

ARE THE PEASANT CHILDREN TO LEARN TO WRITE FROM US?  
Or, Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children ?

by Leo Tolstoy

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In the fourth number of Ydsnaya Polyana, in the department of children's compositions, there was printed by the editor's mistake "A Story of How a Boy Was Frightened in Tula." This story was not composed by a boy, but by the teacher from a boy's dream as related to him. Some of the readers, who follow the numbers of Ydsnaya Polyana, have expressed their doubts as regards the authorship of this story. I hasten to beg the readers' indulgence for this oversight, and to remark that in such matters a falsification is impossible. This story was recognized, not because it was better, but because it was worse, infinitely worse, than all children's compositions. All the other stories belong to the children themselves. Two of them, " He Feeds with the Spoon, and Pricks the Eye with the Handle," and " A Soldier's Life," were composed in the following manner.

The chief art of the teacher, in the study of language, and the chief exercise with the aim in view of guiding children to write compositions consist in giving them themes, and not so much in furnishing them as in presenting a large choice, in pointing out the extent of the composition, and in indicating the initial steps. Many clever and talented pupils wrote nonsense ; they wrote : " It began to burn, they began to drag out things, and I went into the street," and nothing came of it, although the subject was rich, and that which was described left a deep impression on the child. They did not understand, above all, why they should write, and what good there was in writing. They did not understand the art of expressing life by means of words, nor the charm of this art.

As I have already mentioned in the second number, I tried many different methods of giving them themes to write. I gave them, according to their inclinations, exact, artistic, touching, funny, epic themes, – all to no purpose. Here is how I unexpectedly hit upon the present method.

The reading of the collection of Snegirév's proverbs has long formed one of my favourite occupations, – nay, enjoyments. To every proverb I imagine individuals from among the people and their conflicts in the sense of the proverb. Among the number of unrealizable dreams, I always imagine a series of pictures, or stories, written to fit the proverbs. Once, last winter, I forgot everything after dinner in the reading of Snegirév's book, and even returned to the school with the book. It was the lesson in the Russian language.

" Well, write something on a proverb ! " I said.

The best pupils, Fédka, Sémka, and others, pricked up their ears.

"What do you mean by 'on a proverb'? What is it? Tell us!" the questions ran.

I happened to open to the proverb: "He feeds with the spoon, and pricks the eye with the handle."

"Nowr, imagine," I said, "that a peasant has taken a beggar to his house, and then begins to rebuke him for the good he has done him, and you will get that 'he feeds with the spoon, and pricks the eye with the handle.'"

"But how are you going to write it up?" said Fédka and all the rest who had pricked up their ears. They retreated, having convinced themselves that this matter was above their strength, and betook themselves to the work which they had begun.

"Write it yourself," one of them said to me.

Everybody was busy with his work; I took a pen and inkstand, and began to write.

"Well," said I, "who will write it best? I am with you."

I began the story, printed in the fourth number of the Ydsnaya Polyana, and wrote down the first page. Every unbiassed man, who has the artistic sense and feels with the people, will, upon reading this first page, written by me, and the following pages of the story, written by the pupils themselves, separate this page from the rest, as he will take a fly out of the milk: it is so false, so artificial, and written in such a bad language. I must remark that in the original form it was even more monstrous, since much has been corrected, thanks to the indications of the pupils.

Fédka kept looking up from his copy-book to me, and, upon meeting my eyes, smiled, winked, and repeated: "Write, write, or I'll give it to you!" He was evidently amused to see a grown person write a theme.

Having finished his theme worse and faster than usual, he climbed on the back of my chair and began to read over my shoulders. I could not proceed; others came up to us, and I read to them what I had written.

They did not like it, and nobody praised it. I felt ashamed, and, to soothe my literary ambition, I began to tell them the plan of what was to follow. In the proportion as I advanced in my story, I became enthusiastic, corrected myself, and they kept helping me out. One

would say that the old man should be a magician; another would remark: "No, that won't do, - he will be just a soldier; the best thing will be if he steals from him; no, that won't go with the

proverb," and so forth.

All were exceedingly interested. It was evidently a new and exciting sensation for them to be present at the process of creation, and to take part in it. Their judgments were all, for the most part, of the same kind, and they were just, both as to the very structure of the story and as to the details and characterizations of the persons. Nearly all of them took part in the composition ; but, from the start, there distinguished themselves positive Sémka, by his clearly defined artistic quality of description, and Fédka, by the correctness of his poetical conceptions, and especially by the glow and rapidity of his imagination.

Their demands had so little of the accidental in them and were so definite, that more than once I debated with them, only to give way to them. I was strongly possessed by the demands of a regular structure and of an exact correspondence of the idea of the proverb to the story ; while they, on the contrary, were only concerned about the demands of artistic truth. I, for example, wanted that the peasant, who had taken the old man to his house, should himself repent of his good deed,— while they regarded this as impossible and created a cross old woman.

I said : " The peasant was at first sorry for the old man, and later he hated to give away the bread."

Fédka replied that that would be improbable: "He did not obey the old woman from the start and would not submit later."

"What kind of a man is he, according to you?" I asked.

" He is like Uncle Timoféy," said Fédka, smiling. " He has a scanty beard, goes to church, and he has bees."

" Is he good, but stubborn ? " I asked.

" Yes," said Fédka, " he will not obey the old woman." From the time that the old man was brought into the hut, the work became animated. They evidently for the first time felt the charm of clothing artistic details in words. Sémka distinguished himself more than the rest o

in this respect: the correctest details were poured forth one after the other. The only reproach that could be made to him was that these details sketched only minutes of the present, without connection with the general feeling of the story. I hardly could write as fast as they told me the incidents, and only asked them to wait and not forget what they had told me.

Sémka seemed to see and describe that which was before his eyes : the stiff, frozen bast shoes, and the dirt oozing from them, as they melted out, and the toast into which they were changed when the old woman threw them into the oven.

