

## FOUR GREAT RUSSIANS

WHEN Peter the Great built St. Petersburg he said he was opening a window into Europe. Gogol, Turgenief, Tolstoy, and Dostoieffsky opened the greatest windows that we have even yet into Russia. The Russia that they described is buried, though perhaps it is not really dead. It may yet stretch its enormous bulk and cast away its foul and bloody grave-clothes.

At all events, the Russia of those four masters has disappeared behind the Red Dark. Their work is not the less interesting, and would not be, even if the disappearance should be final. It would remain a portentous monument four-square; Gogol's side the most uncouth, but not the least striking; Turgenief's the most ornamental and most adorned, but not the most definite—indeed, the least national and the least powerful; Tolstoy's the most eulogized, perhaps the most renowned, but not the greatest or the strongest; Dostoieffsky's the most passionately truthful, sincere, and pathetic, if also the most terrible. Of these four architects of the great monument, Turgenief was the least Russian: he had lived in the light of common day outside, and he wrote from memory; into his memories shone gleams of a western sun. His pen was half-civilized, and that gain was a loss to him. One meets in his books characters that one might meet in a French novel—though it would be one of the finest and best of the French novels. He had ideas of beauty less Russian than western, and his absence tempered his pictures; he desired that they should please, and a certain haze of gentleness softens their definition. They are incomparably less massive, less prepotent, than Gogol's or Dostoieffsky's, and are weakened by their graciousness. There was nothing gracious about Gogol's pictures; he painted brutally and did not shrink from their brutality, or dream of making it please. The truth he saw was vastly ugly, and he was only concerned to show it vast and true. He did not write of civilized persons and did not himself pose as a civilized writer. He stripped himself and his characters to the shirt, and gave the latter no pose and no quarter. He was not afraid of

## *Blackfriars*

saying disgusting things if saying them conveyed the absolute portrait he meant. He knew his own strength and power, and was determined to let it take its own unfettered way. For canons of art he did not care : he was like a man who has found out how to paint and is indifferent whether other artists consider him an artist or no. He knew how to make pictures and where to look for them. It did not matter to him whether anyone liked them, or anyone shrank from them. He knew they were like the original people and the original places. He was incomparably stronger as a writer than was Caravaggio as a painter. Caravaggio only discarded tradition in treatment.

Gogol discarded all tradition as to theme and inspiration. He was a very great writer and a very great humanist, though at no pains to seem humane. He followed no school and has no self-confessed scholars, though neither Tolstoy nor Dostoieffsky (nor even Turgenief) would have been themselves had he not been himself before them. In greatness neither Tolstoy nor Turgenief approached him : Dostoieffsky reached heights far above him, but could not rival his huge sanity.

Gogol seized his pen in the dark and wrote before the day. Dostoieffsky wrote in a very chill dawn, his eyes always turned wistfully to a sun that he longed for and prayed for with infinite groanings—which never rose. Tolstoy fancied it had risen, but was particularly in need of his own assistance to mount the heavens. His earliest work is worth more than his later because it is less self-conscious. Heine says that every woman writer writes with one eye on the public and one eye fixed on some man, "except Countess Hahn-Hahn, who has only one eye." Tolstoy's earlier work was written with one eye fixed on Russia and the other on posterity ; in his later work the one eye was fastened more upon the world than upon Russia, and the other eye steadfastly rested, in deep and respectful appreciation, upon himself. The more he became a prophet and a preacher, the less did he become as a master of Russian literature. No doubt he meant nobly ; his life and his work were paved with good intentions. He became, after *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, less purely Russian.

## *Four Great Russians*

His mission, as he fashioned it, was world-wide, and he fell from being a great national to being a cosmopolitan with great purposes. Probably no one loses more in becoming, or trying to become, cosmopolitan than a Russian. If he succeed, as he rarely does, there is nothing that matters left. When a Russian of old time had any willingness to un-nationalize himself, it was mostly to make himself as French as he could, and the result was hardly more than a *petit-maître*.

Tolstoy was too great by far for that : he could only be great, but he began as a great master of Russian literature and ended as a great Nebula in the undiscovered constellation of Theory.

It will be seen that the present writer, though aware of the commonly accepted belief that Tolstoy was the greatest of the Russians, does not hold it. Turgenief seemed less great, chiefly because he was much more modest and claimed less. But he had, what was an uncovenanted mercy in a Russian master, an incomparable charm, to which Tolstoy could never have attained no matter how hard he tried. He had not Tolstoy's brute force, but Tolstoy had not a tithe of the brute force of Gogol ; nor had Tolstoy more than a shadow of Gogol's simplicity (in his later work none of it) nor quarter of Gogol's huge clarity of vision and faithful sincerity of utterance.

