CHAPTER XII

TOLSTOYISM

THE ADMINISTRATION OF charity in Chicago during the winter following the World's Fair had been of necessity most difficult, for, although large sums had been given to the temporary relief organization which endeavored to care for the thousands of destitute strangers stranded in the city, we all worked under a sense of desperate need and a paralyzing consciousness that our best efforts were most inadequate to the situation.

During the many relief visits I paid that winter in tenement houses and miserable lodgings, I was constantly shadowed by a certain sense of shame that I should be comfortable in the midst of such distress. This resulted at times in a curious reaction against all the educational and philanthropic activities in which I had been engaged. In the face of the desperate hunger and need, these could not but seem futile and superficial. The hard winter in Chicago had turned the thoughts of many of us to these stern matters. A young friend of mine who came daily to Hull-House consulted me in regard to going into the paper warehouse belonging to her father that she might there sort rags with the Polish girls; another young girl took a place in a sweatshop for a month, doing her work so simply and thoroughly that the proprietor had no notion that she had not been driven there by need; still two others worked in a shoe factory;—and all this happened before such adventures were undertaken in order to procure literary material. It was in the following winter that the pioneer effort in this direction, Walter Wyckoff's account of his vain attempt to find work in Chicago, compelled even the sternest businessman to drop his assertion that "any man can find work if he wants it."

The dealing directly with the simplest human wants may have been responsible for an impression which I carried about with me almost constantly for a period of two years and which culminated finally in a visit to Tolstoy—that the Settlement, or Hull-House at least, was a mere pretense and travesty of the simple impulse "to live with the poor," so long as the residents did not share the common lot of hard labor and scant fare.

Actual experience had left me in much the same state of mind I had been in after reading Tolstoy's "What to Do," which is a description of his futile efforts to relieve the unspeakable distress and want in the Moscow winter of 1881, and his inevitable conviction that only he who literally shares his own shelter and food with the needy can claim to have served them.

Doubtless it is much easier to see "what to do" in rural Russia, where all the conditions tend to make the contrast as broad as possible between peasant labor and noble idleness, than it is to see "what to do" in the interdependencies of the modern industrial city. But for that very reason perhaps, Tolstoy's clear statement is valuable for that type of conscientious person in every land who finds it hard, not only to walk in the path of righteousness, but to discover where the path lies.

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I had read the books of Tolstoy steadily all the years since “My Religion” had come into my hands immediately after I left college. The reading of that book had made clear that men’s poor little efforts to do right are put forth for the most part in the chill of self-distrust; I became convinced that if the new social order ever came, it would come by gathering to itself all the pathetic human endeavor which had indicated the forward direction. But I was most eager to know whether Tolstoy’s undertaking to do his daily share of the physical labor of the world, that labor which is “so disproportionate to the unnourished strength” of those by whom it is ordinarily performed, had brought him peace!

I had time to review carefully many things in my mind during the long days of convalescence following an illness of typhoid fever which I suffered in the autumn of 1895. The illness was so prolonged that my health was most unsatisfactory during the following winter, and the next May I went abroad with my friend, Miss Smith, to effect if possible a more complete recovery.

The prospect of seeing Tolstoy filled me with the hope of finding a clue to the tangled affairs of city poverty. I was but one of thousands of our contemporaries who were turning toward this Russian, not as to a seer—his message is much too confused and contradictory for that—but as to a man who has had the ability to lift his life to the level of his conscience, to translate his theories into action.

Our first few weeks in England were most stimulating. A dozen years ago London still showed traces of “that exciting moment in the life of the nation when its youth is casting about for new enthusiasms,” but it evinced still more of that British capacity to perform the hard work of careful research and self-examination which must precede any successful experiments in social reform. Of the varied groups and individuals whose suggestions remained with me for years, I recall perhaps as foremost those members of the new London County Council whose far-reaching plans for the betterment of London could not but enkindle enthusiasm. It was a most striking expression of that effort which would place beside the refinement and pleasure of the rich, a new refinement and a new pleasure born of the commonwealth and the common joy of all the citizens, that at this moment they prized the municipal pleasure boats upon the Thames no less than the extensive schemes for the municipal housing of the poorest people. Ben Tillet, who was then an alderman, “the docker sitting beside the duke,” took me in a rowboat down the Thames on a journey made exciting by the hundreds of dockers who cheered him as we passed one wharf after another on our way to his home at Greenwich; John Burns showed us his wonderful civic accomplishments at Battersea, the plant turning street sweepings into cement pavements, the technical school teaching boys brick laying and plumbing, and the public bath in which the children of the Board School were receiving a swimming lesson—these measures anticipating our achievements in Chicago by at least a decade and a half. The new Education Bill which was destined to drag on for twelve years before it developed into the children’s charter, was then a storm center in the House of Commons. Miss Smith and I were much pleased to be taken to tea on the Parliament terrace by its author, Sir John Gorst, although we were quite bewildered by the arguments we heard there for church schools versus secular.

