

# REMINISCENCES OF TOLSTOY

BY HIS SON,

Count Ilya Tolstoy

Translated By George Calderon

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## **REMINISCENCES OF TOLSTOY (Part I.)**

IN one of his letters to his great-aunt, Alexandra Andreyevna Tolstoy, my father gives the following description of his children:

The eldest [Sergei] is fair-haired and good-looking; there is something weak and patient in his expression, and very gentle. His laugh is not infectious; but when he cries, I can hardly refrain from

crying, too. Every one says he is like my eldest brother.

I am afraid to believe it. It is too good to be true. My brother's chief characteristic was neither egotism nor self-renunciation, but a strict mean between the two. He never sacrificed himself for any one else; but not only always avoided injuring others, but also interfering with them. He kept his happiness and his sufferings entirely to himself.

Ilya, the third, has never been ill in his life; broad-boned, white and pink, radiant, bad at lessons. Is always thinking about what he is told not to think about. Invents his own games. Hot-tempered and violent, wants to fight at once; but is also tender-hearted and very sensitive. Sensuous; fond of eating and lying still doing nothing.

Tanya [Tatyana] is eight years old. Every one says that she is like Sonya, and I believe them, although I am pleased about that, too; I believe it only because it is obvious. If she had been Adam's eldest daughter and he had had no other children afterward, she would have passed a wretched childhood. The greatest pleasure that she has is to look after children.

The fourth is Lyoff. Handsome, dexterous, good memory, graceful. Any clothes fit him as if they had been made for him. Everything that others do, he does very skilfully and well. Does not understand much yet.

The fifth, Masha [Mary] is two years old, the one whose birth nearly cost Sonya her life. A weak and sickly child. Body white as milk, curly white hair; big, queer blue eyes, queer by reason of their deep, serious expression. Very intelligent and ugly. She will be one of the riddles; she will suffer, she will seek and find nothing, will always be seeking what is least attainable.

The sixth, Peter, is a giant, a huge, delightful baby in a mob-cap, turns out his elbows, strives eagerly after something. My wife falls into an ecstasy of agitation and emotion when she holds him in her arms; but I am completely at a loss to understand. I know that he

has a great store of physical energy, but whether there is any purpose for which the store is wanted I do not know. That is why I do not care for children under two or three; I don't understand.

This letter was written in 1872, when I was six years old. My recollections date from about that time. I can remember a few things before.

## **FAMILY LIFE IN THE COUNTRY**

FROM my earliest childhood until the family moved into Moscow—that was in 1881—all my life was spent, almost without a break, at Yasnaya Polyana.

This is how we live. The chief personage in the house is my mother. She settles everything. She interviews Nikolai, the cook, and orders dinner; she sends us out for walks, makes our shirts, is always nursing some baby at the breast; all day long she is bustling about the house with hurried steps. One can be naughty with her, though she is sometimes angry and punishes us.

She knows more about everything than anybody else. She knows that one must wash every day, that one must eat soup at dinner, that one must talk French, learn not to crawl about on all fours, not to put one's elbows on the table; and if she says that one is not to go out walking because it is just going to rain, she is sure to be right, and one must do as she says.

Papa is the cleverest man in the world. He always knows everything. There is no being naughty with HIM. When he is up in his study "working," one is not allowed to make a noise, and nobody may go into his room. What he does when he is at "work," none of us know. Later on, when I had learned to read, I was told

that papa was a "writer."

This was how I learned. I was very pleased with some lines of poetry one day, and asked my mother who wrote them. She told me they were written by Pushkin, and Pushkin was a great writer. I was vexed at my father not being one, too. Then my mother said that my father was also a well-known writer, and I was very glad indeed.

At the dinner-table papa sits opposite mama and has his own round silver spoon. When old Natalia Petrovna, who lives on the floor below with great-aunt Tatyana Alexandrovna, pours herself out a glass of kvass, he picks it up and drinks it right off, then says, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Natalia Petrovna; I made a mistake!" We all laugh delightedly, and it seems odd that papa is not in the least afraid of Natalia Petrovna. When there is jelly for pudding, papa says it is good for gluing paper boxes; we run off to get some paper, and papa makes it into boxes. Mama is angry, but he is not afraid of her either. We have the gayest times imaginable with him now and then. He can ride a horse better and run faster than anybody else, and there is no one in the world so strong as he is.

He hardly ever punishes us, but when he looks me in the eyes he knows everything that I think, and I am frightened. You can tell stories to mama, but not to papa, because he will see through you at once. So nobody ever tries.

