

LABOURER EMELYAN AND THE EMPTY DRUM

by Leo Tolstoy

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Emelyan was working for a master. One day he was walking over the field, to his work, when a frog jumped up before him : he almost stepped on it. Emelyan stepped over it. Suddenly he heard some one calling him from behind. He looked around, and saw there standing a beautiful maiden, and she said to him:

" Emelyan, why do you not get married ? "

" How can I marry, pretty maid ? All I have is what I carry with me, and no one will have me."

And the maiden said :

" Take me for a wife ! "

Emelyan took a kopeck to the maiden.

" I would gladly marry you," he said, " but where shall we live? "

" 'We shall think of that," said the maiden. " If only we work much and sleep little, we shall be clothed and fed anywhere."

"Very well," he said, "let us get married! Whither shall we go?"

" Let us go to the city."

Emelyan went with the maiden to the city. She took him to a small house at the edge of the city, and they were married, and began to live.

A popular tale, created along the Vólga in the remote past, and reconstructed by Tolstoy.

One day the king drove beyond the city. As he passed by Emelyan's house, his wife came out to look at the king. The king saw her, and marvelled :

« Where was such a beauty born ? "

The king stopped his carriage, and called up Emelyan's wife, and began to ask her :

" Who are you ? "

" I am the wife of Peasant Emelyfin," she said.

" Why have you, who are such a beauty, married a peasant ? " he said. " You ought to be a queen."

" I thank you for your kind words," she said. " I am satisfied with a peasant."

The king spoke with her, and drove on. He returned to his palace. He could not forget Emelyan's wife. He could not sleep the whole night long, thinking all the time how he might take Emelyan's wife away. He could not think how it could be done. He called his servants, and commanded them to think it out. And the servants of the king said to him :

" Take Emelyfin into your palace to work for you. We will kill him with work, and his wife will be left a widow, then you can take her."

So the king did : he sent for Emelydn, commanding him to be a janitor in his palace, and to live in the palace with his wife.

The messengers went to Emelydn, and told him so. His wife said :

" Why not ? Go ! Work in the daytime, and come to me in the night ! "

Emelydn went. When he came to the palace, the king's steward asked him :

" Why did you come by yourself, without your wife ? "

" Why should I bring her? She has a house of her own."

They gave Emelyan work enough for two to do. Emelydn took hold of the work, thinking he would never finish it ; but, behold, he finished it before night. When the steward saw that he got through with it, he gave him for the next day enough for four to do. Emelydn went home ; but at his home everything was swept clean and tidied : the fire was made in the oven, and everything was baked and cooled. His wife was sitting at the table, sewing at something, and waiting for her husband. She met her husband, got the supper ready, gave him to eat and to drink, and began to ask him about his work.

" Things are bad," he said. " They give me tasks beyond my strength : they will kill me with work."

" Do not think of work," she said. " Look neither forward nor backward, whether you have done much, or whether much is left to do. Work, and everything will come out in proper time."

Emelyan lay down to sleep. In the morning he went out again. He took

hold of the work, and did not look back once. Behold, in the evening everything was done, and he went home to sleep, while it was yet light. They kept increasing his task, but he finished his work in time, and went home to sleep.

A week passed. The king's servants saw that they could not wear out Emelyan with hard labour, and so began to give him cunning tasks ; but they could not wear him out with these, either. No matter what they gave him to do, whether carpenter's, or mason's, or thatcher's work, he finished all by the set time, and went home to his wife to sleep. Another week passed. The king called up his servants, and said to them :

" Do I feed you for nothing ? Two weeks have passed, and I do not see anything from you. You were going to kill Emelyan with work, and I see each day through the window that he goes home singing songs. Do you mean to make fun of me ? "

The king's servants began to justify themselves.

" We have tried with all our might and main to wear him out, first of all, with menial labour, but we could not vanquish him. No matter what we gave him to do, he did, as though sweeping it clean, and feeling no weariness. We began to give him cunning work to do, thinking that he would not have sense enough, and still we could not overcome him. Where does it all come from ? He understands everything, and does everything. Either there is some witchery in him, or in his wife. We are ourselves tired of him. We want to give him now such work to do that he will be unable to finish it. We have decided to ask him to build a cathedral in one day. Call in Emelyan, and command him in one day to build a cathedral opposite the palace. And if he does not build it, we can chop off his head for his disobedience."

