

Three Novellas



“If the world could write by itself,
it would write like Tolstoy.”

Isaak Babel

“Tolstoy’s greatness lies in not turning the story into sentimental tragedy... His world is huge and vast, filled with complex family lives and great social events. His characters are well-rounded presences. They have complete passions: a desire for love, but also an inner moral depth.”

Malcolm Bradbury

“What an artist and what a psychologist!”

Gustave Flaubert

“The pure narrative power of his work is unequalled.”

Thomas Mann

“Tolstoy is the greatest Russian writer of prose fiction.”

Vladimir Nabokov

“The greatest of all novelists.”

Virginia Woolf

Three Novellas

Leo Tolstoy

Translated by Kyril Zinovieff
and April FitzLyon



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Introduction to the 2009 Edition

The publication of these three stories in a single volume provides a rare opportunity for those interested in Tolstoy to see how he developed as a writer and, of course, also as a person. The stories in this volume were written over the course of more than half a century, from 1852 until 1909, a year before his death.

In the case of the first two – *A Landowner's Morning* and *The Devil* – we are presented with his attitude to peasants, an attitude which changed fundamentally from the first story, written in 1852 when serfdom still existed, to the end of the century, by which time serfs had been free for several decades. Emancipated in 1861, they were no longer the chattels of their landowners.

In *A Landowner's Morning*, Tolstoy views his peasants as objects dependent on their owner, who, in turn, feels direct responsibility for their welfare. He sets out to improve their lot in every way that he can, but it's as though they were pieces which he can move about on his chessboard, creatures whom he would like to help, but without feelings of their own which must be taken into account. He expects gratitude; they give him suspicion, mistrust. If he's offering it, then for that very reason there must be a catch in it and it will turn out not for their good but for his. So they categorically reject and entirely misunderstand his well-meant offers of improvement. It is interesting that, in his crestfallen despair, the idea of emancipation – of setting them free from him and free to trust him – never seems to enter his head.

In the second story, *The Devil*, written nearly fifty years later and long after the abolition of serfdom, emancipation has brought about a new situation. It is true that it does not result in a happier relationship; it ends in tragedy, whichever of the two endings you choose. But the story is now about two human beings, a man and a woman, emotionally involved. She is tempted by the material advantages and he by the sexual advantages on offer. The attitude of both may be reprehensible. But there is not doubt whatever that they regard each other, emotionally, as equals. He discovers that the relationship isn't purely sexual, as he had

thought, that he isn't just "a stag" but in some sense a husband. He is possessed by her and she possesses him. That, indeed, is why there has to be a tragedy.

So Russia has changed fundamentally. And Tolstoy the person has changed with it. The third story takes us back to the early days of Tolstoy the writer. In *Childhood* (1852) and *The Sebastopol Stories* (1855–56), he was testing himself out as a realistic and objective describer. In *Family Happiness* (1859), we see him for the first time approaching the subject of marriage, which played such an important part in his great novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. He still deploys an almost photographic realism, but applies it now to the intimate, familial relationship of husband and wife, with the added challenge (for a male writer) of viewing it through the eyes of the wife. The novelist has taken an important step towards his great novels.

In this context, *The Devil* at first sight seems regressive – not so much because of its intense sexuality as because it represents what is in effect a retreat by Tolstoy the novelist, and a victory, at the end of his long life, for Tolstoy the didactic moralist. We can see it coming: in *Anna Karenina* (1877) and in *The Confession* (1879). It emerges, full-blown, in *Resurrection* (1899), where the meticulously observed story makes room for the homily. By the time we get to *The Devil*, Tolstoy is still the great observer, but he wants us to be perfectly sure of the moral message to be drawn from what he observes. *Resurrection* remains a novel – a very, very long one – in which the moral message is to some extent diluted. *The Devil* is stripped down, deliberately and brutally, into a short, edifying tale in which the reader has no escape and the author has completed his trajectory.

A Landowner's Morning

Translated by Kyril Zinovieff

Preface

This story was written nine years before the abolition of serfdom in Russia, at a time when the existence of serfdom was a subject of constant debate.

By this time, there were two main reasons why it was felt, both by the government and by the people as a whole, that the emancipation of the peasants was essential. One was moral: the sense of shame that a country which considered itself in terms of civilization on a par with Europe should still be practising a form of slavery that was medieval in origin and now indefensible. The second reason was rational and to an extent opportunistic: Russia, it was realized, could only compete with Europe economically if its industry was given the resources to develop along capitalist lines. This meant releasing the necessary labour and entrepreneurial energy locked up by an institution which placed much of the peasant population in thrall to its agricultural owners and landlords.

