LEO TOLSTOY

THREE DAYS IN THE VILLAGE

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Three Days in the Village

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Leo Tolstoy
Three Days in the Village / And Other Sketches. Written from 1909 to July 1910

THREE DAYS IN THE VILLAGE

FIRST DAY
TRAMPS

Something entirely new, unseen and unheard-of formerly, has lately shown itself in our country districts. To our village, consisting of eighty homesteads, from half a dozen to a dozen cold, hungry, tattered tramps come every day, wanting a night's lodging.

These people, ragged, half-naked, barefoot, often ill, and extremely dirty, come into the village and go to the village policeman. That they should not die in the street of hunger and exposure, he quarters them on the inhabitants of the village, regarding only the peasants as "inhabitants." He does not take them to the squire, who besides his own ten rooms has ten other apartments: office, coachman's room, laundry, servants' and upper-servants' hall and so on; nor does he take them to the priest or deacon or shopkeeper, in whose houses, though not large, there is still some spare room; but he takes them to the peasants, whose whole family, wife, daughters-in-law, unmarried daughters, and big and little children, all live in one room – sixteen, nineteen, or twenty-three feet long. And the master of the hut takes the cold, hungry, stinking, ragged, dirty man, and not merely gives him a night's lodging, but feeds him as well.

"When you sit down to table yourself," an old peasant householder told me, "it's impossible not to invite him too, or your own soul accepts nothing. So one feeds him and gives him a drink of tea."

Those are the nightly visitors. But during the day, not two or three, but ten or more such visitors call at each hut, and again it is: "Why, it is impossible…" etc.

And for almost every tramp the housewife cuts a slice of bread, thinner or thicker according to the man's appearance – though she knows her rye will not last till next harvest.

"If you were to give to all who come, a loaf [the big peasant loaf of black bread] would not last a day," some housewives said to me. "So sometimes one hardens one's heart and refuses!"

And this goes on every day, all over Russia. An enormous yearly-increasing army of beggars, cripples, administrative exiles, helpless old men, and above all unemployed workmen, lives – that is to say, shelters itself from cold and wet – and is actually fed by the hardest-worked and poorest class, the country peasants.

We have Workhouses,[1] Foundlings' Hospitals, Boards of Public Relief, and all sorts of philanthropic organisations in our towns; and in all those institutions, in buildings with electric light, parquet floors, neat servants, and various well-paid attendants, thousands of helpless people of all sorts are sheltered. But however many such there may be, they are but a drop in the ocean of the enormous (unnumbered, but certainly enormous) population which now tramps destitute over Russia, and is sheltered and fed apart from any institutions, solely by the village peasants whose own Christian feelings induce them to bear this heavy and gigantic tax.

[1] Not in the English sense, for there is no Poor-Law system entitling the destitute to demand maintenance.

Just think what people who are not peasants would say, if – even once a week – such a shivering, starving, dirty, lousy tramp were placed in each of their bedrooms! But the peasants not only house them, but feed them and give them tea, because "one's own soul accepts nothing unless one has them to table."

In the more remote parts of Sarátof, Tambóf, and other Provinces, the peasants do not wait for the policeman to bring these tramps, but always receive them and feed them of their own accord.

And, as is the case with all really good deeds, the peasants do this without knowing that they are doing a good deed; and yet it is not merely a good deed "for one's soul," but is of enormous importance for the whole of Russian society. It is of such importance for Russian society because, but for this peasant population and the Christian feeling that lives so strongly in it, it is difficult to imagine what the fate would be, not only of these hundreds of thousands of unfortunate, houseless tramps, but of all the well-to-do – and especially of the wealthy who have their houses in the country.

It is only necessary to see the state of privation and suffering to which these homeless tramps have come or have been brought, and to imagine the mental condition they must be in, and to realise that it is only this help rendered to them by the peasants that restrains them from committing violence, which would be quite natural in their position, upon those who possess in superfluity all the things these unfortunates lack to keep themselves alive.

So that it is not the philanthropic organisations, not the Government with its police and all its juridical institutions, that protects us, the well-to-do, from being attacked by those who wander, cold, hungry, and homeless, after having sunk – or, for the most part, having been brought – to the lowest depths of poverty and despair; but we are protected, as well as fed and supported, by that same basic strength of the Russian nation – the peasantry.

