

THE APPROACH OF THE END

by Leo Tolstoy

Translated from the Original Russian and edited by Leo Wiener
Assistant Professor of Slavic Languages at Harvard University

1896

This year, 1896, a young man, by the name of Van-der-Veer, was summoned in Holland to enter the national guard.

To the summons of the commander, Van-der-Veer replied in the following letter:

" THOU SHALT NOT KILL

" Mr. Herman Snijders,

" Commander of the National Guard of the Middelburg Circuit.

" Dear Sir : – Last week I received a document in which I was commanded to appear in the magistracy, in order to be enlisted according to the law in the national guard. As you, no doubt, have noticed, I did not appear ; and the present letter has for its purpose to inform you frankly, and without any ambiguities, that I have no intention of appearing before the commission ; I know full well that I subject myself to a heavy responsibility, that you can punish me, and that you will not fail to make use of this your right. But that does not frighten me. The causes which impel me to manifest this passive resistance present to me a sufficiently important counterbalance to this responsibility.

" Better than the majority of Christians, do I, who, if

you so wish, am not a Christian, understand the commandment which is standing at the head of this letter, a commandment inherent in human nature and in reason. When I was still a child, I permitted myself to be instructed in the soldier's trade, – the art of killing; but now I refuse. More than anything else, do I not wish to kill by command, which appears as murder against my conscience, without any personal impulse or any foundation whatever. Can you name to me anything more degrading for a human being than the commission of similar murders or slaughter ? I cannot kill an animal, nor see it killed, and not to kill animals, I became a vegetarian. In the present case I may be ' commanded ' to shoot men who have never done me any harm : soldiers certainly do not study the manual of arms, I suppose, in order to shoot at leaves on the branches of trees.

" But you will perhaps tell me that the national guard must also and

above everything else cooperate in the maintenance of internal order.

" Mr. Commander, if there really existed any order in our society ; if the social organism were indeed sound ; in other words, if there did not exist such crying misuses in our social relations ; if it were not permitted that one man should starve to death, while another permits himself all the lusts of luxury, – you would see me in the first ranks of the defenders of this order; but I unconditionally refuse to cooperate in the maintenance of the present so-called order. What is the use, Mr. Commander, of pulling the wool over each other's eyes ? We both of us know full well what is meant by the maintenance of this order: it is the support of the rich against the poor workers who are beginning to become conscious of their right. Did you not see the part which your national guard played during the last strike in Rotterdam ? Without any reason this guard was compelled for whole hours to do service for the purpose of protecting the property of the business firms that were threatened. Can you for a moment suppose that I will surrender myself to take part in the defence of men who, according to my sincere conviction, are supporting the war between capital and labour, – that I will shoot at the working men who are acting entirely within the limits of their rights ? You cannot be so blind as that ! Why complicate matters ? I cannot, indeed, have myself cut out into an obedient national guardsman, such as you wish to have and as you need '

" On the basis of all these causes, but especially because I despise murder by command, I refuse to serve in the capacity of a member of the national guard, and ask you to send me neither uniform, nor weapons, since I have the imperturbable intention of not using them.

" I greet you, Mr. Commander.

" I. K. Van – der – Veer."

This letter has, in my opinion, a very great importance. Refusals to do military service in Christian countries began as soon as military service made its appearance in them, or, rather, when the countries whose power is based on violence, accepted Christianity, without renouncing violence.

In reality it cannot be otherwise : a Christian, whose teaching prescribes to him meekness, non-resistance to evil, love of all men, even of his neighbour, cannot be martial, that is, cannot belong to a class of men who are destined only to kill their like.

And so true Christians have always refused, and even now refuse, to do military service.

But there have always been few true Christians ; the vast majority of men in Christian countries have only counted among Christians, those who profess the ecclesiastic faith, which has nothing but the name in common with true Christianity. The fact that now and then there appeared, to tens of thousands entering military service, one

who refused it, did not in the least disturb those hundreds of thousands, those millions of men who every year entered military service.

" It is impossible that the whole vast majority of men who enter military service should be mistaken, and that the truth should be with the exceptions, who frequently are uneducated men, who refuse to do military service, while archbishops and scholars recognize it to be compatible with Christianity," said the people of the majority, who, considering themselves Christians, calmly entered into the ranks of murderers.

But here there appears a non-Christian, as he announces himself, and he refuses to do military service, not from religious reasons, but from such as are comprehensible and common to all men, no matter of what faith or what nationality they may be, – whether Catholics, Mohammedans, Buddhists, Confucianists, Spaniards, Arabians, Japanese.

Van-der-Veer refused to do military service, not because he follows the commandment, " Thou shall not kill," but because he considers murder to be contrary to human reason. He writes that he simply hates any murder, and hates it to such an extent that he became a vegetarian, only not to take part in the murder of animals; above all, he says, he refuses to do military service, because he considers murder by command, that is, the duty of killing those men whom he is ordered to kill (wherein indeed military service consists), to be incompatible with human dignity. To the customary retort that, if he does not serve, and others, following his example, refuse to serve, the existing order will be violated, he answers by saying that he does not even wish to support the existing order, because it is bad, because in it the rich rule over the poor, which ought not to be, so that even if he had any doubts as to whether he ought to serve in the army or not, the mere thought that, serving in the army, he will by means of weapons and the threat of murder support the oppressing rich against the oppressed poor, would make him refuse to do military service.