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We heard Keir Hardie before a large audience of workingmen standing in the open square of Canning Town outline the great things to be accomplished by the then new Labor Party, and we joined the vast body of men in the booming hymn

> When wilt Thou save the people,
> O God of Mercy, when!

finding it hard to realize that we were attending a political meeting. It seemed that moment as if the hopes of democracy were more likely to come to pass on English soil than upon our own. Robert Blatchford's stirring pamphlets were in everyone's hands, and a reception given by Karl Marx's daughter, Mrs. Aveling, to Liebknecht before he returned to Germany to serve a prison term for his *lèse majesté* speech in the Reichstag, gave us a glimpse of the old-fashioned orthodox Socialist who had not yet begun to yield to the biting ridicule of Bernard Shaw although he flamed in their midst that evening.

Octavia Hill kindly demonstrated to us the principles upon which her well-founded business of rent collecting was established, and with pardonable pride showed us the Red Cross Square with its cottages marvelously picturesque and comfortable, on two sides, and on the third a public hall and common drawing room for the use of all the tenants; the interior of the latter had been decorated by pupils of Walter Crane with mural frescoes portraying the heroism in the life of the modern workingman.

While all this was warmly human, we also had opportunities to see something of a group of men and women who were approaching the social problem from the study of economics; among others Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb who were at work on their Industrial Democracy; Mr. John Hobson who was lecturing on the evolution of modern capitalism.

We followed factory inspectors on a round of duties performed with a thoroughness and a trained intelligence which were a revelation of the possibilities of public service. When it came to visiting Settlements, we were at least reassured that they were not falling into identical lines of effort. Canon Ingram, who has since become Bishop of London, was then warden of Oxford House and in the midst of an experiment which pleased me greatly, the more because it was carried on by a churchman. Oxford House had hired all the concert halls —vaudeville shows we later called them in Chicago—which were found in Bethnal Green, for every Saturday night. The residents had censored the programs, which they were careful to keep popular, and any workingman who attended a show in Bethnal Green on a Saturday night, and thousands of them did, heard a program the better for this effort.

One evening in University Hall Mrs. Humphry Ward, who had just returned from Italy, described the effect of the Italian salt tax in a talk which was evidently one in a series of lectures upon the economic wrongs which pressed heaviest upon the poor; at Browning House, at the moment, they were giving prizes to those of their costermonger neighbors who could present the best cared-for donkeys, and the warden, Herbert Stead, exhibited almost the enthusiasm of his well-known brother, for that crop of kindliness which can be garnered most easily from the acreage where human beings grow the thickest; at the Bermondsey Settlement they were rejoicing that their University Extension students had successfully

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passed the examinations for the University of London. The entire impression received in England of research, of scholarship, of organized public spirit, was in marked contrast to the impressions of my next visit in 1900, when the South African War had absorbed the enthusiasm of the nation and the wrongs at “the heart of the empire” were disregarded and neglected.

London, of course, presented sharp differences to Russia where social conditions were written in black and white with little shading, like a demonstration of the Chinese proverb, “Where one man lives in luxury, another is dying of hunger.”

The fair of Nijni-Novgorod seemed to take us to the very edge of civilization so remote and eastern that the merchants brought their curious goods upon the backs of camels or on strange craft riding at anchor on the broad Volga. But even here our letter of introduction to Korolenko, the novelist, brought us to a realization of that strange mingling of a remote past and a self-conscious present which Russia presents on every hand. This same contrast was also shown by the pilgrims trudging on pious errands to monasteries, to tombs, and to the Holy Land itself, with their bleeding feet bound in rags and thrust into bast sandals, and, on the other hand, by the revolutionists even then advocating a Republic which should obtain not only in political but also in industrial affairs.

We had letters of introduction to Mr. and Mrs. Aylmer Maude of Moscow, since well known as the translators of “Resurrection” and other of Tolstoy’s later works, who at that moment were on the eve of leaving Russia in order to form an agricultural colony in South England where they might support themselves by the labor of their hands. We gladly accepted Mr. Maude’s offer to take us to Yasnaya Polyana and to introduce us to Count Tolstoy, and never did a disciple journey toward his master with more enthusiasm than did our guide. When, however, Mr. Maude actually presented Miss Smith and myself to Count Tolstoy, knowing well his master’s attitude toward philanthropy, he endeavored to make Hull-House appear much more noble and unique than I should have ventured to do.