The king sent for Emelyan.

" Here is my command," he said : " Build me a new cathedral opposite the palace, on the square. It has to be ready by to-morrow evening. If you get it built, I shall reward you ; but if you do not, I shall put you to death."

When Emelyan had heard the king's words, he turned around and went home.

" Well," he thought, " now my end has come."

He came to his wife and said :

" Wife, get ready ! you must run away wherever you can, or else you will lose your life."

" What frightens you so," she said, " that you want to run ? "

" How can I help being frightened ? The king has commanded me to

build a cathedral to-morrow, in one day. If I do not get it built, he threatens to chop off my head. There is nothing left to do but run away."

His wife did not accept his words.

" The king has many soldiers, and he will catch you anywhere. You cannot run away from him. So long as you have strength you must obey him."

" But how shall I obey, if I have not the strength ? "

" Never mind, husband. Do not trouble yourself : eat your supper and lie down to sleep; get up early in the morning, and all will go well."

Emelyan lay down to sleep ; his wife woke him up.

" Go," she said, " and finish the cathedral as quickly as you can. Here are nails and a hammer. You will find about a day's work left to do."

Emelyan went into the city, and there, indeed, the cathedral was standing in the middle of the square, just a little unfinished. Emelyan began to put on the last touches, wherever necessary, and by evening he had everything done. The king woke up, looked out of the palace, and, behold, there was the cathedral, and Emelyan was walking to and fro, driving in nails here and there. The king was not at all pleased with the cathedral : he was angry, because he had no reason to put him to death, and could not take his wife from him. The king again called his servants.

" Emelyan has done this task, too, and I have no cause to kill him. This task was not big enough for him. You must invent something more cunning. Think out something, or else I will have you put to death before him."

The servants thought out to have Emelyan construct a river around the palace, so that ships might sail on it. The king called Emelyan, and commanded him to do a new task.

" If you were able to build a cathedral in one night," he said, " you are also able to do this work : everything is to be ready by to-morrow as I command. If it is not ready, I shall have your head cut off."

Emelyan was grieved more than ever, and came home gloomy to his wife.

" Why are you so sad ? Has the king commanded you to do something new ? "

Emelyan told her.

" We must ruu away."

But his wife said :

" You cauot ruu away from the soldiers, – they will catch you anywhere. You must obey."

" But how can I obey ? "

" Come now, come now, husband, do not worry ! Eat your supper, and lie down to sleep. Get up as early as possible, and all will be in good time."

Emelyan lay down to sleep. His wife woke him up in the morning.

" Go to the castle," she said. " Everything is ready. Near the harbour, opposite the palace, a little mound is left : so take a spade and even it up."

Emelyan went. When he came to the city he saw a river round about the palace, and the ships were sailing upon it. Emelyan went up to the harbour, opposite the palace, and he saw an uneven place, and evened it up.

The king awoke, and he saw a river where there had been none before ; ships were sailing on the river, and Emelyan was evening up a mound with a spade. The king was frightened and not at all glad of the river and the ships, but annoyed, because he could not put Emelyan to death. He thought to himself : " There is no task which he cannot do. What shall I do ? " He called up his servants and took counsel with them.

"Think out a task," he said, "which will be beyond Emelydn ; for so far, no matter what we have given him to do, he has done, and I am not able to get his wife from him."

The courtiers thought and thought, and finally thought out something. They came to the king and said :

" Emelyan ought to be called and told this : ' Go there, know not where, and bring that, know not what ! ' He will not be able to get away this time, for wherever he may go, you will say that he did not go where it was necessary, and no matter what he may bring, you will say that he did not bring the right thing. Then you can put him to death and take his wife."

The king was happy.

" This is a clever thought of yours," he said.

The king sent for Emelyan, and said to him :

"Go there, know not where, bring that, know not what. If you do not bring it, I shall have your head cut off."

Emelyan came to his wife, and told her what the king had said to him. The wife thought awhile.

" Well," she said, " they have instructed the king cleverly. Now we must do it well."

His wife sat awhile thinking, and then she said to her husband :

" You will have to go a long distance, – to our grandmother, the ancient peasant, soldier mother, – and you must ask her favour. If you get anything from her, go straight to the palace, and I will be there. Now I cannot get out of their hands. They will take me by force, but it will not be for long. If you do ever) 'thing as the grandmother tells you to, you will redeem me soon."

