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The First Distiller

A Comedy in Six Acts

Leo Tolstoy

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1886

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1886

SECOND ELDER. “Fore all I’ll be heard, ‘Cos I’m an old bird!”

THIRD ELDER. Friend! dear friend, dearest friend!

FOURTH ELDER. “Jog along hut, jog along bed, The missis has nowhere to lay down her head!”

Now then, come along!

The Elders take each other’s arms in couples and go off reeling, one couple following the other. The Peasant turns back to the hut, but stumbles before he reaches it,—falls down, and lies muttering incomprehensible words that sound like grunts. The Grandfather and those he was with, rise and exeunt.

Enter Labourer and Chief of Devils.

LABOURER. Did you see? Now the swine’s blood has been roused in them, and from wolves they have turned into swine! [Points to Peasant] There he lies in the dirt and grunts like a hog!

CHIEF. You have succeeded! First like foxes, then like wolves, and now like swine! Well, that is a drink! But tell me, how did you make it? I suppose it’s made of a mixture of foxes’, wolves’, and swine’s blood?

LABOURER. Oh no! I only supplied him with too much corn! As long as he had only as much corn as he needed, he did not grudge his last crust, but when he had more than he knew what to do with, the fox’s, the wolf’s, and the swine’s blood in him awoke. He always had beast’s blood in him, only it could not get the upper hand.

CHIEF. Well, you’re a fine fellow! You’ve atoned for your crust-blunder. Now they only need to drink spirits, and they’re altogether ours!

Curtain

Curtain

ACT VI

The scene represents a village street. To the right some old women are sitting on logs of wood with the Grandfather. In the centre, is a ring of women, girls, and lads. Dance music is played and they dance. Noise is heard from the hut, and drunken screams. An old man comes out and shouts in a tipsy voice. The Peasant follows him and leads him back.

GRANDFATHER. Ah, what doings! what doings! One would think, what more would any one want than to do his work on week days, and when Sunday comes round, to have a good wash, clean the harness, and rest a bit and sit with his family; or go outside and have a talk with the old folk about matters concerning the Commune. Or, if you're young, have a game. There they are playing,—and it's pleasant to look at them. It's all pleasant and good. [Screams inside the hut] But this sort of thing, what is it? It only leads men astray, and pleases the Devils. And it all comes of fat living!

Tipsy men come tumbling out of the hut, shout, and catch hold of the girls.

GIRLS. Leave off, Daddy Tom! What do you mean by it?

LADS. Let's go into the lane. It's impossible to play here.

Exeunt all who were playing in the ring.

PEASANT [goes up to Grandfather] What have you got now? The Elders will allot everything to me! [Snaps his fingers at him] That's what you'll get! So there you are! It's all mine and you've nothing! They'll tell you so themselves!

The four Elders speak all at once.

FIRST ELDER. 'Cos I know what's what!

Contents

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| CHARACTERS | 5 |
| ACT I | 5 |
| ACT II | 7 |
| ACT III | 11 |
| ACT IV | 14 |
| ACT V | 18 |
| ACT VI | 22 |

FIRST ELDER. On you? No, not on you, but on what your seniors say.

FOURTH ELDER. My seniors are greater fools. Go where you came from!

SECOND ELDER. What are you up to now? You fool!

THIRD ELDER. It's true what he's saying! 'Cos why? The host is not entertaining us for nothing. He means business. The business can be arranged. Only you must stand treat! Show us due respect. 'Cos it's you as wants me, and not I you! You're own brother to the pig!

PEASANT. And you're itself! What are you yelling for? Think to surprise me? You are all good at stuffing yourselves!

FIRST ELDER. What are you giving yourself airs for? See if I don't twist your nose to one side!

PEASANT. We'll see whose nose will get twisted!

SECOND ELDER. Think yourself such a marvel? Go to the Devil! I won't speak to you—I'll go away!

PEASANT [holds him] What, will you break up the company?

SECOND ELDER. Let me go, or I'll call for help!

PEASANT. I won't! What right have you to ...?

SECOND ELDER. This right! [Beats him].

PEASANT [to the other Elders] Help me!

They fall on one another, and all speak at once.

