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Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?

by Leo Tolstoy

IN THE FOURTH ISSUE of *Yasnaya Polyana**, in the section with children's compositions, the editors mistakenly printed "A Story of How a Boy Was Frightened in Tula." This story was composed not by a boy, but by the teacher to whom the boy's dream was related. Some of the readers of *Yasnaya Polyana* expressed doubts about the authorship of the story. I hasten to beg the readers' indulgence for this oversight, and to say that in such cases falsification is impossible. The story was found out not because it was better, but because it was worse, far worse, than any child's composition. All the other stories are the children's own. Two of them, "They Feed with the Spoon, Then Poke the Eye with the Handle," and "The Life of a Soldier's Wife," were composed in the following manner.

The chief art of the teacher in the study of language, and the chief goal in having children write compositions,

* *Yasnaya Polyana* was the journal Tolstoy published about his school.

Before he wrote *War and Peace*, LEO TOLSTOY founded and ran a school for peasant children on his estate at Yasnaya Polyana (some 200 miles southeast of Moscow). The articles in this issue are some of Tolstoy's many writings on education.

consists not just in giving them themes, but in presenting them with a large choice, in pointing out the scope of the composition, and in indicating the initial steps. At first many clever and talented students of mine wrote nonsense, such as, "Fire started to burn, they began to drag out things, and I went out into the street," and nothing came of it in spite of the fact that the theme had been rich, and the description had made a deep impression on the children. They did not understand the main thing, which was why they should write and what good there was in writing. As I wrote in the second issue of *Yasnaya Polyana*, I tried many different ways of giving the students themes to write on. I

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gave them, according to their inclinations, specific, artistic, touching, funny, or epic ones—and all for naught. Here is how I unexpectedly came up with the right method.

Reading Snegirev's collected proverbs has long been one of my favorite occupations—or rather, enjoyments. For each proverb I imagine faces in the crowd and individual conflicts to fit the context. Along with a number of unrealizable fantasies, I always imagine a series of pictures, or stories, written to fit the proverbs. Once, last winter, after dinner I lost myself in Snegirev's book, and came to school with it the next day. The class was studying Russian.

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

The best students—Fedka, Semka, and a few others—pricked up their ears.

"What do you mean by 'on a proverb'? What's that? Tell us!" they asked.

I happened to open the book to "He feeds with the spoon, then pokes the eye with the handle."

"Now picture this," I said. "A peasant takes a beggar into his home, and then the peasant begins to rebuke the beggar for the good he has done him, and you will get 'he feeds with the spoon, then pokes the eye with the handle.'"

"But how are you going to write that?" said Fedka, and the rest of them pricked up their ears. Then they suddenly retreated, having convinced themselves that this was beyond their powers, and went back to what they had been working on previously.

"Write it yourself," one said to me.

The students were all busy with their work. I took my pen and inkstand and began to write.

"Well," I said, "who will write it best? My guess is that you will."

I myself began the story published in the fourth issue of *Yasnaya Polyana*, writing the first page. Any unbiased person with common sense and an artistic sensibility will, after reading the first page, written by me, and then what follows, written by the students, note the differences as he would distinguish a fly from the milk: this first page is so false, so artificial, and written in such poor language. I should note too that in the first draft it was even more monstrous, since much was corrected thanks to the students' directions.

Fedka kept looking up at me from his notebook, and smiled, winked, and repeated, "Write, write, or I'll write it for you!" He was evidently quite amused to see a grown-up write a theme.

Having finished his own composition worse and faster than usual, Fedka climbed on the back of my chair and began to read over my shoulder. I could not go on; others came up to us, and I read them what I had written.

They did not like it, and nobody praised it. I felt ashamed, and to soothe my literary ambitions I began to tell them of my plan for what was to follow. The further I got in the story, the more enthusiastic I became; I corrected myself, and they kept helping me out. One student said that the old

man should turn out to be a magician; another remarked: "No, that won't do, he should just be a soldier.... The best thing would be if he steals from him.... No, that wouldn't go with the proverb," and so on.

All were exceedingly interested. It was obviously a new and exciting sensation for the students to be present at the process of creation and to take part in it. The decisions they made were for the most part all the same, and were true to the plot as well as in the details and characterizations. Almost all of them took part in the composing process, but from the start Semka and Fedka especially distinguished themselves: Semka, by his perceptive, artistic descriptions, and Fedka, by the acuity of his poetic gifts, and especially by the glow and rapidity of his imagination.

The students' queries had so little of the accidental in them and were so assured that more than once I started to argue with the students only to abandon my argument posthaste. I was wholly focused on the requirements of a regular structure and of an exact correspondence between the idea of the proverb and the story; the students, on the other hand, were concerned only with the demands of artistic truth. For example, I wanted the peasant who had taken the beggar in to regret his good deed, whereas the students considered this impossible, and created a cross old wife for the peasant instead.

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

Fedka replied that this would be problematic: "He [the peasant] did not obey the old woman in the beginning, so he wouldn't later on."

"What kind of man do you think he is?" I asked.

"He is like Uncle Timofei," Fedka said, smiling. "He has a scraggly beard and keeps bees."

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

"Yes," said Fedka, "he will not obey the old woman."

After the point that the old man was brought into the hut, the work became animated. The students felt, evidently for the first time, the delight of clothing artistic details in words. Semka distinguished himself more than the rest in this: the truest details poured out one after the other. The only reproach that might be made to him was that his details rendered only the present moment, with no connection to the general mood of the story. I could hardly write everything down fast enough, and had to ask them to wait and not to forget what they had told me.

Semka seemingly saw and described exactly what was in his mind's eye: the stiff, frozen bast shoes*, the mud and dirty water that oozed out of them as they thawed, and the toast into which the shoes changed when the old woman threw them in the oven.

* *Bast shoes*: the wooden shoes typically worn by the Russian peasantry (see photo on p. 5).



Leo Tolstoy in 1861

Fedka, on the other hand, saw only those details that evoked in him the particular feelings he had for given characters. Fedka saw the snow drifting behind the beggar's cloth puttees* and felt the compassion with which the peasant said: "Lord, how it snows!" (Fedka's face even expressed how the peasant would have said it—he shook his head, swaying his hands.) Fedka saw, from the mass of rags and patches, an overcoat and a torn shirt, behind which the haggard body of the old man was visible, still wet from the thawing snow. Fedka created the old woman, who grumbled when her husband ordered her to take off the beggar's bast shoes, and the old man's pathetic groan as he muttered through his teeth: "Gently, mamakins, I have sores there."

Semka for the most part needed concrete images—the bast shoes, the overcoat, the old man, the woman—with almost no connection between them; Fedka evoked the feelings of pity that permeated him. Fedka forged ahead, telling how he would feed the old man, how he would fall in the night, and how later he would teach the boy in the field to read. I was obliged to ask Fedka not to be in such a hurry, and not to forget the things he had said. His eyes sparkled almost tearfully; his dark, thin little hands convulsed; he got angry with me, and kept urging me on. "Did you write that? Did you write that?" he kept asking.

