



Previously in the *Dostoevsky for Parents and Children* series:

[Varenka's Memoirs](#) (from the novel *Poor Folk*, 1846 [1883, 1887, 1897, DPC I])

[An Honest Thief](#) (from *Stories of a Man of Experience*, 1848 [suggested by the Introduction to the 1897 anthology, DPC V])

[Nellie's Story](#) (from *The Insulted and Injured*, 1861 [1883, 1887, DPC VI])

[At The Select Boarding School](#) (from the novel *The Adolescent*, 1875 [1883, 1897, DPC II])

[The Merchant's Story](#) (from the novel *The Adolescent*, 1875 [1897, DPC IV])

[A Little Boy at Christ's Christmas Tree](#) (from *The Diary Of A Writer*, January 1876 [1883, 1897, DPC VII])

[The Peasant Marey](#) (from *The Diary Of A Writer*, February 1876 [1883, 1897, DPC III])

{In square brackets we indicate the original Anna Grigorievna Dostoevskaya anthologies in which each story appeared, followed by its order of posting in the present *Dostoevsky for Parents and Children* (DPC) collection. Thus [1883, 1897, DPC II] means the story appeared in the first (1883) and third (1897), but not in the second (1887) Anna Dostoevskaya anthology, and was the second in this series of postings. Please find [here](#) our brief introduction to the original *Dostoevsky for Children* anthologies, and to this English online version. The accompanying illustration comes from [here](#), and is attributed to Vera Dostoevskaya, the author's great-great-great-granddaughter, when she was twelve years old. It was part of a family project destined to bring out a new edition of the original *Dostoevsky for Children* volume. We would love to learn what came out of it. If any of our readers know more, please share!}

Dostoevsky for Parents and Children: (VIII) A Centenarian

Scris de Dostoievski et al.
Vineri, 15 Aprilie 2022 09:20

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"The gentleman applies himself to the roots. 'Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.' Might we not say that filial piety and respect for the elders constitute the root of Goodness?" (*The Analects*, Ed. Slingerland transl.)

No, it is not quite true that Dostoevsky never wrote about normal family life! Today we read a story ever so evanescent as to be almost instantly and ubiquitously forgotten, at least by modern eyes. A tribute to filial piety, and yes, to the memory of olden family values. It is the story of a gentle centenarian's repose, in the midst of her simple, but in their small bourgeois ways endearing family folk. An almost literal retelling of an accidental morning encounter of Anna, the author's wife, is followed by what the author (in spite of the delicacy of his writing, or because of it) seems to have meant as a somehow not so easily forgettable fiction, after all (see the story's conclusion, in the light of the fragment below). With "[Moujik Marey](#)" and "[A Little Boy at Christ's Christmas Tree](#)

", "A Centenarian" is one of the three stories from the *Diary of a Writer*

that he explicitly mentioned to his wife, in view a "children's book". Its meaning in

[Russia](#)
[today](#)
[could](#)
[be](#)

even less obvious than it was in Dostoevsky's already morally sagging times (as he saw them).

Or

[West](#)
[of](#)
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,
[or](#)
[East](#)
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.
But the ancients still give us a reading key (above), as does the author himself:

"You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days. And if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving us." (*The Brothers Karamazov*, from "Ilusha's Funeral. The Speech At The Stone", C. Garnett transl.)

Conversely, from a Dostoevskian perspective, what might come after the passing away of filial piety and the memory of good family ways? [Here](#) , [here](#) , and [here](#) are Eastern Orthodox perspectives that Fyodor Mihailovich might not have found so surprising. But then, like a repenting prodigal son left down here without a home, he might have added: "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will [take me up!](#)"

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F.M. Dostoevsky

A CENTENARIAN

(from *The Diary Of A Writer*, March 1876; Boris Brasol transl., 1919; Russian original [here](#))

"That morning I was much too late" - a lady was telling me the other day - "and I left home almost at noon, and, as if on purpose, there was a heap of things I had to attend to. On Nikolaievskaia Street I had to make two calls, one not far from the other. First -at an office; and at the very gate of the building I met that little old woman; she seemed to me so very old and stooping, with a walking cane. Still I could not guess her age. She came up to the gate and, right there in a corner, she sat down on the porter's bench - just for a little rest. However, I walked by, merely glancing at her.

"Some ten minutes later I left the office, and only two houses farther down there is a store, where last week I had ordered a pair of shoes for Sonia, and, taking this opportunity, I went to fetch them. Now, the little old woman was sitting on the bench at the gate of this house, and she was looking at me. I smiled at her, walked into the store and took the shoes. Well, this took three or four minutes, and I proceeded farther, in the direction of the Nevsky. - Lo! there, again, is my old woman, at a third building, also near the gate, but not on a bench - there was none at this gate - but seated snugly on a projection. Willy-nilly, I suddenly stopped in front of her: why -the thought came to me- does she seat herself at every house ?

" 'Are you tired, little old woman ?' - I asked her.