Gogol had no more sentimentality than an earthquake. Turgenief may seem more feminine than Tolstoy, but he was far less sentimental, and of sentimentality that smells mawkishly he is entirely free. He can be sad as well as pathetic, but his sadness is not morbid ; he is affectionate but never gushing ; he has great pity, but he does not drivel over the people he compassionates. He wrote largely of a given period, but his work was not temporary, and will undoubtedly survive. It never was simply topical, and cannot become old-fashioned. His theme was not really Nihilism, but human beings, and every one of them lives, and will continue to live, because they are not characters in a dramatized thesis, but women and men only touched on the shoulder by the passing theory of their day. They lived to love and weep, and laugh when excuse was given

## *Blackfriars*

them. Tolstoy's characters, after his prophet's mantle fell upon him, lived to preach and were his own creatures.

Turgenief did not create his men and women: God had done that. He only *showed* them, with singular verity and gentleness, and respect and understanding. He loved mankind rather than any social theories, and derived his hope for men not from what men might set out to do for them, but from memory, from remembering whence man came and from whose Hand, what He had done for men and what He must still be willing to do.

I have heard it said that Turgenief is less manly than Tolstoy: the only truth in that is that he is more feminine. It is a vulgarity and obtuseness of criticism to think that a master in whom a certain feminism of delicate quality shows is effeminate. Shakespeare has it—was anyone ever manlier? Robert Browning has it—was any poet ever more masculine? Yet without that feminism he could never have achieved the miracle of Pompilia.

How few great women writers have completely succeeded in giving us first-rate male characters; how few great male writers have given us quite first-rate heroines. Neither Dickens nor Thackeray succeeded, though the much undervalued Anthony Trollope did succeed. George Eliot's heroes are much less manly than her heroines. Charlotte Brontë's principal hero was an improper old maid, her other heroes male governesses. Thackeray's heroines were apt to be mere crying-machines with babies. But no woman could have made truer women than Shakespeare or Browning, only Shakespeare did it over and over again, and Browning's supreme success occurred but once.

Turgenief's feminism was not only, or chiefly, instanced in his appreciation of his women, but in his *maternity* towards all his children. Tolstoy was not even paternal; his attitude was more that of a schoolmaster who stands only *in loco parentis* towards his boys. Tolstoy and Turgenief have this in common, that both read perfectly in French. Gogol does not, though there are passages in Balzac that nearly remind one of him. Dostoeffsky is immeasurably better read in English than in French.

## *Four Great Russians*

All the four Russian masters here dealt with were children of the Russian Church, though one at least of them was an unsubmitive son of hers. It tinged them all, and unfortunately. What they would have been had they been Catholics is about as profitable an enquiry as asking what turn history would have taken if Sixtus V, instead of becoming Friar and Pope, had married Elizabeth Tudor. Yet it is hard to abstain from wondering—at all events, in the case of Dostoieffsky, who happened to detest the Catholic Church, and kept two immense bees in his bonnet, that really troubled him terribly—the Jesuits and the Inquisition. There can be no doubt that if he had been a Catholic his misery would have been less abysmal: perhaps he might even have been happy, and for so great and heroic a soul one must long that he might have been happier. It is hard to imagine a human being less selfish, more completely devoid of prejudice founded on self-love. A martyr of life, he had neither rancour nor grudge against those who inflicted the martyrdom. He seems even to hold them blameless and to think them not much in the wrong from their point of view. In all the appalling tragedy of his *House of the Dead*, which is the biography of his years in Siberia, there is no abuse of the Government for sending him there, not a single outcry against its cruelty. His colossal charity reaches to them, as it covers the hideous, bestial, treacherous, malignant criminals whose companion he had to be at bed and board and toil during those intolerable years of anguish. I said intolerable, yet he bore it, and without complaint. He was legally dead, and much worse than dead in all else. He remained sane enough to know that he was not in hell. With hope he never trifled. So far as he knew, there was no hope but Death, yet he never spread out morbid, wooing arms to death, or sought, or even wished, to die. He bore. The heroism of every waking moment of those foul and loathsome years was stupendous, and, to read of, blinding. The man was incurably a believer in God and in man: he loved both in spite of, nay wholly uninfluenced by, what God had laid upon him, and in spite of all experience of his fellow-men. He deserved the crowns of martyrdom and of sanctity. Had

## *Blackfriars*

he been a Catholic he must have received upon his dead brow the Church's brand of sanctity ; and I must think him a saint of the wilderness as it was, though his faith was awry, and he bore, ignorantly, false witness against much that we revere and believe. Our Lord may have forgiven long ago those who bore false witness against Himself—He did not damn those who struck Him upon the mouth, but asked "Why?"