Fédka, on the contrary, saw only such details as evoked in him the particular feeling with which he looked upon a certain person. Fédka saw the snow drifting behind the peasant's leg-rags, and the feeling of compassion with which the peasant said : " Lord, how it snows ! " (Fédka's face even showed how the peasant said it, and he swung his hands and shook his head.) He saw the overcoat, a mass of rags and patches, and the torn shirt, behind which could be seen the haggard body of the old man, wet from the thawing snow. He created the old woman, who growled as, at the command of her husband, she took off his bast shoes, and the pitiful groan of the old man as he muttered through his teeth: "Softly, motherkin, I have sores here."

Sémka needed mainly objective pictures : bast shoes, an overcoat, an old man, a woman, almost without any connection between them ; but Fédka had to evoke the feeling of pity with which he himself was permeated. He ran ahead of the story, telling how he would feed the old man, how he would fall down at night, and how he would later teach a boy in the field to read, so that I was obliged to ask him not to be in such a hurry and not to forget what he had said. His eyes sparkled to the point of tears ; his swarthy, thin little hands were cramped convulsively ; he was angry with me, and kept urging me on : " Have you written it, have you written it ? " he kept asking me.

He treated all the rest despotically ; he wanted to talk all the time, not as a story is told, but as it is written, that is, artistically to clothe in words the sensuous pictures. Thus, for example, he would not allow words to be transposed ; if he once said, " I have sores on my feet," he would not permit me to say, " On my feet I have sores." His soul, now softened and irritated by the sentiment of pity, that is, of love, clothed every image in an artistic form, and denied everything that did not correspond to the idea of eternal beauty and harmony.

The moment Sémka was carried away by the expression of disproportionable details about the lambs in the doorbench, and so forth, Fédka grew angry and said, " What a lot of bosh ! " I only needed to suggest what the peasant was doing, while his wife went to the gossip, when in Fédka's imagination there would immediately arise a picture with lambs, bleating in the door-bench, with the sighs of the old man and the delirium of the boy Seré-zhka ; I only needed to suggest an artificial and false picture, when he immediately would angrily remark that that was not necessary.

For example, I suggested the description of the peasant's looks, to which he agreed ; but to my proposition to describe what the peasant was thinking while his wife had run over to the gossip, there immediately rose before him the very form of the thought : " If you got in the way of Savdska the corpse, he would pull all your locks out! " He said this in such a fatigued and calmly serious and habitual and, at the same time, good-natured voice, leaning his head on his hand, that the boys rolled in laughter.

The chief quality in every art, the feeling of measure, was

developed in him to an extraordinary degree. He writhed at the suggestion of any superfluous feature, made by some one of the boys.

He directed the structure of the story so despotically, and with such right to this despotism, that the boys soon went home, and only he and Sémka, who would not give in to him, though working in another direction, were left. We worked from seven to eleven o'clock ; they felt neither hunger nor fatigue, and even got angry at me when I stopped writing ; they undertook to relieve me in writing, but they soon gave that up as matters would not go well.

It was then for the first time that Fédka asked my name. We laughed because he did not know.

" I know," he said, « how to call you ; but how do they call you in the manor ? We have such names as Fokanÿ-chev, Zyabrev, Ermflin."

I told him.

" Are we going to print it ? " he asked.

" Yes."

"Then we shall have to print: Work by Makärov, Morozov, and Tolstÿdy."

He was agitated for a long time and could not fall asleep, and I cannot express that feeling of agitation, joy, fear, and almost regret, which I experienced during that evening. I felt that with that day a new world of enjoyment and suffering was opened up to him, – the world of art ; I thought that I had received an insight in what no one has a right to see, – the germination of the mysterious flower of poetry.

I felt both dread and joy, like the seeker after the treasure who suddenly sees the flower of the fem, – I felt joy, because suddenly and quite unexpectedly there was revealed to me that stone of the philosophers, which I had vainly been trying to find for two years, – the art of teaching the expression of thoughts ; and dread, because this art called for new demands, a whole world of desires, which stood in no relation to the surroundings of the pupils, as I thought in the first moment. There was no mistaking. It was not an accident, but a conscious creation.

I beg the reader to read the first chapter of the story and to notice that wealth of features of true creative talent scattered through it ; for example, the feature when the woman in anger complains about her husband to the gossip, and yet weeps, although the author has an apparent dislike for her, when the gossip reminds her of the ruin of her house. For the author, who writes by reasoning out and from memory, the cross woman represents only the opposite of the peasant, – she had to invite the gossip for no other reason than the desire to annoy her husband ; but with Fédka the artistic feeling extends also to the woman, and she, too, weeps,

fears, and suffers, – she is not guilty, to his manner of thinking. Then the accessory feature when the gossip puts on a woman's fur coat. I remember how struck I was by this and how I asked : " Why a woman's fur coat ?" None of us had led Fédka up to the idea that the gossip had put on a fur coat.

He said : " It is more like it ! "

When I asked him whether it would do to say that he put on a man's fur coat, he said :

" No, a woman's fur coat is better."

Indeed, this feature is extraordinary. At first it does not occur to one why it should be a woman's fur coat, and yet one feels that it is excellent and cannot be otherwise.

Every artistic word, whether it belongs to Göthe or to Fédka, differs from the inartistic in that it evokes an endless mass of thoughts, images, and explanations.

The gossip in a woman's fur coat involuntarily presents himself to us as a sickly, narrow-chested peasant, just such as he apparently ought to be. The woman's fur coat, carelessly thrown on the bench and the first to fall into his hands, in addition, presents to us a winter evening scene in the life of the peasant. The fur coat leads you to imagine the late evening, during which the peasant is sitting without his ■wraps near a torch, and the women, coming in and out to fetch water and attend to the cattle, and all that external disorder of the peasant life, where not a person has his clearly defined clothes, and no one thing a definite place. With this one sentence, " He put on a woman's fur coat," the whole character of the surroundings, in which the action takes place, is clearly outlined, and this phrase is not used by accident, but consciously.

I remember vividly how in his imagination arose the words used by the peasant when he found the paper which he could not read.