* *Cloth puttees*: Russian peasants often wore leg wrappings up to the knees (see photo on p. 5).

Fedka treated his classmates despotically. He wanted to talk all the time—not as a story is told, but as it is written—that is, to clothe sensory images in words, like an artist. Thus, for example, he would not allow words to be transposed: if he said, "I have sores on my feet," he would not permit me to say, "On my feet I have sores." His soul, softened and provoked by sentiments of pity—that is, of love—dressed every image in an artistic form, and denied everything that did not correspond to an ideal of eternal beauty and harmony.

When Semka got carried away expressing innumerable details about the lambs in the entryway and so forth, Fedka grew angry and said, "What a lot of hogwash!" I needed only to suggest what the peasant might be doing while his wife went off to the neighbor, when in Fedka's imagination there would immediately arise a picture of lambs bleating in the doorway, the sigh of the old man and the delirium of the boy Seryozhka. If I were to suggest an artificial or a false image, Fedka would remark angrily that that image was extraneous. For example, I suggested a physical description of the peasant, which Fedka agreed to. But I had proposed to describe what the peasant was thinking when his wife had run off to the neighbor. Fedka was suddenly struck by the thought: "If you got in the way of Savoska the corpse, he'd tear all your hair out." Fedka said this in such a tired, calmly serious, and characteristically good-natured voice, head in hand, that the other children rolled with laughter.

The chief quality in every art, the feeling of measure, had developed in Fedka to an extraordinary degree. If one of the other boys suggested adding something superfluous, it sickened Fedka. Fedka ruled over the plot of the story so despotically, and with so much authority in his despotism, that the other boys soon went home, and only he and Semka, who would not give in to him when the two were at cross-purposes, were left.

We worked from seven to eleven o'clock; they felt neither hunger nor fatigue, and got angry at me whenever I stopped writing. They tried to relieve me in the task of writing, but soon gave up that idea as it did not work out. Fedka asked me my name, for the first time. We laughed at the fact that he had not known.

"I know what we call you," he said. "But what do they call you in the manor house? We have names like Fokanychev, Ziabrev, Ermilin."

I told him.

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

"Yes."

"Then we will have to print: Composed by Makarov, Morozov, and Tolstoy."*

Fedka was agitated for a long time and could not fall asleep. I cannot express the feeling of agitation, joy, fear, and near-regret that I myself experienced that evening. I

* Semka was the nickname of Ignat Makarov, Fedka that of Vassily Morozov.

felt that a new world of pleasure and suffering had opened up to Fedka: the world of art. I thought that I had gleaned an insight into what no one has the right to see: the germination of the secret flower of poetry.

I felt both dread and joy, like the treasure hunter who suddenly recognizes the amazing green color of ferns in the forest. I was glad, because suddenly and unexpectedly the philosophers' stone was revealed to me, what I had been vainly trying to find for two years: the art of teaching the expression of thought. Likewise, I felt dread because this art created new demands, a whole new world of desires that had no relation to the students' environment, or so it seemed to me then. There was no mistaking it. It was no accident, but a conscious creation.

I ask the reader to read the first chapter of the story and to note the rich evidence of true creative talent scattered through it: for example, the instance in which the old woman angrily complains about her husband to the neighbor, and—although the author clearly dislikes her—how she weeps when the neighbor reminds her of the ruin of her house. To the story's author, who takes cues from both reason and memory, the cross old woman represents the antithesis of the peasant—she makes her invitation to the neighbor for no other reason than to annoy her husband. Still, Fedka's artistic feelings reached out to the woman—note how she, too, weeps, fears, and suffers. To Fedka's mind, she is not guilty. From that follows the scene in which the neighbor 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 given Fedka the idea that the neighbor should put on a fur coat.

Fedka said, "It is more like him."

When I asked Fedka if it might be more apt to say the neighbor put on a man's fur coat, he said: "No, a woman's fur coat is better."

Indeed, the detail works extraordinarily well. At first it does not occur to one why it should be a woman's fur coat, and yet you feel that the detail is excellent and cannot be otherwise.

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

The neighbor in the woman's fur coat naturally presents us with a sickly, narrow-chested peasant, just as he should be. The addition of the woman's fur coat, carelessly thrown on the bench, then falling into his hands, presents us with the typical evening scene in the life of a peasant. The fur coat prompts you to imagine the late evening scene, the peasant sitting half-undressed by a lit torch, and the women coming and attending to the cattle—all the external disorder of peasant life, in which no one has his own proper clothes and nothing has a definite place. With one phrase, "He put on a woman's fur coat," the whole nature of the context in which the action takes place is clearly outlined. And this phrase is not accidental, but quite deliberate.

I still remember vividly how the peasant's words arose in Fedka's imagination, the words the peasant used when he found the paper he could not read: "If my Seryozha knew how to read and write, he'd jump up, tear this book out of my hands, read it from start to finish, and tell me exactly who this old man is."

One can almost see the relation of this working man to the book he is holding in his sunburnt hands. The kind man, the pious patriarch, stands before you in full. You sense the author has taken a deep liking to the peasant and therefore understands him, so that soon after the author lets him digress about how times are such nowadays that before one knows it, one's soul has perished.

I suggested the idea of the dream, but it was Fedka's idea to give the goat sores on its legs, and this peculiarity gave him much pleasure. The peasant, in a moment of reflection as his back itches—the whole scene with its nocturnal quiet—all is far from accidental, and the cumulative power of these details makes us feel the conscious power of the artist!

I also remember how when the peasant was supposed to be asleep, I proposed having him reflect on his son's future and the future of the relationship between the son and the old beggar—to let the old beggar teach Seryozhka to read, and so on.

Fedka frowned and said: "Yes, yes, that's good," but it was obvious that he did not like my suggestion, and twice he forgot about it.

The feeling for artistic measure was stronger in him than in any authors I know—that sense of measure that only a few artists acquire after immense labor and study—lived with its primeval force in Fedka's uncorrupted, child's soul.

I stopped the lesson because I had become much too agitated.

"What's wrong with you? You're so pale.... Are you ill?" my companion asked me. Indeed, only two or three times in my life have I experienced as strong a sensation as I did on that evening, and for a long time I was unable to account for what I was experiencing. I dimly felt as if I were surreptitiously watching a beehive behind glass, in which the work of the bees was concealed from mortal eyes. It seemed to me that I had corrupted the pure, primitive soul of a peasant boy. I dimly felt something like remorse for an act of sacrilege I had committed. I thought of those children, before whom idle and debauched old men cavort and to whom they show lewd pictures in order to titillate their weary and worn-out imaginations, but at the same time I was ecstatic, happy as a man who has seen something no one has seen before.

