

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Dostoyevsky Smith Willis
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Henry Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Vinci
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Gogol Busch
Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato Scott
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Plato Scott
Andersen Andersen Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte
London Descartes Wells Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Bunner Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Richter Chekhov da Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Doré Dante Shaw Wodehouse
Swift Chekhov Pushkin Alcott
Newton



tredition was established in 2006 by Sandra Latusseck and Soenke Schulz. Based in Hamburg, Germany, tredition offers publishing solutions to authors and publishing houses, combined with worldwide distribution of printed and digital book content. tredition is uniquely positioned to enable authors and publishing houses to create books on their own terms and without conventional manufacturing risks.

For more information please visit: www.tredition.com

TREDITION CLASSICS

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series. The creators of this series are united by passion for literature and driven by the intention of making all public domain books available in printed format again - worldwide. Most TREDITION CLASSICS titles have been out of print and off the bookstore shelves for decades. At tredition we believe that a great book never goes out of style and that its value is eternal. Several mostly non-profit literature projects provide content to tredition. To support their good work, tredition donates a portion of the proceeds from each sold copy. As a reader of a TREDITION CLASSICS book, you support our mission to save many of the amazing works of world literature from oblivion. See all available books at www.tredition.com.



The content for this book has been graciously provided by Project Gutenberg. Project Gutenberg is a non-profit organization founded by Michael Hart in 1971 at the University of Illinois. The mission of Project Gutenberg is simple: To encourage the creation and distribution of eBooks. Project Gutenberg is the first and largest collection of public domain eBooks.

Modern Saints and Seers

Jean Finot

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Jean Finot

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8472-1975-0

www.tredition.com

www.tredition.de

Copyright:

The content of this book is sourced from the public domain.

The intention of the TREDITION CLASSICS series is to make world literature in the public domain available in printed format. Literary enthusiasts and organizations, such as Project Gutenberg, worldwide have scanned and digitally edited the original texts. tredition has subsequently formatted and redesigned the content into a modern reading layout. Therefore, we cannot guarantee the exact reproduction of the original format of a particular historic edition. Please also note that no modifications have been made to the spelling, therefore it may differ from the orthography used today.

MODERN SAINTS AND SEERS

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF

JEAN FINOT

BY

EVAN MARRETT

LONDON

WILLIAM RIDER & SON, LTD.

CATHEDRAL HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

1920

PREFACE

THE FOREST OF ILLUSIONS

"Listen within yourselves, and gaze into the infinity of Space and Time. There resounds the song of the Stars, the voice of Numbers, the harmony of the Spheres." — HERMES TRISMEGISTUS.

In these days the phenomenon of religion, which we believed to have receded into the background of human life, is reappearing among us, more vigorous than ever. The four years' desolation into which the world was plunged has rendered the attraction of "the beyond" irresistible, and man turns towards it with passionate curiosity and undisguised longing. The millions of dead who have vanished from mortal sight seem to be drawing the present towards the unsounded deeps of the future. In many cases their loss has taken all joy and colour from the lives of those who survive them, and tear-stained faces are instinctively turned towards the portals of the Great Mystery.

Occultism is triumphant. In its many different forms it now emerges from obscurity and neglect. Its promises excite our deepest thoughts and wishes. Eagerly we examine the strength of the bridge that it has built between this world and the next; and though we may see our hopes slip down between the crevices, though we may find those who have been disappointed in a more despairing state than before — what matter? We still owe thanks to occultism for some cherished moments of illusion.

The number of its followers increases steadily, for never before has man experienced so ardent a desire for direct contact with the Unknowable. Science will have to reckon with this movement which is carrying away even her own high-priests. She will have to widen her frontiers to include the phenomena that she formerly contemned.

The supernatural world, with its abnormal manifestations, fascinates modern humanity. The idea of death becomes more and more familiar. We even demand, as Renan happily expressed it, to know the truth which shall

enable us not to fear, but almost to love, death: and an irresistible force urges us to explore the depths of subconsciousness, whence, it is claimed, may spring the desired renewal and intensification of man's spiritual life.

