

The World of Foreign Books

RUSSIAN BOOKS.

Surveyed By AVRAHM YARMOLINSKY.

Tolstoy's Boswell.

I HAVE before me a thin, paper covered volume, the first fascicule of a book which will probably exceed in size and may compare in interest with Boswell's "Life of Johnson." The work is a transcription of Tolstoy's conversations and a detailed account of his doings day by day for the last six years of his life (1904-1910). The author is a Slovak physician, Dr. Dushan Makovitzki, who attended Tolstoy during that period. He was a follower of the latter's teachings, and paid several visits to Yasnaya Polyana, the Mecca of the faithful, before he became the master's daily companion. The doctor was a naive and devoted disciple, not more interested in protecting Tolstoy's bodily health than in preserving the least of his utterances. He went about with a tablet of heavy paper in the right pocket of his jacket, and whenever the master opened his lips in his presence the physician would take down the words unobserved and in a secret shorthand, or else he would try to remember literally the sacred phrases, to jot them down at the earliest opportunity. He made no distinction between the significant and the trivial. At night, when the household was asleep, Makovitzki would sit at his desk, painstakingly entering his notes into a copybook, adding the description of all that he knew of the master's occupations during the past day. He would labor at this task far into the night. Sometimes, however, a day or more elapsed before he could transcribe his notes, but he is always careful to indicate this circumstance. The original notes were not revised or altered or in any way edited.

Tolstoy was aware of his physician's preoccupation. On one occasion he remarked upon it in company, saying: "I beg you, my friends, when I die remember this: do not attribute much importance to what I say in conversation. Sometimes I talk foolishly, thoughtlessly, on the spur of the moment. . . . I am more careful about letters, but I feel fully responsible only for what I allow to be published after reading proof." An entry to the same effect is found in Tolstoy's own diaries. Makovitzki confesses that he was sometimes vexed at the idea that he was embarrassing the master, forcing him, so to speak, to refrain from expressing the thought which he didn't care to have written down, "but it seems to me," he adds in his preface, "that when all is said and done Lev Nikolaevich was not displeased by my notetaking; sometimes it seemed to me that Lev Nikolaevich said certain things in a tone in which was heard an unspoken injunction addressed to me: 'Note this down.'"

Tolstoy was extraordinarily fond of his physician and disciple, whom he called St. Dushan. At four o'clock on the morning of October 28, 1910, Tolstoy, like an Oriental holy man, left the comfort of his ancestral home to go into seclusion and meet there his approaching end. Makovitzki was his chosen companion on this lonely journey. Several days later he was dying at a railway station, and the faithful attendant was the one who uttered the last words which were heard by the failing man. Shortly before the end the physicians wanted to see whether Tolstoy was still conscious. Makovitzki took a glass of wine mixed with water, held it to Tolstoy's mouth, and said in clear and solemn tones: "Lev Nikolaevich, wet your lips." The master half opened his eyes and took a swallow. His beloved Dushan outlived him by some eleven years, and the present volume, which has just come off the Moscow presses, was edited by Tolstoy's former secretary. The book is dedicated "to the peace loving Chinese people, whose meekness, humility, patience and firmness in their non-resistance to violence, so touched and moved Tolstoy."

This first fascicule covers only three months out of a period of six years. The material it contains is chiefly interesting for striking illustrations of views which we know Tolstoy to have professed. It holds such various items as the statement that Tolstoy remained a hero to his

valet, although the man had served him for twelve years; an account of a morning's mail which included among other things letters from a Lisbon merchant, a Bulgarian high school boy, a French playwright and an American lady—as well as vivid remarks on politics, religion, and literature. He expressed unbounded admiration for Dickens and a low opinion of Mark Twain; he declared that Nietzsche was a clever feuilleton writer rather than a philosopher. He dislikes William James's "Multiplicity of Religious Experience," saying: "This is a book of a type common to English literature. James criticizes religion from the standpoint of science, and yet the relative importance of religion and science in life is that of an elephant and a louse." The diary happens to cover the date of Bloody Sunday, January 9, 1905. Tolstoy as a Christian anarchist was resolutely opposed to the revolutionary movement in both its liberal and its socialistic aspects. The only difference he saw between a constitutional and a monarchical regime was that between masked and open violence. In the discussion which was aroused by the disquieting events in Petersburg the question came up as to whether there was any difference between an assassination committed by a revolutionist and that committed by a policeman. Tolstoy reported, with a characteristic indulgence in peasant coarseness noted by Gorki in his reminiscences: "Yes, as between the . . . (he uses a vulgar word for excrement) of a cat and of a dog; I don't want to smell either."

A Domestic Tragedy.