If Van-der-Veer had brought forward as the reason of his refusal his belonging to some Christian denomination, men who entered military service could say, " I am not a sectarian and do not acknowledge Christianity, and so do not consider it necessary to act likewise." But the causes adduced by Van-der-Veer are so simple, clear, and common to all men that it is impossible not to apply them to oneself. After this to recognize these causes as not binding, a person will have to say, " I love murder and am prepared to kill, not only enemies, but even my oppressed and unfortunate compatriots, and I do not find anything wrong in promising at the command of the first commander I run across to kill all those whom he commands me to kill."

The matter is, indeed, very simple.

Here is a young man. No matter in what surroundings, what family,

what faith, he may have grown up, he is taught the necessity of being good and that it is bad to kill, not only a man, but even an animal; he is taught to esteem highly his human dignity, and this dignity consists in acting according to one's conscience. A Chinese Confucianist, a Japanese Shintoist or Buddhist, a Turkish Mohammedan are all of them taught the same. Suddenly, after he has been taught all this, he enters military service, where the very opposite of what he has been taught is demanded of him : he is commanded to be ready to wound and kill, not animals, but men ; he is commanded to renounce his human dignity and in matters of murder to obey unknown strangers. What can a man of our time say to such a demand ? Obviously only this : " I do not want to, and I won't."

This is precisely what Van-der-Veer did. And it is hard to imagine what we can retort to him and to all men who, being in the same position as he, must act in the same way.

It is possible not to see what has not yet attracted attention, and not to understand the meaning of an act so long as it is not explained ; but once it is pointed out and explained, we cannot avoid seeing it, or pretend that we do not see what is quite clear.

Even now there may be found a man who has not thought of what he is doing as he enters military service ; there may be found men who wish for war with other nations, or wish to continue oppressing the working men, or even such as love murder for the sake of murder. Such men may become warriors, but even these men cannot now help but know that there are men, - the best men of the whole world, not only among Christians, but also among Mohammedans, Brahmins, Buddhists, Con-fucianists, - who look with loathing and disgust upon war and the military, and the number of these men is growing with every hour. No arguments can veil the simple truth that a man who respects himself cannot go into slavery to a strange master, or even to one he knows, who has murderous intentions. In this only does military service with its discipline consist.

" But the responsibility to which the person refusing subjects himself ?" I am told in reply to this. " It is all very well for you, an old man, who are no longer subject to this temptation and are secure in your position, to preach martyrdom ; but how is it for those to whom you preach and who, believing you, decline to serve and ruin their youthful lives ? "

But what am I to do ? I answer those who tell me this. Must I, because I am an old man, refuse to point out the evil which I see clearly and beyond any doubt, simply because I am an old man and have lived through much and thought much ? Must not a man who is on the other side of a river and thus inaccessible to a murderer, and who sees that this murderer is about to compel one man to kill another, cry out to the man who is to kill not to do so, even if this interference may still more embitter the murderer ? Besides, I fail to see why the government, which subjects to persecution those who refuse to do military service, will not inflict punishment upon me, since it recognizes me as the instigator of these refusals. I am

not so old as not to be subjected to persecutions and punishments of every kind, and my position does not in the least protect me. In any case, whether they will condemn and persecute me or not, whether they will condemn and persecute those who refuse to do military service, I shall never stop, so long as I live, saying what I am saying, because I cannot stop acting in accordance with my conscience.

Christianity, that is, the teaching of truth, is powerful and invincible for the very reason that, in order to act upon people, it cannot be guided by any external considerations. Whether a man be young or old, whether he be subjected to persecutions for it, or not, he, having made the Christian, that is, the true, life-conception his own, cannot depart from the demands of his conscience. In this does the essence and peculiarity of Christianity consist, in contradistinction to all the other religious teachings, and in this does its invincible might lie.

Van-der-Veer says that he is not a Christian, but the motives of his refusal and his act are Christian : he refuses to serve, because he does not wish to kill a brother, he does not obey, because the commands of his conscience are more obligatory to him than the commands of men. It is for this reason that Van-der-Veer's refusal is especially important. This refusal shows that Christianity is not a sect or a faith, which some men may keep, and others may not keep, but that it is nothing but a following in life of that light of the comprehension which shines upon all men. The meaning of Christianity is not in its having prescribed to men certain acts, but in its having foreseen and pointed out the path on which all humanity had to walk and actually did walk.

Men who now act well and sensibly do not do so because they follow Christ's injunctions, but because what eighteen hundred years ago was expressed as a direction of an activity has now become the consciousness of men.

This is why I think that Van-der-Veer's act and letter are of great importance.

