The Wisdom of Children

by Leo Tolstoy

1 – RELIGION

Characters: A boy and his mother

BOY. Why has nurse dressed herself up today and put this new shirt on me?
MOTHER. Because today is a holiday and we are going to church.
BOY. What holiday is it?
MOTHER. Ascension Day.
BOY. What does “ascension” mean?
MOTHER. It means that our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven.
BOY. What does “ascended” mean?
MOTHER. It means that he went up.
BOY. How did he go? On wings?
MOTHER. No, not on wings. He simply went up, because he is God and God can do anything.
BOY. But where did he go to? Papa told me that the sky is really only space. There is nothing there but stars, and beyond the stars other stars, and what we call the sky has no end. So where did he go to?
MOTHER. [Smiling.] One can’t understand everything. One must have faith.
BOY. Faith in what?
MOTHER. What older people say.
BOY. But when I said that someone would die because the salt was spilled, you yourself told me not to believe what is stupid!
MOTHER. Quite right. You should not believe anything stupid.
BOY. But how am I to know what is stupid and what is not?
MOTHER. You must believe the true faith.
BOY. But what is the true faith?
MOTHER. Our faith. [Aside.] I think I am talking nonsense. [Aloud.] Go and tell papa that we are starting, and put on your scarf.
BOY. Shall we have chocolate after the service?
2 – WAR

Characters: Karlchen Schmidt, 9 years old
Pétya Orló, 10 years old
Másha Orlóva, 8 years old

KARLCHEN. Our Prussia won’t let the Russians take land from us!
PÉTYA. But we say that the land is ours as we conquered it first.
MÁSHA. Who are “we”?
PÉTYA. You’re only a baby and don’t understand. “We” means the people of our country.
KARLCHEN. It’s like that everywhere. Some men belong to one country, some to another.
MÁSHA. Whom do I belong to?
PÉTYA. To Russia, like all of us.
MÁSHA. But if I don’t want to?
PÉTYA. Whether you want to or not you are still Russian. And every country has its own czar or king.
KARLCHEN. [Interjecting.] Or Parliament…
PÉTYA. Each has its own army and each collects taxes from its own people.
MÁSHA. But why are they so separated?
PÉTYA. What do you mean? Each country is different.
MÁSHA. But why are they so separated?
KARLCHEN. Well, because every man loves his own fatherland.
MÁSHA. I don’t understand why they are separate. Wouldn’t it be better to be all together?
PÉTYA. To play games it is better to be together, but this is not play, it is an important matter.
MÁSHA. I don’t understand.
KARLCHEN. You’ll understand when you grow up.
MÁSHA. Then I don’t want to grow up.
PÉTYA. You’re little, but you’re obstinate already, like all of them.

3 – THE STATE

Characters: Gavríla, a servant and an army reservist
Mísha, his master’s young son

GAVRÍLA. Well, Míshenka, my dear little master, good-bye! I wonder if God will ever let us meet again.
MÍSHA. Are you really going away?
GAVRÍLA. Of course! There’s war again, and I’m in the reserve.
MÍSHA. Who is the war with? Who is fighting against whom?
GAVRÍLA. Heaven knows! It’s too much for me. I’ve read about it in the papers but can’t understand it all. They say Austria is offended that ours has favored those – what’s their names…
MÍSHA. But why do you go? If the czars have quarreled, let them do the fighting.
GAVRÍLA. How can I help going? It’s for the Czar, the Fatherland, and the Orthodox Faith.
MÍSHA. But you don’t want to go?
GAVRÍLA. Who would want to leave a wife and children? And why should I want to go from a good place like this?
MÍSHA. Then why do you go? Tell them you don’t want to go, and won’t go. What would they do to you?
GAVRÍLA. [Laughs.] What would they do? Drag me off by force!
MÍSHA. But who would drag you off?
GAVRÍLA. Why, men like myself – men under orders!
MÍSHA. But why would they drag you off if they are men like yourself?
GAVRÍLA. It’s the order of the commanders. Orders are given, and one is dragged off.
MÍSHA. But if they too refuse?
GAVRÍLA. They can’t help themselves.
MÍSHA. Why not?
GAVRÍLA. Why, because… Because it’s the law.
MÍSHA. What sort of law?
GAVRÍLA. You say such queer things! I’ve been chattering with you too long. It’s time for me to set the samovar for the last time.

4 – TAXES

Characters: An elder
Grúshka, a girl, 7 years old

The elder enters a poor hut. No one is there except seven-year-old Grúshka. The elder looks around.

ELDER. Is no one in?
GRÚSHKA. Mámka has gone for the cow, and Fédka is in the master’s yard.
ELDER. Well, tell your mother that the Elder has been here. Say that this is the third time, and that if she doesn’t bring the tax-money without fail by Sunday, I shall take the cow.
GRÚSHKA. You’ll take our cow? Are you a thief? We won’t let you have it!
ELDER. [Smiling.] What a clever little girl you are! What’s your name?
GRÚSHKA. Grúshka.
ELDER. Well, Grúshka, you’re a bright little girl. But listen! Tell your mother that I’ll take the cow – although I’m not a thief.
GRÚSHKA. But why will you take the cow if you’re not a thief?
ELDER. Because what the law requires must be paid. I shall take the cow for taxes.
GRÚSHKA. What do you mean by taxes?
ELDER. There’s a clever little girl for you! What are taxes? Why, taxes are what the Czar orders people to pay.
GRÚSHKA. Who to?
ELDER. Why, to the Czar of course! And then they’ll decide where the money shall go.
GRÚSHKA. But is the Czar poor? We are poor and he is rich. Why does he take taxes from us?
ELDER. He doesn’t take the money for himself, you little silly. He needs it for us, for our needs: for the officials, for the army, for education, and for our own good.

GRUSHKA. What good does it do us if you take our cow? That doesn’t do us any good.

ELDER. You’ll understand when you grow up. Mind you, tell your mother what I’ve said.

GRUSHKA. I’m not going to tell her such rubbish. If you and the Czar need anything, do it for yourselves, and we’ll do what we need for ourselves.

ELDER. Ah, when she grows up this girl will be rank poison!

5 – CONDEMNATION

Characters: Mitya, 10 years old
            Ilyusha, 9 years old
            Sonya, 6 years old

MITYA. I told Peter Semenovich that we could get used to going without clothes. He said we couldn’t. Then I told him that Michael Ivanovich says we’ve accustomed our faces to bearing the cold and could accustom our whole bodies to bearing it in the same way. “Your Michael Ivanovich is a fool!” says Peter. [Laughs.] And only yesterday Michael Ivanovich said to me, “Peter Semenovich tells a lot of lies, but what else can one expect from a fool?” [Laughs.]

ILYUSHA. I should have said, “You speak badly of him and he speaks badly of you.”