FIRST ELDER. That's why. 'Cos it means we're all having a spree!

SECOND ELDER. I can arrange everything!

THIRD ELDER. Let's have some more!

PEASANT [to Wife] Bring another bottle!

All sit round the table again and drink.

LABOURER [to Chief] Have you noticed? The wolf's blood in them was aroused, and they've turned as fierce as wolves.

CHIEF. The drink is good! I'm satisfied!

LABOURER. Wait a bit. Let them empty a third bottle. Things will be better still!

PEASANT. Well, old friends, what's your opinion of my business?

My grandfather has been living with me, and I have been feeding him and feeding him, and now he's gone to live with my uncle, and wants to take his share of the property and give it to uncle! Consider it well; you are wise men. We could as well do without our own heads as without you. There's no one in the whole village to come near you. Take you for example, Iván Fedótitch—doesn't every one say you're first among men? And as for me, I'll tell you the truth, Iván Fedótitch, I'm fonder of you than of my own father or mother. As for Michael Stepánitch, he's an old friend.

FIRST ELDER [to Peasant] It's good to talk with a good man. It's the way to get wisdom. It's just the same with you. One can't find any one to compare with you either.

SECOND ELDER. Wise and affectionate—that's what I like you for.

THIRD ELDER. You have my best sympathy. I can't find words to express it. I was saying to my old woman only to-day ...

FOURTH ELDER. A friend, a real friend!

LABOURER [nudges the Chief] Do you hear? All lies! They abuse one another behind their backs, but see how thick they are laying it on now,—like foxes wagging their tails! And it all comes from that drink.

CHIEF. That drink is good, very good! If they take to lying like that, they'll all be ours. Very good; I'm satisfied!

LABOURER. Wait a bit. When they've finished a second bottle it will be better still!

WIFE [serves] Do have another glass.

FIRST ELDER. Won't it be too much? Your health! [Drinks] It's pleasant to drink in the company of a good man.

SECOND ELDER. How can one help drinking? Health to the host and hostess!

THIRD ELDER. Friends, your health!

FOURTH ELDER. This is a brew of the right sort! Let's be merry! We'll arrange things for you. 'Cos it all depends on me!

CHARACTERS

A PEASANT.

HIS WIFE.

MOTHER.

GRANDFATHER.

LITTLE DAUGHTER.

A NEIGHBOUR.

FOUR VILLAGE ELDERS.

OLD WOMEN, WOMEN, GIRLS AND LADS.

THE CHIEF OF THE DEVILS.

HIS SECRETARY.

A DANDY IMP.

THE OFFICIALS' IMP.

THE PEASANTS' IMP.

SENTINELS, DOORKEEPERS AND IMPS.

ACT I

PEASANT [ploughing. Looks up] It's noon. Time to unharness.

Gee up, get along! Fagged out? Poor old beast! One more turn and back again, that will be the last furrow, and then dinner. It was a good idea to bring that chunk of bread with me. I'll not go home, but sit down by the well and have a bite and a rest, and Peggy can graze awhile. Then, with God's help, to work again, and the ploughing will be done in good time.

Enter Imp; hides behind a bush.

IMP. See what a good fellow he is! Keeps calling on God. Wait a bit, friend,—you'll be calling on the Devil before long! I'll just take away his chunk. He'll miss it before long, and will begin to hunt for it. He'll be hungry, and then he'll swear and call on the Devil.

Takes the chunk of bread and sits down behind the bush watching to see what the Peasant will do.

PEASANT [unharnesses the horse] With God's blessing! [Lets the horse loose, and goes towards the place where his coat is lying] I'm awfully hungry. The wife cut a big chunk, but see if I don't eat it all. [Coming up to the coat] Gone! I must have put it under the coat. [Lifting the coat] No, it's not here either! What has happened? [Shakes the coat].

IMP [behind the bush] Go on, go on, search away! I've got it safe!

PEASANT [moves the plough and shakes his coat again] This is strange! Very strange! No one was here, yet the chunk is gone! If the birds had been at it there would be some crumbs left, but there's not a single crumb! No one has been here, and yet some one has taken it!

IMP [rises and looks out] Now he'll call on the Devil.