The wife got her husband ready, and gave him a wallet and a spindle.

" Give this to her," she said. " By this will she tell that you are my husband."

She showed him the road. Emelyan went away. When he came outside the city, he saw them teaching the soldiers. He stood still for awhile, watching them. After the soldiers had practised, they sat down to rest themselves. Emelyan went up to them, and asked :

" Brothers, can you tell me how to go there, know not where, and how to bring that, know not what ? "

When the soldiers heard this, they marvelled.

" Who sent you to find that ? " they asked.

" The king," he said.

" We ourselves," they said, " ever since we have been made soldiers, have been going there, know not where, and cannot get there, and have been seeking that, know not what, and cannot find it. We cannot help you."

Emelyan sat awhile with the soldiers, and went on. He walked and walked, and came to a forest. In the forest there was a hut. In the hut sat an old woman, – the peasant, soldier mother, – spinning at the wheel. She was weeping and did not moisten her fingers with her spittle in her mouth, but with the tears in her eyes. When the old woman saw Emelyan, she called out to him :

" What did you come here for ? "

Emelyan gave her the spindle, and said that his wife had sent him to her. The old woman softened at once, and began to put questions to him. And Emelyan told her' all about his life, how he had married the maiden ; how he had gone to the city to live ; how he had been made a janitor ; how he had served in the palace ; how he had built

the cathedral and had made a river with its ships, and how the king had commanded him to go there, know not where, and bring that, know not what.

The old woman listened to him and stopped weeping. She began to mumble to herself :

" The time has evidently come. Very well," she said, " sit down, my son, and have something to eat."

Emelyan had something to eat, and the old woman said to him :

" Here you have a ball of twine : roll it before you, and follow it, wherever it rolls. It will roll far away, to the very sea. You will come to the sea, and there you will see a large city. Go into the city, and ask them in the outer house to let you stay there overnight. Then look for what you need ! "

" How shall I know it, grandmother ? "

" When you see that which people obey better than their parents, you have found it. Grasp it and take it to the king ! When you bring it to the king, he will say to you that you have not brought the right thing ; say then, 'If it is not that I shall have to break it/ and strike the thing and then take it to the river, break it to pieces, and throw it into the water ; then you will get your wife back, and you will dry up my tears."

Emelyan bade the old woman good-bye, and went away, rolling the ball before him. He rolled it and rolled it, and it brought him to the sea. Near the sea was a large city. At the edge of it stood a large house. Emelyan asked the people in the house to let him stay in it overnight, and they let him. He lay down to sleep. He woke up early in the morning, and heard the father getting up and waking his son, to send him to cut some wood. And the son did not obey him :

" It is early yet : I shall have time enough to do it."

He heard the mother say on the oven :

"Go, my son, your father's bones are aching, - how can he go himself ? It is time."

The son only smacked his lips, and fell asleep again. The moment he fell asleep, there was a thundering and rattling in the street. The son jumped up, dressed himself, and ran out into the street. Emelyan, too, jumped up and ran after him, to see what it was that the son paid more attention to than to his father and his mother. Emelyan ran out, and saw a man walking in the street, carrying a round thing over his belly, and striking it with sticks, and it was this that thundered so and made the son pay attention to it. Emelyan ran up to take a look at the thing. He saw that it was as round as a vat, and skins were stretched over both sides of it. He asked the people what they called this thing.

" A drum," they said.

" Is it empty ? "

" Yes," they said.

Emelyan wondered at the thing, and began to ask the

man to give it to him. The man would not give it to him. Emelyan stopped asking for it, but followed the drummer. He walked the whole day, and when the drummer lay down to sleep, Emelyan seized the drum, and ran away with it. He ran and ran and came home to his city. He went to see his wife, but she was not at home. She had been taken to the king the next day. Emelyan went to the palace, and had himself announced.

soldiers came after him. At the river, Emelyan broke the drum and smashed it to splinters, and threw them into the river. And all the soldiers ran away. But Emelyan took his wife and went home with her. After that the king stopped harassing him, and he began to live happily, gaining what was good, and losing what was evil.

" The man has come," he said, " who went there, know not where, and has brought that, know not what."

He was announced to the king. The king sent word to Emelyan to come the next day. Emelyan asked to be announced once more :

" I have come this day, and have brought what the king has commanded. Let the king come to me, or else will I go in myself."

THE END.