

Exiled to Siberia

Leo Tolstoy

1887

In the city of Vladimir lived a young merchant named Askenov. He owned two stores and a dwelling-house.

Askenov was attractive in person, blond, curly-headed, and a lover of jollity and song. He drank in his youth, and when intoxicated he quarreled. But when once married he drank very rarely.

One day in summer he decided to attend the fair at Nijni-Novogorod. As he was bidding his family farewell, his wife said to him:

"Ivan, do not go to-day; I had a bad dream about you."

Askenov began to laugh, and replied:

"You fear I will commit some folly at the fair."

His wife answered: "I do not myself exactly know what I fear; only I had a bad dream. I saw you as you came from the city. You took off your cap, and all at once I saw that your head was quite white."

Askenov began to laugh more cheerily still. "Ah well! it is a good sign," he said. "I shall do a good business, and will bring you a beautiful present."

So he took leave of his family and departed. Midway in his journey he met an acquaintance, a merchant, with whom he lodged that night. They drank tea together, and went to sleep in adjoining rooms.

Askenov was not a heavy sleeper. He awoke in the middle of the night, and, to travel more comfortably in the coolness of the morning, aroused the postilion, and ordered him to put the horses before the wagon. Then he entered the dim office, paid the landlord, and went away.

After having traveled forty miles, he stopped again to feed the horses, rested himself at the hotel, went out upon the door-step and had his samovar prepared. He took a guitar and began to play. All at once a troika with its gong arrives. A state functionary with two soldiers descends, approaches Askenov, and inquires of him who he is and whither he is going. Askenov excuses himself from replying, but asks him to take some tea. The official, however, continues to press his questions. Where had he slept the night before? Was he alone with the merchant? Why had he left the inn so precipitantly?

Askenov, surprised by these interrogatories, related what had taken place, then said: "Why do you ask me so many questions? I am neither a thief nor a brigand. I am traveling on my own business, and no one has a right to question me."

The official then called his soldiers and replied: "I am a police commissioner, and if I question you it is because the merchant with whom you passed the night was murdered. Show your baggage – and you others, search it."

They entered the hotel-office, took his trunk and satchel, opened them, and in the latter found a knife.

The officer exclaimed, "Whose is this knife?" Askenov turned to look, saw a blade covered with blood, and became terror-stricken.

"And why this blood on the knife?"

Askenov tried to reply, but he could not utter a word.

"I – I do not know – I – A knife – I – It is not mine," he stammered at last.

The police commissioner said: "This morning the merchant was found murdered in bed. No one except yourself could have committed the crime. The rooms were locked from the inside, and within was no one but you and he. Moreover, a knife covered with blood has been found in your bag. Besides, your crime can be read in your face. Confess at once how you killed him, and how much money you stole."

Askenov called God to witness that he was not guilty; that he had not seen the merchant after having taken tea with him; that he had only his own money, eight thousand rubles, and that the knife was not his.

But his voice was husky, his face had become pale, and he trembled like a criminal.

The officer called his soldiers, and ordered them to bind him and place him in the carriage. When they had done so, Askenov, with his feet in irons, crossed himself and began to weep. They took away all his effects, with his money, and put him in prison in the neighboring city.

An inquest was held at Vladimir. All the merchants and inhabitants declared that Askenov, though he had been in the habit of drinking and amusing himself when a young man, was regarded as an honorable person. Then the matter came before the courts. He was accused of having murdered the merchant Riazan, and of having robbed him of twenty thousand rubles.

His wife was in despair, and knew not what to think. Her children were all small, one of them still at the breast. She took them all with her, and went to the city where her husband was imprisoned. At first they refused to let her see him; but as she insisted, she was allowed that privilege. When she saw him in his prison clothes, shackled, mingling with robbers, she fell to the ground, and some time passed before she came to herself again. Then she gathered her children about her, seated herself by Askenov's side, told him of what was going on at home, and asked him to relate how his misfortune had come about. He told her all, and she asked:

"What is to be done now?"

"We must supplicate the Czar," he replied; "for it can not be that the innocent should be punished."

His wife then told him that she had already sent a petition to the Czar; "but it could not have been sent to him," she said.

Askenov made no reply, and remained overwhelmed.

His wife said: "My dream was not in vain. Do you remember it? I saw you with white hair. It will now become white with grief. You ought not to have gone that time."

