

Quench The Spark Or A Spark Neglected Burn The House, Leo Tolstoy

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Translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude 1906

Then came Peter, and said to him, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would make a reckoning with his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

But that servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him a hundred pence: and he laid hold on him, and took him by the throat saying, Pay what thou owest. So his fellow-servant fell down and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay that which was due. So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were exceeding sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.

Then his lord called him unto him, and saith to him, Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me: shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due. So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.’-Matthew. xviii. 21-35.

THERE once lived in a village a peasant named Iván Stcherbakóf. He was comfortably off, in the prime of life, the best worker in the village, and had three sons all able to work. The eldest was married, the second about to marry, and the third was a big lad who could mind the horses and was already beginning to plough. Ivan’s wife was an able and thrifty woman, and they were fortunate in having a quiet, hard-working daughter-in-law.

There was nothing to prevent Iván and his family from living happily. They had only one idle mouth to feed; that was Iván’s old father, who suffered from asthma and had been lying ill on the top of the brick oven for seven years. Iván had all he needed: three horses and a colt, a cow with a calf, and fifteen sheep.

The women made all the clothing for the family, besides helping in the fields, and the men tilled the land. They always had grain enough of their own to last over beyond the next harvest and sold enough oats to pay the taxes and meet their other needs. So Iván and his children might have lived quite comfortably had it not been for a feud between him and his next-door neighbour, Limping Gabriel, the son of Gordéy Ivánof.

As long as old Gordéy was alive and Iván’s father was still able to manage the household, the peasants lived as neighbours should. If the women of either house happened to want a sieve or a tub, or the men required a sack, or if a cart-wheel got broken and could not be mended at once, they used to send to the other house, and helped each other in neighbourly fashion. When a calf strayed into the neighbour’s thrashing-ground they would just drive it out, and only say, ‘Don’t let it get in again; our grain is lying there.’ And such things as locking up the barns and outhouses, hiding things from one another, or backbiting were never thought of in those days.

That was in the fathers’ time. When the sons came to be at the head of the families, everything changed.

It all began about a trifle.

Iván’s daughter-in-law had a hen that began laying rather early in the season, and she started collecting its eggs for Easter. Every day she went to the cart-shed, and found an egg in the cart; but one day the hen, probably frightened by the children, flew across the fence into the neighbour’s yard and laid its egg there. The woman heard the cackling, but said to herself: ‘I have no time now; I must tidy up for Sunday.

I’ll fetch the egg later on.’ In the evening she went to the cart, but found no egg there. She went and asked her mother-in-law and brother-in-law whether they had taken the egg. ‘No,’ they had not; but her youngest brother-in-law, Tarás, said: ‘Your Biddy laid its egg in the neighbour’s yard. It was there she was cackling, and she flew back across the fence from there.’

The woman went and looked at the hen. There she was on the perch with the other birds, her eyes just closing ready to go to sleep. The woman wished she could have asked the hen and got an answer from her.

Then she went to the neighbour’s, and Gabriel’s mother came out to meet her.

‘What do you want, young woman?’

‘Why, Granny, you see, my hen flew across this morning. Did she not lay an egg here?’

‘We never saw anything of it. The Lord be thanked, our own hens started laying long ago. We collect our own eggs and have no need of other people’s! And we don’t go looking for eggs in other people’s yards, lass!’

The young woman was offended, and said more than she should have done. Her neighbour answered back with interest, and the women began abusing each other. Ivan’s wife, who had been to fetch water, happening to pass just then, joined in too. Gabriel’s wife rushed out, and began reproaching the young woman with things that had really happened and with other things that never had happened at all. Then a general uproar commenced, all shouting at once, trying to get out two words at a time, and not choice words either.

‘You’re this!’ and ‘You’re that!’ ‘You’re a thief!’ and ‘You’re a slut!’ and ‘You’re starving your old father-in-law to death!’ and ‘You’re a good-for-nothing!’ and so on.

‘And you’ve made a hole in the sieve I lent you, you jade! And it’s our yoke you’re carrying your pails on — you just give back our yoke!’

Then they caught hold of the yoke, and spilt the water, snatched off one another’s shawls, and began fighting. Gabriel, returning from the fields, stopped to take his wife’s Part. Out rushed Iván and his son and joined in with the rest. Iván was a strong fellow, he scattered the whole lot of them, and pulled a handful of hair out of Gabriel’s beard. People came to see what was the matter, and the fighters were separated with difficulty.

That was how it all began.

