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### A Russian Tale.

BY LEO TOLSTOY.

In the town of Vladimir there lived a young merchant, Ivan Dmitrievitch Aksenov. He was a handsome, fair-haired, curly-headed young fellow, full of fun and always singing. At first Aksenov drank a good deal and was riotous when drunk, but after he married this happens very rarely.

One summer Aksenov was going to the fair in Nijni, and as he was bidding good-by to his family, his wife said, "Ivan Dmitrievitch, don't go to-day; I have had a bad dream about you."

Aksenov laughed and said: "You are always afraid of my going on the spree at the fair."

"I do not know what it is I am afraid of; all I know is that I dreamt a bad dream. I dreamt you had come back from town and taken off your cap, and I looked and saw your hair had all turned gray."

Aksenov laughed. "That means good luck," he said. "See if I don't sell my whole stock, and bring you some fine presents."

And he said good-by to his family and drove away.

When he had travelled half way he met a merchant of his acquaintance and they put up at the same inn. They drank tea together and then went to bed in two adjoining rooms.

Aksenov did not like to sleep late; he awoke before morning, roused his driver and told him to harness so as to start while it was cool.

When they had gone about thirty miles they stopped to feed the horses, and Aksenov rested awhile in the passage at the entrance to the inn. Then he stepped out into the porch and ordered a samovar to be got ready, brought out his guitar and began to play.

Suddenly a three-horse trap drove up with tinkling bells, and an official got out followed by two soldiers. He came up to Aksenov and began to question him: who he was, and whence he came. Aksenov answered him very fully, and then said, "Won't you have a cup of tea with me?" But the officials went on bothering him with questions. "Where have you spent the night? Alone or with another merchant? Did you see the other merchant this morning? Why did you start so early?"

Aksenov related everything just as it had happened, and then said, "Why do you question me in this way? I am neither a thief nor a robber. I am going on my own business, and there is no need to question me."

Then the official called the soldiers and said, "I am the police officer of this district, and am questioning you because the merchant with whom you spent the night has been murdered. Let me see your things. Search him."

They entered the house, and searched Aksenov's luggage. Suddenly the police officer took a knife out of the bag and cried, "Whose knife is this?"

Aksenov looked, and when he saw a knife stained with blood taken out of his bag he was frightened.

"And how did the blood get on the knife?"

Aksenov was going to answer but could hardly utter a word.

Then the police officer said: "This morning the merchant was found in bed with his throat cut. No one could have done it but you. The house was locked from inside, and no one else was there; and here's this blood-stained knife in your bag. Besides, your face betrays you. Tell me how you killed him, and of how much money you have robbed him."

Aksenov swore he had not done it, that he had not seen the merchant after they had drunk their tea together, that he had no money except eight thousand roubles of his own, and that the knife did not belong to him. The police officer ordered the soldiers to bind Aksenov and to put him in the cart. Aksenov crossed himself and began to weep. His money and his things were taken from him, and he was imprisoned in the nearest town, where he was tired, and was charged with robbing a merchant from Riazan of twenty thousand roubles and of murdering him.

His wife was in despair about her husband. Her children were all quite little. She took them all and went to the town where her husband was in prison. At first they would not let her see him, but at last she got the prison authorities to give her permission, and she was taken in to him. When she saw him in prison garments, in chains among robbers, she was bewildered. Then she sat down by his side. She told him about affairs at home, and then questioned him about what had happened to him. He told her, and she said:

"What is to be done now?"

"We must petition the Tzar. Why should an innocent man perish?"

Then his wife said: "It was not in vain that I dreamt your hair had turned gray. You remember? You should not have gone that day." And she began passing her fingers through his hair, and said: "Vania, my dearest love, tell the truth to your wife, it was not you who did it?"

"So you, too, think that of me," said Aksenov, and,

hiding his face in his hands, he began to cry. Then a soldier came up and said that the wife and the children must go away, and Aksenov took leave of his family for the last time.

