

Traveler and Peasant

Leo Tolstoy

1909

[The interior of a peasant hut. An old Traveler is sitting on a bench, reading a book. A Peasant, the master of the hut, just home from his work, sits down to supper and asks the Traveler to share it. The Traveler declines. The Peasant eats, and when he has finished, rises, says grace, and sits down beside the old man.]

PEASANT. What brings you?...

TRAVELER [taking off his spectacles and putting down his book]. There is no train till to-morrow.

The station is crowded, so I asked your missus to let me stay the night with you, and she allowed it.

PEASANT. That's all right, you can stay.

TRAVELER. Thank you!... Well, and how are you living nowadays?

PEASANT. Living? What's our life like?... As bad as can be!

TRAVELER. How's that?

PEASANT. Why, because we've nothing to live on! Our life is so hard that if we wanted a worse one, we couldn't get it... You see, there are nine of us in family; all want to eat, and I have only got in four bushels of corn. Try and live on that! Whether one likes it or not, one has to go and work for wages ... and when you look for a job, wages are down!... The rich do what they like with us. The people increase, but the land doesn't, and taxes keep piling up! There's rent, and the district tax, and the land tax, and the tax for bridges, and insurance, and police, and for the corn store ... too many to count! And there are the priests and the landlords... They all ride on our backs, except those who are too lazy!

TRAVELER. I thought the peasants were doing well nowadays.

PEASANT. So well, that we go hungry for days at a time!

TRAVELER. The reason I thought so, was that they have taken to squandering so much money.

PEASANT. Squandering what money? How strange you talk!... Here are people starving to death, and you talk of squandering money!

TRAVELER. But how is it? The papers say that 700 million rubles (and a million is a thousand thousands)—700 million were spent by the peasants on vodka last year.

PEASANT. Are we the only ones that drink? Just look at the priests... Don't they swill first-rate? And the gentlefolk aren't behind-hand!

TRAVELER. Still, that's only a small part. The greater part stills falls to the peasants.

PEASANT. What of that? Are we not to drink at all?

TRAVELER. No; what I mean is that if 700 millions were squandered on vódka in one year it shows that life can't be so very hard... 700 millions! It's no joke ... one can hardly imagine it!

PEASANT. But how can one do without it? We didn't start the custom, and it's not for us to stop it... There are the Church feasts, and weddings, and memorial feasts, and bargains to be wetted with a drink... Whether one likes it or not, one can't get on without it. It's the custom!

TRAVELER. But there are people who never drink, and yet they manage to live! After all, there's not much good in it.

PEASANT. No good at all! Only evil!

TRAVELER. Then one ought not to drink.

PEASANT. Well, anyhow, drink or no drink, we've nothing to live on! We've not enough land. If we had land we could at least live ... but there's none to be had.

TRAVELER. No land to be had? Why, isn't there plenty of land? Wherever one looks, one sees land!

PEASANT. There's land, right enough, but it's not ours. Your elbow's not far from your mouth, but just you try to bite it!

TRAVELER. Not yours! Whose is it, then?

PEASANT. Whose?... Whose, indeed! There's that fat-bellied devil over there ... he's seized 5000 acres. He has no family, but he's never satisfied, while we've had to give up keeping fowls—there's nowhere for them to run about! It's nearly time for us to stop keeping cattle, too ... we've no fodder for them; and if a calf, or maybe a horse, happens to stray into his field, we have to pay fines and give him our last farthing.

TRAVELER. What does he want all that land for?

PEASANT. What does he want the land for? Why, of course, he sows and reaps and sells, and puts the money in the bank.

TRAVELER. How can he plow a stretch like that, and get his harvest in?

PEASANT. You talk as if you were a child!... What's he got money for, if not to hire laborers?... It's they that do the plowing and reaping.

TRAVELER. These laborers are some of you peasants, I expect?

PEASANT. Some are from these parts, and some from elsewhere.

TRAVELER. Anyway, they are peasants?

PEASANT. Of course they are!... the same as ourselves. Who but a peasant ever works? Of course they are peasants.

