

Mary Tibaldi Chiesa

## LETTERATURA INFANTILE

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The heritage of folk tales and popular and national legends in Russia is immense. They date back to ancient times and have a fantastic content of extraordinary variety and richness; some have a historical background.

In Russia, too, the imagination of primitive peoples filled nature with fantastic beings; in the rivers and springs there were the *russalke*, maidens of marvelous beauty, with long hair and white arms, dancing in the moonlight, singing. In the *russalke*, souls of drowned or fallen young women are impersonated as prisoners of the spirit of the waters, the *vodianoï*.

The *vodianoï* lives in lakes, wells, cisterns, has a long beard, magnetic eyes that lure men down into abyssal whirlpools, is evil and takes pleasure in the misfortunes of its victims. Wicked and malignant are also the witches, the *vedme*, with their hideous appearance and deformed limbs: sometimes, however (as is also the case in our folk tales, both for sorceresses and for the devil), they transform themselves into beautiful women to enchant travelers and divert them from the right path; this is what the Spirit of the Woods, the *liesci*, too does, it is the leader of all witches and imagines himself as an old man with a long green beard and horns on his head. He too takes many forms, and is wicked and terrible: at night he lurks in the woods and chases passers-by with mocking laughter, diverting them from the right path and vanishing at daybreak. In the *liesci* dwell the terrors of those who are forced to cross in darkness the immense lonely forests with dark trees, where the hoarse cries of night birds resound.

A powerful king ruled the sea, alongside his bride Onda [Wave]. He had many beautiful daughters who came to the surface of the waters at night to dance by moonlight. We see them appear in the legend of Sadko, and one of them bewitches the hero, a merchant, known as the Nightingale of Novgorod because of his marvelous voice and his art

of singing while accompanying himself on *gusli*, a kind of small harp. When he descends into the depths of the sea, he plays and sings with such overwhelming power that the King of the Sea, Queen Onda, their daughters, and all the innumerable sea and river beings do a whirling dance, unleashing a terrible storm at the ocean's surface.

Mischievous and sometimes malicious spirits are the *domovoi*, sort of house and field sprites, who play naughty tricks on farmers and their animals.

A terrible wizard was Kastchei the Immortal, who had shut his own life up inside a magic egg and would not die until it had been shattered. The cold that freezes all was personified by Father Frost, an old man with a crimson nose and long white beard, who showed up in the snow-covered woods and possessed great treasure troves of diamonds, — the icicles resplendent in the sunshine, — of gold and silver, — the reflections of the ice and the snow in the sun and moonlight

As popular imagination would have it, all the beasts could speak, and there were numerous fables involving creatures such as foxes, wolves, bears, cats, cockerels, among others.

Popular Russian fairy tales and fables were collected by Afanassiev<sup>1)</sup>, who wrote down hundreds and hundreds of them as told to him in person by the people. His works are a real goldmine for students of popular Russian literature. There are tales, make-believe stories and fables which are truly enchanting due to the breadth of their imagination and to their narrative wit. Yet others are cruel, with grim moments and bloodthirsty episodes, and are unsuitable and morally corrupting for children. In the popular fables the character Ivanushka the Fool (*durachok*), or Johnny Fathead, often appears, a simpleton upon whom fortune frequently smiles and for whom everything goes swimmingly, despite his gullibility; a clownish, naive, fun character who wins the hearts of children and the people.

Alongside fantastical tales there were national myths, epic in nature, *bylines* told and retold to the people and lords of the land by minstrels and storytellers as they went about their errant lives

The *bylines* split into two branches: the *bylines* of the Kiev cycle and those of the Novgorod cycle. In the Kiev cycle the gigantic *bogatyř* appear, who do great deeds with their tremendous strength. The main hero is Ilya Muromets, whose glorious undertakings are the subject of many a song. In the Novgorod cycle mediaeval events, ancient Christian legends and stories of fabulous princes and tsars are narrated. Particularly lovely

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<sup>1)</sup>Hereinafter, the author's spelling of proper names is preserved.

are those about Prince Igor and his deeds. The *bylines* are also not without their grim countenances and bloody episodes; packed as they are with imaginative and heroic events, often infused with a great epic quality, these tales are not designed for children, but rather for youths, who may learn from them about the legendary events and characteristics of the most remote era in Russian history. An admirable illustrator of the fables and the *bylines* was the painter Bilibin, who rendered them in truly enchanting images.

Ivan Krylov (1768–1844) is one of the oldest Russian authors, who, while not writing expressly for children, may largely also be read by them. He devoted himself to the fairy tale and the apologue, writing around two hundred of them. The idea came to him when translating La Fontaine: two of his versions of the great French poet's tales had been published in the Moscow *Spectator* to an enthusiastic reception. He translated many more and dreamt up some of his own, basing them on ancient Indian texts like the *Panchatantra*. There are occasional political allusions to events and historical persons of the age, to traditions in Russian society, to defects and errors of various social classes, from the tsar to the prince, from the bourgeois to the serf. Fables including animals abound, of exactly the kind that children like. Krylov's first twenty-three fairy tales were published in 1809 and rapidly gained a wide circulation, with tens and tens of thousands of copies. They are written in expressive, incisive, lively and colourful language, in elegant and harmonious verse.

Krylov, who had been born to a poor family in Moscow, quickly rose to great fame, being named as a librarian in Petersburg and made a member of the Academy. One day Princess Mary read a very gentle poem of his entitled *Fleur-de-lis*, in which a sky-blue flower, dejectedly sorrowful in a corner, is cheered by the soft kiss of a ray of sunlight, reviving him in a metaphor for the resuscitation of hope. The tsarina gave Krylov a simple little bunch of flowers which he would keep until his dying day, begging to have it placed with him in his coffin. The most delicate verses reveal a fine-tuned sensitivity which was in contrast to the poet's libertine approach to life, known to all and sundry for his... sweet tooth. Yet such contrasts are not infrequent in Russians, and are very human and understandable, given that the weaknesses of mere mortals, alongside their merits and virtues...