PEASANT. Well, it seems there's no help for it! Never mind, I shan't starve to death. If some one has taken it, he's taken it; let him eat it, and may it do him good.

IMP [spits] Oh, the damned peasant! Instead of swearing properly, he only says, "May it do him good." What can one do with such a fellow?

Peasant lies down to rest, makes the sign of the cross, yawns, and falls asleep.

IMP [comes out from behind the bush] It's all very well for the boss to talk. The boss keeps on saying, "You don't bring enough peasants to Hell! See what a lot of tradesmen, gentlefolk, and all sorts of people flock in every day, and how few peasants!" Now, how's one to get round this one? There's no way of getting hold of him. Haven't I stolen his last crust? What can I do better than that? And yet he didn't swear. I'm at my wits' end what to do! Well, I must go and report!

Disappears into the ground.

Curtain

.

PEASANT. Have a drop!

Wife takes a decanter and fills glasses.

WIFE. Do us the honour!

FIRST ELDER [drinks] Your health! Ah, that's good. It runs right through all one's joints. That's what I call proper drink!

The other three Elders do the same. Chief gets out of the oven. Labourer goes and stands by him.

LABOURER [to Chief] See what will happen now! I'll trip up the woman with my foot and she'll spill the liquor. Formerly he did not grudge his last crust, but now see what he'll do about a glass of spirits!

PEASANT. Now then, wife, fill again and hand it round in due order—first to our friend here, then to Daddy Michael.

Wife fills a glass and goes round the table. The Labourer trips her up; she stumbles and upsets the glass.

WIFE. Gracious goodness, I've spilt it! Why do you get in my way, confound you?

PEASANT [to Wife] There now, what a clumsy beast! Her fingers are all thumbs, and she goes swearing at others! See what fine stuff she goes spilling on the ground!

WIFE. I didn't do it on purpose.

PEASANT. On purpose indeed! Wait till I get up; I'll teach you how to pour spirits on the ground. [To Labourer] And you too, you confounded fool, what are you prancing round the table for? Go to the Devil!

Wife again fills and hands the glasses round.

LABOURER [goes back to the oven to the Chief] You see? Formerly he did not grudge his last crust, and now for a glass of spirits he nearly beat his wife and sent me to you—to the Devil!

CHIEF. It's good, very good! I'm satisfied.

LABOURER. You wait a bit. Let them empty the bottle—and you'll see what will happen. Even now they are giving each other smooth oily words; presently they'll start flattering each other,—as cunning as foxes.

ACT V

Interior of hut. The Labourer alone, his horns and hoofs showing.

LABOURER. There's lots of corn. More than there's room for, and he's now got a taste for it. We've been distilling again, and we've filled a barrel and hidden it away. We're not going to treat any one for nothing, but when we want to get something out of a fellow, then we'll treat him! So to-day I told him to invite the village elders and treat them, that they should divide up the property between him and his grandfather, and give everything to him and nothing to the old man! My three years are up to-day, and my work is finished. Let the Chief come and see for himself. I needn't be ashamed of his seeing it!

Chief appears out of the ground.

CHIEF. Time's up! Have you redeemed your bread-blunder? I told you I'd come and see for myself. Have you managed the Peasant?

LABOURER. Done him completely! Judge for yourself. Some of them will meet here soon. Get into the oven, and see what they'll do. You'll be well satisfied!

CHIEF [climbs into the oven] We'll see!

Enter the Peasant and four old men. The Wife follows. The men sit down round the table. The Wife lays the cloth, sets ox-foot brawn and pies on the table. The old men exchange greetings with Labourer.

FIRST ELDER. Well, have you made more of the drink?

LABOURER. Yes, we've distilled as much as we need. Why let valuable stuff be wasted?

SECOND ELDER. And is it a success?

LABOURER. Better than the first lot.

SECOND ELDER. But where did you learn to make it?

LABOURER. Going about in the world one learns many things!

THIRD ELDER. Yes, yes, you're a knowing fellow.

Wife brings spirits and glasses.

ACT II

Hell. The Chief of the Devils sits in the highest place. The Devil's Secretary sits lower down, at a table with writing materials. Sentinels stand at each side. To the right are five Imps of different kinds. To the left, by the door, the Doorkeeper. A dandified Imp stands before the Chief.

