting his family, shut himself up in his study for days on end, taking his meals at odd hours, and refusing to see visitors. Always the exacting artist, he kept mangling successive sets of proof, repeatedly rewriting whole sections, and hurrying off last-minute changes for an instalment just about to go to press. Fresh manuscript chapters in his almost illegible handwriting were cleanly copied by members of the family and their guests. Duplicate sets of corrected proof had to be prepared for translators for foreign publication. Urgent cablegrams and letters from abroad offered huge sums for first publishing rights. Finally, on December 18, Tolstoy noted in his diary:

"Completed Resurrection. Not good, uncorrected, hurried, but it is done with and I'm no longer interested."

Tolstoy's sense of relief may be partly attributed to the fact that he had been working away intermittently on '*Resurrection*', the last of his three great full-length novels, for more than ten years. The theme had been supplied by his good friend, the eminent jurist and writer A. F. Koni. He told Tolstoy the story of a man who had come to him for legal aid. As a youth this man had seduced a pretty orphan girl of sixteen who had been taken into the home of a relative of the young man when her parents died. Once her benefactress observed the girl's pregnant condition, she drove her away. Abandoned by her seducer, the girl, after hopeless attempts to earn an honest livelihood, became a prostitute. Detected in stealing money from one of her drunken "*guests*" in a brothel, the girl was arrested. On the jury that tried the case fate placed her seducer. His conscience awakened to the injustice of his behaviour, he decided to marry the girl, who was sentenced to four months in prison. Koni

concluded his story by relating that the couple did actually marry, but shortly after her sentence expired, the girl died from typhus.

The tale deeply moved Tolstoy, and its effect may well have been connected with an acute stirring of conscience. For shortly before his death he told his biographer of two seductions in his own life which he could somehow never forget.

"The second," he said, "was the crime I committed with the servant Masha in my aunt's house. She was a virgin. I seduced her, and she was dismissed and perished."

At first he urged Koni, a very talented person, to publish the account for *Intermediary*, the firm that Tolstoy established to market inexpensive moral booklets for the masses. Koni agreed to do this. When a year passed and he failed to fulfil his promise, Tolstoy asked to be allowed to make use of the story.

Tolstoy's efforts to cast this incident of real life into literary form were repeatedly interrupted by the manifold activities and extensive polemical writings growing out of his spiritual revelation. Only with some reluctance did he devote his few free hours to the creation of fiction, and it is possible that '*Resurrection*' might never have been finished if it had not been for a special set of circumstances. The government's long and cruel persecution of the Dukhobors, a peasant sect that practiced a form of Christian communism not far removed from Tolstoy's own preaching, and among other things rejected military service, had reached a crucial stage. For several years he and his followers had been aiding the Dukhobors. Now it was decided that the most practical remedy for their misfortunes was to have them emigrate. The Russian government was willing, and Canada agreed to accept them pretty much on their own terms. The problem was to obtain money to transport and settle in Canada some twelve thousand sectarians. Tolstoy helped to organize a campaign to raise funds. Although he had surrendered the copyrights of all his works written since his spiritual change and allowed anyone to publish them free, he now decided to sell a novel and devote the proceeds to the fund to aid the emigration of the Dukhobors. Going over his portfolio of unfinished manuscripts,

he settled upon '*Resurrection*' as the one calculated to earn the most money, and he set to work with a will to complete this long novel.

Before the serial publication had got well under way in the magazine Niva, Tolstoy began to regard his compact with the publisher as one with the devil—he had sold his soul for an advance of twelve thousand roubles, even though the money went to the fund for the Dukhobors. This only instance of violating the repudiation of his copyright privileges to the extent of accepting money for the initial publication of a novel caused him endless trouble. Niva at first attempted to run the lengthy work in weekly instalments. With his painstaking correction of proof and the constant introduction of new matter, Tolstoy found it extremely difficult to keep up this pace. Finally his health broke down and he virtually decided to end the novel with Part II, omitting the brilliant third part. Only the willingness of the editor to forego his demand for weekly instalments persuaded Tolstoy to continue.