MITYA. But seriously, I don’t know which of them is the fool.

SONYA. They’re both fools. A man, who says it of another, is a fool himself.

ILYUSHA. Well, you have just called them both fools, so you must be one yourself!

MITYA. I don’t like their calling one another “fool” behind one another’s backs. When I grow up, I shall not do that. I shall just say what I think to people’s faces.

ILYUSHA. I shall too!

SONYA. And I shall be myself.

MITYA. What do you mean, “Be myself?”

SONYA. I mean that I shall say what I think when I wish to, and if I don’t wish to I shall not.

ILYUSHA. Which just shows that you’re a fool.

SONYA. You said just now that you weren’t going to say nasty things about people.

ILYUSHA. Ah, but I didn’t say it behind your back!

6 – KINDNESS

Characters: Masha and Mishka, two children
            An old woman

Masha and Mishka are in front of their house, building a hut for their dolls.
MÁSHA. [Angrily to Mísha.] No, not that way! Take that stick away. You silly!
OLD WOMAN: [Comes out onto the porch, crosses herself, and exclaims...] May Christ bless her, what an angel she is! She’s kind to everyone.
[The children stop playing and look at the old woman.]
MÍSHA. Who are you speaking of?
OLD WOMAN: Your mother. She remembers God and has pity on us poor folk. She’s just given me a petticoat as well as some tea and money. May God and the Queen of Heaven bless her! She’s not like that heathen over there, who says, “There’s a lot of the likes of you prowling about!” And his dogs are so savage I hardly got away from them.
MÁSHA. Who is that?
OLD WOMAN: The man opposite the dram-shop. Ah, he’s hard. But let him be! I’m grateful to her – sweet dove – who has helped and comforted me in my sorrow. How could we live at all if there weren’t any people like that? [Weeps.]
MÁSHA AND MÍSHA. Yes, she’s very kind.
OLD WOMAN: When you children grow up, be like her and don’t forget the poor. Then God won’t forget you. [Goes away.]
MÍSHA. Poor old woman!
MÁSHA. I’m glad mamma gave her something.
MÍSHA. I don’t know why we shouldn’t give when there is plenty. We don’t need it and she does.
MÁSHA. You remember that John the Baptist said, “Let him who has two coats give away one”? MÍSHA. Yes. When I grow up I shall give away everything.
MÁSHA. You can’t do that!
MÍSHA. Why not?
MÁSHA. What would become of you?
MÍSHA. That’s all the same to me. If we were kind to everyone, everything would be all right.
[Leaves his play, goes to the nursery, tears a sheet out of a notebook, writes something on it, and puts it in his pocket. On the sheet was written, “We must be kind.”]

7 - LABOR

Characters: A father
Kátya, his daughter, 9 years old
Fédya, his son, 8 years old

KÁTYA. Father, our sledge is broken. Couldn't you mend it for us?
FATHER. No, darling, I cannot. I don't know how to do it. Give it to Prohór; he will put it right for you.
KÁTYA. We have asked him to already. He says he is busy. He is making a gate.
FATHER. Well, then, you must just wait a little with your sledge.
FÉDYA. And you, father, can't you mend it for us, really?
FATHER. [Smiling.] Really, my boy.
FÉDYA. Can't you do any work at all?
FATHER. [Laughing.] Oh yes, there are some kinds of work I can do. But not the kind that Prohör does.

FÉDYA. Can you make samovars like Ványa?

FATHER. No.

FÉDYA. Or harness horses?

FATHER. Not that either.

FÉDYA. I wonder why we are all unable to do any work, and they do it all for us. Ought it to be like that?

FATHER. Everybody has to do the work he is fit for. Learn, like a good boy, and you will know what work everybody has to do.

FÉDYA. Are we not to learn how to prepare food and to harness horses?

FATHER. There are things more necessary than that.

FÉDYA. I know: to be kind, not to get cross, and not to abuse people. But isn't it possible to do the cooking and harness horses, and be kind just the same? Isn't that possible?

FATHER. Undoubtedly. Just wait till you are grown up. Then you will understand.

FÉDYA. And what if I don't grow up?

FATHER. Don't talk nonsense!

KÁTYA. Then we may ask Prohör to mend the sledge?

FATHER. Yes, do. Go to Prohör and tell him I wish him to do it.

8 – DRUNKENNESS

Characters: Makárka, 12 years old
            Marfútka, 6 years old
            Pavlúshka, 10 years old
            A teacher

Makárka and Marfútka come out of a house into the street. Marfútka is crying. Pavlúshka is standing on the doorstep of a neighboring house.

PAVLÚSHKA. Where the devil are you off to at this time of night?

MAKÁRKA. He’s drunk again.

PAVLÚSHKA. Uncle Prokhór?

MAKÁRKA. Who else would it be?

MARFÚTKA. He’s beating mammy.

MAKÁRKA. I’m not going in again. He’ll be beating me, too. [Sits down on the threshold.] I’ll spend the night here. I won’t go in.

[Silence. Marfútka cries.]

PAVLÚSHKA. Oh, shut up! It’s no use. What can we do? Leave off I tell you!

MARFÚTKA. [Through her tears.] If I were Czar I’d thrash those who let him have vodka. I wouldn’t let anyone sell vodka!

MAKÁRKA. The idea! The Czar himself deals in vodka. He forbids others to sell it so as not to lose the profit himself.

PAVLÚSHKA. Rubbish!
MAKÁRKA. Rubbish, indeed! Go and ask why Akulína was sent to prison. Because she sold vodka without a license and caused loss to the Czar!

PAVLÚSHKA. Is that what it was for? They said it was for something against the law…

MAKÁRKA. Well, it is against the law to sell vodka without a license.

MARFÚTKA. I wouldn’t let anyone sell it. It’s vodka that does all the harm. Sometimes he’s all right, but when he’s drunk he beats everybody terribly.

PAVLÚSHKA. You do say queer things! I’ll ask our teacher tomorrow. He’ll know all about it.

MAKÁRKA. All right. Ask him.

[Next morning Prokhór, Makárka’s father, having slept off his drunkenness, has gone out to take a hair of the dog that bit him. Makárka’s mother, her eye swollen and blackened, has been kneading bread. Pavlúshka has gone to school. The boys have not yet assembled. The teacher is sitting on the porch smoking while the boys enter the school.]

PAVLÚSHKA. [Going up to teacher.] Tell me, Evgény Seméniich… Someone told me yesterday that the Czar trades in vodka but that Akulína was put in prison for doing so. Is that true?

TEACHER. Whoever told you that was a fool, and you were silly to believe him. The Czar doesn’t trade in anything – that’s why he’s Czar. And Akulína was put in prison for selling vodka without a license and so causing a loss to the State Treasury.

PAVLÚSHKA. How could she cause a loss?