" Now, if my Serézhka knew how to read, he would have come running to me, and would have grabbed the paper out of my hands, and would have read it all, and would have told me who the old man is."

One almost can see the relation of the peasant to the book which he is holding in his sunburnt hands ; the kind man with his patriarchal and pious inclinations rises before you in his whole stature. You feel that the author has taken a deep liking to him and, therefore, has fully comprehended him, so that soon after he lets him make a digression about there being such times nowadays that, before one knows it, one's soul is perished.

The idea about the dream was suggested by me, but it was Fédka's idea to let the goat have sores on its legs, and this conception gave him much pleasure. The reflection of the peasant, while his back is itching, and the picture of the nocturnal quiet, – all that

is far from being accidental, and in all these features one feels so strongly the conscious power of the artist !

I also remember how, when the peasant was to fall asleep, I proposed to make him reflect on the future of his son and on the future relations of his son with the old man, and to let the old man teach Serézhka reading, and so forth.

Fédka frowned and said : " Yes, yes, that is good," but it was obvious that he did not like that suggestion, and twice he forgot it.

His feeling of measure was stronger in him than in any of the authors I am acquainted with, – the feeling of measure, which but few artists acquire at the cost of immense labour and study, lived in its primitive force in his uncorrupted childish soul.

I gave up the lesson, because I was too much agitated.

"What is the matter with you? You are so pale,– are you ill?" my companion asked me. Indeed, only two or three times in my life have I experienced such a strong sensation as on that evening, and for a long time I was unable to render an account to myself of what I was experiencing. I dimly felt that I had criminally looked through a glass hive at the work of the bees, concealed from the gaze of mortal man ; it seemed to me that I had debauched the pure, primitive soul of a peasant boy. I dimly felt something like repentance for an act of sacrilege. I thought of the children, whom idle and debauched old men allow to contort themselves and represent lascivious pictures in order to fan their wearied, worn-out imaginations, and, at the same time, I was happy, as must be happy the man who beholds that which no one beheld before.

For a long time I was unable to render an account to myself of the impression which it had produced on me, though I felt that this impression was one of those which at a mature age educate a man and lead him to a new stage of life, making him renounce the old and fully devote himself to the new. Even on the following day I could not make myself believe that which I had experienced the day before. It seemed so strange to me that a peasant boy, with the bare knowledge of reading, should suddenly manifest a conscious artistic power, such as Göthe, in all his immeasurable height of development, had been unable to equal. It seemed so strange and offensive to me that I, the author of " Childhood," who had had certain success and had earned recognition for artistic talent from a cultivated Russian public, – that I, in the matter of art, not only should be unable to teach anything to eleven-year-old Sémka or Fédka or to help them, but that I only with difficulty and in a happy moment of excitement should be able to follow and understand them. All that seemed so strange to me that I could not believe that which had happened the day before.

The next day we took up the continuation of the story. When I asked Fédka whether he had thought out the continuation, he only swayed

his hands and said : " I know, I know ! Who will write ? "

We went to work, and again the children displayed the same feeling of artistic truth, measure, and enthusiasm.

In the middle of the lesson I was obliged to leave them.

They continued to write without me and finished two pages just as well done, just as well felt, and just as correctly, as the first. The only thing about these pages was that they were paler in details, that these details were not aptly disposed, and that there were two or three repetitions. All that apparently was due to the fact that the mechanism of writing hampered them.

The same took place on the third day. During these lessons other boys frequently joined us, and, as they knew the tenor and the contents of the story, they often helped us out by adding their correct features. Sémka now kept up with us, and now stayed away. Fédka alone carried the story from beginning to end and passed upon all the proposed changes.

There could no longer be any doubt or thought that this success was a matter of accident : we had apparently struck the method which was more natural and a greater incentive than everything tried before. But it was all so unusual that I did not believe that which took place before our eyes. It looked as though a special incident were necessary in order to destroy all my doubts.

I had to leave for a few days, and the story remained unfinished. The manuscript, three large sheets, closely covered with writing, was left in the room of the teacher, to whom I had shown it.

Even before my departure, while I was busy composing, a newly entered pupil had shown our boys the art of making paper flaps, and, as is generally the case, the whole school entered upon a period of flaps, which had supplanted a period of snow-balls, as these again had supplanted a period of whittling sticks. The period of the flaps lasted during my absence.

Sémka and Fédka, who were among the singers, used to come to the teacher's room for singing exercises, and they remained there whole evenings, and even nights. Between the singing and during the singing, the flaps, of course, did their business, and all kinds of paper, which fell into their hands, was transformed into flaps.

The teacher went to get his supper, having forgotten to mention that the papers on the table were important, and so the work of Makarov, Morozov, and Tolstoy was changed into flaps. On the following day, before the lessons, the clacking of the flaps so very much annoyed the pupils that they themselves instituted a persecution against the flaps : they were confiscated with shouts and screams, and solemnly stuck into the fire of the oven.

The period of the flaps came to an end, but with it perished our

manuscript. Never had any loss been so hard to bear as the loss of these three sheets of writing. I was in despair, I wanted to give it all up and begin a new story, but I could not forget the loss, and so involuntarily every minute kept nagging at the teacher and at the makers of the flaps.

(I must remark here, upon this occasion, that just by means of the external disorder and full freedom of the pupils, which Mr. Markov takes so charmingly to task in the Russian Messenger, and Mr. Glyébov in No. 4 of the periodical Education, I, without the least trouble, threats, or cunning, learned all the details of the complicated story of the transformation of the manuscript into flaps, and of its consignment to the flames.)

Sémka and Fédka saw that I was aggrieved, not understanding by what, and they sympathized with me. Fédka finally timidly proposed to me to begin another such a story.

" By yourselves ?" I asked. " I shall not help you now."

" Sémka and I will stay here overnight," said Fédka.

And so they did. At nine o'clock, when the lessons were over, they came to the house, locked themselves up in my cabinet, which afforded me much pleasure, laughed awhile, and grew quiet. Until midnight I could hear them, every time I came up to the door, talking with each other in low tones and scratching their pens. Once only they debated about what came first and what later, and they came to me to settle the dispute, whether he looked for the wallet before the woman went to the gossip, or after. I told them that it made no difference which.