For a long time I was unable to account for this impression, though I felt that it was one that teaches a mature person something, leading him to a new stage of life, making him renounce the old and devote himself to the new. Even the next day I could not make myself believe my experience. It seemed strange to me that a half-literate peasant boy should suddenly arrive at such conscious artistic



Tolstoy's students at the Yasnaya Polyana school

powers—powers that Goethe, for all his immeasurable achievements, was unable to equal. It seemed strange and offensive to me that I, the author of *Childhood*, who had garnered some success and earned recognition for artistic talent from a cultivated Russian public—that I, in the matter of art, should be unable to teach anything to eleven-year-old Semka or Fedka, or to help them in any way, but that only with difficulty and in a happy moment of excitement should I be able to follow them or understand them. All that seemed so strange to me that I could not believe what had happened to me the previous day.

The next evening we sat down to continue the story. When I asked Fedka whether he had thought about how it should continue, he merely waved his hands about and said, “I know, I know! Who will write?” We set to work, and the children displayed the same enthusiasm and the same feelings for artistic truth and measure.

In the middle of the lesson I was obliged to leave them. They continued to write without me, and finished two pages that were just as good, just as well-felt, and just as true as the first page. The only thing about the two new pages was that the details were paler and less apt, and that there were two or three repetitions. All that was obviously due to the fact that the mechanics of writing had hampered them.

The same thing happened the third day. During the writing sessions other boys frequently joined us, and these boys often helped us out by adding their own fresh details. Semka came and went. Only Fedka saw the story through to its conclusion and considered all the proposed changes.

There could no longer be any doubt that our success was no accident: we had apparently found a method that was more natural and more conducive than anything tried

before. But it was all so unusual that I could not believe my eyes. It seemed some remarkable event was necessary to eradicate all my doubts. I was forced to leave [Yasnaya Polyana] for a few days, and the story remained unfinished. The manuscript, three large sheets covered with writing, was left in the room of a teacher to whom I had shown it.

Even before my departure, while I was busy composing, a new student demonstrated to our boys the art of making paper crackers and, as often happens, the whole school began a period of paper crackers—which followed a period of snowballs, and before it a period of whittling sticks. The period of paper crackers took place during my absence.

Semka and Fedka were among the singers who came to this teacher's room for rehearsals, and remained there whole evenings and even nights. Between and during the singing, it goes without saying that the paper crackers were the first order of business, and any form of paper that fell into the students' hands was transformed into a paper cracker.

The teacher went out for supper, having forgotten to mention that the papers on the table were important, and thus the manuscript of Makarov, Morozov, and Tolstoy was soon turned into paper crackers. The next day, before class, the cracking sounds of the paper crackers were so annoying that the students themselves agreed to ban paper crackers: the latter were confiscated with shouts and screams, and solemnly stuck into the fiery oven.

The period of paper crackers came to an end, but with it perished our manuscript. Never had any loss been so hard for me to bear as the loss of those three sheets of writing. I was in total despair. I wanted to give it all up and begin a new story, but I could not forget the loss, and every other

minute I couldn't help reproaching the teacher and the makers of the paper crackers.

(I should remark here that it was actually due to the external disorder and the complete freedom the students enjoy—which Mr. Markov so charmingly takes to task in the *Russian Messenger*, as does Mr. Glybov in the fourth number of *Education*—that I was able to learn, without the least effort, threats, or cunning, the whole complicated story in full detail of the transformation of the manuscript into paper crackers, and of the manuscript's consignment to the flames.)

Although they did not immediately understand the cause, Semka and Fedka saw I was distressed and sympathized with me. Finally Fedka timidly proposed to me that we begin another story.

"The two of you?" I asked. "I shall not help you now."

"Semka and I will stay here overnight," said Fedka.

And so they did. At nine o'clock, when the lessons were over, they came to the house and locked themselves in my office—which pleased me greatly—laughed awhile, and then grew quiet. Until midnight I could still hear them; every time I came to the door, they were talking to each other in low tones and scratching away with their pens. Only once did they debate about what should come first and what should come later—whether the old man looked for the wallet before the old woman went to the neighbor, or after—and they called upon me to judge. I told them it made no difference.

At midnight I knocked and asked to be let in. Fedka, in a new white fur coat with black trim, was sitting deep in the armchair with his legs crossed, leaning his shaggy little head on one hand and fumbling with a pair of scissors with the other. His big dark eyes, gleaming with an unnatural but serious and adult-seeming sparkle, were gazing into the distance; his irregular lips, pressed together as if about to whistle, apparently held in the word that he, having coined it in his imagination, was about to express.

Semka was standing at the large writing desk with a big white sheepskin over his back (tailors had recently been in the village), his belt loosened, his hair disheveled, writing in crooked lines and constantly jabbing his pen into the inkstand.

I tousled Semka's hair; his fat face—with its protruding cheekbones and that matted hair and those surprised and sleepy eyes—looked at me in fright. It was so funny that I burst out laughing. But the children did not laugh with me.

Without changing his expression, Fedka touched Semka on the sleeve and told him to go on writing. "You must wait," he said, "we'll be done soon." (Fedka addresses me with the familiar form of *you** whenever he is agitated or gets carried away by something.) He continued his dictation.

I took away their notebook. Five minutes later they had seated themselves near a small food safe, and were

helping themselves to potatoes and kvass. For some reason, they found the silver spoons hilarious, and roared with musical, childish laughter. Hearing them upstairs, an old woman also burst out laughing without knowing why.

"Don't slouch like that!" said Semka. "Sit straight, or you will eat to one side."

They took off their fur coats. Spreading them out under the writing desk they lay down to sleep, all the time pealing with their charming, childish, peasant laughter.

I read over what they had written. It was a new variant of the previous story. A few things had been left out, and a few new artistic gems had been added. Again there was the same feeling for beauty, truth, and measure. Sometime later, one sheet of the lost manuscript was found. In the printed story, recalling the lost version, I combined the two versions from memory.

The writing of this story took place in early spring, before the end of the school year. For various reasons I was unable to try new experiments. When I gave the students proverbs a second time, the result was only one story. This was written by two of the less good and more spoiled children, sons of the domestic staff. "He Who Is Glad of a Holiday Is Drunk Before Daybreak" was printed in the third number of *Yasnaya Polyana*. The same phenomena were repeated with these boys and this story as had occurred with Semka and Fedka and the first story, only the degree of talent was not the same, nor was the level of enthusiasm and cooperation on my part.

In the summer we never have had and never will have school. We shall devote a separate article to the reasons teaching is impossible in our school during the summer months.*

For part of the summer, Fedka and some of the other boys lived with me. After a swim and tired of playing, they took it into their heads to work. I proposed that they write compositions, and gave them several themes. I told them an entertaining story about the theft of some money, a story of a murder, and a story of the marvelous conversion of a milkman to Orthodoxy. I also proposed writing the autobiography of a boy whose father is sent into the army, and to whom the father later returns a reformed, good man.

"I would write it like this," I said. "I remember that, as a child, I had a father, a mother, and some other relatives. I would tell who they were. Then I would write that I remember how my father went out on the town while my mother wept, and how he beat her; then how he was drafted into the army; how she wept; how life became worse; how father returned, and as if I didn't recognize him, he asked whether Matryona—his wife—was alive; and how everyone was happy, and we began to live well."