Yes! Were it not that there is among Russia's vast peasant population a deep religious consciousness of the brotherhood of all men, not only would these homeless people, having reached the last stages of despair, have long since destroyed the houses of the rich, in spite of any police force (there are and must be so few of them in country districts), but they would even have killed all who stood in their way. So that we ought not to be horrified or surprised when we hear or read of people being robbed, or killed that they may be robbed, but we should understand and remember that if such things happen as seldom as they do, we owe this to the unselfish help rendered by the peasants to this unfortunate tramping population.

Every day from ten to fifteen people come to our house to beg. Some among them are regular beggars, who for some reason have chosen that means of livelihood, and having clothed and shod themselves as best they might, and having made sacks to hold what they collect, have started out to tramp the country. Among them some are blind, and some have lost a leg or an arm; and sometimes, though rarely, there are women and children among them. But these are only a small part. The majority of the beggars that come now are passers-by, without a beggar's sack, mostly young, and not crippled. They are all in a most pitiable state, barefoot, half-naked, emaciated, and shivering with cold. You ask them, "Where are you going?" The answer is always the same: "To look for work"; or, "Have been looking for work, but found none, and am making my way home. There's no work; they are shutting down everywhere." Many of these people are returning from exile.

A few days ago I was barely awake when our servant, Ilyá Vasílyevitch, told me:

"There are five tramps waiting near the porch."

"Take some money there is on the table, and give it them," said I.

Ilyá Vasílyevitch took it, and, as is the custom, gave each of them five copecks [five farthings]. About an hour passed. I went out into the porch. A dreadfully tattered little man with a sickly face, swollen eyelids, restless eyes, and boots all falling to pieces, began bowing, and held out a certificate to me.

"Have you received something?"

"Your Excellency, what am I to do with five copecks?.. Your Excellency, put yourself in my place! Please, your Excellency, look … please see!" and he shows me his clothing. "Where am I to go to, your Excellency?" (it is "Excellency" after every word, though his face expresses hatred). "What am I to do? Where am I to go?"

I tell him that I give to all alike. He continues to entreat, and demands that I should read his certificate. I refuse. He kneels down. I ask him to leave me.

"Very well! That means, it seems, that I must put an end to myself! That's all that's left me to do… Give me something, if only a trifle!"

I give him twenty copecks, and he goes away, evidently angry.

There are a great many such peculiarly insistent beggars, who feel they have a right to demand their share from the rich. They are literate for the most part, and some of them are even well-read persons on whom the Revolution has had an effect. These men, unlike the ordinary, old-fashioned beggars, look on the rich, not as on people who wish to save their souls by distributing alms, but as on highwaymen and robbers who suck the blood of the working classes. It often happens that a beggar of this sort does no work himself and carefully avoids work, and yet considers himself, in the name of the workers, not merely justified, but bound, to hate the robbers of the people – that is to say, the rich – and to hate them from the depths of his heart; and if, instead of demanding from them, he begs, that is only a pretence.

There are a great number of these men, many of them drunkards, of whom one feels inclined to say, "It's their own fault"; but there are also a great many tramps of quite a different type: meek, humble, and very pathetic, and it is terrible to think of their position.

Here is a tall, good-looking man, with nothing on over his short, tattered jacket. His boots are bad and trodden down. He has a good, intelligent face. He takes off his cap and begs in the ordinary way. I give him something, and he thanks me. I ask him where he comes from and where he is going to.

"From Petersburg, home to our village in Toúla Government."

I ask him, "Why on foot?"

"It's a long story," he answers, shrugging his shoulders.

I ask him to tell it me. He relates it with evident truthfulness.

"I had a good place in an office in Petersburg, and received thirty roubles [three guineas] a month. Lived very comfortably. I have read your books *War and Peace* and *Anna Karénina*," says he, again smiling a particularly pleasant smile. "Then my folks at home got the idea of migrating to Siberia, to the Province of Tomsk." They wrote to him asking whether he would agree to sell his share of land in the old place. He agreed. His people left, but the land allotted them in Siberia turned out worthless. They spent all they had, and came back. Being now landless, they are living in hired lodgings in their former village, and work for wages. It happened, just at the same time, that he lost his place in Petersburg. It was not his doing. The firm he was with became bankrupt, and dismissed its employees. "And just then, to tell the truth, I came across a seamstress." He smiled again. "She quite entangled me… I used to help my people, and now see what a smart chap I have become!.. Ah well, God is not without mercy; maybe I'll manage somehow!"

