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Leo Tolstoy
The Candle
1885

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1885

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil." ST. MATTHEW V. 38, 39.

It was in the time of serfdom—many years before Alexander II's liberation of the sixty million serfs in 1862. In those days the people were ruled by different kinds of lords. There were not a few who, remembering God, treated their slaves in a humane manner, and not as beasts of burden, while there were others who were seldom known to perform a kind or generous action; but the most barbarous and tyrannical of all were those former serfs who arose from the dirt and became princes.

It was this latter class who made life literally a burden to those who were unfortunate enough to come under their rule. Many of them had arisen from the ranks of the peasantry to become superintendents of noblemen's estates.

The peasants were obliged to work for their master a certain number of days each week. There was plenty of land and water and the soil was rich and fertile, while the meadows and forests

were sufficient to supply the needs of both the peasants and their lord.

There was a certain nobleman who had chosen a superintendent from the peasantry on one of his other estates. No sooner had the power to govern been vested in this newly-made official than he began to practice the most outrageous cruelties upon the poor serfs who had been placed under his control. Although this man had a wife and two married daughters, and was making so much money that he could have lived happily without transgressing in any way against either God or man, yet he was filled with envy and jealousy and deeply sunk in sin.

Michael Simeonovitch began his persecutions by compelling the peasants to perform more days of service on the estate every week than the laws obliged them to work. He established a brick-yard, in which he forced the men and women to do excessive labor, selling the bricks for his own profit.

On one occasion the overworked serfs sent a delegation to Moscow to complain of their treatment to their lord, but they obtained no satisfaction. When the poor peasants returned disconsolate from the nobleman their superintendent determined to have revenge for their boldness in going above him for redress, and their life and that of their fellow-victims became worse than before.

It happened that among the serfs there were some very treacherous people who would falsely accuse their fellows of wrong-doing and sow seeds of discord among the peasantry, whereupon Michael would become greatly enraged, while his poor subjects began to live in fear of their lives. When the superintendent passed through the village the people would run and hide themselves as from a wild beast. Seeing thus the terror which he had struck to the hearts of the moujiks, Michael's treatment of them became still more vindictive, so that from over-work and ill-usage the lot of the poor serfs was indeed a hard one.

Toward the evening, when the serfs arrived at the village gate, their horses refused to enter. On looking around, the peasants discovered the dead body of their superintendent lying face downward in a pool of blood, where he had fallen from the fence. Peter Mikhayeff alone had sufficient courage to dismount and approach the prostrate form, his companions riding around the village and entering by way of the back yards. Peter closed the dead man's eyes, after which he put the body in a wagon and took it home.

When the nobleman learned of the fatal accident which had befallen his superintendent, and of the brutal treatment which he had meted out to those under him, he freed the serfs, exacting a small rent for the use of his land and the other agricultural opportunities.

And thus the peasants clearly understood that the power of God is manifested not in evil, but in goodness.

"He stood long enough to say: 'There should be peace on earth and good-will to men,' after which he resumed his plowing and singing, the candle burning even more brightly than before."

Simeonovitch had now ceased to ridicule, and, putting aside his guitar, his head dropped on his breast and he became lost in thought. Presently he ordered the elder and cook to depart, after which Michael went behind a screen and threw himself upon the bed. He was sighing and moaning, as if in great distress, when his wife came in and spoke kindly to him. He refused to listen to her, exclaiming:

"He has conquered me, and my end is near!"

"Mishinka," said the woman, "arise and go to the moujiks in the field. Let them go home, and everything will be all right. Heretofore you have run far greater risks without any fear, but now you appear to be very much alarmed."

"He has conquered me!" he repeated. "I am lost!"

"What do you mean?" demanded his wife, angrily. "If you will go and do as I tell you there will be no danger. Come, Mishinka," she added, tenderly; "I shall have the saddle-horse brought for you at once."

When the horse arrived the woman persuaded her husband to mount the animal, and to fulfill her request concerning the serfs. When he reached the village a woman opened the gate for him to enter, and as he did so the inhabitants, seeing the brutal superintendent whom everybody feared, ran to hide themselves in their houses, gardens, and other secluded places.

