

At Home, Chekhov Anton

"They sent over from Grigorievitch's for some book, but I said that you were not at home. The postman has brought the newspapers and two letters. And, Evgeniy Petrovich, I really must ask you to do something in regard to Serozha. I caught him smoking the day before yesterday, and again to-day. When I began to scold him, in his usual way he put his hands over his ears, and shouted so us to drown my voice."

Evgeniy Petrovich Buikovsky, Procurer of the District Court, who had only just returned from the Session House and was taking off his gloves in his study, looked for a moment at the complaining governess and laughed:

"Serozha smoking!" He shrugged his shoulders. "I can imagine that whipper-snapper with a cigarette! How old is he?"

"Seven. Of course you may not take it seriously, but at his age smoking is a bad and injurious habit, and bad habits should be rooted out in their beginning."

"Very true. But where does he get the tobacco?"

"On your table."

"On my table! Ask him to come here."

When the governess left the room, Buikovsky sat in his armchair in front of his desk, shut his eyes, and began to think. He pictured in imagination his Serozha with a gigantic cigarette a yard long, surrounded by clouds of tobacco smoke. The caricature made him laugh in spite of himself; but at the same time the serious, worried face of his governess reminded him of a time, now long passed by, a half-forgotten time, when smoking in the schoolroom or nursery inspired in teachers and parents a strange and not quite comprehensible horror. No other word but horror would describe it. The culprits were mercilessly flogged, expelled from school, their lives marred, and this, although not one of the schoolmasters or parents could say what precisely constitutes the danger and guilt of smoking. Even very intelligent men did not hesitate to fight a vice which they did not understand. Evgeniy Petrovich remembered the director of his own school, a benevolent and highly educated old man, who was struck with such terror when he caught a boy with a cigarette that he became pale, immediately convoked an extraordinary council of masters, and condemned the offender to expulsion. Such indeed appears to be the law of life; the more intangible the evil the more fiercely and mercilessly is it combated.

The Procurer remembered two or three cases of expulsion, and recalling the subsequent lives of the victims, he could not but conclude that such punishment was often a much greater evil than the vice itself.... But the animal organism is gifted with capacity to adapt itself rapidly, to accustom itself to changes, to different atmospheres, otherwise every man would feel that his rational actions were based upon an irrational foundation, and that there was little reasoned truth and conviction even in such responsibilities—responsibilities terrible in their results—as those of the schoolmaster, and lawyer, the writer....

And such thoughts, light and inconsequential, which enter only a tired and resting brain, wandered about in Evgeniy Petrovich's head; they spring no one knows where or why, vanish soon, and, it would seem, wander only on the outskirts of the brain without penetrating far. For men who are obliged for whole hours, even for whole days, to think official thoughts all in the same direction, such free, domestic speculations are an agreeable comfort.

It was nine o'clock. Overhead from the second story came the footfalls of someone walking from corner to corner; and still higher, on the third story, someone was playing scales. The footsteps of the man who, judging by his walk, was thinking tensely or suffering from toothache, and the monotonous scales in the evening stillness, combined to create a drowsy atmosphere favourable to idle thoughts. From the nursery came the voices of Serozha and his governess.

"Papa has come?" cried the boy, "Papa has co-o-me! Papa! papa!"

"Votre père vous appelle, allez vite," cried the governess, piping like a frightened bird.... "Do you hear?"

"What shall I say to him?" thought Evgeniy Petrovich.

And before he had decided what to say, in came his son Serozha, a boy of seven years old. He was one of those little boys whose sex can be distinguished only by their clothes—weakly, pale-faced, delicate.... Everything about him seemed tender and soft; his movements, his curly hair, his looks, his velvet jacket.

"Good evening, papa," he began in a soft voice, climbing on his father's knee, and kissing his neck. "You wanted me?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, Sergey Evgenich," answered the Procuror, pushing him off. "Before I allow you to kiss me I want to talk to you, and to talk seriously.... I am very angry with you, and do not love you any more ... understand that, brother; I do not love you, and you are not my son.... No!"