Even under serfdom, this was partly achieved by allowing peasants to “quit” themselves of their obligations through a system of “quit-rent”; it was possible for a peasant to negotiate an arrangement under which, instead of working on the manorial land, he could choose to work on his own account – in towns and elsewhere – and to pay his owner in money instead of labour. (Tolstoy gives the example of the peasant family which had grown prosperous by becoming carters.) Many of the most enterprising peasants followed this route and the most successful were able to buy their freedom outright (some, indeed, were able to buy up their owners too). But these were the exceptions, and the system of “quit-rent” could not provide enough labour to supply nineteenth-century capitalism. Only emancipation could do that.

Tolstoy did not agree. He believed that on the whole peasants were not helped by education or by being given the freedom to choose; what they needed was material help to go on doing what they did, only better. It followed, though, that landowners for their part had the duty of improving to the best of their ability the standard of living of their peasantry and to help them both financially and materially.

When the story first appeared, in the December 1856 edition of the periodical *Otechestvennyye Zapiski* (*Notes of the Fatherland*), Turgenev (in a letter to A.V. Druzhinin of January 1857) praised it as “masterly” for its “language, story-telling and characterization”. But in the same letter he condemned the implication “running like a trace horse alongside”: that to educate the peasantry as a whole, to improve their conditions of life, was a futile thing. This implication Turgenev found “unpleasant” and in conflict with his own principal concern at the time, which was to shine the most favourable light possible on the potential of the Russian peasant, so as to advance the arguments for emancipation.

The first version of *A Landowner's Morning* was started under a different title in 1852 when Tolstoy was twenty-four, more or less concurrently with *Childhood*. His original intention was to divide the novel into two parts. The first was to deal with peasants, the second with landowners. But the work proceeded slowly in spite of Tolstoy's satisfaction with it, and over four years later even the first part was not as complete as he would have liked. The second consisted merely of a short list of characteristics (mostly disreputable or, at least, unattractive) against some of which he put the names of persons he knew who were presumably to serve as models.

But there were many interruptions and other projects intervened. Tolstoy's original plan now appeared to him too ambitious. So he decided to recast his novel, making a novella or a long short story out of it, by drastically abridging it, retaining no more than the kernel of the idea that first inspired him – the attitude of peasants to landowners – and restricting the time of action to a single morning. As with almost all Tolstoy's writings, the story is based on personal experience and observation. The young landowner, Prince Nekhlyudov, is, of course, himself (he used that name later in other works, when modelling the principal character on his own personality), and the peasants all apparently bear a strong resemblance to those living on Tolstoy's family estate, Yasnaya Polyana. All that remained of the original novel was Nekhlyudov's letter to his aunt, setting out his somewhat vague, but idealistic plan of making his peasants happy, his aunts disillusioning, worldly-wise answer (both now in Russian instead of in French as in the original version) and Nekhlyudov's conversations with the peasants. All unnecessary details were eliminated and all traces of

authorial presence removed. The narrative, thus freed from sententious and didactic expressions of the author's own opinions, was greatly improved.

The work of abridgement and alteration took Tolstoy a mere twelve days to complete, and he then conveyed the novella personally to the editor of the periodical. He himself never again referred to *A Landowner's Morning*. According to Vassily Botkin, a literary-minded tea merchant and friend of many Russian writers, including Turgenev and Belinsky, it "created no impression" on its publication. But several years later, when writing *War and Peace*, Tolstoy incorporated the lesson learnt by Nekhlyudov in his account of Prince Andrew's attempt to educate the peasants on his estate and improve their standard of living at his own expense. This attempt, says Tolstoy, "as has always happened and always will, merely strengthened their distrust of landowners [dislike of their masters]". (Tolstoy's alternative version is in square brackets.) For some reason, however, he excluded this sentence from the next draft of *War and Peace*, and it did not reappear in the final version.

Kyril Zinovieff

1

PRINCE NEKHLIUDOV was nineteen years old, and a third-year university student, when he arrived at his estate for the summer vacation to spend the whole summer there by himself. In the autumn he wrote, in his unformed childish writing, the following letter to his aunt, Countess Beloretskaya, who in his estimation was his best friend and the most intelligent woman in the world. The letter was in French and is here given in translation:

My dear aunt,

I have come to a decision which must affect the whole course of my life. I am leaving the university in order to devote myself to life in the country because I feel that I was born for it. For heaven's sake, my dear aunt, don't laugh at me. You will say that I am young; it may be true, perhaps, that I am still a child, but this does not prevent me feeling my vocation, wanting to do good and to love the good.

