

Who Should Learn Writing of Whom; Peasant Children of Us, or We of Peasant Children?

Leo Tolstoy

1862

In the fourth volume of the journal *Yasnaya Polyana* there was printed among the children's compositions by an editorial mistake "A History of how a boy was frightened in Tula." This little story was not written by a boy, but was made up by the teacher from a dream which he had, and which he related to the boys. Some of the readers, who followed the numbers of *Yasnaya Polyana*, expressed their doubts whether this tale really belonged to the boy. I hasten to apologize to my readers for this oversight, and seize the opportunity to remark how impossible are counterfeits in this class of work. This tale was detected, not because it was better, but because it was worse, incomparably worse, than all the compositions of the children. All the other tales belonged to the children themselves. Two of them, "He eats with your spoon but puts your eyes out with the handle" and "Life in a Soldier's Home," were written in the following way:

The teacher's chief art in the teaching of language, and his chief exercise with this end in view, as he trains children to write compositions, consists in the giving of subjects; and not so much in the mere naming of them as in finding variety of subjects, in indicating the dimensions of the compositions, and the pointing out of elementary processes.

Many of the intelligent and talented scholars would write trash ; would write :

"The fire broke out, they began to pull out the things, and I ran into the street."

And nothing of any consequence was produced, though the subject of the composition was rich, and the description of it may have made a deep impression on the scholars.

They would miss the chief thing : why they wrote, and what was the good of writing it ? They did not comprehend the art of expressing life in words, and the fascination of this art. And, as I have already said in the second number, I tried many different experiments in the giving of subjects. I tried to gauge their inclinations, and gave them explicit, artistic, touching, ludicrous, or epic themes for compositions; but the thing did not work. Now I will tell how I accidentally discovered the true method.

For a long time the perusal of Snegiref's collection of proverbs has been one of my favorite, I will not say occupations, but passions. Every proverb brings up before me characters from among

the people, and their actions, according to the sense of the proverb. Among my impossible dreams I have always thought of writing a series of either stories or plays founded on these proverbs.

Once last winter, after * dinner, I was reading Sne- giref's book, and I took the book with me to school. The class in the Russian language was in progress.

"Now write me something on a proverb," said I.

The best scholars, Fedka, Semka, and the others, pricked up their ears.

"What do you mean, 'on a proverb'?" "What is that ? " " Tell us ! " were the various exclamations.

I happened to open to the proverb : " He eats with your spoon and puts your eyes out with the handle."

"Now imagine," said I, "that a muzhik had taken in some old beggar ; and then, after the kindness that he had received, the beggar had begun to revile him, it would mean that he had eaten with your spoon and put out your eyes with the handle."

" Well, how would you write it ? " said Fedka and all the others, who had pricked up their ears ; but suddenly they gave it up, persuaded that this task was beyond their strength, and resumed the work on which they had been engaged before.

" You write it for us," said one of them to me.

All were busy in their work; I took the pen and inkstand, and began to write.

"Now," said I, "who will write it the best? and I will try with you."

I began the story which is printed in the fourth number of Yasnaya Polyana^ and wrote the first page.

Every unprejudiced man with any feeling for art and nationality, on reading this first page written by me, and the following pages of the story written by the scholars themselves, will distinguish this page from all the others, like a fly in milk, it is so artificial, so false, and written in such a wretched style. It must be noted that in its first form it was still poorer, and has been much improved, thanks to the suggestions of the scholars.

Fedka kept looking up from his copy-book at me, and when his eyes met mine, he would smile and wink, and say, " Write, write ! I will show you ! "

It evidently interested him to have a grown person also write a composition. After' finishing his composition, less carefully and more hurriedly than usual, he leaned over the back of my arm-chair, and began to read over my shoulder. I could not write any longer; others joined our group, and I read aloud what I had written. It did not please them; no one praised it.

I was mortified ; and in order to soothe my literary vanity, I began to tell them my plan of what was to follow. As I went on telling them, I was carried away. I felt better in my mind, and they began to make suggestions.

One said that the old man should be a wizard.

Another said:—

"No; that is not necessary; he must be simply a soldier."

"No; let him rob his benefactor."

"No; that would not be according to the proverb," said they.

All were thoroughly interested. It was evidently something new and fascinating for them to watch the process of composition, and to take part in it. Their opinions were for the most part similar and just, both in regard to the construction of the story, the details, and the traits of the characters.

Nearly all took part in the composition of the story, but from the very beginning the positive Semka stood out with especial clearness by the artistic sharpness of his description, and Fedka by the truth of his poetic delineations, and more than all by the vividness and force of his imagination. Their strictures were to such a degree given advisedly, and with reason, that more than once, when I argued with them, I was obliged to yield.

It was my idea that accuracy in composition, and the close fitting of the thought to the proverb, should enter into the story; they, on the contrary, cared only for artistic accuracy.

For example, I wanted the peasant who took the old beggar into his house to regret his kindly action; they felt that this was an impossibility, and they brought into the action a vixenish woman.

I said:—

”The peasant at first felt sorry for the beggar, but afterwards felt sorry that he had given his bread.”

Fedka replied that such a thing would be absurd.

”From the very first he did not listen to his wife, and surely afterwards he would not yield to her!”

”But what sort of a man is he in your idea?” I asked.

”He is like Uncle Timofei,” said Fedka, smiling; ”his beard is rather thin, he goes to church, and he keeps bees.”

”Good-natured but obstinate?” I suggested.

”Yes,” said Fedka; ”that’s the reason he will not heed his wife.”

From the moment when they introduced the old man the composition began in lively earnest. Here for the first time, evidently, they began to feel the delight of putting artistic work into words. In this respect Semka was particularly brilliant; the most lifelike details followed one another. The solitary fault which might be charged against him was this: that these details pictured only the present moment, and had no relationship to the general idea of the story. I did not hurry them, but rather urged them to go slow, and not to forget what they had said.

It seemed as if Semka saw and described what went on before his eyes: the frozen, snow-covered bark shoes, and the mud which dripped down from them as they thawed out, and the biscuits into which they dried when the woman put them into the oven.

Fedka, on the other hand, saw only those particulars which aroused in him such a sentiment as he would have experienced at the sight of a real person. Fedka saw the snow which had stuck to the old man’s leg-wrappers,¹ and he felt the feeling of pity which inspired the peasant to say:—

”Lord! how can he walk!”