He was evidently an intelligent, strong, active fellow, and only a series of misfortunes had brought him to his present condition.

Take another: his legs swathed in strips of rag; girdled with a rope; his clothing quite threadbare and full of small holes, evidently not torn, but worn-out to the last degree; his face, with its high cheek-bones, pleasant, intelligent, and sober. I give him the customary five copecks, and he thanks me and we start a conversation. He has been an administrative exile in Vyátka. It was bad enough there, but it is worse here. He is going to Ryazán, where he used to live. I ask him what he has been. "A newspaper man. I took the papers round."

"For what were you exiled?"

"For selling forbidden literature."

We began talking about the Revolution. I told him my opinion, that the evil was all in ourselves; and that such an enormous power as that of the Government cannot be destroyed by force. "Evil outside ourselves will only be destroyed when we have destroyed it within us," said I.

"That is so, but not for a long time."

"It depends on us."

"I have read your book on Revolution."

"It is not mine, but I agree with it."

"I wished to ask you for some of your books."

"I should be very pleased… Only I'm afraid they may get you into trouble. I'll give you the most harmless."

"Oh, I don't care! I am no longer afraid of anything… Prison is better for me than this! I am not afraid of prison… I even long for it sometimes," he said sadly.

"What a pity it is that so much strength is wasted uselessly!" said I. "How people like you destroy your own lives!.. Well, and what do you mean to do now?"

"I?" he said, looking intently into my face.

At first, while we talked about past events and general topics, he had answered me boldly and cheerfully; but as soon as our conversation referred to himself personally and he noticed my sympathy, he turned away, hid his eyes with his sleeve, and I noticed that the back of his head was shaking.

And how many such people there are!

They are pitiable and pathetic, and they, too, stand on the threshold beyond which a state of despair begins that makes even a kindly man ready to go all lengths.

"Stable as our civilisation may seem to us," says Henry George, "disintegrating forces are already developing within it. Not in deserts and forests, but in city slums and on the highways, the barbarians are being bred who will do for our civilisation what the Huns and Vandals did for the civilisation of former ages."

Yes! What Henry George foretold some twenty years ago, is happening now before our eyes, and in Russia most glaringly – thanks to the amazing blindness of our Government, which carefully undermines the foundations on which alone any and every social order stands or can stand.

We have the Vandals foretold by Henry George quite ready among us in Russia. And, strange as it may seem to say so, these Vandals, these doomed men, are specially dreadful here among our deeply religious population. These Vandals are specially dreadful here, because we have not the restraining principles of convention, propriety, and public opinion, that are so strongly developed among the European nations. We have either real, deep, religious feeling, or – as in Sténka Rázin and Pougatchéf – a total absence of any restraining principle: and, dreadful to say, this army of Sténkas and Pougatchéfs is growing greater and greater, thanks to the Pougatchéf-like conduct of our Government in these later days, with its horrors of police violence, insane banishments, imprisonments, exiles, fortresses, and daily executions.

Such actions release the Sténka Rázins from the last remnants of moral restraint. "If the learned gentlefolk act like that, God Himself permits us to do so," say and think they.

I often receive letters from that class of men, chiefly exiles. They know I have written something about not resisting evil by violence, and for the greater part they retort ungrammatically, though with great fervour, that what the Government and the rich are doing to the poor, can and must be answered only in one way: "Revenge, revenge, revenge!"

Yes! The blindness of our Government is amazing. It does not and will not see that all it does to disarm its enemies merely increases their number and energy. Yes! These people are terrible, terrible for the Government and for the rich, and for those who live among the rich.

But besides the feeling of terror these people inspire, there is also another feeling, much more imperative than that of fear, and one we cannot help experiencing towards those who, by a series

of accidents, have fallen into this terrible condition of vagrancy. That feeling is one of shame and sympathy.