Let any Catholic read that *House of the Dead* and he must pray for the soul of the patient sufferer who wrote it, and wish that the man, so pure in that sink of foulness, had been, for his comfort, a Catholic, too. There was in him no guile, as there was no malice or spite. He was unspeakably humble. The poignancy of the book is cutting, unbearable. There is not one line in it dictated by self-pity, nor a line inspired by the longing for revenge on those who sent him into that hell for those stolen years of his life. Ranging himself alongside the real criminals who were his companions, he casts upon himself no eye of complacency or pride, on them no glance of scorn or loathing. They were as much the sons of God and of suffering as himself. It never once occurred to him that they mattered less, that what they were was less to God than what he was, that *their* suffering belonged merely to the inevitable bulk of the world's sufferance, while his own was a thing special, monstrous, and scandalous, demanding Divine attention and interference.

Probably every one knows how he came to be in a felon's prison in Siberia. Born in 1821, in a hospital for the poor at Moscow, of which his father was a resident surgeon, his first novel, *Poor Folk*, was written when he was twenty-three. In April of 1849 he was arrested with forty-three others, his crime being complicity in a sort of debating club of advanced opinions. His own opinions do not seem to have been by any means revolutionary. After many months of imprisonment he was, with a score of others, condemned to death. It was the middle of the Russian winter. The windows of the vehicles in which they were driven to Semyonovski Square were sheeted with ice, and he could not see anything outside. In the middle of the

## *Four Great Russians*

square was a scaffold, up to which the condemned were marched and ranged in two lines and stripped to the shirt. A sheriff read, and re-read for each of them, the sentence of death, to be carried out there and then. Dostoeffsky whispered to his next neighbour, "It is impossible they can mean to kill us." For answer the man pointed to a row of coffins near the scaffold. A priest mounted the scaffold and asked if any wished to confess their sins. "Only one," says Dostoeffsky, "accepted the invitation." No one can doubt that it was himself. Petroschevsky, the leader, and two others were already tied to the poles, their heads muffled in a sort of bag, and the soldiers stood ready, awaiting the word of command to fire. . . . Presently there came a stir, but Dostoeffsky was too near-sighted to see quickly what was happening. He was gazing at the glitter of a gilded church dome that an early sunbeam had caught, and thinking "I shall be in five minutes where that light comes from." An officer came galloping across the square waving a white handkerchief: he was sent by the Emperor with a pardon for all the condemned. It had never been intended to carry out the death sentence, but by it to teach a lesson never to be forgotten. One of the three tied to the poles had gone mad and remained mad. For twenty minutes all had been freezing in their shirts in the excruciating cold. Dostoeffsky, years afterwards, said he had no recollection of feeling it. His sentence was commuted to eight years in a Siberian convict prison and many years subsequent exile in Siberia as a soldier. He actually served four years in prison, and two years later was allowed to return from Siberia. He lived for a quarter of a century, suffering many things. He was an epileptic, and he was in chronic poverty and debt. Forty thousand compatriots followed him to the grave. We do not learn that they had lightened his load of debt while he lived. It is much less troublesome to weep or cast flowers upon a coffin.

His work is incomparably greater than that of any of his compatriots. The *House of the Dead* is not reckoned his masterpiece, but it would have been the masterpiece of any other author. It is not, in fact, a novel, but a monument, and stands apart sublimely lonely and great.

## *Blackfriars*

The novel commonly ranked as his masterpiece is *Crime and Punishment*, but I do not think it greater than *The Idiot*. Of those books and *The Brothers Karamazov* I do not propose to speak here, limitation of space forbidding, nor of any of his many other novels and stories. Space, indeed, forbids here anything beyond a quite general allusion to his work. I cannot now attempt to speak of his genius and its quality: it will be seen that in these few lines I have been more occupied with the man than with his achievement as a writer. As a man his dumb appeal to our measureless pity is overwhelming. I should be much mistaken if it were supposed that I recommended indiscriminately his great works to every reader, especially to every young reader. A young reader, clever enough to appreciate them, might very easily appreciate them too much. I do not believe them to be either morbid or unwholesome, but they might have an effect unwholesome and morbid upon a youthful reader succumbing to their singular and melancholy power, precisely because this great writer and great humanist was not a Catholic and was born disinherited of that whole-sightedness that comes from looking at life through the Church's urbanely steady eyes. He saw much, but there is more to see than his loving and sorrowful eyes ever saw. He is not, like Shakespeare, complete. He saw nothing outside Russia, and was so sodden with her pain as to seem unaware that beyond her frontiers there were happier lives.

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