

THE CANDLE

by Leo Tolstoy

Translated from the Original Russian and edited by Leo Wiener
Assistant Professor of Slavic Languages at Harvard University

1885

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil. (Matt. v. 38, 39.)

This happened in the days of slavery. There were then all kinds of masters. There were such as remembered their hour of death and God, and took pity on their people, and there were dogs, – not by that may their memory live! But there were no meaner masters than those who from serfdom rose, as though out of the mud, to be lords! With them life was hardest of all

There happened to be such a clerk in a manorial estate. The peasants were doing manorial labour. There was much land, and the land was good, and there was water, and meadows, and forests. There would have been enough for everybody, both for the master and for the peasants, but the master had placed over them a clerk, a manorial servant of his from another estate.

The clerk took the power into his own hand, and sat down on the peasants' necks. He was a married man, – he had a wife and two married daughters, – and had saved some money: he might have lived gloriously without sin, but he was envious, and stuck fast in sin. He began by driving the peasants to manorial labour more than the usual number of days. He started a brick-kiln, and he drove all the men and women to work in it above

their strength, and sold the brick. The peasants went to the proprietor in Moscow to complain against him, but they were not successful. When the clerk learned that the peasants had entered a complaint against him, he took his revenge out of them. The peasants led a harder life still. There were found faithless people among the peasants: they began to denounce their own brothers to the clerk, and to slander one another. And all the people became involved, and the clerk was furious..

The further it went, the worse it got, and the clerk carried on so terribly that the people became afraid of him as of a wolf. When he drove through the village, everybody ran away from him as from a wolf, so as not to be seen by him. The clerk saw that and raved more than ever because people were afraid of him. He tortured the peasants with beating and with work, and they suffered very much from him.

It used to happen that such evil-doers were put out of the way, and

the peasants began to talk that way about him. They would meet somewhere secretly, and such as were bolder would say:

" How long are we going to endure this evil-doer ? We are perishing anyway, – and it is no sin to kill a man like him."

One day the peasants met in the forest, before Easter week: the clerk had sent them to clean up the manorial woods. They came together at dinner-time, and began to talk:

" How can we live now ?" they said. " He will root us up. He has worn us out with work: neither in the daytime nor at night does he give any rest to us or to the women. And the moment a thing does not go the way he wants it to, he nags at us and has us flogged. Zewën died from that flogging; Anisim he wore out in the stocks. What are we waiting for? He will come here in the evening and will again start to torment us.

We ought just to pull him down from his horse, whack him with an axe, and that will be the end of it. We will bury him somewhere like a dog, and mum is the word. Let us agree to stand by each other and not give ourselves away."

Thus spoke Vasili Mindev. He was more furious at the clerk than anybody else. The clerk had him flogged every week, and had taken his wife from him and made her a cook at his house.

Thus the peasants talked, and in the evening the clerk came. He came on horseback, and immediately began to nag them because they were not cutting right. He found a linden-tree in the heap.

" I have commanded you not to cut any lindens down," he said. " Who cut it down ? Tell me, or I will have every one of you flogged !"

He tried to find out in whose row the linden was. They pointed to Sidor. The clerk beat Sidor's face until the blood came, and struck Vasili with a whip because his pile was small. He rode home.

In the evening the peasants met again, and Vasili began to speak.

" Oh, people, you are not men, but sparrows! * We will stand up, we will stand up !' but when the time for action came, they all flew under the roof. Even thus the sparrows made a stand against the hawk : ' We will not give away, we will not give away ! We will make a stand, we will make a stand!' But when he swooped down on them, they made for the nettles. And the hawk seized one of the sparrows, the one he wanted, and flew away with him. Out leaped the sparrows: ' Chivik, chivik!' one of them was lacking. ' Who is gone ? Vdnka. Well, served him right ! ' Just so you did. * We will not give each other away, we will not give each other away I' When he took hold of Sidor, you ought to have come together and made an end of him. But there you say, 'We will not give away, we will not give away! We will make a stand, we will make a stand !' and when he swooped down on you, you made for the bushes."

The peasants began to talk that way oftener and oftener, and they decided fully to make away with the clerk. During Passion week the clerk told the peasants to get ready to plough the manorial land for oats during Easter week. That seemed offensive to the peasants, and they gathered during Passion week in Vasili's back yard, and began to talk.

" If he has forgotten God," they said, " and wants to do such things, we must certainly kill him. We shall be ruined anyway."

Peter Mikhy^{ev} came to them. He was a peaceable man, and did not take counsel with the peasants. He came, and listened to their speeches, and said:

" Brothers, you are planning a great crime. It is a serious matter to ruin a soul. It is easy to ruin somebody else's soul, but how about our own souls ? He is doing wrong, and the wrong is at his door. We must suffer, brothers."

Vasili grew angry at these words.

