

Leo Tolstoy



The Complete Novels

One Premium Edition

(World Classics Series)

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The Complete Novels of Leo Tolstoy in One Premium Edition

(World Classics Series)

**Anna Karenina, War and Peace, The Death of Ivan Ilyich,
Childhood, Boyhood, Youth, The Cossacks, Resurrection . . .**

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Introduction

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Leo Tolstoy: A Short Biography

by Aylmer Maude

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COUNT LEO TOLSTOY was born 28th August 1828 [in the Julian calendar then used in Russia; 9th September 1828 in today's internationally accepted Gregorian calendar], at a house in the country not many miles from Toúla, and about 130 miles south of Moscow.

He has lived most of his life in the country, preferring it to town, and believing that people would be healthier and happier if they lived more natural lives, in touch with nature, instead of crowding together in cities.

He lost his mother when he was three, and his father when he was nine years old. He remembers a boy visiting his brothers and himself when he was twelve years old, and bringing the news that they had found out at school that there was no God, and that all that was taught about God was a mere invention.

He himself went to school in Moscow, and before he was grown up he had imbibed the opinion, generally current among educated Russians, that 'religion' is old-fashioned and superstitious, and that sensible and cultured people do not require it for themselves.

After finishing school Tolstoy went to the University at Kazán. There he studied Oriental languages, but he did not pass the final examinations.

In one of his books Tolstoy remarks how often the cleverest boy is at the bottom of the class. And this really does occur. A boy of active, independent mind, who has his own problems to think out, will often find it terribly hard to keep his attention on the lessons the master wants him to learn. The

fashionable society Tolstoy met at his aunt's house in Kazán was another obstacle to serious study.

He then settled on his estate at Yásnaya Polyána, and tried to improve the condition of the serfs. His attempts were not very successful at the time, though they served to prepare him for work that came later. He had much to contend against in himself, and after three years he went to the Caucasus to economise, in order to pay off debts made at cards. Here he hunted, drank, wrote his first sketches, and entered the army, in which an elder brother to whom he was greatly attached was serving, and which was then engaged in subduing the native tribes.

When the Crimean War began, in 1854, Tolstoy applied for active service, and was transferred to the army on the frontier of European Turkey, and then, soon after the siege began, to an artillery regiment engaged in the defence of Sevastopol. His uncle, Prince Gortchakóf, was commander-in-chief of the Russian army, and Tolstoy received an appointment to his staff. Here he obtained that first-hand knowledge of war which has helped him to speak on the subject with conviction. He saw war as it really is.

The men who governed Russia, France, England, Sardinia, and Turkey had quarrelled about the custody of the 'Holy Places' in Palestine, and about the meaning of two lines in a treaty made in 1774 between Russia and Turkey.

They stopped at home, but sent other people — most of them poorly paid, simple people, who knew nothing about the quarrel — to kill each other wholesale in order to settle it.

Working men were taken from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Middlesex, Essex, and all parts of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, and Sardinia, and shipped, thousands of miles, to join a number of poor Turkish peasants in trying to kill Russian peasants. These latter had in most cases been forced unwillingly to leave their homes and families, and to march on foot thousands of miles to fight these people they never saw before, and against whom they bore no grudge.

Some excuse had, of course, to be made for all this, and in England people were told the war was “in defence of oppressed nationalities.”

When some 500,000 men had perished, and about £340,000,000 had been spent, those who governed said it was time to stop. They forgot all about the “oppressed nationalities,” but bargained about the number and kind of ships Russia might have on the Black Sea.

Fifteen years later, when France and Germany were fighting each other, the Russian Government tore up that treaty, and the other Governments then said it did not matter. Later still, Lord Salisbury said that in the Crimean War we “put our money on the wrong horse.” To have said so at the time the people were killing each other would have been unpatriotic. In all countries truth, on such matters, spoken before it is stale, is unpatriotic.

