

Leo Tolstoy

What's to be Done?

About a month ago two young men came to see me. One had on a cap and peasant bark-shoes ; the other wore a black hat that had once been fashionable, and torn boots.

I asked them who they were. With unconcealed pride they informed me that they were workmen, expelled from Moscow where they had taken part in the armed rising. Passing our village, they had found occupation as watchmen in a garden, but had lived there less than a month. The day before they came to me, the owner of the garden had dismissed them, charging them with persuading the peasants to attack the garden and lay it waste. They denied the charge with a smile, saying they had persuaded no one, they only went into the village of an evening and chatted with their fellows.

They both, particularly the bolder, smiling one, who had sparkling black eyes and white teeth, had read revolutionary literature; and they both used foreign words, in and out of place, such as "orator," "proletariat," "Social-Democrat," "exploitation," etc.

I asked them what they had read. The darker one replied with a smile, that he had read various pamphlets.

I asked, " Which ? "

" All sorts: ' Land and Liberty,' for instance."

I then asked them what they thought of such pamphlets,

" They tell the real truth," replied the dark one.

" What is it that is so true in them ? " I asked.

"Why, that it has become impossible to go on living so."

"Why is it impossible ?"

" Why ? We have neither land nor work, and the Government throttles the people, without sense or reason."

And, interrupting one another, they began to tell how the Cossacks flogged the people with their heavy whips ; how the police seized people haphazard, and shot people in their own houses, who had done nothing wrong.

On my arguing that an armed rebellion was a bad and irrational affair, the dark one smiled and quietly replied: "We are of a different opinion."

When I spoke of the sin of murder, and about the law of God, they exchanged glances, and the darker one shrugged his shoulders.

"Does the law of God say they are to be allowed to exploit the proletariat?" replied he. "That used to be so, but now people understand better, and it can't go on ..."

I brought them out some booklets, chiefly on religious subjects. They glanced at the titles and were evidently not pleased.

"Perhaps you don't care for them ; if so, don't take them."

"No ! why not?" said the darker one, and, putting them into the breasts of their blouses, they took their leave.

Though I have not been reading the papers, yet from the talk of my family, from letters I receive, and from accounts given by visitors, I knew what had been going on in Russia recently ; and just because I do not read the papers, I knew particularly well of the amazing change that has latterly taken place in the views held by our society and by the people, a change which amounts to this, that whereas formerly people considered the Government to be necessary, now all, except a very few, consider the activity of the Government to be criminal and wrong, and put the blame for all the disturbances on the Government alone. That is the opinion of professors, postal officials, authors, shopkeepers, doctors and workmen alike. This feeling was strengthened by the dissolution of the first Duma, and has reached its highest point as a result of the cruel measures the Government has lately adopted.

I knew this. But my talk with these two men had a great effect on me. Like the shock which suddenly turns freezing liquid into ice, it suddenly turned a whole series of similar impressions I had received before, into a definite and indubitable conviction.

After my talk with them, I saw clearly that all the crimes the Government is now committing in order to crush the Revolution, not only fail to crush it, but inflame it the more; and that if the Revolutionary movement appears for a time to die down under the cruelties of the Government, it will not be destroyed, but will merely be temporarily hidden, and will inevitably spring up again with new and increased strength. The fire is now in such a state that any contact with it can but increase its fierceness. It became clear to me that the only thing that could help would be, the cessation by the Government of all and every attempt to enforce its will; the cessation not only of executions and arrests, but of all banishing, persecuting and proscribing. Only in that way can this horrible strife between brutalised people be brought to an end.

It became perfectly clear to me that the only means of stopping the horrors that are being committed, and the perversion of the people, is the resignation by Government of its power. I was convinced that that was the best thing the Government can now do ; but I was equally firmly convinced that any such proposal, were I to make it,

would be received merely as an indication that I was quite insane. And therefore, though it was perfectly clear to me that the continuance of governmental cruelty can only make things worse and not better, I did not attempt to write, or even to speak, about it.

Nearly a month has passed, and unfortunately my supposition finds more and more confirmation. There are more and more executions, and more and more murders and robberies. I knew this both from conversation and from chance glances at the papers; and I knew that the mood of the people and of society had become more and more embittered against the Government.