Besides papa and mama, there was also Aunt Tatyana Alexandrovna Yergolsky. In her room she had a big eikon with a silver mount. We were very much afraid of this eikon, because it was very old and black.

When I was six, I remember my father teaching the village children. They had their lessons in "the other house," <sup>1</sup> where Alexey Stepanytch, the bailiff, lived, and sometimes on the ground floor of the house we lived in.

There were a great number of village children who used to come. When they came, the front hall smelled of sheepskin jackets;

they were taught by papa and Seryozha and Tanya and Uncle Kostya all at once. Lesson-time was very gay and lively.

The children did exactly as they pleased, sat where they liked, ran about from place to place, and answered questions not one by one, but all together, interrupting one another, and helping one another to recall what they had read. If one left out a bit, up jumped another and then another, and the story or sum was reconstructed by the united efforts of the whole class.

What pleased my father most about his pupils was the picturesqueness and originality of their language. He never wanted a literal repetition of bookish expressions, and particularly encouraged every one to speak "out of his own head." I remember how once he stopped a boy who was running into the next room.

"Where are YOU off to?" he asked.

"To uncle, to bite off a piece of chalk." 2

"Cut along, cut along! It's not for us to teach them, but for them to teach."

## **THE SERVANTS IN THE HOUSE**

WHEN my father married and brought home his young and inexperienced bride, Sofya Andreyevna, to Yasnaya Polyana, Nikolai Mikhailovitch Rummyantsef was already established as cook. Before my father's marriage he had a salary of five rubles a month; but when my mother arrived, she raised him to six, at which rate he continued the rest of his days; that is, till somewhere about the end of the eighties. He was succeeded in the kitchen by his son, Semyon Nikolayevitch, my mother's godson, and this worthy and beloved man, companion of my childish games, still

lives with us to this day. Under my mother's supervision he prepared my father's vegetarian diet with affectionate zeal, and without him my father would very likely never have lived to the ripe old age he did.

Agafya Mikhailovna was an old woman who lived at first in the kitchen of "the other house" and afterward on the home farm. Tall and thin, with big, thoroughbred eyes, and long, straight hair, like a witch, turning gray, she was rather terrifying, but more than anything else she was queer.

Once upon a time long ago she had been housemaid to my great-grandmother, Countess Pelageya Nikolayevna Tolstoy, my father's grandmother, nee Princess Gortchakova. She was fond of telling about her young days. She would say:

I was very handsome. When there were gentlefolks visiting at the big house, the countess would call me, 'Gachette [Agafya], femme de chambre, apportez-moi un mouchoir!' Then I would say, 'Toute suite, Madame la Comtesse!' And every one would be staring at me, and couldn't take their eyes off. When I crossed over to the annex, there they were watching to catch me on the way. Many a time have I tricked them—ran round the other way and jumped over the ditch. I never liked that sort of thing any time. A maid I was, a maid I am.

After my grandmother's death, Agafya Mikhailovna was sent on to the home farm for some reason or other, and minded the sheep. She got so fond of sheep that all her days after she never would touch mutton.

After the sheep, she had an affection for dogs, and that is the only period of her life that I remember her in.

There was nothing in the world she cared about but dogs. She lived with them in horrible dirt and smells, and gave up her whole mind and soul to them. We always had setters, harriers, and borzois, and the whole kennel, often very numerous, was under Agafya Mikhailovna's management, with some boy or other to

help her, usually one as clumsy and stupid as could be found.

There are many interesting recollections bound up with the memory of this intelligent and original woman. Most of them are associated in my mind with my father's stories about her. He could always catch and unravel any interesting psychological trait, and these traits, which he would mention incidentally, stuck firmly in my mind. He used to tell, for instance, how Agafya Mikhailovna complained to him of sleeplessness.

"Ever since I can remember her, she has suffered from 'a birch-tree growing inside me from my belly up; it presses against my chest, and prevents my breathing.'

"She complains of her sleeplessness and the birch-tree and says: 'There I lay all alone and all quiet, only the clock ticking on the wall: "Who are you? What are you? Who are you? What are you?" And I began to think: "Who am I? What am I?" and so I spent the whole night thinking about it.'

"Why, imagine this is Socrates! 'Know thyself,'" said my father, telling the story with great enthusiasm.

In the summer-time my mother's brother, Styopa (Stephen Behrs), who was studying at the time in the school of jurisprudence, used to come and stay with us. In the autumn he used to go wolf-hunting with my father and us, with the borzois, and Agafya Mikhailovna loved him for that.

