

Reminiscences of Tolstoy

by

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Chapter 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," [1] where Alexey Stepanytch, the bailiff, lived, and sometimes on the ground floor of the house we lived in.

[1] The name we gave to the stone annex.

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]

[2] The instinct for lime, necessary to feed their bones, drives Russian children to nibble pieces of chalk or the whitewash off the wall. In this case the boy was running to one of the grown-ups in the house, and whom he called uncle, as Russian children call everybody uncle or aunt, to get a piece of the chalk that he had for writing on the blackboard. us," he said to some one when the boy was gone. Which of us would have expressed himself like that? You see, he did not say to "get" or to "break off," but to "bite off," which was right, because they did literally "bite" off the chalk from the lump with their teeth, and not break it off.

"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 Rummyantsev 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 [3] by one of his relatives, who had charge of his affairs by power of attorney when he was in the Caucasus.

[3] About \$3000.

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 [4] and study were built on the house.

[4] The zala is the chief room of a house, corresponding to the English drawing-room, but on a grand scale. The gostinaya--literally guest-room, usually translated as drawing-room--is a place for more intimate receptions. At Yasnaya Polyana meals were taken in the zala, but this is not the general Russian custom, houses being provided also with a stolovaya, or dining-room.

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. [5]

[5]; Kaftan, a long coat of various cuts, including military and naval frock-coat, and the long gown worn by coachmen.

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 [6] as a young man on the walls, too, and the well-known group of writers of the *Sovremennik* [7] circle in 1856, with Turgenieff, Ostrovsky, Gontcharof, Grigorovitch, Druzhinin, and my father, quite young still, without a beard, and in uniform.

[6] Afanasyi Shenshin, the poet, who adopted his mother's name, Fet, for a time, owing to official difficulties about his birth-certificate. An intimate friend of Tolstoy's.

[7] "*Sovremennik*," or "Contemporary Review," edited by the poet Mekrasof, was the rallying-place for the "men of the forties," the new school of realists. Ostrovsky is the dramatist; Gontcharof the novelist, author of "*Oblomof*"; Grigorovitch wrote tales about peasant life, and was the discoverer of Tchekhof's talent as a serious writer.

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.

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