

NICHOLAS STICK

by Leo Tolstoy

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We passed the night at the house of a soldier ninety-five years old, – he had served under Alexander I. and under Nicholas.

" Well, grandfather, do you want to die ?"

" To die ? Of course I want to very much ! I used to be afraid to, but now I beg God for nothing but this, – to give me a chance to repent and to receive the extreme unction. I have so many sins upon me."

" What are your sins ?"

" What sins ? Do you know when I served ? I served under Nicholas! It was a different kind of service from what it is nowadays. What was it then ? Ugh ! It makes me shudder to think of it. I served even under Alexander, and him the soldiers used to praise, – they said that he was merciful."

I recalled the last period of Alexander's reign, when twenty out of each hundred men used to be beaten to death. A fine man Nicholas must have been, if in comparison with him Alexander was called merciful !

" It was my fate to serve under Nicholas," said the old man.

He immediately became enlivened and began:

" How was it then ? Then they did not even take off the breeches for fifty rods; one hundred and fifty, two

hundred, three hundred, – they used to beat men to death!"

He spoke with disgust and terror, and not without pride about the ancient exploits.

"Not a week passed but that a man or two of the regiment was beaten to death with sticks. Nowadays they do not know what a stick is, but then the word did not leave the mouth : ' Sticks, sticks !'

" Our soldiers nicknamed Nicholas, calling him ' Stick.' He was Nicholas Pavlovich, but they used to say ' Nicholas Stick.' And this nickname stuck to him. So, as I think of those days," continued the

old man, " well, I have outlived it all, it is time for me to die, – as I think of it all, I feel horribly.

" Many a sin did I take upon my soul. It was all a question of subordination. They count you off one hundred and fifty rods for a soldier " (the old man had been an under-officer and sergeant, and now was a candidate), " and you count off two hundred to him. Your wounds do not heal up from it, but you torment him,– and so here is a sin.

" The under-officers used to beat the young soldiers to death. They would strike with the butt of a gun or the fist on some chosen spot, – the chest or the head, – and he would die. And there was never any inquest about the matter. He died from beating, but the authorities wrote, ' Died by the will of God,' and that was the end of it. Did I understand anything then ? I only thought of myself. But now, as I toss about on the oven, unable to sleep through the night, I cannot help but think and see it all; it will be well if I have a chance to get my extreme unction in Christian fashion, and am forgiven, for I am seized by terror. As I think what I myself suffered and what others suffered from me, I do not need any hell, – it was worse than any hell."

I vividly imagined what this dying man must be recalling in his old man's loneliness, and a chill passed through me. I recalled all those horrors, besides the sticks, in which he must have taken part, – the driving to death between two rows, the shooting, the murder, and the pillage of cities and villages in war (he himself had taken part in the Polish war), and I began to ask him about it. I asked him about the driving between two rows.

He told me in detail about this terrible affair, – how they led a man tied to guns between an avenue of soldiers with sharpened sticks, how all struck him, while officers walked behind the soldiers, calling out, " Strike harder ! " " Strike harder!" The old man called out in a commanding voice, evidently not without pleasure recalling and repeating the dashing tone of a commander.

He told me all the details without any sign of repentance, as he might have told about killing steers and curing beef. He told me how they used to lead the unfortunate man up and down between the rows, how the stricken man stretched forward and fell on the bayonets ; how at first the bloody wales were visible, then crossed, then blended together; how the blood came out and spirted ; how the blood-covered flesh flew in clusters ; how the bones were laid bare; how the unfortunate man at first cried, then only groaned in a dull voice with every step and every stroke; how he then grew quiet, and how the doctor, who was detailed to do this, came up, felt the pulse, examined the man, and determined whether the man might be beaten again without being killed, or whether they had better wait and put off the rest till another time, when the wounds had healed up, in order to begin the torture from the beginning and finish the number of strokes which certain beasts, with Stick at their head, had decided must be administered. The doctor used his knowledge to

keep the man from dying until he had endured all the torments which his body could bear.