But why is it that we do not return to the old-established religions? It is because, alas, the Great Agony through which the world has passed has not dealt kindly with any form of established faith. Dogmatic theology, which admits and exalts the direct interference of the divinity in our affairs, has received some serious wounds. The useless and unjustifiable sacrifice of so many innocent lives, of women, of old men, of children, left us deeply perplexed. We could not grasp the reason for so much suffering. Never, at any period in the past, have the enemies of humanity and of God so blasphemed against the eternal principles of the universe – yet how was it that the authors of such crimes went unpunished?

Agonising doubts seized upon many faithful hearts, and amid all the misery with which our planet was filled we seemed to distinguish a creeping paralysis of the established faiths. Just at the time when we most had need of religion, it seemed to weaken and vanish from our sight, though we knew that human life, when not enriched and ennobled by spiritual forces, sinks into abysmal depths, and that even any diminution in the strength of these forces is fatally injurious to our most sacred and essential interests.

Attempts to revive our faith were bound to be made sooner or later, and we shall no doubt yet witness innumerable pilgrimages towards the source of religion.

The psychology of the foundations of the spiritual life; the mysterious motives which draw men towards, or alienate them from, religious leaders; the secret of the influence exercised by these latter upon mankind in the mass – all these things are now and always of intense interest. Through the examination of every kind of disease, the science of medicine discovers the laws of health; and through studying many religions and their followers we may likewise arrive at a synthesis of a sane and wholesome faith. The ever-increasing numbers of strange and attractive places of worship which are springing up in all countries bear witness to man's invincible need to find shelter behind immediate certainties, even as their elaborate outer forms reflect the variety of his inward aspirations.

In the great forest of ecstasies and illusions which supplies spiritual nourishment to so many of our fellow-humans, we have here confined ourselves to the examination of the most picturesque and unusual plants, and have gathered them for preference in the soil of Russia and of the United States. These two countries, though in many respects further apart than the Antipodes, furnish us with characteristic examples of the thirst for renewal of faith which rages equally in the simple soul of an uncultured peasant and in that of a business man weary of the artificialities of modern life.

Many of us held mistakenly that our contemporaries were incapable of being fired to enthusiasm by new religions, whose exponents seemed to us as questionable as their doctrines. But we need only observe the facts to behold with what inconceivable ease an age considered prosaic and incredulous has adopted spiritual principles which frequently show up the lack of harmony between our manner of life and our hidden longings.

The religious phenomena which we see around us in so many complex forms seem to foreshadow a spiritual future whose content is illimitable.

Such examples of human psychology, whether normal or morbid, as are here offered to the reader, may well recall to mind some of the strangest products of man's imagination. The tales of Hoffmann or of Edgar Allan Poe pale before these inner histories of the human soul, and the most moving novels and romances appear weak and artificial when compared to the eruptions of light and darkness which burst forth from the depths of man's subconsciousness.

These phenomena will interest the reader of reflective temperament no less than the lover of the sensational and the improbable in real life.

MODERN SAINTS AND SEERS

PART I

THE SALVATION OF THE POOR

A. THE ORGANISED SECTS

The tragic death of the monk Rasputin made a deep impression upon the civilised world, and truth was lost to view amid the innumerable legends that grew up around his life and activities. One leading question dominated all discussions:—How could an individual so lacking in refinement and culture influence the life of a great nation, and become in indirect fashion one of the main factors in the struggle against the Central Powers? Through what miracle did he succeed in making any impression upon the thought and conduct of a social order infinitely superior to himself?

Psychologists are fascinated by the career of this adventurer who ploughed so deep a furrow in the field of European history; but in seeking to detach the monk from his background, we run the risk of entirely failing to comprehend the mystery of his influence, itself the product of a complex and little understood environment. The misery of the Russian people, combined with their lack of education, contributed largely towards it, for the desire to escape from material suffering drove them to adopt the weirdest systems of salvation for the sake of deliverance and forgetfulness.

The perception of the ideal is often very acute among the uneducated. They accept greedily every new "message" that is offered them, but alas, they do not readily distinguish the true from the false, or the genuine saint from the impostor.

