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The Beginning of the End

Leo Tolstoy

1896

During last year, in Holland, a young man named Van der Veer was called on to enter the National Guard. To the summons of the commander, Van der Veer answered in the following letter:—

”Thou Shalt do no Murder.”

To M. Herman Sneyders, *Commandant of the National Guard of the Midelburg district.*

Dear Sir,—Last week I received a document ordering me to appear at the municipal office, to be, according to law, enlisted in the National Guard. As you probably noticed, I did not appear, and this letter is to inform you, plainly and without equivocation, that I do not intend to appear before the commission. I know well that I am taking a heavy responsibility, that you have the right to punish me, and that you will not fail to use this right. But that does not frighten me. The reasons which lead me to this passive resistance seem to me strong enough to outweigh the responsibility I take.

I, who, if you please, am not a Christian, understand better than most Christians the commandment which is put at the head of this letter, the commandment which is rooted in human nature, in the mind of man. When but a boy, I allowed myself

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to be taught the trade of soldier, the art of killing; but now I renounce it. I would not kill at the command of others, and thus have murder on my conscience without any personal cause or reason whatever.

Can you mention anything more degrading to a human being than carrying out such murder, such massacre? I am unable to kill, even to see an animal killed; therefore I became a vegetarian. And now I am to be ordered to shoot men who have done me no harm; for I take it that it is not to shoot at leaves and branches of trees that soldiers are taught to use guns.

But you will reply, perhaps, that the National Guard is besides, and especially, to keep civic order.

M. Commandant, if order really reigned in our society, if the social organism were really healthy—in other words, if there were in our social relations no crying abuses, if it were not established that one man shall die of hunger while another gratifies his every whim of luxury, then you would see me in the front ranks of the defenders of this orderly state. But I flatly decline to help in preserving the present so-called "social order." Why, M. Commandant, should we throw dust in each other's eyes? We both know quite well what the "preservation of order" means: upholding the rich against the poor toilers, who begin to perceive their rights. Do we not know the role which the National Guard played in the last strike at Rotterdam? For no reason, the Guard had to be on duty hours and hours to watch over the property of the commercial houses which were affected. Can you for a moment suppose that I should shoot down working-people who are acting quite within their rights? You cannot be so blind. Why then complicate the question? Certainly, it is impossible for me to allow myself to be molded into an obedient National Guardsman such as you want and must have.

For all these reasons, but especially because I hate murder by order, I refuse to serve as a National Guardsman, and ask

were made to justify slavery, but only to maintain it; so to-day no man attempts any longer to justify war and armies, but only tries, in silence, to use the inertia which still supports them, knowing very well that this cruel and immoral organization for murder, which seems so powerful, may at any moment crumble down, never more to be raised.

Once a drop of water oozes through the dam, once a brick falls out from a great building, once a mesh comes loose in the strongest net—the dam bursts, the building falls, the net unweaves. Such a drop, such a brick, such a loosed mesh, it seems to me, is the refusal of Van der Veer, explained by reasons universal to all mankind.

Upon this refusal of Van der Veer like refusals must follow more and more often. As soon as these become numerous, the very men (their name is legion) who the day before said, "It is impossible to live without war," will say at once that they have this long time declared the madness and immorality of war, and they will advise everybody to follow Van der Veer's example. Then, of wars and armies, as these are now, there will remain only the recollection.

And this time is coming.

January 6, 1897.

you not to send me either uniform or arms, because I have a fixed resolve not to use them.—I greet you, M. Commandant,

J. K. Van der Veer.

This letter, in my opinion, has great importance. Refusals of military service in Christian states began when in Christian states military service appeared. Or rather when the states, the power of which rests upon violence, laid claim to Christianity without giving up violence. In truth, it cannot be otherwise. A Christian, whose doctrine enjoins upon him humility, nonresistance to evil, love to all (even to the most malicious), cannot be a soldier; that is, he cannot join a class of men whose business is to kill their fellow-men. Therefore it is that these Christians have always refused and now refuse military service.

But of true Christians there have always been but few. Most people in Christian countries count as Christians only those who profess the doctrines of some Church, which doctrines have nothing in common, except the name, with true Christianity. That occasionally one in tens of thousands of recruits should refuse to serve did not trouble the hundreds of thousands, the millions, of men who every year accepted military service.

Impossible that the whole enormous majority of Christians who enter upon military service are wrong, and only the exceptions, sometimes uneducated people, are right; while every archbishop and man of learning thinks the service compatible with Christianity. So think the majority, and, untroubled regarding themselves as Christians, they enter the rank of murderers. But now appears a man who, as he himself says, is not a Christian, and who refuses military service, not from religious motives, but from motives of the simplest kind, motives intelligible and common to all men, of whatever religion or nation, whether Catholic, Mohammedan, Buddhist, Confucian, whether Spaniards or Japanese.