When they were gone Aksenov recalled what had been said, and when he remembered that his wife had also suspected him, he said to himself: "It seems that no one but God can know the truth, and it is to Him alone we must appeal, and from Him alone expect mercy."

And Aksenov gave up writing petitions, gave up all hope, and only prayed to God.

He was condemned to be flogged with a whip, and when his wounds were healed he was sent to the mines in Siberia with other convicts. Here he worked for twenty-six years. His hair turned white as snow, and his narrow beard grew long and gray. All his mirth vanished, his back became bent, he walked slowly and spoke little, never laughed, but often prayed to God.

The prison authorities liked Aksenov for his meekness, and his fellow prisoners respected him; they called him "Grandfather," and "Man of God."

Aksenov got no letters from home, and did not know whether his wife and children were still alive or not.

One day a gang of new prisoners, condemned to the mines, arrived at the prison. In the evening the old prisoners collected around the new ones, and began asking them where they came from, and what they were sentenced for. Aksenov listened with a downcast air to what was being said.

One of the new convicts, a tall, healthy looking man of sixty, was relating how he had been taken.

"Well, friends," he said, "I only took a horse that was tied to a sledge, and I was taken up and accused of theft. I said I had only taken him to get home sooner, and then had let it go. Besides, the driver was a person al friend of mine; so it's all right, I said. 'No,' they say, 'you've stolen it.' Something did happen once—I should have been here long ago by rights; but I was not found out then."

"And where did you come from?"

"From Vladimir; we were resident in the town. My name is Makar, and they honor me with the patronymic of Semenovich."

Aksenov lifted his head and said: "Tell me, Semenovich, have you not heard anything of the merchant Aksenov of Vladimir? Are they still living?"

"Of course I have. They are rich, these Aksenovs, though their father is in Siberia. A sinner like ourselves, I suppose. And then, grandfather, how did you get here?"

Aksenov did not care to speak of his misfortune. He sighed and said: "I have been in penal servitude there for twenty years—six years for my sin."

What sin?"

But Aksenov only said, "I suppose I have deserved it!"

His companions, however, told the newcomer how Aksenov came to be in Siberia, and about the merchant who had been killed and the knife that was found hidden among Aksenov's things.

When Makar Semenovich heard all this he slapped his knee and cried: "Well this is wonderful! It's wonderful! But you've grown old, grandfather."

The others asked him why he was so surprised, and where he had seen Aksenov before, but Makar Semenovich did not answer. He only said: "It's wonderful that we should meet here, lads!"

These words awakened in Aksenov's mind the thought that this man knew who had killed the merchant, so he said: "Perhaps you have heard about this affair, or perhaps you have heard who killed the merchant?"

"Evidently it was he in whose bag the knife was found," answered Makar Semenovich with a laugh. "Even if someone else hid the knife there, you know, no one's a thief till he's found out. Besides, how could anyone have shoved the knife into your bag without your hearing, when it was close to your head?"

When Aksenov heard this he felt sure that it was this very man who had killed the merchant. He rose and walked away. All that night Aksenov kept awake. He felt terribly depressed, and all sorts of things rose in his mind; the image of his wife when he parted from her, the last time he went to the fair. He seemed to see her as if she were present, her face, her eyes; he could hear her speaking and laughing. Then he saw his children, quite little as they were then. And he remembered himself as he was then—young and merry. He remembered how he had sat playing his guitar in the porch of the inn where he was arrested. He remembered the place where he was whipped, and the executioner and the people standing around, the chains, the convicts, the twenty-six years of prison life, and his old age, and felt so low-spirited that he had thoughts of committing suicide.

"And it's all that scoundrel's fault!" And he grew so angry with Makar Semenovich that he longed for vengeance, even if he had to perish for it himself.

A fortnight passed in this way. Aksenov could not sleep at night, and felt so depressed that he did not know what to do with himself.

