

Nikolai Palkin

Leo Tolstoy

1899

We were spending the night at the house of a soldier ninety-five years old, who had served under Alexander I. and Nicholas I.

"Tell me, are you ready to die?"

"Ready to die? How should I be yet? I used to be afraid of dying, but now I pray God for only one thing; that God would be pleased to let me make my confession and partake of the communion; I have so many sins on my conscience."

"What sins?"

"How can you ask? Let us see, when was it I served? Under Nicholas. Was the service then such as it is now? How was it then? Uh ! it fills me with horror even to remember it. Then Alexander came. The soldiers used to praise this Alexander. They said he was gracious."

I remembered the last days of Alexander, when twenty men out of every hundred were beaten to death. Nicholas must have been a terror, if in comparison with him Alexander was called gracious.

"I happened to serve under Nicholas," said the old man, and he immediately began to grow animated and to give me his recollections.

"How was it then? At that time fifty blows with the rod was thought nothing ... one hundred and fifty, two hundred, three hundred ... they used to whip men

to death, and with cudgels too Never a week went

by that they did not beat one or two men to death from each regiment. To-day people don't know what a cudgel is, but then the word 'palka' was never out of men's mouths. 'Palka ! ' ' Palka ! ' "

"Among us soldiers he was called NikolaY Palkin Nicholas the cudgeler. He was really Nikolai Pavlo- vitch, and yet he was called nothing else but Nikolai Palkin. That was his universal nickname. That 's what I remember of that time," continued the old man. "Yes, when one has lived out a century, it is time for one to die, and when you think of it, it becomes hard.

"I have so many sins on my soul ! It was a subor- dinat'e's work. One had to apply one hundred and fifty blows to a soldier" the old man had been noncom- missioned officer and sergeant major, but was now "kan- didat " " and you give him two hundred. And the man died on your hands, and you tortured him to death ... that was a sin.

"The noncommissioned officers used to beat the young soldiers to death. They would strike them any- where with the butt-end of the gun or with the fist, over the heart or on the head,

and the man would die. And there was never any redress. If a man died, murdered that way, the authorities would write, 'Died by the will of God,' and thus it was covered up. And at that time did I realize what it meant? One thought only of one-self. But now when you crawl up on top of the stove and can't sleep o' nights, you keep thinking about it and living it over again. Good as it is to take the holy communion in accordance with the Christian law and be absolved, still horror seizes you. When you remember all that you have been through, yes, and what others have suffered on your account, then no other hell is necessary ; it is worse than any hell."

I vividly imagined what must have been the recollections of this solitary old man there, face to face with death, and a pang went through my heart. I remembered other horrors besides the cudgels, which he must have witnessed : men killed in running the gantlet, put to death by shooting, the slaughter and pillage of cities in war he had taken part in the Polish war and I thought I would question him particularly in regard to all this : I asked him about running the gantlet. He gave full particulars about this horrible punishment : how they drove the man, with his arms tied, between two rows of soldiers provided with sharpened sticks, how all struck at him, while behind the soldiers marched the officers shouting "Strike harder." When he told about this the old man gave the order in a commanding tone, evidently well satisfied with his memory and the commanding tone with which he spoke.

He told all the particulars without manifesting the slightest remorse, as if he were telling how they killed oxen and prepared fresh meat. He related how they drove the unhappy victims back and forth between the lines, how the tortured man would at last stumble and fall on the bayonets, how, at first the bloody wheals began to appear, how they would cross one another, how gradually the wheals would blend together and swell and the blood would spurt out, how the blood-stained flesh would hang in clots, how the bones would be laid bare; how the wretch at first would scream, then only dully groan at every step and at every blow ; how at length no sound would be heard, and the doctor, who was in attendance for this very purpose, would come up, feel the man's pulse, examine and decide whether the punishment could go on, whether he was already beaten to death, or whether it should be postponed till another occasion ; and then they would bring him to, so that his wounds might be dressed, and he might be made ready to receive the full sum of blows which certain wild beasts, with Nikolai Palkin at their head, had decided ought to be administered to him.