Fedka went so far as to express in pantomime the manner in which the peasant said these words; waving his hand and shaking his head. He saw the old man’s thin, tattered cloak, and his torn shirt, under which showed his emaciated body wet with melting snow. He imagined the woman, as she grumblingly obeyed her husband’s command, and pulled off his lapti, and the old man’s pitiful groan muttered through his teeth:—

”Easy, little mother;² my feet are sore there!”

Semka wanted objective pictures above all,—the lapti, the thin cloak, the old man, the peasant woman, without much of any connection among them; Fedka wanted to express the feeling of pity with which he himself was filled.

¹ *Onuchi*, bands of cloth wound around the leg instead of stockings, and worn under the boots, or *lapti*.

² *Matushka*.

He went on to speak of how the old man would be given his supper; how he would fall sick in the night; how afterwards in the field he would teach the boy his letters, so that I was obliged to tell him not to hurry and not to forget what he had said. His eyes gleamed with unshed tears; his dirty, thin hands contracted nervously; he was impatient, and kept spurring me on: "Have you written it? have you written it?" he kept asking me.

He was despotically irritated with all the others; he wanted to be the only one to speak,—not to speak as men talk but to speak as they write,—in other words to express artistically in words the images of feeling; for example, he would not permit the words to be changed about, but was very particular about their order.

His soul at this time was softened and stirred by the sentiment of pity,—that is, love,—and it pictured every object in an artistic form, and took exception to everything that did not correspond to his idea of eternal beauty and harmony.

As soon as Semka was drawn into describing incongruous details about the lambs huddled in the corner near the door, or anything of the sort, Fedka would become vexed and say:—

"Ho, you; you are talking twaddle."

I needed only to suggest anything,—for example, what was the peasant doing while his wife went off to her neighbor's,³—and Fedka's imagination would immediately construct a picture of lambs bleating near the door, and the old man sighing, and the lad Serozha delirious; I had only to suggest some artificial and false detail in the picture, and he would become angry instantly, and declare with irritation that it was not necessary.

For instance, I proposed that he describe the peasant's external appearance; he agreed: but my proposal that he should describe what the peasant thought while his wife was gone to her neighbor's immediately brought up in his mind this idea:—

"Ekh! woman! if you should meet the dead Savoska, he would tear your hair out."

And he said this in such a weary and calmly naturally serious, and at the same time good-natured, tone of voice, leaning his head on his hand, that the children went into a gale of laughter.

The chief condition of every art—the feeling of proportion—was extraordinarily developed in him. He was wholly upset by any superfluous suggestion made by any of the boys. He took it upon himself to direct the construction of this story in such a despotic way, and with such a just claim to be despotic, that very soon the boys went home, and he alone was left with Semka, who did not give way to him, though he worked in a different manner.

We worked from seven to eleven o'clock; the children felt neither hunger nor weariness, and they were really indignant with me when I stopped writing; then they tried to take turns in writing by themselves, but they soon desisted—the thing did not work.

Here for the first time Fedka asked me what my name was. We laughed at him, because he did not know.

"I know," said he, "how to address you; but what do they call your estate name?⁴ You know we have the Fokanuichef family, the Zabrefs, the Yermilinas."

I told him.

"And are we going to be printed?" he asked,

"Yes."

"Then it must be printed: *The work of Makarof, Morozof, and Tolstoy!*"

³ *Kum*, a gossip or god-father.

⁴ *Dvor-to vash*.

He was excited for a long time, and could not sleep; and I cannot represent the feeling of excitement, of pleasure, of pain, and almost of remorse which I experienced in the course of that evening. I felt that

from this time a new world of joys and sorrows had been revealed to Fedka,—the world of art; it seemed to me that I was witnessing what no one has the right to see,—the unfolding of the mysterious flower of poesy.

To me it was both terrible and delightful; just as if a treasure-seeker should find the lady-fern in bloom.

The pleasure consisted for me in suddenly, unexpectedly, discovering the philosopher's stone, for which I had been vainly seeking for two years — the art of expressing thought.

It was terrible, because this art would bring new demands and a whole world of desires incompatible with the sphere in which the pupils live — or so it seemed to me at the first moment.

There could be no mistake. This was not chance, but conscious, creative genius. I beg the reader to peruse the first chapter of the story, and notice the abundant touches of true creative talent scattered through it. For example, the scene where the woman complains angrily of her husband to her neighbor, and yet this woman, for whom the author feels a lively antipathy, bursts into tears when the neighbor reminds her of the breaking up of her home.

For the author who writes with the intellect and memory alone a quarrelsome woman would be created only as a foil for the peasant : from simple desire to torment her husband she would have necessarily called in the neighbor. But in Fedka the artistic feeling was expressed in the woman also, and so she weeps, and fears, and suffers ; in his eyes she is not to blame.

Afterwards there is a little side-play, when the neighbor puts on the woman's cloak ^ ; I remember that I was so extremely struck by it that I asked him, " Why the woman's cloak . "

Not one of us had suggested to Fedka the idea of having the neighbor put on the woman's cloak.

He replied : —

" Why, it's more life-like."

When I asked him, " Might we not say that he put on the husband's cloak ? " he replied, " No ; it is better to have the wife's."

^ Shubyonka.

And in very fact this touch is extraordinary. At first you do not see why it should be the woman's cloak, but at the same time you feel that it is admirable — that it could not be otherwise.

Every artistic phrase, whether it belongs to a Goethe or a Fedka, is distinguished from one which is not artistic by the simple fact that it calls up an innumerable throng of thoughts, representations, and illustrations.

The neighbor, in the woman's cloak, irresistibly suggests the picture of a feeble, narrow-chested peasant, just as in all probability he was. The woman's cloak, thrown down on the bench, and therefore coming first to hand, brings up before you a perfect picture of a peasant's establishment on a winter's evening. At the mere mention of the cloak there arise involuntarily before your eyes the late hour, at the time when the peasant, undressed for the night, is sitting before his splinter, and the women, coming and going in their housework, — getting water and feeding the cattle, — and all that external disorder in the peasant's mode of life, where not a single person has a garment that is particularly his, and not a single thing has its proper place.

This one expression, " He put on the tvomans cloak, defines the whole character of the environment in which the action passes, and this phrase was not discovered accidentally, but chosen deliberately.

