

Penguin  Classics

TOLSTOY

CHILDHOOD, BOYHOOD,
YOUTH



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

FOUNDER EDITOR (1944-64): E. V. RIEU

COUNT LEO NIKOLAYEVICH TOLSTOY was born in 1828 at Yasnaya Polyana in the Tula province, and educated privately. He studied Oriental languages and law at the University of Kazan, then led a life of pleasure until 1851 when he joined an artillery regiment in the Caucasus. He took part in the Crimean war and after the defence of Sevastopol he wrote *The Sevastopol Stories*, which established his reputation. After a period in St Petersburg and abroad, where he studied educational methods for use in his school for peasant children in Yasnaya, he married Sophie Andreyevna Behrs in 1862. The next fifteen years was a period of great happiness; they had thirteen children, and Tolstoy managed his vast estates in the Volga Steppes, continued his educational projects, cared for his peasants and wrote *War and Peace* (1865-68) and *Anna Karenin* (1874-76). *A Confession* (1879-82) marked an outward change in his life and works; he became an extreme rationalist and moralist, and in a series of pamphlets after 1880 he expressed theories such as rejection of the state and church, indictment of the demands of the flesh, and denunciation of private property. His teaching earned him numerous followers in Russia and abroad, but also much opposition and in 1901 he was excommunicated by the Russian holy synod. He died in 1910 in the course of a dramatic flight from home, at the small railway station of Astapovo.

ROSEMARY EDMONDS was born in London and studied English, Russian, French, Italian and Old Church Slavonic at universities in England, France and Italy. During the war she was translator to General de Gaulle at Fighting France Headquarters in London and, after the liberation, in Paris. She went on to study Russian Orthodox Spirituality, and has translated Archimandrite Sophrony's *The Monk of Mount Athos* and *Wisdom from Mount Athos*. She has also translated Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenin*, *The Cossacks* and *Resurrection*; *The Queen of Spades* by Pushkin; and Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, all for the Penguin Classics. Her other translations include works by Gogol and Leskov. She is at present researching into Old Church Slavonic texts.

L. N. TOLSTOY

CHILDHOOD
BOYHOOD
YOUTH

TRANSLATED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ROSEMARY EDMONDS



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INTRODUCTION

LEV NIKOLAYEVICH TOLSTOY was twenty-three and convalescing in Tiflis after mercury treatment for 'the venereal sickness' when he completed the first part of *Childhood*, which appeared in a Petersburg monthly in September 1852, above the initials L.N. It created an immediate sensation, one reviewer writing: 'If this is the first production of L.N. Russian literature must be congratulated on the appearance of a new and remarkable talent.' It was Tolstoy's first published work and first attempt at fiction. The original plan comprised a great novel (with the general title of *Four Epochs of Growth*) founded – but only founded – on the reminiscences and traditions of his family, so that Tolstoy was displeased when the magazine altered his *Childhood* to *The History of My Childhood*. 'The alteration is especially disagreeable,' he complained to the editor, 'because, as I wrote to you, I meant *Childhood* to form the first part of a novel.'

Childhood is fiction but fiction rooted in reality (for Tolstoy '*l'art égale la vie*') and in autobiography – Tolstoy produced no work which did not contain a portrait of himself. When still only a boy of nineteen he confided to his Diary that he wanted to know himself through and through, and from then until his death at the age of eighty-two he observed and described the morphology of his own soul. He is little interested in invention: his concern is with the experienced and the perceived; and half a century later, when he was planning a 'perfectly truthful account' of his life and, anxious not to repeat himself, re-read *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, he regretted the book 'so ill and (in a literary sense) insincerely is it written. But it could not have been otherwise, in the first place because my intention was to relate not my own story but that of my childhood friends, and this resulted in an incoherent jumble of events from their childhood and my own, and secondly because at the time of writing it I was far from being independent in my forms of expression but was strongly under the influence of two writers: Sterne (his *Sentimental Journey*) and Töpffer (*La Bibliothèque de mon oncle*).'

Incidentally, Tolstoy disliked the last two parts, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, even more, not only because they contained fewer autobiographical

elements and seemed to him an 'awkward mixture of fact and fiction' – but for their insincerity: their 'desire to put forward as good and important what I did not then consider good and important, namely, my democratic turn of mind'.