TEACHER. Because there is an excise duty on liquor. A vedro (2.7 gallons) costs the Treasury two rubles, and it sells at eight rubles and forty kopéks. The difference goes as revenue for the government. And that revenue is very large – seven hundred million rubles a year.

PAVLÚSHKA. So that the more vodka is drunk, the bigger the revenue?

TEACHER. Of course. If it weren’t for this revenue, there wouldn’t be enough money for the army and the schools, and all that we need.

PAVLÚSHKA. But if everybody needs these things, why don’t they take the money direct from us? Why get it through vodka?

TEACHER. Why get it through vodka? Because that’s the law! Well, children, now you’re here, take your places!

9 – CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Characters: Peter Petróvich, a professor
Márya Ivánovna, his wife
Fédyá, their son, 9 years old
Iván Vasílevich, the military public prosecutor

Márya Ivánovna is sewing. Fédyá is listening to his father’s conversation.

IVÁN VASÍLEVICH. One cannot deny the lessons of history. The suppression – that is, the elimination from circulation of perverted people who are dangerous to society – attains its aim, as we have seen not only in France after the Revolution, but at other times in history, and again here and now in Russia.
PETRÓVICH. No, we cannot be sure of that. We cannot know the ultimate consequences, and that assertion does not justify these exceptional enactments.¹

IVÁN VASÍLEVICH. But we have no right to presuppose that the results of the exceptional enactments will be harmful either, or that, even if harm does result, it will have been caused by the application of these enactments. That is one thing! Another is that men who have lost all semblance of humanity and who have become wild beasts must be treated with severity. In the case of that man, for instance, who calmly cut the throats of an old woman and her three children just for the sake of three hundred rubles – how could you deal with him except by the extreme penalty?

PETRÓVICH. I don’t absolutely condemn the infliction of the death penalty. I only oppose the courts-martial, which inflict it so frequently. If these repeated executions acted only as a deterrent it would be different, but they demoralize people by making them indifferent to the killing of their fellow men.

IVÁN VASÍLEVICH. Again, we do not know the ultimate consequences, but we do know the beneficial results…

PETRÓVICH. Beneficial?

IVÁN VASÍLEVICH. Yes, we have no right to deny the immediate benefits. How can society afford not to deal out retribution according to his deeds to such a criminal as…

PETRÓVICH. You mean that society should revenge itself?

IVÁN VASÍLEVICH. Not revenge itself! On the contrary, replace personal revenge by public retribution.

PETRÓVICH. Yes, but surely it should be done in a way prescribed by law once and for all – not by exceptional enactment.

IVÁN VASÍLEVICH. Public retribution replaces that fortuitous, exaggerated, unlawful revenge, frequently unfounded and mistaken, that private persons might employ.

PETRÓVICH. [Becoming heated.] Then in your opinion this public retribution is never applied casually, but is always above suspicion and never mistaken? No, I can never agree to that! Your arguments will never convince me or anyone else that these exceptional enactments, under which thousands have been executed and are still being executed, are reasonable, legitimate, or beneficial. [Gets up and walks up and down agitatedly.]

FÉDYA. [To his mother.] Mamma, what is papa upset about?

MÁRYA IVÁNOVNA. Papa thinks it is wrong that there should be so many executions.

FÉDYA. Do you mean that people are put to death?

MÁRYA IVÁNOVNA. Yes. He thinks it should not be done so often.

FÉDYA. [Going up to his father.] Papa, doesn’t it say in the Ten Commandments, “You shall not kill”? Then it ought not to be done at all!

PETRÓVICH. [Smiling.] That doesn’t refer to what we are talking about. It means that individuals should not kill one another.

FÉDYA. But when men are executed they are killed just the same, aren’t they?

PETRÓVICH. Of course, but you must understand when and why it may be done.

FÉDYA. When may it be done?

PETRÓVICH. Now how can I explain… Well, in war for instance. And when a criminal kills someone, how can he be allowed to go unpunished?

FÉDYA. But why does the Gospel say we should love everyone and forgive everyone?

¹ Translator’s note – A reference to the State of Enforced Protection (a modified state of siege), which at that time overrode the common law in Russia.
PETER PETRÓVICH. It would be well if that could be done, but it can’t.
FÉDYA. Why not?
PETER PETRÓVICH. Oh, because it can’t! [Turns to Iván Vasílevich, who has been smiling as he listened to Fédya.] So, my worthy Iván Vasílevich, I do not, and cannot, recognize the exceptional enactments and the courts-martial.

10 – PRISONS

Characters: Sëmka, 13 years old
Aksútka, 10 years old
Mítka, 10 years old
Paláshka, 9 years old
Vánka, 8 years old

The children are sitting by a well after gathering mushrooms.

AKSÚTKA. What a dreadful state Aunt Matrêna was in! And the children! One began to howl and then they all howled together.
VÁNKA. Why were they so upset?
PALÁSHKA. Why? Because their father was being taken to jail. Enough to make them upset.
VÁNKA. What’s he been sent to jail for?
AKSÚTKA. Who knows? They came and told him to get ready, and took him and led him off. We saw it all…
SËMKA. They took him for stealing horses. Dëmkin’s was stolen, and Krasnóvs’ was his work, too. Even our gelding fell into his clutches. Do you think they ought to pat him on the head for it?
AKSÚTKA. Yes, I know. But I can’t help feeling sorry for the children. There are four of them you know, and they’re so poor – they haven’t even any bread. They came begging from us today.
SËMKA. But then they shouldn’t steal.
MÍTKA. Yes, but it was the father who did the stealing, not the children. So why should they have to go begging?
SËMKA. To teach them not to steal.
MÍTKA. But it wasn’t the children, it was their father.
SËMKA. Oh, how you keep harping on one string! “The children, the children!” Why did he do wrong? Is he to be allowed to steal because he has a lot of children?
VÁNKA. What will they do with him in the jail?
AKSÚTKA. Just keep him there, that’s all.
VÁNKA. Will they feed him?
SËMKA. Yes, of course, the damned horse-thief! What is prison to him? Everything is provided and he sits there comfortably. If only I was Czar, I’d know how to deal with horse-thieves. I’d teach them not to steal! But what happens now? He sits there at ease with friends of his own kind, and they teach one another how to steal better. My grandfather was telling us how
Petrúkha used to be a good lad, but after he had been in jail just once he came out such a thorough scoundrel that it was all up with him. From that time he began...