I still remember vividly how his imagination conjured up the words spoken by the peasant when he found the paper and could not read it : —

" If my Serozha here knew how to read, he would jump up, tear the paper out of my hands, read it all through, and tell me who this old man is."

In this way we can see the relation between the laboring man and the book which he holds in his sun- burned hands ; this worthy man, with his patriarchal, pious inclinations, seems to stand before you. You feel that the author has a deep love for him, and has therefore completely understood him, so as to suggest to him immediately after this his digression about such times having now passed and the danger of the soul being lost.

The idea of the dream was suggested by me, but the introduction of the goat with wounded legs was Fedka's, and he was particularly delighted with it. And the peasant's meditations at the time when his back was beginning to itch, and the picture of the quiet night, — all of this was the farthest removed from accidental : in all these touches can be felt such a conscious, artistic power

I still remember that at the time of the muzhik's going to sleep, I proposed to make him think of the future of his son and of the son's future relations with the old man, that the old man should teach Serozha his letters, and so on. Fedka frowned and said : " Yes, yes, very good," but it was evident that this proposition did not please him, and twice he forgot it. The sense of proportion was as strong in him as in any writer I know — the same sense of proportion as rare artists obtain with great labor and pains, in all its primitive strength lived in his uncontaminated childish soul.

I put an end, to the lesson because I was too much excited.

" What is the matter ? what makes you so pale ? Truly you are n't well, are you ? " my companion asked of me.

In fact, only two or three times in my life had I ever experienced such a powerful emotion as I had that evening, and it was long before I could give a rational account to myself of what I had experienced. I was uneasy, and felt as if I had been criminally spying through a glass, into a hive, at the labors of the bees, hidden from mortal gaze. It seemed to me that I had done a wrong to the peasant lad's pure, innocent soul. I had an uneasy feeling as if I had been engaged in a sacrilege.

I remembered children whom idle and debauched old men compelled to display themselves and to present voluptuous pictures so as to stir their frigid and enfeebled imaginations, and at the same time I felt a keen delight, such as a man must feel who has witnessed something that no one has ever seen before.

It was long before I could explain the impression which I had received, though I was conscious that it was one of those which in mature life lift a man to a higher stage of existence, and compel him to renounce the old, and give himself unreservedly to the new.

The next day I could not believe in the reality of the experience through which I had passed that evening. It seemed to me quite too strange that a half-educated peasant lad had suddenly developed a conscious, artistic power, such as Goethe, with all his measureless height of development, was unable to attain. It seemed to me, too, strange that I, the author of " Childhood," who have now gained a certain success and reputation for artistic talent in the literary circles of Russia, that I, in the matter of art, was not only unable to guide or aid this eleven-year-old Fedka, and Semka, but that barely, — and that only in a happy moment of excitement, — could I follow

them and comprehend them. It seemed to me so strange, that I could not believe in what had happened the evening before.

On the next day we occupied ourselves with the continuation of the tale. When I asked Fedka whether he had thought out the sequel and how, he made no reply, ^ but waving his hands simply said : —

” I know, I know ! Who will write it?”

We began to write the continuation, and again, as far as the children were concerned, with the same sense of artistic truth, proportion, and enthusiasm.

When the lesson was half done, I was compelled to leave them. They continued without me and wrote two pages as beautifully, as sympathetically, as genuinely, as the first. These pages were only a little poorer in details, and these details were sometimes not introduced with perfect skill ; there were also two repetitions. All this evidently arose from the fact that the mechanism of composition troubled them. On the third day it was the same.

During these lessons other boys were frequently present, and knowing the spirit and idea of the story, they made suggestions and added their genuine strokes. Semka went away and stayed away. Only Fedka kept on with the story from beginning to end, and acted as censor on all the changes proposed.

There could be no doubt that this success is a matter of chance : we evidently struck accidentally on that method which was more natural and more stimulating than those we had tried hitherto. But all this was too unusual, and I did not believe in what was going on before my eyes. Something which seemed like an extraordinary chance was required to dissipate my doubts.

I had been away for several days, and the story remained unfinished. The manuscript — three large sheets fully written over — was left in the room of the teacher to whom I had been showing it.

Just before my departure, while I was engaged with the composition, a new pupil who had come had been showing the children the art of making fly-flappers out of paper, and throughout the whole school, as is apt to be the case, had come a time of fly-flappers, taking the place of snow-ball time, which in its turn had taken the place of carved sticks.

The fly-flapper time lasted during my absence. Semka and Fedka, who belonged to the choir, used to go to the teacher’s room to sing, and they would spend whole evenings and sometimes whole nights there.

In the intervals and during the time of singing, of course, the fly-flappers were in full swing, and every available piece of paper which fell into their hands was turned into a fly-flapper. The teacher went to supper and forgot to caution the children not to touch the papers on his table, and so the manuscript containing the work of Makarof, Morozof, and Tolstof was turned into fly-flappers.

On the next day, before school, the slapping had become such a nuisance to the pupils themselves, that they themselves declared a general persecution on fly-flappers ; with a shout and a rush the fly-flappers were all collected, and with general enthusiasm flung into the lighted stove.

The time of fly-flappers was ended, but with it our manuscript had also gone to ruin.

Never was any loss more severe for me to bear than that of those three written sheets. I was in despair.

Wringing my hands, I went to work to rewrite the story, but I could not forget the loss of it, and involuntarily I kept heaping reproaches on the teacher, and the manufacturers of the fly-flappers.

Here I cannot resist observing in this connection that as the result of this external disorder and perfect free- dom among the scholars, which have furnished decorous amusement for Mr. Markof, in the Russian Messenger, and Mr. Glyebof, in the journal Education, without the slightest trouble, and without having to use threats or cunning, I learned all the details of the complicated history of the manuscript turned into fly-flappers, and of its cremation.

Semka and Fedka saw that I was disturbed, and though, evidently, they did not know the reason, they seemed to be very sympathetic; Fedka at last timidly proposed to me to rewrite the story.

"By yourselves .-" "I asked; "I cannot help any in it."

"Semka and I will come and spend the night at your house," replied Fedka.

And indeed, after the lessons, they came to my house about nine o'clock and locked themselves in my library. I was not a little delighted that after some giggling, they became quiet, and at twelve o'clock when I went to the door, I heard merely their low conversation and the scratching of the pen. Only once they asked me about something that had been in the former copy, and wanted my opinion on the question, — Had the peasant hunted for his wallet before or after his wife went to the neighbor's ?