Van der Veer refuses military service, not because he follows the commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder," not because he

is a Christian, but because he holds murder to be opposed to human nature. He writes that he simply abhors all killing, and abhors it to such a degree that he becomes a vegetarian just to avoid participation in the killing of animals; and, above all, he says, he refuses military service because he thinks "murder by order," that is, the obligation to kill those whom one is ordered to kill (which is the real nature of military service), is incompatible with man's uprightness.

Alluding to the usual objection that if he refuses others will follow his example, and the present social order will be destroyed, he answers that he does not wish to preserve the present social order, because it is bad, because in it the rich dominate the poor, which ought not to be. So that, even if he had any other doubt as to the propriety of serving or not serving, the one consideration that in serving as a soldier he must, by carrying arms and threatening to kill, support the oppressing rich against the oppressed poor, would compel him to refuse military service.

If Van der Veer were to give as the reason for his refusal his adherence to the Christian religion, those who now join the military service could say, "We are no sectarians, and do not acknowledge Christianity; therefore we do not see the need to act as you do."

But the reasons given by Van der Veer are so simple, clear, and universal that it is impossible not to apply them each to his own case. As things are, to deny the force of these reasons in one's own case, one must say:—

"I like killing, and am ready to kill, not only evil-disposed people, but my own oppressed and unfortunate fellow-countrymen, and I perceive nothing wrong in the promise to kill, at the order of the first officer who comes across me, whomever he bids me kill."

Here is a young man. In whatever surroundings, family, creed, he has been brought up, he has been taught that he must be good, that it is bad to strike and kill, not only men, but

before our eyes, is always attained through a conflict between the awakening conscience and the inertia of the old condition.

At first the inertia is so powerful, the conscience so weak, that the first attempt to escape from error is met only with astonishment. The new truth seems madness. Is it proposed to live without slavery? Then who will work? Is it proposed to live without fighting? Then everybody will come and conquer us.

But the power of conscience grows, inertia weakens, and astonishment is changing to sneers and contempt. "The Holy Scriptures acknowledge masters and slaves. These relations have always been, and now come these wiseacres who want to change the whole world;" so men spoke concerning slavery. "All the scientists and philosophers recognize the lawfulness, and even sacredness, of war; and are we immediately to believe that there is no need of war?"

So men speak concerning war. But conscience continues to grow and to become clear; the number increases of those who recognize the new truth, and sneer and contempt give place to subterfuge and trickery. Those who support the error make slow to understand and admit the incongruity and cruelty of the practice they defend, but think its abolition impossible just now, so delaying its abolition indefinitely. "Who does not know that slavery is an evil? But men are not yet ripe for freedom, and liberation will produce horrible disasters"—men used to say concerning slavery, forty years ago. "Who does not know that war is an evil? But while mankind is still so bestial, abolition of armies will do more harm than good," men say concerning war to-day.

Nevertheless, the idea is doing its work; it grows, it burns the falsehood; and the time has come when the madness, the uselessness, the harmfulness, and wickedness of the error are so clear (as it happened in the sixties with slavery in Russia and America) that even now it is impossible to justify it. Such is the present position as to war. Just as, in the sixties, no attempts

idea that mankind can live without slavery; and there is no longer slavery in Christian nations. And there shall not pass away another hundred years after the clear utterance of the idea that mankind can live without war, before war shall cease to be. Very likely some form of armed violence will remain, just as wage-labor remains after the abolition of slavery; but, at least, wars and armies will be abolished in the outrageous form, so repugnant to reason and moral sense, in which they now exist.

Signs that this time is near are many. These signs are such as the helpless position of governments, which more and more increase their armaments; the multiplication of taxation and the discontent of the nations; the extreme degree of efficiency with which deadly weapons are constructed; the activity of congresses and societies of peace; but above all, the refusals of individuals to take military service. In these refusals is the key to the solution of the question. You say that military service is necessary; that, without soldiers, disasters will happen to us. That may be; but, holding the idea of right and wrong which is universal among men to-day, yourselves included, I cannot kill men to order. So that if, as you say, military service is essential—then arrange it in some way not so contradictory to my, and your, conscience. But, until you have so arranged it, do not claim from me what is against my conscience, which I can by no means disobey.