When the war was over Count Tolstoy left the army and settled in Petersburg. He was welcome to whatever advantages the society of the capital had to offer, for not only was he a nobleman and an officer, just back from the heroic defence of Sevastopol, but he was then already famous as a brilliant writer. He had written short sketches since he was twenty-three, and while still young was recognised among Russia’s foremost literary men.

He had, therefore, fame, applause, and wealth — and at first he found these things very pleasant. But being a man of unusually sincere nature, he began in the second, and still more in the third, year of this kind of life, to ask himself seriously why people made such a fuss about the stories, novels, or poems, that he and other literary men were producing. If, said he, our work is really so valuable that it is worth what is paid for it, and worth all this praise and applause — it must be that we are saying something of great importance to the world to know. What, then, is our message? What have we to teach?

But the more he considered the matter, the more evident it was to him that the authors and artists did not themselves know what they wanted to teach — that, in fact, they had nothing of real importance to say, and often relied upon their powers of expression, when they had nothing to express.

What one said, another contradicted, and what one praised, another jeered at.

When he examined their lives, he saw that, so far from being exceptionally moral and self-denying, they were a more selfish and immoral set of men even than the officers he had been among in the army.

In later years, when he had quite altered his views of life, he wrote with very great severity of the life he led when in the army and in Petersburg. This is the passage — it occurs in *My Confession*: “I cannot now think of those years without horror, loathing, and heart-ache. I killed men in war, and challenged men to duels in order to kill them; I lost at cards, consumed what the peasants produced, sentenced them to punishments, lived loosely, and deceived people. Lying, robbery, adultery of all kinds, drunkenness, violence, murder ... there was no crime that I did not commit; and people approved of my conduct, and my contemporaries considered, and consider me, to be, comparatively speaking, a moral man.”

Many people — forgetting Tolstoy’s strenuous manner of writing, and the mood in which *My Confession* was written — have concluded from these lines that as a young man he led a particularly immoral life. Really, he is selecting the worst incidents, and is calling them by their harshest names: war and the income from his estate are “murder” and “robbery.” In this passage he is — like John Bunyan and other good men before him — denouncing rather than describing the life he lived as a young man. The simple fact is that he lived among an immoral, upper-class, city society, and to some extent yielded to the example of those around him; but he did so with qualms of conscience and frequent strivings after better things. Judged even as harshly as he judges himself, the fact remains that those among whom he lived considered him to be above their average moral level.

Dissatisfied with his life, sceptical of the utility of his work as a writer, convinced that he could not teach others without first knowing what he had to teach, Tolstoy left Petersburg and retired to an estate in the country, near the place where he was born, and where he has spent most of his life.

It was the time of the great emancipation movement in Russia. Tolstoy improved the condition of his serfs by commuting their personal service for a fixed annual payment, but it was not possible for him to set them free until after the decree of emancipation in 1861.

In the country Tolstoy attended to his estates and organised schools for the peasants. If he did not know enough to teach the 'cultured crowd' in Petersburg, perhaps he could teach peasant children. Eventually he came to see that before you can know what to teach — even to a peasant child — you must know the purpose of human life. Otherwise you may help him to 'get on,' and he may 'get on to other people's backs,' and there be a nuisance even to himself.

Tolstoy twice travelled abroad, visiting Germany, France, and England, and studying the educational systems, which seemed to him very bad. Children born with different tastes and capacities are put through the same course of lessons, just as coffee beans of different sizes are ground to the same grade. And this is done, not because it is best for them, but because it is easiest for the teachers, and because the parents lead artificial lives and neglect their own children.

In spite of his dissatisfaction with literary work Tolstoy continued to write — but he wrote differently. Habits are apt to follow from afar. A man's conduct may be influenced by new thoughts and feelings, but his future conduct will result both from what he was and from what he wishes to become. So a billiard ball driven by a cue and meeting another ball in motion, takes a new line, due partly to the push from the cue and partly to the impact of the other ball.

At this period of his life, perplexed by problems he was not yet able to solve, Tolstoy, who in general even up to old age has possessed remarkable strength and endurance of body as well as of mind, was threatened with a breakdown in health — a nervous prostration. He had to leave all his work and go for a time to lead a merely animal existence and drink a preparation of mare's milk among the wild Kirghíz in Eastern Russia.