VÁNKA. Then why do they lock them up?
SÉMKA. Oh, go and ask them!
AKSÚTKA. They lock him up and feed him...
SÉMKA. So that he should learn his job better!
AKSÚTKA. While his children and their mother starve to death! They’re neighbors and I’m sorry for them. What’ll become of them? They come begging for bread and we can’t help giving.
VÁNKA. Then why do they put people in prison?
SÉMKA. What else could be done with them?
VÁNKA. “What else could be done?” Well, somehow… so that...
SÉMKA. You say “somehow,” but how, you don’t know yourself! Wiser men than you have thought about it and haven’t found a way.
PALÁSHKA. I think if I was the Czarítsa...
AKSÚTKA. [Laughs.] Well, what would you do, Czarítsa?
PALÁSHKA. I’d make it so that no one should steal and the children wouldn’t cry.
AKSÚTKA. Yes, but how would you do it?
PALÁSHKA. I’d arrange it so that everyone should have all they need and no one should be wronged, and everything would be all right for everybody.
SÉMKA. Well done, Czarítsa! But how would you do it all?
PALÁSHKA. I don’t know, but I’d do it.
MÍTKA. Let’s go through the thick birch wood, shall we? The girls got a lot of mushrooms there the other day.
SÉMKA. That’s a good idea. Come on, you others. And you, Czarítsa, mind you don’t spill your mushrooms. You’re getting too clever by half!
[They get up and set out.]

11 – RICHES

Characters: A landowner
His wife
Vásya, their son, 6 years old
A tramp

The landowner and his wife are sitting at tea on a balcony with their daughter and Vásya. A young tramp approaches.

LANDOWNER. [To tramp.] What is it?
TRAMP. [Bowling.] You can see what it is, master! Have pity on a workless man! I’m starving and in rags. I’ve been in Moscow, and am begging my way home. Help a poor man!
LANDOWNER. Why are you in want?
TRAMP. Because I have no money, master.
LANDOWNER. If you worked you wouldn’t be so poor.
TRAMP. I’d be glad to work, but there’s no work to be had nowadays. They’re shutting down everywhere.

LANDOWNER. Other people get work. Why can’t you?

TRAMP. Honest, master, I’d be thankful to get a job, but I can’t get one. Have pity on me, master! This is the second day I’ve had nothing to eat.

LANDOWNER. [Looks into his purse and to his wife.] Avez-vous de la petite monnaie? Je n’ai que des assignats.²

WIFE. [To Vásya.] Go and look in the bag on the little table by my bed, there’s a good boy. You’ll find a purse there. Bring it to me.

VÁSYA. [Does not hear what his mother has said, but stares at the tramp without taking his eyes off him.]

WIFE. Vásya, don’t you hear? [Pulls him by the sleeve.] Vásya!

VÁSYA. What is it, mamma? [His mother repeats what she had said. Vásya jumps up.] All right, mamma. [ Goes out, still looking at the tramp.]

LANDOWNER. [To tramp.] Wait a little – in a minute. [Tramp steps aside. To his wife, in French.] It’s dreadful what a lot of them are going about without work. It’s all laziness, but still it’s terrible if he’s really hungry.

WIFE. They exaggerate. I hear it’s just the same abroad. In New York, I see, there are about a hundred thousand unemployed! Would you like some more tea?

LANDOWNER. Yes, please, but a little weaker this time. [He smokes and they are silent.]

[The tramp looks at them, shakes his head, and coughs, evidently wishing to attract their attention. Vásya runs in with the purse and immediately looks round for the tramp. He gives the purse to his mother and stares at the man.]

LANDOWNER. [Taking a three-penny bit from the purse.] Here you – what’s your name – take this!

TRAMP. [Takes off his cap, bows, and takes the coin.] Thank you for having pity on a poor man.

LANDOWNER. The chief pity to me is that you don’t get work. If you worked you wouldn’t go hungry. He who works will not want.

TRAMP. [Putting on his cap and turning away] It’s true what they say: “Work bends your back, but fills no sack.” [Goes off.]

VÁSYA. What did he say?

LANDOWNER. Some stupid peasant proverb: “Work bends your back, but fills no sack.”

VÁSYA. What does that mean?

LANDOWNER. It means that work makes a man bent without his becoming rich.

VÁSYA. And is that wrong?

LANDOWNER. Of course it is! Those who loaf about like that fellow and don’t want to work are always poor. Only those who work get rich.

VÁSYA. But how is it we are rich? We don’t work!

WIFE. [Laughing.] How do you know papa doesn’t work?

VÁSYA. I don’t know. But I do know that we are very rich, so papa ought to have a lot of work to do. Does he work very hard?

LANDOWNER. All work is not alike. Perhaps my work couldn’t be done by everyone.

VÁSYA. What is your work?

LANDOWNER. To have you fed, clothed, and taught.

² Have you any small change? I have nothing but paper money.
VÁSYA. But he has to do that, too, for his children. Then why does he have to go about so miserably while we are so…

LANDOWNER. [Laughing.] Here’s a natural socialist!

WIFE. Yes, indeed: “Ein Narr kann mehr fragen, als tausend Weise antworten können.” One fool can ask more than a thousand sages can answer. Only one should say “ein Kind” instead of “ein Narr.” And it’s true of every child.

12 – LOVING THOSE WHO INJURE YOU

Characters: Másha, 10 years old
Ványa, 8 years old

MÁSHA. I was just thinking how nice it would be if mamma came back now and took us out driving with her – first to the Arcade and then to see Nástya. What would you like to happen?

VÁNYA. Me? I’d like it to be the same as yesterday.

MÁSHA. Why, what happened yesterday? Grísha hit you and then you both cried! There’s not much good in that!

VÁNYA. That’s just what there was! It was so good that nothing could be better. And that’s what I should like to happen again today.

MÁSHA. I don’t know what you’re talking about.

VÁNYA. Well, I’ll try to explain what I mean. Do you remember how last Sunday Uncle Pável Ivánovich… Isn’t he a dear?

MÁSHA. Yes, everybody loves him. Mamma says he’s a saint. And that’s quite true.

VÁNYA. Well… Do you remember that last Sunday he told a story of a man whom everybody treated badly, and how the worse they treated him the more he loved them? They abused him, but he praised them. They beat him, but he helped them. Uncle said that if people behaved like that they would feel very happy. I liked that story and I wanted to be like that man. So when Grísha hit me yesterday I kissed him. And he cried. And I felt so happy. But I didn’t manage so well with nurse. She began scolding me, and I forgot how I ought to behave and was rude to her. And now I should like to try again and behave as I did to Grísha.

MÁSHA. You mean you’d like someone to hit you?

VÁNYA. I should like it very much. I should do as I did with Grísha, and should feel happy directly.

MÁSHA. What rubbish! You always were stupid and you still are!

VÁNYA. That doesn’t matter. I know now what to do to be happy all the time.

MÁSHA. You little idiot! But does it really make you happy to behave like that?

VÁNYA. Very happy!
Volódya is reading and doing homework. Sónya is writing. The porter comes in with a heavy load on his back, followed by Mísha.

PORTER. Where shall I put this load, master? It has almost pulled my arms out of their sockets.

VOLÓDYA. Where were you told to put it?