I told them it made no difference.

At twelve o'clock I tapped at the door and went in.

Fedka, in a new white shubka with black fur trim- ming, was sitting buried in the easy-chair, with his legs crossed and his bushy little head resting on one hand, while his other played with the scissors. His big black eyes, gleamin<; with an unnatural but serious and ma- ture light, had a far-away look; his irregular lips, puck- ered up as if to whistle, were evidently waiting for the phrase, which, though ready-made in his imagination, he was trying to formulate.

Semka, standing in front of the great writing-table, with a big white patch of sheepskin on his back (the tailors had just been through the village), with his girdle unloosed and his hair tumbled, was writing very crooked Hues and constantly dipping the pen in the inkstand.

I rumbled up Semka's hair, and when, with his fat face, and its projecting cheek-bones, and his disheveled hair, he turned to me with a startled look in his thought- ful and sleepy eyes, it was so ludicrous that I laughed aloud ; but the children did not laugh.

Fedka, not altering the expression of his face, pulled Semka by the sleeve to make him go on with his writ- ing.

"Wait," said he to me ; "done in a minute ! " (Fedka used the familiar ////, "thou, *to me when he was excited* and eager), and he went on dictating something more.

I took their copy from them and at the end of five minutes, when they were installed near the cupboard eating potatoes and kvas, and looking at the silver spoons, to which they were so unaccustomed, they broke out, without themselves knowing why, into ringing, boyish laughter. The old woman in the room above hearing them laugh, laughed too, without knowing why.

"What are you filling up so for.?" said Semka. "Sit straight, or you will eat yourself one-sided."

And while they were taking off their shubas and bestowing themselves under the writing-table for the night, they did not cease to bubble over with the charm- ing, healthy laughter of the peasant child. I read through what they had written. It was a new variation of the former story. Some things were left out, some new artistic beauties were added. And once more there was the same feeling for beauty, truth, and proportion.

Afterwards one sheet of the lost manuscript was found. In the story as it was printed I welded the two variants together by the aid of the sheet that was found and by bringing my recollection

to bear upon it. The composition of this story took place in the early spring, before the end of our school year.

Owing to various circumstances I was prevented from making new experiments. Only one tale was written, on a proverb, by two of the boys who were most ordinary in their talents and most sophisticated, being sons of house-servants. ^ The story on the proverb, " He who is happy on a holiday is drunk before daylight," was printed in number three. The same occurrences took place again with these boys and with this story as with Scmka and Fedka and the first story, only with the difference of degree of talent and degree of enthusiasm, and of my cooperation.

In the summer we have no lessons, have had no lessons, and intend to have no lessons. The reason why teaching is impossible in our school in summer we explain in a special article.

One part of the summer Fedka and the other boys lived with me. After they had bathed and played, they were thinking what they should do with themselves. I proposed to them to write a composition, and suggested several themes. I told them a very remarkable story of a robbery of money, the story of a murder, the story of a miraculous conversion of a Molokan to Orthodoxy, and again I proposed to them to write in the form of autobiography the story of a lad whose poor and dissolute father was sent off as a soldier, and on his return proved to be a reformed and excellent man. I said : —

" I should write it this way. ' I remember when I was a little fellow we had living at home a mother, a father, and several other relatives,' and what they were. Then I should describe my recollection of how my father used to go on sprees, how my mother was always weeping, and how he beat her; then how they sent him as a soldier, how she wailed when we began to live

1 Dvorovuie.

even more wretchedly than before ; how my father came back, and I should not have known him if he had not asked if Matriona did not live there — this was regarding his wife — and how then we rejoiced and we began to live well."

This was all I said to begin with. This theme completely charmed Fedka. He instantly seized a pen and paper and began to write. While he was writing I only suggested to him the idea of the sister, and of the mother's death. All the rest he himself wrote, and did not even show it to me, except the first chapter, until it was all finished.

When he showed me the first chapter, and I began to read it, I felt that he was in a state of intense emotion, and holding his breath. He looked now at the manuscript, following my reading, now into my face, trying to detect in it an expression of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

When I told him that it was very good he reddened with delight, but he said nothing to me ; and with an eagerly light step he went with his note-book to the table, laid it down, and slowly went outdoors.

Outdoors, that day, he was wildly frolicsome with the other children, and when our eyes met he looked at me with such a grateful, affectionate expression ! At the end of the day he had already forgotten what he had written. I only invented the title, suggested the chapter divisions, and here and there corrected mistakes made by him merely through inadvertence. This story in its primitive form is printed in a pamphlet under the title, Soldatkinu Zhityo, " Life in a Soldier's Home."

I will not speak of the first chapter, although it is marked by its own inimitable beauties, and though the careless Gordyef is presented in it with thorough life-likeness and vivacity, — Gordyef, who seems to be ashamed of acknowledging his remorse, and considers it decorous only to ask the assembly about his son, — in spite of this, this chapter is incomparably feebler than all the

succeeding ones; and I was the only one to blame for this, for in the writing of this chapter I could not refrain from making suggestions to him, and from telling it as if I were writing it.

If there is any error in the introduction of persons and dwellings into the description, I am the only person to blame. If I had left him alone, then I am convinced he would have written the same thing in the tenor of the action, instinctively with greater artistic skill, without borrowing anything from us, without any mannerisms of description logically disposed : first the description of the principal actors — even their biographies, then, the description of the scene and environment, and then the action taking place.

And, strangely enough, all these descriptions, sometimes covering dozens of pages, make the reader less acquainted with the actors than a single carelessly introduced artistic stroke at the beginning of the action, when the characters have not as yet been described. Thus in this first chapter a single phrase spoken by Gordyei : "This is just what I need," when he, waving his hand, makes his mind up to serve his time as a soldier, and only asks the assembly not to abandon his son — this phrase makes the reader better acquainted with the character than my manifold and obtrusive description of his dress, his figure, and his habit of frequenting the village kabak! In exactly the same way far more impression is produced by the old woman who is always scolding her son, when at the time of her tribulation she is talking with her sister-in-law : —

"You '11 smart for it, Matriona! What is to be done ? Evidently it 's God's will. You see you are young still. Maybe God will bring you also to see. But I am so full of years now — I am always ailing I fear I am going to die ! "

In the second chapter my influence in the way of insipidity and depravation is still to be seen, but again profoundly artistic touches in the description of the paintings and the boy's death redeem the whole. I suggested that the boy should have slender legs; I suggested the sentimental detail of the Uncle Nefeda, the grave-digger ; but the mother's complaints expressed in the one phrase : " O Lord, if this little slave would only die ! " — present to the reader the whole essence of the situation ; and immediately afterwards that night when the older brother ^ is wakened by his mother's sobs, and her answer to the grandmother's question, " What is the matter?": — "My son is dead ;" and this old Babushka getting up and kindling a fire and washing the poor little boy — all these details are his own ; it is all so concise, so simple, and so strong ! Not a word can be dropped, not a word changed or added ! There are five lines all together, and in these five lines the whole picture of that pitiful night is presented to the reader : a picture reflected in the mirror of a six- or seven-year-old lad's imagination.

