

APROPOS OF A. I. ERSHOV'S BOOK, "RECOLLECTIONS FROM SEVASTOPOL"

by Leo Tolstoy

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A. I. Ershov sent me his book, *Recollections from Sevastopol*, asking me to read it and tell him the impression produced on me by this reading.

I read the book, and I feel very much like telling about the impression which the reading produced on me, because this impression is very powerful. The author and I went through all that thirty-four years ago. What we went through was what the author describes, – the horror of the war, – and what he almost does not describe, – the spiritual condition experienced then by the author.

A boy who is just let out from a military school finds his way to Sevastopol. A few months before, this boy was joyous and happy, as girls are happy the next day after their marriage. Only yesterday, it seems, he put on his officers uniform, which the experienced tailor properly padded with cotton under the facings, spreading the heavy cloth and the shoulder-straps, so as to conceal the youthful and unformed childish breast and give it the aspect of • manliness; only yesterday he put on this uniform and went to the hair-dresser's, where he had his hair fixed and treated with pomatum and accentuated his nascent moustache with wax, and, clattering over the steps with his sword hanging down from a gilt hanger, and with his cap poised jauntily, he walked down the street. He no longer looks about him carefully, for fear of neglecting to salute an officer, and the lower ranks see him from afar, and he nonchalantly touches the visor of his cap or commands, " Excused !" It was only yesterday that the general, his commander, spoke to him seriously as to an equal, and he saw before him a brilliant military career. It was only yesterday, it seems, that his nurse admired him, and his mother was touched and wept for joy, kissing and fondling him, and he felt both happy and ashamed. It was only yesterday that he met a charming girl; they talked of all kinds of nonsense, and the lips of both of them wrinkled with repressed smiles; and he knew that she, and not only she, but girls a hundred and a thousand times more beautiful than she, might, and certainly must, fall in love with him. All that, it seems, happened yesterday. All that may have been petty, and ridiculous, and vainglorious, but all that was innocent and, therefore, sweet.

And here he is in Sevastopol. Suddenly he sees that something is not quite right, that something he did not expect is taking place. His commander tells him, that same man whom his mother loves so much, from whom not she alone, but everybody else as well, expected so much good, him, with his bodily and spiritual, unique, incomparable beauty, to go where they kill and maim people. The commander does

not deny the fact that he is the same youth, whom all love and whom nobody can help but love, and whose life is more important to him than anything else in the world, – he does not deny this, but he calmly says, " Go, and let them kill you." His heart is compressed by double fear, the fear of death and the fear of shame, and, looking as though it did not make any difference to him whether he went to death or stayed where he is, he gets ready, pretending that he is interested in what he is going for, and also in his things and bed. He goes to the place where they kill; he goes, hoping that it is only talk about people being killed there, but that in reality there is nothing of the kind, but something else. He needs only, however, to stay half an hour on the bastions, in order to see that in reality it is more terrible, more intolerable, than he expected. In his very sight a man was agleau with joy and abloom with alacrity. And here something pings, and this man falls into the excrements of other men, – one terrible suffering, regret, and arraignment of everything taking place here.

This is terrible, but he must not look, he must not think.

He cannot help thinking: " That was he, but it will soon be I. How so ? For what ? Why I, that same I who am so good, so sweet, so dear, not only to my nurse, not only to my mother, not only to ' her,' but to so many people? How they loved me on my way down, at the station, how they were happy with me, and made me a present of a tobacco-pouch! And here they are not interested in my pouch, not even how and when they will maim this my body, these legs, these arms, and will kill me as they have killed him. Nobody is interested to know whether I shall to-day be one of those; on the contrary, it seems desirable to them that I should be.

Yes, I am of no use to any one here. And if I am not, why am I here ?" he puts the question to himself, but is unable to find an answer.

It would be well if some one would explain to him what all this is for, or, if not explain, would tell him something encouraging. But no one ever says anything of the kind. Indeed, it seems, it is impossible to say this. It would make him feel ashamed, if some one should say that to him. And so no one says anything.

" Why, then, why am I here ?" the boy calls out to himself, and he feels like crying. And there is no answer, except a morbid fainting of the heart. But the sergeant enters, and lie dissembles – Time goes on. Others are looking, or he thinks that they are looking at him, and he makes every effort in order not to disgrace himself. Not to disgrace himself, he has to act like the others: stop thinking, smoke, drink, jest, and conceal. And a day, another, a third, a week pass– The boy gets used to concealing his fear and drowning thought. What is most terrible to him is this, that he is the only one who is in such ignorance as to why he is here in this terrible condition : others, it seems to him, know something, and he wants to provoke the others to a frank conversation. He thinks that it would be easier to confess, if he knew that others are in the same terrible condition. But it seems impossible to provoke the others to a sincere conversation : the others apparently are as much afraid to speak of it as he is. It is impossible to speak of it. What they may speak of is scarps and counterscarps, porter, ranks, rations, cards, – that

is all right. And thus passes day after day ; the youth gets used to not thinking, not asking, and not speaking about what he is doing, and he none the less feels all the time that he is doing what is contrary to his whole being. Thus pass seven months, and the youth is not killed and not maimed, and the war comes to an end.

The terrible moral torture has come to an end. No one has found out how afraid he was, how he wanted to get away, and how he did not understand why he remained there. At last he can breathe freely, come to his senses, and reflect on what has happened.