Gabriel wrapped the hair torn from his beard in a paper, and went to the District Court to have the law of Iván. ‘I didn’t grow my beard,’ said he, ‘for pockmarked Iván to pull it out!’ And his wife went bragging to the neighbours, saying they’d have Iván condemned and sent to Siberia. And so the feud grew.

The old man, from where he lay on the top of the oven, tried from the very first to persuade them to make peace, but they would not listen. He told them, ‘It’s a stupid thing you are after, children, picking quarrels about such a paltry matter. Just think! The whole thing began about an egg. The children may have taken it — well, what matter? What’s the value of one egg? God sends enough for all! And suppose your neighbour did say an unkind word — put it right; show her how to say a better one! If there has been a fight — well, such things will happen; we’re all sinners, but make it up, and let there be an end of it! If you nurse your anger it will be worse for you yourselves.’

But the younger folk would not listen to the old man. They thought his words were mere senseless dotage. Iván would not humble himself before his neighbour.

‘I never pulled his beard,’ he said, ‘he pulled the hair out himself. But his son has burst all the fastenings on my shirt, and torn it. . . . Look at it!’

And Iván also went to law. They were tried by the Justice of the Peace and by the District Court. While all this was going on, the coupling-pin of Gabriel’s cart disappeared. Gabriel’s womenfolk accused Ivan’s son of having taken it. They said: ‘We saw him in the night go past our window, towards the cart; and a neighbour says he saw him at the pub, offering the pin to the landlord.’

So they went to law about that. And at home not a day passed without a quarrel or even a fight. The children, too, abused one another, having learnt to do so from their elders; and when the women happened to meet by the river-side, where they went to rinse the clothes, their arms did not do as much wringing as their tongues did nagging, and every word was a bad one.

At first the peasants only slandered one another; but afterwards they began in real earnest to snatch anything that lay handy, and the children followed their example. Life became harder and harder for them.

Iván Stcherbakóf and Limping Gabriel kept suing one another at the Village Assembly, and at the District Court, and before the Justice of the Peace until all the judges were tired of them. Now Gabriel got Iván fined or imprisoned; then Iván did as much to Gabriel; and the more they spited each other the angrier they grew — like dogs that attack one another and get more and more furious the longer they fight.

You strike one dog from behind, and it thinks it’s the other dog biting him, and gets still fiercer. So these peasants: they went to law, and one or other of them was fined or locked up, but that only made them more and more angry with each other. ‘Wait a bit,’ they said, ‘and I’ll make you pay for it.’ And so it went on for six years. Only the old man lying on the top of the oven kept telling them again and again: ‘Children, what are you doing? Stop all this paying back; keep to your work, and don’t bear malice — it will be better for you. The more you bear malice, the worse it will be.’

But they would not listen to him.

In the seventh year, at a wedding, Ivan’s daughter-in-law held Gabriel up to shame, accusing him of having been caught horse-stealing. Gabriel was tipsy, and unable to contain his anger, gave the woman such a blow that she was laid up for a week; and she was pregnant at the time. Iván was delighted. He went to the magistrate to lodge a complaint. ‘Now I’ll get rid of my neighbour! He won’t escape imprisonment, or exile to Siberia.’ But Ivan’s wish was not fulfilled. The magistrate dismissed the case.

The woman was examined, but she was up and about and showed no sign of any injury. Then Ivan went to the Justice of the Peace, but he referred the business to the District Court. Ivan bestirred himself: treated the clerk and the Elder of the District Court to a gallon of liquor and got Gabriel condemned to be flogged. The sentence was read out to Gabriel by the clerk: ‘The Court decrees that the peasant Gabriel Gordéyef shall receive twenty lashes with a birch rod at the District Court.’

Ivan too heard the sentence read, and looked at Gabriel to see how he would take it. Gabriel grew as pale as a sheet, and turned round and went out into the passage. Ivan followed him, meaning to see to the horse, and he overheard Gabriel say, ‘Very well! He will have my back flogged: that will make it burn; but something of his may burn worse than that!’

Hearing these words, Ivan at once went back into the Court, and said: ‘Upright judges! He threatens to set my house on fire! Listen: he said it in the presence of witnesses!’

Gabriel was recalled. ‘Is it true that you said this?’

‘I haven’t said anything. Flog me, since you have the power. It seems that I alone am to suffer, and all for being in the right, while he is allowed to do as he likes.’