Krylov's art was rightly appreciated for its variety of aspects and its multitude of merits, the pureness of its style and form, its refined irony and satire, its graceful imagination and poetic colour. These qualities are difficult to successfully translate. *60 Animal Fairy-Tales* [*60 favolelli di animali*] by Krylov were transcribed by M. Tibaldi Chiesa, who managed

this feat thanks to the assistance of Natalia Bavastro, and presented in an artistic edition with stupendous illustrations by V. Nicoulin<sup>2)</sup>.

The fairy tales had found their bard in Krylov; soon after, at the beginning of the 19th Century, the fables, or *skazki*, were to find an incredible versifier in the greatest Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin. He was born in Moscow on 26th May 1799 to a noble family and learnt to read with his grandmother Mary, a profoundly Russian woman who was attached to her country's traditions. The boy was much happier to spend time with her than with his French tutor, who limited himself to mild surveillance. Nonetheless, Alexander spent many hours in his father's well-appointed library, reading avidly, especially the works of French authors, and neglecting to study Russian. Fortunately he was called back to tradition and to the worship of his mother tongue by a humble poor elderly lady, his good old wet nurse Arina Radionova. His *niania* was a faithful custodian of the immense heritage of ancient Russian popular traditions, a magical kingdom of fables, legends, proverbs, songs and *bylines*. Little Alexander was very fond of her and would often leave his playmates to seek her out. Aged 12 he started at the Lyceum in Tsarskoye Selo and poetic inspiration began to flow from him in the form of song. Among those early verses we can find some dedicated to trusty old Arina.

How could I fail to mention, oh my dear *niania*, the spell cast by those mysterious nights? With a bonnet on her head, dressed in old-fashioned clothes, she drove the evil spirits away with her prayers, she blessed me piously, then in a low voice she would tell stories. Not daring to move, barely breathing, huddled up under the blankets, I couldn't feel my own body any more. I would shiver, then little by little my eyelids would close as I was taken over by sleepiness. Then, as in a crowd, from the blue heights winged dreams peopled with fairies and sorcerers would descend, and enchanted my sleep with their magic... I would lose myself in sweet thoughts... my youthful spirit floated through the kingdom of the imagination...

At college this unusual boy with his proud and touchy nature, with his quick and keen wit, had immediately caught the notice of his teachers and fellow students; he was, after all, destined to become Russia's greatest poet. Having passed his final exams in 1817, the young man set off for Petersburg and was taken on at the Foreign Office. However, he continued to develop his poetry and his songs made him a champion of freedom. In March 1820 some of Pushkin's poems fell into the hands

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<sup>2)</sup>I. Krylov, *60 favolelli*, translated by M. Tibaldi Chiesa, ill. by V. Nicouline, Milan, Italgo, 1945.

of the police and the young man was exiled to Southern Russia. He left with a heavy heart, but at the same time accepted his exile as a chance to get away from the turbine of city life, which had only give him bitterness, tiredness and disillusionment.

The marvellous landscape of the Caucasus, with its towering snow-capped mountains, with its wild and precipitous crags, with its steep and stony paths, with its dark forests and its fearful ravines, and later the sight of the Crimea, ridden over by Cossacks on horseback, populated with rebellious mountain tribes, with its mild climate, with the scintillating smile of its blue sea, with its blooming gardens, with its poplars, with its cypresses. with its myrtles, with its olive groves, with its vineyards offered the poet sustenance for his fevered imagination. The southern nature of the Crimea provided him with the backdrops of Italy, a much longed for destination which he was never to get to visit. He knew, albeit imperfectly, our language, and read Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, Alfieri, Manzoni, Pellico and Pindemonte; Italian music enthralled him, and he found Rossini especially exhilarating. The Italian revolution of 1820–21 was greeted with enthusiasm in faraway Russia and “found an echo”, as A.M. Pizzagalli writes in an essay on *Pushkin and Italy* [Pusckin e l’Italia] “in the heart of Russia’s first national poet, Alexander Pushkin.” In a letter of 11<sup>th</sup> March 1821 to his friend Rayevski he wrote extolling the virtues of Italy, which, he said, “by pulling itself out of the miserable condition into which it had fallen, was rising from ‘the dust’ and appeared regenerated ‘on the European political stage’”.

In March ‘21 Pushkin went to Chisinau, “an accursed city”, where he had to live and get bored for two years. Separated from his friends, far away from the literary scene, the poet tried to amuse himself through creative work, reading, social gatherings, playing cards and duels, which he did as often as possible and with total indifference: his hot blood boiled over easily and he would not be placated unless he could settle the matter through the use of arms. In 1823 he obtained permission to go to Odessa to take the waters. He liked to walk along the huge sea front and observe the boundless horizon, dreaming of fleeing to Italy. And in his head the sound of the waves of the Black Sea crashing against the rocks was transformed unconsciously into the rhythm that would accompany the winged harmonies of his verse. The poetry flew around Russia and started to bring him great fame. In August, Pushkin was forced back to his father’s holding at Mikhaylovskoye, still under strict police surveillance. He spent his days writing in bed or riding around the countryside. He had to stay there for two years. He mourned his lost freedom, the chance to come and go as he pleased, but he got more

and more used to his peaceful exile, and his rich creative and imaginary interior life made up for the harshness of the outside world. In a red cloth blouse, tied at the waist with a light blue ribbon, with a straw hat on his head and an iron rod in his hand, with tousled hair, with a sunburnt face overshadowed by long frizzy brown sideburns, he would go to visit the monastery at Svyatogorsk and to see the fairs that were held there, delighted to mix with the common people: he would sit on the ground and gather around him beggars and blind people, who would sing songs and ballads to him. As the long Russian winter set in he had no choice but to shut himself in at home, writing and reading. His old *niania* Arina was living in the same house as him. She stayed in one wing of the building (empty, because Pushkin's relatives, unlike him, had all left) and drove away his boredom in the long nights with the magic of her fantastical stories. Another poet, Jazikov, described her thus in an ode: "Playful as girlhood, free as our youth, knowledgeable as maturity, eloquent as wine". And later, in 1827, Pushkin would declaim to her:

Friend from my days of severe sorrow, my dear little old lady, all alone in the depths of the pinewood, you have been awaiting me for so long. By the window of your little bedroom you fret and wait for me like a trusted sentry, and the knitting needles in your wrinkly hands keep slowing down as you glance towards the entrance and the dark road disappearing into the distance. Nostalgia and premonitions of distress relentlessly oppress your heart...

Pushkin's personality had been taking shape and asserting itself in this loneliness, as he wrote to Rayevski: "I feel my soul has completely evolved. I can create". The two years' exile were destined to produce bear marvellous fruit. Along with the masterpieces of lyric poetry, tragedy and the novel, along with *Boris Godunov* and *Eugene Onegin*, he wrote the *skazki*, the fables in verse, minor works, but nonetheless significant and important. They are the perfect examples of this type of fable, true gems: Pushkin has injected them with the scent and essence of the soul of the Russian people, as he had heard it ringing in the voice of faithful old Arina. He honed and lit up the tales of his *niania*, masterfully tempering imagination with humour, fantastical descriptions with satirical jest, the lyrical with the grotesque. Pushkin possessed a great degree of evocative flair, and his words breathe life into the make-believe beings and unreal landscapes of his fables as they take shape in front of our eyes with the bluntly folkloric tones and dazzling national colour which lend them their unmistakable character. His sarcasm is honed under the iridescent veil of let's-pretend: hence

the obviously inept tsar Dadon is beaten to death, not without reason, by the golden cockerel, whereas Tsar Saltan is more gently satirised as a docile man at the mercy of shrewd, unscrupulous gossips. The fable of *The Princess and the Seven Knights* [*La principessa e i sette cavalieri*] is steeped in atmosphere of dreamy poetic enchantment, and in the episode involving Prince Yelisei in the kingdom of the Sun, the Moon and the Wind, Pushkin's masterstrokes lead him to glorious heights of the poetic art. Consider how *The Tsar Saltan* [*Lo zar Saltan*] echoes the Greek myth of Danae, thrown to the waves locked in a chest with her baby, and how the motif from the German fairy tale of *Snow White* [*Biancaneve*] is recast so that the seven heroes are strapping young men of high standing as against seven dwarves from the mines. The tale of the *Fisherman and the Golden Fish* [*Il pescatore e il pesciolino d'oro*] was already a widely-known theme from popular poetry, but Pushkin treats it masterfully, adding expert touches here and there, and producing an inimitable version. *The Priest and His Workman Balda* [*Il pope e il suo servo Cetrullo*] is a typically Russian short story, comical and diverting in its naivety, while not lacking in satirical undertones. As for *The Legend of Prince Oleg* [*Leggenda del principe Oleg*], this tale is a law unto itself, not being a fantastical fairy tale but the retelling of an episode caught somewhere between legend and history, full of admonitory wisdom and deep symbolism.

Pushkin wrote the *skazki* between 1831 and 1835, when, on the accession of Tsar Nicholas I to the throne, he had come back from exile and could even live in a city, in Moscow and in Petersburg, albeit under continual surveillance and absolutely forbidden from travelling abroad.

Not only from Arina, but, according to his biographer Hoffmann, wherever he went in the Caucasus, in Bessarabia and on the Volga Pushkin happily listened to fables, legends and popular song, taking down notes so as to recast them. *The Golden Cockerel* was the last of the *skazki* he made into a poem, and it is him at his most original, bitter and cruel: Pushkin wrote it at Boldino in 1835.

In that year he had come back to Mikhaylovskoe and written to his wife, in a melancholy letter "I found everything there had always been at Mikhaylovskoe, only my *niania* was gone" And added, "The fir trees have a nest of little trees...". Pushkin too had his children, his own little trees, at Mikhaylovskoe, whom he loved tenderly and to whom he must certainly have read his marvellous fables, which were later learnt by heart by generations of Russian children as they learnt at the same time to love the greatest poet of their homeland. Two years after his last fable, in 1837, Pushkin was to die tragically, crushed by cruel fate at

only 38 years of age. A duel, arising from malicious slander and a vile plot, was the cause of his premature death, suddenly interrupting the life of a genius and stifling a voice which still had so much singing left in it. "Owing to his genius, Pushkin not only belonged to Russia, but to the whole of Europe", wrote Zhukovsky lamenting that sad fate. And as the poet particularly loved our own Italy, Mary Tibaldi Chiesa translated his fables so that Italian children could get to know them: the painter Vsevolod Nicoulin illustrated this book with colourful and imaginative art which was faithful to the spirit and traditions of his homeland<sup>3</sup>.

Mary Tibaldi Chiesa, in collaboration with Adriana Lyanowa, translated two short novels by Alexander Pushkin, suitable for adolescents from twelve years up.

One, *The Captain's Daughter* [*La figlia del capitano*], is well-known, especially because it has twice been made into a film, as well as having already had numerous versions in our language<sup>4</sup>.

*The Captain's Daughter* is without doubt one of the most perfect of Pushkin's narrative works. It is a reworking in the form of a short novel of a real event occurring around 1773, but it is so profoundly true and human that in its most intimate being it goes beyond any time and spatial limits.

