Scris de D.C.C.
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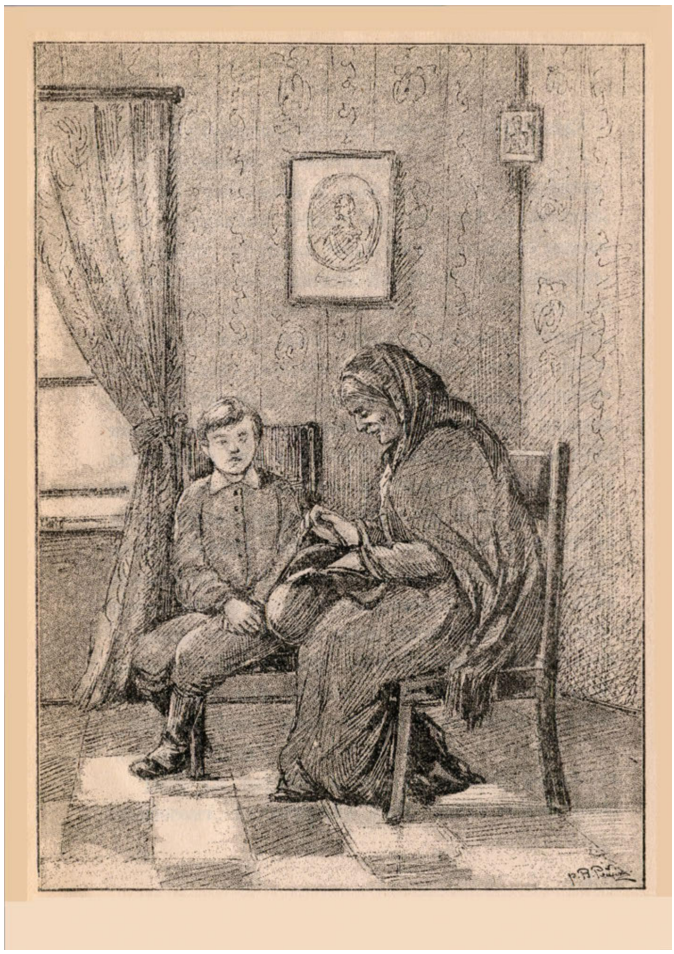

"The matter [in the epistolary novel Poor Folk] is simple: it concerns some good-hearted simpletons who assume that to love the whole world is an extraordinary pleasure and duty for every one. They cannot comprehend a thing when the wheel of life with all its rules and regulations runs over them and fractures their limbs and bones without a word. That's all there is — but what drama, what types! I forgot to tell you, the artist's name is Dostoevsky."

Thus exclaimed Vissarion Belinsky, the leading literary critic of the age (quoted by Dostoevsky biographer Joseph Frank), u pon closing our author's first masterpiece, sampled in last week's posting. Here is the second installment of our series, which is intended to bring to the attention of a larger audience a wonderful collection of Dostoevsky short stories and excerpts, best known as "Dostoevsky for Children". Brought out posthumously, under the loving care of Anna Grigorievna Dostoevskaya, the author's wife, it fulfilled one of her husband's cherished literary wishes. More on the collection
here
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But, as a continuation of Belinsky's thought, we might say that, starting with the main characters in Poor Folk, Makar Devushkin and Varenka Dobroselova, whose very names connote virgin candor and kind simplicity, and all the way to the better known Prince Myshkin (the Idiot) and Alyosha Karamazov, Dostoevsky is pursuing essentially one path, until it touches that which, in the Dostoevskian worldview, makes it immune to the wheel of life. And it is precisely the path of

such good hearted co-sufferers with the whole world. Then, their tears become the mourning that causes eternal joy, already felt in everyday life. A telos for any Christian education...