As I wrote to you before, I found my affairs here in very bad shape indeed. Trying to put them right again, I made a close study of them and discovered that the main evil consists in the quite pathetic poverty of the peasants, an evil which can be righted only through work and patience. If you could only see two of my peasants, David and Ivan, and the life they and their families lead, I am sure the mere sight of these two unfortunate people, more than anything I can say, will convince you that I am right in my intention. Is it not my direct and sacred duty to look after the happiness of these seven hundred men for whom I shall have to answer before God? Is it not a sin to abandon them, for the sake of pleasure or ambitious plans, to the whims of callous village elders and farm managers? And why seek in some other sphere opportunities for being useful and doing good, when such a noble and impressive duty lies immediately to hand? I feel it in me to become a good landlord – and in order to be one, as I understand it, there is no need for a university degree or official rank which you so much want me to have. My dear aunt, do not make

ambitious plans for me; get used to the idea that I have chosen quite a special path, but one which is good and which will, I feel, lead me to happiness. I have thought a lot about my future duties, have written out rules of conduct for myself and, if only God grants me life and strength, I shall succeed in my enterprise.

Do not show this letter to my brother Vasya; I am afraid of his jibes. He is used to dominating me and I am used to obeying him. Vanya may not approve my intention, but he will understand it.

The Countess sent him the following letter in reply, here also translated from the French:

So far as I am concerned, my dear Dmitry, your letter proves nothing except that you have a very kind heart, and this I never doubted. But, dear friend, our good qualities do us more harm in life than our bad ones. I shall not tell you that you are doing a silly thing and that your behaviour distresses me, but shall try to convince you by persuasion alone. Let's reason it out, my dear boy. You say that you feel a vocation for life in the country, that you want your peasants to be happy and that you hope to be a good landlord. I must tell you, first, that we feel our vocation only after we have once made a mistake about it; second, that it is easier to achieve one's own happiness than the happiness of others; and third, that to be a good landlord you must be cold and stern, which you are not likely ever to become, though you try to pretend you are.

You consider your arguments to be irrefutable, and even take them to constitute rules of conduct, but at my age, my boy, people do not believe in arguments and rules, but only in experience. And experience tells me that your plans are childish. I am getting on for fifty and have known many worthy men, but I have never heard of a young man of good family and abilities burying himself in the country on the plea of doing good. You have always wanted to appear original, but your originality is nothing but excessive self-esteem. And, my friend, you had better choose the well-trodden paths – they lead quicker to success, and success, even if you don't need it as such, is essential to enable you to do the good you aspire to do.

The poverty of a few peasants is a necessary evil, or else an evil which can be remedied without forgetting one's duties to society, to

one's relations and to oneself. With your intelligence, your kind heart and your love of virtue, there is no career in which you would not succeed, but at least choose one which would be worthy of you and would do you credit.

I believe in your sincerity when you say you are not ambitious, but you are deceiving yourself. Ambition is a virtue for someone of your age and your means, but it becomes ridiculous as well as a defect when a man can no longer satisfy this passion. And you will experience this if you do not change your intention. Goodbye, my dear Dmitry. I think I love you all the more for your absurd but noble and magnanimous plan. Do as you wish, but I must confess I cannot agree with you.

On receiving this letter, the young man considered it for a long time and, having finally decided that even a highly intelligent woman could err in her judgements, applied for a discharge from his university and settled down in the country for ever.

2

THE YOUNG LANDOWNER, as he wrote to his aunt, had drawn up a set of rules for his estate management, and his entire life and work had to follow an hourly, daily and monthly timetable. Sundays were fixed for receiving petitioners – domestic servants and peasants – for visiting the households of poor peasants, and for giving them assistance with the agreement of the village commune which met every Sunday evening and had to decide how much assistance should be given and to whom. Over a year had passed in such activities and the young man was no longer quite a novice in either the practice or the theoretical knowledge of farm management.

It was a bright June morning when Nekhlyudov, having finished his coffee and read a chapter of *Maison Rustique*, put a notebook and a wad of banknotes in the pocket of his light raincoat, left the large country house with its colonnades and terraces, where he occupied one small room on the ground floor, and went along the unswept, overgrown paths of the old English-style garden, in the direction of the village which stretched out on either side of the main road.

Nekhlyudov was a tall, well-built young man with a mass of thick, curly brown hair, with bright, sparkling black eyes, a fresh complexion and red lips over which the first down of youth was only just beginning to appear. His gait and all his movements revealed strength, energy and the good-natured arrogance of youth. A motley crowd of peasants was coming back from church. Old men, young girls, children, women with their babies, all dressed in their Sunday best, were dispersing to their homes, bowing low to the squire and stepping out of his way.