And it is not fear, so much as shame and pity, that should oblige us, who are not in that condition, to respond in one way or other to this new and terrible phenomenon in Russian life.[2]

[2] One of the most depressing features of L. N. Tolstoy's environment is the large number of unemployed and beggars from the adjacent highway. They wait outside the house for hours every day for the coming of Leo Nikolayevich. The consciousness of his inability to render them substantial aid weighs heavily upon him, as does also the fact that, owing to insurmountable obstacles, he cannot even feed them, and allow them to sleep in the house in which he himself lives. These unfortunates surround Leo Nikolayevich at the steps, and besiege him with their importunate requests, just at the time when he seeks the fresh air and is most in need of mental rest and solitude after long-continued and strenuous mental labour. In view of this fact, the idea has occurred to some of Leo Nikolayevich's friends, of establishing in the village of Yásnaya Polyána a lodging- and eating-house for tramps, the use of which by the latter would save L. N. unnecessary trouble. The establishment of such premises – L. N. has viewed the idea very favourably – would at least afford some temporary relief to the wandering poor who are in dire need. At the same time the peasantry of Yásnaya Polyána would be relieved of the too heavy burden of supporting the passing unemployed described by Tolstoy in his article. Lastly, it would afford Tolstoy, in his declining years, considerable mental relief, which it would seem that he has more than deserved by his incessant labours on behalf of distressed mankind. Perhaps among those who read the present sketches some will be found who, prompted by the impulses animating the author, may desire to render some material help towards the practical realisation of the projected undertaking.Contributions may be sent to the following address: V. Tchertkoff, Editor of the Free Age Press, Christchurch, Hants, Eng.

SECOND DAY
THE LIVING AND THE DYING

As I sat at my work, Ilyá Vasílyevitch entered softly and, evidently reluctant to disturb me at my work, told me that some wayfarers and a woman had been waiting a long time to see me.

"Here," I said, "please take this, and give it them."

"The woman has come about some business."

I told him to ask her to wait a while, and continued my work. By the time I came out, I had quite forgotten about her, till I saw a young peasant woman with a long, thin face, and clad very poorly and too lightly for the weather, appear from behind a corner of the house.

"What do you want? What is the matter?"

"I've come to see you, your Honour."

"Yes … what about? What is the matter?"

"To see you, your Honour."

"Well, what is it?"

"He's been taken wrongfully… I'm left with three children."

"Who's been taken, and where to?"

"My husband … sent off to Krapívny."

"Why? What for?"

"For a soldier, you know. But it's wrong – because, you see, he's the breadwinner! We can't get on without him… Be a father to us, sir!"

"But how is it? Is he the only man in the family?"

"Just so … the only man!"

"Then how is it they have taken him, if he's the only man?"

"Who can tell why they've done it?.. Here am I, left alone with the children! There's nothing for me but to die… Only I'm sorry for the children! My last hope is in your kindness, because, you see, it was not right!"

I wrote down the name of her village, and her name and surname, and told her I would see about it and let her know.

"Help me, if it's only ever so little!.. The children are hungry, and, God's my witness, I haven't so much as a crust. The baby is worst of all … there's no milk in my breasts. If only the Lord would take him!"

"Haven't you a cow?" I asked.

"A cow? Oh, no!.. Why, we're all starving!" said she, crying, and trembling all over in her tattered coat.

I let her go, and prepared for my customary walk. It turned out that the doctor, who lives with us, was going to visit a patient in the village the soldier's wife had come from, and another patient in the village where the District Police Station is situated, so I joined him, and we drove off together.

I went into the Police Station, while the doctor attended to his business in that village.

The District Elder was not in, nor the clerk, but only the clerk's assistant – a clever lad whom I knew. I asked him about the woman's husband, and why, being the only man in the family, he had been taken as a conscript.

The clerk's assistant looked up the particulars, and replied that the woman's husband was not the only man in the family: he had a brother.

"Then why did she say he was the only one?"

"She lied! They always do," replied he, with a smile.

I made some inquiries about other matters I had to attend to, and then the doctor returned from visiting his patient, and we drove towards the village in which the soldier's wife lived. But before we were out of the first village, a girl of about twelve came quickly across the road towards us.

"I suppose you're wanted?" I said to the doctor.