She began to stroke his hair with her hand, and said:

"My dear Ivan, speak the truth to your wife. Was it not you who killed him?"

"Askenov replied: "And you, also, think so!" He hid his face in his hands and wept.

A soldier appeared. He told the wife and children that it was time for them to go, and Askenov bade his family farewell for the last time.

When his wife was gone he mentally reviewed his conversation with her. Recollecting that she also had asked him if he had not murdered the merchant, he said to himself: "God alone knows the truth. Him I must implore. I will await his mercy." And from that moment he ceased to ask for human aid, lifted up his soul in hope, and prayed continually to God.

Askenov was sentenced to the knout, and then to hard labor for life. The sentence was carried out. He was beaten with the knout, and when his wounds were healed they sent him, with other life convicts, to Siberia.

There Askenov remained at hard labor for twenty-six years. His hair became white as snow, and his long gray beard hung limply from his face. All his gaiety disappeared. He began to stoop and to lag in his gait. He spoke but little, and never laughed. He frequently prayed to God.

In prison he learned to make shoes, and with the money thus earned bought a book of martyrs, which he read when there was light in his dungeon. On festal days he attended the prison chapel, read the Apostles, and sang in the choir. He never lost his beautiful voice. The officials loved him for his docility; his companions held him in high regard, called him "grandfather" and "man of God." When the convicts demanded any thing, it was always Askenov who was made to present their request. When the prisoners quarreled, it was again Askenov whom they chose as arbitrator. No one wrote him from home, and Askenov knew not whether his wife and children were still living.

One day new convicts were taken to the prison. In the evening the old ones asked of the new from what cities or villages they came, and for what causes. Askenov also approached, and with inclined head listened to what was said. One of the new convicts was an old man of sixty years, tall in stature, and with a gray, trimmed beard. He related the reasons for his doom.

"It is thus, my brothers," he said, "they have sent me here for nothing. I detached a horse from a sleigh; they seized me, saying I stole it. And I – I replied: 'I only wished to travel more rapidly; you see indeed that I have let the horse loose. No crime has been committed.' 'No,' they said; 'you have stolen it,' but they knew neither where nor when I had stolen it. To be sure I was guilty of misdeeds, which ought to have sent me here long before, but they could never surprise me in the act. And now they have brought me here contrary to all law. Now, listen. I have already been in Siberia. But I did not remain here long."

"Whence do you come?" asked one of the convicts.

"I am from the city of Vladimir. I am a small shopkeeper of that place. My name is Makar."

Askenov raised his head and asked: "Have you not heard the merchant Askenov spoken of at Vladimir? Are they still alive?"

"Why, to be sure. But they are rich merchants, although their father is in Siberia: he must have sinned like the rest of us."

Askenov did not like to speak on the subject of his misfortune. He sighed and said: "It is for my sins that I have been in prison twenty-six years."

Makar asked, "For what sins?"

"I merit my punishment," responded Askenov, simply.

He would say nothing more. But the other convicts related to the newly-arrived why Askenov found himself in Siberia; how some one, during the journey, had murdered the merchant and placed a bloody knife among Askenov's baggage; and how, by reason of that, he had been unjustly condemned.

In hearing this, Makar cast a glance upon Askenov, struck his knees with his hands, and exclaimed:

"Oh, what a wonder! This is a miracle. Ah, you have grown quite old, grandfather!"

They asked why he was so astonished; where he had seen Askenov. But Makar did not reply; he merely said: "It is a miracle, brothers, that fate has re-united us here."

These expressions convinced Askenov that this man must be the assassin, and he said to him: "Have you heard this affair spoken of before, Maker [sic]; or have you indeed seen me elsewhere than here?"

"What? I have heard it spoken of. The earth is full of ears. A Russian proverb. But it is a long time since that affair took place, and I have forgotten the particulars they told me."

"Perhaps you learned who killed the merchant?" asked Askenov.

Makar began to laugh, and said: "As it was in your bag the knife was found, you doubtless killed him yourself. If it should be that some one else put the knife there – why, not caught, not a thief. And, moreover, how could he have placed the knife in your bag? You had it under your head. You must have heard."