Serozha looked earnestly at his father, turned his eyes on to the chair, and shrugged his shoulders.

"What have I done?" he asked in doubt, twitching his eyes. "I have not been in your study all day and touched nothing."

"Natalya Semyonovna has just been complaining to me that she caught you smoking.... Is it true? Do you smoke?"

"Yes, I smoked once, father.... It is true."

"There, you see, you tell lies also," said the Procuror, frowning, and trying at the same time to smother a smile. "Natalya Semyonovna saw you smoking twice. That is to say, you are found out in three acts of misconduct—you smoke, you take another person's tobacco, and you lie. Three faults!"

"Akh, yes," remembered Serozha, with smiling eyes. "It is true. I smoked twice—to-day and once before."

"That is to say you smoked not once but twice. I am very, very displeased with you! You used to be a good boy, but now I see you are spoiled and have become naughty."

Evgeniy Petrovich straightened Serozha's collar, and thought: "What else shall I say to him?"

"It is very bad," he continued. "I did not expect this from you. In the first place you have no right to go to another person's table and take tobacco which does not belong to you. A man has a right to enjoy only his own property, and if he takes another's then he is a wicked man." (This is not the way to go about it, thought the Procuror.) "For instance, Natalya Semyonovna has a boxful of dresses. That is her box, and we have not, that is neither you nor I have, any right to touch it, as it is not ours.... Isn't that plain? You have your horses and pictures ... I do not

take them. Perhaps I have often felt that I wanted to take them ... but they are yours, not mine!"

"Please, father, take them if you like," said Serozha, raising his eyebrows. "Always take anything of mine, father. This yellow dog which is on your table is mine, but I don't mind...."

"You don't understand me," said Buikovsky. "The dog you gave me, it is now mine, and I can do with it what I like; but the tobacco I did not give to you. The tobacco is mine." (How can I make him understand? thought the Procurer. Not in this way). "If I feel that I want to smoke someone else's tobacco I first of all ask for permission...."

And idly joining phrase to phrase, and imitating the language of children, Buikovsky began to explain what is meant by property. Serozha looked at his chest, and listened attentively (he loved to talk to his father in the evenings), then set his elbows on the table edge and began to concentrate his short-sighted eyes upon the papers and inkstand. His glance wandered around the table, and paused on a bottle of gum-arabic. "Papa, what is gum made of?" he asked, suddenly lifting the bottle to his eyes.

Buikovsky took the bottle, put it back on the table, and continued:

"In the second place, you smoke.... That is very bad! If I smoke, then ... it does not follow that everyone may. I smoke, and know ... that it is not clever, and I scold myself, and do not love myself on account of it ... (I am a nice teacher, thought the Procurer.) Tobacco seriously injures the health, and people who smoke die sooner than they ought to. It is particularly injurious to little boys like you. You have a weak chest, you have not yet got strong, and in weak people tobacco smoke produces consumption and other complaints. Uncle Ignatius died of consumption. If he had not smoked perhaps he would have been alive to-day."

Serozha looked thoughtfully at the lamp, touched the shade with his fingers, and sighed. "Uncle Ignatius played splendidly on the fiddle!" he said. "His fiddle is now at Grigorievitch's."

Serozha again set his elbows on the table and lost himself in thought. On his pale face was the expression of one who is listening intently or following the course of his own thoughts; sorrow and something like fright showed themselves in his big, staring eyes. Probably he was thinking of death, which had so lately carried away his mother and Uncle Ignatius. Death is a tiling which carries away mothers and uncles and leaves on the earth only children and fiddles. Dead people live in the sky somewhere, near the stars, and thence look down upon the earth. How do they bear the separation?

"What shall I say to him?" asked the Procurer. "He is not listening. Apparently he thinks there is nothing serious either in his faults or in my arguments. How can I explain it to him?"

The Procurer rose and walked up and down the room.