Just a few characters, living through a series of intensely dramatical events and experiences. After an almost opaque and colourless beginning, which sees a young nobleman of the small landowning class sent, by order of his severe and reserved father, to do his military service in Siberia, the rhythm of the novel picks up as it hastens inexorably along to its conclusion. Everything which befalls the protagonist feels like the call of destiny: the meeting in a blizzard with the rebel chief, Pugachev (to whom Mussorgsky, had he not been taken by premature death, had wanted, after composing in *Boris* the deeds of the "false Dimitri, the usurper Grishka Otrepiev", and in *Khovanshchina* [*Kovantscina*] those of a rebellious squire against Tsarina Sophia, to dedicate an opera by the name of Pugachevshchina), the gift of a hare pelt by the young soldier to the swashbuckling revolutionary, to him an unknown traveller, and the unexpected consequences of that gesture; and then the love for Masha, the sweet and dainty "captain's daughter", a true, passionate, burning love, capable of making any sacrifice and of standing any test, exactly as adolescent and young love should be; here lies the whole plot, which

<sup>3</sup> Pushkin A.S. *Il gallo d'oro e altre fiabe* (translated by M. Tibaldi Chiesa, ill. by V.P. Nicouline). Milan: Hoepli, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Pushkin A. S. *La figlia del capitano* (translated by A. Lyanowa e M. Tibaldi Chiesa, ill. by B. Bodini). Milan: Mondadori, 1966.

winds and unwinds in an atmosphere of rebellion and war, of massacre and pillage, and draws in the reader with that powerful immediacy which is the hallmark of genius.

Never in his style is there an adjective or a detail out of place: sobriety and straightforwardness accompany a laudable ability to portray character. There are unforgettable characters, like the trusted old wife of the commander of the Siberian fort, whose heroic end is very apt, being described in a few strokes of the pen, with neither hyperbole nor verbosity, so as to be so moving as to make one choke; and the humble devoted servant Savelic, who shows all the infinite joy of absolute dedication to one's lord and master by an infinite number of slaves; Savelic is surly and grumpy, yet full of unlimited goodness and invaluable common sense under his rough and ready appearance. Pugachev is in contrast to him, quite a different popular character, an unscrupulous man with no restraint, reckless and rash, but in whose heart there is still room for rudimentary feelings of gratitude and a certain amount of cocky, chivalric generosity.

It is altogether a picture painted by a magisterial hand, in an era packed with foreboding.

Less well-known is the other short novel by Alexander Pushkin, by the name of *Dubrovsky*.

It tells the intensely dramatic story of the son of an old country nobleman, who has gradually fallen into extreme poverty, and whose possessions have been reduced to practically nothing: an old house with a small parcel of land attached.

Not far from him lives another nobleman, who is rather well-off and owns a large country estate.

These two men were once in the same regiment, and the richer nobleman, who is haughty, overbearing and despotic and gathers to him only mercenaries or false friends who take advantage of his table and his hospitality, has nobody who, as it were, is fond of him, or who will tell him certain uncomfortable home truths, apart from his old comrade. But one day even these two fall out in an irreparable way, after a terrible scene in which the richer of the two crosses a line during a visit to a kennels by saying that he keeps his dogs better than some human beings would like to live. From that moment on he loses the friend of his youth; he walks away to never set foot again in the house of the heartless rich tyrant. The richer man, in a temper, dreams up a mean and cruel revenge: fabricating an interpretation of old documents in an absolutely arbitrary fashion as a way of attempting to expropriate from his old comrade what

little he has left, claiming to have every right over the property on the basis of some cooked up ancient hereditary privilege.

The consequences are awful, going far beyond what the rich nobleman would have imagined or even wanted, causing the poor elderly nobleman to die of a broken heart.

The son of the latter, Dubrovsky, comes to his dying father's bedside and also swears vengeance against the man who had led him to die in such a vile way.

Following his father's funeral he sets fire to the house, and, followed by his faithful servants, runs off into hiding to become a bandit.

Some time later, after getting his hands on the identity documents of a French tutor through a mixture of cunning and money, he introduces himself to the rich man in the guise of this tutor, and is welcomed into the household, where he is supposed to provide the nobleman's young adoptive son with an education. He has a young lass, Maria, as pretty of face as she is mild and sweet of heart and soul. A feeling of ardent affection quickly connects the girl and the fake tutor, whose true identity is bound to be outed sooner or later.

This happens suddenly one day and the "gentleman bandit" is forced to hastily flee.

Soon afterwards Maria is forced by her father into marrying one of his acquaintances, an old and insignificant country landowner for whom she feels neither sympathy nor fondness.

By prior arrangement, she tries to send a message to Dubrovsky so that he can come and save her: but due to unexpected obstacles he gets there too late, after the wedding has already been celebrated. Dubrovsky withdraws chivalrously into the shadows and disappears into the dense forest, having understood that the only way out is to give up on his love, however biting and desperate the pain may be.

This is another minor masterpiece of Pushkin's, from which young readers can learn a lot, as the novel has a deeply human and moral core.