At midnight I knocked and asked to be let in. Fédka in a new white fur coat, with black trimming, was sitting deep in the armchair, with one leg over the other, leaning his shaggy little head on his hand, and fumbling the scissors in the other hand. His large black eyes, gleaming with an unnatural, but serious sparkle, like that of a grown person, were looking somewhere into the distance ; his irregular lips, compressed as though for a whistle, apparently held back the word which he, having coined it in his imagination, was about to express.

Sémka, standing at the large writing-table, with a large white patch of sheepskin over his back (the tailors had but lately been in the village), with ungirt belt, and dishevelled hair, was writing crooked lines, constantly sticking his pen into the inkstand.

I tossed Sémka's hair, and his fat face with protruding cheekbones and matted hair, as he, with surprised and sleepy eyes, looked in fright at me, was so funny, that I burst out into a laugh, but the children did not laugh with me.

Without changing the expression of his face, Fédka touched Sémka's sleeve and told him to go on. " Thou must wait," he said, " we shall

be through soon." (Fédka says " thou " to me whenever he is carried away by something and agitated.) He continued to dictate.

I took away their copy-book, and five minutes later, when they, seating themselves near a small safe, were getting away with potatoes and kvas, and, looking at the silver spoons, which they thought so funny, laughing their sonorous, childish laugh, without any cause whatever, – the old woman, hearing them up-stairs, also burst out laughing, without knowing why.

" Don't tip so ! " said Sémka. " Sit straight, or you will eat on one side only."

They took off their fur coats, and, spreading them under the writing-table, lay down on them to sleep, all the time rolling out their healthy, charming, childish, peasant laugh.

I read over what they had written. It was a new variant of the same thing. A few things were left out, and a few new, artistic beauties were added. Again there was the same feeling of beauty, truth, and measure. Later on one sheet of the lost manuscript was found. In the printed story I combined both variants from memory, and from the sheet which was recovered.

The writing of this story took place early in spring, before the end of our scholastic year. For various reasons I was unable to make new experiments. On given proverbs only one story was written by two very mediocre and spoilt children, being the sons of manorial servants. " He who is fond of a holiday gets drunk before daybreak," was printed in the third number. The same phenomena were repeated with these boys and with this story as had been observed with Sémka and Fédka and the first story, only with a difference in the degree of talent and in the enthusiasm and the cooperation on my part.

In the summer we have never had school and never will have. We shall devote a separate article to the cause why teaching is impossible in the summer in our school.

One part of the summer Fédka and some other boys lived with me. Having had a swim, and being tired of playing, they took it into their heads to work. I proposed to them to write a composition, and so told them several themes. I told them a very entertaining story about the theft of some money, the story of a murder, the story of a marvellous conversion of a Milker to Orthodoxy, and I also proposed to them to write in the form of an autobiography the history of a boy whose poor and dissolute father is sent to the army, and to whom the father later returns a reformed, good man.

I said : " I should write it like this. I remember that when I was a child I had a father, a mother, and some other relatives, and who they were. Then I should write that I remember how my father was all the time out on sprees, while my mother wept, and he heat her; then, how he was sent to the army ; how she wept ; how our life grew harder; how father returned, and he did not seem to recognize me,

but asked me whether Matréna – that is, his wife – was alive ; and how all were happy, and we began to live well.”

That was all which I said in the beginning. Fédka took a great liking to this theme. He immediately took the pen and paper, and began to write. During his writing, I only hinted to him about the sister and about the mother's death. The rest he wrote himself and did not even show it to me, except the first chapter, until it was all done.

When he showed me the first chapter, and I began to read, I felt that he was greatly agitated and that, holding his breath, he kept looking now at the manuscript and watching my reading, and now at my face, wishing to divine upon it an expression of approbation or disapproval.

When I told him that it was very good, he flamed up, without saying anything to me, with agitated, though slow, steps walked with the copy-book up to the table, put it down, and slowly walked out into the yard. Outside he was madly wanton with the boys during the day, and, whenever our eyes met, looked at me with a grateful and kindly glance. The next day he forgot entirely about what he had written.

I only wrote out the title, divided the story into chapters, and here and there corrected the mistakes, which were due to carelessness. This story, in its primitive form, is being printed in a book under the title of “A Soldier's Life.”

I do not speak of the first chapter, although there are some inimitable beauties even there, and although heedless Gordyéy is there represented exceedingly true to life and vividly, – Gordyéy, who seems to be ashamed to confess his repentance, and who regards it as proper to beg the meeting of the Commune only about his son ; still, this chapter is incomparably weaker than all the following. The fault is all my own, for I could not keep, during the writing of this chapter, from suggesting to him and telling him how I should have written. If there is a certain triteness in the introduction, when describing persons and dwellings, I am exclusively to blame for it. If I had left him alone, I am sure he would have described the same in action, imperceptibly, much more artistically, without the accepted and really impossible manner of logically distributed descriptions, which consists in first describing the dramatis personæ, even their biographies, then the locality and the surroundings, and then only the action itself.

Strange to say, all these descriptions, sometimes on dozens of pages, acquaint the reader much less with the persons than a carelessly dropped artistic feature during an action which has already begun among persons totally unfamiliar to the reader. Even thus in this first chapter, the one phrase of Gordyéy's, « That is all I need, » when he, renouncing everything, acquiesces in his fate to become a soldier, and only asks the Commune not to abandon his son, – this phrase acquaints the reader much better with the person than the description of his attire, his figure, and his habit of

frequenting the tavern, several times repeated and urged upon him by me. The same effect is produced by the words of the old woman, who always scolded her son, when, during her grief, she enviously remarks to her daughter-in-law : " Stop, Matr na ! What is to be done ? Evidently God has willed it so ! You are young yet, – maybe God will grant you to see him again. But see how old I am – I am ill – before you know it, I shall be dead ! "

In the second chapter there may still be noted my influence of triteness and tampering, but here again the profoundly artistic features in the description of pictures and of the boy's death redeem the whole matter. I suggested to him that the boy had thin legs, I also suggested the sentimental details about Uncle Nef dya, who digs the little grave ; but the lamentation of the mother, expressed in one clause, "   Lord, when will this slavery end ! " presents to the reader the whole essence of the situation ; and thereupon that night, when the elder brother is wakened by his mother's tears, and her answer to the grandmother's inquiry what the matter was, with the simple words, " My son has died," and the grandmother, getting up and making a fire and washing the little body, – all that is strictly his own ; all this is so compressed, so simple, so strong, – not one word may be omitted, not one word changed, nor added. There are in all five lines, and in these five lines there is painted for the reader the whole picture of that sad night, – a picture reflected in the imagination of a boy six or seven years old.