Gabriel wished to say something more, but his lips and his cheeks quivered, and he turned towards the wall. Even the officials were frightened by his looks. ‘He may do some mischief to himself or to his neighbour,’ thought they.

Then the old Judge said: ‘Look here, my men; you’d better be reasonable and make it up. Was it right of you, friend Gabriel, to strike a pregnant woman? It was lucky it passed off so well, but think what might have happened! Was it right? You had better confess and beg his pardon, and he will forgive you, and we will alter the sentence.’

The clerk heard these words, and remarked: ‘That’s impossible under Statute 117. An agreement between the Parties not having been arrived at, a decision of the Court has been pronounced and must be executed.’

But the Judge would not listen to the clerk.

‘Keep your tongue still, my friend,’ said he. ‘The first of all laws is to obey God, Who loves peace.’ And the Judge began again to persuade the peasants, but could not succeed. Gabriel would not listen to him.

‘I shall be fifty next year,’ said he, ‘and have a married son, and have never been flogged in my life, and now that pockmarked Ivan has had me condemned to be flogged, and am I to go and ask his forgiveness? No; I’ve borne enough. . . . Ivan shall have cause to remember me!’

Again Gabriel’s voice quivered, and he could say no more, but turned round and went out.

It was seven miles from the Court to the village, and it was getting late when Ivan reached home. He unharnessed his horse, put it up for the night, and entered the cottage. No one was there. The women had already gone to drive the cattle in, and the young fellows were not yet back from the fields. Iván went in, and sat down, thinking. He remembered how Gabriel had listened to the sentence, and how pale he had become, and how he had turned to the wall; and Ivan’s heart grew heavy.

He thought how he himself would feel if he were sentenced, and he pitied Gabriel. Then he heard his old father up on the oven cough, and saw him sit up, lower his legs, and scramble down. The old man dragged himself slowly to a seat, and sat down. He was quite tired out with the exertion, and coughed a long time till he had cleared his throat. Then, leaning against the table, he said: ‘Well, has he been condemned?’

‘Yes, to twenty strokes with the rods,’ answered Iván.

The old man shook his head.

‘A bad business,’ said he. ‘You are doing wrong, Iván! Ah! it’s very bad — not for him so much as for yourself! . . . Well, they’ll flog him: but will that do you any good?’

‘He’ll not do it again,’ said Iván.

‘What is it he’ll not do again? What has he done worse than you?’

‘Why, think of the harm he has done me!’ said Iván. ‘He nearly killed my wife, and now he’s threatening to burn us up. Am I to thank him for it?’

The old man sighed, and said: ‘You go about the wide world, Iván, while I am lying on the oven all these years, so you think you see everything, and that I see nothing. . . . Ah, lad! It’s you that don’t see; malice blinds you. Others’ sins are before your eyes, but your own are behind your back. “He’s acted badly!” What a thing to say! If he were the only one to act badly, how could strife exist? Is strife among men ever bred by one alone?

Strife is always between two. His badness you see, but your own you don’t. If he were bad, but you were good, there would be no strife. Who pulled the hair out of his beard? Who spoilt his haystack? Who dragged him to the law court? Yet you put it all on him! You live a bad life yourself, that’s what is wrong! It’s not the way I used to live, lad, and it’s not the way I taught you. Is that the way his old father and I used to live?

How did we live? Why, as neighbours should! If he happened to run out of flour, one of the women would come across: “Uncle Trol, we want some flour.” “Go to the barn, dear,” I’d say: “take what you need.” If he’d no one to take his horses to pasture, “Go, Iván,” I’d say, “and look after his horses.” And if I was short of anything, I’d go to him. “Uncle Gordéy,” I’d say, “I want so-and-so!” “Take it Uncle Trol!” That’s how it was between us, and we had an easy time of it. But now? . . . That soldier the other day was telling us about the fight at Plevna (A town in Bulgaria, the scene of fierce and prolonged fighting between the Turks and the Russians in the war of 1877). .

Why, there’s war between you worse than at Plevna! Is that living? . . . What a sin it is! You are a man and master of the house; it’s you who will have to answer. What are you teaching the women and the children? To snarl and snap? Why, the other day your Taráska — that greenhorn — was swearing at neighbour Irena, calling her names; and his mother listened and laughed. Is that right? It is you will have to answer. Think of your soul. Is this all as it should be?