One night, as he was walking about the prison, he saw some earth falling from under one of the beds. Suddenly Makar Semenovich appeared from under the bed, and looked up at Aksenov with a frightened face. Aksenov tried to pass without looking at him, but he seized Aksenov's hand and told him how he had dug a hole under the wall, and carried the earth out inside his top-boots, which he had emptied every day on the way, when the convicts were taken to their work.

"You just keep quiet, old man, and I'll lead you out, too. But if you blab, I shall get whipped to death, and I'll not let you off; I'll kill you."

When Aksenov looked at his enemy he trembled all over with anger, pulled his hand away, and said: "I have no reason to get out, and you have no reason to kill me. You killed me long ago. As to telling them about you, I may do it, or I may not do it, as God will direct me."

The next day, when the convicts were led to go to their work, one of them was noticed by the soldiers emptying earth out of his boots. The prison was searched, and a hole found. Everyone denied having any knowledge of it. Those who knew did not betray Makar Semenovich, knowing he would be whipped almost to death for it. Then the inspector turned to Aksenov, whom he knew to be a just man.

"You are a truthful old man," he said, "tell me before God, who has dug the hole?"

Makar Semenovich stood looking quite unconcerned, with his eyes turned toward the inspector, and did not look round at Aksenov. Aksenov's lips and hands trembled, and for a long time he could not utter a word. He thought, "shall I screen him? But why should I, since he has ruined me? Let him pay for my sufferings. And yet if I tell, it is quite true, they may whip him to death. And suppose I suspect him unjustly? Besides, what good would it do me?"

"Well, old man," said the inspector, "tell us the truth who is it that has been digging under the wall?"

Aksenov looked at Makar Semenovich, and said, "I can't say, your honor. God will not let me tell you."

However much the inspector tried, Aksenov would say no more.

That night when Aksenov had gone to bed, he heard someone come up and sit down on his bed. He peered through the darkness, and recognized Makar.

"What do you want with me?" asked Aksenov. "What are you doing here?"

Makar Semenovich was silent.

Aksenov sat up and said, "What do you want?"

Makar Semenovich bent close over Aksenov and whispered, "Ivan Dmitrievitch, forgive me!"

"What for?" asked Aksenov.

"I killed the merchant, and hid the knife among your things. I meant to kill you, too, but heard a noise outside, so I shoved the knife in your bag and jumped out of the window."

Aksenov was silent. Makar Semenovich got off the bed and said, bowing to the ground, "Ivan Dmitrievitch, forgive me! For the love of God, forgive me. I will confess that I killed the merchant, and you will be forgiven and will go home."

"It is easy for you to talk, but what have I had to bear?" said Aksenov. "Where am I to go to now? My wife is dead, my children have forgotten me. I have nowhere to go."

Makar Semenovich did not rise, but beat his head against the floor and cried, "Ivan Dmitrievitch, forgive me! The whip was not so hard to bear when you flogged me, as it is to look at you now. And you have had pity on me—and you did not tell. For the love of Christ, forgive me, cursed fiend that I am," and he began to sob.

When Aksenov heard him sobbing, he, too, began to weep, and said, "God will forgive you. Maybe I am a hundred times as bad as you." And suddenly he felt his heart grow light, and the longing for home no longer oppressed him, and he no longer had any wish to leave the prison, but only longed for his last hour to come.

In spite of what Aksenov said, Makar Semenovich acknowledged his guilt. But when the order for his release came, Aksenov was already dead.—British Weekly.

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### Getting Ready Beforehand.

Have you learned your part of the dialogue for next week, Sonny, Gilbert's mother asked him when he came in from school one Monday afternoon. I know some of it already, Mamma, Gilbert answered readily, "and anyway, I don't need to begin to learn it so soon. Why it's most two weeks before I'll have to speak it."

It is less than two weeks, my dear.

But mamma, it's so easy! It won't take me more than a day to learn it."

"But if that is so, Gilbert, it would be better to take the time now, when you are sure of having it. If we