" 'I 'm getting tired, dearie; I feel tired all the time. It's warm - I ponder - sun is shining; why

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shouldn't I go for dinner to my granddaughter's?

" 'So you're going to have dinner, good woman?'

" 'To have dinner, dear, to have dinner.'

" 'But this way you'll not get there.'

" 'No, I'll get there; see, I walk a few steps, and then I rest myself; afterwards I get up and again start going.'

"I looked at her and became very curious. The woman - a tiny, neat, old little creature, wearing old clothes - probably one of the commonalty - with a small cane; her face pale, yellow, the skin drying on the bones; colorless lips - a regular mummy; but she sits and keeps smiling, and the friendly sun is shining straight on her.

" 'Probably, you are very old, little grandmother?' I asked her, jestingly, of course.

" 'Hundred and four, darling; I 'm only (she said jokingly) a hundred and four years old. . . . And where are you going?'

"And she looked at me and laughed. Probably , she was glad that there was someone to talk to; but that curiosity as to where I was going seemed, to me, strange in a centenarian.

" 'See, grandmother' - said I, laughing too - 'I called at the store for these shoes for my girl, and now I am taking them home.'

" 'Look, what tiny bits of shoes they are; yours is a little girl? That's good. Any other children?'

"And she kept on laughing and looking at me. Her eyes were dim, almost lifeless eyes, and yet a warm ray, as it were, radiated from them.

" 'Grandmother, won't you please take five kopecks; buy yourself a loaf of white bread' - said I, handing her the coin.

" 'Why should you be offering me five kopecks ? -Well, thanks, I 'll take your money!'

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" 'Take it, grandmother, don't mind it.' -She took it. One could see that she was not begging, that she had not been reduced to that state, and she accepted my money so gracefully -not at all as if it were charity, but somehow as from mere politeness or because of kindheartedness. However, this may have pleased her, since who would start conversing with an old woman? Whereas now someone is not only talking to her but taking tender care of her.

" 'Well, good-bye, grandmother' - I said. 'Reach your destination in good health.'

" 'I shall, dearie - I shall. And you go along to your granddaughter!' - said the old woman, losing the thread of our conversation and forgetting that I had a daughter and not a granddaughter. Apparently she must have been thinking that everybody had granddaughters.

"I started going, and turned to look at her for the last time. I saw her getting up slowly, with difficulty; she tapped her cane and crawled along the street. Perhaps, ten times more would she repose herself before she finally nached her folks 'for dinner.' And whither does she go to dine? Such a strange little old woman!"

That morning I had listened to this story - why, not even a story, but some sort of an impression of meeting a centenarian (in truth, when does one meet a woman centenarian, especially a woman so full of spiritual life?) - and I forgot all about it. Only, late at night, having read a magazine article and having put aside that periodical, I suddenly recalled that old woman, and promptly put the finishing touches to the picture of how she had reached her folks for dinner. And there emerged another, maybe quite plausible little picture.

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Her granddaughters - perhaps even great-granddaughters, but all the same she called them "granddaughters" - are probably some artisans and, naturally, married women; otherwise, she would not be calling on them for dinner; they are living in a basement, or maybe renting some barber shop; they are poor people - this stands to reason -and yet they are subsisting and keeping their home in good order. She dragged herself up to them, possibly sometime after one o'clock. She wasn't expected; even so, they greeted her rather cordially.

"There she is, Maria Maximovna; come in, come in; be welcome, God's servant!"

The old woman walks in, with a little laugh; the doorbell continues to ring - long, sharply, in a thin tinkle. Her granddaughter is, most probably, the wife of that barber, while he is not yet an old man - a man of thirty - five or thereabouts, as steady as his trade, even though that trade is a frivolous one; of course, he is wearing a suit as greasy as a pancake - is it because of the pomade? -I can't tell, but I have never seen "barber-surgeons" looking otherwise; and also the collars of their coats invariably look as if they had been rolled in flour. Three youngsters - a boy and two little girls - came running in a jiffy to their great-grandmother. Usually, such all too old little women are somehow on intimate terms with children; they themselves become spiritually akin to children - sometimes to the very dot. The old woman seated herself. Maybe a guest or

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someone calling on business - a man of about forty, an acquaintance - was about to leave the host. Besides, a nephew - the sister's son, a lad of seventeen - is staying with them for a while; he hopes to find a job in some printer's shop. The old woman crosses herself, and sits down, looking at the guest.

"Oh, I'm tired! Who's this with you?"

"You mean me?" - says the guest, laughing. "Now, Maria Maximovna, is it possible you didn't recognize me? Only two years ago - don't you remember ? - we'd been planning - you and I - to go to the woods after golden-brown mushrooms?"

"Oh, yes, now I know who you are, you teaser! I remember you; only I forgot your name; but I remember. Oh, how tired I am!"

"Now, Maria Maximovna, esteemed old woman, I meant to ask you, why don't you grow at all ?"
- the guest continues to joke.

"Go on!"-laughs the grandmother, apparently pleased, however.

"Maria Maximovna, I'm a good fellow."