You throw a word at me, and I give you two in return; you give me a blow, and I give you two. No, lad! Christ, when He walked on earth, taught us fools something very different. . . . If you get a hard word from any one, keep silent, and his own conscience will accuse him. That is what our Lord taught. If you get a slap, turn the other cheek. “Here, beat me, if that’s what I deserve!” And his own conscience will rebuke him. He will soften, and will listen to you. That’s the way He taught us, not to be proud! . . . Why don’t you speak? Isn’t it as I say?’

Iván sat silent and listened.

The old man coughed, and having with difficulty cleared his throat, began again: ‘You think Christ taught us wrong? Why, it’s all for our own good. Just think of your earthly life; are you better off, or worse, since this Plevna began among you? Just reckon up what you’ve spent on all this law business — what the driving backwards and forwards and your food on the way have cost you! What fine fellows your sons have grown; you might live and get on well; but now your means are lessening. And why?

All because of this folly; because of your pride. You ought to be ploughing with your lads, and do the sowing yourself; but the fiend carries you off to the judge, or to some pettifogger or other. The ploughing is not done in time, nor the sowing, and mother earth can’t bear properly. Why did the oats fail this year? When did you sow them? When you came back from town! And what did you gain? A burden for your own shoulders. . . . Eh, lad, think of your own business! Work with your boys in the field and at home, and if some one offends you, forgive him, as God wished you to. Then life will be easy, and your heart will always be light.’

Iván remained silent.

‘Iván, my boy, hear your old father! Go and harness the roan, and go at once to the Government office; put an end to all this affair there; and in the morning go and make it up with Gabriel in God’s name, and invite him to your house for to-morrow’s holiday’ (it was the eve of the Virgin’s Nativity). ‘Have tea ready, and get a bottle of vódka and put an end to this wicked business, so that there should not be any more of it in future, and tell the women and children to do the same.’

Iván sighed, and thought, ‘What he says is true,’ and his heart grew lighter. Only he did not know how, now, to begin to put matters right.

But again the old man began, as if he had guessed what was in Ivan’s mind.

‘Go, Iván, don’t put it off! Put out the fire before it spreads, or it will be too late.’

The old man was going to say more, but before he could do so the women came in, chattering like magpies. The news that Gabriel was sentenced to be flogged, and of his threat to set fire to the house, had already reached them. They had heard all about it and added to it something of their own, and had again had a row, in the pasture, with the women of Gabriel’s household.

They began telling how Gabriel’s daughter-in-law threatened a fresh action: Gabriel had got the right side of the examining magistrate, who would now turn the whole affair upside down; and the schoolmaster was writing out another petition, to the Tsar himself this time, about Iván; and everything was in the petition — all about the coupling-pin and the kitchen-garden — so that half of Ivan’s homestead would be theirs soon. Iván heard what they were saying, and his heart grew cold again, and he gave up the thought of making peace with Gabriel.

In a farmstead there is always plenty for the master to do. Iván did not stop to talk to the women, but went out to the threshing-floor and to the barn. By the time he had tidied up there, the sun had set and the young fellows had returned from the field. They had been ploughing the field for the winter crops with two horses. Iván met them, questioned them about their work, helped to put everything in its place, set a torn horse-collar aside to be mended, and was going to put away some stakes under the barn, but it had grown quite dusk, so he decided to leave them where they were till next day.

Then he gave the cattle their food, opened the gate, let out the horses. Tarás was to take to pasture for the night, and again closed the gate and barred it. ‘Now,’ thought he, ‘I’ll have my supper, and then to bed.’ He took the horse-collar and entered the hut. By this time he had forgotten about Gabriel and about what his old father had been saying to him. But, just as he took hold of the door-handle to enter the passage, he heard his neighbour on the other side of the fence cursing somebody in a hoarse voice: ‘What the devil is he good for?’ Gabriel was saying. ‘He’s only fit to be killed!’ At these words all Ivan’s former bitterness towards his neighbour re-awoke. He stood listening while Gabriel scolded, and, when he stopped, Iván went into the hut.

There was a light inside; his daughter-in-law sat spinning, his wife was getting supper ready, his eldest son was making straps for bark shoes, his second sat near the table with a book, and Tarás was getting ready to go out to pasture the horses for the night. Everything in the hut would have been pleasant and bright, but for that plague — a bad neighbour!

Iván entered, sullen and cross; threw the cat down from the bench, and scolded the women for putting the slop-pail in the wrong place. He felt despondent, and sat down, frowning, to mend the horse-collar. Gabriel’s words kept ringing in his ears: his threat at the law court, and what he had just been shouting in a hoarse voice about some one who was ‘only fit to be killed.’