" At midnight, mother was weeping. Grandmother got up and says : —

" * What is the matter ? Christ be with you.'

" Mother says : —

" ' My son is dead.'

" Grandmother lighted the fire, washed the little boy, put on his shirt and his girdle, and laid him under the Saints. When it was light ..."

You see the boy himself, wakened by the well-known sobbing of his mother, looking out, half asleep, from under his caftan somewhere on the sleeping-bunk, and with frightened, shining eyes watching all that is going on in the izba ; you see also that emaciated martyr of a soldier's wife ^ who the day before had exclaimed : " If only this little slave would die ! " now repentant and so overwhelmed by the death of this same slave that all she can say is u menya S7U7i pomer — "My son is dead," does not know what has happened to her, and calls the old woman to her aid ; you

see also this old woman, wearied out by the toils of life, bent and lean, and with fleshless limbs, who with her work-worn hands deliberately, calmly takes hold : she lights the pine stick, she brings water and washes the little lad's body, puts every-

^ Bratishka, colloquial diminutive of brat.

' Expressed in the compound stradalitsa-soldatka.

thing in its place, and lays the washed and girdled body " under the Saints." And you see those images, all that sleepless night, till dawn, as if you yourself had gone through with it, as the boy went through with it, looking out from under his caftan : with all its details that night also remains in your imagination.

In the third chapter my influence is still less. All the individuality of the elder sister belongs to him. Even in the first chapter by a single touch the relationship of the sister to the family is indicated: — "She worked for what she wore ; she was getting ready to be married."

And this one touch sketches out the girl completely : unable to take part and actually taking no part in the joys and sorrows of the family. She had her legitimate interest, her individual purpose, given to her by Providence — her coming marriage, her future family. Any professional writer, especially any one desirous of instructing the people, presenting before them examples of morality worthy of imitation, would infallibly have approached this sister with a question as to her participation in the common necessity and sorrow of the family. He would have made her either a shameful example of indifference, or a model of love and self-sacrifice, and the result would have been a notion, and there would have been no living personage, no sister. Only a man who had profoundly studied and known life would have understood that for such a girl the question of the sorrow of the family and her father's enlistment was legitimately only secondary ; she was going to be married ! And this an artist, though only a child, sees in the simplicity of his soul.

If we had depicted the sister as a most touching, self-sacrificing maiden we should not have imagined her at all, and should not have loved her as we do now. To me now that fat-cheeked, ruddy-faced maiden is so sweet and full of life as she goes out in the evening to the choral dances in shoes bought with the money she has earned, and her red kumatch dress, loving her family, although oppressed by the poverty and squalor which make such a contrast to her natural disposition. I feel that she is a good girl, because her mother has never complained of her or had any grief from her. On the other hand, I feel that she, with her fondness for finery, her snatches of song, and her stories of village gossip, picked up during her field work in summer or the street in winter, is the only one during the gloomy time of the soldier's absence to represent gaiety, youth, and hope. There is reason in it when he says that the only joy was when the sister was married ; there is reason in his describing the wedding gayeties with such loving detail ; there is reason in his making his mother say after the wedding : —

" Now we can have a good time all through."

Evidently after the sister was married they lost the cheerfulness and joy which she brought into their home. All the description of the wedding is extraordinarily good.

There are details at which you cannot help feeling some perplexity, and remembering that it was written by a lad eleven years old, you ask yourself: "Isn't this sudden . "

Thus, you see from this concise and powerful description of an eleven-year-old boy, not taller than a table, with intelligent and observant little eyes, a boy whom no one had ever given any attention to, but gifted with memory, and

When he wanted a little bread, for instance, he did not say that he asked it of his mother, but said that he begged his mother. ^ And this was said deliberately, and said because he remembered his size as compared to his mother's, and his relations to his mother, timid in the presence of others, but intimate when they were alone together.

Another of the multitude of observations which he was able to make at the time of the marriage ceremony he remembered, and he wrote precisely what for him and for each one of us outlines the whole character of these ceremonies. When they said that it was sad, the

1 Not poprostit u materi, but nagnul mat'. Nagnut', from nagibaf., means to bow down.

sister seized Kondryashka by the ears and they began to kiss each other. Then the grandmother's death, her recollections of her son before she died, and the especial character of the mother's sorrow — all this is so firmly and concisely drawn, and it is all his own. I said more about the father's return than of anything else when I gave them the theme of the story. This scene pleased me, and I described it with sentimental insipidity ; but this same scene also pleased him very much, and he asked me not to say anything : " Don't tell me," said he, " I know, I know." And from this place he wrote the rest of the story at a sitting.

It will be very interesting to me to know the opinion of other judges, but I consider it my duty to express my opinion with frankness. I have not met anything like these pages in all Russian literature. In the whole scene of the meeting there is not one hint that it is affecting ; it is simply told how the matter was, but out of all that took place only that is told which is indispensable for the reader to comprehend the position of all the persons. The soldier in his house said only three sentences. At first, when he had already braced himself up, he said : —

Zdravstvu'ite — " How are you ? " ^

When he began to forget the part he was assuming, he said : —

" Well, is this all the family you have ? "

And all was betrayed in the words : —

Gdye-zh moya maniushka ? — " Where is my dear mother ? "

What perfectly simple and natural words, and not one of the characters forgotten ! The boy was glad, and even shed tears ; but he was a boy, and therefore, though his father was weeping, he was examining everything in his sack and in his pockets. Not even the sister is forgotten. So you see that buxom little peasant woman in her fine shoes comes modestly into the izba and, without saying anything, kisses her father. And

1 A common salutation : " Hail," or " Good morning," or " Good day," or " Good evening," or " God bless you."

you see the abashed and happy soldier who indiscriminately salutes every one, not knowing who is who, and when at last he recognizes the young woman as his daughter, again draws her to him and kisses her this time, not simply as any young woman, but kisses her as his daughter, whom he had left long before, as if without compunction.