Nekhlyudov stopped as soon as he reached the street, took the notebook out of his pocket and, on the last page, filled with his childish writing, he read the names of several peasants with comments. "Ivan Churis – asked for props," he read and went up to the gate of the second house on the right.

Churis's abode consisted of a crumbling log shack, rotting at the corners, sloping to one side and so sunk into the ground that a small window with a broken pane and a shutter torn off one of its hinges and one other window, stopped up with tow, were only just visible above the manure heap. A log-built passageway with a dirty threshold and a low door, another small log shack, even lower and more ancient than the passage, a gate and a wattle shed clustered next to the main building. All this had at one time or other been covered by a single uneven roof; now, however, rotting black thatch hung thickly only on the eaves, while laths and rafters were in places clearly visible. In the front of the yard was a well with ramshackle wooden sides, the remains of a post and pulley, and a dirty puddle which had been trampled by cattle and in which ducks were now splashing about. Two ancient willows, split, half-broken and with some straggly, pale-green branches stood beside the well. Under one of these willows – witnesses to the fact that someone at some time in the past had tried to make the place look a little more attractive – sat a fair-haired eight-year-old girl who was making another two-year-old girl crawl around her. A puppy was playing beside them but, on seeing Nekhlyudov, dashed headlong under the gate and barked furiously from there, a frightened, quivering bark.

"Is Ivan at home?" asked Nekhlyudov.

The elder girl seemed to freeze into immobility at this question and opened her eyes wider and wider without replying. The younger one opened her mouth and prepared to cry. A little old woman, in a tattered check skirt, tied low down with an old reddish belt, looked on

from behind the door, but also said nothing. Nekhlyudov came up and repeated his question.

“He is, master,” uttered the old woman in a quivering voice, bowing low and in a state of frightened agitation.

When Nekhlyudov, after greeting her, went through the passage into the small yard, the old woman rested her chin in her hand, came to the door and slowly shook her head without taking her eyes off the squire.

The yard had a poverty-stricken appearance. Here and there lay old, blackened, uncarted manure. Scattered about on the manure lay a rotting wooden block, a pitchfork and two harrows. A plough and a cart without a wheel and empty, useless beehives, piled on top of each other, were standing and lying in one corner of the sheds surrounding the yard. The roof over the sheds was almost entirely bare of thatch and one side of it had collapsed so that the front beams were no longer resting on the fork-posts but on the manure. Churis, using both the butt and the edge of his axe, was breaking down the wattle fence which had been crushed by the roof. Ivan Churis was a man of about fifty, below average height. The features of his suntanned, oblong-shaped face, framed by a light-brown beard streaked with grey, and thick hair of the same colour, were handsome and expressive. His dark-blue, half-closed eyes shone with intelligence and light-hearted good nature. When he smiled, his small shapely mouth, sharply defined under a scanty fair moustache, expressed a quiet self-confidence and a somewhat mocking indifference to the surrounding world. His rough skin, deep wrinkles, sharply defined veins on his neck, face and hands, unnatural stoop and crooked bandy legs revealed a life spent entirely in heavy work, well beyond his strength. His clothes consisted of white hempen trousers with blue patches on the knees and a dirty shirt of the same material, torn at the back and sleeves, with a tape by way of a belt worn rather low with a small brass key dangling from it.

“Good morning,” said the squire as he entered the yard.

Churis looked round and then resumed his work. With one great effort he freed the wattle fence from under the roof, and only then stuck his axe into the wooden block and came out in the middle of the yard, adjusting his belt.

“A happy Sunday to you, your honour,” he said, bowing low and then shaking back his hair.

“Thank you, my friend. I just came to have a look at your cottage and the way you live,” said Nekhlyudov, shy and friendly as a child, examining the man’s clothes. “Let’s see what you wanted the props for – the ones you asked for at the general meeting of the commune.”

“The props? Well, you know what props are for, your honour, sir. I wanted to prop things up a bit – you can see for yourself. The other day, for example, the corner there collapsed, but thank God the cattle were not in at the time. Everything here is hanging by a thread,” said Churis, looking contemptuously at his thatchless, lopsided, crumbling sheds. “The rafters, now, and the gable-ends and the beams – just touch them, and they’ll all fall apart; there won’t be enough left for a piece of useful timber. And where can a man get wood nowadays? You know yourself.”

“Well then, what do you want five props for, if one shed has collapsed and the others soon will? You don’t want props, you want new rafters, new beams, new posts, that’s what you want,” said the squire, obviously showing off his knowledge.

