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Leo Tolstoy
Elias
Translated by Robert Nisbet Bain
1885

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There dwelt once upon a time in the Ufimsk government a Bashkir named Elias. The father of Elias had left him a poor man. His father had only gotten him a wife a year before, and then died. In those days Elias owned seven mares, two cows, and twice ten sheep. But Elias was now the master, and began to spread himself out; from morn to eve he labored with his wife, rose up earlier and lay down later than all other men, and grew richer every year. Five-and-thirty years did Elias continue to labor, and won for himself great possessions.

Elias now had two hundred head of horses, a hundred and fifty head of horned cattle, and one thousand two hundred sheep. Many men-servants pastured the *tabuns*^{<1} and the herds of Elias, and many maid-servants milked the mares and the cows and made kumis, butter and cheese. Elias had much of everything, and everybody round about envied the life of Elias. People said: "Ah, what a lucky fellow that Elias is! He has everything in abundance, he has no need to die." And good people began to know Elias and make

¹ Studs of horses

his acquaintance. And guests came to him from afar. And Elias welcomed them

all, and gave them to eat and to drink. Whosoever came to him found abundance of kumis, and tea, and sherbet, and the flesh of rams. Whenever guests came a ram or two was immediately killed, and if there were many guests they killed a mare.

Elias had three children — two sons and a daughter. Elias had provided his sons with wives, and had given his daughter in marriage. While Elias was poor his sons had worked with him and guarded the herds and the *tabuns* themselves, but when the sons became rich they began to amuse themselves, and one of them took to drink. One of them — the eldest — was presently killed in a brawl, and the younger son fell into the power of a stuck-up wife, and this son no longer listened to his father, and Elias had to give him his portion and get rid of him.

So Elias paid him out and gave him a house and cattle, and the riches of Elias were diminished. And shortly after this a disease fell upon the sheep of Elias, and many of them perished. And then came a year of scarceness — no hay would grow — and many cattle starved in the winter. Then the Kirghiz came and stole the best part of the horses, and the estate of Elias diminished still further. Elias began to fall lower and lower, and his natural forces were less. And when he had reached his seventieth year things came to such a pass that he began to sell his furs, his carpets, his *kibitki*² and then he began to sell his cattle, down to the very last one; and so Elias came to naught. And he himself perceived that he had nothing left, and he was obliged in his old age

to go with his wife to live among the common people. And the only things which Elias could now call his own were the clothes he had on his body, his fur cloak, his hat, and his shoes; and his wife, Shem Shemagi, was also an old woman. The son whom he

² A covered wagon.

between my old man and me. He would say: ‘We ought to do this,’ and then I would say: ‘No! we ought to do that!’ and so we began to curse each other, and that was sinful. Thus we lived, and went on from care to care, from sin to sin, and we found no happiness in life.”

”Well, but now?”

”Now I and my old man rise up together, we converse lovingly and agree in all things, we have naught to quarrel about and naught to trouble us — our sole care is to serve our master. We labor according as we are able, we labor gladly, so that our master may have no loss and may prosper. We come to the house — there is dinner, there is supper, there is kumis. If it be cold there is the *kizyak*³ wherewith to warm ourselves, and there are furs. And there is time, when we wish it, to talk together, to think of our souls, and to pray to God. For fifty years we sought happiness, and only now have we found it.”

The guests began to laugh.

But Elias said: ”Laugh not, brethren! this is no jest, but human life. And at first my old woman and I were fools and wept because we had lost our wealth, but now God hath revealed the truth to us, and now we also reveal it to you, not for our amusement but for your good.”

And the Mullah said: ”These be wise sayings, and Elias hath spoken the real truth, and all this is written down in the Scriptures.”

And the guests ceased to laugh, and they pondered these things in their hearts.

³ Dried cow-dung used as fuel by the Bashkirs.

had bought off departed into a distant land, and his daughter died. And there was none to help the old folks.

Their neighbor, Muhamedshah, pitied the old folks. He himself was neither rich nor poor, but lived at his ease, and he was a good man. He remembered that he had eaten bread and salt with Elias, and he was filled with compassion and said to Elias:

”Come to me, Elias, and live with me along with thine old woman. In the summer thou shalt work for me according to thy strength in the melon fields, and in the winter thou shalt feed my cattle and let Shem Shemagi milk the cows and make kumis. I will feed and clothe you both, and whatever ye may want tell it me and I will give it you.”