PORTER. Vasíli Timoféevich said, “Put it in the lesson-room for the present till the master comes himself.”

VOLÓDYA. Well, then, dump it there in the corner. [Goes on with his reading. The porter puts down his load and sighs.]

SÓNYA. What’s that he’s brought?

VOLÓDYA. A newspaper called The Truth.

SÓNYA. Why is there such a lot of it?

VOLÓDYA. It’s the file for the whole year. [Goes on reading.]

MÍSHA. People have written all that!

PORTER. True enough! Those who wrote it must have worked hard.

VOLÓDYA. What did you say?

PORTER. I said that those who wrote it all didn’t shirk work. Well, I’ll be going. Please tell them that I brought the papers. [Goes out.]

SÓNYA. [To Volódya.] Why does papa want all those papers?

VOLÓDYA. He wants to cut out Bolshakóv’s articles.

SÓNYA. But Uncle Mikháil Ivánovich says that Bolshakóv’s articles make him sick!

VOLÓDYA. Oh, that’s what Uncle Mikháil Ivánovich thinks. He reads Verity for All.

MÍSHA. And is uncle’s Verity as big as this?

SÓNYA. Bigger still! But this is only for one year, and it has been coming out for twenty years or more.

MÍSHA. What? Twenty lots like this, and another twenty?

SÓNYA. [Wishing to astonish Mísha.] Well, what of it? Those are only two newspapers. There are thirty or more of them published.

VOLÓDYA. [Without lifting his head.] Thirty! There are five hundred and thirty in Russia alone, and if you reckon those published abroad, there are thousands.

MÍSHA. You couldn’t get them into this room?

VOLÓDYA. This room! They’d fill up our whole street. But please don’t keep worrying. I’ve got an exam tomorrow, and you’re hindering me with your nonsense. [Reads again.]

MÍSHA. I think they oughtn’t to write so much.

SÓNYA. Why shouldn’t they?

MÍSHA. Because if it’s the truth, they shouldn’t always be repeating the same thing, and if it’s not true, they oughtn’t to write it at all.

SÓNYA. So that’s what you think!

MÍSHA. But why do they write such an awful lot?
VOLÓDYA. [Looking up from his book.] Because without the freedom of the press we shouldn’t know the truth.

MÍSHA. But papa says that the truth is in Truth, and Uncle Mikháil says that Truth makes him sick. How do they know whether the truth is in Truth or in Verity?

SÓNYA. He’s quite right! There are too many papers, and magazines, and books.

VOLÓDYA. How like a woman, always frivolous!

SÓNYA. No! I say there are so many of them that we can’t tell…

VOLÓDYA. Everyone has his reason given him to judge where the truth is.

MÍSHA. Well, if everyone has a reason, then everyone can judge for himself.

VOLÓDYA. So your great mind has pronounced on the matter! But do please go away somewhere and stop interrupting me.

14 – REPENTANCE

Characters: Vólya, 8 years old
Fédya, 10 years old

Vólya stands in the passage with an empty plate and is crying. Fédya runs in and stops short.

FÉDYA. Mamma told me to see where you were. What are you crying about? Did you take it to nurse? [Sees the empty plate and whistles.] Where is the pudding?

VÓLYA. I… I… I wanted… And suddenly… Oh, oh, oh, I didn’t mean to, but I ate it…

FÉDYA. You didn’t take it to nurse but ate it yourself? That was a nice thing to do! And mamma thought you’d like to take it to nurse!

VÓLYA. Yes, I did like taking it… But all of a sudden… I didn’t mean to… Oh, oh, oh!

FÉDYA. You just tasted it and then ate it all up! That’s good! [Laughs.]

VÓLYA. Yes, it’s all very well for you to laugh. But how can I tell them… I can’t tell nurse and I can’t tell mamma…

FÉDYA. Well, you’ve done it. Ha, ha, ha! So you ate it all up! Now what’s the use of crying? You’ve got to think what to do.

VÓLYA. What can I think of? What am I to do?

FÉDYA. What a fix! [Tries not to laugh. Silence.]

VÓLYA. What shall I do? It’s terrible! [Sobs.]

FÉDYA. What are you so upset about? Stop crying, do! Just go and tell mamma you took it.

VÓLYA. That would make it worse.

FÉDYA. Well, then, go and confess to nurse.

VÓLYA. How can I?

FÉDYA. Listen, then! You stay here, and I’ll run to nurse and tell her. She won’t mind.

VÓLYA. No, don’t say anything to her. How can I tell her?

FÉDYA. Oh, rubbish! You’ve done wrong, but what’s to be done? I’ll just go and tell her. [Runs off.]

VÓLYA. Fédya! Fédya! Wait! Oh, he’s gone… I only meant to taste it, and then – I don’t remember how – but I ate it all up! What shall I do? [Sobs.]
FÉDYA. [Comes running.] That’s enough crying! I told you nurse would forgive you. She only said, “Oh, my poor darling!”

VÓLYA. But isn’t she angry?

FÉDYA. She didn’t think of being angry! “The Lord be with him and the pudding!” she said. “I’d have given it to him myself.”

VÓLYA. But you see I didn’t mean to do it! [Begins to cry again.]

FÉDYA. What’s the matter now? We won’t tell mamma, and nurse has forgiven you!

VÓLYA. Yes, nurse has forgiven me. She’s kind and good. But I’m bad, bad, bad! That’s what makes me cry.

15 – ART

Characters:

A footman
The housekeeper
Pável, the butler’s assistant
Natásha, 8 years old
Nína, a High School girl
Sénechka, a High School boy

FOOTMAN. [Carrying a tray.] Almond-milk with the tea, and some rum!

HOUSEKEEPER. [Knitting a stocking and counting the stitches.] Twenty-two, twenty-three…

FOOTMAN. Do you hear, Avdótya Vasílevna? Hey, Avdótya Vasílevna!

HOUSEKEEPER. I hear, I hear! Directly! I can’t tear myself in half. To Natásha.] I’ll get you a plum in a minute, dear. Only give me time. I’ll get the milk ready first. [Strains the milk.]

FOOTMAN. [Sitting down.] Well, I saw quite enough of it! Whatever do they pay their money for?

HOUSEKEEPER. What are you talking about? Did they go to the theatre? It seems to have been a long play today.

FOOTMAN. The opera is always long. You sit and sit… They were good enough to let me see it. I was surprised! [Pável comes in bringing some plums, and stops to listen.]

HOUSEKEEPER. Then there was singing?

FOOTMAN. Yes, but what singing! Just stupid shouting – not like anything real at all. “I love her very much,” he says and shouts it as loud as he can, not a bit like anything real. And then they quarrel and have a fight, and then start singing again.

HOUSEKEEPER. But a season ticket for the opera costs a lot, they say.

