

Notes From My Visit With Leo Tolstoy

Henry George, Jr.

[From a visit made in 1909 by Henry George, Jr. with Leo Tolstoy at Tolstoy's home in Russia. Reprinted in condensed form from the typewritten original found among George's papers housed at the Henry George birthplace, Philadelphia, PA, 2005]

"I am now quite old - eighty-one. I do not expect to stay much longer."

These were among Count Tolstoy's first words to me at my only visit to him at Yasnay Polyana, in the Government of Tula a few miles south of Moscow. It was on the 18th of June, 1909.

For all his four-score and more of years, Tolstoy did not appear to be so much feeble with age as delicate, and his words indicated his purpose of spirit to die with his armor on - if it be only spiritual armor. He said "one of my feet has to be nursed. But I am keeping at work."

The work was one on morals, which I do not believe has yet appeared, but some ideas of his range of thoughts and mental activity may be gathered from an article which he dictated and gave out to the Russian newspapers in expectation of my visit. I will quote briefly from the translation which I subsequently had made for me in London in proof of this mental vigor.

"The land question is, indeed, the question of the deliverance of mankind from slavery produced by the private ownership of land, which, to my mind, is now in the same situation in which the questions of serfdom in Russia and slavery in America were in the days of my youth."

"The difference is only that, while the injustice of the private ownership of land is quite as crying as that of slave ownership, it is much more widely and deeply connected with all human relations; it extends to all parts of the world (slavery existed only in America and Russia) and is much more tormenting to the land slave than personal slavery.

"It will and must be solved in one way alone: by the recognition of the equal right of every man to live upon and to be nourished by the land on which he was born - that same principle which is so invincibly proved by the teachings of Henry George."

I must confess to having had some secret misgivings as to the justification of Tolstoy's manner of living - his putting on the poor man's garb, doing manual labor and affecting a simplicity which the scoffers called theatrical and which in my own heart I had at times thought at least eccentric, but all this cleared away in an instant on standing before the master of Yasnaya Polyana. I saw in him nothing of the eccentric, the show-man, or the poseur. It was the man born to high station, of aristocratic rank by family right and genius who was trying in the midst of a vast despotism not to debase himself, but to be of the plain people, as Lincoln loved to call those from whom he himself had sprung. It was the striving of a great mind to strip off of the flesh and to be re-born

in spirit from the most primary physical conditions.

To take the first step toward understanding Tolstoy one must remember that the Russian Empire embraces more than a hundred millions of people divided into a hundred nations and scattered over one great stretch of continuing territory that makes one-seventh of the dry land of the earth. It is an agricultural country; a country of farms and little towns; with a people for the most part primitive in their ways and thoughts and practicing a religion reflecting the rites and ceremonies of the middle ages - a people supporting the splendour of the Imperial Court at St. Petersburg and supported by a vast secret and open police system and the greatest standing army on the globe.