Tolstoy, standing by clad in his peasant garb, listened gravely but, glancing distrustfully at the sleeves of my traveling gown which unfortunately at that season were monstrous in size, he took hold of an edge and pulling out one sleeve to an interminable breadth, said quite simply that “there was enough stuff on one arm to make a frock for a little girl,” and asked me directly if I did not find “such a dress” a “barrier to the people.” I was too disconcerted to make a very clear explanation, although I tried to say that monstrous as my sleeves were they did not compare in size with those of the working girls in Chicago and that nothing would more effectively separate me from “the people” than a cotton blouse following the simple lines of the human form; even if I had wished to imitate him and “dress as a peasant,” it would have been hard to choose which peasant among the thirty-six nationalities we had recently counted in our ward. Fortunately the countess came to my rescue with a recital of her former attempts to clothe hypothetical little girls in yards of material cut from a train and other superfluous parts of her best gown until she had been driven to a firm stand which she advised me to take at once. But neither Countess Tolstoy nor any other friend was on hand to help me out of my predicament later, when I was asked who “fed” me, and how did I obtain

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“shelter”? Upon my reply that a farm a hundred miles from Chicago supplied me with the necessities of life, I fairly anticipated the next scathing question: “So you are an absentee landlord? Do you think you will help the people more by adding yourself to the crowded city than you would by tilling your own soil?” This new sense of discomfort over a failure to till my own soil was increased when Tolstoy’s second daughter appeared at the five-o’clock tea table set under the trees, coming straight from the harvest field where she had been working with a group of peasants since five o’clock in the morning, not pretending to work but really taking the place of a peasant woman who had hurt her foot. She was plainly much exhausted, but neither expected nor received sympathy from the members of a family who were quite accustomed to see each other carry out their convictions in spite of discomfort and fatigue. The martyrdom of discomfort, however, was obviously much easier to bear than that to which, even to the eyes of the casual visitor, Count Tolstoy daily subjected himself, for his study in the basement of the conventional dwelling, with its short shelf of battered books and its scythe and spade leaning against the wall, had many times lent itself to that ridicule which is the most difficult form of martyrdom.

That summer evening as we sat in the garden with a group of visitors from Germany, from England and America, who had traveled to the remote Russian village that they might learn of this man, one could not forbear the constant inquiry to one’s self, as to why he was so regarded as sage and saint that this party of people should be repeated each day of the year. It seemed to me then that we were all attracted by this sermon of the deed, because Tolstoy had made the one supreme personal effort, one might almost say the one frantic personal effort, to put himself into right relations with the humblest people, with the men who tilled his soil, blacked his boots, and cleaned his stables. Doubtless the heaviest burden of our contemporaries is a consciousness of a divergence between our democratic theory on the one hand, that working people have a right to the intellectual resources of society, and the actual fact on the other hand, that thousands of them are so overburdened with toil that there is no leisure nor energy left for the cultivation of the mind. We constantly suffer from the strain and indecision of believing this theory and acting as if we did not believe it, and this man who years before had tried “to get off the backs of the peasants,” who had at least simplified his life and worked with his hands, had come to be a prototype to many of his generation.

Doubtless all of the visitors sitting in the Tolstoy garden that evening had excused themselves from laboring with their hands upon the theory that they were doing something more valuable for society in other ways. No one among our contemporaries has dissented from this point of view so violently as Tolstoy himself, and yet no man might so easily have excused himself from hard and rough work on the basis of his genius and of his intellectual contributions to the world. So far, however, from considering his time too valuable to be spent in labor in the field or in making shoes, our great host was too eager to know life to be willing to give up this companionship of mutual labor. One instinctively found reasons why it was easier for a Russian than for the rest of us to reach this conclusion; the Russian peasants have a proverb which says: “Labor is the house that love lives in,” by which they mean that no two people nor group of people can come into affectionate relations with each other unless

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they carry on together a mutual task, and when the Russian peasant talks of labor he means labor on the soil, or, to use the phrase of the great peasant, Bondereff, “bread labor.” Those monastic orders founded upon agricultural labor, those philosophical experiments like Brook Farm and many another have attempted to reduce to action this same truth. Tolstoy himself has written many times his own convictions and attempts in this direction, perhaps never more tellingly than in the description of Lavin’s morning spent in the harvest field, when he lost his sense of grievance and isolation and felt a strange new brotherhood for the peasants, in proportion as the rhythmic motion of his scythe became one with theirs.