Tolstoy had calculated correctly. The first full-length novel in twenty years from the celebrated author of '*War and Peace*' and '*Anna Karenina*', and also a man now universally known as a religious reformer and moral thinker, was an event of intense international interest. While '*Resurrection*' was appearing serially in Russia, simultaneous publication in translation was arranged in England, France, Germany, and the United States. Partly because of the previous public repudiation of his copyright privileges, much pirating went on which caused Tolstoy a great deal of embarrassment—he had sold first publication rights to various foreign firms in an effort to realize the maximum income on behalf of the Dukhobors. Pirated copies of the novel quickly appeared in Russia; twelve different translations came out in Germany alone in 1900; and fifteen editions, under authorized and unauthorized imprints, accumulated in France during 1899 and 1900. Extreme liberties were often taken in these foreign versions. When French readers of the serialized translation in '*Echo de Paris*' characteristically complained that the love scenes, which they relished, were too infrequent, the businesslike editor had no scruples about omitting the next regular instalment and substituting for it one in which the hero and heroine were again

occupied with each other. On the other hand, the editor of '*Cosmopolitan*', which had bought first serial rights in the United States, did not hesitate to tone down or delete love passages which he thought might offend the sensibilities of this magazine's respectable middle-class readers. In the end, Tolstoy was happy to revert to his rule of not taking money for his writings, unwilling perhaps to realize that the rule itself had been the cause of all his trouble.

The Russian censor caused additional annoyance and not a little anguish to Tolstoy, who in some instances protested the deletions of this high executioner of words. The censor, however, could hardly be expected in those days to tolerate the author's sacrilegious barbs against the Russian Orthodox Church or his exposure of the way prisoners were treated in Siberia. In fact, very few of the many chapters of the novel escaped the censor's awful blue pencil, and it is estimated that be made four hundred and ninety-seven separate alterations or deletions in the text. Not until 1936 did the complete and unaltered text of '*Resurrection*' appear in Russian, in the huge Jubilee Edition of Tolstoy's works.

In the course of writing the novel, Tolstoy did considerable research, reading many books and articles—he read six books on prostitution alone—and he consulted experts on legal procedure, visited jails and talked with convicts. Once he got fairly into the work, it absorbed him completely, and he told his wife that since '*War and Peace*' he had never been so powerfully gripped by the creative urge. Koni's slender narrative served only as the initial inspiration for the erection of a huge, complex superstructure, and as in the case of Tolstoy's other two large novels, the story element grew to formidable length, with numerous ramifications. There were several quite different beginnings, and again and again he cast out themes and introduced entirely new ones. Even such a small detail as the description of the external appearance of the heroine exists in as many as twenty variants. There were six separate redactions of '*Resurrection*', and before Tolstoy had finished his extensive revisions, he had piled up enough rejected material to fill a volume almost as large as the novel itself.

As in Tolstoy's previous full-length novels, there is a great deal of autobiographical matter in '*Resurrection*'. In many respects the hero, Dmitri Nekhlyudov, resembles his creator, and a number of the other characters are plainly modelled on people Tolstoy knew. For example, Toporov is a thinly disguised and unflattering portrait of the sinister and celebrated Procurator of the Holy Synod, K. P. Pobedonostsev. Some of these autobiographical aspects are curiously stressed in an interesting passage in the diary of Tolstoy's wife. While wearing her eyes out over recopying his labyrinthine manuscript, she vented her spleen against '*Resurrection*' largely because her husband had refused first publishing rights for her edition of his works—it may be remembered that he had previously allowed her the right to publish for money anything he wrote before his spiritual revelation, that is, before 1881.

"I torment myself," she wrote, "over the fact that Leo Nikolaevich, a seventy-year-old man, describes the scene of fornication between the serving girl and the officer with the peculiar relish of a gastronome eating something tasty. I know, because he himself told me about this in detail, that in this scene he is describing his own intimate relations with the serving girl of his sister.... I'm also tormented by the fact that I see in the hero, Nekhlyudov, portrayed as progressing from his downfall to his moral resurrection, Leo Nikolaevich, who thinks this very thing about himself."

Abroad, especially in England and the United States, '*Resurrection*' was enthusiastically received and enjoyed a larger sale than any other work by Tolstoy up to that time. Though some conservative foreign critics expressed indignation over what seemed an excessively frank and un-Victorian treatment of sex, as well as the novelist's contemptuous regard for the conventions of law and order and the sacredness of the church, progressive critics showered praises on perhaps the only man in Russia at that time who had the courage to expose in fiction the evils that beset his country. In Russia the publication of '*Resurrection*' was an event transcending its artistic significance. Something of the widespread excitement

aroused by the novel as it appeared serially is reflected in a letter to Tolstoy by his friend V. V. Stasov, a distinguished art critic: "How all of us here rejoiced when we learned that the chapters of '*Resurrection*' will not be 60 or 80 but l00 or more. Without exception all are saying on every side:

'Ah, there will be more, more will be added! May God grant that there will be more and more!"'