THE DANDY IMP. The whole of my booty for the three years has been 220,005 men. They're all in my power now.

THE CHIEF. All right. Thank you. Pass on.

The Dandy Imp goes to the right.

THE CHIEF [to the Secretary] I'm tired! Is there much business left? Whose reports have we had, and whose are still to come?

THE SECRETARY [counts on his fingers and, as he counts, points to the Imps to the right. When he mentions any Imp, the one referred to bows] We've had the Gentlefolks' Devil's report. He's captured 1836 in all. And the Tradesmen's Devil's with 9643. From the Lawyers', 3423. The Women's we've also just had: 186,315 married women, and 17,438 maids. Only two Devils are left, the Officials' and the Peasants'. There are altogether 220,005 souls on the list.

CHIEF. Well then, we'd better finish it all to-day. [To the Doorkeeper] Let them in!

The Officials' Devil enters, and bows to the Chief.

CHIEF. Well, how have you got on?

OFFICIALS' IMP [laughing, and rubbing his hands] My affairs are all right, just as soot they are white! The booty is such that I don't remember anything like it since the creation of the world.

CHIEF. What, have you captured a great many?

OFFICIALS' IMP. It's not so much the quantity. Only 1350 men in all, but such splendid fellows! Such fellows, they might shame any Devil! They can embroil people better than we ourselves can. I've introduced a new fashion among them.

CHIEF. What's that new fashion?

OFFICIALS' IMP. Why, in former times lawyers were in attendance on the judges and deceived people. Now, I've arranged for them to do business also apart from the judges. Whoever pays most, is the one to whose business they attend. And they'll take such trouble over it that they'll make out a case where there is none! They and the officials between them embroil people far better than we Devils can.

CHIEF. All right. I'll have a look at them. You may pass on.

The Officials' Imp goes to the right.

CHIEF [to Doorkeeper] Let in the last one.

Enter the Peasants' Imp with the chunk of bread. He bows to the ground.

PEASANTS' IMP. I can't live like this any longer! Give me another appointment!

CHIEF. What appointment? What are you jabbering about? Get up and talk sense. Give in your report! How many peasants have you captured this week?

PEASANTS' IMP [crying] Not one!

CHIEF. What? Not one! What do you mean? What have you been doing? Where have you been loafing?

PEASANTS' IMP [whimpering] I've not been loafing; I've been straining every nerve all the time, but I can't do anything! There now, I went and took his last crust from under the very nose of one of them, and, instead of swearing, he wished it might do me good!

CHIEF. What?... What?... What are you mumbling there? Just blow your nose, and then speak sensibly! One can't make head or tail of what you're saying.

PEASANTS' IMP. Why, there was a peasant ploughing; and I knew he had brought only a chunk of bread with him, and had nothing else to eat. I stole his crust. By rights he should have sworn; but what does he do? He says, "Let him who has taken it eat it, and

OLD WOMAN. If only no harm comes of it. Oh dear, it does burn!

But it is nice.

WIFE. Drink it! Then you'll feel it running through your veins.

OLD WOMAN. Well, I suppose I'll have to try. [Drinks].

WIFE. Has it reached your feet yet?

OLD WOMAN. True enough, it does run through you. I feel it here now! And it really makes one feel quite light. Come—give me some more. [Drinks again] Fine! Now I'm quite young again.

PEASANT. Didn't I tell you?

OLD WOMAN. Ah, it's a pity my old man is no longer here. He might have seen once more what I was like in my young days.

Labourer plays. Peasant and Wife dance.

OLD WOMAN [comes into the middle] Do you call that dancing? Let me show you. [Dances] That's the way! Then like this, and like that! Do you see?

Grandfather goes up to the vessel and lets the spirit run out on to the ground.

PEASANT [notices and rushes at his Grandfather] What are you up to, you old fool? Spilling such fine stuff! Oh, you old dotard! [Pushes him away and holds tumbler under tap] You've emptied it all!