"No, it's your Honour I want," said the girl to me.

"What is it?"

"I've come to your Honour, as mother is dead, and we are left orphans – five of us. Help us!.. Think of our needs!"

"Where do you come from?"

The girl pointed to a brick house, not badly built.

"From here … that is our house. Come and see for yourself!"

I got out of the sledge, and went towards the house. A woman came out and asked me in. She was the orphans' aunt. I entered a large, clean room; all the children were there, four of them: besides the eldest girl – two boys, a girl, and another boy of about two. Their aunt told me all about the family's circumstances. Two years ago the father had been killed in a mine. The widow tried to get compensation, but failed. She was left with four children; the fifth was born after her husband's death. She struggled on alone as best she could, hiring a labourer at first to work her land. But without her husband things went worse and worse. First they had to sell their cow, then the horse, and at last only two sheep were left. Still they managed to live somehow; but two months ago the woman herself fell ill and died, leaving five children, the eldest twelve years old.

"They must get along as best they can. I try to help them, but can't do much. I can't think what's to become of them! I wish they'd die!.. If one could only get them into some Orphanage – or at least some of them!"

The eldest girl evidently understood and took in the whole of my conversation with her aunt.

"If at least one could get little Nicky placed somewhere! It's awful; one can't leave him for a moment," said she, pointing to the sturdy little two-year old urchin, who with his little sister was merrily laughing at something or other, and evidently did not at all share his aunt's wish.

I promised to take steps to get one or more of the children into an Orphanage. The eldest girl thanked me, and asked when she should come for an answer. The eyes of all the children, even of Nicky, were fixed on me, as on some fairy being capable of doing anything for them.

Before I had reached the sledge, after leaving the house, I met an old man. He bowed, and at once began speaking about these same orphans.

"What misery!" he said; "it's pitiful to see them. And the eldest little girlie, how she looks after them – just like a mother! Wonderful how the Lord helps her! It's a mercy the neighbours don't forsake them, or they'd simply die of hunger, the dear little things!.. They are the sort of people it does no harm to help," he added, evidently advising me to do so.

I took leave of the old man, the aunt, and the little girl, and drove with the doctor to the woman who had been to see me that morning.

At the first house we came to, I inquired where she lived. It happened to be the house of a widow I know very well; she lives on the alms she begs, and she has a particularly importunate and pertinacious way of extorting them. As usual, she at once began to beg. She said she was just now in special need of help to enable her to rear a calf.

"She's eating me and the old woman out of house and home. Come in and see her."

"And how is the old woman?"

"What about the old woman?.. She's hanging on…"

I promised to come and see, not so much the calf as the old woman, and again inquired where the soldier's wife lived. The widow pointed to the next hut but one, and hastened to add that no doubt they were poor, but her brother-in-law "does drink dreadfully!"

Following her instructions, I went to the next house but one.

Miserable as are the huts of all the poor in our villages, it is long since I saw one so dilapidated as that. Not only the whole roof, but the walls were so crooked that the windows were aslant.

Inside, it was no better than outside. The brick oven took up one-third of the black, dirty little hut, which to my surprise was full of people. I thought I should find the widow alone with her children; but here was a sister-in-law (a young woman with children) and an old mother-in-law. The soldier's wife herself had just returned from her visit to me, and was warming herself on the top of the oven. While she was getting down, her mother-in-law began telling me of their life. Her two sons had lived together at first, and they all managed to feed themselves.

"But who remain together nowadays? All separate," the garrulous old woman went on. "The wives began quarrelling, so the brothers separated, and life became still harder. We had little land, and only managed to live by their wage-labour; and now they have taken Peter as a soldier! So where is she to turn to with her children? She's living with us now, but we can't manage to feed them all! We can't think what we are to do. They say he may be got back."

The soldier's wife, having climbed down from the oven, continued to implore me to take steps to get her husband back. I told her it was impossible, and asked what property her husband had left behind with his brother, to keep her and the children. There was none. He had handed over his land to his brother, that he might feed her and the children. They had had three sheep; but two had been sold to pay the expenses of getting her husband off, and there was only some old rubbish left, she said, besides a sheep and two fowls. That was all she had. Her mother-in-law confirmed her words.

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