The orthodox clergy of the old Russian régime, recruited under deplorable conditions, attained but rarely the moral and intellectual eminence necessary to inspire their flock with feelings of love and

confidence; while, on the other hand, the false prophets and their followers, vigorously persecuted by official religion, easily gained for themselves the overwhelming attraction of martyrdom. Far from lessening the numbers of those who deserted the established church, persecution only increased them, and inflamed the zeal of its victims, so that they clung more passionately than ever to the new dogmas and their hunted exponents.

These sects and doctrines, though originating among the peasantry, did not fail to spread even to the large towns, and waves of collective hysteria, comparable to the dances of death of the Middle Ages, swept away in their train all the hypersensitives and neurotics that abound in the modern world. Even the highest ranks of Russian society did not escape the contagion.

We shall deal in these pages with the most recent and interesting sects, and with those that are least known, or perhaps not known at all. Beginning with the doctrines of melancholia, of tenderness, of suffering, of exalted pietism, and of social despair—which, whether spontaneous or inspired, demoniac or divine, undoubtedly embody many of the mysterious aspirations of the human soul—we shall find ourselves in a strange and moving world, peopled by those who accomplish, as a matter of course, acts of faith, courage and endurance, foreign to the experience of most of us.

These pages must be read with an indulgent sympathy for the humble in spirit who adventure forth in search of eternal truth. We might paraphrase on their behalf the memorable discourse of the Athenian statesman: "When you have been initiated into the mystery of their souls you will love better those who in all times have sought to escape from injustice."

We should feel for them all the more because for so long they have been infinitely unhappy and infinitely abused. Against the dark background of the abominations committed by harsh rulers and worthless officials, the spectacle of these simple souls recalls those angels described by Dante, who give scarcely a sign of life and yet illuminate by their very presence the fearful darkness of hell; or those beautiful Greek sarcophagi upon which fair and graceful scenes are depicted upon a background of desolation. These "pastorals" of religious faith have a strangely archaic atmosphere, and I

venture to think that my readers will enjoy the contemplation of such virgin minds, untouched by science, in their swift and effortless communings with the divine.

The mental profundities of the *moujik* exhale sweetness and faith like mystic flowers opening under the breath of the Holy Spirit. In them, as in the celebrated *Psychomachy* of Prudence, the Christian virtues meet with the shadows of forgotten gods, Holy Faith is linked to Idolatry, Humility and Pride go hand in hand, and Libertinism seeks shelter beneath the veils of Modesty.

This thirst for the Supreme Good will in time find its appeasement in the just reforms brought by an organised democracy to a long-suffering people. Some day it may be that order, liberty and happiness shall prevail in the Muscovite countries, and their inhabitants no longer need to seek salvation by fleeing from reality. Then there will exist on earth a new paradise, wherein God, to use Saint Theresa's expression, shall henceforth "take His delight."

CHAPTER I

THE NEGATIVISTS

The most propitious and fertile soil in which collective mania can grow is that of unhappiness. Famine, unjust taxation, unemployment, persecution by local authorities, and so on, frequently lead to a dull hatred for the existing social, moral and religious order, which the simple-minded peasant takes to be the direct cause of his misfortunes.

Thus it was that the Negativists denied everything—God, the Devil, heaven, hell, the law, and the power of the Tsar. They taught that there is no such thing as right, religion, property, marriage, family or family duties. All those have been invented by man, and it is man who has created God, the Devil, and the Tsar.

In the record of the proceedings taken against one of the principal upholders of this sect, we find the following curious conversation between him and the judge.

"Your religion?"

"I have none."

"In what God do you believe?"

"In none. Your God is your own, like the Devil, for you have created both. They belong to you, like the Tsar, the priests, and the officials."

These people believe neither in generosity nor in gratitude. Men give away only what is superfluous, and the superfluous is not theirs. Labour should be free; consequently they kept no servants. They rejected both trade and money as useless and unjust. "Give to thy neighbour what thou canst of that of which he has need, and he in turn will give thee what thou needest." Love should be entirely free. Marriage is an absurdity and a sin, invented by man. All human beings are free, and a woman cannot belong to any one man, or a man to any one woman.