Another Russian writer who devoted himself to the genre of fables was Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky (1773–1852). His life was also like a fairy tale. He was the son of a Turkish slave girl and a boyar, Andrea Zhukovsky, who took him from his native village in the province of Tula to the city, to stay with an aunt who was an artist. He quickly showed a flair for literature, studied at University and took part in the 1812 war, which was the inspiration for his poem *The Bard in the Russian Warriors' Camp* [*Il bardo nel campo dei guerrieri russi*]. The Tsarina made him first lector and then tutor for her princelings. Zhukovsky translated German and Greek authors, the great Indian poem of the *Mahabharata*,

the lyric poetry of the Persian Ferdowsi, as well as making up fables for the Tsar's children, in which oriental elements rubbed shoulders with Russian ones. The long fairy tales *The Tale of Iván Tsarévich and the Grey Wolf* [*Lo zarevic Ivan e il lupo grigio*] and *The Tale of Tsar Berendei* [*La fiaba dello Zar Berendei*] (the latter written for a competition between him and Pushkin, who wrote *Tsar Saltan* for the occasion) are among the loveliest and best-known of Zhukovsky's, revealing a lively and lavishly colourful imagination.

A light-hearted, brilliant and lively verse fable, *The Little Hump-backed Horse* [*Il cavallino gobbettino*], was written by Yershov, and Mary Tibaldi Chiesa translated it for young Italian readers, publishing it alongside other Nordic fables in a book with superb illustrations by Gustavino<sup>5</sup>. This story was made into a lovely cartoon film, which thrills audiences from six years old to... 90.

The worthy writer of noble Ural extraction, Sergei Aksakov (b. 1791 — d. 1859), wrote some lovely tales, suitable also for youngsters. His *Tales and Memoirs of a Hunter* [*Racconti e ricordi di un cacciatore*], *Notes on Fishing* [*Appunti sulla pesca*], *A Family Chronicle* [*La cronaca di famiglia*] and *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson* [*L'infanzia del nipotino di Bagrov*] earned him nothing less than the honorary title of "The Russian Homer"; and if truth be told, without going so far as to compare him to Homer, Aksakov did have an unusual talent as a narrator and as a poet: he has a profound sense of nature, about which he writes superbly, and this is well-suited to youngsters. In the book *Russian Tales* [*Racconti russi*], translated by Giuseppina Spezia (S. E. I Torino), one can find rather interesting samples of Aksakov's works.

The great writer Nikolai Gogol (b. 1809 — d. 1852) also included characters and plot twists from old fairy tales in his writing. He is not an author for youngsters, but young people may well read his superbly adventurous and imaginative book *Taras Bulba*, and the famous *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* [*Racconti della fattoria di Dikanka*], which have been translated into Italian by Federico Verdinois<sup>6</sup>.

Lightly happy tales are to be found in the books *Grandpa Polycarp* [*Nonno Policarpo*] and *Old Times* [*Vecchi anni*], by Pavel Melnikov-Pechersky (b. 1819 — d. 1883), an intellectual and ethnographer of

<sup>5</sup>Ershov P. *Il cavallino gobbo ed altre fiabe nordiche* (ed. by M. Tibaldi Chiesa, ill. by Gustavino). Milan: Ed. Genio, 1949.

<sup>6</sup>Gogol N. *Le veglie alla fattoria di Dicanca* (transl. by F. Verdinois). Lanciano: Carabba, 1923.

great note with a great depth of knowledge about primitive Russia, who wrote these tales in his twilight years. They are suitable for children.

Ivan Nikitin (1824–1862) also wrote for children, finding fame after a tough life of struggle and difficulty, especially with his novel *Kulak* [*L'incettatore*].

Another great Russian writer, Ivan Turgenev (b. 1818 — d. 1883), left us many books which, while they may not be suitable for young children, are fine for older kids and teenagers. They are thoughtful, intimate works, including delicately sensitive psychological studies, with images and episodes that are characteristic of Russian country, county and city life. The novels are at times a little gloomy and reserved, with a veil of melancholy and touching flourishes which are deeply moving for the reader. Special mention goes to *A Nest of the Gentry* [*Un nido di gentiluomini*], *Hunter's Sketches* [*Ricordi di un cacciatore*], and the superb *Prose Poems* [*Poemetti in prosa*] and *New Prose Poems* [*Nuovi poemetti in prosa*], where the truest essence of Turgenev's soul comes out, as dreamy and absorbed, agreeable and melancholy, with a propensity for mysticism, calling up memories of certain nostalgic and heartfelt Russian songs, whose echo lingers long in the ears of those who have heard them.

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) may be read by teenagers and youngsters. The best for older children is the book of fairy tales, fables and short stories, taken from an enormous work of four volumes, called *ABC Book* [*Abbecedario*] and written by Tolstoy during the period of 1853–72, in which he was actively attempting to educate the people and also founded the *School Magazine of Yasnaya Polyana* [*Rivista della Scuola di Jasnaja Poliana*]. The *ABC Book*, alongside the narrative part, included a method for learning to read and count. Subsequently Tolstoy republished the fables and short stories separately, in four volumes, and this work proved immensely popular, running to over a million copies. It includes translations, reworkings and original works by Tolstoy, including translations and imitations of Aesop and La Fontaine's fables and ancient Indian works, Russian fairy tales and popular legends, *bylines*, realist tales, autobiographical pages and historical accounts. They are all written in a plain and simple style so as to be intelligible both to children and to the general public, and were chosen with the aim of educating. In some pages Tolstoy's greatness can be discerned, with his incomparable narrative magic arising out of spontaneity and instinct blended with consummate craft and expertise. Particularly lovely are the stories including animal protagonists, such as those involving the dogs Bulka and Milton; the episode in which the firemen's dog saves not only the

children but also a large doll of theirs from the fire is charming; and worthy or note are some stories imbued with profound wisdom and mystical goodness, such as the one about a man unjustly sentenced to deportation to Siberia, who goes on to find the real culprit there yet forgives him (The title is: *God Sees the Truth, But Does Not Immediately Tell It* [*Dio vede la verità, ma non la dice subito*]); and the stories with a historic background, such as *The Prisoner from the Caucasus* [*Il prigioniero del Caucaso*], superbly translated by Erme Cadei. Another of Tolstoy's books which is suitable for children of 13 years or over is *Hadji Murad*, recently translated into Italian by Adriana Lyanowa and Mary Tibaldi Chiesa, with a few abridgements so as to make it fit for all hands<sup>7)</sup>.