On hearing these words, Askenov perceived clearly that he was the person who had killed the merchant. He arose and went away. All that night Askenov could not sleep. He fell into profound listlessness, and dreamed dreams. Now it was his wife he saw as she appeared at the time of that last fair. He saw her still alive, her face, her eyes; he heard her speak and laugh: now it was his children who appeared to him as they then were, all small, one in a fur cloak and the other at the breast. He saw himself as he then was, young, lively, seated and playing the guitar on the doorstep of the tavern, where he was arrested. And he was reminded of the infamous place where they had whipped him, of the executioner, of the crowd round about, the irons, convicts, and of the twenty-six years he had spent in prison. He thought of his old age, and a desire to take his own life seized upon Askenov.

"And all this on account of that brigand!" he thought.

He felt such a passion of wrath against Makar coming over him, that he would have been willing to perish that hour could he be revenged upon him. He prayed all night without being able to calm himself. The next morning he did not approach nor look at Makar.

Fifteen days passed thus. Askenov could not sleep at night, and during the day he felt such a weariness that he knew not what to do with himself. One night, as he was walking up and down in the prison, he perceived that earth was being thrown from under one of the planks used as a bed. He stopped to see what was going on, and all at once Makar came quickly from beneath the bed, and looked at Askenov with an expression of terror. The latter wished to pass on so as to avoid looking at him; but Makar seized him by the hand, and told him how he was digging a tunnel under the wall, how he was in the habit of filling his boots with the earth thrown up and emptying it in the street every morning when they were taken out to work. He added:

"Only keep quiet, old man. I will take you with me. If you expose me I will be whipped to the last extremity, but you will pay for it. I will kill you!"

Looking at him who had ruined him, Askenov trembled with anger. He drew away his hand, and said: "I do not desire to escape, and you will have no need to murder me. You have already killed me a long time ago. Whether I shall expose you or not is for God to decide."

The next morning, when the convicts were taken to work, the soldiers noticed that Makar emptied earth from his boots. An investigation was made in the prison, and the tunnel was discovered. The overseer came and demanded to know who had excavated it. Every body denied

all knowledge of the matter. Those who knew, did not wish to betray Makar, as he would be whipped "half-dead" for his offense. The chief then addressed himself to Askenov.

"Old man," he said, "you who are an upright fellow, tell me who has done this."

Makar remained impassible, looking at the superintendent without turning toward Askenov. As to the latter, his arms and his legs trembled; he could not say a word.

"Shall I remain silent?" he thought. "But why pardon him, since it is he who has ruined my life? Let him pay for my tortures. Shall I speak? True, they will whip him nearly to death, and if it should not be he, if he should not be the assassin I suspect him to be – and then, would it be any solace to me?"

The chief repeated his demand. Askenov looked at Makar, and replied:

"I cannot tell, your highness; God does not permit me, and I shall not tell you. Do with me as you please. You are master."

Notwithstanding every effort of the chief, Askenov said no more. Thus it was that no one knew who had dug the tunnel.

The following night, as Askenov was reclining upon his plank-bed trying to sleep, he heard some one approach and place himself at his feet. Through the obscurity he recognized Makar. Askenov said to him:

"Have you still further need of me? What are you doing there?"

Makar remained silent, and Askenov raised himself up saying: "What do you want? Go away, or I will call the watchman."

Makar hung over Askenov and whispered in his ear: "Ivan Askenov, forgive me."

"Why? What should I forgive you?"

"It was I who murdered the merchant, and I put the knife in your bag! I intended to kill you also, but some one made a noise in the yard. I placed the knife in your bag, and escaped by the window."

Askenov remained silent, and knew not what to say.

Makar slipped from the bed, prostrated himself on the earth, and said:

"Ivan Askenov, pardon me; in the name of God, pardon me! I will declare that I killed the merchant; they will set you at liberty, and you can return home."

And Askenov replied: "That is easily said. But I, I have suffered here too long. Where should I go now? My wife is dead; my children have forgotten me. I have nowhere to go."

Makar, still prostrated and striking the earth with his head, said: "Ivan, pardon me. If I had been beaten with the knout, that would have been less painful than [sic] to see you thus. And you still had pity on me; you did not expose me. Pardon me, in the name of Christ, pardon a wretched malefactor!" And he began to sob.

Hearing Makar weeping, Askenov himself also began to weep.

"God will pardon you. Perhaps I am a hundred times worse than you."

And he felt a sudden joy flooding his soul. He ceased from that moment to grieve over his home, and no longer desired to leave his prison. He thought only of his last hour.

Makar would not listen to Askenov, and declared himself the guilty one. When the order came to restore Askenov to liberty, he was already dead.

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