

For a Single Word

Leo Tolstoy

1908

I happened to be drinking tea this winter in a cook-shop where I am known. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and being a regular customer, a newspaper was as usual handed to me, as a special mark of respect.

Having put on the spectacles my old eyes require, I dived into the paper and became absorbed in an article about Leo Tolstoy.

It was quiet in the place, there were few customers and I gave myself up entirely to the reading.

My reading was interrupted by an old man in a peasant's coat, wearing bark shoes, and with a small bag on his arm, who came up and softly touched my shoulder, saying:

"Won't you give me a kopeck¹? I'm hungry!"

I was vexed at the fellow's impertinence in disturbing me. I considered myself poor, almost a beggar, though I did not go begging, and in my vexation, without looking up from the paper, I said:

"There are plenty of you hungry ones loafing about! I am hungry myself. Go to the devil!"

And having said this, I went on reading.

But my reading was interrupted by a strange sound of convulsive weeping and sobbing.

I took off my spectacles, laid them on the newspaper, and looked at the beggar. He was an old man, evidently a peasant: pale, thin and with a bent back. He stood without moving, and his sunken chest heaved again and again with sobs.

I suddenly felt pained and ashamed. A lump rose in my throat, and I could hardly keep from tears (we old folk have a weakness that way). Feeling ashamed, I tried in my mind to excuse myself for not having given him anything, and for having even told him to go to the devil.

"I am hungry myself, out of work, and have a large family on my hands," thought I. But immediately the voice of conscience began to speak in my soul.

"Still, you should not treat him like that. It was wrong. You have done wrong brother Vasily!" said I to myself.

I did not know what it was that made him weep so: the want of bread, or my rude refusal. In the sixty years of my life, I have seen but little joby, and since I can remember I have myself experienced the harshness of men, and heard from them just such words as I had said to the old man; but yet I felt pained and ashamed.

¹ A small denomination of Russian money

I sat, he stood before me, and for a minute, we looked at each other in silence. It was long before I could find words to say to him; out at last, mastering my confusion, in a voice just as unsteady and timid as that in which he had asked me for a kopeck a minute before, I said:

"What are you crying about, friend? It won't help matters - one has to bear things..."

"It is hard to bear...I tried to find a job...No! Begging I'm not used to...and no one gives...there now, since they let me out of prison - will you believe it, Daddy - it's the third day and I've not had a pound of bread to eat...I'm that hungry!"

He again sniffed, and tears again came into his eyes. I felt uncomfortable, but as it seemed to me that this man, let out from prison, was not in such despair merely for want of bread, but had something more important on his mind, I tried to get into conversation with him, in order if possible to comfort him.

"Teras won't do muh good," I said, "they'll only upset you still more. There! Sit down by me here, and let's have a talk. Tell me all about it, plainly."

The old man sat down by me, and placed his bag on his knees, and I began to question him.

"Where are you from?"

"I? I am from the Kursk Government, Oboyansk District, Rybatzk Parish, Bopbrofka Village."

"How did you get here?"

"How did I get here? I was sent here as an exile."

"What was that for?"

"Why exiled? Why, for one single word!"

"What word was that, my good fellow?"

He faltered, as if afraid to tell me what word it was he suffered for. Though I am myself a peasant, I was dressed in town clothes. I wore a pea-jacket, and strong boots and goloshes; and a newspaper and spectacles were lying in front of me. He noted all this searchingly and suspiciously and remained silent; probably suspecting me of some evil intention. "He's not asking without a reason, Why? and what for? and where from?" thought he; so he remained silent, probably considering that "Better is good silence than a blundering word."

I understood that it was hard for him to say the word for which he was suffering, to a strange townsman who might prove to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. And having understood this, I no longer tried to draw him out, though I much wanted to know how such a man could have been arrested and exiled (as he evidently had been) for "political reasons."

I have known many "politicals", and have even lived in the same lodging with some of them. They were mostly young, advanced, self-confident and eloquent men. How could this pitiful old man, so totally unlike them, have become a "political"?

"Look here," I said, "You go into that little room over there, and wait about half-an-hour. When the isvostchiks [cabmen] come in, I'll see what we can get together for you. Now go and order some soup, and as much bread as you can eat."

"But how? I've no money! There now!"

"There now, order it and eat it and we'll pay the money."

The old man went. I remained alone again, put on my spectacles, and set to work to finish the article. But again my reading was interrupted, this time by a waiter.

"Vasily Stepanovitch! Did you order soup and bread for that old man?"

"Will you pay the 12 kopecks [3 pence]?"

"Yes."

