

The Imp and The Peasant's Bread

A poor peasant went off early one morning to plough, taking with him for his breakfast a piece of bread. He got his plough ready, put his coat round the bread, hid it under a bush and started work. After a while, when his horse was tired and he was hungry, the peasant stopped ploughing, let the horse loose to feed, and went to get his coat and his breakfast.

He lifted the coat, but the bread was gone! He looked and looked, turned the coat over and shook it, but the bread was gone, The peasant could not understand this at all.

‘That’s strange,’ he thought; ‘I saw no one, yet someone has been here and has taken the bread!’

It was an imp who had stolen the bread!’

It was an imp who had stolen the bread while the peasant was ploughing, and at that moment he was sitting behind the bush, waiting to hear the peasant swear and call on the name of the Devil.

The peasant was sorry to lose his breakfast, but, ‘it cannot be helped,’ said he. ‘After all, I shall not die of hunger! No doubt, whoever took the bread needed it. May it do him good!’

He went to the well, had a drink of water and rested for a while. Then he caught his horse fastened it to the plough and began ploughing again.

The imp was upset because he had not made the peasant do wrong, and he went to the Devil, his master, to report what had happened.

He came to the Devil and told how he had taken the peasant’s bread, and how the peasant, instead of swearing, had said, ‘May it do him good!’

The Devil was angry and replied, ‘If the man got the better of you, it was your own fault - you don’t understand your business! If the peasants and their wives do that kind of thing, we shall be lost. The matter can’t be left like that! Go back at once and make things right. If in three years you don’t get the better of that peasant, I’ll have you thrown into holy water!’

The imp was frightened. He hurried back to earth, thinking how he could make up for his mistake. He thought and thought, and at last he thought of a good plan.

He changed himself into a working man and went to work with the poor peasant. The first year he advised the peasant to sow corn in a low-lying damp place. The peasant took his advice and sowed there. The year happened to be a very dry one, and the crops of the other peasants were all burned up by the sun, but the poor peasant’s corn grew

thick and tall and heavy with grain. Not only had he enough grain to last him for the whole year, but he had also much to spare.

The next year the imp advised the peasant to sow on the hill, and it happened to be a wet summer. Other people's corn was beaten down and the ears did not fill, but the peasant's crop, on the hill, was a fine one. He had more grain to spare than before, so that he did not know what to do with it all.

Then the imp showed the peasant how he could crush the grain and make vodka from it; and the peasant made vodka and began to drink it himself and to give it to his friends.

So the imp went to the Devil, his master, and claimed proudly that he had now succeeded where he had failed before. The Devil said that he would come and see for himself.

He came to the peasant's house and saw that the peasant had invited his wealthy friends and was giving them drinks. His wife was offering the drink to the guests and as she took it round she fell against the table and a glassful splashed on to the floor.

The peasant spoke angrily to his wife. 'What are you doing, you foolish woman? Do you think that this good drink is dirty water that you can pour all over the floor, you careless creature?

The imp made a sign to the Devil, his master. 'See', he said, 'that is the man who made no trouble when he lost his only piece of bread.'

The peasant still shouted angrily at his wife, and began to carry the drink to his guests himself. Just then a poor peasant, who had not been invited, came in, on his way from work. He greeted everyone, sat down, and saw that they were drinking. He was tired after his day's work, and felt that he would like a drop of vodka. He sat and sat, getting thirstier and thirstier, but the host did not offer him any, but only said, 'I cannot find drink for every one who comes here.'

This pleased the Devil; but the imp laughed happily and said, 'Wait. There is more to come yet!'

The rich peasants drank and their host drank too and they began to say nice things about each other and made speeches full of lies.

The Devil listened and listened and praised the imp.

'If the drink makes them so much like foxes that they begin to cheat each other, soon they will all be in our hands.'

'Wait for what is coming,' said the imp. 'Let them drink another glass each. Now they are like foxes, shaking their tails and trying to please each other but soon you will see them like fierce wolves.'

The peasants drank another glass each and their talk became wilder and rougher. Instead of making soft speeches they began to grow angry and shout at one another. Soon they began fighting and hit one another on the nose. The host joined in the fight and he too was well beaten.

The Devil watched all this with great delight.

‘This is fine,’ he said.

But the imp replied, ‘Wait - the best is yet to come. Wait till they have had a third glass. Now they are fighting like wolves, but let them drink one more glass and they will be like pigs.’

