

CHOICE LITERATURE.

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE TO LIVE.

BY COUNT LÉON TOLSTOY.

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. If any man love not his brother, he abideth in death (1st John iii. 14). And he that hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his heart from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? (iii. 17). My children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth (iii. 18). Love is of God, and he that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God (iv. 7). He that loveth not knoweth not God: for God is love (iv. 8). No one hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us (iv. 20). God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him (iv. 16). He that saith, I love God, and hateth his brother, lieth: for he that loveth not his brother, whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen? (iv. 20).

I.

In the house of a peasant there lodged a bootmaker with his wife and children. He had no home and no land of his own, and supported himself and his family by his trade of bootmaking. Bread was dear, and labour cheap, and all his earnings were spent on food. The bootmaker and his wife had but one sheepskin between them, and this was worn into tatters: he had been saving money for more than a year to buy a skin to make a new one with.

Towards autumn the bootmaker had got together enough savings; there were three rouble notes in his wife's chest, and five roubles twenty kopecks were owed him by peasants in the village.

Early in the morning he prepared to set off to the village to get the sheepskin. He put on a woman's wadded nankeen doublet over his shirt, and over that a cloth coat; put the three rouble notes in his pocket, broke off a stick, and started after breakfast. He thought to himself, "I shall receive five roubles from a peasant, and with this along with my three I will buy a skin."

When the bootmaker reached the village, he visited a countryman—he was not at home; his wife had promised the week before to send her husband with money, but had not given it. He went to another—the countrymen swore he had no money, and could only give twenty kopecks for mending a pair of boots. The bootmaker thought he could take the skin on credit, but the tanner did not believe in credit.

"Give me money," he said, "and then you can have anything you like; we know how difficult it is to get one's money back."

So it turned out that the bootmaker could do no business to speak of; he had only received twenty kopecks for repairs, and a peasant had given him an old pair of felt boots to mend.

The downhearted bootmaker drank off twenty kopecks worth of vodka and went home without the skin. Early in the morning he had felt half frozen, but when he had drunk he no longer felt the want of a sheepskin. The bootmaker paced along, with one hand tapping the hard, frozen road with his stick, and swinging backwards and forwards the felt boots he held in the other. As he went he talked to himself as follows:—

"Well, I declare, I feel quite warm without a sheepskin! I have drunk a tumbler; it plays through all my veins. I need of a warm skin now. I have quite forgotten all my troubles. What a man I am after all! What do I need? I shall be able to do without a sheepskin; I shall never want one again. My wife will have a dull time of it—that's the only objection. Besides, it is downright shameful; you work for him, and he leads you about. Well, look here; if you don't bring money I will take away your hat, indeed I will. It's really too bad; he pays by dribbles! But what can you do with some twenty kopecks? Drink—that's all! He says, 'I'm in need.' So he can be in need and I can't. You have a home, and cattle, and all that you want, whilst I have nothing; all my property is in myself, you have your home-made bread, and I have to buy it wherever I can, and bread alone costs three roubles a week. I shall come home and find the bread has run out. Another fresh supply for one rouble and a half that I have to make ready. So you shall have to give me my due."

Thus talking to himself the bootmaker went up to a chapel on the turning, and saw behind the latter something whitish. It was growing dusk; the bootmaker looked very attentively, and could not make out what this could be. There is no stone like that here, he thought. A beast, perhaps. It is not like a beast; the upper part is like a man, but still it looks too white for a man. Besides, what should a man be doing here?

He went a little nearer, and now there was no mistake about it. What a wonderful thing! a man it was, alive or dead, sitting on the floor, and leaning motionless against the chapel. The bootmaker shuddered and thought to himself, "A man has been murdered; they have cut him up and thrown him down here; if you go up quite close to him you will not be able to clear yourself."

And the bootmaker went by. He passed round the chapel, losing sight of the man. As he was passing by the chapel he, however, turned his head, and saw the man standing off from the chapel, as if shaking and staring at him. The bootmaker was the more afraid, and thought to himself, "Shall I go up to him or pass him by? Shall I go, in spite of the danger? Who knows what he is? I dare say he came hither through no good deeds. Suppose I go up to him, and he jumps up and throttles me, and no escape is left; and if he don't throttle me I shall still have to bother myself with him. But what shall I do with him? Surely I can't deprive myself of my last clothes and clothe him. God spare me from him!"

And the bootmaker hastened his steps. He had nearly left the chapel behind him, but his conscience pricked him. He stopped on the road.

"What are you about, Simon?" he said to himself.