Half-an-hour later, all the tables were occupied by isvostchiks who had come for tea and supper, after seeing a train off. The place, which had been quiet till then, became noisy with their talk: one was telling about a gendarme, another about a passenger, a third was complaining of the badness of the roads. One story was interrupted by another, with the addition of abuse and jokes.

I sat biding my time before appealing to my comrades. I myself was for many years an isvostchik; and I knew them all, and they all knew me. At the end of half-an-hour the talk began to quiet down, all were busy eating, drinking tea, or sitting over their bottle. It was long before I could make up my mind to begin. At last I plucked up courage, and spoke to one more likely to help than the others in a matter of that kind. He was generally known as Alyoha, out on so solemn an occasion I address him as Alexey Titych.

I told him all about the affair, and proposed that together we should persuade our comrades to pity the poor man - a brother peasant, suffering as he said, "For one word" and should ask them to help him.

I called the old man out of the dark little room. The isvostchiks did not ask him "Who? Where-from? What for?" But as if at the word of command, they all, one after another, pulled out their purses; and help (in the form of copper coins) poured from all sides into the old man's hand.

"Don't take it ill, old man! Nowadays one can perish for nothing at all," said the givers as they handed the money.

The old man was deeply moved, and could hardly bow to them often enough. The business was done: the old man's hand was full of coppers.

I now no longer feared to frighten him by my curiosity, so I asked him to speak out and tell me how it all came about. I told him to sit by me, and when he had done so I said:

"What was the word for which you were exiled to this place, my dear fellow?"

His former timidity had vanished. He cast a look round on those who had helped him, as if inviting them, too, to listen, and he began his tale.

"It's hard friend, ah! how hard! Will you believe it, God only knows - He is my witness that I speak the truth...I am suffering for one single word. This is how it happened."

"There was a pogrom in our province, in Koursk; I daresay you've heard of it?"

"Yes, of course!" said several voices. "It was in the papers."

"Well there! Yes...yes...it may have been also in the papers, but the rumor spread everywhere. Well, you see our peasants began to plunder the gentry, rob them of everything, and in some places fired their houses."

"Well, and you mean you took part in it too, Daddy?" asked Alyoha.

"Who, I?... That's just it, that I did not. I was exiled for a word, just for one word. I was driving one day from our town, from Oboyan, and some of our squire's farm laborers were driving the same way. One word led to another...chatter, chatter, babbl;e, babble...We grew talkative. They know me, I know them. *"That was fine, Mikisha, the way your Oboyan people cleared our squire out of their parts; they should clear him out of this farm, now - burn it too!"* - And I only said *"Our Oboyanites have cleared your squire out of their parts, and you can burn your farm yourselves, if you wish to."*

"And there my talk with them ended. After that, we said good-bye, and they went their way and I went mine."

"I had forgotten all about it, and was living quietly at home.

A week passed; it was evening, I had climbed onto the stove, and laid down; and just as I was falling asleep, some one knocked at the window.

"*Oh, bother you!*" And I even gave a jump. My eldest daughter went to open the door. I raised my head and listened. "*What silly fellow is there?*" I heard someone asking for me. He gives my name and surname. My daughter says: "*He is at home, lying on the oven.*"

"I couldn't make out whose voice it was; but I saw a policeman pushing his way into the hut. "*Where is he?*" says he, naming me.

"I was quite stunned. I think "*What can he want me for?*" But as to my talk with the laborers, it never entered my head."

"*Come, get down, dress quick! Look alive, march! To the officer at the police-station!*"

"I tried to find out what for, but he was a close-tongued hound. He even stamped his foot and shouted, "*No arguing, look alive!*"

"I hurriedly put on this coat, and did not even take my warm mittens. We came out, and started off. He got on his horse and drove me along. My little ones were quite frightened. I have five children, the eldest a girl of seventeen; and a boy of twelve, who is now left head of the house; the others are all younger and younger. They followed me through the village, screaming and crying with all their might."

The old man gasped for breath, his chest heaved, his shoulders jerked, his face was awry, and he covered his eyes with his hand.

"Oh, how hard it was to part, brothers! There now, my eldest daughter...may God not let her out of his keeping, and my little son...what is her, but a little nestling? ...and here am I, far out of sight of all five of them. You see I have hardly an ounce of strength left, and to have still to suffer so much! Oh lord, it seems I could drag through a lifetime quicker than through this one year!"

"But how did it all come about?"

"This is how it came about, as I was told. The quire's laborers went home, and went and told the steward, "We've been driving with Mikishka, and he was telling us how their Oboyanites cleared out the squire's seat in their parts. Now, he said, "*It's your turn to clear out the quire's farm*" The steward told the squire, and our squire's a retired Lieutenant-Colonel. He wrote a paper to the Governor. "*There,*" says he, "*The peasant Mikishka is telling my laborers to burn my farm;*" but never had I such a thought in my head!