At length Michael reached the other gate, which he found closed also, and, being unable to open it himself while seated on his horse, he called loudly for assistance. As no one responded to his shouts he dismounted and opened the gate, but as he was about to remount, and had one foot in the stirrup, the horse became frightened at some pigs and sprang suddenly to one side. The superintendent fell across the fence and a very sharp picket pierced his stomach, when Michael fell unconscious to the ground.

There was a time when it was possible for the peasants, when driven to despair, to devise means whereby they could rid themselves of an inhuman monster such as Simeonovitch, and so these unfortunate people began to consider whether something could not be done to relieve *them* of their intolerable yoke. They would hold little meetings in secret places to bewail their misery and to confer with one another as to which would be the best way to act. Now and then the boldest of the gathering would rise and address his companions in this strain: "How much longer can we tolerate such a villain to rule over us? Let us make an end of it at once, for it were better for us to perish than to suffer. It is surely not a sin to kill such a devil in human form."

It happened once, before the Easter holidays, that one of these meetings was held in the woods, where Michael had sent the serfs to make a clearance for their master. At noon they assembled to eat their dinner and to hold a consultation. "Why can't we leave now?" said one. "Very soon we shall be reduced to nothing. Already we are almost worked to death - there being no rest, night or day, either for us or our poor women. If anything should be done in a way not exactly to please him he will find fault and perhaps flog some of us to death - as was the case with poor Simeon, whom he killed not long ago. Only recently Anisim was tortured in irons till he died. We certainly cannot stand this much longer." "Yes," said another, "what is the use of waiting? Let us act at once. Michael will be here this evening, and will be certain to abuse us shamefully. Let us, then, thrust him from his horse and with one blow of an ax give him what he deserves, and thus end our misery. We can then dig a big hole and bury him like a dog, and no one will know what became of him. Now let us come to an agreement—to stand together as one man and not to betray one another."

The last speaker was Vasili Minayeff, who, if possible, had more cause to complain of Michael's cruelty than any of his fellow-serfs. The superintendent was in the habit of flogging him severely every week, and he took also Vasili's wife to serve him as cook.

Accordingly, during the evening that followed this meeting in the woods Michael arrived on the scene on horseback. He began at once to find fault with the manner in which the work had been done, and to complain because some lime-trees had been cut down.

"I told you not to cut down any lime-trees!" shouted the enraged superintendent. "Who did this thing? Tell me at once, or I shall flog every one of you!"

On investigation, a peasant named Sidor was pointed out as the guilty one, and his face was roundly slapped. Michael also severely punished Vasili, because he had not done sufficient work, after which the master rode safely home.

In the evening the serfs again assembled, and poor Vasili said: "Oh, what kind of people *are* we, anyway? We are only sparrows, and not men at all! We agree to stand by each other, but as soon as the time for action comes we all run and hide. Once a lot of sparrows conspired against a hawk, but no sooner did the bird of prey appear than they sneaked off in the grass. Selecting one of the choicest sparrows, the hawk took it away to eat, after which the others came out crying, 'Twee-twee; and found that one was missing. 'Who is killed; they asked. 'Vanka! Well, he deserved it.' You, my friends, are acting in just the same manner. When Michael attacked Sidor you should have stood by your promise. Why didn't you arise, and with one stroke put an end to him and to our misery?"

The effect of this speech was to make the peasants more firm in their determination to kill their superintendent. The latter had already given orders that they should be ready to plow during the Easter holidays, and to sow the field with oats, whereupon the serfs became stricken with grief, and gathered in Vasili's house to hold another indignation meeting. "If he has really forgotten God," they said, "and shall continue to commit such crimes against us, it is truly necessary that we should kill him. If not, let us perish, for it can make no difference to us now."

"Well," said the elder, "they all spoke of you in anything but complimentary terms; but it is mean in me to repeat what they said."

"Mean or not you must tell me, I say!"