He told how, when the man could no longer walk, they put him prostrate on a military cloak, with a blood-covered pillow down the spine; how they carried him to the hospital to be cured, so that, when he was cured, he might receive the missing one or two thousand strokes, which he had not yet received and was unable to bear at one time. He told me how they begged for death, and did not get it at once, but were cured and beaten a second, sometimes a third time. And the man lived and tossed about in the hospital, awaiting new torments, which would bring him to death. And all this, because a man ran away from the army, or had the manliness, daring, and self-renunciation to complain for his comrades that they were badly fed, and that the authorities stole their shares.

He told me all this, and when I tried to evoke his repentance at these recollections, he at first looked surprised and then frightened.

" No," he said, " why should I ? It was according to judgment! Was I guilty of it? It was according to the law."

The same calm and absence of repentance he showed in relation to the military horrors in which he had taken part, and many of which he had seen in Turkey and in Poland.

He told me of the murder of children, of the starvation and freezing of captives, of the killing with a bayonet of a young Pole who pressed himself against a tree. And when I asked him whether his conscience did not torment him for these acts, he absolutely failed to understand me. This was in a lawful war, for king and fatherland. Those were not only not bad acts, but such as he regarded as valorous, virtuous, and redeeming his sins. What troubled him was only his personal acts, when he, being a commander, used to beat and punish his men. It was these acts that tormented his conscience; but to purge himself from them he has a salvation, and that is the extreme unction, which he hopes he will succeed in receiving before death, and for which he has begged his niece. His niece, understanding the importance of it, has promised it to him, and he is satisfied.

His having ruined and killed innocent children and women, his having killed men with bullets and the bayonet, his having beaten to death people, standing in the row, and having dragged them to the hospital, and again back to the torture, – all this does not trouble him: all this is, as it were, not his affair. All this was, as it were, not done by him, but by another person.

What would happen to this old man, if he comprehended, what ought to be so clear to him who was standing on the threshold of death, that between him, his conscience, and God, as now, on the eve of death, there was no mediator, and there can be none, just as there could be none at that moment, when he was made to torment and kill people ?

What would happen to him, if he now understood that there is nothing to redeem the evil which he did to men, when he was able not to do it? If he understood that there is one eternal law, which he has always known and could not help knowing, a law demanding love and compassion for people, and that what he called law was a detestable, godless deception, to which he ought not to have submitted? It is terrible to think what would present itself to him in his sleepless nights on the oven, and what his despair would be, if he understood that, when he had the strength to do good and evil to men, he did only evil; that, when he has come to understand what the evil and what the good consists in, he is no longer able to do anything but be uselessly tormented and repent? His sufferings would be terrible!

"Why, then, wish to torment him? Why torment the conscience of a dying old man? It would be better to calm it. Why irritate the people and remind them of what is long past?"

Past? What is past? Can that pass which we have not only not begun to eradicate and cure, but which we even are afraid to call by name? Can a cruel disease pass, only because we say that it has passed? It does not pass and will never pass and cannot pass, so long as we do not recognize ourselves as sick. To cure a disease, we must first recognize it. But we do not do this. We not only fail to do this, but we employ all our efforts to the end that we may not see it, may not call it by name.

The disease does not pass, but is only modified; it eats deeper into the flesh, the blood, the bones. The disease consists in this, that men born good and meek, men illuminated by Christian truth, men with love implanted in their hearts, with compassion for men, commit – man over men – frightful cruelties, without knowing themselves why they are committing them and for what purpose. Our Russians, meek, good men, impressed with the spirit of Christ's teaching, who repent in their hearts for having offended men with a word, for not having given their last to mendicants and not having shown pity to prisoners, – these men pass the best period of their lives in murder and in torturing their brothers, and not only fail to repent of their acts, but even consider these acts virtuous or, at least, indispensable, just as inevitable as food or breathing. Is this not a terrible disease? And is it not incumbent on everybody to do everything he can, in order to cure it, and, first of all and above all else, to point it out, to recognize it, to call it by its name?

The old soldier has passed all his life in torturing and killing other people. We say, "Why mention it? The soldier does not consider himself guilty, and those terrible deeds – the stick, the driving through the rows, and the others – have already passed; why mention the past? Nowadays these things no longer exist.