FOOTMAN. For our box they pay three hundred rubles for twelve performances.

PÁVEL. [Shaking his head.] Three hundred rubles! Who gets the money?

FOOTMAN. Those who sing get a lot, of course. They say that a prima donna earns fifty thousand rubles in a year.

PÁVEL. Not to speak of thousands, three hundred rubles is a tremendous lot of money to a peasant. Some of us struggle all our lives and can’t save three hundred rubles or even a hundred.

NíNA. [Comes into the pantry.] Is Natasha here? Where have you been? Mamma is asking for you.
NATÁSHA. [Eating a plum.] I’ll come in a minute.
NÍNA. [To Pável.] What did you say about a hundred rubles?
HOUSEKEEPER. [Pointing to the footman.] Semën Nikoláevich was telling us about the singing at the opera today and how highly the singers are paid, and Pável here was surprised. Is it true, Nína Mikháilovna, that a singer gets as much as twenty-five thousand rubles?
NÍNA. Even more! One singer was offered a hundred and fifty thousand rubles to go to America. And that’s not all. In the papers yesterday it was reported that a musician received twenty-five thousand rubles for a fingernail.
PÁVEL. They’ll print anything! Is such a thing possible?
NÍNA. [With evident satisfaction.] It’s true, I tell you.
PÁVEL. But why did they pay him that for a nail?
NATÁSHA. Because he was a pianist and was insured, so that he got paid for it if anything happened to his hand and he couldn’t play.
PÁVEL. What a business!
SÉNECHKA. [Entering.] What a congress you have here! What’s it all about? [Nína tells him.]
SÉNECHKA. [With even greater satisfaction.] I know a better one than that! A dancer in Paris has insured her legs for two hundred thousand rubles in case she injures them and can’t work.
FOOTMAN. Those are the people, if you’ll excuse my saying so, who do their work without breeches!
PÁVEL. There’s work for you! Fancy paying them money for it!
SÉNECHKA. But remember, not everybody can do it, and think how many years it takes them to learn it.
PÁVEL. Learn what? Something good, or how to twirl their legs?
SÉNECHKA. Oh, you don’t understand. Art is a great thing.
PÁVEL. Well, I think it’s all rubbish! And it’s the fat folk who have such mad money to throw away. If they had to earn it as we do, with a bent back, there wouldn’t be any of those dancers and singers. The whole lot of them isn’t worth a farthing.
SÉNECHKA. What a thing it is to have no education! To him Beethoven, Viardo, and Raphael are all rubbish.
NATÁSHA. And I think that what he says is true.
NÍNA. Let us go. Come along!

16 – SCIENCE

Characters: A schoolboy, 15 years old, on the modern side of the school
A schoolboy, 16 years old, on the classical side
Volódya and Petrósha, 8 year old twins

MODERNIST. What good are Latin and Greek to me? Everything good, or of any importance, has been translated into modern languages.
CLASSICIST. You will never understand the Iliad unless you read it in Greek.
MODERNIST. But I have no need to read it at all, and I don’t want to.
VOLÓDYA. What is the Iliad?
MODERNIST. A story.
CLASSICIST. Yes, but there isn’t another story like it in the world.
PETRŮSHA. What makes it so good?
MODERNIST. Nothing. It’s just a story like any other.
CLASSICIST. You’ll never get a real understanding of the past unless you know those stories.
MODERNIST. In my opinion, that is just as much a superstition as the superstition called theology.
CLASSICIST. [Growing heated.] Theology is falsehood and nonsense, but this is history and wisdom.
VOLÓDYA. Is theology really nonsense?
CLASSICIST. What are you joining in for? You don’t understand anything about it.
VOLÓDYA AND PETRŮSHA. [Together, offended.] Why don’t we understand?
VOLÓDYA. Perhaps we understand better than you do.
CLASSICIST. Oh, all right, all right! But sit still and don’t keep interrupting our conversation.
[To the modernist.] You say the ancient languages have no application to modern life. But the same can be said about bacteriology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy. What good is it to know the distances of the stars, and their sizes, and all those details that are of no use to anyone?
MODERNIST. Why do you say such knowledge is no good? It is very useful.
CLASSICIST. What for?
MODERNIST. What for? All sorts of things – navigation, for instance.
CLASSICIST. You don’t need astronomy for that!
MODERNIST. Well, how about the practical application of science to agriculture, medicine, and industry…
CLASSICIST. That same knowledge is also utilized in making bombs, and in wars, and is used by the revolutionaries. If it made people live better lives…
MODERNIST. And are people made better by your sort of science?
VOLÓDYA. What sort of science does make people better?
CLASSICIST. I told you not to interrupt the conversation of your elders. You only talk nonsense.
VOLÓDYA AND PETRŮSHA. [Together.] But nonsense or not, what sciences make people live better?
MODERNIST. There are no such sciences. Everyone must do that for himself.
CLASSICIST. Why do you bother to talk to them? They don’t understand anything.
MODERNIST. Why not? [To Volódya and Petrůsha.] They don’t teach one how to live in the high school.
VOLÓDYA. If they don’t teach that, then there is no need to study.
PETRŮSHA. When we grow bigger we won’t learn unnecessary things.
VOLÓDYA. But we will live better ourselves.
CLASSICIST. [Laughing.] See how these sages have summed it all up!
17 – GOING TO LAW

Characters: A peasant
His wife
Fédor and Péťka, their sons
Their sons’ godfather

PEASANT. [Entering hut and taking off his things.] Lord, what weather! I could hardly get there.
WIFE. Yes, it’s a long way off! It must be some fifteen kilometers.
PEASANT. It’s quite twenty. [To Fédor.] Go and put up the horse.
WIFE. Well, have they awarded it to us?
PEASANT. The devil of an award! There’s no sense in it at all.
GODFATHER. What’s it all about, friend? I don’t understand.
PEASANT. Well, you see it’s like this: Averyán has grabbed my kitchen-garden and says it’s his,
and I can’t get the matter settled.
WIFE. We’ve been at law about it for two years.
GODFATHER. I know, I know. It was being tried by the local court last Lent. But I heard that it
was settled in your favor.
PEASANT. Yes, that’s so, but Averyán went to the Land Captain, and he sent the case back for
re-trial. So I went before the judges, and they, too, decided in my favor. That should have
settled it. But no, they’ve reconsidered it now and given it to him. There’s fine judges for
you!
WIFE. Well, what’s going to happen now?
PEASANT. I’m not going to let him take what’s mine. I shall take the matter to a higher court.
I’ve spoken to a lawyer about it already.
GODFATHER. But suppose the higher court goes his way, too?
PEASANT. Then I’ll take it higher still! I won’t give way to that fat-bellied devil, if I have to part
with my last cow. He shall learn who he’s up against.
GODFATHER. What a curse these judges are – a real curse! But what if they also decide in his
favor?
PEASANT. I’ll take it to the Czar… But I must go and give the horse his hay. [Goes out.]
PÉŤKA. And if the Czar decides against us, who is there to go to then?
WIFE. Beyond the Czar there’s nobody.
PÉŤKA. Why do some of them award it to Averyán and others to daddy?
WIFE. It must be because they don’t know themselves.
PÉŤKA. Then why do we ask them, if they don’t know?
WIFE. Because no one wants to give up what belongs to him.
PÉŤKA. When I grow up I know what I’ll do. If I disagree with anybody about anything we’ll
draw lots to see who is to have it. Whoever gets it, that will be the end of it. I always do that
with Akúlka.
GODFATHER. And perhaps that’s the best way, really! Settle it without sin.
WIFE. So it is. What haven’t we spent over that bit of ground – more than it’s worth! Oh, it’s a
sin – a sin!
18 – CRIMINAL LAW