In 1862 Tolstoy married, and he and his wife, to whom he has always been faithful, have lived to see the century out together. Not even the fact that the Countess has not agreed with many of the views her husband has expressed during the last twenty years, and has been dissatisfied at his readiness to part with his property, to associate with 'dirty' low-class people, and to refuse payment for his literary work — not even these difficulties have diminished their affection for one another. Thirteen children were born to them, of whom five died young.

The fact that twenty years of such a married life preceded Tolstoy's change of views, and that the opinions he now expresses were formed when he was still as active and vigorous as most men are at half his age, should be a sufficient answer to those who have so misunderstood him as to suggest that, having worn himself out by a life of vice, he now cries sour grapes lest others should enjoy pleasures he is obliged to abandon.

For some time Tolstoy was active as a "Mediator of the Peace," adjusting difficulties between the newly emancipated serfs and their former owners. During the fourteen years that followed his marriage he also wrote the long novels, *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karénina*. His wife copied out *War and Peace* no less than seven times, as he altered and improved it again and again. With his work, as with his life, Tolstoy is never satisfied — he always wants to get a step nearer perfection, and is keen to note and to admit his deficiencies.

The happiness and fulness of activity of his family life kept in the background for nearly fifteen years the great problems that had begun to trouble him. But ultimately the great question: What is the meaning of my life? presented itself more clearly and insistently than ever, and he began to feel that unless he could answer it he could not live.

Was wealth the aim of his life?

He was highly paid for his books, and he had 20,000 acres of land in the Government of Samára; but suppose he became twice or ten times as rich, he asked himself, would it satisfy him? And if it satisfied him — was not death

coming: to take it all away? The more satisfying the wealth, the more terrible must death be, which would deprive him of it all.

Would family happiness — the love of wife and children — satisfy him, and explain the purpose of life? Many fond parents stake their happiness on the well-being of an only child, and make that the aim of their lives. But how unfortunate such people are! If the child is ill, or if it is out too late, how wretched they make themselves and others. Clearly the love of family afforded no sufficient answer to the problem: What am I here for? Besides, there again stood death — threatening not only him but all those he loved. How terrible that they, and he, must die and part!

There was fame! He was making a world-wide literary reputation which would not be destroyed by his death. He asked himself whether, if he became more famous than Shakespeare or Molière, that would satisfy him? He felt that it would not. An author's works outlive him, but they too will perish. How many authors are read 1000 years after their death? Is not even the language we write in constantly altering and becoming archaic? Besides, what was the use of fame when he was no longer here to enjoy it? Fame would not supply an explanation of life.

And as he thought more and more about the meaning of life, yet failed to find the key to the puzzle, it seemed to him — as it seemed to Solomon, Schopenhauer, and to Buddha when he first faced the problems of poverty, sickness, and death — that life is an evil: a thing we must wish to be rid of. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." "Which of us has his desire, or having it is happy?"

Was not the whole thing a gigantic and cruel joke played upon us by some demoniac power — as we may play with an ant, defeating all its aims and destroying all it builds? And was not suicide the only way of escape?

But though, for a time, he felt strongly drawn towards suicide, he found that he went on living, and he decided to ask those considered most capable of teaching, their explanation of the purpose of life.

So he went to the scientists: the people who studied nature and dealt with what they called 'facts' and 'realities,' and he asked them. But they had

nothing to give him except their latest theory of self-acting evolution. Millions of years ago certain unchanging forces were acting on certain immutable atoms, and a process of evolution was going on, as it has gone on ever since. The sun was evolved, and our world. Eventually plant life, then animal life, were evolved. The antediluvian animals were evolved, and when nature had done with them it wiped them out and produced us. And evolution is still going on, and the sun is cooling down, and ultimately our race will perish like the antediluvian animals.