His wife gave Tarás his supper, and, having eaten it, Tarás put on an old sheepskin and another coat, tied a sash round his waist, took some bread with him, and went out to the horses. His eldest brother was going to see him off, but Iván himself rose instead, and went out into the porch. It had grown quite dark outside, clouds had gathered, and the wind had risen. Iván went down the steps, helped his boy to mount, started the foal after him, and stood listening while Tarás rode down the village and was there joined by other lads with their horses. Iván waited until they were all out of hearing. As he stood there by the gate he could not get Gabriel’s words out of his head: ‘Mind that something of yours does not burn worse!’

‘He is desperate,’ thought Iván. ‘Everything is dry, and it’s windy weather besides. He’ll come up at the back somewhere, set fire to something, and be off. He’ll burn the place and escape scot free, the villain! . . . There now, if one could but catch him in the act, he’d not get off then!’ And the thought fixed itself so firmly in his mind that he did not go up the steps but went out into the street and round the corner. I’ll just walk round the buildings; who can tell what he’s after?’

And Iván, stepping softly, passed out of the gate. As soon as he reached the corner, he looked round along the fence, and seemed to see something suddenly move at the opposite corner, as if some one had come out and disappeared again. Iván stopped, and stood quietly, listening and looking. Everything was still; only the leaves of the willows fluttered in the wind, and the straws of the thatch rustled. At first it seemed pitch dark, but, when his eyes had grown used to the darkness, he could see the far corner, and a plough that lay there, and the eaves. He looked a while, but saw no one.

‘I suppose it was a mistake,’ thought Iván; ‘but still I will go round,’ and Iván went stealthily along by the shed. Iván stepped so softly in his bark shoes that he did not hear his own footsteps. As he reached the far corner, something seemed to flare up for a moment near the plough and to vanish again. Iván felt as if struck to the heart; and he stopped. Hardly had he stopped, when something flared up more brightly in the same place, and he clearly saw a man with a cap on his head, crouching down, with his back towards him, lighting a bunch of straw he held in his hand. Iván’s heart fluttered within him like a bird. Straining every nerve, he approached with great strides, hardly feeling his legs under him. ‘Ah,’ thought Iván, ‘now he won’t escape! I’ll catch him in the act!’

Iván was still some distance off, when suddenly he saw a bright light, but not in the same place as before, and not a small flame. The thatch had flared up at the eaves, the flames were reaching up to the roof, and, standing beneath it, Gabriel’s whole figure was clearly visible.

Like a hawk swooping down on a lark, Iván rushed at Limping Gabriel. ‘Now I’ll have him; he shan’t escape me!’ thought Iván. But Gabriel must have heard his steps, and (however he managed it) glancing round, he scuttled away past the barn like a hare.

‘You shan’t escape!’ shouted Iván, darting after him.

Just as he was going to seize Gabriel, the latter dodged him; but Iván managed to catch the skirt of Gabriel’s coat. It tore right off, and Iván fell down. He recovered his feet, and shouting, ‘Help! Seize him! Thieves! Murder!’ ran on again. But meanwhile Gabriel had reached his own gate. There Iván overtook him and was about to seize him, when something struck Iván a stunning blow, as though a stone had hit his temple, quite deafening him. It was Gabriel who, seizing an oak wedge that lay near the gate, had struck out with all his might.

Iván was stunned; sparks flew before his eyes, then all grew dark and he staggered. When he came to his senses Gabriel was no longer there: it was as light as day, and from the side where his homestead was something roared and crackled like an engine at work. Iván turned round and saw that his back shed was all ablaze, and the side shed had also caught fire, and flames and smoke and bits of burning straw mixed with the smoke, were being driven towards his hut.

‘What is this, friends? . . .’ cried Iván, lifting his arms and striking his thighs.’ Why, all I had to do was just to snatch it out from under the eaves and trample on it! What is this, friends? . . .’ he kept repeating. He wished to shout, but his breath failed him; his voice was gone. He wanted to run, but his legs would not obey him, and got in each other’s way. He moved slowly, but again staggered and again his breath failed. He stood still till he had regained breath, and then went on.

Before he had got round the back shed to reach the fire, the side shed was also all ablaze; and the corner of the hut and the covered gateway had caught fire as well. The flames were leaping out of the hut, and it was impossible to get into the yard. A large crowd had collected, but nothing could be done. The neighbours were carrying their belongings out of their own houses, and driving the cattle out of their own sheds. After Ivan’s house, Gabriel’s also caught fire, then, the wind rising, the flames spread to the other side of the street and half the village was burnt down.