The father had reformed. How many false and awkward phrases we should have put in at such an opportunity. But Fedka simply told how the daughter brought wine, but he refused to drink. And you see also the peasant woman, as she gets out her last twenty kopecks, and breathlessly whispers to the young woman in the entry to go after liquor, and thrusts the copper coins into her hand. And you see that young woman, as with her apron over her arm, with the flask in her hand, her shoes clattering, her elbows flying out behind her back, runs off to the kabak. You see her coming back to the izba all flushed, taking the flask out from under her apron, her mother with pride and elation setting it on the table, and then showing first some offense and then

joy because her husband did not proceed to drink. And you see that, if he resists the temptation to drink now, he has really reformed. You feel how completely other people have become all members of the family.

” My father asked a blessing and sat down at the table. I sat next him ; my sister sat on the bench, but mother stood by the table and kept gazing at father and saying : —

” * VVhy, how young you have grown ! — You have no beard ! ’

” Every one laughed.”

And only when all have taken their departure the genuine family talk begins. Here only is it revealed that the soldier has been thriving, and thriving by the simplest and most natural means, just as almost all men in the world thrive : in other words, the money belonging to others, to the treasury, to society, has by a fortunate chance been diverted into his hands.

Some readers of the story have remarked about it that this detail is immoral, and that the idea of the budget as of a milch-cow ought to be suppressed, rather than confirmed.

For me this touch, entirely apart from its artistic unity, is especially dear. You see the crown funds get into some one’s hands, why should they not sometimes come to a homeless soldier . *There will often be found* absolute contrariety between the views regarding honesty held by the people and by the upper class. The demands of the people are especially grave and stern regarding honesty in the more intimate relations, for instance, in relation to the family, the village, the commune. In relation to those outside — to the public, to the empire, especially to foreigners, toward the treasury, they have a confused notion of the general laws of honesty. The muzhik who will never tell his brother a lie, who will endure every imaginable privation for his family, who will not take a spare kopeck or one that he has not earned from his neighbor or fellow-villager, that same muzhik will skin a stranger or a person from the city as he would a linden, and will tell a lie at every word he speaks to a nobleman or a functionary ; supposing he is a soldier, he will, without the slightest compunction, kill a French prisoner, and if crown money comes into his hands, consider it a crime to his family not to divert it to his own use.

In the upper class the exact opposite takes place. Any one of us would sooner deceive his wife, his brother, a tradesman with whom he had dealt for a score of years, his servant, his peasants, his neighbor, and at the same time while abroad is most scrupulous not to cheat any one and is always asking if, by chance, he owes any one money. He will also fleece his regiment or company for champagne and gloves, and will lay himself out in polite attentions to a French prisoner. This same man in regard to the treasury will consider it the greatest of crimes to divert funds to his own use, even if he is without money — will stop at considering it so, and generally, when the

1 Naih brat, ” Our brother.”

struggle comes, will yield, and do that which he himself considers disgraceful. I do not say which is the better of the two ; I only tell what the fact is as it seems to me. I remark only that honesty is not the conviction, that the expression ” honest convictions ” is nonsense. Honesty is a moral habit ; in order to acquire it, it is impossible to proceed in any other way than to begin with the nearest relations. The expression ” honest convictions ” is in my opinion perfectly meaningless ; there are honest habits, but no honest convictions.

The words chestiiuiya nbyczJideniya, ” honest convictions,” are only a phrase; in consequence of this, these so-called honest convictions, applied to the most distant conditions of life — the treasury, the government, Europe, humanity — and not based on habits of honesty, not taught on the most intimate relations of life, these honest convictions, or rather phrases of honesty, consequently are proved to be impotent with relation to life.

I return to the story. The episode of the money taken from the public funds, which seems at first immoral, but which in our opinion is quite the contrary, has the most beautiful and touching character. How frequently the literarian of our circle, in the simplicity of his soul, wishing to represent his hero as the ideal of honor betrays to us all the vile and dissolute inwardness of his imagination ! Here, on the contrary, the author has to make his hero happy ; for his happiness his return to his family would be sufficient, but it was necessary to do away with the poverty which had for so many years weighed on the family, but how was he to get the money ? From the impersonal treasury ! If he is to give them wealth, he must get it of some one — it could not be found in a more legitimate or reasonable place !

In the scene of the explanation about this money there is a pretty detail, one word, which, every time I read it over, seems to strike me with new force. It explains the whole picture, it outlines all the characters and their relations, and it is only one word, and a word irregularly used and syntactically wrong — it is the word *zatoropilas*, "she hurried up." The teacher of syntax must say that this is contrary to rule. *Zatoropilas* requires a complement — "hurried up — to do what?" the teacher must ask. But in the story it simply says : —

"Mother took the money and hurried up and carried it off to hide it away."

This is charming ! I should like to say such a word, and I should like the teachers who instruct in language to say or write such a proposition.

"When we had eaten dinner, sister kissed father again, and went home. Then father began to turn over the things in his bag, and mother and I looked on. Suddenly mother spied a little book and she said : —

" ' Af ! have you learned to read ? ' "

" Father said : —

" ' I have. ' "

" Then father took out a great parcel, and gave it to mother.

" Mother says : —

" ' What is that ? ' "

" Father said : —

" ' Money. ' "

" Mother was delighted, and she hurried up and carried it off to hide it away. Then mother came back and said : —

" ' Where did you get it ? ' "

" Father said : —

" ' I was noncommissioned officer, and I had the public funds : I paid off the soldiers and had some left ; I kept it. ' "

" Mother was so glad, and she skipped about like mad. The day was already gone and evening was coming on. They lighted the fire. My father took the little book and began to read. I sat near him and listened, while my mother lighted a splinter. And my father read his book a long time. Then they went to bed. I lay down on the back bench with my father, and mother lay at our feet and they talked a long time, almost till midnight. Then they went to sleep. "

Again the detail, scarcely noticeable but still somewhat surprising you, and deeply impressing you, of the way they went to bed : the father and son lay down together, the mother lay at their feet, and it was long before they could get through talking. How cozily I think the son cuddled up to his father's heart, and how wonderful and comfortable it was to him, as he lay half awake, to hear those two voices, one of which he had not heard for so long.