It is very ingenious. It seems nearer the truth than the guess, attributed to Moses, that everything was made in six days. But it does not answer the question that troubled Tolstoy, and the reply to it is obvious. If this self-acting process of evolution is going on — let it evolve! It will wipe me out whether I try to help it or to hinder it, and not me only, but all my friends, and my race, and the solar system to which I belong.

The vital question to Tolstoy was: “What am I here for?” And the question to which the scientists offered a partial reply was, “How did I get here?” — which is quite a different matter.

Tolstoy turned to the priests: the people whose special business it is to guide men’s conduct and tell them what they should, and what they should not, believe.

But the priests satisfied him as little as the scientists. For the problem that troubled him was a real problem, needing all man’s powers of mind to answer it; but the priests having, so to say, signed their thirty-nine articles, were not free to consider it with open minds. They would only think about the problems of life and death subject to the proviso that they should not have to budge from those points to which they were nailed down in advance. And it is no more possible to think efficiently in that way than it is to run well with your legs tied together.

The scientists put the wrong question; the priests accepted the real question, but were not free to seek the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Moreover, the greatest and most obvious evil Tolstoy had seen in his life, was that pre-arranged, systematic, and wholesale method of murder called war. And he saw that the priests, with very few exceptions, not only did nothing to prevent such wholesale murder, but they even went, as chaplains, with the soldiers, to teach them Christianity without telling them it was wrong to fight; and they blessed ships of war, and prayed God to scatter our enemies, to confound their politics and to frustrate their knavish tricks. They would even say this kind of thing without knowing who the 'enemies' were. So long as they are not we, they must be bad and deserve to be 'confounded.'

Nor was this all. Professing a religion of love, they harassed and persecuted those who professed any other forms of religious belief. In the way the different churches condemned each other, and struggled one against another, there was much that shocked him. Tolstoy tried hard to make himself think as the priests thought, but he was unable to do so.

Then he thought that perhaps if people could not tell him in words what the object of life is, he might find it out by watching their actions. And first he began to consider the lives of those of his own society: people of the middle and upper classes. He noticed among them people of different types.

First, there were those who led an animal life. Many of these were women, or healthy young men, full of physical life. The problem that troubled him no more troubled them than it troubles the ox or the ass. They evidently had not yet come to the stage of development to which life, thought, and experience had brought him, but he could not turn back and live as they lived.

Next came those who, though capable of thinking of serious things, were so occupied with their business, professional, literary, or governmental work, that they had no time to think about fundamental problems. One had his newspaper to get out each morning by five o'clock. Another had his diplomatic negotiations to pursue. A third was projecting a railway. They could not stop and think. They were so busy getting a living that they never asked why they lived?

Another large set of people, some of them thoughtful and conscientious people — were hypnotised by authority. Instead of thinking with their own heads and asking themselves the purpose of life, they accepted an answer given them by some one else: by some Church, or Pope, or book, or newspaper, or Emperor, or Minister. Many people are hypnotised by one or other of the Churches, and still more are hypnotised by patriotism and loyalty to their own country and their own rulers. In all nations — Russia, England, France, Germany, America, China and everywhere else — people may be found who know that it is not good to boast about their own qualities or to extol their own families, but who consider it a virtue to pretend that their nation is better than all other nations, and that their rulers, when they quarrel and fight with other rulers, are always in the right. People hypnotised in this way cease to think seriously about right or wrong, and, where their patriotism is concerned, are quite ready to accept the authority of anyone who to them typifies their Church or their country. However absurd such a state of mind may be, it keeps many people absorbed and occupied. How many people in France eagerly asserted the guilt of Dreyfus on the authority of General Mercier, and how many people in England were ready to fight and die rather than to agree to arbitration with the Transvaal after Chamberlain told them that arbitration was out of the question!

There were a fourth set of people, who seemed to Tolstoy the most contemptible of all. These were the epicureans: people who saw the emptiness and purposelessness of their lives, but said, “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.” Belonging to the well-to-do classes and being materially better off than common people, they relied on this advantage and tried to snatch as much pleasure from life as they could.

None of these people could show Tolstoy the purpose of his life. He began to despair, and was more and more inclined to think suicide the best course open to a brave and sincere man.