Styopa's examination was in the spring. Agafya Mikhailovna knew about it and anxiously waited for the news of whether he had got through.

Once she put up a candle before the eikon and prayed that Styopa might pass. But at that moment she remembered that her borzois had got out and had not come back to the kennels again.

"Saints in heaven! they'll get into some place and worry the cattle and do a mischief!" she cried. "'Lord, let my candle burn for the dogs to come back quick, and I'll buy another for Stepan Andreyevitch.' No sooner had I said this to myself than I heard the



dogs in the porch rattling their collars. Thank God! they were back. That's what prayer can do."

Another favorite of Agafya Mikhailovna was a young man, Misha Stakhovitch, who often stayed with us.

"See what you have been and done to me, little Countess!" she said reproachfully to my sister Tanya: "you've introduced me to Mikhail Alexandrovitch, and I've fallen in love with him in my old age, like a wicked woman!"

On the fifth of February, her name-day, Agafya Mikhailovna received a telegram of congratulation from Stakhovitch.

When my father heard of it, he said jokingly to Agafya Mikhailovna:

"Aren't you ashamed that a man had to trudge two miles through the frost at night all for the sake of your telegram?"

"Trudge, trudge? Angels bore him on their wings. Trudge, indeed! You get three telegrams from an outlandish Jew woman," she growled, "and telegrams every day about your Golokhvotika. Never a trudge then; but I get name-day greetings, and it's trudge!"

And one could not but acknowledge that she was right. This telegram, the only one in the whole year that was addressed to the kennels, by the pleasure it gave Agafya Mikhailovna was far more important of course than this news or the about a ball given in Moscow in honor of a Jewish banker's daughter, or about Olga Andreyevna Golokvastovy's arrival at Yasnaya.

Agafya Mikhailovna died at the beginning of the nineties. There were no more hounds or sporting dogs at Yasnaya then, but till the end of her days she gave shelter to a motley collection of mongrels, and tended and fed them.

# THE HOME OF THE TOLSTOYS

I CAN remember the house at Yasnaya Polyana in the condition it was in the first years after my father's marriage.

It was one of the two-storied wings of the old mansion-house of the Princes Volkonsky, which my father had sold for pulling down when he was still a bachelor.

From what my father has told me, I know that the house in which he was born and spent his youth was a three-storied building with thirty-six rooms. On the spot where it stood, between the two wings, the remains of the old stone foundation are still visible in the form of trenches filled with rubble, and the site is covered with big sixty-year-old trees that my father himself planted.

When any one asked my father where he was born, he used to point to a tall larch which grew on the site of the old foundations.

"Up there where the top of that larch waves," he used to say; "that's where my mother's room was, where I was born on a leather sofa."

My father seldom spoke of his mother, but when he did, it was delightful to hear him, because the mention of her awoke an unusual strain of gentleness and tenderness in him. There was such a ring of respectful affection, so much reverence for her memory, in his words, that we all looked on her as a sort of saint.

My father remembered his father well, because he was already nine years old when he died. He loved him, too, and always spoke of him reverently; but one always felt that his mother's memory, although he had never known her, was dearer to him, and his love for her far greater than for his father.

Even to this day I do not exactly know the story of the sale of the old house. My father never liked talking about it, and for that reason I could never make up my mind to ask him the details of the transaction. I only know that the house was sold for five thousand paper rubles <sup>3</sup> by one of his relatives, who had charge of his affairs

by power of attorney when he was in the Caucasus.

It was said to have been done in order to pay off my father's gambling debts. That was quite true.

My father himself told me that at one time he was a great card-player, that he lost large sums of money, and that his financial affairs were considerably embarrassed.

The only thing about which I am in doubt is whether it was with my father's knowledge or by his directions that the house was sold, or whether the relative in question did not exceed his instructions and decide on the sale of his own initiative.

My father cherished his parents' memory to such an extent, and had such a warm affection for everything relating to his own childhood, that it is hard to believe that he would have raised his hand against the house in which he had been born and brought up and in which his mother had spent her whole life.

Knowing my father as I do, I think it is highly possible that he wrote to his relative from the Caucasus, "Sell something," not in the least expecting that he would sell the house, and that he afterward took the blame for it on himself. Is that not the reason why he was always so unwilling to talk about it?

In 1871, when I was five years old, the zala <sup>4</sup> and study were built on the house.

The walls of the zala were hung with old portraits of ancestors. They were rather alarming, and I was afraid of them at first; but we got used to them after a time, and I grew fond of one of them, of my great-grandfather, Ilya Andreyevitch Tolstoy, because I was told that I was like him.