" At midnight the mother for some reason began to weep. Grandmother arose and said : ' What is the matter ? Christ be with you ! ' The mother said : ' My son has died.' Grandmother made a fire, washed the boy, put a shirt on him, girded him, and placed him beneath the images. When day broke – "

You see the boy himself, awakened by the familiar tears of his mother, half-sleepy, under a caftan somewhere on the hanging bed, with frightened and sparkling eyes watching the proceedings in the hut ; you see the haggard soldier's widow, who but the day before had said, " How soon will this slavery come to an end ? ' repentant and crushed by the thought of the end of this slavery, to such an extent that she only says, " My son has died, and knows not what to do, and calls for the grandmother to help her ; and you see the old woman, worn out by the sufferings of life, bent down, emaciated, with bony limbs, as she calmly takes hold of the work with her hands that are accustomed to labour ; she lights a torch, brings the water, and washes the boy ; she laces everything in the right place, and sets the boy, washed and girt, under the images. And you see those images, and all that night without sleep, until daybreak, as though you yourself were living through it, as that boy lived through it, gazing at it from underneath the caftan ; that night arises before you with all its details and remains in your imagination.

In the third chapter there is less of my influence. The whole personality of the nurse belongs to him. Even in the first chapter,

he characterized the relations of the nurse with the family in one sentence : " She was working for her own dowry, to get ready for marriage."

This one feature paints the girl as she is : she cannot take part, and she really does not take part, in the joys and sorrows of her family. She has her lawful interests, her only aim, decreed by Providence, – her future marriage, her future family.

An author of our kind, especially one who wants to instruct the people by presenting to them models of morality worthy of imitation, would certainly have treated the nurse with reference to the interest she took in the common want and sorrow of the family. He would have made her a disgraceful example of indifference, or a model of love and self-sacrifice, and there would have been an idea, but not a living person, the nurse. Only a man who has profoundly studied and learned life could understand that for the nurse the question of the family's bereavement, and of the father's military service, was lawfully a secondary question, for she has her marriage ahead.

This very thing, in the simplicity of his heart, sees the artist, though but a child. If we had described the nurse as a most sympathetic, self-sacrificing girl, we should not be able at all to present her to our imagination, and we should not love her, as we love her now. Now there stands before me the dear, living form of the fat-cheeked, ruddy-faced girl, running in the evening to take part in the round dance, in shoes and red cotton kerchief bought with the money earned by her, loving her family, though distressed by that poverty and gloom which form such a contrast to her own mood.

I feel that she is a good girl, if for no other reason than because her mother never complained about her nor was aggrieved by her. On the contrary, I feel that she, with the cares about her attire, with the snatches of tunable songs, with the village gossips, brought from the summer field work or from the wintry street, was the only representative of mirth, youth, and hope during the sad time of the soldier woman's loneliness. He says with good reason that the only joy there was, was when the nurse-girl was married. It is, therefore, with good reason that he describes the wedding-feast at such length and with so much love ; it is with good reason that he makes the mother say after the wedding, " Now we are completely ruined." It is evident that, by giving up the nurse, they lost that joy and merriment which she had brought with her into the house.

All that description of the wedding is uncommonly good. There are some details there which simply stagger you, and, remembering that it is an eleven-year-old boy who wrote it, you ask yourself, "Is it possible it is not merest accident ? " Back of this compressed and strong description you just see the eleven-year-old boy, not taller than the table, with his bright and intelligent eyes, to whom nobody pays any attention, but who remembers and notices everything.

When, for example, he wanted some bread, he did not say that he asked his mother for it, but that he bent his mother down. This is not said by accident, but because he remembers his relation to his mother at that stage of his growth, and because he remembers how timid that relation was in the presence of others, and how familiar in their absence. There is one other thing out of a mass of observations which he could have made during the wedding ceremony which seemed to have impressed him, and which he noted down, because to him and to each of us it pictures the whole character of these ceremonies. When they said that it was bitter, the nurse took Kon-dräshka by his ears, and they began to kiss each other. Then the death of the grandmother, her thought of her son before her death, and the peculiar character of the mother's grief, – all that is so firm and so compressed, and all that is strictly his own.

I told him most about the father's return when I gave him the plot of the story. I liked that scene, and I told it to him with trite sentimentality. He, too, liked the scene, and he asked me : " Don't tell me anything ! I know it all myself, I do," and sat down to write, after which he finished the story at one sitting.

It will be very interesting for me to know the opinion of other judges, but I consider it my duty frankly to express my opinion. I have not come across anything like these pages in Russian literature. In the whole meeting there is not one reference to its having been touching ; all that there is told is how it happened, and only so much of what took place is told as is necessary for the reader to understand the situation of all the persons.

The soldier said only three sentences in his house. At first he braced himself and said, " Good morning ! " When he began to forget the part he was to play, he said, " Is that all there is of your family ? " And everything was said in the words, " Where is my mother ? "

What simple and natural words they all are, and not one person is forgotten ! The boy was happy, and even wept; but he was a child, and so he, in spite of his father's tears, kept examining his wallet and pockets. Nor is the nurse forgotten. You almost see that ruddy woman, who, in shoes and fine attire, timidly enters the room, and, without saying anything, kisses her father. You almost see the embarrassed and happy father, who

kisses all in succession, without knowing whom, and who, upon learning that the young woman is his daughter, calls her up once more and now kisses her, not as any young woman, but as a daughter, whom he had once left behind, without taking any thought of her.