It would seem that the story was concluded : the father had returned ; poverty was a thing of the past. But Fedka was not satisfied with this, — these imaginary people were too real and too vivid in his imagination, — he needed still to imagine a vivid picture of their changed existence, and to present before himself clearly that the peasant woman was no longer a lonely, woe-begone wife of a soldier, with little children, but that there was now in the house a strong man, who would lift from his wife's weary shoulders the burden of crushing misfortunes and poverty, and lead a new life independent, firm, and cheerful.

And with this object in view he pictures for us only one scene : how the lusty soldier with a nicked ax is cutting wood and carrying it into the izba. You see how the keen-eyed little lad, accustomed to the groaning of the feeble mother and grandmother, contemplates with amazement, respect, and pride his father's muscular bare arms, the energetic blows of the ax falling with the panting breath of a man's labor, and the log which like a sliver is splintered under the gap-toothed ax.

You look at all this and are perfectly satisfied about the subsequent life of the soldier's wife. I say to myself, she will now no longer be in despair, poor thing.

" In the morning mother got up, came to father, and said : —

" ' Gordyef ! get up, we need firewood for the oven.'

" Batya got up, dressed himself, put on his cap, and said : —

" ' Is there an ax .? '

" Mother said : —

" ' Yes, but very dull, I 'm sorry to say, and it won't cut.'

" My father took the ax firmly in both hands, went to the log, stood it up on end, and struck it with all his might, and split the log ; he split it into fire-wood, and carried it into the izba. Mother proceeded to warm up the izba ; she kindled the fire, and by this time it was broad daylight."

But to the artist even this is too little. He wants to show also another side of their life, the poetry of the joyous family life, and he sketches for you the following picture : —

" When it was broad daylight my father said : —

" ' Matriona ! '

" Mother came, and said : —

" ' Well, what is it .? '

" Father said : —

" • I am thinking of buying a cow, five lambs, two nice horses, and an izba. You see everything's gone to rack and ruin ... the whole will cost about a hundred and fifty silver rubles.' ...

" Mother thought for a while ; then she said : —

" ' Yes, but we shall be spending all the money.'

" Father said : ' We will work.'

" Mother said : —

" ' Well, all right, we will buy them ; but there 's one thing — where shall we get some lumber ? '

" Father asked : —

" ' Has n't Kiryukha any ? '

" Mother said : —

" ' That 's just the trouble — no ! The Fokanuchefs ^ have got it all.'

" Father pondered, and said : —

" ' Well, we '11 get some of Bryantsef.'

” Mother said : —

” ’ I doubt it very much.*

” Father said : —

” ’ It must be so — he is a forester ! ’

” Mother said: —

1 A peasant family, named after the father, Foka : Foka’s son would be Fokanuich, and the genitive plural, as in so many Russian names, forms the family name : Fokanuichef ; so likewise Romanof, Chernuishef ; often also the adjective ending is added, sky : Fokanuichevsky. — Ed.

” ’ Look out he does n’t cheat you, he is such a beast ! ’

” Father said : —

” I will go and carry him some brandy,^ and have a little talk with him. And do you cook an egg in the ashes for dinner.’

” Mother boiled a morsel for dinner — she got it of her folks. Then father took some liquor and went to Bryantsef, and we remained and sat a long time. I began to feel lonely without father, and so I begged mother to let me go where father had gone. Mother said : —

” ’ You will lose your way.’

” I began to cry and wanted to go, but mother beat me, and I sat on the stove and began to cry louder than ever. Then I saw father come in, and he asked : —

” ’ What are you crying about ? ’

” Mother said: —

” ’ Fedyushka wanted to run after you, and I whipped him.’

” Father came to me, and said : —

” ’ What are you crying about ? ’

- ’ I began to be sorry for mother. Father went to her

and began to make believe beat her, and he kept saying : —

” ’ Don’t you whip Fedya ! Don’t you whip Fedya ! *

” Mother made believe howl, and I sat on father’s knee and was happy. Then father sat down to table, placed me next to him, and cried : —

” ’ Give me and Fedya something to eat, mother — we are hungry.’

” So mother gave us some meat, and we set to work eating. After we had eaten, mother said :

—
” ’ Well, how about the wood ? ’

” Father said : —

” ’ Fifty silver rubles.’

” Mother said: —

” ’ That ’s nothing at all’

” Father said : —

^ Vodotchki^ diminutive of vodka, which is in turn the diminutive of voda, water. — Ed.

” ’ It ’s no use talking — it ’s splendid lumber.’ ”

How simple ! how little is said, yet it gives you the perspective of their whole family life. You see that the lad is still only a child, who one moment is weeping, and the next happy ; you see that the lad cannot appreciate his mother’s love, and instantly prefers his virile father, who can split the log ; you see that his mother knows that this must be so, and is not jealous ; you see that

marvelous Gordyei, whose happiness has filled his heart to overflowing. You remark how they eat the meat ; and this charming comedy, which they all play and all know it is a comedy, but they play it out of excess of joy.

” Don’t whip Fedya ! Don’t whip Fedya ! ” says the father, waving his arms. And the mother, accus- tomed to real tears, pretends to cry, joyously smiling at her husband and at her son, and this lad who climbs up on his father’s knee is proud and glad, not knowing why — proud and glad perhaps because they are happy now.

” Then father sat down to table, placed me next him, and cried : —

” ‘ Give me and Fedya something to eat, mother — we are hungry.’ ”

We are hungry, and he sits him next him ! What love and happy pride of love breathes in those words ! There is nothing in the whole charming tale more charming, more sincere, than this last scene.

But what do we mean by all this ? What significance has this story in reference to pedagogy, written by one possibly exceptional lad ? They will say to us : —

” Maybe you, the teacher, assisted him unconsciously in the composition of these and the other tales, and it is too difficult to mark the division between what belongs to you and what was original.”

They will say to us : —

” Let us grant the story is good, but this is only one of the styles of literature.” They will say to us : —

” Fedka and the other boys, whose compositions you print, are fortunate exceptions.”

They will say to us : —

” You yourself are a writer; you have, unconsciously to yourself, helped the boys on such paths as it is im- possible to prescribe for other non-writing teachers as a rule.”