GRANDFATHER. It's evil and not good! God has sent you a good harvest for you to feed yourself and others, but you have turned the corn into devils' drink. No good will come of it. Give up this business. Else you'll perish and ruin others! You think this is drink? It's fire, and will burn you up! [Takes a brand from the fire and lights the spilt spirit. The spirit burns. They all look on with horror].

Curtain

I feel my feet getting younger. They're moving of themselves.
[Starts dancing].

WIFE [drinks] You're a real clever 'un, Nick! Now then, strike up!
Labourer takes a balaláyka¹ and plays. Peasant and Wife dance.

LABOURER [plays in the foreground of the scene, laughing and winking as he watches them. Then he leaves off playing, but they still continue to dance] You'll pay for that crust! You've done it now, my fine fellows. They'll never get out of it. The Chief can come when he likes now!

Enter a fresh-looking elderly woman, and a very old white-haired man, the Peasant's Grandfather.

GRANDFATHER. What's the matter? Have you gone mad? Dancing while every one else is at work!

WIFE [dances and claps her hands] Oh—Oh—Oh— [Sings] "That I'm sinning I will own, Free from sin is God alone!"

OLD WOMAN. Oh, you wretch! The oven's not cleaned out yet, and here you are dancing!

PEASANT. Wait a bit, mother. See what has been happening here. We can make old people young again! Here you are! Just drink this! [Passes tumbler].

OLD WOMAN. There's plenty of water in the well. [Smells it] But what have you put in? My—what a smell!

PEASANT. You just drink it.

OLD WOMAN [tastes] Dear me! But won't one die of it?

WIFE. It will make you more alive. You'll grow young again!

OLD WOMAN. Nonsense! [Drinks] But it's nice! Better than our drinks. Here, father, have some too.

Grandfather sits down and shakes his head.

LABOURER. Never mind him. But granny must have another glass.
[Hands some to the old woman].

may it do him good!" I've brought the chunk of bread away with me. Here it is!

CHIEF. Well, and what of the others?

PEASANTS' IMP. They're all alike. I could not manage to take a single one.

CHIEF. How dare you appear before me with empty hands? And as if that were not enough, you must needs bring some stinking crust or other here! Do you mean to mock me? Do you mean to live in Hell and eat the bread of idleness? The others do their best, and work hard! Why, they [points to the Imps] have each supplied 10,000 or 20,000, or even 200,000. And you come with empty hands, and bring a miserable crust, and begin spinning your yarns. You chatter, but don't work; and that's why you've lost hold of them. But wait a bit, my friend, I'll teach you a thing or two!

PEASANTS' IMP. Before you punish me, listen to what I'll tell you. It's all very well for those other Devils, who have to do with gentlefolk, with merchants, or with women. It's all plain sailing for them! Show a nobleman a coronet, or a fine estate, and you've got him, and may lead him where you like. It's the same with a tradesman. Show him some money and stir up his covetousness, and you may lead him as with a halter. And with the women it's also plain sailing. Give them finery and sweets—and you may do what you like with them. But as to the peasants—there's a long row to hoe with them! When he's at work from morn till night—sometimes even far into the night—and never starts without a thought of God, how's one to get at him? Master, remove me from these peasants! I'm tired to death of them, and have angered you into the bargain!

CHIEF. You're humbugging, you idler! It's no use your talking about the others. They've got hold of the merchants, the nobles, and the women, because they knew how to treat them, and invented new traps for them! The official one there—he has made quite a new departure. You must think of something too!

¹ The balaláyka is an instrument (generally three-stringed) used by Russian peasants, and answering to the negroes' banjo.

You've stolen a crust, and brag about it! What a clever thing to do! Surround them with snares, and they'll get caught in one or other of them. But loafing about as you do, and leaving the way open for them, those peasants of yours have gained strength. They begin not to care about their last crust. If they take to such ways, and teach their women the same, they'll get quite beyond us! Invent something! Get out of the hole as best you can.

PEASANTS' IMP. I can't think how to set about it. Let me off! I can stand it no longer!

CHIEF [angrily] Can't stand it! What do you think, then? Am I to do your work for you?

PEASANTS' IMP. I can't!

CHIEF. Can't? Wait a bit! Hollo, there! bring the switches; give him a thrashing.

The Sentinels seize the Imp and whip him.