That was all I said at first. Fedka took a great liking to this theme. He immediately took up pen and paper and began to write. While he wrote I planted thoughts about the sister and about the grandmother's death. The rest he wrote

* Russian, like French, has two forms of the second-person pronoun. Typically, a student would *never* use the familiar form when addressing a teacher.

* This article never appeared—Ed.

himself; he didn't show me anything except the first chapter until it was all done.

When he showed me the first chapter and I began to read it, I could sense that he was terribly agitated. He held his breath while he watched my eyes scan the manuscript, trying to glean from them an expression of approval or disapproval.

When I told him it was very good, he flushed but said nothing. With excited but quiet steps he walked up to the desk, set the notebook down, and walked slowly out into the yard. Once outside he was wild and short-tempered with the other boys during the day, and whenever our eyes met he looked at me with grateful, tender eyes. By the next day he had forgotten entirely about what he had written.

I came up with a title and divided the story into chapters, here and there correcting mistakes made due to carelessness. The original version of the story is being published in pamphlet form under the title "The Life of a Soldier's Wife."

I am not speaking of the first chapter, although there are some inimitable beauties there, and although in it heedless Gordyei is represented exceedingly vividly and true to life—Gordyei, who is ashamed to confess his repentance and who regards it as proper to plead to the Town Council only for his son's welfare—despite this, the chapter is drastically weaker than all that follows. The fault is mine alone, for I could not hold back during the writing from making suggestions to Fedka and telling him how I might have written the chapter. If there is a certain triteness in the introduction, in the description of persons and dwellings, I alone am to blame for it. If I had left Fedka alone, I am sure he would have described the same actions subtly, more artistically, without using the accepted and truly impossible method of logically distributing the descriptions, which consists in describing first the *dramatis personae*—even giving their histories—then the locale and surroundings, all before describing the action itself.

The odd thing about it is that these various descriptions, which sometimes run to dozens of pages, acquaint the reader with *dramatis personae* much less effectively than would a careless but artistic detail dropped into an action already in progress, among characters totally unfamiliar to the reader. Thus even in this first chapter, Gordyei's singular phrase "That is all I need"—when he renounces everything and acquiesces to his fate as a soldier, and only asks the Town Council not to abandon his son—this phrase acquaints the reader much better with Gordyei than a description of his attire, physique, or his habit of frequenting the tavern, which I repeatedly pressed on Fedka. The same effect is produced by the words of the old woman, who always scolded her son, when in her grief she enviously remarks to her daughter-in-law: "That's enough, Matryona! What are we going to do? It was apparently what God wished! Look, you're still young—maybe God will bring him back to you. But me, I'm so old and so sick that I could die any minute."

In the second chapter there are still traces of triteness due to my tampering, but here again the profoundly artistic detail in the description of the pictures and of the boy's death redeems the whole enterprise. I prompted Fedka to say that the boy had thin little legs; I also suggested the sentimental details about Uncle Nefed, who makes the little coffin. But the mother's lament—expressed simply with "Lord, when will this burden end?"—presents the reader with the whole essence of the situation. That night, when the older son is wakened by the mother's tears, the mother responds to the grandmother's inquiry of what the matter is with the simple words "My son has died," and the grandmother gets up, makes a fire, and washes the little body of the dead infant son—all this is Fedka's own. It is all so compressed, so simple, so strong, that one word cannot be omitted, changed, or added. There are five lines in all, and those five lines paint a picture of that whole sad night for the reader—a picture reflected in the imagination of a six- or seven-year-old boy.

"My mother started crying about something in the middle of the night. Grandmother got up and said, "What's the matter? Christ is with you!"

Mother said, "My son is dead."

Grandmother lit a fire, washed the boy's body, put a shirt on him, girded him, and laid him in front of the icons. When it became light...."

You see the boy, awakened by the familiar tears of his mother, emerging sleepily from under a caftan somewhere on the sleeping bunk, watching the goings-on in the hut with frightened and sparkling eyes; you see the exhausted wife, the soldier's widow—who but the day before had said "When will this burden end?"—repentant and so crushed by her infant son's death that she only says "My son has died"; not knowing what to do, she calls to the grandmother for help. You see the old woman, worn out by the sufferings of life, bent over, emaciated, with bony limbs, as she calmly takes hold of the work with hands used to labor; she lights a torch, brings water, and washes the baby; she puts everything in the right place and lays out the body, washed and dressed, under the icons. And you see the icons, and the sleepless night through to daybreak, as though you yourself were living through it, as that boy [the narrator] lived through it, looking out from under the caftan; that night rises before you in full detail and stays in your imagination.

In the third chapter there is less of my influence. The character of the sister belongs entirely to Fedka. Even in the first chapter he characterizes the relationship between the sister and her family in one sentence: "Only my sister worked—for her dowry, not for the family—she bought new clothes and was preparing to marry." This one detail depicts the girl for who she is: she cannot take part—and does not really want to take part—in the joys and travails of the family. She has her own legitimate interests; her only goal, decreed by Providence, is her future marriage.

One of our fellow authors, especially one who wants to instruct the people by offering them moral models worthy of imitation, would have certainly have stereotyped the sister by the [lack of] interest she takes in the common needs and sorrows of the family. This author would have made her a disgraceful example of indifference, or a model of love and self-sacrifice, and there would have been an idea of the sister, not a living person. Only a person who has profoundly studied and learned life could understand that for the sister the question of the family's bereavement, and of the father's conscription, was legitimately a secondary question: she has her marriage to think about.

This very thing, in the simplicity of his heart, the child, though a child, sees as an artist. If we had described the sister as a completely sympathetic, self-sacrificing girl, we would not have been able to imagine her at all, and we would not be able to love her as we love her now. Now there stands before me the dear, living figure of a ruddy, fat-cheeked peasant girl, running off in the evening to the round dance in shoes and a red cotton kerchief bought with the money she's earned, loving her family, but burdened by its poverty and gloom, which are in such contrast to her own mood.

I feel that the sister is good, if for no other reason than that her mother never complains about her or is aggrieved by her. Moreover, I feel that the sister—with her concern for clothes, with the snatches of hummed songs, the gossip she hears during the summer field work or on the street in wintertime—was the representative of mirth, youth, and hope during the sad time of the soldier's wife's loneliness. Fedka says rightly that their only joy is when the sister marries. 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 our ruin is complete." It is apparent that, by letting the sister go, they have lost the joy and merriment which she brought to the house.

The whole description of the wedding is unusually good. There are some details there that simply stagger one; remembering that it is an eleven-year-old boy who wrote it, you ask yourself, "Is it possible this was just an accident?" Behind the strong, compressed description you see just the eleven-year-old boy, no taller than the table, with his bright and intelligent little eyes, to whom nobody pays any attention, but who notices and remembers everything.