Beside him hung the portrait of another great-grandfather, Prince Nikolai Sergeyevitch Volkonsky, my grandmother's father, with thick, black eyebrows, a gray wig, and a red kaftan. <sup>5</sup>

This Volkonsky built all the buildings of Yasnaya Polyana. He was a model squire, intelligent and proud, and enjoyed the great respect of all the neighborhood.

On the ground floor, under the drawing-room, next to the entrance-hall, my father built his study. He had a semi-circular niche made in the wall, and stood a marble bust of his favorite dead brother Nikolai in it. This bust was made abroad from a death-mask, and my father told us that it was very like, because it was done by a good sculptor, according to his own directions.

He had a kind and rather plaintive face. The hair was brushed smooth like a child's, with the parting on one side. He had no beard or mustache, and his head was white and very, very clean. My father's study was divided in two by a partition of big bookshelves, containing a multitude of all sorts of books. In order to support them, the shelves were connected by big wooden beams, and between them was a thin birch-wood door, behind which stood my father's writing-table and his old-fashioned semicircular arm-chair.

There are portraits of Dickens and Schopenhauer and Fet <sup>6</sup> as a young man on the walls, too, and the well-known group of writers of the *Sovremennik* <sup>7</sup> circle in 1856, with Turgenieff, Ostrovsky, Gontcharof, Grigorovitch, Druzhinin, and my father, quite young still, without a beard, and in uniform.

My father used to come out of his bedroom of a morning—it was in a corner on the top floor—in his dressing-gown, with his beard uncombed and tumbled together, and go down to dress.

Soon after he would issue from his study fresh and vigorous, in a gray smock-frock, and would go up into the zala for breakfast. That was our dejeuner.

When there was nobody staying in the house, he would not stop long in the drawing-room, but would take his tumbler of tea and carry it off to his study with him.

But if there were friends and guests with us, he would get into conversation, become interested, and could not tear himself away.

At last he would go off to his work, and we would disperse, in winter to the different school-rooms, in summer to the croquet-lawn or somewhere about the garden. My mother would settle

down in the drawing-room to make some garment for the babies, or to copy out something she had not finished overnight; and till three or four in the afternoon silence would reign in the house.

Then my father would come out of his study and go off for his afternoon's exercise. Sometimes he would take a dog and a gun, sometimes ride, and sometimes merely go for a walk to the imperial wood.

At five the big bell that hung on the broken bough of an old elm-tree in front of the house would ring and we would all run to wash our hands and collect for dinner.

He was very hungry, and ate voraciously of whatever turned up. My mother would try to stop him, would tell him not to waste all his appetite on kasha, because there were chops and vegetables to follow. "You'll have a bad liver again," she would say; but he would pay no attention to her, and would ask for more and more, until his hunger was completely satisfied. Then he would tell us all about his walk, where he put up a covey of black game, what new paths he discovered in the imperial wood beyond Kudeyarof Well, or, if he rode, how the young horse he was breaking in began to understand the reins and the pressure of the leg. All this he would relate in the most vivid and entertaining way, so that the time passed gaily and animatedly.

After dinner he would go back to his room to read, and at eight we had tea, and the best hours of the day began—the evening hours, when everybody gathered in the zala. The grown-ups talked or read aloud or played the piano, and we either listened to them or had some jolly game of our own, and in anxious fear awaited the moment when the English grandfather-clock on the landing would give a click and a buzz, and slowly and clearly ring out ten.

Perhaps mama would not notice? She was in the sitting-room, making a copy.

"Come, children, bedtime! Say good night," she would call.

"In a minute, Mama; just five minutes."

"Run along; it's high time; or there will be no getting you up in the morning to do your lessons."

We would say a lingering good night, on the lookout for any chance for delay, and at last would go down-stairs through the arches, annoyed at the thought that we were children still and had to go to bed while the grown-ups could stay up as long as ever they liked.

## **A JOURNEY TO THE STEPPES**

WHEN I was still a child and had not yet read "War and Peace," I was told that NATASHA ROSTOF was Aunt Tanya. When my father was asked whether that was true, and whether DMITRY ROSTOF was such and such a person and LEVIN such and such another, he never gave a definite answer, and one could not but feel that he disliked such questions and was rather offended by them.

In those remote days about which I am talking, my father was very keen about the management of his estate, and devoted a lot of energy to it. I can remember his planting the huge apple orchard at Yasnaya and several hundred acres of birch and pine forest, and at the beginning of the seventies, for a number of years, he was interested in buying up land cheap in the province of Samara, and breeding droves of steppe horses and flocks of sheep.