But the child is father of the man, and the prototype is here. It does not take overmuch hindsight to discern in this semi-autobiographical story the man and the writer Tolstoy was to become. We have Tolstoy the moralist who regarded life from beginning to end as a 'serious matter' to be lived accordingly; Tolstoy the fanatical seeker after God and justice among men, though an early period of scepticism had brought him to 'the verge of insanity'. The boy with his *RULES OF LIFE* foreshadows the man whose search for the meaning of life – how to live in relation to God, to one's fellows and to oneself – was eventually to preoccupy him to the total exclusion of his literary work. Unrestrained by any Anglo-Saxon *mauvaise honte*, Tolstoy constantly reveals his spiritual condition and gives us 'the whole diapason of joy and sorrow' – and shame. With the sixteen-year-old who retires to the box-room to scourge his bare back in order to harden himself to physical pain, and then – suddenly remembering that death may come for us mortals at any moment – casts his lesson-books aside and for three days lies on his bed, enjoying a novel and eating honey-cakes bought with the last of his pocket-money, we live the conflict in Tolstoy between Puritan and Epicurean. At a very early age he recognized that his 'tendency to philosophize' was to do him 'a great deal of harm', the weary mental struggle yielding nothing save an artful elasticity of mind which weakened his will-power, and a habit of perpetually dissecting and analysing, which destroyed spontaneity of feeling and clarity of reason. It was not intellectual curiosity, nor hunger after wisdom through knowledge, that drove Tolstoy to spend his life from first to last in observing and recording: it was despair and the fear of death, of nothingness. 'Wherefore live, seeing that life is so horrible?' he asks with Ecclesiastes. He had no dreams of another world to comfort and inspire him: his act, as Carl Nötzel said, was an architecture of the depths, not of the heights.

The *dramatis personae* of *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth* are a *mélange* of real people and imagined characters of whom perhaps the most deeply felt portrait is that of the old housekeeper, who 'accomplished the best and greatest thing in life – she died without regret or fear'. (The older he grew the more Tolstoy was to turn to the common people for

sincerity and wisdom – and to the end of his life he himself retained much that was Orthodox.)

The searchlight of Tolstoy's eye falls with like penetration on the world of nature, which for him is equally divine (in the Homeric sense) with human beings. We are caught up in the violence of the storm, we *feel* the 'sublime moment of silence' before the thunder-clap; we smell the damp smell of rotting leaf-mould in the orchard, hear the anxious twittering of the sparrows disturbed in the bush overhead and peer up and see the round green apples, 'lustrous as bone', hanging high on the old apple-tree, close to the burning sun.

Tolstoy was always an ardent admirer of Rousseau and *Childhood* reveals their kinship – but Tolstoy is a more profound, more radical thinker than Rousseau. He has the Russian consciousness of guilt, absent in Rousseau, and a dual nature to contend with: a vegetarian without the vegetarian temperament, a man full of earthly passions and lust for life, proud and given to black rages, yet with a persistent hunger after asceticism. 'The arbiter of what is good and evil is not what people say and do, nor is it progress, but it is my heart and I,' and even in childhood his heart gave him no peace.

In 1857, when the third part of this trilogy was published, Druzhinin, the critic and translator of Shakespeare, wrote to Tolstoy:

You have an inclination to super-refinement of analysis. Each of your defects has its share of strength and beauty, and almost every one of your qualities bears with it the seed of a defect.

Your style quite accords with that conclusion: you are most ungrammatical, sometimes with the lack of grammar of a reformer and powerful poet reshaping a language his own way and for ever, but sometimes with the lack of grammar of an officer sitting in a casemate and writing to his chum. One can say with assurance that all the pages you have written with love are admirable – but as soon as you grow cold your words get entangled and diabolical forms of speech appear . . . Above all avoid long sentences. Cut them up into two or three; do not be sparing of full-stops . . . Do not stand on ceremony with the particles, and strike out by dozens the words *which*, *who*, and *that*.

There are very few passages in *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth* where Tolstoy might be suspected of having grown cold; and certainly no later self-portrait is quite so expressive as this first one, which he wrote

in order to learn to know himself, not to instruct or convert. Tolstoy possessed the rare quality of empathy: he stirred the very foundations of the human conscience and his characters belong to any and every age. Reading him, our own life-experience is widened and intensified.