At Ivan’s house they barely managed to save his old father; and the family escaped in what they had on; everything else, except the horses that had been driven out to pasture for the night, was lost; all the cattle, the fowls on their perches, the carts, ploughs, and harrows, the women’s trunks with their clothes, and the grain in the granaries — all were burnt up!

At Gabriel’s, the cattle were driven out, and a few things saved from his house.

The fire lasted all night. Iván stood in front of his homestead and kept repeating, ‘What is this? . . . Friends! . . . One need only have pulled it out and trampled on it!’ But when the roof fell in, Iván rushed into the burning place, and seizing a charred beam, tried to drag it out. The women saw him, and called him back; but he pulled out the beam, and was going in again for another when he lost his footing and fell among the flames. Then his son made his way in after him and dragged him out. Iván had singed his hair and beard and burnt his clothes and scorched his hands, but he felt nothing. ‘His grief has stupefied him,’ said the people. The fire was burning itself out, but Iván still stood repeating: ‘Friends! . . . What is this? . . . One need only have pulled it out!’

In the morning the village Elder’s son came to fetch Iván.

‘Daddy Iván, your father is dying! He has sent for you to say good-bye.’

Iván had forgotten about his father, and did not understand what was being said to him.

‘What father?’ he said. ‘Whom has he sent for?’

‘He sent for you, to say good-bye; he is dying in our cottage! Come along, daddy Iván,’ said the Elder’s son, pulling him by the arm; and Iván followed the lad.

When he was being carried out of the hut, some burning straw had fallen on to the old man and burnt him, and he had been taken to the village Elder’s in the farther Part of the village, which the fire did not reach.

When Iván came to his father, there was only the Elder’s wife in the hut, besides some little children on the top of the oven. All the rest were still at the fire. The old man, who was lying on a bench holding a wax candle (Wax candles are much used in the services of the Russian Church, and it is usual to place one in the hand of a dying man, especially when he receives unction) in his hand, kept turning his eyes towards the door. When his son entered, he moved a little. The old woman went up to him and told him that his son had come. He asked to have him brought nearer. Iván came closer.

‘What did I tell you, Iván?’ began the old man ‘Who has burnt down the village?’

‘It was he, father!’ Iván answered. ‘I caught him in the act. I saw him shove the firebrand into the thatch. I might have pulled away the burning straw and stamped it out, and then nothing would have happened.’

‘Iván,’ said the old man, ‘I am dying, and you in your turn will have to face death. Whose is the sin?’

Iván gazed at his father in silence, unable to utter a word.

‘Now, before God, say whose is the sin? What did I tell you?’

Only then Iván came to his senses and understood it all. He sniffed and said, ‘Mine, father!’ And he fell on his knees before his father, saying, ‘Forgive me, father; I am guilty before you and before God.’

The old man moved his hands, changed the candle from his right hand to his left, and tried to lift his right hand to his forehead to cross himself, but could not do it, and stopped.

‘Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!’ said he, and again he turned his eyes towards his son.

‘Iván! I say, Iván!’

‘What, father?’

‘What must you do now?’

Iván was weeping.

‘I don’t know how we are to live now, father!’ he said.

The old man closed his eyes, moved his lips as if to gather strength, and opening his eyes again, said: ‘You’ll manage. If you obey God’s will, you’ll manage!’ He paused, then smiled, and said: ‘Mind, Iván! Don’t tell who started the fire! Hide another man’s sin, and God will forgive two of yours!’ And the old man took the candle in both hands and, folding them on his breast, sighed, stretched out, and died.

Iván did not say anything against Gabriel, and no one knew what had caused the fire.

And Ivan’s anger against Gabriel passed away, and Gabriel wondered that Iván did not tell anybody. At first Gabriel felt afraid, but after awhile he got used to it. The men left off quarrelling, and then their families left off also. While rebuilding their huts, both families lived in one house; and when the village was rebuilt and they might have moved farther aPart, Iván and Gabriel built next to each other, and remained neighbours as before.

They lived as good neighbours should. Iván Stcherbakóf remembered his old father’s command to obey God’s law, and quench a fire at the first spark; and if any one does him an injury he now tries not to revenge himself, but rather to set matters right again; and if any one gives him a bad word, instead of giving a worse in return, he tries to teach the other not to use evil words; and so he teaches his womenfolk and children. And Iván Stcherbakóf has got on his feet again, and now lives better even than he did before.

The End