Hadji Murad is two times a miracle: once as a work of art and twice because Tolstoy wrote it aged seventy-five, a late gift for mankind at a late stage of his life. News of the existence of this unpublished first emerged in the very same month as the death of the great writer, having been found among his manuscripts. It came out posthumously and may well be considered one of Tolstoy's masterpieces. Towards the end of his life he had seemed to have drifted away from any kind of fantastical or romantic creation, but then the evocative character of Hadji Murad came to capture his imagination. In a letter he admitted that the act of having been taken over by the intoxicating act of creation seemed to him to be a betrayal of his moral and religious mission: to get caught up like that, now he had one foot in the grave, when he should have been concentrating on matters that were more appropriate to his situation, weighed heavily on his conscience. He did it "as if hiding from himself" and he undoubtedly told himself what Hadji Murad's eyes told Prince Vorontsov: "Old as he was, he should have been thinking about death," about eternal life, and not about mortal and fleeting things. But the artist in him could not resist the temptation. He gave in and once again created something immortal.

The charm exerted by the figure of Hadji Murad is so large as to explain how Tolstoy fell for him. The hero of the Caucasus, with a wild and primitive soul, stands out in relief against the incomparable backdrop of the mountainous landscape of his homeland, which is populated by proud strong men who seemingly belong to a time much further back in history than the mid-20th Century. In contrast to him is the antagonist Imam Shamil, both spiritually and physically odious with his half-closed eyes and reddish beard, and in whom can be discerned an echo of the

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<sup>7)</sup>Tolstoj L. N. *Hadgi-Murat: l'eroe del Caucaso* (Italian version by A. Lyanowa e M. Tibaldi Chiesa, ill. by H. von Horst). Milan: Ed. Genio, 1941.

other antagonist, the cruel and incompetent Tsar Nicholas I, in the midst of his abject and servile courtiers in Petersburg, in a compelling image which is starkly opposed to the scenes of war and peace in the Caucasian settings. Studying the sources took up nine years of Tolstoy's life, from 1896 to 1904, but the story does not become bogged down in historical baggage, and proceeds at a lively and steady pace, and colourful details, characteristic touches and historical information are all perfectly blended with the imaginative part of a story inspired by the land of Prometheus and his sons. The novel has the same freshness as Tolstoy's early works when he was twenty-five, when he was an artillery lieutenant; and yet at the same time it is expertly balanced and laid out, with consummate style and craft, the fruit of long years of experience. The magic of the Orient wraps the tale in the shawl of its enchantment, lending an unusual tone to the book. And underlying Tolstoy's hand-picked topic, the inescapable destiny of the man he compares at times to a "chained hawk", at others to a "crushed thistle", is a greater meaning which goes beyond one man's destiny and lends the book the quality of an article of faith or belief.

The *Gospel Parables* [*Novelle evangeliche*] are also from Tolstoy's late life, and show human depth and pureness of Christian spirit, Angelo Colombo took charge of the version for Italian children, writing in his preface "Count Leo Tolstoy, a peasant among peasants, spread the word of truth and love around him. He went into log cabins to converse and often stopped in village schools to tell his favourite stories: his own, but more commonly those of the people, which inspired his work"<sup>8</sup>). Let's not forget that Tolstoy, in his essay *What is Art?* [*Che cos'è l'arte?*], chose not to emphasise the beautiful as the source of artistic creation, preferring to focus on that which elevates the soul, that which joins men in fraternal love. This aesthetic principle also informs *Gospel Parables*.

Another book of Tolstoy's, which may be given as reading material to teenagers, if not children, is *Childhood, Adolescence, Youth* [*Infanzia, Adolescenza, Giovinezza*]. The style is not without its flaws in slowness of action and overly detailed description, which may at times seem monotonous. Yet for the attentive and thoughtful reader the book is a source of real enjoyment due to its subtle psychological investigation, its sincere and truthful spontaneity, the profound humanity of its characters and of the episodes described. This is where the greatness of Tolstoy lies, in his incomparable narrative artistry, where everything is harmo-

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<sup>8</sup>) Tolstoi L. *Ivan l'idiota ed altri racconti* (ed. by A. Colombo). Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1929.

niously tempered and balanced, the dialogue with the observations, the descriptions with the reflections, and the sentences proceeding at a gentle pace, calmly and evenly, as though drawing powerful breaths. Through reading these pages one obtains a deep knowledge of the life of a rich Russian family, with all its numerous employees, the tutor, the teacher, the wet nurse, the servants, and one can follow the upbringing of the boys and girls by the parents and tutors. Everything is portrayed with great simplicity and naturalness, and one gets a sense of real life with its joys and its sorrows. with its everyday routine and its unforeseen events, with its fortunes and its catastrophes. The outstanding figure is that of the mother, who is noble and beautiful, as if bathed in the light of the devotion of her son who lost her at a young age; and beside her the good and faithful *niania*, full of adoring affection for her mistress and her little masters. A superb book upon which one may profitably meditate.

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), another great Russian writer, famous as a playwright and as a novelist, also has pages suitable for young readers. His novellas *The Young Ivan* [*Il piccolo Ivan*], a melancholy tale about a young boy apprentice cobbler, and *Kashtanka*, the story of a dog who stayed loyal to her master, preferring to go back to him rather than stay at the circus, among others, are lovely and help to introduce teenagers to an author whose theatrical works and adult novellas they will read in later life.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (b. 1822 — d. 1881) wrote many pages in which children act: the great writer has an unusual aptitude for deeply penetrating their psychology. *A Little Hero* [*Il piccolo eroe*], a novella translated into Italian by Olga Resnevic, may well be read by teenagers, along with the novel *Netochka*. But in general, this dark, bitter, pessimistic author is not well suited to first youth, when one's heart is still full of bright hopes and rosy dreams.