London, 1961

ROSEMARY EDMONDS

Except in one instance (on page 28) the footnotes have been added by the translator.

CHILDHOOD

I · OUR TUTOR, KARL IVANYCH

On the 12th of August 18—, exactly three days after my tenth birthday, for which I had received such wonderful presents, Karl Ivanych woke me at seven in the morning by hitting at a fly just over my head with a flap made of sugar-bag paper fastened to a stick. His action was so clumsy that he caught the little ikon of my patron-saint, which hung on the headboard of my oak bedstead, and the dead fly fell right on my head. I put my nose out from under the bedclothes, steadied with my hand the ikon which was still wobbling, flicked the dead fly on to the floor, and looked at Karl Ivanych with wrathful if sleepy eyes. He, however, in his bright-coloured quilted dressing-gown, with a belt of the same material round the waist, a red knitted skull-cap with a tassel on his head and soft goat-skin boots on his feet, continued to walk round the room, taking aim and smacking at the flies on the walls.

‘Of course I am only a small boy,’ I thought, ‘but still he ought not to disturb me. Why doesn’t he go killing flies round Volodya’s bed? There are heaps of them there. But no, Volodya is older than me: I am the youngest of all – that is why I am tormented. All he thinks of every day of his life is how to be nasty to me,’ I muttered. ‘He is perfectly well aware that he woke me up and startled me, but he pretends not to notice it . . . disgusting man! And his dressing-gown and the skull-cap and the tassel too – they’re all disgusting!’

While I was thus mentally expressing my vexation with Karl Ivanych he went up to his own bed, looked at his watch which was suspended above it in a little shoe embroidered with glass beads, hung the fly-swat on a nail and turned to us, obviously in the best of moods.

‘*Auf, Kinder, auf! . . . ’s ist Zeit. Die Mutter ist schon im Saal!*’¹ he cried in his kindly German voice. Then he came over to me, sat down at the foot of my bed and took his snuff-box from his pocket. I pretended to be asleep. Karl Ivanych first took a pinch of snuff, wiped his nose, snapped his fingers, and only then began on me. With a chuckle he started tickling my heels. ‘*Nun, nun, Faulenzer!*’²

1. Get up, children, get up! . . . It’s time! Your Mother is already in the dining-room!

2. Now then, lazy-bones!

Much as I dreaded being tickled, I did not jump out of bed or answer him but merely hid my head deeper under the pillow and kicked out with all my might, doing my utmost to keep from laughing.

'How nice he is, and how fond of us!' I said to myself. 'How could I have had such horrid thoughts about him just now?'

I was annoyed with myself and with Karl Ivanych; I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. I was all upset.

'*Ach, lassen Sie,*¹ Karl Ivanych!' I cried with tears in my eyes, thrusting my head from under the pillows.

Karl Ivanych was taken aback. He stopped tickling my feet and began to ask anxiously what was the matter with me? Had I had a bad dream? His kind German face and the solicitude with which he tried to discover the cause of my tears made them flow all the faster. I felt ashamed and could not understand how only a moment before I had hated Karl Ivanych and thought his dressing-gown, skull-cap and the tassel repulsive. Now, on the contrary, I liked them all very much indeed and even the tassel seemed to be a clear testimony to his goodness. I told him I was crying because of a bad dream: I had dreamt that mamma was dead and they were taking her away to bury her. I invented all this, for I really could not remember what I had been dreaming that night; but when Karl Ivanych, affected by my story, tried to comfort and soothe me it seemed to me that I actually had dreamt that awful dream and I now shed tears for a different reason.

When Karl Ivanych left me and sitting up in bed I began pulling my stockings on my little legs my tears ceased somewhat but the melancholy thoughts occasioned by the dream I had invented still haunted me. Presently Nikolai, who looked after us children, came in, a neat little man, always grave, conscientious and respectful, and a great friend of Karl Ivanych. He brought our clothes and foot-wear: boots for Volodya, but I still wore those detestable shoes with bows. I would have been ashamed to let him see me cry; besides, the morning sun was shining cheerfully in at the windows and Volodya was mimicking Marya Ivanovna (our sister's governess) and laughing so gaily and loudly as he stood at the wash-stand that even the sober-minded Nikolai, a towel over his shoulder, soap in one hand and a basin in the other, smiled and said:

'That's enough, Vladimir Petrovich. Please wash now.'