At the long dinner table laid in the garden were the various traveling guests, the grown-up daughters, and the younger children with their governess. The countess presided over the usual European dinner served by men, but the count and the daughter, who had worked all day in the fields, ate only porridge and black bread and drank only kvas, the fare of the hay-making peasants. Of course we are all accustomed to the fact that those who perform the heaviest labor eat the coarsest and simplest fare at the end of the day, but it is not often that we sit at the same table with them while we ourselves eat the more elaborate food prepared by someone else’s labor. Tolstoy ate his simple supper without remark or comment upon the food his family and guests preferred to eat, assuming that they, as well as he, had settled the matter with their own consciences.

The Tolstoy household that evening was much interested in the fate of a young Russian spy who had recently come to Tolstoy in the guise of a country schoolmaster, in order to obtain a copy of “Life,” which had been interdicted by the censor of the press. After spending the night in talk with Tolstoy, the spy had gone away with a copy of the forbidden manuscript but, unfortunately for himself, having become converted to Tolstoy’s views he had later made a full confession to the authorities and had been exiled to Siberia. Tolstoy, holding that it was most unjust to exile the disciple while he, the author of the book, remained at large, had pointed out this inconsistency in an open letter to one of the Moscow newspapers. The discussion of this incident, of course, opened up the entire subject of non-resistance, and curiously enough I was disappointed in Tolstoy’s position in the matter. It seemed to me that he made too great a distinction between the use of physical force and that moral energy which can override another’s differences and scruples with equal ruthlessness.

With that inner sense of mortification with which one finds one’s self at difference with the great authority, I recalled the conviction of the early Hull-House residents; that whatever of good the Settlement had to offer should be put into positive terms, that we might live with opposition to no man, with recognition of the good in every man, even the most wretched. We had often departed from this principle, but had it not in every case been a confession of weakness, and had we not always found antagonism a foolish and unwarrantable expenditure of energy?

The conversation at dinner and afterward, although conducted with animation and sincerity, for the moment stirred vague misgivings within me. Was Tolstoy more logical than life warrants? Could the wrongs of life be reduced to the terms of unrequited labor and all be made right if each person performed the amount necessary to satisfy his own wants? Was it

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not always easy to put up a strong case if one took the naturalistic view of life? But what about the historic view, the inevitable shadings and modifications which life itself brings to its own interpretation? Miss Smith and I took a night train back to Moscow in that tumult of feeling which is always produced by contact with a conscience making one more of those determined efforts to probe to the very foundations of the mysterious world in which we find ourselves. A horde of perplexing questions, concerning those problems of existence of which in happier moments we catch but fleeting glimpses and at which we even then stand aghast, pursued us relentlessly on the long journey through the great wheat plains of South Russia, through the crowded Ghetto of Warsaw, and finally into the smiling fields of Germany where the peasant men and women were harvesting the grain. I remember that through the sight of those toiling peasants, I made a curious connection between the bread labor advocated by Tolstoy and the comfort the harvest fields are said to have once brought to Luther when, much perturbed by many theological difficulties, he suddenly forgot them all in a gush of gratitude for mere bread, exclaiming, “How it stands, that golden yellow corn, on its fine tapered stem; the meek earth, at God’s kind bidding, has produced it once again!” At least the toiling poor had this comfort of bread labor, and perhaps it did not matter that they gained it unknowingly and painfully, if only they walked in the path of labor. In the exercise of that curious power possessed by the theorist to inhibit all experiences which do not enhance his doctrine, I did not permit myself to recall that which I knew so well—that exigent and unremitting labor grants the poor no leisure even in the supreme moments of human suffering and that “all griefs are lighter with bread.”

I may have wished to secure this solace for myself at the cost of the least possible expenditure of time and energy, for during the next month in Germany, when I read everything of Tolstoy’s that had been translated into English, German, or French, there grew up in my mind a conviction that what I ought to do upon my return to Hull-House was to spend at least two hours every morning in the little bakery which we had recently added to the equipment of our coffeehouse. Two hours’ work would be but a wretched compromise, but it was hard to see how I could take more time out of each day. I had been taught to bake bread in my childhood not only as a household accomplishment, but because my father, true to his miller’s tradition, had insisted that each one of his daughters on her twelfth birthday must present him with a satisfactory wheat loaf of her own baking, and he was most exigent as to the quality of this test loaf. What could be more in keeping with my training and tradition than baking bread? I did not quite see how my activity would fit in with that of the German union baker who presided over the Hull-House bakery, but all such matters were secondary and certainly could be arranged. It may be that I had thus to pacify my aroused conscience before I could settle down to hear Wagner’s “Ring” at Beyreuth; it may be that I had fallen a victim to the phrase, “bread labor”; but at any rate I held fast to the belief that I should do this, through the entire journey homeward, on land and sea, until I actually arrived in Chicago when suddenly the whole scheme seemed to me as utterly preposterous as it doubtless was. The half dozen people invariably waiting to see me after breakfast, the piles of letters to be opened and answered, the demand of actual and pressing wants—were these