Characters: Gríshka, 12 years old
Sēmka, 10 years old
Tíshka, 13 years old

TíSHKA. They’ll put him in prison so that he doesn’t sneak into someone else’s corn-bin again. He’ll be afraid to do it another time.
SĒMKA. It’s all right if he really did do it, but Grandpa Mikita was saying that Mitrofán was sent to jail quite wrongly.
TÍSHKA. What do you mean, wrongly? Won’t the man who sentenced him wrongly be punished?
GRÍSHKA. They won’t pat him on the head for it if he sentenced him wrongly. He’ll be punished, too.
SĒMKA. But who will punish him?
TÍSHKA. Those who are above him.
SĒMKA. And who is above him?
TÍSHKA. The authorities.
SĒMKA. But suppose the authorities make a mistake, too?
GRÍSHKA. There are still higher authorities who will punish them. That’s why there is a Czar.
SĒMKA. And if the Czar makes a mistake, who’ll punish him?
TÍSHKA. “Who will punish? Who will punish?” We know….
GRÍSHKA. God will punish him.
SĒMKA. Then surely God will punish the man who climbed into the corn-bin? So God and God alone ought to punish anyone who is guilty. God will make no mistakes.
TÍSHKA. But you see it can’t be done like that!
SĒMKA. Why not?
TÍSHKA. Because…

19 – PRIVATE PROPERTY

Characters: An old carpenter
A boy, 7 years old

The old carpenter is mending the rails of a balcony. The son of the owner is watching him and admiring his work.

BOY. How well you work! What’s your name?
CARPENTER. Well, they used to call me Khrólka, but now they call me Khrol. My other name is Sávich.
BOY. How well you work, Khrol Sávich!
CARPENTER. What’s worth doing at all is worth doing well. What pleasure is there in bad work?
BOY. Have you got a balcony at your house?
CARPENTER. [Laughing.] A balcony! Ah, my boy, such a balcony as yours can’t compare with! One with neither window nor door, neither roof nor walls nor floor. That’s what our balcony is like.

BOY. You’re always making jokes! No, but really and truly, have you got a balcony like this? I want to know.

CARPENTER. A balcony? Why, my dear child, how could the likes of us have a balcony? It’s a mercy if we have as much as a roof over our heads – and you speak of a balcony! I’ve been trying to build myself a hut ever since the spring. I pulled down the old one, but I can’t get the new one finished. It hasn’t got a roof on yet and it stands there getting damp without it.

BOY. [Surprised.] Why is that?

CARPENTER. Why? Just because I am not able to do it.

BOY. What do you mean? You work for us, don’t you?

CARPENTER. I can work all right for you, but not for myself.

BOY. I still don’t understand. Please explain.

CARPENTER. You will understand when you are grown up. I am able to do your work, but as for my own, I cannot do it.

BOY. But why?

CARPENTER. Because I need wood for that, and I haven’t got any. It has to be bought, and I have nothing to buy it with. When I have finished my work here and your mother pays me, just you tell her to pay me well. Then I’ll drive to the forest, get five ash trees or so to bring home, and finish my roof.

BOY. Do you mean that you haven’t a forest of your own?

CARPENTER. Some have such big forests that you can walk three whole days and not reach the end, but I have none at all.

BOY. Mother says that all her trouble comes from our forest. She worries about it continually.

CARPENTER. That’s the worst of it. Having too much wood worries your mother, and having none at all worries me. But here I am gabbing with you and forgetting my work. I won’t get anywhere doing that. [Resumes his work.]

BOY. When I grow up, I shall arrange to have just the same as everybody else so that all of us will be equal.

CARPENTER. Well then, grow up quickly, so that I may still be alive. Mind you, don’t forget… Now where have I put my plane?

20 – CHILDREN

Characters:
A lady with her children
A schoolboy, 14 years old
Tánichka, a girl, 5 years old
An old peasant woman

The boy and girl are walking in the garden. The peasant woman approaches them.

LADY. What do you want, Matrëna?
OLD WOMAN. I have come again to ask a favor of your ladyship.
LADY. What is it?
OLD WOMAN. I am almost too ashamed to speak, but that would not help. My daughter, the one for whom you stood godmother, has got another baby. God has given her a boy this time. She sent me to ask your ladyship if you would do her a favor and have the child christened into our Orthodox faith.3

LADY. But didn’t she have a child very recently?
OLD WOMAN. It was a year ago, in Lent.
LADY. How many grandchildren have you got now?
OLD WOMAN. There are seven, and all of them are still babes. Such a misfortune!
LADY. How can you speak like that?
OLD WOMAN. I can’t help it. That’s how one comes to sin; but then, our misery is so great. Is your ladyship willing to help us and stand as godmother to the child? Believe me, on my soul, we have nothing to pay the priest; bread itself is scarce in the house. All the children are small. My son-in-law is working away from home, and I am alone with my daughter. I am old, and she is expecting or nursing the whole time. What work can she do? There’s only me to do all the work, and that crowd around me crying for food…
LADY. Are there really seven children?
OLD WOMAN. May I die if there aren’t! The eldest is only just beginning to help a little; the rest are all too small.
LADY. But why has she had so many?
OLD WOMAN. What can you expect? He is living nearby in the town. He comes home for a visit or on a holiday… and they are young people. If only he were taken somewhere far away!
LADY. Yes. Some mourn because they have no children or because their children die, but you mourn because there are so many.
OLD WOMAN. So many, so many! More than we have strength for. But you will give her some hope, my lady?
LADY. Very well. I was godmother to the others, and I will be to this one, too. You say it is a boy?
OLD WOMAN. A boy – little but healthy. He cries like anything… Will you fix the time?
LADY. Have it whenever you like.
[The old woman thanks her and goes away.]
TÁNICHKA. Mamma, why is it some people have children and others not? You have and Matrëna has, but Parásha hasn’t.
LADY. Parásha isn’t married. Children are born when people are married. They marry, become husband and wife, and then children are born.
TÁNICHKA. Always?
LADY. No, not always. Cook has a wife, you know, but they have no children.
TÁNICHKA. But couldn’t it be arranged so that people who want children should have them and those who don’t want them shouldn’t have them?
BOY. What stupid things you ask!
TÁNICHKA. Not stupid at all! I think that if Matrëna’s daughter doesn’t want children, it would be better to arrange that she shouldn’t have them. Can’t that be done, mamma?
BOY. You talk nonsense, silly. You don’t know anything about it.
TÁNICHKA. Can’t it be done, mamma?