Resurrection naturally forces comparison with those supreme works, '*War and Peace*' and '*Anna Karenina*', and it must be admitted that it falls below the lofty artistic achievements of these earlier novels. However, its best things, artistically speaking, belong to the narrative method of Tolstoy's earlier fiction rather than to the compressed, direct, and stylistically unadorned manner of the later period after '*What Is Art?*' was written. In '*Resurrection*' there is that same wealth of precise realistic detail which conveys the appearance of indubitable actuality to imagined situations, as well as roundness, completeness, and the vitality of life to his characters. In its enchanting setting, the account of the first pure love of Nekhlyudov and Katusha Maslova, certainly the finest section of the novel, is all compounded of that same wonderful elusive quality that transformed the girlish loves of Natasha in '*War and Peace*' into the incommunicable poetry of youthful dreams. Tolstoy never did anything more delightfully infectious in fiction than the scene of the Easter service in the village church, where the young hero and heroine, after the traditional Russian greeting "*Christ is risen*," exchange kisses with the carefree rapture of mingled religious exaltation and dawning affinity for each other.

There is much of the old master also in Tolstoy's handling of the trial scene, in the portrayal of high society in both Moscow and Petersburg, and in the remarkably realistic treatment of the brutal march of the convicts to Siberia. In this area, however, the satirical representations of society are much less objective, and more grim and didactically purposeful than anything in '*War and Peace*' and '*Anna Karenina*'. Herein, indeed, lies the major artistic fault of Tolstoy's last full-length novel.

While he was writing '*War and Peace*' Tolstoy, troubled by the thought that the radical critics would attack him for failing to

expose the faults of the privileged classes and the dark misery of the peasantry in his work, wrote to a friend to defend his avoidance of social problems:

"The aims of art are incommensurable (as they say in mathematics) with social aims. The aim of an artist is not to resolve a question irrefutably, but to compel one to love life in all its manifestations, and these are inexhaustible. If I were told that I could write a novel in which I could indisputably establish as true my point of view on all social questions, I would not dedicate two hours to such a work; but if I were told that what I wrote would be read twenty years from now by those who are children today, and that they would weep and laugh over it and fall in love with the life in it, then I would dedicate all my existence and all my powers to it."

Some thirty years later Tolstoy turned his back on this admirable credo of relative objectivity in art in writing '*Resurrection*'—an unashamedly purpose novel. To be sure, most great novels are in one sense or another purpose novels, but the purpose is sublimated in a depiction of life free of any special pleading that distorts the essential artistic unity of the whole. In '*Resurrection*' Tolstoy's purpose of condemning the violence of government, the injustice of man-made laws, the hypocrisy of the Church, and of pleading the biblical injunction to judge not that you be not judged, obtrudes in a rather scholastic manner throughout the novel.

In fact, '*Resurrection*' is in many respects an amazingly accurate portrayal of the spiritual biography of Tolstoy, and though this may detract from it as an artistic performance, it provides rich and authoritative material for all who wish to understand the tremendous moral and religious struggle of one of the foremost thinkers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For the essence of much that Tolstoy thought and suffered during and after his spiritual travail is condensed in the pages of this novel.

Nekhlyudov's youthful idealism, forgotten in a subsequent period of debauchery in the army and in high society, which in turn is followed by a spiritual crisis, moral suffering, and an intense search for the meaning of life, is a pattern of development that Tolstoy himself experienced. Although there are certain autobiographical elements in the immediate cause of the crisis, the soul-searing confrontation of Nekhlyudov with the prostitute Katusha Maslova at her trial for robbery and murder, ten years after he seduced her as a pure young girl, is based on the stuff of Koni's real-life story. But the handling of the theme from this point on is done entirely in terms of the religious, moral, and social convictions that Tolstoy eventually arrived at after his own conversion.

Despite this rather doctrinaire approach, the resolution of the future relations between Nekhlyudov and Katusha is worked out with considerable psychological subtlety. The hero recognizes, as does Katusha after being unjustly convicted, that his initial determination to follow her to Siberia and marry her is simply an attempt at self-sacrifice to atone for having started her on her wayward path. Before this action can come from the heart, before it can be purged of every aspect of self-interest, sentimentality, and conscious do-goodism, he must undergo his own Golgotha on the way to achieving a new faith where practice of the golden rule is instinctive and not calculated. His example and patient ministrations also begin to work a moral change in Katusha, and this transformation is completed by her harsh prison experiences, in the course of which she learns from some of her fellow convicts, especially among the political prisoners, the true dignity of man. Katusha's original pure love for Nekhlyudov is restored. Here, in the struggle between the truth of the moralist and the truth of the artist in Tolstoy, the artist prevails. He makes no concession to the conventional happy ending of virtue rewarded, for Katusha ultimately refuses to marry Nekhlyudov. She senses that she will only be a hindrance to the work that he must do in the world in living according to his new faith, and she gives up this happiness by deciding to share in marriage the life of one of her fellow prisoners who loves her with an entirely platonic love. Sex, indeed, is the inevitable victim of the higher synthesis of the Tolstoyan life of the spirit.