"Some of them declared that your back should be broken."

Simeonovitch appeared to enjoy this immensely, for he laughed outright. "We shall see whose back will be the first to be broken," said he. "Was that Tishka's opinion? While I did not suppose they would say anything good about me, I did not expect such curses and threats. And Peter Mikhayeff—was that fool cursing me too?"

"No; he did not curse you at all. He appeared to be the only silent one among them. Mikhayeff is a very wise moujik, and he surprises me very much. At his actions all the other peasants seemed amazed."

"What did he do?"

"He did something remarkable. He was diligently plowing, and as I approached him I heard some one singing very sweetly. Looking between the plowshares, I observed a bright object shining."

"Well, what was it? Hurry up!"

"It was a small, five-kopeck wax candle, burning brightly, and the wind was unable to blow it out. Peter, wearing a new shirt, sang beautiful hymns as he plowed, and no matter how he handled the implement the candle continued to burn. In my presence he fixed the plow, shaking it violently, but the bright little object between the colters remained undisturbed."

"And what did Mikhayeff say?"

"He said nothing—except when, on seeing me, he gave me the holy-day salutation, after which he went on his way singing and plowing as before. I did not say anything to him, but, on approaching the other moujiks, I found that they were laughing and making sport of their silent companion. 'It is a great sin to plow on Easter Monday,' they said. 'You could not get absolution from your sin if you were to pray all your life.'"

"And did Mikhayeff make no reply?"

"Yes," replied the elder; "they have accomplished about half the field."

"Is there no fault to be found?"

"Not that I could discover. The work seems to be well done. They are evidently afraid of you."

"How is the soil?"

"Very good. It appears to be quite soft."

"Well," said Simeonovitch, after a pause, "what did they say about me? Cursed me, I suppose?"

As the elder hesitated somewhat, Michael commanded him to speak and tell him the whole truth. "Tell me all," said he; "I want to know their exact words. If you tell me the truth I shall reward you; but if you conceal anything from me you will be punished. See here, Catherine, pour out a glass of vodki to give him courage!"

After drinking to the health of his superior, the elder said to himself: "It is not my fault if they do not praise him. I shall tell him the truth." Then turning suddenly to the superintendent he said:

"They complain, Michael Simeonovitch! They complain bitterly."

"But what did they say?" demanded Michael. "Tell me!"

"Well, one thing they said was, 'He does not believe in God.'"

Michael laughed. "Who said that?" he asked.

"It seemed to be their unanimous opinion. 'He has been overcome by the Evil One,' they said."

"Very good," laughed the superintendent; "but tell me what each of them said. What did Vasili say?"

The elder did not wish to betray his people, but he had a certain grudge against Vasili, and he said:

"He cursed you more than did any of the others."

"But what did he say?"

"It is awful to repeat it, sir. Vasili said, 'He shall die like a dog, having no chance to repent;'"

"Oh, the villain!" exclaimed Michael. "He would kill me if he were not afraid. All right, Vasili; we shall have an accounting with you. And Tishka—he called me a dog, I suppose?"

This despairing program, however, met with considerable opposition from a peaceably-inclined man named Peter Mikhayeff. "Brethren," said he, "you are contemplating a grievous sin. The taking of human life is a very serious matter. Of course it is easy to end the mortal existence of a man, but what will become of the souls of those who commit the deed? If Michael continues to act toward us unjustly God will surely punish him. But, my friends, we must have patience."

This pacific utterance only served to intensify the anger of Vasili. Said he: "Peter is forever repeating the same old story, 'It is a sin to kill any one.' Certainly it is sinful to murder; but we should consider the kind of man we are dealing with. We all know it is wrong to kill a good man, but even God would take away the life of such a dog as he is. It is our duty, if we have any love for mankind, to shoot a dog that is mad. It is a sin to let him live. If, therefore, we are to suffer at all, let it be in the interests of the people—and they will thank us for it. If we remain quiet any longer a flogging will be our only reward. You are talking nonsense, Mikhayeff. Why don't you think of the sin we shall be committing if we work during the Easter holidays—for you will refuse to work then yourself?"