And a couple of days ago the following happened :

When I was out riding, a young man in a pea-jacket and wearing a curious blue cap with a straight crown, who was driving in a peasant cart in the same direction as I, jumped off his cart and came up to me.

He was a short man, with small, red moustaches, an unhealthy complexion, and a clever, harsh face with a dissatisfied expression.

He asked me for booklets, and did this evidently as an excuse for entering into conversation.

I asked him where he came from.

He was a peasant from a distant village, from which the wives of some men who have been imprisoned lately, had been to see me.

It is a village I know well, and in which it fell to my lot to administer the Charter of Liberation¹ ; and I always admired the particularly handsome and bold type of peasants who live there. From that village specially talented pupils used to come to my school.

I asked him about the peasants who had been sent to prison. With the same assurance and absence of doubt that I had recently met with in everyone—the same full confidence that the Government alone is to blame—he told me that though they had done no wrong, they had been seized, beaten and imprisoned.

Only with great difficulty could I get him to explain what they were accused of.

It turned out that they were " orators," and held meetings at which the necessity of expropriating the land was spoken of.

I said that the establishment of the equal right of all to the use of the land cannot be established by violence.

He did not agree.

" Why not ? " said he ; " we only need to organize."

" How will you organize ? " asked I.

" That will be seen, when the time comes."

" Do you mean, another armed rising ? "

" It has become a painful necessity."

I said (what I always say in such cases) that evil cannot be conquered by evil, but only by not doing evil.

" But it has become impossible to live so. We have no work and no land. What's to become of us ? " said he, looking at me from under his brows.

" I am old enough to be your grandfather," said I, " and I won't argue with you ; but I will say one thing to you as to a young man beginning life. If what the Government is doing is bad, what you are doing, or are preparing to do, is equally bad. You, as a young man forming your habits, should do one thing: you should live rightly, not sinning or resisting the will of God."

He shook his head, dissatisfied, and said,

" Every man has his own God. Millions of men—millions of Gods."

" All the same," said I, " I advise you to cease taking part in the Revolution."

"What's to be done?" replied he. "One can't go on enduring and enduring. What's to be done ? "

I felt that no good would come of our talk and wished to ride away, but he stopped me.

"Won't you help me to subscribe for a newspaper ?" said he.

I refused and rode away from him, feeling sad.

He was not one of those factory unemployed of whom thousands are now roaming Russia; but he was a peasant agriculturist living in the village, and there are not hundreds nor thousands but millions of such peasants ; and the infection of such a mood as his is spreading more and more.

On returning home, I found my family in the saddest frame of mind. They had just read the newspaper that had come (it was the 6th October, old style).

"Twenty-two more executions to-day! It is horrible," said my daughter.

" Not only horrible, but senseless," said I.

" But what's to be done ? They cannot be allowed to rob and kill, and go unpunished," said one of those present.

The words : What's to be done ? were the very words those two vagabonds from the garden, and to-day's peasant revolutionary, had used.

" It is impossible to endure these insensate horrors committed by a corrupt Government which is ruining both the country and the people. We hate the means we have to employ, but What's to be done ? " say the Revolutionists on the one side.

-r " One cannot allow some self-selected pretenders to seize power and rule Russia as they like, perverting and ruining it. Of course the temporary measures now employed are lamentable, but What's to be done?" say the others, the Conservatives.

And I thought of people near to me—Revolutionists and Conservatives, and of to-day's peasant, and of those unfortunate, Revolutionists who import and prepare bombs, and who murder and rob, and of the equally pitiable, lost men, who decree and organise the Courts-martial, take part in them and shoot and hang, assuring themselves (all of them alike) that they are doing what is necessary, and, all alike, repeating the same words : What's to be done ?

What's to be done ? say both these and those, but they do not put it as a question : " What ought I to do ? " They put it forward as an assertion that it will be much worse for everyone if we cease to do what we are doing.

