

NYT March 27, 1899

Simple Life of Tolstoi

Ernest H. Crosby Tells of a Visit to the Russian Nobleman.

BELIEVES IN THE SINGLE TAX

He Has No Carpets in His House and Wears the Poorest Clothes --
Story of Czar's Kissing Him False.

Ernest H. Crosby entertained an audience at Cooper Union last night with a talk on Count Tolstoi. "Tolstoi," said Mr. Crosby, "is a remarkable man and in many ways paradoxical. All competent critics agree that he is the leading novelist on earth. Yet he considers wasted all the time he has spent on his novels and comes nearest to losing his temper when they are spoken of in his presence. A veteran of two wars, he believes that war is absolutely criminal. An owner of great landed estates, he condemns private property in land, and the only practical reform he advocates is the single tax reform of Henry George. [Applause.] He is the most rigid moralist living today, and yet his last novel was excluded from our mails because of its immorality.

"The book that gives the kernel of Tolstoi's philosophy is his book 'Life.' It seems to give his ideas from the centre. He says that to every one the essential thing in life is to get happiness, and concludes that it can only be obtained by helping others. He has lived out his theory.

"Tolstoi was born in 1828 on an estate five hours by rail south of Moscow, and when eight or nine years old moved to Moscow with the family, as his older brothers were put to school there. One day they came home from school and said that they had discovered a great secret -- there was no God. The idea of God had just been invented by the old folks. This marked the end of Tolstoi's religious belief on the old lines.

"An incident happened when he was a university student which produced a great effect. He happened to go to a ball on a cold Winter's night, and passed a happy evening. When he came out he found the peasant coachman who had driven his sleigh nearly frozen to death. This made a great impression on him, and seemed to present to him the picture of the upper classes oppressing the poor. He went back to his estates to devote himself to bettering the condition of the peasantry there, but found they did not appreciate the work he strove to do for them."

Mr. Crosby here traced the story of Tolstoi's life, his military and literary career. "Once in Paris," said he, "he went to see an execution by the guillotine. As he heard the head fall into the box he could not help feeling from his head to his feet that no theory of civilization could justify such an act under any circumstances. [Applause.] I think he was right, and that a community in which you find men and women willing to do what they did a week ago at Sing Sing, when they murdered a woman, does not deserve to call itself a civilized community."

Mr. Crosby said that at fifty years of age Tolstoi, although rich, famous and contented with his family life, was often tempted to commit suicide, and hid away a rope in a closet in his house, and refrained from going hunting, lest he should suddenly kill himself. The reason was that he had no working theory of life. The speaker told of Tolstoi's five-year struggles to get such a theory, and how he turned in vain from one to another class of people for help. He tried going to church in vain. "Then he tried the Gospels," said Mr. Crosby, "and came to the conclusion that the part we call the Sermon on the Mount was the most important."

Mr. Crosby described the method of living Tolstoi finally decided on. "I went to see him at his country place," he said. "He still has the same fine house he used to live in, but he has taken everything out of it. There is not a mat or carpet -- simply the bare floor. There is not an ornament in the house, save two family portraits and a piano -- a

concession to his wife. At his house I took several meals. I have seen plenty of far better meals in tenement houses. There was not even a tablecloth, simply a sort of oilcloth, such as is used in cheap restaurants. Tolstoi is a vegetarian, and doesn't touch milk or eggs. He doesn't drink tea and coffee, as he doesn't believe in stimulants. His clothes are the poorest and coarsest. I don't suppose his keep for a year is more than that of the poorest Russian peasant."

"There is no acting, no playing to the galleries, about Tolstoi. All admit two things about him: He is absolutely sincere and absolutely sane." Mr. Crosby told an incident of Tolstoi's little girl; having been struck on the arm by a peasant boy, and running in to ask her father to whip the boy. "Tolstoi," said he, "said to her: 'Now what good would that do? The boy struck you because he felt hateful. For me to whip him would simply make him worse. The only way to make him better is to treat him lovingly. Carry a saucer of sweetmeats out to him.' The girl actually did so. That illustrates Tolstoi's methods.

Mr. Crosby had many questions to answer from audience after his address. In response to one he said the former Czar never allowed Tolstoi's name to be mentioned at Court. Mr. Crosby said that he had written to Tolstoi to ask as to the truth of a newspaper account, saying that the present Czar had met and kissed him in a railway station. Tolstoi replied that it was made out of whole cloth.