"There was a Nicholas Stick. Why mention him?"

It is only the old soldier who mentioned him before his death. Why irritate the people?"

Just so they spoke during Nicholas's reign of Alexander. The same was in Alexander's time said of the deeds of Paul. The same was said in Catherine's time of Peter, and so forth. Why mention it all ?

Why mention it ? If I have had a bad or a dangerous disease, which was hard to cure, and I am freed from it, I shall gladly mention it. I shall refrain from mentioning it only when I am ailing, ailing badly, and am getting worse and want to deceive myself. Only then will I not mention it. And we do not mention it, only because we know that we are as ill as ever.

" Why pain the old man and irritate the people ? The sticks and the driving between the rows, – all that is long past." Past ? Changed in form, but not past.

Everything that has taken place in some past we recall, not only with terror, but even with indignation. We read the descriptions of executions, burnings for heresies, tortures, military settlements, sticks, and drivings through the rows, and it is not so much that we are frightened at the cruelty of men, as that we cannot even imagine the mental conditions of those men who did all that. What was there in the soul of the man who got up in the morning, washed himself, put on his boyar garments, prayed to God, and then went to the executionroom to wrench joints and to beat old men and women with the knout, and at this occupation passed his customary five hours, like a modern official of the Senate, then returned to his family and calmly sat down to dinner, and then read the Holy Scripture ? What was there in the souls of those commanders of regiments and of companies (I knew one such) who the evening before danced with a beauty at a ball, and went away earlier than usual, in order early on the following morning to attend to the execution by driving through the rows of a fugitive soldier, a Tartar, and who had this man beaten to death, and then returned home to dine with his family ? All this happened in the time of Peter, and of Catherine, and of Alexander, and of Nicholas. There was no time when there did not exist those terrible deeds, which we, reading of them, are unable to understand. We cannot understand how people failed to see those horrors which they committed, how they failed to see, if not the bestial inhumanity of those terrors, at least their senselessness. This happened at all times.

Is our time indeed so particularly fortunate that we do not have those horrors, those deeds, which to our descendants will appear just as incomprehensible ? There are the same deeds, the same horrors, but we do not see them, just as our ancestors did not see the horror of their horrors. We now see clearly, not only the cruelty, but also the senselessness of the burning of heretics and of judicial tortures for the purpose of discovering the truth. A child sees the senselessness of these things. But the men of that time did not see it. Clever, learned men asserted that the rack was an indispensable condition of the life of men, that it was hard, but that it was impossible to get along without it. The same was the case with the sticks, with slavery. And the time has passed, and it

is hard for us to imagine the condition of men, in which such a gross aberration was possible. But this has existed at all times, and so it must exist in our time, and we are, no doubt, just as much blinded in respect to our horrors.

Where are our tortures, our slavery, our sticks ? We imagine that they do not exist, that this was before, but is now past. We imagine so, because we do not wish to understand the past, and because we carefully close our eyes to it.

But if we look into the past, our present situation and its causes will be revealed to us. If only we will call the stakes, brandings, tortures, executioner's blocks, recruitments, by their real names, we shall also find the true name for the prisons, penitentiaries, armies with universal military service, prosecuting attorneys, and gendarmes.

If we will not say, "Why recall it?" but will look attentively at what used to be done in former times, we shall understand and see clearly what is being done now.

If it is clear to us that it is silly and cruel to chop heads off on the block and to find out the truth from people by means of wrenching their bones, it will become equally clear that it is just as silly and cruel, if not more so, to hang people and to put them in solitary confinement, which is equal to or worse than death, and to find out the truth by means of hired lawyers and prosecuting attorneys. If it shall become clear to us that it is silly and cruel to kill an erring man, it will become equally clear that it is sillier still to put such a man in the penitentiary, in order completely to demoralize him; when it becomes clear that it is silly and cruel to catch peasants for the army and brand them like cattle, it will become clear that it is just as silly and cruel to put into the army every man of twenty-one years of age. If it is clear how silly and cruel John the Terrible's guard was, the silliness and cruelty of the body-guard and the protective guard will become much clearer still.