Churis kept silent.

“In other words you need timber, not props. You should have said so.”

“Of course I need it, but there’s nowhere to get it from. I can’t always go to the squire’s house asking for it. Odd peasants we would be, the likes of us, if we all got into the habit of going to your house begging for all the stuff we need. But if you will be kind enough,” he said, bowing and shuffling from foot to foot, “about those oak tops, I mean, lying about on your threshing floor, not being used for anything... I might change some, cut some up, and fix up something with the old stuff.”

“How do you mean, the old stuff? You’ve just been saying yourself that all you have is old and rotten. There’s one corner there, collapsed already; another may do so tomorrow and then another the next day. So if it’s to be done at all, it must be done all anew; otherwise it’s just wasted labour. Tell me, what do you think: can your place last out this coming winter without collapsing or can’t it?”

“Who knows?”

“Yes, but what do you think – will it collapse or not?”

Churis thought for a minute.

“It should all collapse,” he said suddenly.

“Well now, there you are! You should have said at the meeting that you need to have all the buildings rebuilt, and not just have a few props. I’d be glad to help you, you know...”

“I am very grateful to you, sir,” replied Churis mistrustfully and without looking at the squire. “If you could only let me have about four beams and a few props I could fix things up myself, perhaps, and any bad timber could be used for struts in the cottage.”

“But is your cottage in a bad state too?”

“The wife and I are expecting someone to be crushed any time,” said Churis with complete indifference. “In fact, the other day a ceiling beam did crush my old woman.”

“How do you mean – crushed her?”

“It just did, your honour. Came down with a whoosh across her back, so she lay as good as dead till night-time.”

“Well, and has she recovered?”

“She has in a way, but she is always ailing. But then she’s been ailing from birth, really.”

“Are you ill?” Nekhlyudov asked the woman who was still standing in the doorway and who had immediately started groaning as soon as her husband mentioned her.

“It never leaves me – just here – it never does,” she answered, pointing to her dirty, emaciated chest.

“Again!” said the young squire, shrugging his shoulders in annoyance. “Why then if you are ill didn’t you go to the hospital? That’s what the hospital was opened for. Haven’t you been told of it?”

“We have indeed, sir, but there’s just no time. It’s work for the manor and work at home, and the children – and I am all alone. There’s no one to help us.”

3

NEKHLYUDOV STEPPED INTO THE COTTAGE. The uneven, sooty walls in one corner of the room were hung with all kinds of rags and garments, while, in the opposite corner, they were literally covered with reddish cockroaches gathered round the icons and the bench. In the middle of this black, foul-smelling, fourteen-foot

shack, there was a large crack in the ceiling which, in spite of struts in two different places, sagged so that it threatened to collapse at any moment.

“Oh, yes, the cottage is very bad,” said the squire, looking closely at Churis, who did not seem eager to start a conversation on this subject.

“It’ll crush us and it’ll crush the children,” began the woman in a tearful voice leaning against the stove under the *polati*.*

“Don’t you start, now,” said Churis sternly, and his moustache twitched, almost concealing a subtle, scarcely perceptible smile, as he turned to the squire. “I just can’t think what to do with it, your honour, with the cottage, I mean. I put in struts and I put in boards, but there’s just nothing can be done!”

“How can we spend the winter here? O-o-oh,” said the woman.

“Well, of course, if we put up struts and a new beam in the ceiling,” her husband interrupted her with a quiet, businesslike expression, “and changed some of the beams, we could perhaps live through the winter somehow. We could get along, only the struts would block up the cottage inside, that’s the trouble. But if you so much as touch it, there’ll be nothing left of it – not one sound splinter. It only holds together while it stands,” he concluded, obviously very pleased that he had grasped that fact.

Nekhlyudov was both annoyed and pained that Churis should have brought himself to such a pass without applying to him sooner, for ever since his arrival he had never once refused to help the peasants and tried only to induce them to come straight to him with their troubles. He even had a feeling of anger against this man, shrugged his shoulders crossly and frowned. But the sight of the destitution surrounding him and, in the midst of that destitution, Churis’s calm and self-satisfied appearance, turned his annoyance into a feeling of sadness as well as hopelessness.

“Now Ivan, why didn’t you tell me before?” he remarked reproachfully as he sat down on the dirty, crooked bench.

“Haven’t had the courage to, your honour,” replied Churis with the same scarcely perceptible smile, shuffling from one black, bare foot to the other on the uneven earth floor, but he said it so boldly and calmly that it was hard to believe that he had not the courage to apply to the squire.