The doctor employed his science to keep the man from dying before he had endured all the tortures which his body could be made to endure. And the man, when he could no longer walk a step, was laid flat on the ground in his cloak, and with that bloody swelling over his whole back was carried to the hospital to be treated, so that when he was well again they might give him the thousand or two blows which he had not yet received, and could not bear all at one time.

He told how the victims implored death to come to their relief, and how the officers would not grant it to them, but would heal them for a second and third time, and at last beat them to death.

And all this because a man had either deserted from his regiment, or had the courage or the audacity and the self-confidence to complain in behalf of his comrades because they were ill fed, and those in command pilfered their rations.

He told all this ; and when I tried to draw from him some expression of remorse for these things, he was at first amazed and afterwards alarmed.

"No," said he, "that was all right; it was the judgment of the court. Was it my fault? It was by order of the court and according to law."

He displayed the same serenity and lack of remorse regarding the horrors of war, in which he had taken part, and of which he had seen so much in Turkey and Poland.

He told about children murdered, about prisoners dying of cold and starvation, about a young boy a Polyak run through by a bayonet and impaled on a tree. And when I asked him if his conscience did not torment him on account of these deeds, he utterly failed to understand me.

” This is all a part of war, according to law ; for the Czar and the fatherland. These deeds are not only not wrong, but are such as are honorable and brave, and atone for many sins.” The only things that troubled him were his private actions, the fact that he, when an officer, had beaten and punished men. These actions tormented his conscience. But in order to be pardoned for them he had a resource : this was the holy communion, which he hoped he should be enabled to partake of before he died, and for which he was beseeching his niece. His niece promised that he should have it, because she recognized the importance of it ; and he was content.

The fact that he had helped to ruin and destroy innocent women and children, that he had killed men with bullet and bayonet, that he had stood in line and whipped men to death and dragged them off to the hospital and back to torture again, all this did not trouble him at all ; all this was none of his business, all this was done, not by him, but as it were, by some one else.

How was it possible that this old man, if he had understood what ought to have been clear to him, as he stood on the very threshold of eternity, did not realize that between him and his conscience and God, as now on the eve of death, there was and could be no mediator, so there was and could be none even at that moment when they compelled him to torture and beat men? How is it that he did not understand that now there was nothing that could atone for the evil he had done to men when he might have refrained from doing it? that he did not understand that there is an eternal law which he always knew and could not help knowing a law which demands love and tenderness for man ; and what he called law was a wicked and godless deception to which he should not give credence?

It was terrible to think of what must have arisen before his imagination during his sleepless nights on the oven, and his despair, if he had realized that when he had the possibility of doing good and evil to men, he had done nothing but evil ; that when he had learned the distinctions of good and evil nothing else was now in his power than uselessly to torment himself and repent. His sufferings would have been awful !

But why should one desire to trouble him? Why torment the conscience of an old man on the very verge of death? Better give it comfort. Why annoy the people in recalling what is already past?

Past? What is past? Can a severe disease be past only because we say that it is past? It does not pass away, and never will pass away, and cannot pass away as long as we do not acknowledge ourselves sick. To be cured of a disease, one must first recognize it. And this we do not do. Not only do we fail to do it, but we employ all our powers not to see it, not to recognize it.

Meantime, the disease, instead of passing away, changes its form, sinks deeper into the flesh, the blood, the bones. The disease is this : that men born good and gentle, men with love and mercy rooted in their hearts, perpetrate such atrocities on one another, themselves not knowing why or wherefore.

Our native Russians, men naturally sweet-tempered, good, and kind, permeated with the spirit of Christ’s teaching, men who confess in their souls that they would be insulted at the suggestion of their not sharing their last crust with the poor, or pitying those in prison, these same men spend the best years of their lives in murdering and torturing their brethren, and not only are

not remorseful for such deeds, but consider them honorable, or at least indispensable, and just as unavoidable as eating or breathing.

Is not this a horrible disease? Is it not the moral duty of every one to do all in his power to cure it, and first and foremost to point it out, to call it by name?

The old soldier had spent all his life in torturing and murdering other men. We ask, Why talk about it? The soldier did not consider himself to blame ; and those dreadful deeds the cudgel, the running of the gantlet, and the other things are all past; why then recall that which is already ancient history? This is done away with.

