

A LETTER ON TOLSTOY, W. T. STEAD, AND THE *KREUZER SONATA*

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THE APPENDED LETTER from Tatjana Tolstoy to W. T. Stead contains a story and a moral.¹

While visiting Count Leo Tolstoy at Jasnaja Poljana in May and early June, 1888,² the editor and publicist W. T. Stead learned from the venerable novelist of his latest work "exposing the conventional illusion of romantic love."³ He told Stead that although he was revising the manuscript, he continued to adhere to his original plan of showing how a marriage could be deprived of its "first condition" by "the substitution of romantic love, a fever born of carnal passion, for true Christian love, which is born of identity of sentiment, similarity of ideal, [and] the friendship of the soul."⁴

By the end of August, 1889, Tolstoy was reading the manuscript to house guests and his family.⁵ His wife, who loathed the semi-autobiographic story as an affront to her marriage, finally compelled him to accept her changes, "toning down certain sections and softening . . . the realism of the language,"⁶ and, by late December, 1889, the work was ready for publication. But it was quickly apparent that its appearance in Russia would be delayed indefinitely. Alexander III, inspired by his confidant and tutor, Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonoscev, the Procurator of the Holy Synod and *censor extraordinaire* whose inveterate hatred of Tolstoy had crystallized into a systematic campaign to suppress the ideas and works of the novelist,⁷ instructed

¹I am deeply indebted to Miss Estelle W. Stead and Mr. W. K. Stead for permitting me to study and use the Stead papers.

²On Stead's conversations with Tolstoy, see W. T. Stead, *The Truth About Russia* (London, 1888), pp. 49, 393-457ff; Frederic Whyte, *The Life of W. T. Stead* (London, 1925), II, 14, 203, 237, 259, 313; W. T. Stead, "Count Tolstoy's New Tale: With a Condensation of the Novel [The Kreutzer Sonata]," *Review of Reviews*, I (April, 1890), 330.

³Stead, "Count Tolstoy's New Tale," p. 330. *The Kreutzer Sonata* was begun by Tolstoy in 1887. Cf. Tikhon Polner, *Tolstoy and His Wife* (New York, 1945), p. 164.

⁴Stead, "Count Tolstoy's New Tale," p. 330.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 331; Polner, p. 165.

⁶Polner, p. 166; Ernest J. Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy* (Boston, 1946), p. 442. When Stead met Tatjana Tolstoy in Rome during November, 1889, she told him that the publication of her father's novel had been delayed because after reading it to his family, Tolstoy had "suddenly discovered [that] it required radical alteration . . ." "Stead, "Count Tolstoy's New Tale," p. 331.

⁷Pobedonoscev never forgave Tolstoy for his personal plea in 1881 to intercede with the Emperor to spare the assassins of Alexander II. Cf. Arthur E. Adams, "Pobedonostsev's Thought Control," *The Russian Review*, XI (October, 1952), 241-42. See also Alexandra Tolstoy, *Tolstoy. A Life of My Father* (New York, 1953), pp. 285, 297-99; Rose Strunsky, ed. *The Journal of Leo Tolstoy (1895-1899)* (New York, 1917), *passim*.

his censors categorically to ban the publication of *The Kreutzer Sonata* in Russia.⁸

It was at this point that the enterprising Stead attempted to accomplish a major literary *coup* for his newly founded *Review of Reviews* by presenting to the English and American public an “advance sketch” of the Tolstoy masterpiece that had been banned in Russia. By emphasizing his desire to realize their common dream of “establishing a universal library . . . which would bring the best thoughts of the best men of all time within range of the poorest peasant,”⁹ Stead overcame Tolstoy’s reluctance to offend Victorian sensibilities with his novel and secured the permission of the authorized translator, Isabel Hapgood,¹⁰ to publish a condensed version of the *Sonata* in April, 1890—a year before it appeared in Russia.¹¹

Thus the significance of this short letter lies not only in the fact that it reveals something of Stead’s resourcefulness as an editor, but more in what it illustrates of the strictures which the Imperial despotism imposed on an artist who personified in himself all that was latently great in Russian life. In its small way, this letter is symbolic of the truism that great ideas and art are universal and immortal.

Dear Sir,

My father does not feel very well today, so he has asked me to answer your letter for him.¹² He thanks you very much for the *Review of Reviews*,¹³ of which he highly approves, and which interested him very much. Unluckily several pages are cut out and the beginning of the article is blackened, so that we could not even make out the title. The numbers of the cut out pages are from 64 till 67.¹⁴ The new story of my father will probably not appear in Russia, as we have heard that

⁸Simmons, p. 441. In spite of the censors, endless copies of the novel were lithographed and circulated in Russia. Polner, p. 165.

⁹See introduction in Stead, “Count Tolstoy’s New Tale,” p. 332. In this direction, Aylmer Maude, who knew both men well, wrote: “When in 1888, . . . Stead visited Yásnaya, the two men discussed a ‘Penny Universal Classical Library,’ and Stead’s ventures in that direction were no doubt influenced by that conversation.” Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy: First Fifty Years and Later Years* (London, 1908-10), II, 209.

¹⁰Stead cited Miss Hapgood as having at first refused to translate the work and writing to him: “I have never read anything like it in my life, and I hope never shall again.” Stead, “Count Tolstoy’s New Tale,” p. 332.

¹¹*The Kreutzer Sonata* was published in Russia for the first time in 1891.

¹²Tatjana Lvovna Tolstojaja Sukhótina (1864-1950), eldest of Tolstoy’s daughters, served as his secretary during this time. In 1899, she married Mikhail Sergejevich Sukhótin. Cf. Tatiana Sukhótin Tolstoy, *The Tolstoy Home. Diaries of Tatiana Sukhótin-Tolstoy* (London, 1950).

¹³The inaugural issue of the *Review of Reviews*, Vol. I (January, 1890).

¹⁴In the pages mentioned above, the author “E. J. D.” (undoubtedly the English expert on Russia, E. J. Dillon) reviewed a series of articles by Vladimir Solovëv for the Russian monthly, *Messenger of Europe*, for which the periodical received its “first warning” from the

the censure [sic] is already prepared to stop it. My father has promised the translation of it to an American lady— Miss Hapgood,¹⁵ so now it is her permission that must be asked.

My father says that his story is not at all fit to be read by young girls, although the chief idea of it is moral, and that it is just the reverse of what is said in the *Review of Reviews* that a novel ought to be.¹⁶

Excuse my english, [sic] I am quite forgetting the little I knew and believe me yours truly

Tatiana Tolstoy

12/24 Jan. 1890.

Yasnaya Poliana

Imperial censor. In this series, Solovëv declared that Russian “national political consciousness has for the [past] half century been nourished with . . . crumbs that fell from the intellectual table of the West,” and denounced the “abnormal love” of the Russian Church for traditional ceremonial as “a mental disease . . . paraded as a proof of the . . . superiority of the Russians, in the matter of religion, over Western peoples.” Cf. E. J. D., “The Periodicals of Russia,” *Review of Reviews*, I (January, 1890), 65.

¹⁵Isabel Florence Hapgood (1859-1928). Cf. Tolstoy, *My Father*, p. 297.

¹⁶A reference to Stead’s citation of a statement by Walter Besant to the effect that a novelist must be careful not to destroy “the very basis of society” in his work. Besant further declared that “Art herself, . . . will not allow the creation of impossible figures moving in an unnatural atmosphere. Those writers who yearn to treat of the adulteress and the courtesan because they love to dwell on images of lust are best kept in check by existing discouragements” Cf. “Mrs. Grundy on Fiction,” *Review of Reviews*, I (January, 1890), 44.