The father is reformed. How many false and inept phrases we should have used upon that occasion ! But Fédka simply told how the nurse brought some liquor, and he did not drink it. You just seem to see the woman, who, taking out of her pouch the last twenty-three kopeks, breathing heavily, in a whisper orders the young woman in the vestibule to bring some liquor, and deposits the copper money in

her open hand.

You see the young woman, who, raising her apron with her hand, with the bottle underneath it, thumping with her shoes and swinging her elbows, runs down to the tavern. You see her enter the room with flushed face, taking the bottle out from underneath the apron, and you see her mother place it on the table with an expression of self-contentment and joy, and how she feels both annoyed and happy because her husband has stopped drinking. And you see that if he has given up drinking at such an occasion, he certainly has reformed. You feel that the members of the family have become different people.

" My father said a prayer and sat down at the table. I sat down by his side ; the nurse sat down on the doorbench, and mother stood at the table, and looked at him, and said : \* See how much younger you look ! You have no beard now ! ' All laughed."

Only when all the others left, the real family conversation began. Only then it was revealed that the soldier had grown rich. He had become enriched in the simplest and most natural manner, as nearly all people in the world grow rich, that is, money which did not belong to him, the Crown's money, by a lucky accident came into his hands. Some of the readers of the story remarked that this detail was immoral, and that the conception of the Crown as a milch-cow ought to be eradicated, and not strengthened in the masses. But to me this feature, leaving alone its artistic truth, is particularly pleasing. The Crown's money always remains somewhere,— why, then, is it not to remain in the hands of some homeless soldier Gordyéy ?

We frequently meet with diametrically opposite conceptions of honesty in the masses and in the upper classes. The demands of the masses are peculiarly serious and severe in respect to honesty in the nearest relations, for example, in relation to the family, the village, the Commune. In relation to outsiders, — the public, the government, especially the foreigner, the treasury, — the application of the common rules of honesty presents itself but dimly. A peasant who will never tell a lie to his brother, who will endure all kinds of privations for his family, who will not take a superfluous or unearned kopek from his fellow villager or neighbour, — the same peasant will strip a foreigner or townsman like a linden switch, and will at every word tell a man of the gentry or an official a lie ; if he be a soldier, he will without the slightest compunction stab a captive Frenchman, and, if Crown money falls into his hands, he will not regard it a crime before his family to take advantage of it.

In the upper classes, on the contrary, the very opposite takes place. A man of our kind will much sooner deceive a wife, a brother, a merchant, with whom he has had dealings for dozens of years, his servants, his peasants, his neighbour, — and this same man abroad is all the time consumed by fear lest he should cheat somebody, and begs all the time to have pointed out to him any one he may be owing money to. This same gentleman of our class will stint his company

and regiment, to obtain money for his champagne and gloves, and will bubble up with civilities before a captive Frenchman. The same man

regards it as the greatest crime to make use of the Crown's money, when he is penniless, – he only regards it so, for generally he will not stand his ground when the opportunity offers itself, but will commit that which he himself regards as a piece of rascality.

I am not saying which is better, – I am only telling what is, as it appears to me. I will, however, remark that honesty is not a conviction and that the expression " honest convictions " is nonsense. Honesty is a moral habit ; in order to acquire it, it is impossible to go by any other part than to begin with the nearest relations. The expression " honest con Actions " is, in my opinion, absolutely meaningless: there are honest habits, but not honest convictions.

The words " honest convictions " are an empty phrase ; for this reason those reputed honest convictions, winch refer to the most remote vital conditions, to the Crown's money, to the government, to Europe, to humanity, and which are not based on habits of honesty and not educated on the nearest vital relations, – for this reason those honest convictions, or, more correctly, those empty phrases of honesty, prove inadequate in relation to life.

I return to the story. The mention of the money taken from the Crown, which in the first moment may appear immoral, in our opinion, on the contrary, is a charming, touching characteristic. How often a litterateur of our class, wishing, in the simplicity of his soul, to represent his hero as an ideal of honesty, shows us all the dirty and corrupt interior of his imagination ! Here, on the contrary, the author must make his hero happy : for happiness, his return to his family would suffice, but he had to abolish the poverty which had been weighing so heavily on the family for so many years ; where was he to get the wealth from? From the impersonal Crown. To give wealth, one has to get it first, – and it could not have been got in a more lawful and clever manner.

In the very scene when the money is mentioned there is a tiny detail, one word, which seems to strike me anew, every time I read it. It illumines the whole picture, paints all the persons and their relations, and only one word, and an incorrectly, syntactically incorrectly, used word at that, – the word " hastened." A teacher of syntax must say that it is irregular. Hastened demands some modification, – hastened to do what ? the teacher ought to ask. And here it is simply said : " Mother took the money and hastened and carried it away to bury it," and it is charming. I wish I myself had used such a word, and I wish that teachers, who teach language, might say or write such a sentence.

" When we had eaten, the nurse kissed father again and went home. Then father began to rummage through his wallet, and mother and I just looked on. Mother saw a little book there, so she says : 'Oh, you have learned to read ? ' Says father : ' I have.'

" Then father took out a kerchief tied in a large knot and gave it to mother.

" Says mother : ' What is this ? '

" Says father : ' Money.'

" Mother was happy and hastened and carried it away to bury it. Then mother came back, and says she :

" ' Where did you get it ? '

" Says father : ' I was an under-officer and had Crown money : I gave it to the soldiers, and what was left in my hands, I kept.'

" My mother was so happy and ran around like a mad person. The day had passed, and the evening came. They lighted a fire. My father took the book and began to read. I sat down near him and listened, and mother held the torch. Father read the book for a long time. Then we lay down to sleep. I lay down on the back bench with father, and mother lay down at our feet, and they talked for a long time, almost until midnight. Then we fell asleep."