Nikolai Palkin is no more. Why recall his regime? Only the old soldier remembered it before his death. Why stir the people up about it?

Thus in the time of Nicholas they spoke of Alexander. In the same way in the time of Alexander they recalled the deeds of Paul. Thus in the time of Paul they spoke of Catharine and all her profligacies, and all the follies of her lovers. Thus in the time of Catharine they spoke of Peter, and so on and so on. Why recall it?

Yes, why?

If I have a severe or dangerous disease difficult to cure, and I am relieved of it, I shall always be glad to be reminded of it. I shall not mention it only when I am suffering, and my suffering continues and grows worse all the time, and I wish to deceive myself ; only then I shall not mention it ! And we do not mention it because we know that we are still suffering. Why disturb the old man and stir up the people? The cudgels and the running of the gantlet all that is long past !

Past? It has changed its form, but it is not past. In every foregoing period there have been things which we remember not only with horror, but with indignation.

We read the descriptions of distraining for debt, burning for heresy, military colonization, whippings and running of the gantlet, and are not only horror-struck at the cruelty of man, but we fail to imagine the mental state of those who did such things. What was in the soul of the man who could get up in the morning, wash his face and hands, put on the dress of a boyar, say his prayers to God, then go to the torture-chamber to stretch the joints and whip with the knout old men and women, and spend in this business his ordinary five hours, like the modern functionary in the senate ; then return to his family and calmly sit down to dinner and finish the day reading the Holy Scripture? What was in the souls of those regimental and company commanders?

I knew such a man, who one evening danced the mazurka with a beautiful girl at a ball, and retired earlier than usual so as to be awake early in the morning to make arrangements to compel a runaway soldier a Tartar to be killed in running the gantlet; and after he had seen this man whipped to death, he returned to his family and ate his dinner ! You see all this took place in the time of Peter, and in the time of Alexander, and in the time of Nicholas. There has not been a time when terrible things of this kind have not taken place, which we in reading about them cannot understand. We cannot understand how men could look on such horrors as they perpetrated, and not see the senselessness of them, even if they did not recognize the bestial inhumanity of them. This has been so in all times. Is our day so peculiar, so fortunate, that we have no such horrors, no such doings, which will seem just as ridiculous and incomprehensible to our descendants? There are just such deeds, just such horrors, only we don't see them, as our predecessors did not see those in their day.

To us now, it is clear that the burning of heretics, the application of torture for eliciting the truth, is not only cruel, but also ridiculous. A child sees the absurdity of it. But the men of those

times did not see it so. Sensible, educated men were persuaded that torture was one of the indispensable conditions of the life of man, that it was hard, nay, impossible, to get along without it. So also with corporal punishment, with slavery. And time passed ; and now it is hard for us to comprehend the mental state of men in which such a mistake was possible. But this has been in all times because so it had to be, and also in our time, and we must be just as reasonable in regard to the horrors of our day.

Where are our tortures, our slavery, our whippings? It seems to us that we no longer have such things, that they used to be, but have disappeared. This seems to us so because we do not wish to comprehend the old, and we strenuously shut our eyes to it.

But if we look at the past, then our present position is revealed to us and its causes. If we only called bonfires, branding irons, tortures, the scaffold, recruiting stations, by their real names, then we should find also the right name for dungeons, jails, wars, and the general military obligation, and policemen. If we do not say, "Why mention it?" and if we look attentively at what was done in old times, then we should take notice of what is doing now.

If it became clear to us that it was stupid and cruel to cut men's heads off on the scaffold, and to elicit the truth from their lips by means of tearing their joints asunder, then likewise it would be also equally clear to us if not even more so that it is stupid and cruel to hang men, or put them into a state of solitary confinement, even worse than death, and to elicit the truth through hired lawyers and judges.

If it becomes clear to us that it is stupid and cruel to kill a man who has made a mistake, then also it will be clear that it is still more stupid to confine such a man in a jail, in order to finish corrupting him ; if it is clear that it is stupid and cruel to compel muzhiks into being soldiers and to brand them like cattle, then it will seem equally stupid and cruel to make every man who has reached the age of twenty-one become a soldier. If it is clear that stupidity and cruelty are the cause of crime, then still clearer will be the stupidity of guards and police.

