

How a Devil's Imp redeemed his loaf

A Count Tolstoy's Tale, translated by HP Blavatsky



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[It has been thought advisable to include in the present Series this translation by H.P.B. of one of the well-known tales of Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, for reasons given in her own introductory note. However, contrary to her statement, no other stories have been found in the succeeding issues of *Lucifer*.]

Since the West has shown such due appreciation of the writings of the greatest novelist and mystic of Russia of today, his best works have all been translated. The Russian, however, recognizes in none of these translations that popular national spirit which pervades the original tales and stories. Pregnant as these are with popular mysticism and the spirit of theosophical altruism, some of them are charming but most difficult to render into a foreign language. Yet, one may try. One thing is certain: no foreign translator, however able, unless born and bred in Russia and acquainted with Russian *peasant* life, will be able to do them justice, or even to convey to the reader their full meaning, owing to their absolutely national idiomatic language. If the genius of the Russian literary language is so *sui generis* as to be most difficult to render in translation, the Russian of the lower classes — the speech of small tradesmen, peasants and labourers, is ten times more so. Difficult as it may seem to a foreigner, yet a born Russian may attempt it, perhaps, with a little more success. At all events, as said, one may try.

Selecting therefore, from such popular tracts, — allegories and moral stories in the form of popular tales — we have translated some for the readers of *Lucifer*. The Christmas Numbers, December, January and February, will contain charming little stories, well worthy of a new translation. Two of them, *Wherein is Love, Therein is God; God is in Right, and not in Might*, and some others are stamped with the spirit of truly religious mysticism. Each deserves to be read by the admirers of this great Russian author. For this number, however, we have selected one of a less mystical but more satirical spirit; a cap calculated to fit the head of any drinking Christian nation *ad libitum*, and we only hope its title, translated *verbatim et literatim*, will not shock still more the susceptibilities of the opponents of the title of this magazine. Russia is afflicted with the demon of drink, as much as, though *not more* than, England or any other country; yet it is not so much the Karma of the nation, as that of their respective governments, whose Karmic burden is growing heavier and more terrible with every year. This curse and universal incubus, drink, is the direct and legitimate progeny of the Rulers; it is begotten by their greed for money, and FORCED by them on the unfortunate masses. Why, in Karma's name, should the latter be made to suffer here, and hereafter?

How a Devil's Imp redeemed his loaf; or the first distiller.

Translated by HP Blavatsky

A poor peasant went out early to plough; and as he was leaving home without breaking his fast, he carried along with him a loaf of bread. Once in the field he turned over his plough, adjusted the plough tail, put the ropes under a bush, and over them his loaf of black bread, and covered the whole with his *caftan*. At last, the horse got tired and the *moojik* felt hungry. Then he stopped his plough in the furrow, unhitched his horse, and leaving it to graze, moved toward his *caftan* for his meal. But when he had lifted it up — lo, no loaf was to be seen. Our *moojik* searched for it here, and he searched for it there, he shook his garment and turned it hither and thither — no loaf! He felt surprised. Marvellous doings! No one around, and yet the loaf is carried away by someone. That someone, in truth, was an Imp, who, while the peasant was ploughing, had stolen his loaf and was now hiding behind a bush, preparing to note down the man's profanity, when he would begin to swear and take the devil's name. The peasant felt a little sore. "But, after all," said he, "this won't starve me; and he who carried away my bread, perchance needed it. Let him eat it then, and good luck to him."

So, going to the well he drank some water, rested a bit, then catching his horse, he hitched it again to the plough and returned quietly to his work. The Imp felt considerably troubled at such a failure in tempting man to sin and forthwith proceeding home to hell, he narrated to his Elder — the Chief Devil — how he had robbed the *moojik* of his loaf, who instead of cursing, had only said "to his good luck!" Satan felt very angry at this. "If," he argued, "the *moojik* had the best of thee, in this business, then it must be thine own fault; thou didst not know how to bring the thing about. It would be a bad job for us," he added, "if the peasants, and after them their women, were to take such tricks: no life would become possible for us after this, and such an event cannot be left disregarded. "Go," continued Satan, "and make up for the failure of the loaf. And if at the end of three years thou shalt not have the best of that man, I will bathe thee in holy water."