" He has got it into his head that it is a sin to kill a man. Of course it is, but what kind of a man is he ? It is a sin to kill a good man, but such a dog even God has commanded us to kill. A mad dog has to be killed, if we are to pity men. If we do not kill him, there will be a greater sin. What a lot of people he will ruin! Though we shall suffer, it will at least be for other people. Men will thank us for it. If we stand gaping, he will ruin us all. You are speaking nonsense, Mikhy^{ev}. Will it be a lesser sin if we go to work on Christ's holiday ? You yourself will not go."

And Mikhy^{ev} said:

" Why should I not go ? If they send me, I will go to plough. It is not for me. God will find out whose sin it is, so long as we do not forget him. Brothers, I am not speaking for myself. If we were enjoined to repay evil with evil, there would be a commandment of that kind, but we are taught just the opposite. You start to do away with evil, and it will only pass into you. It is not a hard thing to-kill a man. But the blood sticks to your soul. To kill a man means to soil your soul with blood. You imagine that when you kill a bad man you have got rid of the evil, but, behold, you have reared a worse evil within you. Submit to misfortune, and misfortune will be vanquished."

The peasants could not come to any agreement: their thoughts were scattered. Some of them believed with Vasili, and others agreed with Peter's speech that they ought not commit a crime, but endure.

The peasants celebrated the first day, the Sunday. In the evening the elder came with the deputies from the manor, and said:

" Mikhail Semenovich, the clerk, has commanded me to get all the

peasants ready for the morrow, to plough the field for the oats." The elder made the round of the village with the deputies and ordered all to go out on the morrow to plough, some beyond the river, and some from the highway. The peasants wept, but did not dare to disobey, and on the morrow went out with their ploughs and began to plough.

Mikhail Semenovich, the clerk, awoke late, and went out to look after the farm. His home folk – his wife and his widowed daughter (she had come for the holidays) – were all dressed up. A labourer hitched a cart for them, and they went to mass, and returned home again. A servant made the samovar, and when Mikhail Semenovich came, they sat down to drink tea. Mikhail Semenovich drank his tea, lighted a pipe, and sent for the elder.

"Well," he said, "have you sent out the peasants to plough?"

"Yes, Mikhail Semenovich."

"Well, did all of them go?"

"All. I placed them myself."

"Of course, you have placed them, – but are they ploughing? Go and see, and tell them that I will be there in the afternoon, and by that time they are to plough a desyatfna to each two ploughs, and plough it well. If I find any unploughed strips, I will pay no attention to the holiday."

"Yes, sir."

The elder started to go out, but Mikhail Semenovich called him back. He called him back, but he hesitated, for he wanted to say something and did not know how to say it. He hesitated awhile, and then he said:

"Listen to what those robbers are saying about me. Tell me everything, – who is scolding me, or whatever they may be saying. I know those robbers: they do not like to work; all they want to do is to lie on their sides and loaf. To eat and be idle, that is what they like; they do not consider that if the time of ploughing is missed it will be too late. So listen to what they have to say, and let me know everything you may hear! Go, but be sure you tell me everything and keep nothing from me!"

The elder turned around and left the room. He mounted his horse and rode into the field to the peasants.

The clerk's wife had heard her husband's talk with the elder, and she came in and began to implore him. The wife of the clerk was a peaceable woman, and she had a good heart. Whenever she could, she calmed her husband and took the peasants' part.

She came to her husband, and began to beg him: "My dear Mfshenka,

do not sin, for the Lord's holiday! Foi Christ's sake, send the peasants home! "

Mikhdil Semenovich did not accept his wife's words, but only laughed at her:

" Is it too long a time since the whip danced over you that you have become so bold, and meddle in what is not your concern ? "

"Mishenka, my dear, I have had a bad dream about you. Listen to my words and send the peasants home ! "

"Precisely, that's what I say. Evidently you have gathered so much fat that you think the whip will not hurt you. Look out! "

Semenovich grew angry, knocked the burning pipe into her teeth, sent her away, and told her to get the dinner ready.

Mikhail Semenovich ate cold gelatine, dumplings, beet soup with pork, roast pig, and milk noodles, and drank cherry cordial, and ate pastry for dessert; he called in the cook and made her sit down and sing songs to him, while he himself took the guitar and accompanied her.

Mikhail Semenovich was sitting in a happy mood and belching, and strumming the guitar, and laughing with the cook. The elder came in, made a bow, and began to report what he had seen in the field.

" Well, are they ploughing ? Will they finish the task ? "

" They have already ploughed more than half."

" No strips left ? "

" I have not seen any. They are afraid, and are working well."

" And are they breaking up the dirt well ? "

"The earth is soft and falls to pieces like a poppy." The clerk was silent for awhile.

" What do they say about me ? Are they cursing me ?"

The elder hesitated, but Mikhail Semenovich commanded him to tell the whole truth.

"Tell everything! You are not going to tell me your words, but theirs. If you tell me the truth, I will reward you; and if you shield them, look out, I will have you flogged. O Katyusha, give him a glass of vodka to brace him up!"