If we only cease to shut our eyes to the past, saying : " Why recall the past? " it will become clear to us that we have the same horrors, only under new forms.

We say that all this is past, now we have no tortures, no adulterous Catharines with their powerful lovers, no more slavery, no more whippings to death, and so on, but how is it in reality? Nine hundred thousand men in prison and under arrest, shut up in narrow, ill-smelling cells, and dying by a slow physical and moral death. Women and children are left without subsistence, and these men are maintained in caverns of corruption, in prisons, and in squads ; and only inspectors, having full control of these slaves, get any advantage from this senseless, cruel confinement of them.

Tens of thousands of men with dangerous ideas go into exile, and carry these ideas into the farthest corners of Russia, go out of their minds, and hang themselves. Thousands sit in prisons, and either kill themselves with the connivance of the prison officers, or go mad in solitary confinement. Millions of the people go to rack and ruin physically and morally in the slavery of the factories. Hundreds of thousands of men every autumn leave their families, their young wives, and take lessons in murder, and systematically go to destruction. The Russian Czar cannot go anywhere without being surrounded by a visible cordon of a hundred thousand soldiers, stationed ninety steps apart all along the road, and a secret cordon following him everywhere.

A king collects tribute and builds a castle, and in the castle he constructs a pond, and on the pond dyed with blue, with a machine which raises a wind, he sails around in a boat ; but his people are perishing in factories : this happens in Ireland and in France and in Belgium.

It does not require great penetration to see that in our day it is just the same, and that our day is just as fecund with horrors, with the same horrors, with the same tortures, and that these, in the eyes of succeeding generations, will seem just as marvelous in their cruelty and stupidity. The disease is the same, and the disease is not felt by those that profit by these horrors.

Let them profit for a hundred, for a thousand times more. Let them build their castles, set up their tents, give their balls, let them swindle the people. Let the Nikolai' Palkins whip the people to death, let them shut up hundreds of men secretly in fortresses ; only let them do this themselves, so as not to corrupt the people, so as not to deceive them by compelling them to take part in this, as the old soldier was.

This horrible disease lies in the deception : in this fact that for a man there can be any sanctity and any law higher than the sanctity and the law of love to one's neighbor; in the deception, which conceals the fact, that, though a man in carrying out the demands of men may do many bad things, only one kind of thing he ought not to do. He ought never at any one's instigation to go against God, to kill and to torture his brethren.

Eighteen hundred years ago, to the question of the Pharisees, it was said : " Render unto Ccesar the things that are Ctzar's, and to God the things that are God's."

If there was any faith among men and they recognized any duty to God, then above all they would recognize it as their duty before God to do what God Himself taught man when He said : " Thou shalt not kill"; when He said, "Do not unto others what you would not have others do to you " / when He said, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" saying it not in words only, but writing in ineradicable marks on the heart of every man love to one's neighbor; mercy, horror of murder and of torture of one's brethren.

If men only believed in God, then they could not help acknowledging this first obligation to Him, not to torture, not to kill, and then the words, " Render unto Ccesar the things that are Cczsar's, and to God the things that are God's," would have for them a clear, definite significance.

"To the Czar or to any one all he wishes," the believing man would say, "but not what is contrary to God."

Cesar needs my money take it; my house, my labors take them ; my wife, my children, my life take them ; all these things are not God's. But when Cesar requires that I apply the rods to my neighbor's back, that is God's affair. My behavior that is my life for which I must give an account to God ; and what God has forbidden me to do that I cannot give to Cesar. I cannot bind, imprison, whip, kill my fellow- men ; all that is my life, and it belongs to God alone, and I may not give it to any one except God.

The words, "To God the things that are God's," for us signify whatever they give to God, kopecks, candles, prayers, in general everything that is unnecessary to any one, much less to God ; but everything else ; all one's life, all one's soul which belongs to God, they give to Cesar ; in other words, according to the significance of the word C&sar as understood by the Jews to some entire stranger. This is horrible ! Let the people remember this.

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