A Russian book for teenagers, which has also been very popular and enthusiastically welcomed abroad, is *Marussia* by Marco Vovchog, which was translated into French by Stahl, (under the pseudonym Hetzel) and was read by countless youths. It is the moving story of a heroic little girl, who, driven by love for her country, Ukraine, collaborates with conspirators, risking life and limb several times and finally dying in tragic circumstances. The character of the girl, set against the other characters, the warriors, and the backdrop of a landscape devastated by war, sticks indelibly in the mind of the younger reader, who keenly follows her fortunes, loving her courage, her selflessness, her self-sacrifice. A truly lovely book which is still read today with real enjoyment and profound emotion even years after it was written.

Among Russian authors who have written books for a youthful audience we should not forget Alexei Remizov, who wrote a collection of fantasy tales, *Tales of Asseka, the Monkey King* [*Fiabe di Asseka, re delle scimmie*], which is full of imagination and bright folkloric element; Nemirovich-Danchenko, with his novels *The Falcon's Nests* [*Nidi di falchi*], about the adventures of a young boy in the Caucasus, and *The Storm* [*La tempesta*], set during the Russ-Turkish War; Vsevolod Garshin, whose books *The Bear* [*L'orso*], *Stories of War* [*Racconti di guerra*], (in 1877 the author volunteered to fight against the Turks) and *Four Days* [*Quattro giorni*], are popular with youngsters.

Then there is Dmitry Mamin, well-known amongst young readers, also in Italy, under the pseudonym Sibiryak. Like Aksakov, he hailed from the Urals and he sang of them and their people. A keen hunter and sportsman, he wrote many books about his hobbies. Notable are *The Little Deer* [*Il piccolo cervo*], a delicately told hunting episode; *Simovie on Studenaia* [*Simovie sulla Studenaia*], a portrayal of life on the Steppes, and various novellas, such as *Fireflies* [*Lucciole*], set in the woods, the rather charming *Story of a Sparrow* [*Storia di un passero*], with many little winged beasts alongside the human characters; the lively and amusing *Ivan's Party* [*La festa di Ivan*], *Snow and Charcoal* [*Neve e carbone*], the story of two free horses on the Steppes, who get captured, and their fate; all in lively, animated prose written with clarity and simplicity, well suited to the mind of a child.

A recent translation into Italian by Raia Pirola Pomerantz has seen the appearance of a volume of quite charming stories that are full of imagination and observational ability by Mikhail Ossorgin<sup>9)</sup> called *Natasha the Little Swallow and Other Russian Tales* [*Rondinella Natascia e altri racconti russi*]; and *Vassia and Feferka* by Elachich, another good writer for children<sup>10)</sup>.

Raia Pirola Pomerantz has also translated a lovely children's novel by Nikolai Gheorghievich Mikhailovsky, known under the pen name of N. G. Garin, *Tioma's Childhood* [*L'infanzia di Tioma*]. Garin, born in 1852, was not by trade a writer. He was an engineer and directed the construction of stretches of railway in the Caucasus and in Bulgaria. Giving up on his chosen career, he retired to the country and, at Samara, after an unhappy attempt at devoting himself to the administration of his own land, was taken on in 1896 as an inspector of work on the Trans-

<sup>9)</sup> Ossorgin M. *Rondinella Natascia e altri racconti russi* (Italian version by R. Pirola Pomerantz, cover and ill. by R. Aloy). Milan: Morreale, 1924.

<sup>10)</sup> Elachich E. *Fer-ferka e Vania* (transl. by R. Pirola Pomerantz). Turin: Soc. Edit. Internazionale, 1928.

Siberian Railway. He first broke through as a writer in 1882 at the age of thirty, when he published *Tioma's Childhood* in one magazine, and *Some Years in the Country* [*Alcuni anni in campagna*] in another. The first one was given a particularly good welcome and was followed by two later books called *The High-School Boys* [*I liceisti*] and *University Students* [*I goliardi*].

This trilogy, with autobiographical overtones, and written in simple, lively and truthful style, was widely popular in Russia and is well suited to being read by youngsters, and the same is true of later volumes of stories which came out between 1893 and 1900. Garin passed away in 1906, mourned by his large following of readers.

Another Russian author of books for youngsters is T. Shepkina Cupernik, who wrote *The Lion-Hearted Knight* [*Il cavalier Cuor di leone e altri racconti*] and other tales, translated into Italian by Katia Tcacenko; Alexey Karassik, author of a gripping and unusual autobiographical book, *How I Became a Kalmuk* [*Come divenni Calmucco*], in which he tells of the adventures of his youth, when he fell into the hands of the Kalmuk nomads in the Lower Volga region and Asiatic Russia, and stayed with them as he was believed to have been sent by God; Baikov, author of *The Great Wang* [*Il grande Van*] (a novel translated into Italian<sup>11)</sup>), of *The Forest Rustles* [*La foresta stormisce*] and *Tales of Siberia, Manchuria and China* [*I racconti della Siberia, della Manciuuria e della Cina*]; Alexei Tolstoy, author of *The Silver Prince* [*Il principe argento*]; V.P. Zhelikovskaya, the author of a charming autobiographical work, *When I Was Little* [*Quand'ero bambina*] (translated into Italian by Maria Chiara<sup>12)</sup>), of *Prince Iliko* [*Il principe Iliko*] and *In The Savage Tartar Village* [*Nel selvaggio villaggio tartaro*]; Klaudia Lukashevich devoted himself to the genre of adolescent writing. Soschenko is the author of *Comic Stories* [*Storie comiche*], novellas with more than a hint of the grotesque. Kuprin, too, has good writing for a youthful audience.