Where did they take me? Why, first the policeman drove me to the officer at the police station. It was late. They put me into the Guard House and did not examine me that evening. The night, lads, seemed like a week to to me. I never closed my eyes. "*Ah, well,*" thought I, "*the officer won't keep me long. He'll ask me something, and send me home. I'll have my sleep out at home.*" Then I saw the dawn breaking...it was morning...I waited and waited, and it seemed so long..Still they did not call me. It was as if my soul would jump out of my body. My heart went pit-a-pat "*Oh,*" think I, "*It's no good that is coming...*" Then I heard a knocking on my cell. "*Well,*" think I, "*now Jesus help Mikishka!*" The lock clicked, the door opened, they took me to the officer. He looks at me, shakes his head and says:

"*Any way, my man, it's a niceroad you've started on in your old age! You should guide the young ones, but you yourself have taken to*" How did he call it?...pro - pro - pan...is it? No, I can't say it."

"Taken to Propaganda?" some one suggested.

"Yes, that's it. I don't even now know what that word may mean. Then he took a paper, and says "*Listen! This is an order from the Governor,*" and he began to read. My eyes grew misty. My brain went round, and I could make nothing out. I only understood that I was said to have told people to burn the house. He finished reading, and says, "*Well, to what Province do you wish to be sent?*"

"I was silent, and did not know what to say to him. He again repeats, "To what Province?" I stand like an image. "Well then, I will send you to Toula. Do you hear what I say?"

"I hear it, and now, Your Ho nour, can I go straight home?"

"Take him, and march him off!" Two soldiers were standing there, and they marched me to prison, with drawn swords, one in front and the other behind me, as if I were a savage beast. There I sat a fortnight, and then I was brought to Toula under convoy. I was never here before in all my born days. Will you believe me lads? I have been going about three days, and had only a pound of bread to eat. I've got quite starved. Work, I see is scarce in these parts. I've tried to get a job, but no! Begging is a thing I'm not used to, and no one gives anything. May God give you good health, children! He sends me to you. I've eaten and drunk my fill of soup and bread, and here you've collected a store for me. God will send you his Kingdom unawares," and one old man began to cross himself and to bow all round saying, "Thank you!"

"But have you had a trial?" some one asked.

"What trial? No trial at all! They give short trial to the likes of us."

"Well, and where did they take you next?" I asked.

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They brought me to Toulsa, kept me a night in one prison, told me to report myself every Wednesday at the police station, and not to go more than ten miles from town for a twelve-month. But how I'm to live they didn't say, nor what's to become of my children - with no one to care (*illegible text*)

I didn't feel as if (*illegible text*) live out one year in this place; and it's hard to die in a stranger's field.

"What is to be done, Daddy? It's all the same, whether one dies in one's own field or another's - the earth is the earth. Aren't we all in the same bondage? The children will grow up without you. Don't they say, and don't they write in the papers that there are many thousands in the prisons alone. Some for truth's sake, some for wrong-doing. Some have been hung, some stabbed, some shot, it's like the eend of the world! Go on living, Daddy, until your sould goes away of itself."

The old man turned his head towards the place whence the voice was preaching to him; and, as if agreeing, he shrugged his shoulders, scratching himself, for the prison had supplied him richly with insects.

"Daddy, you should go to the baths," somebody remarked "and it would be well to bake your clothes in a hot oven, or those prison lodgers will eat you up."

"Yes, my lad, it is long since I washed my body...Well brothers, may God's will be done! My thanks to you!"

"No need, Daddy, no need! Come again some day, if you need to. We'll collect some more for you."

"Thank you, thank you, my dears!" I may have luck tomorrow. They promised to give me a job on the tram-line and now excuse me, children...I am going...Don't judge me harshly."

"Where to? The doss-house?²"

"No, I slept there last night; God save us from such people as there are there! I'll spend the night at the railway station; and tomorrow, God willing, I'll get a day-laborer's job on the tram."

I left the cook-shop with him, and we took leave of each other. I pressed his hand.

"Thank you, friend!" said he, "I have had a rest with you."

² A cheap lodging house

He took off his cap, crossed himself, made his way towards the railway station, while I went home.

"Here is a man," thought I, "who has to drag on in his old age far from his children. A year is a long time. Will he live to see his children, and what will become of his eldest daughter, of whom he said 'May God not let her out of his keeping'? Anything may happen. The uncared-for meet most easily such as deceive and dishonor them."

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