But there were the peasants — for whom he had always felt great sympathy, and who lived all around him. How was it that they — poor, ignorant, heavily-taxed, compelled to serve in the army, and obliged to

produce food, clothing and houses, not only for themselves but for all their superiors — how was it that they, on the whole, seemed to know the meaning of life? They did not commit suicide, but bore their hard lot patiently, and when death came met it with tranquillity. The more he thought about it, the more he saw that these country peasants, tilling the soil and producing those necessities of life without which we should all starve, were living a comparatively good and natural life, doing what was obviously useful, and that they were nearer to a true understanding of life than the priests or the scribes. And he talked of these things with some of the best of such men, and found that, even if many of them could not express themselves clearly in words, they had firm ground under their feet. Some of them, too, were remarkably clear in thought and speech, free from superstition, and able to go to the roots of the matter. But to break free from the superstitions of science, and the prejudices of the ‘cultured crowd’ to which he belonged, was no easy matter even for Tolstoy, nor was it quickly accomplished.

When the peasants spoke to him of “serving God” and “not living for oneself,” it perplexed him. What is this “God”? How can I know whether he, or it, really exists? But the question: What is the meaning of my life? demanded an answer, and the peasants, by example as well as by words, helped him towards that answer.

He studied the sacred books of the East: the scriptures of the Chinese, of the Buddhists, and of the Mahommedans; but it was in the Gospels, to which the peasants referred him, that he found the meaning and purpose of life best and most clearly expressed. The fundamental truths concerning life and death and our relation to the unseen, are the same in all the great religious books of the East or of the West, but, for himself at least, Tolstoy found in the Gospels (though they contain many blunders, perversions and superstitions) the best, most helpful, and clearest expression of those truths.

He had always admired many passages in the Gospels, but had also found much that perplexed him. He now re-read them in the following way: the only way, he says, in which any sacred books can be profitably studied.

He first read them carefully through to see what they contained that was perfectly clear and simple, and that quite agreed with his own experience of life and accorded with his reason and conscience. Having found (and even marked in the margin with blue pencil) this core that had been expressed so plainly and strongly that it was easy to grasp, he read the four little books again several times over, and found that much that at first seemed obscure or perplexing, was quite reasonable and helpful when read by the light of what he had already seen to be the main message of the books. Much still remained unintelligible, and therefore of no use to him. This must be so in books dealing with great questions, that were written down long ago, in languages not ours, by people not highly educated and who were superstitious.

For instance, if one reads that Jesus walked on the water, that Mahommed's coffin hung between heaven and earth, or that a star entered the side of Buddha's mother before he was born, one may wonder how the statement got into the book, and be perplexed and baffled by it rather than helped; but it need not hinder the effect of what one has understood and recognised as true.

Reading the Gospels in this way, Tolstoy reached a view of life that answered his question, and that has enabled him to walk surefootedly, knowing the aim and purpose of his life and ready to meet death calmly when it comes.

Each one of us has a reason and a conscience that come to us from somewhere: we did not make them ourselves. They oblige us to differentiate between good and evil; we must approve of some things and disapprove of others. We are all alike in this respect, all members of one family, and in this way sons of one Father. In each of us, dormant or active, there is a higher and better nature, a spiritual nature, a spark of the divine. If we open our hearts and minds we can discern good from evil in relation to our own conduct: the law is "very near unto you, in your heart and in your mouth." The purpose of our life on earth should be to serve, not our lower, animal nature but the power to which our higher nature recognises its kinship.

Jesus boldly identifies himself with his higher nature, speaks of himself, and of us, as Sons of the Father, and bids us be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.

This then is the answer to the question: What is the meaning and purpose of my life? There is a Power enabling me to discern what is good, and I am in touch with that Power; my reason and conscience flow from it, and the purpose of my conscious life is to do its will, i.e. to do good.