Here are some extracts taken from some other legal records. Two of the believers were brought before the judge, accompanied by a child.

"Is this your wife?" the judge inquired of the man.

"No, she is not my wife."

"How is it then that you live together?"

"We live together, but she is not mine. She belongs to herself."

Turning to the woman, the judge asked:

"Is this your husband?"

"He is not *mine*. He does not belong to me, but to himself."

"And the child? Is he yours?"

"No, he is not ours. He lives with us; he is of our blood; but he belongs to himself."

"But the coat you are wearing—is that yours?" demanded the exasperated judge.

"It is on my back, but it is not mine. It belonged once to a sheep; now it covers me; but who can say whose it will be to-morrow?"

The Negativists invented, long before Tolstoi, the doctrine of inaction and non-resistance to evil. They were deceived, robbed and ruined, but would not apply to the law, or to the police. Their method of reasoning and their way of speaking had a peculiar charm. A solicitor who visited one of the Siberian prisons reports the following details concerning a man named Rojnof. Arrested and condemned to be deported for vagabondage, he escaped repeatedly, but was at length imprisoned. The inspector was calling the roll of the prisoners, but Rojnof refused to answer to his name. Purple with rage, the inspector approached him and asked, "What is your name?"

"It is you who have a name. I have none."

After a series of questions and answers exchanged between the ever more furious official and the prisoner, who remained perfectly calm, Rojnof was flogged—but in spite of raw and bleeding wounds he still continued to philosophise.

"Confess the truth," stormed the inspector.

"Seek it," replied the peasant, "for yourself, for indeed you have need of it. As to me, I keep my truth for myself. Let me be quiet—that is all I ask."

The solicitor visited him several months later, and implored him to give his name, so that he might obtain his passport and permission to rejoin his wife and children.

"But I have no need of all that," he said. "Passports, laws, names—all those are yours. Children, family, property, class, marriage—so many of your cursed inventions. You can give me only one single thing—quietness."

The Siberian prisons swarmed with these mysterious beings. Poor souls! Their one desire was to quit as soon as possible this vale of injustice and of tears!

CHAPTER II

THE WHITE-ROBED BELIEVERS

Sometimes this longing for a better world, where suffering would be caused neither by hunger nor by laws, took touching and poetic forms.

About the month of April, 1895, all eyes in the town of Simbirsk were turned upon a sect founded by a peasant named Pistzoff. These poor countryfolk protested against the injustices of the world by robing themselves in white, "like celestial angels."

"We do not live as we should," taught Pistzoff, an aged, white-haired man. "We do not live as our fathers lived. We should act with simplicity, and follow the truth, conquering our bodily passions. The life that we lead now cannot continue long. This world will perish, and from its ruins will arise another, a better world, wherein all will be robed in white, as we are."

The believers lived very frugally. They were strict vegetarians, and ate neither meat nor fish. They did not smoke or drink alcohol, and abstained from tea, milk and eggs. They took only two meals daily — at ten in the morning, and six in the evening. Everything that they wore or used they made with their own hands — boots, hats, underclothing, even stoves and cooking utensils.

The story of Pistzoff's conversion inevitably recalls that of Tolstoi. He was a very rich merchant when, feeling himself inspired by heavenly truth, he called his employés to him and gave them all that he had, including furniture and works of art, retaining nothing but white garments for himself and his family. His wife protested vehemently, especially when Pistzoff forbade her to touch meat, on account of the suffering endured by animals when their lives are taken from them. The old lady did not share his tastes, and firmly upheld a contrary opinion, declaring that animals went gladly to their death! Pistzoff then fetched a fowl, ordered his wife to hold it, and procured a hatchet with which to kill it. While threatening the

poor creature he made his wife observe its anguish and terror, and the fowl was saved at the same time as the soul of Madame Pistzoff, who admitted that fowls, at any rate, do not go gladly into the cooking-pot.