The cook went and brought the elder the vodka. The elder saluted, drank the vodka, wiped his mouth, and began to speak. " I cannot help it," he thought, " it is not my fault if they do not pYaise

him; I will tell him the truth, if he wants it." And the elder took courage and said:

" They murmur, Mikhail Semenovich, they murmur."

" What do they say ? Speak ! "

" They keep saying that you do not believe in God." The clerk laughed.

" Who said that ? "

" All say so. They say that you are submitting to the devil."

The clerk laughed.

" That is all very well," he said, " but tell me in particular what each says. What does Vasili say ? "

The elder did not wish to tell on his people, but with Vasili he had long been in a feud.

" Vasili," he said, " curses more than the rest."

" What does he say ? Tell me ! "

" It is too terrible to tell. He says that you will die an unrepenting death."

" What a brave fellow! " he said. " Why, then, is he gaping ? Why does he not kill me ? Evidently his arms are too short. All right," he said, " Vasili, we will square up accounts. And Tishka, that dog, I suppose he says so, too?"

" All speak ill of you."

" But what do they say ?"

" I loathe to tell."

" Never mind ! Take courage and speak! "

"They say: 'May his belly burst, and his guts run out!'"

Mikhail Semenovich was delighted, and he even laughed.

" We will see whose will run out first. Who said that ? Tishka ?"

" Nobody said a good word. All of them curse you and threaten you."

" Well, and Peter Mikhy^{ev} ? What does he say ? He, too, I suppose, is cursing me ?"

" No, Mikhail Semenovich, Peter is not cursing."

" What does he say ?"

" He is the only one of all the peasants who is not saying anything. He is a wise peasant. I wondered at him, Mikhail Semenovich."

" How so?"

" All the peasants were wondering at what he was doing."

" What was he doing ? "

" It is wonderful. I rode up to him. He is ploughing the slanting desyatina at Turkin Height. As I rode up to him, I heard some one singing such nice, high tones, and on the plough-staff something was shining."

« Well ?"

" It was shining like a light. I rode up to him, and there I saw a five-kopek wax candle was stuck on the cross-bar and burning, and the wind did not blow it out. He had on a clean shirt, and was ploughing and singing Sunday hymns. And he would turn over and shake off the dirt, but the candle did not go out. He shook the plough in my presence, changed the peg, and started the plough, but the candle was still burning and did not go out."

" And what did he say ?"

" He said nothing. When he saw me, he greeted me and at once began to sing again."

" What did you say to him ?"

" I did not say anything to him, but the peasants came up and laughed at him : ' Mikhy^{ev} will not get rid of his sin of ploughing during Easter week even if he should pray all his life.' "

" What did he say to that ? "

«All he said was: ' Peace on earth and good-will to men.' He took his plough, started his horses, and sang out in a thin voice, but the candle kept burning and did not go out."

The clerk stopped laughing. He put down the guitar, lowered his head, and fell to musing.

He sat awhile; then he sent away the cook and the elder, went behind the curtain, lay down on the bed, and began to sigh and to sob, just as though a cart were driving past with sheaves. His wife came and began to speak to him ; he gave her no answer. All he said was:

" He has vanquished me. My turn has come."

His wife tried to calm him.

" Go and send them home ! Maybe it will be all right. See what deeds you have done, and now you lose your courage."

" I am lost," he said. " He has vanquished me."

His wife cried to him:

" You just have it on your brain, * He has vanquished me, he has vanquished me.' Go and send the peasants home, and all will be well. Go, and I will have your horse saddled."

The horse was brought up, and the clerk's wife persuaded him to ride into the field to send the peasants home.

Mikhail Semenovitch mounted his horse and rode into the field. He drove through the yard, and a woman opened the gate for him, and he passed into the village. The moment the people saw the clerk, they hid themselves from him, one in the yard, another around a corner, a third in the garden.

The clerk rode through the whole village and reached the outer gate. The gate was shut, and he could not open it while sitting on his horse. He called and called for somebody to open the gate, but no one would come. He got down from his horse, opened the gate, and in the gateway started to mount again. He put his foot into the stirrup, rose in it, and was on the point of vaulting over the saddle, when his horse shied at a pig and backed up toward the picket fence; he was a heavy man and did not get into his saddle, but fell over, with his belly on picket. There was but one sharp post in the picket fence, and it was higher than the rest. It was this post that he struck with his belly. He was ripped open and fell to the ground.

When the peasants drove home from their work, the horses snorted and would not go through the gate. The peasants went to look, and saw Mikhail lying on his back. His arms were stretched out, his eyes stood open, and all his inside had run out and the blood stood in a pool, – the earth had not sucked it in.

The peasants were frightened. They took their horses in by back roads, but Mikhy^{ev} alone got down and walked over to the clerk. He saw that he was dead, so he closed his eyes, hitched his cart, with the aid of his son put the dead man in the bed of the cart, and took him to the manor.

The master heard about all these things, and to save himself from sin substituted tenant pay for the manorial labour.

And the peasants saw that the power of God was not in sin, but in goodness.

