

An excerpt From Leo Tolstoy, Resurrection

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR

When Nekhludoff knew Selenin as a student, he was a good son, a true friend, and for his years an educated man of the world, with much tact; elegant, handsome, and at the same time truthful and honest. He learned well, without much exertion and with no pedantry, receiving gold medals for his essays. He considered the service of mankind, not only in words but in acts, to be the aim of his young life. He saw no other way of being useful to humanity than by serving the State. Therefore, as soon as he had completed his studies, he systematically examined all the activities to which he might devote his life, and decided to enter the Second Department of the Chancellerie, where the laws are drawn up, and he did so. But, in spite of the most scrupulous and exact discharge of the duties demanded of him, this service gave no satisfaction to his desire of being useful, nor could he awake in himself the consciousness that he was doing "the right thing."

This dissatisfaction was so much increased by the friction with his very small-minded and vain fellow officials that he left the Chancellerie and entered the Senate. It was better there, but the same dissatisfaction still pursued him; he felt it to be very different from what he had expected, and from what ought to be.

And now that he was in the Senate his relatives obtained for him the post of Gentleman of the Bedchamber, and he had to go in a carriage, dressed in an embroidered uniform and a white linen apron, to thank all sorts of people for having placed him in the position of a lackey.

However much he tried he could find no reasonable explanation for the existence of this post, and felt, more than in the Senate, that it was not "the right thing," and yet he could not refuse it for fear of hurting those who felt sure they were giving him much pleasure by this appointment, and because it flattered the lowest part of his nature. It pleased him to see himself in a mirror in his gold embroidered uniform, and to accept the deference paid him by some people because of his position.

Something of the same kind happened when he married. A very brilliant match, from a worldly point of view, was arranged for him, and he married chiefly because by refusing he would have had to hurt the young lady who wished to be married to him, and those who arranged the marriage, and also because a marriage with a nice young girl of noble birth flattered his vanity and gave him pleasure.

But this marriage very soon proved to be even less "the right thing" than the

Government service and his position at Court. After the birth of her first child the wife decided to have no more, and began leading that luxurious worldly life in which he now had to participate whether he liked or not.

She was not particularly handsome, and was faithful to him, and she seemed, in spite of all the efforts it cost her, to derive nothing but weariness from the life she led, yet she perseveringly continued to live it, though it was poisoning her husband's life. And all his efforts to alter this life was shattered, as against a stone wall, by her conviction, which all her friends and relatives supported, that all was as it should be.

The child, a little girl with bare legs and long golden curls, was a being perfectly foreign to him, chiefly because she was trained quite otherwise than he wished her to be. There sprung up between the husband and wife the usual misunderstanding, without even the wish to understand each other, and then a silent warfare, hidden from outsiders and tempered by decorum. All this made his life at home a burden, and became even less "the right thing" than his service and his post.

But it was above all his attitude towards religion which was not "the right thing." Like every one of his set and his time, by the growth of his reason he broke without the least effort the nets of the religious superstitions in which he was brought up, and did not himself exactly know when it was that he freed himself of them. Being earnest and upright, he did not, during his youth and intimacy with Nekhludoff as a student, conceal his rejection of the State religion. But as years went on and he rose in the service, and especially at the time of the reaction towards conservatism in society, his spiritual freedom stood in his way.

At home, when his father died, he had to be present at the masses said for his soul, and his mother wished him to go to confession or to communion, and it was in a way expected, by public opinion, but above all, Government service demanded that he should be present at all sorts of services, consecrations, thanksgivings, and the like. Hardly a day passed without some outward religious form having to be observed.

When present at these services he had to pretend that he believed in something which he did not believe in, and being truthful he could not do this. The alternative was, having made up his mind that all these outward signs were deceitful, to alter his life in such a way that he would not have to be present at such ceremonials. But to do what seemed so simple would have cost a great deal. Besides encountering the perpetual hostility of all those who were near to him, he would have to give up the service and his position, and sacrifice his hopes of being useful to humanity by his service, now and in the future.

To make such a sacrifice one would have to be firmly convinced of being right.

And he was firmly convinced he was right, as no educated man of our time can help being convinced who knows a little history and how the religions, and especially Church Christianity, originated.

But under the stress of his daily life he, a truthful man, allowed a little falsehood to creep in. He said that in order to do justice to an unreasonable thing one had to study the unreasonable thing. It was a little falsehood, but it sunk him into the big falsehood in which he was now caught.

Before putting to himself the question whether the orthodoxy in which he was born and bred, and which every one expected him to accept, and without which he could not continue his useful occupation, contained the truth, he had already decided the answer. And to clear up the question he did not read Voltaire, Schopenhauer, Herbert Spencer, or Comte, but the philosophical works of Hegel and the religious works of Vinet and Khomyakoff, and naturally found in them what he wanted, i.e., something like peace of mind and a vindication of that religious teaching in which he was educated, which his reason had long ceased to accept, but without which his whole life was filled with unpleasantness which could all be removed by accepting the teaching.

And so he adopted all the usual sophistries which go to prove that a single human reason cannot know the truth, that the truth is only revealed to an association of men, and can only be known by revelation, that revelation is kept by the church, etc. And so he managed to be present at prayers, masses for the dead, to confess, make signs of the cross in front of icons, with a quiet mind, without being conscious of the lie, and to continue in the service which gave him the feeling of being useful and some comfort in his joyless family life. Although he believed this, he felt with his entire being that this religion of his, more than all else, was not "the right thing," and that is why his eyes always looked sad.

And seeing Nekhludoff, whom he had known before all these lies had rooted themselves within him, reminded him of what he then was. It was especially after he had hurried to hint at his religious views that he had most strongly felt all this "not the right thing," and had become painfully sad. Nekhludoff felt it also after the first joy of meeting his old friend had passed, and therefore, though they promised each other to meet, they did not take any steps towards an interview, and did not again see each other during this stay of Nekhludoff's in Petersburg.