When, for example, the little boy wanted some bread, Fedka did not say that the boy asked his mother for it, but that he "bent his mother down." This is said not by accident, but because Fedka is recalling his own relationship with his mother at that stage of growth, and because he remembers how that relationship receded in the presence of others, and how familiar he and his mother were when it was just the two of them. There is another thing he chose and noted down from the mass of observations he could have made about the wedding ceremony, because to him—

and to each of us—it captures the whole character of the ceremony: when they are told "Kiss!" the sister grabs Kondrashka by the ears, and they begin to kiss. Then the death of the grandmother, her recollection of her son prior to death, and the special character of the mother's grief—all this is so sure and so compressed, and it is all strictly Fedka's own.

When I gave Fedka the plot of the story, I talked with him most about the father's return. I liked that scene, and told it to him in a trite and sentimental way. He, too, liked the scene and said: "Don't tell me anything! I know it all myself, I know it." He sat down to write, and finished the story in one sitting.

It will be interesting for me to know other judges' opinions, but I consider it my duty frankly to express my own. I have not come across anything like these pages in Russian literature. In the whole episode there is not one reference to its having been touching—everything is described simply, how it happened—there is only what is necessary for the reader to understand the characters and the scene.

Once home, the soldier says only three sentences. At first he braces himself and says: "Hello!" When he begins to forget the role he must play, he says, "Is this all the family you've got?" And everything is conveyed by the question, "Where is my mother?"

What simple and natural words these all are, and not one of the characters is left out! The boy is happy and even weeps; but he is a child, and so in spite of his father's tears he keeps examining his father's wallet and looking in his pockets. Nor is the sister forgotten. It's easy to see that ruddy woman, who, in her shoes and fine clothes timidly enters the room and without saying a word kisses the father. You see the embarrassed and happy soldier, who kisses everyone in succession without knowing who they all are, and who, upon learning that the young woman is his daughter, calls her to him again and kisses her a second time, not as a young woman but as a daughter whom he had once left behind without any thought.

The father has reformed. How many false and inept phrases could have been used here! But Fedka simply tells how the sister brings some vodka, but the father does not drink it. You just see the mother, breathing heavily, take the last twenty-three kopecks out of her purse. With whispers she sends her daughter in the hall to go out for more, and deposits the copper money in her open hand.

You see the young woman who, raising her apron with her hand, has a half-bottle underneath it. Clumping her shoes and swinging her elbows she runs down to the tavern. You see her enter the house with a flushed face and take the bottle out from underneath the apron, and you see the mother place it on the table with an expression of self-satisfaction and joy, and how she feels both annoyed and happy that her husband has stopped drinking. And you see that he has truly reformed, because he will not drink even on this special occasion. You feel that the members of the family have become different people.

My father said a prayer before he sat down at the table. I sat down beside him; Sister sat on the bench, and Mother stood by the table looking at my father. She said, "You know, you look so much younger without your beard." Everyone laughed.

Only when the others have all left does the real family discussion begin. Only then is it revealed that the soldier has become rich. He has become rich in the simplest and most natural way, as nearly all people in the world become rich—that is, through money that did not belong to him, which came into his hands through a lucky accident. Some of the readers of the story remarked that this detail was immoral, and that the perception of the state as a milk cow needs to be eradicated, not strengthened, among the masses. But to me this detail—its artistic truth aside—is particularly pleasing. The Crown's monies always get waylaid somewhere—why not in the hands of the poor, itinerant soldier, Gordyei?

We often encounter diametrically opposed conceptions of honesty in the masses on the one hand and the upper classes on the other. The demands of the people are particularly serious and strong in respect to the honesty of close relations—for example, the family, the village, or the commune. With outsiders—the public, the government, the treasury, and foreigners especially—the application of the common rules of honesty becomes vague. The same peasant who will never lie to his brother and who will endure all kinds of hardships for his family, who will take not an extra or undeserved kopeck from his neighbor or fellow villager—will strip a foreigner or a townsman like a linden switch, and will tell strings of lies to a nobleman and an official; if a soldier, that peasant will stab a captive Frenchman without the slightest remorse; and if state funds fall into his hands, he will not regard it as a crime—at least not before his family—to take advantage of them.

In the upper classes, on the contrary, quite the opposite occurs. A man from our class will just as soon deceive a wife, a brother, or a merchant with whom he has had dealings for dozens of years, or his servants, his serfs, and his neighbors. But when this man is abroad he is forever consumed by fear lest he cheat someone and always wants it pointed out to him to whom he owes money. This same gentleman will stiff his company and regiment to get money for his champagne and gloves, and yet will shower civilities on the captive Frenchman. This same man regards it as the greatest crime to make use of the Crown's money when he is penniless. But he only *regards* it as such, for typically he won't stand on such high ground when the opportunity presents itself, and will commit the very deed he regards as entirely underhanded.

I am not saying which is better; I am only telling it as it is, as it appears to me. I will only 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, the only way is to start with our relationships with those closest to us. The expression "honest convictions" is, for

me, absolutely meaningless: there are honest habits, not honest convictions.

"Honest convictions" is an empty phrase; for this reason those supposedly honest convictions which refer to the remotest conditions of life—to the Crown's monies, to the government, to Europe, to humankind—these things are not grounded in honest habit and are not informed by near and vital relations. Because of this, these "honest convictions"—or rather, these empty phrases—prove inadequate in relation to life.

I return to the story. The mention of the money taken from the Crown—which at first appears immoral—conversely has, in our opinion, a quite charming and touching character. How often a *littérateur* of our circles, his simple soul wishing to present his hero as the paragon of honesty, shows us the whole dirty and corrupt interior of his own imagination! Here, on the contrary, the author needs to make his hero happy: for happiness, the hero's return to his family might suffice, but the author must also wipe out the poverty that has been weighing so heavily on the family for so many years. From where was the hero to find necessary wealth? From the faceless State. Only to offer wealth, one must get it first—and this was the most lawful and clever way he could find.

In the same scene in which the money comes up, there is a tiny detail, one word whose novelty strikes me each time I read it. It sheds light on the whole picture, colors in all the characters and the relationships between them. This one word—used incorrectly, from the point of syntax—is the word *hastened*. A teacher of syntax would be obliged to say so. *Hastened* requires a modifier: "Hastened to do what?" the teacher must ask. But the story simply goes: "Mother took the money and hastened and carried it away to hide it." I wish I myself had chosen such a word, and I wish that language teachers might say or write such a sentence.

When we had eaten, Sister kissed Father again, and went home. Then Father began to rifle through his wallet as Mother and I looked on. Mother saw a little book there, and says: "Oh, you have learned to read?"

Father said, "I have."

Then Father took out a big bundle from his bag and gave it to mother.

Mother said, "What is this?"

Father said, "Money."

Mother was happy and hastened and carried it away to hide it. Then Mother came back, and said, "Where did you get it?"

Father said, "I was an under-officer and had government 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 was over, and evening came. They lit 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 went to bed. I lay down on the back bench with Father, and Mother lay down at our feet, and they talked for a long time, almost till midnight. Then we fell asleep.