TRAVELER. And if the peasants did not go and work for him...?

PEASANT. Go or stay, he wouldn't let us have it. If the land were to lie idle, he'd not part with it! Like the dog in the manger, that doesn't eat the hay himself and won't let others eat it!

TRAVELER. But how can he keep his land? I suppose it stretches over some three or four miles? How can he watch it all?

PEASANT. How queer you talk! He himself lies on his back, and fattens his paunch; but he keeps watchmen!

TRAVELER. And those watchmen, I dare say, are also peasants?

PEASANT. What else could they be? Of course they are!

TRAVELER. So that the peasants work the rich man's land for him, and guard it for him from themselves?

PEASANT. But how can one help it?

TRAVELER. Simply by not going to work for him, and not being his watchmen! Then the land would be free. The land is God's, and the people are God's; let him who needs it, plow and sow and gather in the harvest!

PEASANT. That is to say, you think we ought to strike? To meet that, my friend, they have the soldiers. They'd send their soldiers ... one, two, fire!... some would get shot, and others taken up. Soldiers give short shrift!

TRAVELER. But is it not also the likes of you that are soldiers? Why should they shoot at their own fellows?

PEASANT. How can they help it? That's what the oath is for.

TRAVELER. The oath? What oath?

PEASANT. Don't you understand? Aren't you a Russian?... The oath is—well, it's the oath!

TRAVELER. It means swearing, doesn't it?

PEASANT. Well, of course! They swear by the Cross and by the Gospels, to lay down their life for their country.

TRAVELER. Well, I think that should not be done.

PEASANT. What should not be done?

TRAVELER. Taking the oath.

PEASANT. Not done? Why, the law demands it!

TRAVELER. No, it is not in the Law. In the Law of Christ, it is plainly forbidden. He said: "Swear not at all."

PEASANT. Come now! What about the priests?

TRAVELER [takes a book, looks for the place, and reads]: "It was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but I say unto you, Swear not at all... But let your speech be, Yea, yea; nay, nay: and whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one" (Matthew v. 33). So, according to Christ's Law, you must not swear.

PEASANT. If there were no oath, there would be no soldiers.

TRAVELER. Well, and what good are the soldiers?

PEASANT. What good?... But supposing other Czars were to come and attack our Czar ... what then?

TRAVELER. If the Czars quarrel, let them fight it out themselves.

PEASANT. Come! How could that be possible?

TRAVELER. It's very simple. He that believes in God, no matter what you may tell him, will never kill a man.

PEASANT. Then why did the priest read out in church that war was declared, and the Reserves were to be ready?

TRAVELER. I know nothing about that; but I know that in the Commandments, in the Sixth, it says quite plainly: "Thou shalt do no murder." You see, it is forbidden for a man to kill a man.

PEASANT. That means, at home! At the wars, how could you help it? They're enemies!

TRAVELER. According to Christ's Gospel, there is no such thing as an enemy. You are told to love everybody.

[Opens the Bible and looks for place.

PEASANT. Well, read it!

TRAVELER. "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment... Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt

love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you” (Matthew v. 21, 43–44).

[A long pause.]

PEASANT. Well, but what about taxes? Ought we to refuse to pay them too?

TRAVELER. That’s as you think best. If your own children are hungry, naturally you should first feed them.

PEASANT. So you think soldiers are not wanted at all?

TRAVELER. What good do they do? Millions and millions are collected from you and your folk for them—it’s no joke to clothe and feed such a host! There are nearly a million of those idlers, and they’re only useful to keep the land from you; and it is on you they will fire.

[The PEASANT sighs, and shakes his head.]

PEASANT. That’s true enough! If everybody were to do it at once ... but if one or two make a stand, they’ll be shot or sent to Siberia, and that will be the end of the matter.

TRAVELER. And yet there are men, even now—young men—who by themselves stand up for the Law of God, and refuse to serve. They say: “According to Christ’s Law, I dare not be a murderer! Do as you please, but I won’t take a rifle in my hands!”

PEASANT. Well, and what happens?