"This poor man is dying in need, and you are afraid, and leave him in the lurch. So you are richer than usual, are you? Are you afraid of being stripped of your riches? Nay, Simon, that's bad!"

Simon turned round and went up to the man.

II.

Simon went up to the man and eyed him attentively. He was a young man, in the full strength of manhood; there were no marks of blows on his body, but the man was evidently half frozen and out of heart. He propped himself up as he sat, and did not look on Simon, as though to much exhausted to lift up his eyes. Simon went up quite close to him, and suddenly the man seemed to wake up, turned his head a little, opened his eyes, and looked upon Simon. And that look of his went to Simon's heart. He threw down his felt boots, took off his girdle, laid it on the boots, and stripped off his overcoat.

"We must have some talk together," he said. "Come, put on a thing or two."

Simon put his hands under the man's elbows, and began to raise him up. The man raised himself up, and Simon saw his body was shapely and clean, that his arms and legs were not broken, and that he had a sweet face. Simon threw his overcoat over his shoulders, but he could not catch the sleeves. Simon guided his arms for him, straightened the overcoat, wrapped it round him, and tightened it with the girdle.

Simon took off his old fur cap, with the intention of putting it on the man, but his head began to feel so cold that he thought to himself, "I am quite bald-headed, but he has long, curly locks; I had better lend him my boots," and he put it on again.

He made him sit down, and put on him his felt boots.

When the bootmaker had clothed him he said:

"Well, my lad, you must take exercise and warm yourself. Can you go?"

The man stands still and looks pleasantly on Simon, but does not utter one single word.

"Can't you speak, then? It won't do to spend the winter here. We must go to my home. Here, take my cudgel. Stand on your feet and shake yourself."

The man set off; he walked without difficulty, and did not lag behind.

As they went along Simon asked:

"Where do you come from?"

"Not from these parts."

"That I see; I know all who live in these parts. How came you here at the chapel?"

"I mustn't say."

"Perhaps some one has offended you?"

"No one has offended me; God has punished me."

"Of course everything is done by God; but still one has to abide somewhere. Whither do you want to go?"

"It's all one to me."

Simon wonders; the man didn't look a mischief-maker; his words were soft, but he objected to speak of himself. And Simon thought to himself, "Who knows what may have happened?" and he said to his companion,—

"Never mind, come to my home; at least, you'll warm yourself."

Simon reaches his yard, and the stranger does not lag behind, but walks by his side. A biting wind began to rise and find its way under Simon's coat, and he began to get quite sober and to feel quite frozen. He sniffled as he went, wrapped himself round in his woman's doublet, and thought, "Here's a pretty sheepskin. Matrona won't praise me for this! I went off to get one, and I came home even without my overcoat, yes, and along with a half-clothed man." And the thought of Matrona made him feel uneasy. But when he looked on the stranger, he remembered the look the man gave him at the chapel, and his heart throbbed with delight.

III.

Simon's wife rose early. She cut up wood, brought water, fed the infant, cat, and thought to herself again and again, "When shall I bake bread, to-day or to-morrow?" A large bit remained.

"Should Simon dine here and not eat much supper, there will be enough bread for to-morrow," she thought to herself.

Matrona turned the bit over and over and thought to herself, "I won't bake now. There is no more than enough flour to do this with. We can manage till Friday."

Matrona took away the bread, and sat down at a table to sew a patch on her husband's shirt, and as she sewed she thought of her husband, of how he would buy a sheepskin.

"Perhaps the tanner will take him in. He's a simple fellow, that man of mine. He never tricks another himself, but a little child could take him in. That's a lot of money, eight roubles. One can get a fine coat for that. Not a dyed one, but a sheepskin. What straits I was put to last winter for want of a sheepskin! I couldn't go to the stream, or anywhere else. And now he has gone off with all my clothes. I haven't got a thing to put on. He didn't start early. It is time he were back again. Perhaps he has been tripping, that bird of mine."

Such thoughts had scarcely passed through Matrona's head, when the steps of the staircase began to creak. Some one had come in. Matrona thrust in her needle, and went into the vestibule. She saw that two were coming in, Simon along with a countryman, with no hat on and in felt boots.

Matrona perceived at once the smell of wine in her husband. "Yes," she thought, "that's it. He has been tripping with some good-for-nothing fellow, and has even brought him along home with him."

Matrona let them pass into the cottage, and went in herself. She saw before her a stranger, a young, thin man, and their overcoat over his shoulders. There was no shirt to be seen under the coat, and he wore no hat. He stood as he had come in, without moving and with downcast eyes. And Matrona thought to herself, "That's a bad man—he's afraid."

Matrona frowned and moved away to the stove. There she stood and watched what they would do.