Thus, inevitably, and very soon, must answer all honest and reasonable men; not only the men of Christendom, but even Mohammedans and the so-called heathen, the Brahmanists, Buddhists, and Confucians. Maybe, by the power of inertia, the soldiering trade will go on for some time to come; but even now the question stands solved in the human conscience, and with every day, every hour, more and more men come to the same solution; and to stay the movement is, at this juncture, not possible. Every recognition of a truth by man, or rather, every deliverance from an error, as in the case of slavery

even animals; he has been taught that a man must value his uprightness, which uprightness consists in acting according to conscience. This is equally taught to the Confucian in China, the Shintoist in Japan, the Buddhist, and the Mohammedan. Suddenly, after being taught all this, he enters the military service, where he is required to do the precise opposite of what he has been taught. He is told to fit himself for wounding and killing, not animals, but men; he is told to renounce his independence as a man, and obey, in the business of murder, men whom he does not know, utter strangers to him.

To such a command, what right answer can a man of our day make? Surely, only this, "I do not wish to, and I will not."

Exactly this answer Van der Veer gives. And it is hard to invent any reply to him and to those who, in a similar position, do as he does.

One may not see this point, through attention not having been called to it; one may not understand the import of an action, as long as it remains unexplained. But once pointed out and explained, one can no longer fail to see, or feign blindness to what is quite obvious.

There may still be found men who do not reflect upon their action in entering military service, and men who want war with foreign people, and men who would continue the oppression of the laboring class, and even men who like murder for murder's sake. Such men can continue as soldiers; but even they cannot now fail to know that there are others, the best men in the world,—not only among Christians, but among Mohammedans, Brahmanists, Buddhists, Confucians,—who look upon war and soldiers with aversion and contempt, and whose number grows hourly. No arguments can talk away this plain fact, that a man with any sense of his own dignity cannot enthralled himself to an unknown, or even a known, master whose business is killing. Now just in this consists military service, with all its compulsion of discipline.

"But consider the consequences to him who refuses," I am told. "It is all very well for you, an old man exempted from this exaction, and safe by your position, to preach martyrdom; but what about those to whom you preach, and who, believing in you, refuse to serve, and ruin their young lives?"

"But what can I do?"—I answer those who speak thus.—"Because I am old, must I therefore not point out the evil which I clearly, unquestionably see, seeing it precisely because I am old and have lived and thought for long? Must a man who stands on the far side of the river, beyond the reach of that ruffian whom he sees compelling one man to murder another, not cry out to the slayer, bidding him to refrain, for the reason that such interference will still more enrage the ruffian? Moreover, I by no means see why the government, persecuting those who refuse military service, does not turn its punishment upon me, recognizing in me an instigator. I am not too old for persecution, for any and all sorts of punishments, and my position is a defenseless one. At all events, whether blamed and persecuted or not, whether those who refuse military service are persecuted or not, I, whilst I live, will not cease from saying what I now say; for I cannot refrain from acting according to my conscience." Just in this very thing is Christian truth powerful, irresistible; namely, that, being the teaching of truth, in affecting men it is not to be governed by outside considerations. Whether young or old, whether persecuted or not, he who adopts the Christian, the true, conception of life, cannot shrink from the claims of his conscience. In this is the essence and peculiarity of Christianity, distinguishing it from all other religious teachings; and in this is its unconquerable power.

Van der Veer says he is not a Christian. But the motives of his refusal and action are Christian. He refuses because he does not wish to kill a brother man; he does not obey, because the commands of his conscience are more binding upon him than the commands of men. Precisely on this account is Van der Veer's

refusal so important. Thereby he shows that Christianity is not a sect or creed which some may profess and others reject; but that it is naught else than a life's following of that light of reason which illumines all men. The merit of Christianity is not that it prescribes to men such and such acts, but that it foresees and points out the way by which all mankind must go and does go.

Those men who now behave rightly and reasonably do so, not because they follow prescriptions of Christ, but because that line of action which was pointed out eighteen hundred years ago has now become identified with human conscience.

This is why I think the action and letter of Van der Veer are of great import.

As a fire lit on a prairie or in a forest will not die out until it has burned all that is dry and dead, and therefore combustible, so the truth, once articulated in human utterance, will not cease its work until all falsehood, appointed for destruction, surrounding and hiding the truth on all sides as it does, is destroyed. The fire smolders long; but as soon as it flashes into flame, all that can burn burns quickly.

So with the truth, which takes long to reach a right expression, but once that clear expression in word is given, falsehood and wrong are soon to be destroyed. One of the partial manifestations of Christianity,—the idea that men can live without the institution of slavery,—although it had been included in the Christian concept, was clearly expressed, so it seems to me, only by writers at the end of the eighteenth century. Up to that time, not only the ancient pagans, as Plato and Aristotle, but even men near to us in time, and Christians, could not imagine a human society without slavery. Thomas More could not imagine even a Utopia without slavery. So also men of the beginning of this century could not imagine the life of man without war. Only after the Napoleonic wars was the idea clearly expressed that man can live without war. And now a hundred years have gone since the first clear expression of the