TRAVELER. They are put in prison; they remain there, poor fellows, three years, or four... But I’ve heard that it’s not so bad for them, for the authorities themselves respect them. And some are even let out as unfit for service—bad health! Though he is sometimes a strapping, broad-shouldered fellow, he’s “not fit,” because they’re afraid of taking a man of that kind, for fear he should tell others that soldiering is against God’s Law. So they let him go.

PEASANT. Really?

TRAVELER. Yes, sometimes it happens that they are let off; but it also happens that they die there. Still, soldiers die too, and even get maimed in service—lose a leg, or an arm...

PEASANT. Oh, you’re a clever fellow! It would be a good thing, only it won’t work out like that.

TRAVELER. Why not?

PEASANT. That’s why.

TRAVELER. What’s that?

PEASANT. That the authorities have power given them.

TRAVELER. They only have power, because you obey them. Do not obey the authorities, and they won’t have any power!

PEASANT. [shakes his head]. You do talk queer! How can one do without the authorities? It is quite impossible to do without some authority.

TRAVELER. Of course it is! Only whom will you take for authority—the policeman, or God? Whom will you obey—the policeman, or God?

PEASANT. That goes without saying! No one is greater than God. To live for God is the chief thing.

TRAVELER. Well, if you mean to live for God, you must obey God and not man. And if you live according to God, you will not drive people off the land: you will not be a policeman, a village elder, a tax-collector, a watchman, or above all, a soldier... You will not promise to kill men.

PEASANT. And how about those long-maned fellows—the priests? They must see that things are being done not according to God’s Law. Then why don’t they teach how it ought to be?

TRAVELER. I don’t know anything about that. Let them go their way, and you go yours.

PEASANT. They are long-maned devils!

TRAVELER. It's not right to judge others like that! We must each remember our own faults.

PEASANT. Yes, that's right enough. [Long pause. The PEASANT shakes his head, and smiles.]
What it comes to is this: that if we all were to tackle it at once, the land would be ours at one go, and there would be no more taxes.

TRAVELER. No, friend, that's not what I mean. I don't mean that if we live according to God's will, the land will be ours, and there will be no more taxes. I mean that our life is evil, only because we ourselves do evil. If one lived according to God's will, life would not be evil. What our life would be like if we lived according to God's will, God alone knows; but certainly life would not be evil. We drink, scold, fight, go to law, envy, and hate men; we do not accept God's Law; we judge others; call one fat-paunched and another long-maned; but if anyone offers us money, we are ready to do anything for it: go as watchmen, policemen, or soldiers, to help ruin others, and to kill our own brothers. We ourselves live like devils, and yet we complain of others!

PEASANT. That's so! But it is hard, oh, how hard! Sometimes it's more than one can bear.

TRAVELER. But, for our souls' sakes, we must bear it.

PEASANT. That's quite right... We live badly, because we forget God.

TRAVELER. Yes, that's it! That's why life is evil. Take the Revolutionaries; they say: "Let's kill this or that squire, or these fat-paunched rich folk (it's all because of them); and then our life will be happy." So they kill, and go on killing, and it profits them nothing. It's the same with the authorities: "Give us time!" they say, "and we'll hang, and do to death in the prisons, a thousand or a couple of thousand people, and then life will become good..." But it only gets worse and worse!

PEASANT. Yes, that's just it! How can judging and punishing do any good? It must be done according to God's Law.

TRAVELER. Yes, that is just it. You must serve either God or the devil. If it's to be the devil, go and drink, scold, fight, hate, covet, don't obey God's Law, but man's laws, and life will be evil. If it is God, obey Him alone. Don't rob or kill, and don't even condemn, and do not hate anyone. Do not plunge into evil actions, and then there will be no evil life.

PEASANT [sighs]. You speak well, daddy, very well—only we are taught so little! Oh, if we were taught more like that, things would be quite different! But people come from the town, and chatter about their way of bettering things: they chatter fine, but there's nothing in it... Thank you, daddy, your words are good!... Well, where will you sleep? On the oven, yes?... The missus will make up a bed for you.

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