" Now what has happened? For the period of seven months I was in fear and agony, concealing my suffering from everybody else. There was no exploit, that is, an act of which I may be proud; there was not even such as it would be a pleasure to recall. All the exploits reduce themselves to this, that I was food for cannon, for a long time stayed in a place where they killed a lot of men, by wounding them in their heads, their breasts, and all the parts of their bodies. But that is not my personal affair. It may have been prominent, but I was partaker in the common cause. The common cause ? What does it consist in ? They have killed dozens, thousands of men – well, what of it ? Sevastopol, that Sevastopol which was defended, has been surrendered, and the fleet has been sunk, and the keys of the temple at Jerusalem have remained where they were before, and Russia has been diminished. What of it ? Is it possible there is but one conclusion, that in my stupidity and youth I got into a terrible condition, in which I passed seven months, and that on account of my youth I was unable to get away from it ? Is that all ?" The youth is in a very advantageous position for making this inevitable logical conclusion : in the first place the war ended disgracefully and cannot be justified in any way (there is no liberation of Europe or of the Bulgarians, and so forth); in the second place, the youth has not paid such a tribute to war as that of being maimed for life, which would make it hard to recognize as a mistake what was its cause. The youth has received no special honours, the renunciation of which would be connected with the renunciation of war; the youth could tell the truth, which is this, that he accidentally got into a hopeless situation and, not knowing how to get out of it, continued to stay in it until it solved itself. The youth feels like saying this, and he would certainly say it frankly ; but suddenly the youth is surprised to hear people all about him speak of the past war, not as something disgraceful, as which it appears to him, but as something good and even unusual; he hears that the defence in which he took part was a great historic event, that it was an unheard-of defence, that those who were in Sevastopol, and he, too, were heroes above all heroes, and that his not having run away, like the staying of the artillery horse, which could not break the halter and so did not get away, was a great exploit, – that he is a hero. And so the boy listens, at first in surprise, and later with curiosity, and loses the strength to tell the whole truth, – he cannot speak against his companions and give them away; but he still wants to say part of the truth, and he composes a description of what he experienced, and in this description tries to say everything which he experienced. He

describes his position in the war: people are being killed about him; he kills people; he feels terror, disgust, and pity. But the very first question which occurs to any one – why he does it, why he does not stop and go away – the author does not answer. He does not say, as they spoke anciently, when they hated their enemies, as the Jews hated the Philistines, that he hated the allies; on the contrary, he here and there shows his sympathy for them as for his brothers. Nor does he speak of his ardent desire to have the keys of the temple at Jerusalem vested in our hands, or even that the fleet should exist or not. You felt, as you read the book, that the questions of men's life and death are not commensurable with the political questions. And the reader feels that to the question why the author did what he did there is but one answer: " Because I was taken up in my childhood, or immediately before the war, or because I accidentally fell into a condition from which I could not get out without great efforts. I fell into this condition, and when I was made to perform the most unnatural deeds in the world, – killing my brothers, who had not offended me in any way, – I preferred doing that to being subject to punishment and disgrace." And though in the book short hints are thrown out as to the love of Tsar and country, one feels that those are only a tribute to the conditions under which the author lives. Though it is assumed that, since it is good to sacrifice one's soundness and life, all the sufferings and death, which are encountered, are reasons for praising those who undergo them, one feels that the author knows that that is not true, because he does not voluntarily subject his life to danger. One feels that the author knows that there is a law of God—" love thy neighbour, and so thou shalt not kill " – which cannot be abolished by any human sophistry. In this does the worth of the book consist; but it is a pity that this is only felt and not expressed frankly and clearly. The sufferings and death of men are described, but nothing is said as to what produces them.

Thirty-five years ago that was all right, but now something else is wanted. It is necessary to describe what produces the sufferings and death at wars, in order that these causes may be found out, understood, and destroyed.

"War! How terrible war is, with its wounds, blood, and deaths," say people. " We must establish the Red Cross, in order to alleviate the wounds, the sufferings, and death." But it is not the wounds, the sufferings, death, that are terrible in war. All men, who eternally suffer and who die, ought to become accustomed to sufferings and to death, and not to be terrified by them. Even without war people die from hunger, from inundations, from infectious diseases. What is terrible is not suffering and death, but that people are permitted to produce them.

The one sentence of a man, who for the sake of curiosity asks that a certain man be hanged, and that of another, who answers, "All right, hang him, if you please," – this one sentence is full of men's death and suffering. Such a sentence, printed and read, carries death and suffering to millions. It is not suffering and crippling and bodily death, but spiritual crippling and death that should be diminished. We do not need the Red Cross, but the simple cross of Christ, in

order that the lie and deception be destroyed –

I was just finishing this preface, when a young man from the School of Yunkers came to see me. He told me that he was troubled by religious doubts. He had read Dostoevski's The Great Inquisitor, and he was troubled by doubts as to why Christ taught a doctrine which was so hard to execute. He had read none of my writings. I cautiously told him that he ought to read the Gospel and there look for answers to the questions of life. He listened and agreed with me. Before the end of our conversation

I spoke to him about wine, advising him not to drink. He said: " But in military service this is sometimes necessary." I thought, he would say, " For the sake of health, or strength," and was getting ready to vanquish him with proofs from experience and science, but he said : " For example, at Geok-Tepe, when Skobelev wanted to kill the population, the soldiers refused, and he filled them with liquor, and then –" That is where all the horrors of war are: in this boy with his fresh, youthful face, with his shoulder-straps, through which are carefully drawn the ends of the hood, with clean, blackened boots, and with his naive eyes, and so forlorn a world-conception !

That is where the horror of war is!

What millions of workers of the Red Cross will cure the wounds which swarm in these words, – the product of a whole education ?

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