"Well, then," replied Peter, "if they shall send me to plow, I will go. But I shall not be going of my own free will, and God will know whose sin it is, and shall punish the offender accordingly. Yet we must not forget him. Brethren, I am not giving you my own views only. The law of God is not to return evil for evil; indeed, if you try in this way to stamp out wickedness it will come upon you all the stronger. It is not difficult for you to kill the man, but his blood will surely stain your own soul. You may think you have killed a bad man—that you have gotten rid of evil—but you will soon find out that the seeds of still greater wickedness have been planted within you. If you yield to misfortune it will surely come to you."

As Peter was not without sympathizers among the peasants, the poor serfs were consequently divided into two groups: the followers of Vasili and those who held the views of Mikhayeff.

On Easter Sunday no work was done. Toward the evening an elder came to the peasants from the nobleman's court and said: "Our superintendent, Michael Simeonovitch, orders you to go to-morrow to plow the field for the oats." Thus the official went through the village and directed the men to prepare for work the next day—some by the river and others by the roadway. The poor people were almost overcome with grief, many of them shedding tears, but none dared to disobey the orders of their master.

On the morning of Easter Monday, while the church bells were calling the inhabitants to religious services, and while every one else was about to enjoy a holiday, the unfortunate serfs started for the field to plow. Michael arose rather late and took a walk about the farm. The domestic servants were through with their work and had dressed themselves for the day, while Michael's wife and their widowed daughter (who was visiting them, as was her custom on holidays) had been to church and returned. A steaming samovar awaited them, and they began to drink tea with Michael, who, after lighting his pipe, called the elder to him.

"Well," said the superintendent, "have you ordered the moujiks to plow to-day?"

"Yes, sir, I did," was the reply.

"Have they all gone to the field?"

"Yes, sir; all of them. I directed them myself where to begin."

"That is all very well. You gave the orders, but are they plowing? Go at once and see, and you may tell them that I shall be there after dinner. I shall expect to find one and a half acres done for every two plows, and the work must be well done; otherwise they shall be severely punished, notwithstanding the holiday."

"I hear, sir, and obey." The elder started to go, but Michael called him back. After hesitating for some time, as if he felt very uneasy, he said:

"By the way, listen to what those scoundrels say about me. Doubtless some of them will curse me, and I want you to report the exact words. I know what villains they are. They don't find

work at all pleasant. They would rather lie down all day and do nothing. They would like to eat and drink and make merry on holidays, but they forget that if the plowing is not done it will soon be too late. So you go and listen to what is said, and tell it to me in detail. Go at once."

"I hear, sir, and obey."

Turning his back and mounting his horse, the elder was soon at the field where the serfs were hard at work.

It happened that Michael's wife, a very good-hearted woman, overheard the conversation which her husband had just been holding with the elder. Approaching him, she said:

"My good friend, Mishinka, I beg of you to consider the importance and solemnity of this holy-day. Do not sin, for Christ's sake. Let the poor moujiks go home."

Michael laughed, but made no reply to his wife's humane request. Finally he said to her:

"You've not been whipped for a very long time, and now you have become bold enough to interfere in affairs that are not your own."

"Mishinka," she persisted, "I have had a frightful dream concerning you. You had better let the moujiks go."

"Yes," said he; "I perceive that you have gained so much flesh of late that you think you would not feel the whip. Lookout!"

Rudely thrusting his hot pipe against her cheek, Michael chased his wife from the room, after which he ordered his dinner. After eating a hearty meal consisting of cabbage-soup, roast pig, meat-cake, pastry with milk, jelly, sweet cakes, and vodki, he called his woman cook to him and ordered her to be seated and sing songs, Simeonovitch accompanying her on the guitar.

While the superintendent was thus enjoying himself to the fullest satisfaction in the musical society of his cook the elder returned, and, making a low bow to his superior, proceeded to give the desired information concerning the serfs.

"Well," asked Michael, "did they plow?"