The number of Pistzoff's followers increased daily, and the sect of the "White-robed Believers" was formed. Their main tenet being *loving-kindness*, they lived peacefully and harmed none, while awaiting the supreme moment when "the whole world should become white."

For the rest, the white-robed ones and their prophet followed the doctrines of the *molokanes*, who drank excessive quantities of milk during Lent—hence their name. This was one of the most flourishing of all the Russian sects. Violently opposed to all ceremonies, they recognised neither religious marriages, churches, priests nor dogmas, claiming that the whole of religion was contained in the Old and New Testaments. Though well-educated, they submitted meekly to a communal authority, chosen from among themselves, and led peaceful and honest working lives. All luxuries, even down to feminine ornaments or dainty toilettes, were banned. They considered war a heathen invention—merely "assassination on a large scale"—and though, when forced into military service, they did their duty as soldiers in peace-time, the moment war was in view it was their custom to throw away their arms and quietly desert. There were no beggars and no poor among them, for all helped one another, the richer setting aside one-tenth of their income for the less fortunate.

Hunted and persecuted by the government, they multiplied nevertheless, and when banished to far-away districts they ended by transforming the waste, uncultivated lands into flourishing gardens.

CHAPTER III

THE STRANGLERS

A sect no less extraordinary than the last was that of the Stranglers (*douchiteli*). It originated towards the end of 1874, and profited by a series of law cases, nearly all of which ended in acquittal. The Stranglers flourished especially in the Tzarevokokschaïsk district, and first attained notoriety under the following circumstances.

A large number of deaths by strangling had been recorded, and their frequency began to arouse suspicion. Whether they were due to some criminal organisation, or to a series of suicidal impulses, the local police were long unable to decide, but in the end the culprits were discovered.

Were they, however, in reality culpable?

The unfortunate peasants, after much reflection, had come to the conclusion that death is not terrible, but that what is indubitably to be feared is the last agony—the difficult departure from terrestrial life. They decided, therefore, to come to the assistance of the Death Angel, and, when any sufferer approached the final struggle, his neighbours or relatives would carry him off to some isolated spot, tie up his head firmly but kindly in a cushion—and soon all was over.

Before, however, they had recourse to such drastic measures, they would inquire from the wizards (or *znachar*) of the district, doctors being almost unknown, whether the invalid still had any chance of recovery, and it was only after receiving a negative reply that the pious ceremony took place. We say "pious" because there is something strangely pathetic in this "crowning of the martyrs," as the peasants called it. Arising in the first place from compassion, the motive for the deed was, after all, a belief in the need for human sacrifice. The invalid who consents to give up his life for the honour of heaven accomplishes thereby an act of sublime piety; but what merit has he who dies only from necessity?

The corpses were buried in the forest and covered with plants and leaves, but no sign was left that might betray them to the suspicious authorities. When a member of the community disappeared, and the police made inquiries, they always had the greatest possible difficulty in finding his remains. Sometimes even his nearest relations did not know where the "saviours of his soul" had hidden him.

But there was one thing that marked the discovery of a dead Strangler. His body never bore any trace of violence, and as dissection always proved, in addition, the existence of some more or less serious disease, the sham "murderers" were eventually left in peace. A small local paper, the *Volgar* (April, 1895), from which these facts are taken, reports that several actions brought against them ended in their acquittal.

Lord Avebury recounts that certain cannibal tribes kill those of their members who have reached the stage of senile decay, and make them the substance of a more or less succulent repast. These savages act, no doubt, whether consciously or unconsciously, from some perception of the misery and uselessness of old age, but the Russian peasants cannot be compared to them. The Stranglers are not moved by any unconscious sentiment. Their belief is the logical application of a doctrine of pessimism, whose terrible consequences they have adopted, although they know not its terminology. What is the life of a *moujik* worth? Nothing, or nearly nothing. Is it not well, then, to accelerate the coming of deliverance? Let us end the life, and, snapping the chains that bind us to mortals, offer it as a sacrifice to heaven! So reason these simple creatures, inexorable in their logic, and weighed down by untold misery.