Today's story, "At The Select Boarding School", taken from the novel The Adolescent, is an important landmark on that path. It is a heartwarming short story, for young and old, that can be read independently, (as suggested by this
1887 illustrated Russian edition, in pdf format
) It is also a window that opens a beautiful view on our collection. To appreciate it, a minimal perspective on its larger context may be useful, at the risk of oversimplifying a rich narrative:

The humble serf Sofia Andreevna, married at only 18 to a good-hearted but old mudjik, has been seduced and abandoned by their young master, the romantic "predator" Versilov. Versilov now relentlessly draws the fruit of Sofia's unfortunate fall with him, little Arkadi, towards the underground of his spasmodic and contagious egotism. Through action and reaction, intendedly or unintendedly, from near and afar, he cannot do otherwise. An early memory of the "accidental family's" child is the Touchard boarding house. Cold, hypocritical, calculating, enfeuded to Western caste reflexes, the pension symbolizes a large part of the Versilov "school". The child's first escape from the paternal traps lies in the Christ-filled simplicity of his mother. Her visit to the Touchard boarding school is almost hesychast in demeanor - but it marks the beginning of the battle with darkness in the heart of little Arkadi, and becomes the germ of his first rebirth. (Also see
here, in Romanian
)

Following Met. Anthony Khrapovitsky, then, we see that encounters such as that of little Arkady with Sofia Andreevna, sometimes perhaps easily overlooked and forgotten, are
a
key to Dostoevsky's worldview, and indeed to everyday spiritual life
, including here the Metropolitan's understanding of his considerable pastoral experience. They are all ultimately amenable to Christ-filled, co-suffering love. As is true Christian education. Today's story thus foreshadows the whole novel The Adolescent, illuminates our collection, and contains the core of Dostoevsky's paideic vision.

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F.M. Dostoevsky

At The Select Boarding School

(from A Raw Youth, 1875, also published as The Adolescent, A Raw Youth, and An Accidental Family; Constance Garnett transl., 1916)

The bell rang steadily and distinctly, once every two or three seconds; it was not an alarm bell, however, but a pleasant and melodious chime, and I suddenly recognized that it was a familiar chime; that it was the bell of St. Nikolay's, the red church opposite Touchard's, the old-fashioned Moscow church which I remembered so well, built in the reign of Tsar Alexey Mihalovitch, full of tracery, and with many domes and columns, and that Easter was only just over, and the new-born little green leaves were trembling on the meagre birches in Touchard's front garden. The brilliant evening sun was pouring its slanting rays into our classroom, and in my little room on the left, where a year before Touchard had put me apart that I might not mix with "counts' and senators' children," there was sitting a visitor. Yes, I, who had no relations, had suddenly got a visitor for the first time since I had been at Touchard's. I recognized this visitor as soon as she came in: it was mother, though I had not seen her once since she had taken me to the village church and the dove had flown across the cupola. We were sitting alone together and I watched her strangely. Many years afterwards I learned that being left by Versilov, who had suddenly gone abroad, she had come on her own account to Moscow, paying for the journey out of her small means, and almost by stealth, without the knowledge of the people who had been commissioned to look after her, and she had done this solely to see me. It was strange, too, that when she came in and talked to Touchard, she did not say one word to me of being my mother. She sat beside me, and I remember I wondered at her talking so little. She had a parcel with her and she undid it: in it there turned out to be six oranges, several gingerbread cakes, and two ordinary loaves of French bread. I was offended at the sight of the bread, and with a constrained air I announced that our 'food' was excellent, and that they gave us a whole French loaf for our tea every day.

"Never mind, darling, in my foolishness I thought 'maybe they don't feed them properly at school,' don't be vexed, my own."

"And Antonina Vassilyevna (Touchard's wife) will be offended. My schoolfellows will laugh at me too..."

"Won't you have them; perhaps you'll eat them up?"

"Please, don't..."