It will be interesting to see what Makovitzki's notes contribute to our knowledge of the domestic tragedy which overshadowed Tolstoy's last years and was largely responsible for his flight from Yasnaya Polyana. Recently a good deal of light has been thrown upon this intimate matter by the publication of a number of documents, chiefly a memorandum by his close friend, Chertkov, which appeared last year in the Petersburg historical review, "Works and Days." It has long been an open secret that for various reasons the relations between Lev Tolstoy and his wife were in his old age strained to the last degree. It was also known that the man's final will, which he penned in the forest with a stump for a desk a few months before his death, bequeathed everything he had ever written to his daughter Alexandra and that this will was unsuccessfully contested by his widow. Chertkov substantiates the reports concerning these domestic difficulties. He declares that for the last ten years of Tolstoy's life the latter was forced to keep his diaries in a safe deposit vault to protect them from his wife. "Besides her boundless egotism and despotism," writes Chertkov, "she suffered from a perversion of sentiment and imagination, which impelled her to spread the most loathsome slanders about those against whom she cherished ill feeling—beginning with Lev Nikolaevich himself." Furthermore, the Countess suffered from mental derangement, described (in 1910) by a psychiatrist as paranoia. Being irresponsible, she was likely to destroy or alter her husband's unpublished manuscripts, and so his friends agreed that they should by all means be kept out of her hands. Jealous of every one and suspicious of the existence of the will so unfavorable to her, the Countess made the last months of her husband's life intolerable.

Mme. Tolstoy's autobiography, which is now also accessible in English, naturally gives the other side of the story. Although it was published only last year, it was written in 1913, when she had been a widow for three years. While it deals with various matters relating to both herself and her husband, its main concern is with the tragedy at the close of her married life. She casts the blame for it upon certain friends of Tolstoy, who intruded upon the privacy of his family life and estranged him from her. There is profound pathos in the passage describing how this woman, who had borne her husband thirteen children, was not allowed to see him when he lay dying at Astapovo. Her autobiography, if it proves nothing else, cer-

tainly demonstrates again the difficulties attendant upon being the wife of a genius, especially if the genius acts upon his strong convictions as to how the business of life should be carried on.

The Reminiscences of Lev Tolstoy, Jr.

There would also seem to be drawbacks to being the son of a genius. For the last two years one of Tolstoy's sons, Lev, has been offering his reminiscences piecemeal to the Russian public. In a sketch published last summer he told about the relations between his father and himself. As a high school boy of seventeen Lev, Jr., embraced his father's teachings and resolved to become a Christian martyr for the good of humanity. In those years the family, which then included some ten children, lived in Moscow. The father was spending his evenings learning the shoemaker's trade, and even made a pair of boots for this son, who, however, never wore them. The eminent shoemaker was of little assistance to his son when it came to problems in geometry, but in the evening he could be heard settling world problems for his visitors with great ease. The boy, who was present at these discussions, would go to bed, his brain buzzing with the talk and his home work left undone. The young man somehow managed to get into the university, but as science was anathema to a Tolstoyan he soon drifted away from his studies. "I am certain," he writes, "that my leaving the university vexed my father rather than pleased him. My attachment to his ideas alarmed him. But naturally he could not tell me plainly that I shouldn't listen to him, but should live like everybody else." In due time Lev, Jr., was drafted into the army. As a Tolstoyan he determined publicly to refuse the oath. But fate denied him the crown of martyrdom. The commander of the battalion, guessing his state of mind, called a conference of physicians and the young man was pronounced unfit for military service and politely dismissed. Throughout this period, Lev Tolstoy, Jr., insists, his father guided him not at all and treated him as any acquaintance rather than as a son.

The younger Tolstoy believes that his parents retained a mutual affection to the last. He makes no attempt to pass judgment on the complexities of their relations. He does narrate, however, a striking incident which indicates his bias. He was staying at Yasnaya Polyana a few months before his father's death. Late one night he was roused from sleep by the apparition of the latter in a dressing gown. "Go and get her," said the old man. "Get whom?" asked Lev, puzzled. "Take her home," said the father; "she won't listen to me. She's lying on the ground in the linden walk. You must lift her up." The son dressed and ran into the garden. He found the old Countess lying on the ground, her head pressed against the trunk of a linden tree. She refused to get up. "He chased me out like a dog," she groaned, and cried hysterically. "I won't go back; I won't go back until he comes."

The narrator continues: "I took pity on her and ran up to father's room. 'Well?' he said agitatedly. 'She doesn't want to come,' said I. 'She says you chased her out.' 'Oh, Lord!' father cried. 'But no, no! It's intolerable.' 'Go to her,' I said, 'she won't come unless you do.' 'But no, no!' he repeated beside himself with despair. 'I won't go.' 'But you are her husband,' I said loudly, with irritation. 'It's your duty to attend to this.' He looked at me with astonishment and timidly followed me into the garden without a word. It was only then that mother returned to the house. . . . The following day, the narrator adds, Tolstoy made this entry in his diary: "Yesterday Lev shouted at me as if I were a child. Yet I did not shout at him, but only told him in loud and irritated tones all that I considered necessary to say."

New Dostoyevski Material.

It is to be hoped that by the time Tolstoy's centenary is celebrated (1928) all his unpublished writings will have been given to the world. He would thus be more fortunate than Dostoyevski, whose centenary occurred last year. However, the publication of long inaccessible Dos-

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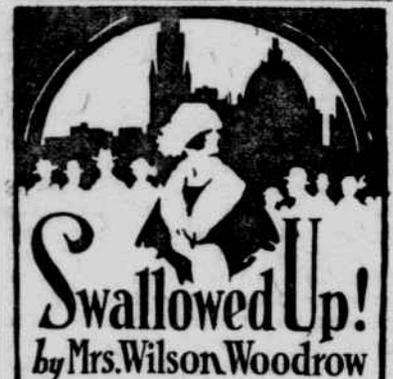
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