They will say to you : —

” From all this it is impossible to deduce any general rule or theory. It is partly an interesting pheomenon, and nothing more.”

I will endeavor to make my deductions so as to answer all these objections set before me.

The feelings of truth, beauty, and goodness are in- dependent of the degree of development. Beauty, truth, and goodness are concepts, expressing only the harmony of relations toward truth, beauty, and goodness. False- hood is only the unconformity of relations toward truth : there is no such thing as absolute truth. I do not lie when I say that tables turn from the contact of fingers, if I believe it, although it is not the truth ; but I lie when I say I have no money, if, according to my notions, I have money. A large nose is not necessarily ugly, but it is ugly on a small face. Ugliness is only in- harmoniousness in relation to beauty. To give one’s dinner to a beggar, or to eat it oneself, has nothing wrong in it ; but to give it away or eat it when my mother is dying of starvation is inharmoniousness toward goodness.

In training, educating, developing, or doing whatever you please to a child, we must have, and unconsciously have, one object, — the attainment of the greatest har- mony as regards truth, beauty, and goodness. If the time did not pass, if the child did not live in all its phases, we might calmly attain this harmony, adding where there seemed to be a lack, and subtracting where there seemed to be a superfluity.

But the child lives ; every side of his being strives toward development, one outstripping another, and for the most part, the forward motion of these sides of his we take for the goal, and cooperate only with the development, and not with the harmony of development.

This contains the eternal mistake of all pedagogical theories. We see our ideal before us when it is really behind us. The inevitable development of a man is not only not the means for the attainment of this ideal of harmony which we carry in ourselves, but is an impediment set by the Creator against the attainment of a lofty ideal of harmony. In this inevitable law of the forward motion is included the idea of that fruit of the tree of good and evil which our first parents tasted.

The healthy child is born into the world, perfectly satisfying those demands of absolute harmony in the relations of truth, beauty, and goodness which we bear within us ; he is like the inanimated existences, — to the plant, to the animal, to nature, — which constantly present to us that truth, beauty, and goodness we are seeking for and desire. In all ages and among all people the child represents the model of innocence, sinlessness, goodness, truth, and beauty.

Man is born perfect; — that is a great dictum that is enunciated by Rousseau, and that dictum stands like a rock, firm and true. Having been born, man sets up before himself his prototype of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness. But every hour in his life, every minute of time, increases the distance, the size, and the time of those relations which at his birth were found in perfect harmony, and every step and every hour threatens the violation of this harmony, and every succeeding step threatens a new violation, and gives no hope of restoring the violated harmony. The majority of educators lose from sight the fact that childhood is the prototype of harmony, and they take as an end the child's development, which goes on according to unchangeable laws. Development is mistakenly taken as an end, because with educators happens what takes place with poor sculptors.

Instead of trying to establish a local exaggerated development, or to establish a general development, in order to wait the new opportunity which puts an end to the previous irregularity, like the poor sculptor, instead of scratching off the superfluity, they keep sticking on more and more ; so also educators apparently strive for only one thing, — how the process of development may not cease ; and if they think of harmony at all, then they always strive to attain it, approaching the unknown prototype in the future, receding from the prototype in the past and present. However irregular the education of a child has been, there still remain in it the primitive features of harmony. Still modifying, at least not helping, the development, we may hope to attain some nearness to regularity and harmony.

But we are so self-confident, so dreamily given over to the false ideal of mature perfection, so impatient are we toward the anomalous near us, and so firmly confident in our power of correcting them, so little are able to understand and appreciate the primitive beauty of a child, that we make all possible haste to rouse the child, to correct all the irregularities that come under our observation ; we regulate, we educate : First, we must bring up one side even with the other, then the other with the first. They keep developing the child more and more, and removing it farther and farther from the old and abolished prototype, and ever more and more impossible becomes the attainment of the imaginary ideal of the perfectibility of the adult man.

Our ideal is behind us and not before us.

Education spoils and does not improve a man. The more the child is spoiled, the less it is necessary to educate him, the greater is the freedom he requires. To teach and educate a child is impossible and senseless on the simple ground that the child stands nearer than I do, nearer than any adult does, to that ideal of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness to which, in my pride, I wish to lead him.

The consciousness of this ideal is stronger in him than in me. All he needs of me is material for filling out harmoniously and on all sides. As soon as I gave him perfect freedom, ceased to

teach him, he wrote this poetic tale, the like of which is not to be found in Russian literature. And therefore, according to my notion, it is impossible for us to teach children, and especially peasants, writing and composition, especially poetic composition. All that we can do is to show them how to get started.

If what I have done for the attainment of this end may be called methods, then these methods are the following : —

I. To propose the largest and most varied choice of themes, not inventing them especially for children, but proposing the most serious themes, such as interest the teacher himself.

II. To give children children's works to read, and to propose as models, because children's works are always more genuine, more elegant, and more moral than the works of adults.

III. (Especially important.) Never, while examining children's works, make for the pupils any observations about the neatness of the note-books, or about the calligraphy, or about the spelling, or, above all, about the order of topics or the logic.

IV. As in authorship the difficulty lies not in the dimensions, or the contents, or the artfulness of the theme, so the progression of the themes ought not to lie in the dimensions, or the contents, or the language, but in the mechanism of the action, consisting first in the choice of one out of a large number of ideas and images presenting themselves ; secondly, in the choice of words wherewith to array it; thirdly, in remembering it and finding a place for it ; fourthly, in remembering what has been already written, so as not to indulge in repetitions, and not to omit anything, and including the ability to write what follows with what precedes ; fifthly and lastly, while thinking and writing, not letting the one interfere with the other.

With this end in view, I did as follows : — Some of these phases of work I at first took on myself, gradually transferring them all to their care. At first I chose for them from among the thoughts and images those which seemed to me the best, and I remembered and pointed out the places, and I corrected what had been written, preventing them from repetitions ; and I myself wrote, leaving it to them only to clothe the thoughts and images in words ; afterwards I gave them full choice, then I let them correct what had been written ; and finally, as in the story called Soldatkin Zhityo, "A Soldier's Life," they took upon themselves the whole process of the writing.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Leo Tolstoy
Who Should Learn Writing of Whom; Peasant Children of Us, or We of Peasant Children?
1862

Original text from RevoltLib.com, 2021.

theanarchistlibrary.org