And I did not even touch her presents; the oranges and gingerbread cakes lay on the little table before me, while I sat with my eyes cast down, but with a great air of dignity. Who knows, perhaps I had a great desire to let her see that her visit made me feel ashamed to meet my schoolfellows, to let her have at least a glimpse that she might understand, as though to say, "See, you are disgracing me, and you don't understand what you are doing." Oh, by that time I was running after Touchard with a brush to flick off every speck of dust! I was picturing to myself, too, what taunts I should have to endure as soon as she was gone, from my schoolfellows and perhaps from Touchard himself; and there was not the least friendly feeling for her in my heart. I only looked sideways at her dark-coloured old dress, at her rather coarse, almost working-class hands, at her quite coarse shoes, and her terribly thin face; there were already furrows on her forehead, though Antonina Vassilyevna did say that evening after she had gone: "Your mamma must have been very pretty."

So we sat, and suddenly Agafya came in with a cup of coffee on a tray. It was just after dinner, and at that time Touchard always drank a cup of coffee in his drawing-room. But mother thanked her and did not take the cup: as I learned afterwards she never drank coffee in those days, as it brought on palpitations of the heart. The fact was that Touchard inwardly considered her visit, and his permitting me to see her, an act of great condescension on his part, so that the cup of coffee sent her was, comparatively speaking, a signal proof of humanity which did the utmost credit to his civilization, feelings, and European ideas. And as though on purpose, mother refused it.

I was summoned to Touchard, and he told me to take all my lesson books and exercise books to show my mother: "That she may see what you have succeeded in attaining in my establishment." At that point Antonina Vassilyevna, pursing up her lips, minced out to me in a jeering and insulting way:

"Your mamma does not seem to like our coffee."

I collected my exercise books and carried them to my waiting mother, passing through the

crowd of "counts' and senators' children" in the classroom who were staring at mother and me. And it actually pleased me to carry out Touchard's behests with literal exactitude. "Here are my lessons in French grammar, here are my dictation exercises, here are the conjugations of the auxiliary verbs avoir and être, here is the geography, descriptions of the principal towns of Europe, and all parts of the world," and so on. For half an hour or more I went on explaining in a monotonous little voice, keeping my eyes sedately cast down. I knew that my mother knew nothing of these learned subjects, could not perhaps even write, but in this too I was pleased with my part. But I did not succeed in wearying her: she listened all the time without interrupting me, with extraordinary and even reverent attention, so that at last I got tired of it myself and left off; her expression was sad, however, and there was something pitiful in her face.

She got up to go at last; Touchard suddenly walked in, and with an air of foolish importance asked her: "Whether she was satisfied with her son's progress? Mother began muttering incoherent thanks; Antonina Vassilyevna came up too. Mother began begging them both "not to abandon the orphan, who was as good as an orphan now, but to treat him with kindness."...And with tears in her eyes she bowed to them both, each separately, and to each with a deep bow, exactly as "simple people" bow down when they ask a favour of the gentry. The Touchards had not expected this, and Antonina Vassilyevna was evidently softened, and revised her opinion about the cup of coffee. Touchard humanely responded with even greater dignity "that he made no distinction between the children, that here all were his children, and he was their father, that I was almost on an equal footing with the sons of senators and counts, and that she ought to appreciate that," and so on, and so on. Mother only bowed down, but was much embarrassed. At last she turned to me, and with tears shining in her eyes said: "Good-bye, darling."

She kissed me, that is I allowed myself to be kissed. She evidently wanted to go on kissing, embracing and hugging me, but either she herself felt ashamed before company, or felt hurt by something else, or guessed that I was ashamed of her, for she hurriedly went out, bowing once more to the Touchards. I stood still.

"Mais suivez donc votre mère," said Antonina Vassilyevna: "il n'a pas de coeur, cet enfant!"

Touchard responded by shrugging his shoulders, which meant, of course, "it's not without reason that I treat him as a lackey."

I obediently followed my mother; we went out on to the steps. I knew that they were all looking at me out of the window. Mother turned towards the church and crossed herself three times; her

lips were trembling, the deep bell chimed musically and regularly from the belfry. She turned to me and could not restrain herself, she laid both hands on my head and began crying over it.