Here again we have a scarcely perceptible detail, which does not startle us in the least, but which leaves a deep impression, – the detail of their going to bed : the father lay down with his son, the mother lay at their feet, and they did not get tired talking for a long time. How tightly, I think, the son must have hugged to his father's breast, and what a joy and happiness it was for him, falling asleep and waking again, to hear the two voices, one of which he had not heard for so long a time.

One would think all is ended : the father has returned, and there is no more poverty. But Fédka was not satisfied with that (his imaginary people apparently made a deep impression upon his imagination) ; he had to form a picture of their changed life, to present to himself vividly that now the woman was no longer alone, a saddened soldier's wife with small babies, but that there was a strong man in the house, who would take off the wearied shoulders of his wife all the burden of the crushing sorrow and want, and would independently, firmly, and merrily begin a new life.

For this purpose he paints us only one scene : the powerful soldier with a notched axe chops some wood and brings it into the house. You see the keen-eyed boy, used to the groans of his feeble mother and grandmother, with wonderment, respect, and pride admiring the bared muscular arms of his father, the energetic swinging of the axe, coinciding with the pectoral sigh of masculine labour, and the block, which, like a piece of kindling-wood, is split under the notched axe. You look at it, and your mind is eased about the future life of the soldier's wife. Now she will not be lost, the dear one, I think.

" In the morning mother got up, walked over to father, and says she : ' Gordyéy, get up ! I need some wood to make a fire in the oven.'

" Father got up, dressed himself, put on his cap, and says he :  
' Have you an axe ? '

" Says mother : ' I have, – it is notched ; maybe it won't cut.'

« My father took the axe firmly with both his hands, walked over to the block, put it up standing, swung the axe with all his might, and split the block ; he chopped up some wood and brought it to the house. Mother made a fire in the oven, and it burned, and soon it grew daylight."

But the artist is not satisfied with that. He wants to show us another side of their lives, the poetry of the happy family life, and so he paints the following picture for us :

" When it was all daylight, my father said : ' Matréná ! '

" My mother came up, and says she : ' Well, what ? '

" Says father : 'I am thinking of buying a cow, five sheep, two little horses, and a hut, – this one is falling to pieces, – well, that will take about one hundred and fifty roubles.'

"Mother thought awhile, then says she: 'Well, we shall spend all the money.\*

" Says father : 'We will begin to work.'

" Says mother : ' All right, we will buy it all, but where shall we get the timber ? '

" Says father : ' Hasn't Kiryukha any ? '

" Says mother: ' That's where the trouble is : the Fok-anÿchevs have taken it away.'

" Father thought awhile, and says he : ' Well, we shall get it from Brantsev.'

" Says mother : ' I doubt whether he has any.'

" Says father : ' Why should he not have ? He has a forest.'

" Says mother : ' I am afraid he will ask too much, – he is such a beast.\*

" Says father : ' I will take some brandy to him, and maybe we shall come to some understanding ; and you bake an egg in the ashes for dinner.'

"Mother got the dinner ready, – she borrowed from her friends. Then father took the brandy and went to Bràntsev's, and we stayed at home, waiting for a long time. I felt lonely without father. I began to ask mother to let me go there where father was.

" Says mother : 'You will lose your way.'

" I began to cry and wanted to go, but mother slapped me, and I sat down on the oven and cried more than before. Then I saw father coming into the room. Says he : ' Why are you crying ? '

" Says mother : ' Fédka wanted to run after you, and I gave him a beating.'

" Father walked over to me, and says he : ' What are you crying about ? '

" I began to complain of mother. Father went up to mother and began to beat her, in jest, saying : ' Don't beat Fedka ! Don't beat Fédka ! '

"Mother pretended to be crying. I sat down on father's knees and was happy. Then father sat down at the table, and put me by his side, and shouted : ' Mother, give Fédka and me something to eat, – we are hungry ! '

" And mother gave us some beef, and we began to eat. When we were through dinner, says mother : ' What about the timber ? '

" Says father: ' Fifty roubles in silver.'

" Says mother : ' That is not bad.'

" Says father : ' I must say, it is fine timber.' "

It seems so simple : so little is said, and you see the perspective of their whole domestic life. You see that the boy is still a child, who will cry and a minute later will be happy ; you see that the boy is not able to appreciate his mother's love, and that he has exchanged her for the virile father who was chopping the block ; you see that the mother knows that it must be so, and she is not jealous ; you see that splendid Gordyéy, whose heart is brimful of happiness.

You notice that they ate beef, and that is a charming comedy, which they all play, and all know that it is a comedy, which they play from excess of happiness. " Don't beat Fédka ! Don't beat Fédka ! " says the father, raising his hand against her. And the mother, who is used to unfeigned tears, pretends to be crying, with a smile of happiness at the father and the son, and the boy, who climbed on his father's knees, was proud and happy, not knowing why, – proud and happy, no doubt, because now they were all happy.

" Then father sat down at the table, and put me by his side, and

shouted: ' Mother, give Fédka and me something to eat, – we are hungry ! ' ”

“We are hungry,” and he placed him by his side. What love and happy pride of love breathes in these words! There is nothing more charming and heartfelt in the whole charming story than this last chapter.

But what do we mean to say by all that ? What import does this story, written, probably, by an exceptional boy, have pedagogically ? We shall be told : “ You, the teacher, may unconsciously, to yourself, have helped in the composition of these stories, and it would be too difficult to find the limits of 'that which belongs to you, and of that which is original.”

We shall be told : “ We shall admit that the story is good, but that is only one kind of literature.”

We shall be told : “ Fédka and the other boys, whose compositions you have printed, are happy exceptions.”

We shall be told : “ You are yourself a writer, and, without knowing it, you have been helping the pupils along paths which cannot be prescribed as a rule to other teachers who are not authors themselves.”

We shall be told: “From all that it is impossible to deduce a common rule or theory. It is partially an interesting phenomenon, and nothing else.”

I shall try to give my deductions in such a manner as to serve as answers to all the retorts imagined by me.