PEASANTS' IMP. Oh! Oh! Oh!...

CHIEF. Have you thought of something?

PEASANTS' IMP. Oh, oh, I can't!

CHIEF. Give him some more. [They whip] Well—thought of something?

PEASANTS' IMP. Yes—yes, I have!

CHIEF. Well, tell us what it is.

PEASANTS' IMP. I've invented a dodge that will bring them all into my grasp, if you'll only let me take a labourer's place with that peasant. But I can't explain what it is beforehand.

CHIEF. All right. Only remember, that if you don't atone for that crust within three years, I'll flay you alive!

PEASANTS' IMP. They'll all be mine in three years' time.

CHIEF. All right. When the three years are past, I shall come and see for myself!

Curtain

Enter Wife and little girl.

WIFE. What's the matter? Why are you kicking up such a row?

PEASANT. You just taste what we've been distilling. [Hands her the glass] Smell! What does it smell of?

WIFE [smells] Dear me!

PEASANT. Drink!

WIFE. But perhaps it may do one some harm?

PEASANT. Drink, fool!

WIFE. True. It is nice!

PEASANT [a little tipsy] Nice indeed! You wait and see what'll happen. Nick says it drives all weariness out of one's bones. The young grow old. I mean, the old grow young. There now, I've only had two glasses of it, and all my bones have got easy. [Swaggers] You see? Wait a bit, when you and I drink it every day we'll grow young again! Come, Martha! [Embraces her].

WIFE. Get along. Why, it's made you quite silly.

PEASANT. There, you see! You said Nick and I were wasting the corn, but just see what stuff we've concocted. Eh? It's good, ain't it?

WIFE. Of course, it's good if it makes the old young again. Just see how jolly it has made you! And I feel jolly too! Now then, join in! Ah ... Ah ... Ah ... [Sings].

PEASANT. Yes, that's the way! We'll all be young, all young.

WIFE. We must call mother-in-law, for she's always sad and grumbling. She needs renewing. When she's younger she'll get kinder.

PEASANT [tipsy] Yes, call mother. Call her here, and grandfather too. I say, Mary, run and call your granny and great-grandfather. Tell him he must get down from the oven! We'll make him young again. Now then, quick! One, two, three, and away! Off like a shot! [Girl runs off. To Wife] We'll have another glass.

Labourer fills and hands the glasses.

PEASANT [drinks] At first we got young at the top, in the tongue; then it went down into the arms. Now it has reached the feet.

LABOURER. As sweet as honey. When once you've tasted it you'll never give it up.

PEASANT. Is that so? Well, I'll go to the neighbour's; he used to have a copper. We'll have a try!

Curtain

ACT IV

A barn. In the middle a closed copper on the fire, with another vessel, under which is a tap.

LABOURER [holds a tumbler under the tap and drinks the spirit] Well, master, it's ready now.

PEASANT [sitting on his heels and looking on] What a queer thing. Here's water coming out of the mixture. Why are you letting this water off first?

LABOURER. It's not water. It is the very stuff itself!

PEASANT. Why is it so clear? I thought it would be yellow like grain. This is just like water.

LABOURER. But you just smell it!

PEASANT. Ah, what a scent! Well, well, let's see what it's like in the mouth. Let me taste! [Tries to take the tumbler out of the Labourer's hand].

LABOURER. Mind, you'll spill it! [Turns the tap off, drinks and smacks his lips] It's ready! Here you are. Drink it!

PEASANT [drinks, first sipping, then taking more and more, till he empties the glass and gives it back] Now then, some more. One can't tell the taste from such a drop.

LABOURER [laughing] Well, you seem to like it! [Draws some more].

PEASANT [drinks] Eh, that's the sort! Let's call the missis. Hey, Martha! Come along! It's ready! Come on there!

ACT III

A barn. Carts loaded with grain. The Imp as a Labourer. He is shovelling grain off the cart, and the Peasant is carrying it away in a measure.

LABOURER. Seven!

PEASANT. How many quarters?

LABOURER [looks at the numbers marked on the barn door] Twenty-six quarters. And this is the seventh bushel of the twenty-seventh quarter.

PEASANT. It won't all go in; the barn is nearly full!