Elias thanked his neighbor and dwelt with his wife in the house of Muhamedshah as one of his servants. At first it seemed grievous to them, but soon they grew accustomed to it, and the old people continued to live there and work according to their strength.

It was profitable to the master to have such people, for the old folks had themselves been masters and knew how things should be rightly ordered, and were not idle but worked according to their ability; the only thing which grieved Muhamedshah was to see people who had been so high fall to such a low estate.

And it chanced one day that distant relations came as guests, to Muhamedshah, and a Mullah came also. And Muhamedshah bade Elias take a ram and slay it Elias skinned the ram and cooked it, and set it before the guests. The guests ate the ram’s flesh, drank as much tea as they wanted, and then fell a-drinking kumis. The guests sat with their host on down cushions on the floor and drank their kumis out of little cups, and conversed together, and Elias went about his work and passed by the door where they were sitting.

Muhamedshah saw him and said to one of his guests: ”Didst thou see that old man who passed by my door?”

”I saw him,” said the guest; ”is there anything extraordinary about him?”

"There is this much extraordinary about him — that he was once upon a time our richest man — Elias they called him; perchance thou hast heard concerning him?"

"How could I help hearing of him?" replied the guest; "seen it all I have not, but the fame of him was spread far and wide."

"Well, now he hath naught, and he lives with me as a servant, and his old woman lives with him and milks my cows."

The guest was astonished. He clicked with his tongue, shook his head, and said: "Ah! 'tis plain how fortune goes flying round like a wheel. One she raises on high, another she thrusts down below. Tell me," said the guest, "is the heart of the old man sore within him, perchance?"

"Who can tell? He lives peaceably and quietly, and looks well.

"May one converse with him?" said the guest; "I should like to question him concerning his life."

"Certainly, it is possible," replied the host, and he shouted from behind the *kibitka*, "Babad," which signifies grandfather in the Bashkir language, "go and drink kumis and call hither the old man!"

And Elias came to them with his wife. Elias greeted the guests and the host, recited a prayer, and squatted down on his knees at the door, and his wife went behind the curtain and sat down with her mistress.

They gave Elias a cup full of kumis. Elias drank the healths of the guests and the host, did obeisance, drank a little more, and then placed the cup aside.

"Now, tell me, grandfather," said one of the guests, "I suppose it grieves thee looking at us, to call to mind thy former life, and to recollect how fortunate thou wert, and how now thou dwellest in misery?"

And Elias smiled and said: "If I were to speak to thee of good fortune and ill fortune thou wouldst not believe me — far better it would be if thou didst ask my old wife concerning this thing. She

is a woman, and therefore what her heart feeleth that her tongue speaketh; she will tell thee the whole truth about this matter."

And the guest spake, turning towards the curtain: "Speak now, old woman! tell me, how judgest thou concerning thy former good fortune and thy present ill fortune?"

And Shem Shemagi answered from behind the curtain: "This is how I judge: I and my old man lived together for fifty years; we sought after happiness and we could not find it, and only now this is the second year in which we have wanted for nothing, and we live as working folks and have found real happiness, and we want nothing else."

The guests were astonished and the host was astonished; he even rose up and threw aside the curtain to behold the old woman. And there the old woman stood with folded arms, and she was smiling, and she looked at her old man, and he smiled also.

And the old woman also said: "I speak the truth, I jest not: we sought happiness for half a hundred years, and while we were rich we did not find it at all; now that we have nothing left and live among working people we have found such happiness that we need nothing better."

"And in what, then, does your present happiness consist?"

"It consists in this: while we were rich I and my old man had not a single quiet hour together, we had no time to talk, no time to think of our souls, no time to pray to God. So many cares were we saddled with. At one time guests came to see us, and it was a worry what to set before each and with what presents to gratify them lest they should speak scornfully concerning us. Then there was the trouble of seeing to it that the wolves did not rend the lambs or kids or that thieves did not chase away the horses. Even when we lay down it was not to sleep, for we feared that the sheep might overlay the lambs in the night. You might get up and go about at night, and no sooner would your mind be at ease than a fresh worry would arise: how to find hay or pasturage in the winter time — and so it would go on. And all this was nothing to the disagreements