I still have pretty clear, though rather fragmentary and inconsequent, recollections of our three summer excursions to the steppes of Samara.

My father had already been there before his marriage in 1862, and afterward by the advice of Dr. Zakharyin, who attended him.

He took the kumiss-cure in 1871 and 1872, and at last, in 1873, the whole family went there.

At that time my father had bought several hundred acres of cheap Bashkir lands in the district of Buzuluk, and we went to stay on our new property at a khutor, or farm.

In Samara we lived on the farm in a tumble-down wooden house, and beside us, in the steppe, were erected two felt kibitkas, or Tatar frame tents, in which our Bashkir, Muhammed Shah Romanytch, lived with his wives.

Morning and evening they used to tie the mares up outside the kibitkas, where they were milked by veiled women, who then hid themselves from the sight of the men behind a brilliant chintz curtain, and made the kumiss.

The kumiss was bitter and very nasty, but my father and my uncle Stephen Behrs were very fond of it, and drank it in large quantities.

When we boys began to get big, we had at first a German tutor for two or three years, Fyodor Fyodorovitch Kaufmann.

I cannot say that we were particularly fond of him. He was rather rough, and even we children were struck by his German stupidity. His redeeming feature was that he was a devoted sportsman. Every morning he used to jerk the blankets off us and shout, "Auf, Kinder! auf!" and during the daytime plagued us with German calligraphy.

## **OUTDOOR SPORTS**

THE chief passion of my childhood was riding. I well remember

the time when my father used to put me in the saddle in front of him and we would ride out to bathe in the Voronka. I have several interesting recollections connected with these rides.

One day as we were going to bathe, papa turned round and said to me:

"Do you know, Ilyusha, I am very pleased with myself to-day. I have been bothered with her for three whole days, and could not manage to make her go into the house; try as I would, it was impossible. It never would come right. But to-day I remembered that there is a mirror in every hall, and that every lady wears a bonnet.

"As soon as I remembered that, she went where I wanted her to, and did everything she had to. You would think a bonnet is a small affair, but everything depended on that bonnet."

As I recall this conversation, I feel sure that my father was talking about that scene in "Anna Karenina" where ANNA went to see her son.

Although in the final form of the novel nothing is said in this scene either about a bonnet or a mirror,—nothing is mentioned but a thick black veil,—still, I imagine that in its original form, when he was working on the passage, my father may have brought Anna up to the mirror, and made her straighten her bonnet or take it off.

I can remember the interest with which he told me this, and it now seems strange that he should have talked about such subtle artistic experiences to a boy of seven who was hardly capable of understanding him at the time. However, that was often the case with him.

I once heard from him a very interesting description of what a writer needs for his work:

"You cannot imagine how important one's mood is," he said. "Sometimes you get up in the morning, fresh and vigorous, with your head clear, and you begin to write. Everything is sensible and consistent. You read it over next day, and have to throw the whole



thing away, because, good as it is, it misses the main thing. There is no imagination in it, no subtlety, none of the necessary something, none of that only just without which all your cleverness is worth nothing. Another day you get up after a bad night, with your nerves all on edge, and you think, 'To-day I shall write well, at any rate.' And as a matter of fact, what you write is beautiful, picturesque, with any amount of imagination. You look it through again; it is no good, because it is written stupidly. There is plenty of color, but not enough intelligence.

"One's writing is good only when the intelligence and the imagination are in equilibrium. As soon as one of them overbalances the other, it's all up; you may as well throw it away and begin afresh."

As a matter of fact, there was no end to the rewriting in my father's works. His industry in this particular was truly marvelous.

We were always devoted to sport from our earliest childhood. I can remember as well as I remember myself my father's favorite dog in those days, an Irish setter called Dora. They would bring round the cart, with a very quiet horse between the shafts, and we would drive out to the marsh, to Degatna or to Malakhov. My father and sometimes my mother or a coachman sat on the seat, while I and Dora lay on the floor.

When we got to the marsh, my father used to get out, stand his gun on the ground, and, holding it with his left hand, load it.

Dora meanwhile fidgeted about, whining impatiently and wagging her thick tail.

While my father splashed through the marsh, we drove round the bank somewhat behind him, and eagerly followed the ranging of the dog, the getting up of the snipe, and the shooting. My father sometimes shot fairly well, though he often lost his head, and missed frantically.

But our favorite sport was coursing with greyhounds. What a pleasure it was when the footman Sergei Petrovitch came in and

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