LABOURER. Shovel it nice and even.

PEASANT. So I will.

Exit with measure.

LABOURER [alone, takes off his cap, his horns appear] It will be some time before he returns. I'll ease my horns a bit. [Horns rise] And I'll take my boots off too; I can't do it when he's here. [Takes his boots off, his hoofs appear. Sits on the threshold] It's the third year now. It's near the time of reckoning. There's more corn than there's room for. Only one more thing left to teach him, and then let the Chief come and see for himself. I'll have something worth showing him! He'll forgive me for that crust!

Neighbour approaches. Labourer hides his horns and hoofs.

NEIGHBOUR. Good day to you.

LABOURER. The same to you.

NEIGHBOUR. Where's your master?

LABOURER. He's gone to spread the grain more even; it won't all go in.

NEIGHBOUR. Dear me, what a run of luck your master is having! More than he has room for? We're all amazed at the harvests your master has had these two years. It's as if some one had told him what was coming. Last year was a dry season, and he had sown in the bog. Others had no harvest, but your threshing

ground was covered with sheaves! This year we've a rainy summer, and he's been sharp enough to sow on the hill. Everybody's corn has rotted, but you have a splendid harvest. What grain! Ah, what grain!

Takes some grain, weighs it in his hand, and chews it.

PEASANT [enters with empty measure] How d'ye do, neighbour?

NEIGHBOUR. Good day. I was saying to your man here, how well you managed to guess where to sow your corn. Every one envies you. What heaps, what heaps of corn you have got! You'll not eat it all in ten years.

PEASANT. It's all thanks to Nicholas here. [Points to Labourer] It was his luck. Last year I sent him to plough, and what did he do but plough in the bog. I gave him a scolding, but he persuaded me to sow there. And so I did, and it turned out all for the best! And this year he again guessed right, and sowed on the hill!

NEIGHBOUR. It's as if he knew what kind of season it would be. Yes, you have got corn enough and no mistake! [Silence] And I have come to ask you to lend me a sack of rye. Ours is all used up. I'll return it next year.

PEASANT. All right, you may have it.

LABOURER [nudging the Peasant] Don't give it!

PEASANT. No more words about it. Take it.

NEIGHBOUR. Thank you. I'll just run and fetch a sack.

LABOURER [aside] He keeps to his old ways ... still goes on giving. He doesn't always obey me. But just wait a bit. He'll soon stop giving away.

Exit Neighbour.

PEASANT [sitting down on the threshold] Why should one not give to a good man?

LABOURER. Giving is one thing, getting back another! You know—"It's a good world to lend in, a good world to spend in, But to get back one's own, it's the worst world that's known."

That's what the old folk say.

PEASANT. Don't worry. We've plenty of corn.

LABOURER. Well, what of that?

PEASANT. We've enough, not only till next harvest but for two years ahead. What are we to do with it all?

LABOURER. What are we to do with it? I could make such stuff of this corn as would make you rejoice all the days of your life.

PEASANT. Why, what would you make of it?

LABOURER. A kind of drink. Drink, that would give you strength when you are weak, satisfy you when you are hungry, give you sleep when you are restless, make you merry when you're sad, give you courage when you're afraid. That's the drink I'd make!

PEASANT. Rubbish!

LABOURER. Rubbish indeed! It was just the same when I told you to sow in the bog, and then on the hill. You did not believe me then, but now you know! You'll find out about the drink the same way.

PEASANT. But what will you make it of?

LABOURER. Why, of this same corn.

PEASANT. But won't that be a sin?

LABOURER. Just hear him! Why should it be a sin? Everything is given for a joy to man.

PEASANT. And where did you get all your wisdom from, Nick? You seem a very ordinary man to look at, and hard-working too. Why, I don't remember you so much as ever taking your boots off all these two years you've been with me. And yet you seem to know everything. Where did you learn it?

LABOURER. I've been about a good deal!

PEASANT. And so you say this drink will give one strength?

LABOURER. Just wait till you try it and see the good that comes of it.

PEASANT. And how are we to make it?

LABOURER. It's not hard to make when you know how! Only we shall want a copper and a couple of iron vessels.

PEASANT. And does it taste nice?