And everyone is so accustomed to these words, which hide an explanation and a justification of the most horrible and immoral actions, that it enters no one's head to ask : " Who are you, who ask, What's to be done ? Who are you, that you consider yourselves called on to decide other people's fate by actions which all men (even you yourselves) know to be odious and wicked ? How do you know that what you wish to alter, should be altered in the way that seems good to you ? Do you not know that there are many men such as you, who consider bad and harmful what you consider good and useful ? And how do you know that what you are doing will produce the results you expect. especially as you cannot but be aware that (particularly in affairs relating to the life of a whole nation) the results attained are generally contrary to those aimed at ? And above all, what right have you to do what is contrary to the law of God (if you acknowledge a God), or to the most generally accepted laws of morality (if you acknowledge nothing but the generally accepted laws of morality) : by what right do you consider yourselves freed from those most simple, indubitable, human obligations, which are irreconcilable with your Revolutionary (or with your Governmental) acts ? "

If your question : What's to be done ? is really a question, and not a justification ; and if you put it—as you should do—to yourselves, a quite clear and simple answer naturally suggests itself. The

answer is that you must do, not what the Tsar, Governor, police-officers, Duma, or some political party demands of you, but what is natural to you as a man, what is demanded of you by that Power which sent you into the world—the Power most people are accustomed to call God.

And as soon as one gives this reply to the question, What's to be done? that stupid, crime-begetting fog is at once dispelled, under whose influence, for some reason, men imagine that they alone, of all men—they (perhaps the most entangled and the most astray from the true path of life) are called on to decide the fate of millions, and for the questionable benefit of these millions to commit deeds which, not questionably but evidently, produce disasters to these millions.

There exists a general law, acknowledged by all reasonable men, confirmed by tradition, by all the religions of all the nations, and by true science. This law is that men, to fulfil their destiny and attain their greatest welfare, should help one another, love one another, and in any case should not attack one another's liberty and life. Yet, strange to say, people appear who assure us that it is quite needless to obey this law, and that there are cases in which one may and should act contrary to it; and that such deviations from the eternal law will bring more welfare, both to individuals and to societies, than the fulfilment of the reasonable, supreme law common to all humanity.

The workmen in a vast, complex factory have received from the master clear instructions, accepted by them themselves, as to what they should and should not do, both that the works may go well, and for their own welfare. But people turn up who have no idea of what the works produce or of how it is produced, and they assure the workmen that they should cease to do what the master has ordered, and should do just the contrary, in order that the works may go properly and the workers obtain the greatest benefit.

Is that not just what these people are doing—unable as they are to grasp all the consequences flowing from the general activity of humanity? They not only do not obey those eternal laws (common to all mankind and confirmed by the human intellect) framed for the success of that complex human activity, as well as for the benefit of its individual members, but they break them, directly and consciously, for the sake of some small, one-sided, 'casual aims set up by some of themselves (generally the most erring) under the impression (forgetting that others imagine quite the contrary) that they will thereby attain results more beneficial than those attained by fulfilling the eternal law common to all men and consonant with the nature of man.

I know that to men suffering from that spiritual disease: political obsession, a plain and clear answer to the question, What's to be done? an answer telling them to obey the highest law common to all mankind, the law of love to one's neighbour, will appear abstract and unpractical; an answer which would seem to them practical, would

be one telling them that men, who cannot know the consequences of their actions, and cannot know whether they will be alive an hour hence, but who do know very well that every murder and act of violence is bad, should nevertheless— under the fanciful pretext that they are establishing other people's future welfare—unceasingly act as if they knew quite surely what consequences their actions will produce, and as if they did not know that to kill and torment people is bad, but only knew that such or such a monarchy or constitution is desirable.

That will be the case with many who are suffering from the spiritual disease of political obsession, but I think the great majority of people suffering from all the horrors and crimes done by men who are so diseased, will at last understand the terrible deception under which those lie who acknowledge coercive power used by man to man as rightful and beneficent; and having understood this, they will free themselves for ever from the madness and wickedness of either participating in force—using power, or submitting to it; and will understand that each man should do one thing, namely : should fulfil what is demanded of him by the reasonable and beneficent Source, which men call "God," of whose demands no man possessed of reason can fail to be conscious.

I cannot but think that if all men, forgetting their various positions as ministers, policemen, presidents and members of various combative or non-combative parties, would only do the deeds natural to each of them as a human being—not only would those horrors and sufferings cease, of which the life of man (especially the life of Russian people) is now full, but the Kingdom of God would have come upon earth.

If only some people acted so, the more of them there were, the less evil would there be, and the more good order and general welfare.

1

The only official position Tolstoy ever held, after he left the army, was that of "Arbiter of the Peace" in 1861-2. In that capacity it fell to his lot to regulate the relations between the landlords and the newly-emancipated serfs in his district. (Trans.)