"Mother, stop...I'm ashamed...they can see from the window..."

She broke out hurriedly:

"Well God...God be with you...The heavenly angels keep you. Holy Mother, Saint Nikolay...My God, my God!" she repeated, speaking rapidly and making as many signs of the cross over me as she possibly could. "My darling, my darling! Stay, my darling..."

She hurriedly put her hand in her pocket and drew out a handkerchief, a blue checked handkerchief, with a tightly fastened knot at the corner, and began untying the knot...but it would not come untied...

"Well never mind, take it with the handkerchief: it's clean, it may be of use perhaps. There are four fourpenny-bits in it, perhaps you'll need the money; forgive me, darling, I have not got any more just now...forgive me, darling."

I took the handkerchief. I wanted to observe that we were allowed very liberal diet by M. Touchard and Antonina Vassilyevna, and were not in need of anything, but I restrained myself and took the handkerchief.

Once more she made the sign of the cross over me, once more she whispered a prayer, and suddenly--suddenly bowed to me exactly as she had done to the Touchards upstairs--a prolonged low bow--I shall never forget it! Then I shuddered, I don't know why. What had she meant by that bow? "Was she confessing the wrong she had done me?" as I fancied once long afterwards--I don't know. But at the time it made me more ashamed than ever that they "were looking out of window and that Lambert would, most likely, begin beating me."

At last she went away. The apples and oranges had been devoured by the sons of counts and senators, and the four fourpenny-bits were promptly taken from me by Lambert and spent at the confectioner's on tarts and chocolates, of which I was not offered a taste.

Fully six months had passed and it was a wet and windy October. I had quite forgotten about mother. Oh, by then hate, a blind hatred of everything had crept into my heart, and was its sustenance, though I still brushed Touchard as before; but I hated him with all my might, and every day hated him more and more. It was then that in the melancholy dusk of one evening I began rummaging for something in my little box, and suddenly in the corner I saw her blue cotton handkerchief; it had been lying there ever since I had thrust it away. I took it out and even looked at it with some interest. The corner of the handkerchief still retained the creases made by the knot, and even the round impress of the money was distinctly visible; I put the handkerchief in again, however, and pushed the box back. It was the eve of a holiday, and the bells were ringing for the all-night service. The pupils had all gone to their homes after dinner, but this time Lambert had stayed for Sunday. I don't know why he hadn't been fetched. Though he used still to beat me, as before, he used to talk to me a great deal, and often needed me. We talked the whole evening about Lepage's pistols, which neither of us had seen, and Circassian swords and how they cut, how splendid it would be to establish a band of brigands, and finally Lambert passed to the familiar obscene subjects which were his favourite topics, and though I wondered at myself, I remember I liked listening. Suddenly I felt it unbearable, and I told him I had a headache. At ten o'clock we went to bed; I turned away with my head under the quilt and took the blue handkerchief from under my pillow: I had for some reason fetched it from the box an hour before, and as soon as our beds were made I put it under the pillow. I put it to my face and suddenly began kissing it: "Mother, mother," I whispered, and my whole chest contracted as though in a vice. I closed my eyes, and saw her face with the quivering lips when she crossed herself facing the church, and afterwards made the sign of the cross over me, and I said to her, "I'm ashamed, they are looking at us." "Mother darling, mother, were you really with me once?. Mother darling, where are you now, my far-away visitor? Do you remember your poor boy, whom you came to see?...Show yourself to me just this once, come to me if only in a dream, just that I may tell you how I love you, may hug you and kiss your blue eyes, and tell you that I'm not ashamed of you now, and tell you that I loved you even then, and that my heart was aching then, though I simply sat like a lackey. You will never know, mother, how I loved you then! Mother, where are you now? Do you hear me? Mother, mother, do you remember the dove in the country?"