The feelings of truth, beauty, and goodness are independent of the degree of development. Beauty, truth, and goodness are conceptions which express only the harmony of relations in the sense of truth, beauty, and goodness. Lie is only a non-correspondence of relations in the sense of truth ; there is no absolute truth. I am not lying when I say that the tables whirl about under the touch of my fingers, if I believe it to be so, even though it is an untruth ; but I am lying when I say that I have no money when, according to my ideas, I have money. No immense nose is monstrous, but it is monstrous on a small face. Monstrosity is only a disharmony in relation to beauty. To give away my dinner to a mendicant, or to eat it up myself has nothing of badness in it ; but to give it away, or eat it up myself, while my mother is starving is a disharmony of relations in the sense of goodness.

In bringing up, educating, developing, or in any way you please influencing the child, we ought to have and unconsciously do have one aim in view, – to attain the greatest harmony possible in the sense of truth, beauty, and goodness. If time did not run, if the child did not live with every side of himself, we should be able quietly to attain this harmony by supplementing there where there

seems to be a lack, and by reducing where there seems to be a superfluity. But the child lives ; every side of his existence strives after development, trying to outstrip every other side, and, for the most part, we mistake the progress of these sides of his being for the aim, and cooperate in this development only, instead of aiding the harmony of the development. In this lies the eternal mistake of all pedagogical theories.

We see our ideal before us, whereas it is behind us. The necessary development of man is far from being a means of attaining that ideal of harmony which we bear within us; it is, on the contrary, a hindrance, put in our way by the Creator, in the attainment of the highest ideal of harmony. In this necessary law of forward motion lies the meaning of that fruit of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which our first ancestor tasted.

A healthy child is born into the world, completely satisfying all the demands of unconditional harmony in relation to truth, beauty, and goodness, which we bear within us ; he is near to inanimate beings, – to the plant, to the animal, to Nature, which always represents to us that truth, beauty, and goodness, which we are seeking and wishing for. In all the ages and with all men, the child has been represented as a model of innocence, sinlessness, goodness, truth, and beauty. "Man is born perfect" is a great word enunciated by Rousseau, and this word will remain firm and true, like a rock. At birth man represents the prototype of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness. But every hour in life, every minute of time increases the extent, the quantity, and the duration of those relations which during his birth were in full harmony, and every step and every hour threaten the impairment of that harmony, and every successive step and every successive hour threaten a new impairment and gives no hope of the restitution of the impaired harmony.

For the most part educators forget that the child's age is the prototype of harmony, and they assume the development of the child, which goes on independently according to immutable laws, as the aim. The development is erroneously taken for the aim because to the educators happens that which takes place with poor sculptors.

Instead of trying to arrest a local exaggerated development or the general development, instead of waiting for a new incident to destroy the irregularity which has arisen, just as a poor sculptor, instead of eradicating that which is superfluous, keeps pasting on more and more, – even thus educators seem to be concerned only about not interrupting the process of development, and if they ever think of the harmony, they try to attain it by approaching an unknown prototype in the future, by departing from the prototype in the present and in the past.

No matter how irregular the development of a child may be, there are always left in him the primitive features of harmony. By moderating, at least by not pushing, the development, we may hope to get a certain approach to regularity and harmony. But we are so sure of ourselves, we are so visionarily devoted to the false ideal of

manhood perfection, we are so impatient with irregularities which are near to us and so firmly believe in our ability to correct them, we are so little able to comprehend and value the primitive beauty of a child, that we, as fast as we can, magnify and paste up the irregularities that strike our vision, – we correct, we educate the child. Now one side has to be equalized with the other, now the other has to be equalized with the first. The child is developed more and more, and all the time departs more and more from the former shattered prototype, and the attainment of the imaginary prototype of the perfection of manhood becomes ever more impossible. Our ideal is behind us, not before us. Education spoils, it does not correct men. The more a child is spoiled, the less he ought to be educated, the more liberty he needs.

It is impossible and absurd to teach and educate a child, for the simple reason that the child stands nearer than I do, than any grown-up man does, to that ideal of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness, to which I, in my pride, wish to raise him. The consciousness of this ideal is more powerful in him than in me. All he needs of me is the material, in order to fill out harmoniously and on all sides. The moment I gave him full liberty and stopped teaching him, he wrote a poetical production, the like of which cannot be found in Russian literature. Therefore, it is my conviction that we cannot teach children in general, and peasant children in particular, to write and compose. All that we can do is to teach them how to go about writing.

If what I did in order to obtain this result may be called method, this method consisted in the following :

(1) Give a great variety of themes, not inventing them specially for the children, but propose such as appear most serious and interesting to the teacher himself.

(2) Give the children children's compositions to read, and give them only children's compositions as models, for children's compositions are always more correct, more artistic, and more moral than the compositions of grown people.

(3) (Most important.) When looking through a pupil's composition, never make any remarks to him about the cleanliness of the copy-book, nor about penmanship, nor orthography, nor, above all, about the structure of the sentences and about logic.

(4) Since the difficulty of composition does not lie in the volume, nor the contents, nor the artistic quality of the theme, the sequence of the themes is not to be based on volume, nor on the contents, nor on the language, but in the mechanism of the work,

which consists, first, in selecting one out of a large number of ideas and images presented ; secondly, in choosing words for it and clothing it in words ; thirdly, in remembering it and finding a place for it; fourthly, in not repeating nor leaving out anything, and in the ability of combining what follows with that which precedes, all the time keeping in mind what is already written down ; fifthly, and finally, in thinking and writing at the same time, without having one of these acts interfere with the other. To obtain this end, I did as follows : A few of those sides of the labour I at first took upon myself, by degrees transferring them

to their care. At first I chose from the ideas and images that presented themselves to them such as I considered best, and retained them, and pointed out the place, and consulted what had already been written, keeping them from repetitions, and myself wrote, leaving to them only the clothing of the images and ideas in words ; then I allowed them to make their own choice, and later to consult that which had been written down, until, at last, as in the case of " A Soldier's Life," they took the whole matter into their own hands.