The town of Yasnaya Polyana

Here again we have a noticeable but hardly striking detail that leaves a deep impression: how they go to bed. The father lies down with his son, the mother at their feet, and it's a long time before they tire of talking. How ardently, I think, the son must have pressed himself to his father's chest, and what joy and happiness it was for the son, falling asleep and waking again, hearing the two voices, one of which he had not heard for so long.

It seems as if it's all over: the father has returned, and there is no poverty. But Fedka was not content with this (his imaginary people are so alive, so deeply seated in his imagination). He felt the need to create a vivid picture of their changed life: how the woman is no longer alone, a grieving soldier's wife with small babies; how there is now a strong man in the house, who will take from his wife's shoulders the burden of grief and grinding poverty; and how independently, firmly, and joyfully a new life begins.

He paints for us only one scene: the powerful soldier chops some wood with a notched ax and brings it into the house. You see the sharp-eyed boy, used to the groans of his feeble mother and grandmother, admiring the bared, muscular arms of his father with wonder, respect, and pride; the energetic swinging of the ax, simultaneous with the chesty sighs of masculine labor; and the block of wood, like a piece of kindling, split under the notched ax. You see this, and your mind is eased completely about the future life of the soldier's wife. "Now she will not be lost, the dear," I think to myself.

In the morning, Mother got up, went over to Father, and said, "Gordyei, get up! I need some wood to make a fire in the stove."

Father got up, dressed himself, put on his cap, and said, "Do you have an ax?"

Mother said, "I have...it is notched—maybe it won't cut."

My father took the ax firmly in both hands, walked over to the block of wood, stood it on end, swung the ax with all his might, and split the block; he chopped up some wood and carried

it over to the house. Mother lit a fire in the hut and stoked it, and soon it grew light.

But to the artist, this seems paltry. He wants to show us another side of their lives, the poetry of happy family life, and so he paints the following picture for us:

After daybreak, my father said: "Matryona!"

My mother came up and said, "Well, what?"

Father said, "I am thinking of buying a cow, five sheep, two horses, and a new house—this one is falling to pieces—well, that will take about 150 rubles."

Mother, lost in thought a while, said, "Well, then we will spend all the money."

Father said, "We will begin to work."

Mother said, "All right, we'll buy all these things, but where will we get the lumber?"

Father said, "Doesn't Kiryukha have any?"

Mother said, "That's the trouble. The Fokanychevs have taken it all."

Father thought a while, and said, "Well, we'll get it from Brantsev."

Mother said, "I doubt if he has any."

Father said, "Why wouldn't he? He's sitting on a forest."

Mother said, "I'm afraid he will ask too much. He's such a beast."

Father said, "I will go to him with some vodka and maybe come to an understanding with him, and you bake some eggs in the ashes for dinner."

Mother got some dinner ready—she borrowed from her friends. Father took the vodka and went to Brantsev's, and we sat and waited for a long time. I felt lonely without Father. I began to ask Mother to let me go after Father.

Mother said, "You will lose your way."

I began to cry and wanted to go, but Mother slapped me, and I sat on the stove and cried more than ever. Then I saw Father enter the hut. He came toward me and said, "Why are you crying?"

Mother said, "Fedka wanted to run after you, and I gave him a beating."

Father walked over to me and he said, "What are you crying about?"

I began to complain about Mother. Father went up to Mother and pretended to beat her in jest, saying: "Don't beat Fedya! Don't beat Fedya!"

Mother pretended to cry. I sat down on Father's knees and was happy. Then Father sat down at the table with me at his side and shouted: "Mother, give Fedka and me something to eat—we're hungry!"

And Mother gave us some beef, and we began to eat. When we were done eating, Mother said, "What about the lumber?"

Father said, "Fifty rubles in silver."

Mother said, "That is not bad."

Father said, "It goes without saying that it's fine lumber."

It seems so simple: so little is said, and you see in perspective their whole domestic life. You see that the boy is still a child, who will cry one minute and the next will be happy; you see that the boy is unable to appreciate his mother's love, and that he has swapped her for the virile father chopping the block of wood; you see that the mother knows that it must be so, and is not jealous; you see the wondrous Gordyei, whose heart is overflowing with happiness.

You note that they ate beef. This is lovely comedy, which they all play knowing that it is a comedy, and which they are led to play by an excess of happiness. "Don't beat Fedka! Don't beat Fedka!" says the father, waving his hand at her. And the mother, who is used to unfeigned tears, pretends to cry, smiling joyfully at the father and son; and the little boy who climbs up on his father's knees is proud and happy, not knowing why—proud and happy, no doubt, because now they are all happy.

"Then Father sat down at the table with me at his side and shouted: 'Mother, give Fedka and me something to eat—we are hungry!'"

"We are hungry," he says and he seats Fedka by his side. What love and happy pride of love breathes in these words! There is nothing more lovely and heartfelt in the whole lovely story than this last scene.

But what do we mean to say by all this? What importance does this story—written, perhaps, by an exceptional boy—have pedagogically? They will tell us: "You, the teacher, may have unconsciously helped in the composition of this and other stories, and to define what belongs to you and what is original would be exceedingly difficult."

They will tell us: "We will admit that the story is good, but as literature it is of the one-dimensional variety."

They will tell us: "Fedka and the other boys whose compositions you printed are the happy exceptions."

They will tell us: "You yourself are a writer, and without knowing it you have been leading the students up paths that essentially cannot be taught by teachers who are not authors themselves."

They will tell us: "From all this it is impossible to derive a common rule or theory. It is merely partial evidence of an interesting phenomenon, nothing else."

[...]

It's impossible and absurd to teach and educate a child for the simple reason that the child stands closer than I do—and than any grown-up 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 lies more powerfully in him than in me. All he needs of me is the necessary material to fulfill himself, harmoniously and multifariously. The moment I gave Fedka complete freedom and stopped teaching him, he wrote a poetic work, one that is unique in Russian literature. And thus it is my conviction that we cannot teach children in general, and peasant children in particular, to write and to compose—particularly artistic works. All that we need teach them is how to set about writing.

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

Give a wide variety of themes—not ones you've invented especially for children, but those that seem most serious and interesting to you, the teacher.

Give the children children's work to read, and give them only children's work as models, for children's compositions are always more correct, more artistic, and morally truer than adults' work.

Most important, when looking through a piece composed by a student, never make any comments about the neatness of the notebook, about penmanship, spelling, and above all, about sentence structure or logic.

Since the difficulty of composing stories doesn't lie in the volume, content, or artistic quality of the given themes, the sequence of themes need not be based on volume, content, or language, but rather on logistics: first, selecting one out of a large number of presented ideas and images; second, choosing the right words for clothing a particular image or idea; third, remembering that one idea or image and finding a place for it; fourth, not repeating or leaving out anything, and successfully unifying what comes before with what comes after; fifth, and finally, thinking and writing at the same time, without letting one interfere with the other. To attain this goal, I did the following: a few of the aspects of the work I at first took upon myself, gradually turning them over to the students' care. At first I chose the ideas and images I considered best. I kept these in mind, and pointed them out when appropriate. I consulted what had already been written, kept the students from repeating themselves, and played the role of scribe, leaving the students free to clothe the images and ideas in words. I had them make their own choices, then consult the written text themselves, until finally—as in the case of "The Life of a Soldier's Wife"—they had taken the entire process of writing into their own hands.