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all to be pushed aside and asked to wait while I saved my soul by two hours' work at baking bread?

Although my resolution was abandoned, this may be the best place to record the efforts of more doughty souls to carry out Tolstoy's conclusions. It was perhaps inevitable that Tolstoy colonies should be founded, although Tolstoy himself has always insisted that each man should live his life as nearly as possible in the place in which he was born. The visit Miss Smith and I made a year or two later to a colony in one of the southern States portrayed for us most vividly both the weakness and the strange august dignity of the Tolstoy position. The colonists at Commonwealth held but a short creed. They claimed in fact that the difficulty is not to state truth but to make moral conviction operative upon actual life, and they announced it their intention "to obey the teachings of Jesus in all matters of labor and the use of property." They would thus transfer the vindication of creed from the church to the open field, from dogma to experience.

The day Miss Smith and I visited the Commonwealth colony of threescore souls, they were erecting a house for the family of a one-legged man, consisting of a wife and nine children who had come the week before in a forlorn prairie schooner from Arkansas. As this was the largest family the little colony contained, the new house was to be the largest yet erected. Upon our surprise at this literal giving "to him that asketh," we inquired if the policy of extending food and shelter to all who applied, without test of creed or ability, might not result in the migration of all the neighboring poorhouse population into the colony. We were told that this actually had happened during the winter until the colony fare of corn meal and cow peas had proved so unattractive that the paupers had gone back, for even the poorest of the southern poorhouses occasionally supplied bacon with the pone if only to prevent scurvy from which the colonists themselves had suffered. The difficulty of the poorhouse people had thus settled itself by the sheer poverty of the situation, a poverty so biting that the only ones willing to face it were those sustained by a conviction of its righteousness. The fields and gardens were being worked by an editor, a professor, a clergyman, as well as by artisans and laborers, the fruit thereof to be eaten by themselves and their families or by any other families who might arrive from Arkansas. The colonists were very conventional in matters of family relationship and had broken with society only in regard to the conventions pertaining to labor and property. We had a curious experience at the end of the day, when we were driven into the nearest town. We had taken with us as a guest the wife of the president of the colony, wishing to give her a dinner at the hotel, because she had girlishly exclaimed during a conversation that at times during the winter she had become so eager to hear good music that it had seemed to her as if she were actually hungry for it, almost as hungry as she was for a beefsteak. Yet as we drove away we had the curious sensation that while the experiment was obviously coming to an end, in the midst of its privations it yet embodied the peace of mind which comes to him who insists upon the logic of life whether it is reasonable or not—the fanatic's joy in seeing his own formula translated into action. At any rate, as we reached the common-place southern town of workaday men and women, for one moment its substantial buildings, its solid brick churches, its ordered streets, divided into those of the rich and those

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of the poor, seemed much more unreal to us than the little struggling colony we had left behind. We repeated to each other that in all the practical judgments and decisions of life, we must part company with logical demonstration; that if we stop for it in each case, we can never go on at all; and yet, in spite of this, when conscience does become the dictator of the daily life of a group of men, it forces our admiration as no other modern spectacle has power to do. It seemed but a mere incident that this group should have lost sight of the facts of life in their earnest endeavor to put to the test the things of the spirit.

I knew little about the colony started by Mr. Maude at Purleigh containing several of Tolstoy's followers who were not permitted to live in Russia, and we did not see Mr. Maude again until he came to Chicago on his way from Manitoba, whither he had transported the second group of Dukhobors, a religious sect who had interested all of Tolstoy's followers because of their literal acceptance of non-resistance and other Christian doctrines which are so strenuously advocated by Tolstoy. It was for their benefit that Tolstoy had finished and published "Resurrection," breaking through his long-kept resolution against novel writing. After the Dukhobors were settled in Canada, of the five hundred dollars left from the "Resurrection" funds, one half was given to Hull-House. It seemed possible to spend this fund only for the relief of the most primitive wants of food and shelter on the part of the most needy families.

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