"In my time these questions were decided very simply," he thought. "Every boy caught smoking was flogged. The cowards and babies, therefore, gave up smoking, but the brave and cunning bore their floggings, carried the tobacco in their boots and smoked in the stable. When they were caught in the stable and again flogged, they smoked on the river-bank ... and so on until they were grown up. My own mother in order to keep me from smoking used to give me money and sweets. Nowadays all these methods are regarded as petty or immoral. Taking logic as his standpoint, the modern teacher tries to inspire in the child good principles not out of fear, not

out of wish for distinction or reward, but consciously."

While he walked and talked, Serozha climbed on the chair next the table and began to draw. To prevent the destruction of business papers and the splashing of ink, his father had provided a packet of paper, cut especially for him, and a blue pencil. "To-day the cook was chopping cabbage and cut her finger," he said, meantime sketching a house and twitching his eyebrows. "She cried so loud that we were all frightened and ran into the kitchen. Such a stupid! Natalya Semyonovna ordered her to bathe her finger in cold water, but she sucked it.... How could she put her dirty finger in her mouth! Papa, that is bad manners!"

He further told how during dinner-time an organ-grinder came into the yard with a little girl who sang and danced to his music.

"He has his own current of thoughts," thought the Procuror. "In his head he has a world of his own, and he knows better than anyone else what is serious and what is not. To gain his attention and conscience it is no use imitating his language ... what is wanted is to understand and reason also in his manner. He would understand me perfectly if I really disliked tobacco, if I were angry, or cried.... For that reason mothers are irreplaceable in bringing up children, for they alone can feel and cry and laugh like children.... With logic and morals nothing can be done. What shall I say to him?"

And Evgeniy Petrovich found it strange and absurd that he, an experienced jurist, half his life struggling with all kinds of interruptions, prejudices, and punishments, was absolutely at a loss for something to say to his son.

"Listen, give me your word of honour that you will not smoke!" he said.

"Word of honour!" drawled Serozha, pressing hard on his pencil and bending down to the sketch. "Word of honour!"

"But has he any idea what 'word of honour' means?" Buikovskiy asked himself. "No, I am a bad teacher! If a schoolmaster or any of our lawyers were to see me now, he would call me a rag, and suspect me of super-subtlety.... But in school and in court all these stupid problems are decided much more simply than at home when you are dealing with those whom you love. Love is exacting and complicates the business. If this boy were not my son, but a pupil or a prisoner at the bar, I should not be such a coward and scatterbrains...."

Evgeniy Petrovich sat at the table and took up one of Serozha's sketches. It depicted a house with a crooked roof, and smoke which, like lightning, zigzagged from the chimney to the edge of the paper; beside the house stood a soldier with dots for eyes, and a bayonet shaped like the figure four.

"A man cannot be taller than a house," said the Procuror. "Look! the roof of your house only goes up to the soldier's shoulder."

Serozha climbed on his father's knee, and wriggled for a long time before he felt comfortable. "No, papa," he said, looking at the drawing. "If you drew the soldier smaller you wouldn't be able to see his eyes."

Was it necessary to argue? From daily observation the Procuror had become convinced that children, like savages, have their own artistic outlook, and their own requirements, inaccessible to the understanding of adults. Under close observation Serozha to an adult seemed abnormal. He found it possible and reasonable to draw men taller than houses, and to express with the pencil not only objects but also his own sentiments. Thus, the sound of an orchestra he drew as a round, smoky spot; whistling as a spiral thread.... According to his ideas, sounds were closely allied

with forms and colour, and when painting letters he always coloured L yellow, M red, A black, and so on. Throwing away his sketch, Serozha again wriggled, settled himself more comfortably, and occupied himself with his father's beard. First he carefully smoothed it down, then divided it in two, and arranged it to look like whiskers.

"Now you are like Iván Stepánovitch," he muttered; "but wait, in a minute you will be like ... like the porter. Papa, why do porters stand in doorways? Is it to keep out robbers?"

The Procurer felt on his face the child's breath, touched with his cheek the child's hair. In his heart rose a sudden feeling of warmth and softness, a softness that made it seem that not only his hands but all his soul lay upon the velvet of Serozha's coat. He looked into the great, dark eyes of his child, and it seemed to him that out of their big pupils looked at him his mother, and his wife, and all whom he had ever loved.