Just as a fire started in the prairie or the forest does not subside until it has consumed everything dry and dead, which, therefore, is subject to consumption, so also a truth once expressed in words does not cease acting until it has destroyed the whole lie which is subject to annihilation and which surrounds and conceals the truth on all sides. The fire glimmers for a long time, but the moment it bursts into flame, it soon consumes everything which burns. Even so a thought for a long time begs for recognition, without finding any expression; it need but find a clear expression in speech, and the lie and the evil are soon destroyed. One of the special manifestations of Christianity, – the idea that humanity can live without slavery, – though included in the idea of Christianity, was clearly expressed, so far as I know, not earlier than the end of the eighteenth century. Up to that time not only the ancient pagans, Plato and Aristotle, but even men who were nearer to our time and

Christians could not imagine human society without slavery. Thomas Moore could not imagine Utopia even without slavery. Even so the men of the beginning of the present century could not imagine the life of humanity without war. Only after the Napoleonic wars was the thought clearly expressed that humanity can live without slavery. One hundred years have passed since the time when the idea was clearly enunciated that humanity can live without slavery, and among Christians there is no longer any slavery ; and less than a hundred years will pass from the time that the idea has been clearly enunciated that humanity can live without war, and there will be no war. It is very likely that war will not be fully abolished, even as slavery is not fully abolished. It is very likely that military violence will remain, just as hired labour remained after the abolition of slavery, but in any case war and the army will be abolished in that coarse form which is contrary to reason and to the moral sentiment, and in which they now exist.

There are very many signs that this time is near. These signs are to be found in the hopeless condition of the governments, which keep increasing their armies, and in the growing burden of taxes, and in the dissatisfaction of the nations, and in the instruments of war, which are carried to the highest degree of destructiveness, and in the activity of the congresses and the peace societies, but chiefly in the refusal of individual persons to do military service. In these refusals does the key lie to the solution of the question.

" You say that military service is indispensable, that if it did not exist, we should be overcome by terrible calamities. All this may be possible, but with that conception of good and evil which is common to all men of our time and even to you, I cannot kill men by command. Thus if, as you say, military service is very necessary, make it such that it will not be in such contradiction with my conscience and with yours. So long as you have not arranged it so, but demand of me what is directly opposed to my conscience, I am not at all able to obey."

Thus inevitably must answer, and soon will answer, all the honest and sensible men, not only of our Christian world, but also the Mohammedans and the so-called pagans, – the Brahmins, Buddhists, and Confucianists. Maybe war will from inertia last for some time yet, but the question is already solved in the consciousness of men, and with every day, with every hour, a growing number of men are coming to the same conclusion, and it is now quite impossible to arrest this movement.

Every recognition of a truth by men, or rather, every liberation from some error, – so it was visibly with slavery, – is always obtained through a struggle between men's clearer consciousness and the inertia of the previous state.

At first the inertia is so strong and the consciousness so feeble that the first attempt at a liberation from error is only met with surprise. The new truth presents itself as madness. " How can we live without slavery ? Who will work? How can we live without war?

Everybody will come and will conquer us." But the power of consciousness keeps growing, the inertia keeps diminishing, and the surprise gives way to ridicule and contempt. " Holy Writ recognizes masters and slaves. Such a relation has existed since eternity ; and suddenly wiseacres have appeared who want to change the whole world," was what people said of slavery. " All the learned and the sages have recognized the legality and even the sanctity of war, and suddenly we are to believe that we must wage no war ' " people say of war. But the consciousness keeps growing and being clarified ; the number of men who recognize the new truth keeps growing larger, and ridicule and contempt give way to cunning and deception. The men who have been supporting the error make it appear that they understand and recognize the incompatibility and cruelty of the measure which they are defending, but consider its abolition impossible at present, and delay the abolition for an indefinite time.

" Who does not know that slavery is bad ; but men are not yet prepared for freedom, and the emancipation will produce terrible calamities," they said of slavery forty years ago. " Who does not know that war is evil?" But the thought does its work, grows, and burns the lie, and the time arrives when the madness, aimlessness, harm, and immorality of the delusion are so clear (so it was within our memory, in the sixties, in Itussia and in America) that it is impossible to defend it. So it is now in the case of war. Just as then they no longer tried to justify slavery, but only maintained it, so they do not try now to justify war and the army, but only keep silent, making use of the inertia, which still holds up war and the army, knowing very well that all this apparently powerful, cruel, and immoral organization of murder may any moment come down with a crash, never to rise again. It is enough for one drop of water to ooze through a dam, or for one brick to fall out of a large building, or for one mesh to come loose in the strongest net, in order that the dam should be broken, the building come to its fall, the net go to pieces. Such a drop, such a brick, such a loosened mesh to me appears to be Van-der-Veer's refusal, which is explained by causes that are common to all humanity. After Van-der-Veer's refusal other refusals must follow ever more frequently, and as soon as there shall be many such refusals, the same men who but yesterday said (their name is legion) that it is impossible to live without war, will say that they have for a long time been preaching the madness and immorality of war, will advise you to act like Van-der-Veer, and of war and the army, in the form in which it now exists, there will be left nothing but a recollection.

This time is near at hand.

Ydsnaya Polyana, September 24., 1896.