In the many scenes, often brilliantly realized, in the courts, the prisons, in Nekhlyudov's dealings with his peasants, and in the homes of high society, rarely is the moralizing element unadorned by abundant trappings of real life. However, these scenes, through which Nekhlyudov sometimes moves like a somnambulist, often appear to be contrived indictments of various aspects of Russian society designed to explain and justify the hero's spiritual resurrection. For every abuse revealed and for every moral corrective administered, chapter and verse may be found in the various controversial books and articles that Tolstoy had already written on these subjects. The positions taken are argued with all his consummate skill, and irony and paradox are employed most effectively. Yet, in some of these passages, Tolstoy, either as the omniscient author or through the mouths of his characters, seems to be searching for absolutes in a world of incomplete knowledge and imperfect men. Occasionally there are lapses of taste, as in the blasphemously satiric account of the Russian Orthodox Church service, and at least once he fails to grasp the historic significance and political thinking of a whole group of characters he introduces—the revolutionary intelligentsia.

Among the scores of secondary characters in '*Resurrection*', hardly any lack that baffling artistic touch of definition and individualization which dazzled readers and critics alike in the great novels of Tolstoy's earlier period. However fleeting their roles may be, the judges and jurymen at the trial, the amazing women inmates of Katusha's cell, and the various political prisoners are brought to life with a few deft strokes of description and psychological observation. And still more memorably characterized are those creatures of high society and official Moscow and Petersburg life—the Korchagin family, especially the mother and her daughter Missy who vainly hopes to marry Nekhlyudov; the cynical advocate Fanarin who symbolizes the irrelevance of justice in the courts of law; the Vice-Governor Maslenikov whose official duties are regarded as mere append-ages to social climbing; and the general's pretty wife Mariette whose delicate suggestions of a liaison with Nekhlyudov he regarded as a more reprehensible and much less honest approach than that of the streetwalker who had accosted him.

The story of '*Resurrection*', however, is overwhelmingly the story of Nekhlyudov, who is imbued with his creator's instinct to discover the purpose of life. In the first part of the novel the hero emerges as a rather fascinating man of action who engages our sympathies in his developing personality. As a member of the gentry—Tolstoy's own class which he knew so well—Nekhlyudov has many of the appealing traits found in Prince Andrew in '*War and Peace*' and Vronsky in Anna Karenina. But unlike these characters, Nekhlyudov is soon confronted by a crisis that transforms him into an intellectual Tolstoyan, a development that seems false to his nature, and more dictated by the author than by life. In the remainder of the novel he is more acted upon than active in a series of situations patently designed to aid him in his search for the meaning of life. And he finds it in the end, very much as Tolstoy did, in the Sermon on the Mount.

"A perfectly new life dawned that night for Nekhlyudov," the novel concluded, "not because he had entered into new conditions of life, but because everything he did after that night had a new and quite different meaning for him. How this new period of his life will end, time alone will prove."

This hint at a sequel to the novel has some basis in fact, for shortly after he finished it, Tolstoy wrote in his diary:

"I want terribly to write an artistic, not a dramatic, but an epic continuation of '*Resurrection*': the peasant life of Nekhlyudov."

Apparently in his new existence the hero was to play the part of a peasant, perhaps a successful Tolstoyan peasant, which would have been unique in either fiction or life. But Tolstoy never lived to complete this grand design.

According to Tolstoy's principal criterion of real art, namely, infectiousness, which he developed in his treatise '*What Is Art?*', '*Resurrection*' holds up quite well. That is, the novel deals with feelings sincerely expressed by the author, and so artistically conveyed that they infect readers and cause them to share these feelings with him and with each other. And certainly

more than any of his other novels, '*Resurrection*' fulfils Tolstoy's definition of the best art, for it evokes in us feelings of brotherly love and of the common purpose of the life of all humanity—a striving to achieve spiritual and moral perfection through service to others.