If we only stop closing our eyes to the past, and saying, " Why remember the past ? " it will become clear to us that in our time there are just such horrors, only in new forms.

We say, " All this has passed; we have no longer the rack, harlot Catherines with their plenipotentiary lovers, no longer any slavery, nor beating to death with sticks, etc."

But this only seems so! Three hundred thousand men in penitentiaries and prisons sit locked up in narrow, stinking apartments and die a slow bodily and moral death. Their wives and children are cast away without any support, while these men are kept in dens of debauchery, in prisons and penitentiaries, and it is only to the wardens, the complete masters of these slaves, that this cruel, senseless confinement is of any use.

Tens of thousands of men with " harmful ideas " carry these ideas in their exile to the most distant corners of Russia, lose their minds, and hang themselves. Thousands sit in fortresses, and are either secretly killed by the chiefs of the prisons, or lose their minds in their solitary confinement. Millions of people perish, physically and morally, in slavery to manufacturers. Hundreds of thousands are every autumn taken away from their families, from their young wives, are taught to commit murder, and are systematically corrupted.

The Russian Tsar cannot drive out anywhere without having about him a visible chain of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, who are stationed along the road at a distance of fifty feet from one another, and a secret chain, which follows him everywhere.

A king collects the tribute and builds a tower, and on the tower he makes a pond, and on the pond, which is painted with blue paint, and which is made to produce the semblance of a storm by means of a machine, he goes rowing in a boat. And the people starve in factories in Ireland, in France, in Belgium.

It does not take special penetration to see that everything is the same in our time, and that our time is full of the same horrors, the same tortures, which for subsequent generations will be just as remarkable on account of their cruelty and their silliness. The disease is the same, and those who are diseased are not those who take advantage of these horrors. Let them take a hundred and a thousand times more advantage of the horrors; let them build towers and theatres, and give balls; let them fleece the people ; let Stick beat the people to death; let Pobyedondstsev and Orzhdvski secretly hang people by the hundred in the prisons, – so long as they do it themselves. Let them stop corrupting the people, deceiving them, causing them to take part in it, as the old soldier took part in it.

This terrible disease is in the deception, in the fact that for a man there can be some holiness and some law which is higher than the holiness and law of love of neighbour; in the deception, which conceals the fact that a man, to fulfil the demands of other men, is able to commit many acts, except one kind of acts, which he, as a man, is never able to commit: he can at no man's request go against God's will, – he cannot kill and torture his brothers.

Eighteen hundred years ago it was said, in reply to the Pharisees' question whether tribute ought to be given to Caesar: "Unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." If men had any faith at all, and regarded even so little as due to God, they would first of all consider themselves under obligation to God, not only in respect to what God taught man in words, when he said, " Thou shalt not kill; " when he said, " Do not unto another what thou dost not wish shall be done unto thee; " when he said, " Love thy neighbour as thyself," – but also in respect to what God wrote in indelible characters in the heart of every man, – love of his neighbour, compassion toward him, horror of murder and of the torturing of his fellow men.

If men believed in God, they could not help but recognize this first obligation toward Him, which is, not to torture, not to kill. And then the words, " Unto God the things that are God's, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's," would have for them a definite meaning. " To the Tsar, or to anybody else, everything you please," the believer would say, " only not what is contrary to God's will. Caesar needs my money, let him take it; my house, my labours, let him take them ; my wife, my children, my life, let him take them; all that is not God's.

But if Caesar needs that I should raise and let fall a rod on the back of my neighbour, – that is God's. This is my act, my life, that of which I shall give an account to God, and God has commanded me not to do this, and this I cannot give to Caesar. I cannot bind, lock up, persecute, kill a man : all this is my life, and that is God's, and I cannot give it to any one but God."

The words, " Unto God the things that are God's," mean to us that we are to give to God penny candles, masses, words, – in general, everything which nobody needs for any purpose, least of all God; but everything else, our whole life, the whole holiness of our soul, which belongs to God, we give to Caesar, that is (according to the meaning which " Caesar " has for the Jews), to a hateful stranger.

This is terrible! Men, come to your senses !