Special mention must go to Ludmila<sup>13)</sup> Charskaya, author of several novels that are especially suitable for "young ladies" between the ages of twelve and fifteen.

She was very popular in Russia with young female readers at the turn of the century and now Italian girls can get to know one of her most famous novels, *The Princess of the Caucasus* [*La principessa del Cau-*

<sup>11)</sup>Baikov N. A. *Il grande Wang* (trad. di R. Radex). Milano: Garzanti, 1940.

<sup>12)</sup>Gelikovskaja V. P. [Zhelikovskaya], *Com'ero da bimba. Dai ricordi della prima infanzia*. (Translated by da M. Chiara). Lanciano: Carabba, 1930.

<sup>13)</sup>In the Italian text. The real name was Lydia.

*caso*], as translated by Mary Tibaldi Chiesa and Adriana Lyanowa<sup>14</sup>). A brief plot outline is as follows: Nina, a restless and spirited young Tartar princess of fifteen years of age, a true daughter of the Caucasus, does not feel at home in her adoptive father Prince George's rich home, and dreams of a free and savage life, with carefree gallops in the mountains, with adventure and danger. Her parents try in vain to tame her wild nature.

Nina secretly makes friends with the terrifying Kerim, chief of the bandits, who saved her life one night in a storm, and makes him her idol. After the death of her adoptive father, she becomes a rich heiress, but has to endure confinement in the gloomy castle of her strict grandmother's, and must resist attempts to have her paired off with the vain and opportunistic Durov, whom she hates with a passion. Taken off to boarding school, she fights in vain against the bars of a new prison. She is saved from her desperation by Lydia, a mysterious and incomprehensible friend whom she had met earlier: it is by her efforts that the rebellious teenager Nina, often unfair and sometimes selfish, learns the real meaning of life and to love it and her fellows.

We should also mention the following Russian books for teenagers and youngsters: *In Ukraine [Nell'Ucraina]*, sketches and tales by A. J. Efimenko; *The Old Bell-Ringer [Il vecchio campanaro]*<sup>15</sup>) and *The Blind Musician [Il musicista cieco]* by V. Korolenko (the former has been translated into Italian); *Gutaper, the Boy [Gutaper, il ragazzo]*, and other tales by D. Grigorovic; *Sketches of the Seminary [Schizzi dal seminario]* by Pomialovski; *Naval Tales [Racconti navali]* by Stanukovic; *Tales and Novellas [Racconti e novelle]* by Severzov-Polinov; *Tales for Children [Racconti per bambini]* by D. Tikhomirov; *Humorous Tales of Teffi [Racconti umoristici di Teffi]*; the historical novels of Soloviev; *Gleb's Journey [Il viaggio di Gleb]* and other tales by Boris Zaitsev; the poems and children's books by Sasha Cherniy, the stories by Grebenshikov; *Jura, the Scarab-Beetle in the Sun [Jura, Lo scarabeo al sole]* and other stories by Korsak; *The Good Lord's Summer, Pilgrimage, Mary [L'estate del buon Dio, Pellegrinaggio, Mary]* and other tales by Shmelev; the stories and novels by Krassnov; *Years at the Gymnasium [Gli anni del ginnasio]* by A. Zhablonovsky; *Joy and Sorrow [Gioia e dolore]* and other tales by Chistyakov; the fantastical fables by Zhershov;

<sup>14</sup>Charskaja, L. *La principessa del Caucaso* (Italian version by A. Lyanowa and M. Tibaldi Chiesa, drawings by E. Tamburini). Milan: A. Vallardi, 1953.

<sup>15</sup>Korolenko V. *Il diù del diavolo, Il campanaro, Il sogno di Makar*. Milan: Sonzogno, 1903; Korolenko V. *Il vecchio campanaro*. (Translated by B. Jakovenko). Florence: Vallecchi, 1926. (Fontana viva. Opere scelte per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza).

and, among the most recent (from 1927 to 1931), the books on zoology and botany by V. Bianki; *The South Pole Expedition* [*La spedizione al Polo Sud*] by Amundsen and Scott in 1910, by S. Cackina; *The Secret of Porcelain* [*Il segreto della porcellana*] by E. Danko (how the secret of porcelain, hitherto known only to the Chinese, was uncovered); *My Life* [*La mia vita*] by V. Durov, a famous animal tamer, in which he shows how a cat, a mouse and a bird can all live peacefully together; *Natasha and Kolya* [*Natascia e Kolja*], the life of two children, by J. Fausek; *Leshka* [*Lescka*], the story of a young boy, by S. Fedorchenko; *Childhood Memories* [*Ricordi di infanzia*], with many animal characters, and the *Story of a Little Rabbit, a Mouse and a Sparrow* [*Storia di un coniglietto, di un topo e di un passero*], by E. Gorbunova-Posadova; *History of Writing and the Book* [*Storia della scrittura e del libro*] and *Story of Time Measurement* [*Storia della misura del tempo*] by M. Iliyn; several popular short stories and songs for children by J. Meksin and A. Olsufieva; *Summer* [*Leto*]<sup>16)</sup> children's games for the woods, meadows and vegetable gardens, by A. Pakhomov; the story of a young girl who makes friends with the animals in Daghestan, by O. Perovskaya; stories and books of historical information, by N. Rubakin; the story of a child and a camel, by A. Samokhvalov: *The African Guest* [*L'ospite dell'Africa*], the elephant, by S. Tsayakiy.

*Translated by Tom Bird. Edited by Giulia De Florio*

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<sup>16)</sup>In Russian in the original text.