1. Oh leave me alone.

I quite cheered up.

'*Sind Sie bald fertig?*'¹ Karl Ivanych called from the schoolroom.

His voice sounded stern: the kindly tone which had moved me to tears had vanished. In the schoolroom Karl Ivanych was an entirely different person: there he was the tutor. I dressed myself quickly, washed and with the brush still in my hand smoothing down my wet hair appeared at his call.

Karl Ivanych, spectacles on nose and book in hand, was sitting in his usual place between the door and the window. To the left of the door were two shelves: one of them belonged to us children – the other was Karl Ivanych's *own* shelf. On ours were all sorts of books – lesson-books and story-books, some standing, others lying flat. Only two big volumes of *Histoire des Voyages* in red bindings rested decorously against the wall, and then came tall books and thick books, big books and little, bindings without books and books without bindings, since everything got pushed and crammed in anyhow when playtime arrived and we were told to tidy up the 'library', as Karl Ivanych pompously labelled this shelf. The collection of books on his *own* shelf, if not so large as ours, was even ~~more~~ more miscellaneous. I remember three of them: a German pamphlet on the manuring of cabbages in kitchen-gardens (minus a cover), one volume of a *History of the Seven Years' War*, bound in parchment with a burn at one corner, and a complete course of hydrostatics. Karl Ivanych spent most of his time reading and had even injured his eyesight by doing so; but except for these books and the *Northern Bee* he never read anything else.

Among the things that lay on Karl Ivanych's shelf was one which recalls him to me more than all the rest. It was a round piece of cardboard attached to a wooden stand which could be moved up and down by means of small pegs. A caricature of a lady and a wig-maker was pasted on to the cardboard. Karl Ivanych, who was very clever at that sort of thing, had thought of and made this contrivance himself to protect his weak eyes from any very strong light.

I can see before me now his tall figure in the quilted dressing-gown and his thin grey hair visible beneath the red skull-cap. I see him sitting beside a little table on which stands the cardboard circle with the picture of the wig-maker; it casts its shadow on his face; he holds his book in one hand, the other rests on the arm of his chair; near him lie his watch with the figure of a huntsman painted on the dial, a chequered

1. Are you nearly ready?

pocket-handkerchief, a round black snuff-box, his green spectacle-case and a pair of snuffers on their tray. Everything is arranged so precisely and carefully in its proper place that this orderliness alone is enough to suggest that Karl Ivanych's conscience is clear and his soul at peace.

If we got tired of running about the *salon* downstairs and crept upstairs on tiptoe to the schoolroom – there was Karl Ivanych sitting by himself in his arm-chair and reading one or other of his beloved books, with a calm, stately expression on his face. Sometimes I caught him when he was not reading: his spectacles had dropped down on his big aquiline nose, his half-closed blue eyes had a peculiar look in them, and a sad smile played on his lips. All would be quiet in the room: his even breathing and the ticking of the watch with the huntsman on the dial were the only sounds.

Sometimes he did not notice me and I used to stand at the door and think: 'Poor, poor old man! There are a lot of us, we can play and enjoy ourselves; but he is all alone with no one to make a fuss of him. It is true what he says when he talks about being an orphan. And the story of his life is such a dreadful one! I remember him telling Nikolai about it – how awful to be in his position!' And I would feel so sorry for him that sometimes I would go up and take his hand and say, 'Lieber Karl Ivanych!' He liked to have me say that, and would always pet me and show that he was touched.

On the other wall hung maps, nearly all of them torn but skilfully mended by Karl Ivanych. On the third wall, in the middle of which was the door leading to the stairs, on one side hung two rulers – the first all hacked and scored, that was ours, and the other, a new one, his *own* private ruler, used by him more for urging us on than for ruling lines; on the other side was a blackboard on which our more serious misdeeds were marked with noughts and our little ones with crosses. To the left of the board was the corner where we were made to kneel when we were naughty.

How well I remember that corner! I remember the shutter on the stove, the ventilator in the shutter and the noise it made when it was reversed. Sometimes you had to kneel and kneel in that corner until your knees and back ached and you would think: 'Karl Ivanych has forgotten me. No doubt he is sitting comfortably in his soft arm-chair reading his hydrostatics – but what about me?' And to remind him of oneself one would begin gently opening and shutting the damper, or