3 In Russia, the godmother gives the christening robes and a dress to the mother. The godfather pays the priest and gives his godchild a cross.
LADY. How can I tell you? We don’t know. It depends on God.
TÁNICHKA. But what causes children to be born?
BOY. [Laughs.] A goat!
TÁNICHKA. [Offended.] There’s nothing to laugh at. I think that if children make it hard for people, as Matrëna says, it ought to be arranged that they shouldn’t be born. Nurse hasn’t any children and never has had.
LADY. But she isn’t married. She has no husband.
TÁNICHKA. So should all be who don’t wish to have children. Or else what happens? Children are born and there’s nothing to feed them on. [The lady exchanges glances with the boy and is silent.] When I am grown up I will certainly marry and arrange to have just a girl and a boy, and no more. It isn’t right that there should be children and they shouldn’t be loved! How I shall love my children! Really, mamma! I will go to nurse and ask her about it. [Goes away.]
LADY. [To her son.] Yes, how goes the saying? “Out of the mouths of babes…” how is it? “there comes truth.” What she said is quite true. If only people understood that marriage is an important matter and not an amusement – that they should marry not for their own sakes but for their children’s – we should not have those horrors of abandoned and neglected children, and it would not happen as with Matrëna’s daughter, that children are not a joy but a grief.

21 – EDUCATION

Characters:  A porter
Nikoláy, a high school boy, 15 years old
Kátya, 7 years old
Their mother

The porter is polishing the doorknobs. Kátya is building a toy house with little bricks. Nikoláy enters and flings down his books.

NIKOLÁY. Damn them all, and their blasted high school!
PORTER. What’s the matter?
NIKOLÁY. They’ve given me a failing grade, may devil take them! There’ll be trouble again. Much good their damned geography is to me. Where is California! Why the devil must I know that?
PORTER. And what will they do to you?
NIKOLÁY. Keep me back in the same class again.
PORTER. But why don’t you learn your lessons?
NIKOLÁY. Because I can’t learn rubbish, that’s why. Oh, let them all go to blazes! [Throws himself into a chair.] I’ll go and tell mamma that I can’t go on, and that will be the end of it. Let them do what they like, but I can’t go on. And if she won’t take me out of the school – by God, I’ll run away!
PORTER. Where will you run to?
NIKOLÁY. I’ll run away from home. I’ll hire myself out as a coachman or a yard-porter! Anything would be better than that rot.

PORTER. But a porter’s job isn’t easy, you know. Getting up early, chopping the wood, carrying it in and stoking the fires.

NIKOLÁY. Phew! [Whistles.] That’s a holiday! Splitting logs is a nice job. You won’t put me off with that. It’s an awfully nice job. You should just try to learn geography!

PORTER. Really? But why do they make you do it?

NIKOLÁY. You may well ask why! There’s no “why” about it – it’s just the custom. They think people can’t get along without it.

PORTER. But you must learn, or you’ll never get into the Service and receive a grade and a salary like your papa and your uncle.

NIKOLÁY. But suppose I don’t want to?

KÁTYA. Yes, suppose he doesn’t want to?

[Mother enters with a note in her hand.]

MOTHER. The Headmaster writes that you’ve failed again! That won’t do, Nikólenka. It’s one of two things: either you study or you don’t.

NIKOLÁY. Of course it’s one or the other. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t! Let me leave school for God’s sake, mamma! I simply can’t learn.

MOTHER. Why can’t you?

NIKOLÁY. I just can’t! It won’t go into my head.

MOTHER. It won’t go into your head because you don’t concentrate. Stop thinking about rubbish and think of your lessons.

NIKOLÁY. I’m in earnest, mamma. Do let me leave! I don’t ask for anything else, only set me free from this horrible studying – this drudgery. I can’t stand it!

MOTHER. But what will you do?

NIKOLÁY. That’s my affair.

MOTHER. No, it’s not your affair; it’s mine. I am answerable to God for you, and I must have you educated.

NIKOLÁY. But supposing I can’t be educated?

MOTHER. [Severely.] What nonsense! I appeal to you as your mother, for the last time, to turn over a new leaf and do what is demanded of you. If you don’t listen to me I shall have to take other steps.

NIKOLÁY. I have told you I can’t and don’t want to.

MOTHER. Take care, Nikoláy!

NIKOLÁY. There’s nothing to take care of! Why do you torment me? You don’t understand.

MOTHER. Don’t dare to speak to me like that! How dare you? Leave this room at once! And take care!

NIKOLÁY. All right, I’ll go. I’m not afraid of anything and I don’t want anything from you. [Runs out, slamming the door.]

MOTHER. [To herself.] He worries me to death. But I know what it all comes from. It’s all because he won’t concentrate on the necessary things, but fills his head with rubbish – the dogs and the hens.

KÁTYA. But mamma, don’t you remember you yourself told me how impossible it was to stand in a corner and not think of a white bear?

MOTHER. I’m not talking about that. I’m saying he must learn what he is told to.

KÁTYA. But he says he can’t.
MOTHER. He talks nonsense.
KÁTYA. But he doesn’t say he doesn’t want to do anything; only he doesn’t want to learn geography. He wants to work. He wants to be a coachman or a porter.
MOTHER. If he were a porter’s son he might be a porter, but he is your father’s son and so he must study.
KÁTYA. But he doesn’t want to!
MOTHER. Whether he wants to or not, he must.
KÁTYA. But supposing he can’t?
MOTHER. Mind you don’t follow his example!
KÁTYA. But that’s exactly what I shall do. I won’t on any account learn what I don’t want to.
MOTHER. Then you will be an ignorant fool. [Silence.]
KÁTYA. When I grow up and have children of my own, I won’t on any account force them to learn. If they want to study I shall let them, but if they don’t I shan’t make them.
MOTHER. When you grow up you’ll do nothing of the kind.
KÁTYA. I certainly shall.
MOTHER. You won’t, when you grow up.
KÁTYA. Yes I shall, I shall, I shall!
MOTHER. Then you’ll be a fool.
KÁTYA. Nurse says that God needs fools.

1910


This transcription is under no copyright protection. It is our gift to you.
You may freely copy, print, and transmit it, but please do not change or sell it.
And please bring any mistakes to our attention.