The peasants had their third glass and started to behave just like animals. They made strange noises and shouted, without knowing why, and did not listen to one another.

Then the guests began to go. Some went alone, some in twos, and some in threes, all walking unsteadily, first this way and then that way along the street. The host went out to say good-bye to his guests, but he fell on his nose into some water, covered himself with mud from head to foot and lay there making a noise like a pig.

This pleased the Devil even more.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘you have discovered a fine drink and have quite made up for your mistake about the bread. But now tell me how this drink is made. I suppose you first put in fox’s blood and that was what made the peasants as clever as foxes? Then, I suppose, you added the blood of wolves; that is what made them fierce like wolves? And at the finish you must have put in the blood of pigs to make them behave like pigs.’

‘No’, Said the imp, ‘I did not do it that way. I only made certain that the peasant had more corn than he needed. The blood of wild animals is always in men; but as long as men have only as much corn as they need, it is kept under control. At that time the peasant did not make any trouble over losing his last piece of bread. But when he had corn to spare, he looked for ways of getting pleasure out of it and I showed him a pleasure - drinking and when he began to turn God’s good gifts into strong drink for his own pleasure, the blood of the fox, the wolf and the pig in him all showed itself. If only he goes on drinking, he will always be a wild animal !’

The Devil praised the imp, forgave him for his former mistake and gave him a position of high honour.

- COUNT LEO TOLSTOY

About the Author :

Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828-1910) known as Leo Tolstoy was born in an aristocratic Russian family. He ranks among the world's top story writers. He is best known for the novels - War and Peace, Anna Karenina and Resurrection. He also wrote plays as well as numerous philosophical articles.

About the Story :

The story is based on a folk tale, about how an imp tempts a peasant and by corrupting him brings out the beast in him. It is a story with deep meaning. This story narrates that a man is satisfied when he is poor but when he has excess money he finds ways of getting pleasure out of it. It also reveals the true nature of man. The story not only amuses us but, is also a cautionary tale against the dangers of alcohol.

Glossary

peasant	-	a country person, farmer
imp	-	little devil, a mischievous spirit
devil	-	chief spirit of evil and an opponent of God
damp	-	not dry, slightly wet
vodka	-	a kind of wine, Russian drink
swearing	-	using rude or offensive language
hurried	-	moved rapidly or in great haste
claimed	-	demanding something as rightful or due
splash	-	move in water so that drops of it go in all directions
pleased	-	satisfied, happy and delighted
unsteadily	-	unstable, shaky
certain	-	definite, confident
praised	-	approved / admired

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative :

- Who stole the peasant bread ?
(a) a neighbour (b) an imp
(c) a farmer (d) a child

2. The imp changed himself into a _____.
 (a) farmer (b) working man
 (c) businessman (d) devil
3. The peasant crushed the grain and made _____ from it.
 (a) juice (b) herbal drink
 (c) vodka (d) medicine
4. The Devil _____ the imp and forgave him for his former mistake.
 (a) rebuked (b) taught
 (c) praised (d) hated

(B) State whether the statements given below are True (T) or False (F) :

1. The peasant was sorry to lose his breakfast. []
2. The imp advised the peasant to sow corn on the hill. []
3. The peasant's crop was burnt up by the sun. []
4. The Devil came to the peasant's house. []
5. The peasant shouted angrily at his wife. []
6. The peasant became good natured after drinking vodka. []
7. The imp mixed the blood of animals in the drink. []

(C) Answer the following questions in 20-25 words each :

1. How did the imp steal the peasant's bread ?
2. What did the peasant say when he lost his breakfast ?
3. How many years did the devil give the imp to make things right ?
4. What happened to the peasant's crop in the first year ?
5. What did the peasant's do with the extra grain had ?
6. How did the peasants behave after having the first glass of vodka ?

(D) Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each :

1. What did the peasant not understand when he lifted his coat ?
2. What happened when the imp advised the peasant to sow the corn on the hill ?

3. How did the peasant behave when his wife fell and a glassful splashed on to the floor ?
4. How did the peasants behave after having had their third glass of drink ?
5. What was the imp's answer when the Devil asked him about mixing the blood of animals in the drink ?

(E) Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each :

1. What lesson does the story teach you ?
2. How did the Imp succeed in his plan to corrupt the gentle peasant ?
3. "The blood of wild animal is always present in men". Explain.

ACTIVITY :

Do you think that the peasants behaved like animals due to the effect of alcohol ? If yes, discuss the harmful consequences of excessive consumption of alcohol on human body.