"And it's nice to speak to a good fellow. Oh, mother, I'm always out of breath. I see you've already sewn Serejenka's overcoat." - She points at the nephew.

The nephew, a chubby and healthy young urchin, gives a broad smile and comes up closer; he is wearing a brand-new, gray overcoat and, as yet, he is unable to put it on with an indifferent air. Indifference will come only in a week maybe, but now every minute he keeps looking at the

cuffs, the facing and, generally, at himself, in the mirror, and he feels a special respect for himself.

"Now, come and turn" - chatters the barber's wife. "Just look, Maximovna, what an overcoat we've tailored! Six roubles to the kopeck! Prokhorych says that nowadays 't isn't worth starting the job for less; you'd be shedding tears yourself, while this one - there will be no end to its wear. See, what cloth! -Do turn, you! What a lining! And how solid! -Turn, I'm telling you! Thus money flows away, Maximovna ! That's the last we saw of our kopecks!"

"Yes, dear, living has grown so expensive nowadays - simply impossible! Better you don't talk about this: it just upsets me" - spiritedly remarks Maximovna, who is still out of breath.

"Now, that's enough!" observed the host. "It's time to have a bite! What's that, Maria Maximovna, I can see you must be quite tired out!"

"Why, good man, indeed I am tired - d'you see, it's a warm day; sunny. Now - I ponder - I 'll call on them What's the use of lying all the time! Oh ! . . . On my way here I met a little lady, a young one; she bought shoes for her children. 'You're tired, old dear' - she says. 'Here, take five kopecks and buy yourself a loaf of white bread ! ' And, d'you know, I did take the five kopecks"

"Now, grandmother, first you better rest a while. See, how you're losing breath today!"
-suddenly observed the host, with emphasized solicitude.

Everybody is looking at her: indeed, suddenly she has grown so pale; her lips have turned quite white. She also is staring at everybody, but somehow dimly.

"Here" - I ponder - "gingerbreads for little children . . . see, the five kopecks. . . ."

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And again she stops, to catch her breath. Everybody becomes silent, just for about five seconds.

"What's the matter, grandmother ?" asks the host, bending over her.

But grandmother made no reply. Again there was silence for about five seconds. The old woman, as it were, had become even whiter, while her whole face had shrunk. Her eyes became motionless and a smile froze on her lips.

"A priest should be sent for! . . ." - the guest suddenly, half aloud, speaks from behind them.

"Yes . . . but . . . isn't it too late ?" . . . mumbles the host.

"Grandmother! Hear! Grandmother!" - cries the barber's wife, turning to the old woman and suddenly seized with alarm. But grandmother is immobile, only her head begins to incline sideways. In her right hand, which rests on the table, she is holding that five-kopeck coin, while her left hand remains on the shoulder of her great-grandson Misha-a boy of six. He stands motionless and, with his eyes wide open, stares at his great-grandmother.

"She has passed away I "- measuredly and solemnly pronounces the host, stooping and crossing himself lightly.

"That's it! I could see her all sinking down" - warmly and abruptly says the guest. He is quite astounded and looks around at everybody.

"Oh, God! What a thing! How are we going to manage it, Makarych? Shall we put her there?" the hostess hastily twitters, quite upset.

"Hither-thither" - sedately retorts the host. "We'll manage it ourselves. Isn't she a relative of yours? But I must go and report it."

"A hundred and four years! Just think!" - the guest keeps repeating in a state of ever-increasing affection. Somehow, he even turns red all over.

"Yes, in recent years she began to forget life itself" - still more solemnly and more soberly remarks the host, looking for his hat and taking his cloak.

"And only a minute ago she was laughing, and how cheerful she was! See, the five-kopeck coin in her hand! 'Gingerbreads' - she said. Oh, oh! Such is our life!"

"Well, let's go, Petr Stepanych!" - the host cuts short his guest, and they both depart.

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Of course, over such a one no tears are shed. A hundred and four years - "and she passed away painlessly and unashamed." The hostess sent to the neighbors for help. The neighbor women came running in haste, listening almost with pleasure to the news, sighing and screaming.

It goes without saying that, to begin with, a samovar was brought in. Children with an astonished air, hiding in a corner, stare at the dead grandmother. No matter how long Misha may live, he will remember the little old woman - how she died, pressing her hand upon his shoulder. Well, and when he dies, no one on earth will learn that once upon a time there lived such an old woman, and that she had lived one hundred and four years - how and what for, God only knows. Thus, millions of people pass away: they live unnoticed and they die unnoticed. Only, perhaps, in the instant of death itself of these centenarians - both men and women - there is something touching, as it were, and calm, even solemn and pacifying: even in our time, one hundred years strangely affect men. God bless the lives and deaths of simple, kind folks!

However, this is but a light and themeless little scene. Truly, one intends to recount, from among the things heard in the course of the month, something more entertaining, but when one starts writing, it develops that the thing either cannot be recorded or that it is irrelevant, or else

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that "one shouldn't tell everything one knows," and, in the long run, there remain only the most pointless subjects