The Imp got terribly frightened at this threat, and running up to earth again, he set himself to thinking how to atone for his guilt. Thus he thought, thought still, and thought more, and went on thinking until he had found what he had to do. Assuming the appearance of a good fellow, he offered himself as a labourer to the poor peasant; and as it happened to be a drought, he advised him to sow his seed in a swamp. Hence, while the fields of all the other peasants were parched, and their harvests burnt by the sun, the crop of the poor peasant grew high and thick, full and grainy. His household had bread to their heart's content up to the next harvest, and the surplus proved considerable. The following year, the summer being wet, the imp taught the peasant to sow his seed on the mountains. While his neighbours' corn was blasted, fell down and got rotten, the peasant's field on the hills brought forth the richest harvest. The *moojik* stored still more of the corn; and did not know what to do with it.

Then his labouring man taught him to press the corn and distil it into spirit. Having distilled plenty of it, the *moojik* took to drinking and making others drink thereof. One day the Imp returned to the Elder boasting that he had redeemed his loaf. The Chief went up to see for himself.

Then came the Elder to the *moojik*, and found that having invited the richest and wealthiest of his neighbours, he was entertaining them with whiskey. There was the mistress carrying the glasses to her guests. Hardly had she begun her round when stumbling over the table, she upset the drink. Out at her flew the *moojik* abusing his wife to his fill.

“Behold,” he cried, “the *devil’s fool*. Takest thou good drink for slops? Thou, heavy-handed stupid, to spill on the earth such treasure!”

Here the Imp poked the Elder in the ribs, “Observe,” said he, “and see, if he won’t grudge a loaf *now*.”

Having abused his wife, the *moojik* began offering the drink himself. Just then a poor labourer returning from work happened to drop in, unasked, and wishing a merry day to all, he took a seat. Seeing the company drinking, he too, craved to have a drop after his hard day’s work. There he sat, smacking his lips time after time, but the host would offer him nought, only keeping on grumbling: “Who can afford to furnish with whiskey all of you!”

This pleased the chief Devil immensely; as to the Imp, he boasted more than ever: “You wait and see what will come next!” he whispered.

Thus drank the rich peasants, thus drank the host, pandering to each other, and flattering each other, with sweet words, making honeyed and false speeches. Listened the Elder to these, and praised the Imp for this, also. “Without all peradventure,” said he, “this drink making them turn into such foxes, they will take to cheating each other next; and at this rate they will soon fall, everyone of them, into our hands.”

“Wait and see,” said the Imp, “what will come next, when each has one glass more. Now they are only like unto cunning foxes; given time, and they will get transformed into ferocious wolves.”

The peasants had each one glass more, and forthwith their talk became louder and more brutal. Instead of honeyed speeches, they proceeded to abuse each other, and turning gradually fiercer, they ended by getting into a free fight and damaging each other’s noses badly. Then the host took also a turn and got soundly thrashed.

As the Elder looked on, he felt much pleased with this too. “’Tis good,” saith he, “very, very good.”

“Wait and see,” said the Imp, “something still better is in store, as soon as they will have emptied their third glass. Now they are fighting like hungry wolves, at the third glass they will have become like swine.”

The peasants had their third round, and quite lost their reason. Grumbling and hiccapping, shouting at each other, and knowing not what they said, they

rushed out, some alone, some in couples, and some in triplets, and scattered in the streets. The host trying to see his guests off, fell with his nose in a mud-puddle, rolled in it and unable to rise, lay there grunting like a hog . . . This pleased the Elder Devil most of all.

“Well,” saith he, “thou hast invented a fine drink, indeed, and redeemed thy loaf! Tell me,” he added, “how hast thou managed to compound it? Surely thou must have fermented it first, with the blood of the fox; thence the craft of the drunken peasant, who becomes forthwith a fox himself. Then thou hast distilled it with wolf’s blood, which makes him as wicked as a wolf? Finally, thou hast mixed the whole with the blood of the swine; therefore has the peasant become like a hog.”

“Not so,” quoth the Imp. “I only helped him to get some extra cereals. The wild beast’s blood is ever present in man, but it remains latent and finds no issue so long as he has no more bread than he needs for his food, and then it is that he does not grudge to another his last morsel of bread. But no sooner did man get more corn than he needed, than he took to inventing things wherewith to gratify his passions. Then it was that I taught him the enjoyment — of intoxicating drink. And no sooner had he commenced to distil the gift of God into spirit, for his gratification, than his original foxish, wolfish and swinish blood arose in him. Let him now only go on drinking wine and liquor, and he will remain for ever a beast.”

For which invention the Elder Devil freely praised his Devil’s Imp, forgave him his failure with the stolen loaf, and promoted him in Hell.

