



Plays
LEO TOLSTOY
PLAYS
Translated by
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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	ix
Plays published during Tolstoy's life	
THE POWER OF DARKNESS (1886)	3
THE FIRST DISTILLER (1886)	97
FRUITS OF CULTURE (1889)	125
Posthumous Plays	
THE LIVE CORPSE	229
THE CAUSE OF IT ALL	303
THE LIGHT SHINES IN DARKNESS	321

PREFACE

The Power of Darkness, Tolstoy's first and greatest play, was not written until he was fifty-eight years of age, and it was not allowed to be performed in Russia till some years later. Both there and elsewhere abroad it was highly successful on the stage, as was also the comedy, Fruits of Culture, which he wrote three years later, to be performed by his own family and their friends.

The only other play published during his lifetime, The First Distiller, is a very slight piece of no particular dramatic importance. It was written in the cause of temperance.

Besides these, he left three other plays finished, or nearly finished, when he died.

Plays

The Live Corpse (which in English has also been called The Man who was Dead) is the one best adapted for the stage. The Cause of it All is, like The First Distiller, a short and unimportant piece dealing with the effects of drink. The most interesting, not dramatically but psychologically, of the three is The Light Shines in Darkness, which was left in an unfinished state. In it Tolstoy presents his own case, and deals with the contradiction that existed and has so often been commented on, between practice and theory in his own life and teaching.

For the purpose of the play he greatly simplified his own highly complex personality, and, though many of the details and characters are drawn from life with extraordinary exactitude, the picture presented is not one which all the people concerned are disposed to regard as quite fair to themselves.

The play presents the terrible clash which resulted from the calls Tolstoy made on himself and on others to abandon all customary ways of life and to start afresh in a new direction. In his own case he was never allowed to test the effects of a life of extreme poverty and manual labour, such as he advocated; nor did those of his followers who adopted such a life achieve much success therein. Tolstoy's artistic sincerity is indeed shown by the fact that, despite his spiritual fervour and his profound conviction that he had really found the road to salvation for mankind, he has not, in this play, minimised the failure of his efforts to carry convictions to those about him, or to achieve any other success than that of obtaining an inward assurance that he was fulfilling the will of God. This assurance would, no doubt, have been more fully indicated in the last act, had he lived to complete it.

Tolstoy was well aware of the advantages a play possesses over a novel as a means of propaganda, and but for the existence of the Censorship he would have written more for the stage. When asked, in 1892, whether he would write any more plays, he replied: "I would do so with great pleasure, and I even feel a special need to express myself in that way; but I feel certain the Censor would not pass my plays. You would not believe how, from the very commencement of my activity, that horrible Censor question has tormented me! I wanted to write what I felt; but at the same time I felt that what I wrote would not be permitted; and involuntarily I abandoned the work. I abandoned, and went on abandoning, and meanwhile the years passed away."

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There is one other matter of some importance on which I must here say a word.

No accepted standard of transliteration for Russian names into English has hitherto existed. Each writer has been a law unto himself. Now, at last, the Liverpool School of Russian Studies has prepared and privately circulated a scheme, which deserves to be, and is likely to be, generally adopted. It differs in some particulars from the plan I have followed heretofore; but the advantage to Anglo-Russian literature of the general adoption of a uniform and authoritative rule will be so great that I hasten to put myself in accord with the Liverpool scheme, without even waiting for it to be publicly promulgated.

The result of so doing however is that in the three earlier plays now reprinted from stereotype plates the transliteration does not quite coincide with the plan adopted in the three freshly translated plays. For this discrepancy I must ask the readers' kind indulgence.

AYLMER MAUDE.

Plays
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