—Translated by Christopher Edgar



A Walk in the Woods

Or, What Is Art?

by Leo Tolstoy

The following passage is from Tolstoy's essay, "The School at Yasnaya Polyana"—*Editor*.

OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL, in the open air, new relations between the students and teachers establish themselves, despite all the liberties granted the students in school. The greater liberty, simplicity, and trust between the students and teachers outside the school are our ideal for what we should strive for *in* the school.

Recently we read Gogol's "Elf-king" with the oldest class. The last scenes had a powerful effect on them and stirred up their imagination. Several in the crowd tried to look like witches, recalling the previous night.

It had not been not cold out—a moonless winter night with clouds in the sky. We stopped at the crossroads. The older, third-year students stopped near me, inviting me to accompany them further; the younger ones looked at me a while and sped downhill. The younger ones had begun to study with a new teacher, and I no longer had the rapport with them that I had with the older boys.

"Come on, let's go to the preserve (a small forest some two hundred paces from the house)," said one of them. Fedka, a small boy of ten with a tender, impressionable, poetic, and bold nature, was the most persistent in his demands. Danger seems to be his main recipe for enjoyment. In the summer it always made me shudder to see him swim out to the very middle of the pond, which is some 350 feet wide, with two other boys, and now and then disappear in the hot reflections of the summer sun. Fedka would then swim over the deepest part, turning on his back and sending up a spout of water, calling out in a thin voice to his companions on the shore so that they could see what a fine fellow he is.

Fedka knew that there were wolves in the forest, and therefore he wanted to go to the preserve. The others chimed in, and so the four of us headed off to the forest. Another boy, who I'll call Semka—a lad of about twelve, healthy both morally and physically, who goes by the nickname of Vavilo—walked ahead and kept calling to someone in the distance in a high, shrill voice. Pronka, a sickly, meek, and exceptionally talented boy—the son of a poor family and sickly, I think, mainly due to an insufficient diet—walked alongside me.

Fedka was walking between Semka and me, talking away in his extremely soft voice, first telling us how in the summer he had watched over some horse here and then saying that he

was not afraid of anything. "Suppose something should jump out at us?" he asked, insisting that I answer. We did not go into the forest itself—that would have been too scary—but even at the forest's edge it had become darker. We could hardly see the path, and lights in the village were hidden from view.

Semka stopped and began to listen closely. "Stop, boys! What is that?" he said suddenly.

We grew silent, but nothing was audible; nonetheless, our fear increased.

"Well, what would we do if a wolf jumped out and came right at us?" Fedka asked.

We began to talk about robbers in the Caucasus. They recalled a story about the Caucasus I had told them long before, about the Abreks, the Cossacks, and Hadji Murad. Semka went ahead of us, taking long steps in his big boots and evenly swaying his strong back. Pronka tried to walk beside me, but Fedka pushed him off the path. Pronka, who probably always submitted to such treatment on account of his poverty, ran up alongside me only during the most interesting passages, even though he sank knee-deep in the snow as he did this.

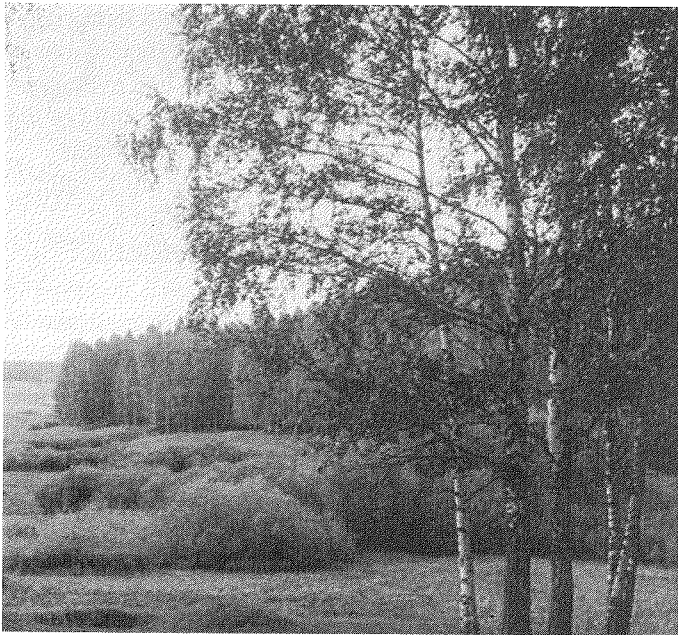
Anyone who knows anything about peasant children has noticed that they are not accustomed to any kind of affection—tender words, kisses, being touched, and so on. I happened to see a lady in a peasant school who, wishing to treat a peasant boy kindly, said, "Come, darling, let me kiss you!" She actually kissed him, and the kissed boy was so embarrassed and offended because he couldn't fathom why this should be done to him. A boy of five years of age is above these caresses—he is already a "lad." Therefore I was quite struck when Fedka, walking by my side, suddenly touched me during the scariest part of the story, first lightly, then holding two of my fingers with his whole hand. He would not let them go. The moment I grew silent, Fedka demanded that I keep talking, and he did this in such an imploring and agitated voice that I could not help but give in to his wish.

At one point Fedka yelled, "Don't get in my way!" at Pronka, who had run ahead. He had become carried away to the point of cruelty. He felt both terror and joy as he held onto my fingers, and no one should dare interrupt his pleasure.

"Come on, more, more! That's right!"

We passed the forest and began to approach the village from the other end.

"Let's go farther," all cried when the lights of the village became visible. "Let's keep going!"



The woods near Yasnaya Polyana

We walked in silence, now and then sinking in the loose, untrodden path. The white darkness seemed to sway before our eyes; the clouds were low, as though falling upon us. There was no end to the whiteness on which we crunched alone through the snow. The wind rustled through the bare tops of the aspens, but where we were, behind the forest, it was quiet.

I finished my story with the Abrek being surrounded, beginning to sing songs, and then throwing himself on his dagger. All were silent.

“Why did he begin singing when they surrounded him?” asked Semka.

“Didn’t you hear? He was getting ready to die!” Fedka replied dolefully.

“I think it was a prayer he sang,” added Pronka.

All agreed. Fedka suddenly stopped. “How was it you said they cut your aunt’s throat?”* he asked, having not had enough terror for one day. “Tell us! Tell us!”

I told them once more the terrible story of the murder of Countess Tolstoy, and they stood silently around me, gazing into my face.

“The fellow got caught!” said Semka.

“It must have really frightened him to walk through the night, while she lay with her throat cut,” said Fedka. “I would have run away!” and his grip moved up on my two fingers.