Simon took off his hat, and sat on a bench like a good soul.

"Well, Matrona," he said, "let's have some supper."

Matrona muttered something between her teeth. She stood at the stove without moving, and looked first on one and then on the other, only turning her head as she did so. Simon sees that his wife is not herself, but, however, he does not pay attention to that, and takes the stranger by the hand.

"Sit down, my friend," he said; "we will have some supper." The stranger sat on the bench.

"Well, wife, haven't you boiled anything yet?"

Matrona quite lost her temper.

"Not for you indeed! I see you have drunk yourself mad. You went to get a sheepskin, and you've come back without an overcoat, and have brought home with you some half-clothed vagrant or other. I have no supper for you, you drunkard."

"Enough, Matrona; what do you talk nonsense for? You should first ask what sort of a man—"

"Tell me what you have done with the money."

Simon fumbled in his overcoat, drew out a bit of paper, and unfolded it.

"Here is the money. Triphon couldn't give me anything; he promised to pay me to-morrow."

Matrona felt more angry still; he had not bought a skin, and had clothed some vagabond or other in his last overcoat; yes, and had brought him home with him.

She snatched up the paper from the table and put it away, saying:

"I have no supper. We can't feed every half-clothed drunkard here."

"Ah, Matrona, hold your tongue. Listen first to what I've to say."

"Learn sense of a drunkard fool! I was quite right in objecting to be your wife, you drunkard: mother gave me linen—you have spent it on drink."

Simon wished to explain to his wife that he had only drunk twenty kopecks' worth; he wished to say where he had found the man. Matrona did not give him the chance of putting in a word; she broke in at every two words on whatever he began to say. She even reminded him of all that had happened ten years ago.

Matrona talked on without stopping, bustled up to Simon, and seized him by the arms of his coat.

"Give me my under-waistcoat; I had only one left, and you took it off me and lugged it on yourself. Off with it, you spotted dog."

Simon began to take off the under-waistcoat and draw out the arms. His wife tugged at it till the seams began to crack. Matrona snatched up the under-waistcoat, tossed it over her head, and made for the door. She was on the point of going out, but hesitated and stood still; her heart was agitated—she wished to smother her wrath and to hear something about the stranger.

IV.

Matrona stood still and said:

"If he were a good man, he would not be nearly unclothed like that, he has not even got a shirt on his back. Had you gone for something good, you would tell me now where you picked up such a dandy."

"But I am telling you; on my way I saw this man almost unclothed, and half frozen to death at the chapel. It is not summer now, to be almost naked. It was God who threw me in his way, or else he would have perished. But what was to be done? I therefore took him along with me, clothed him, and brought him hither. Everything may happen. Calm yourself. It's sinful, Matrona, to carry on like this. We must die some day."

Matrona wanted to have it out with her husband, but she cast a look on the stranger and kept silence. He was sitting quite still on the edge of the bench. His hands were folded on his knees, and his head was sunk on his breast. He was frowning, as if being strangled by something. Matrona became silent. Simon exclaimed:

"Matrona, have you no God in you?"

On hearing these words she gave another look at the stranger, and suddenly her heart melted. She moved away from the door, went up to the corner of the stove, and served supper. She placed a bowl on the table, poured out krass, took out the last bit of bread, and gave a knife and spoons.

"Sup a bit," she said.

Simon moved the stranger.

"Swallow a few spoonfuls, my lad," she said.

Simon cut up the bread, crumbled it, and began to sup. And Matrona sat at the corner of the table, propped herself up with her hand, and looked on the stranger.

Matrona began to feel pity for him, and to feel quite fond of him. And the stranger suddenly brightened up, left off frowning, lifted up his eyes to Matrona, and smiled.

When they had supped, Matrona cleared the table and began to question the stranger.

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm not from these parts."

"And how came you on the road?"

"I can't answer that."

"Who robbed you?"

"God punished me."

"Were you lying there without clothes on?"

"Yes, I was lying naked and half frozen. Simon saw me, had pity on me, took off his overcoat, put it on me, and told me to come hither. And here you have fed me, given me drink, and had pity on me. May God bless you!"

Matrona got up, took from the window-sill an old shirt of Simon's, the same she had mended, and gave it to the stranger.

"Here, take this," she said. "I see you have no shirt on. Put it on, and sleep where you like, in the attic or on the stove."

The stranger took off his overcoat, put on the shirt, and lay down in the attic. Matrona put out the light, took his overcoat, and climbed up to her husband.

Matrona covered herself with a corner of the overcoat. She lay down, but did not sleep; her thoughts were full of the stranger.