Nor do the Gospels leave us without telling us how to apply this teaching to practical life. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chaps. v. vi. and vii.) had always attracted Tolstoy, but much of it had also perplexed him, especially the text: "Resist not him that is evil; but whosoever smiteth thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." It seemed to him unreasonable, and shocked all the prejudices of aristocratic, family and personal 'honour' in which he had been brought up. But as long as he rejected and tried to explain away that saying, he could get no coherent sense out of the teaching of Jesus or out of the story of his life.

As soon as he admitted to himself that perhaps Jesus meant that saying seriously, it was as though he had found the key to a puzzle; the teaching and the example fitted together and formed one complete and admirable whole. He then saw that Jesus in these chapters is very definitely summing up his practical advice: pointing out, five times over, what had been taught by "them of old times," and each time following it by the words, "but I say unto you," and giving an extension, or even a flat contradiction, to the old precept.

Here are the five commandments of Christ, an acceptance of which, or even a comprehension of, and an attempt to follow which, would alter the whole course of men's lives in our society.

(1) "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment."

In the Russian version, as in our Authorised Version, the words, "without a cause," have been inserted after the word angry. This, of course, makes

nonsense of the whole passage, for no one ever is angry without supposing that he has some cause. Going to the best Greek sources, Tolstoy detected this interpolation (which has been corrected in our Revised Version), and he found other passages in which the current translations obscure Christ's teaching: as for instance the popular libel on Jesus which represents him as having flogged people in the Temple with a scourge!

This, then, is the first of these great guiding rules: Do not be angry.

Some people will say, We do not accept Christ's authority — why should we not be angry?

But test it any way you like: by experience, by the advice of other great teachers, or by the example of the best men and women in their best moods, and you will find that the advice is good.

Try it experimentally, and you will find that even for your physical nature it is the best advice. If under certain circumstances — say, if dinner is not ready when you want it — you allow yourself to get very angry, you will secrete bile, which is bad for you. But if under precisely similar circumstances you keep your temper, you won't secrete bile. It will be better for you.

But, finally, one may say, "I cannot help being angry, it is my nature; I am made so." Very well; there is no danger of your not doing what you must do; but religion and philosophy exist in order to help us to think and feel rightly, and to guide us in so far as our animal nature allows us to be guided. If you can't abstain from anger altogether, abstain from it as much as you can.

(2) "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, that every one that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

This second great rule of conduct is: Do not lust.

It is not generally accepted as good advice. In all our towns things exist — certain ways of dressing, ways of dancing, some entertainments, pictures, and theatrical posters — which would not exist if everybody understood that lust is a bad thing, spoiling our lives.

Being animals we probably cannot help lusting, but the fact that we are imperfect does not prevent the advice from being good. Lust as little as you can, if you cannot be perfectly pure.

(3) “Again, ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: but I say unto you, Swear not at all... . But let your speech be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay.”

How absurd! says some one. Here are five great commandments to guide us in life — the first is: “Don’t be angry,” the second is: “Don’t lust.” These are really broad, sweeping rules of conduct — but the third is: “Don’t say damn.” What is the particular harm, or importance, of using a few swear-words?

But that, of course, is not at all the meaning of the commandment. It, too, is a broad, sweeping rule, and it means: Do not give away the control of your future actions. You have a reason and a conscience to guide you, but if you set them aside and swear allegiance elsewhere — to Tsar, Emperor, Kaiser, King, Queen, President or General — they may some day tell you to commit the most awful crimes; perhaps even to kill your fellow-men. What are you going to do then? To break your oath? or commit a crime you never would have dreamt of committing had you not first taken an oath?

The present Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm II, once addressed some naval recruits just after they had taken the oath of allegiance to him. (The oath had been administered by a paid minister of Jesus Christ, on the book which says “Swear not at all.”) Wilhelm II reminded them that they had taken the oath, and that if he called them out to shoot their own fathers they must now obey!

The whole organised and premeditated system of wholesale murder called war, is based and built up in all lands (in England and Russia to-day as in the Roman Empire when Jesus lived) on this practice of inducing people to entrust their consciences to the keeping of others.

But it is the fourth commandment that people most object to. In England, as in Russia, it is as yet hardly even beginning to be understood.