We stopped in the grove beyond the threshing floors at the end of the village. Semka picked up a stick from the snow and began hitting the frozen trunk of a linden tree with it. The hoarfrost fell off the branches onto his cap, and the lonely banging resounded through the forest.

“Lev Nikolaevich,” said Fedka (I thought he wanted to say something about the countess), “why do people learn singing? I often really wonder why they sing.”

God knows what made him leapfrog from the terrors of murder to this question, but through everything—the sound of his voice, the seriousness with which he wanted an answer, the silent interest of the other two boys—I could feel a real and legitimate connection between this question and the previous conversation. Whether or not the connection consisted in my explaining the possibility of crime from ignorance (I had talked to them about this), and Fedka’s act of transferring himself into the murderer’s soul and then recalling his own favorite occupation (Fedka has a charming voice and immense musical talent), or whether the connection consisted in his feeling that the time had come for the conversation to become heartfelt and that in his soul questions were bubbling up demanding solutions, Fedka’s question did not surprise any of us.

“What is drawing for? And what is the good of writing?” I asked, positively not knowing how to explain to him what art is for.

“What is drawing for?” Fedka repeated thoughtfully. He was actually asking me what art is for. I did not dare and did not know how to explain it to him.

“What is drawing for?” said Semka. “You draw everything, so you know how to make things from it.”

“No, that’s drafting,” said Fedka. “But why do you draw figures?”

Semka’s healthy nature was not at a loss: “What is a stick for? What is a linden for?” he asked, still hitting the linden tree with his stick.

“Yes, what is a linden tree for?” I asked.

“To make rafters with,” replied Semka.

“What is it for in the summer, when it has not yet been cut down?”

“For nothing.”

“No, really,” Fedka kept at it, “why does a linden grow?” And we began to talk about how there is a usefulness to things, and about how there is also beauty and how art is beauty, and we all understood each other, and Fedka understood fully why a linden grows and why people sin. Pronka agreed with us, but he understood beauty in more moral terms—as goodness. Semka, with his great intelligence, understood correctly, but did not see beauty without usefulness. He was dubious. This often happens with people of great intelligence who feel that art is a force, but at the same time feel in their souls no need of that force. Like them, Semka wanted to approach art with his intellect, and he tried to start the fire [of art] in himself by himself.

“Let’s sing ‘He Who’ [a hymn] tomorrow. I remember my part,” said Semka. Semka has a fine ear, but no taste or gracefulness in his singing.

Fedka understood completely that the linden is beautiful because of its leafiness, and that it is pleasing to look at in summer—and apart from that, nothing else is needed.

* Avdotya Maximovna, Tolstoy’s aunt, was murdered by her serf cook in 1861.

Pronka understood that it is a shame to cut down a linden, because like us it is alive: “Drinking birch sap is just the same as drinking blood.” Semka said almost nothing, but made it clear that he did not think there was much use in a linden when it is rotten.

It feels strange to me to repeat what we said on that evening, but I remember we talked through everything, it seemed to me, there is to say on the subjects of utility and of physical and moral beauty.

We headed for the village. Fedka had not let go of my hand—from gratitude, I thought. We were so close to one another that night, as we had not been for some time. Pronka walked beside us along the wide village street.

“Gosh, a light is still burning in Mazanov’s house!” Pronka said. “As I was going to school today, Gavryukha was coming from the tavern,” he added, “drunk, beyond drunk! The horse was all in a lather and he kept tanning her hide—these things always make me feel sorry. They do! What does he beat her for?”

“The other day Father gave his horse free rein, coming from Tula,” said Semka, “and the horse took him into a snowdrift, but he was drunk and asleep.”

“Gavryukha kept whipping her across the eyes. I felt so sorry,” Pronka said again. “What did he beat her for? He got down and whipped her.”

Semka suddenly stopped.

“They are asleep,” he said, looking through the windows of the black, crooked hut where he lived. “Won’t you walk a little more?”

“No.”

“Gooooood-bye, Lev Nikolaevich!” Semka suddenly shouted, and, as though forcibly tearing himself away from us, he ran for his house quick as a lynx, raised the latch, and disappeared.

“So you will take us home? First one, then the other?” asked Fedka.

We walked on. In Pronka’s house there was a light on. We looked through the window: his mother, a tall, beautiful, but haggard-looking woman with black brows and eyes, was sitting at the table and cleaning potatoes. In the middle of the room hung a candle; one of Pronka’s brothers, the mathematician in the upper class, was standing at the table, eating potatoes with salt. The hut was tiny, dirty, and black.

“So you’re not lost after all!” the mother yelled at Pronka. “Where have you been?”

Pronka gave a meek, sickly smile while looking at the window. The mother guessed that he was not alone, and immediately changed her natural expression to a poorly feigned one.

Now only Fedka was left.

“The tailors are at our house, so there is a light on,” he said in the soft voice he had used that evening. “Good-bye, Lev Nikolaevich!” he added softly and tenderly, and began to knock with the ring on the locked door. “Let me in!” his thin voice rang out through the winter quiet of the village.

A long time passed before they let him in. I glanced through the window. The hut was a large one. Legs and feet could be seen on the stove and on the benches. His father was playing cards with the tailors—some copper coins were lying on the table. A woman, the boy’s stepmother, was sitting near the torch-stand, looking greedily at the money. One tailor, a real scoundrel, held his cards on the table, bending them like bark and looking triumphantly at his partner. Fedka’s father, his collar unbuttoned, was scowling from the mental strain and vexation, fumbling with his cards in indecision and waving his toughened peasant hand over them.

“Let me in!” Fedka called.

The woman got up and went to open the door.

“Good-bye!” Fedka said once more. “Let’s always take walks like that.”

—Translated by Christopher Edgar



The articles in this issue came from T&W’s new book, *Tolstoy as Teacher: Leo Tolstoy’s Writings on Education*, edited by Bob Blaisdell and translated by Christopher Edgar. This book developed from Blaisdell’s article, “Tolstoy, the Teacher,” which appeared in *Teachers & Writers*, Vol. 29, No. 2.

Before John Dewey, and long before Kenneth Koch, there was Leo Tolstoy. After visiting Western Europe to research the schools there in 1861, Tolstoy returned to Russia brimming with progressive and sometimes radical ideas on education. Tolstoy taught his students at Yasnaya Polyana in many subjects—including imaginative writing. The school was a paradise for Tolstoy, and he published

many articles about his teaching experiences. This new collection features the most important of Tolstoy’s writings on education and two short stories by Tolstoy’s students. *Tolstoy as Teacher* also includes an introductory essay that examines the role of the school in Tolstoy’s life and work, an annotated bibliography, and an essay with ideas on how to use Tolstoy’s fiction to inspire students to write imaginatively. This book will surprise and delight writers, teachers of imaginative writing from elementary to college level, teachers of English and other subjects, and anyone interested in education or in Tolstoy’s work and thought. This 264 pp. paperback is available from T&W for \$16.95 plus \$4 shipping and handling.