"What is the good of thrashing him?" he asked. "Punishment is ... and why turn myself into a schoolmaster?... Formerly men were simple; they thought less, and solved problems bravely.... Now, we think too much; logic has eaten us up.... The more cultivated a man, the more he thinks, the more he surrenders himself to subtleties, the less firm is his will, the greater his timidity in the face of affairs. And, indeed, if you look into it, what a lot of courage and faith in one's self does it need to teach a child, to judge a criminal, to write a big book...."

The clock struck ten.

"Now, child, time for bed," said the Procurer. "Say good night, and go."

"No, papa," frowned Serozha. "I may stay a little longer. Talk to me about something. Tell me a story."

"I will, only after the story you must go straight to bed."

Evgeniy Petrovich sometimes spent his free evenings telling Serozha stories. Like most men of affairs he could not repeat by heart a single verse or remember a single fairy tale; and every time was obliged to improvise. As a rule he began with the jingle, "Once upon a time, and a very good time it was," and followed this up with all kinds of innocent nonsense, at the beginning having not the slightest idea of what would be the middle and the end. Scenery, characters, situations all came at hazard, and fable and moral flowed out by themselves without regard to the teller's will. Serozha dearly loved these improvisations, and the Procurer noticed that the simpler and less pretentious the plots, the more they affected the child.

"Listen," he began, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Once upon a time, and a very good time it was, there lived an old, a very, very old tsar, with a long grey beard, and ... this kind of moustaches. Well! He lived in a glass palace which shone and sparkled in the sun like a big lump of clean ice.... The palace ... brother mine ... the palace stood in a great garden where, you know, grew oranges ... pears, cherry trees ... and blossomed tulips, roses, water lilies ... and birds of different colours sang.... Yes.... On the trees hung glass bells which, when the breeze blew, sounded so musically that it was a joy to listen. Glass gives out a softer and more tender sound than metal. ... Well? Where was I? In the garden were fountains. ... You remember you saw a fountain in the country, at Aunt Sonia's. Just the same kind of fountains stood in the king's garden, only they were much bigger, and the jets of water rose as high as the tops of the tallest poplars."

Evgeniy Petrovich thought for a moment and continued:

"The old tsar had an only son, the heir to his throne—a little boy about your size. He was a good boy. He was never peevish, went to bed early, never touched anything on the table ... and in all ways was a model. But he had one fault—he smoked."

Serozha listened intently, and without blinking looked straight in his father's eyes. The Procuror continued, and thought: "What next?" He hesitated for a moment, and ended his story thus:

"From too much smoking, the tsarevitch got ill with consumption, and died ... when he was twenty years old. His sick and feeble old father was left without any help. There was no one to govern the kingdom and defend the palace. His enemies came and killed the old man, and destroyed the palace, and now in the garden are neither cherry trees nor birds nor bells.... So it was, brother."

The end of the plot seemed to Evgeniy Petrovich naive and ridiculous. But on Serozha the whole story produced a strong impression. Again his eyes took on an expression of sorrow and something like fright; he looked thoughtfully at the dark window, shuddered, and said in a weak voice:

"I will not smoke any more."

"They will tell me that this parable acted by means of beauty and artistic form," he speculated. "That may be so, but that is no consolation.... That does not make it an honest method.... Why is it morals and truth cannot be presented in a raw form, but only with mixtures, always sugared and gilded like a pill. This is not normal.... It is falsification, deception ... a trick."

And he thought of those assessors who find it absolutely necessary to make a "speech of the public which understands history only through epics and historical novels; and of himself drawing a philosophy of life not from sermons and laws, but from fables, romances, poetry....

"Medicine must be sweetened, truth made beautiful. ... And this good fortune man has taken advantage of from the time of Adam.... And after all maybe it is natural thus, and cannot be otherwise ... there are in nature many useful and expedient deceits and illusions...."

He sat down to his work, but idle, domestic thoughts long wandered in his brain. From the third story no longer came the sound of the scales. But the occupant of the second story long continued to walk up and down....