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Theme for Children

Every man has a stain upon his conscience. I am no exception. But the majority look at these adornments very simply; they wear them as lightly as starched shirts. But to far me I never wear such shirts, and probably for that cause feel my stain very uncomfortable. In one word—I wish to confess.

I do not confess merely because I have no other agreeable recreation in my life, or because confession is the only way in which I can attract the attention of others; I do not enter into confessions because it gives me an opportunity to expose my virtues. Not at all. I am not guided by any one of these motives which usually impel men to public confessions. I confess only because I feel the time has come. And so I have taken up my pen with the intention of using it as a brush for the cleaning of my soul from that dark stain which has pained me for years.

It all began on a merry May day, when, walking up the street, I met a schoolgirl known to me. Her name was Lisotcha; she had merry hazel eyes—though now they were sad; a rosy, clear-cut, animated face—now pale and deadly; a walk like a bird's flight—now she could barely move a foot.

"Lisotcha, how do you do? May I ask after the health of your dolls?" I forgot to mention the class she was in. It was the fourth. I loved to play with her dolls; after relations with men such play revives and animates.

"Good morning," answered Lisotcha, and in her voice I heard tears.

"What is the matter?" I asked in alarm. I confess I loved her; and she returned my love with the fervor and passion of her twelve summers. I was myself then only fifty-three.

"They—they have again—composition," she said through her tears.

"A composition? Is the theme so said that even before writing it makes you cry?"

She smiled.

"Yes. You are all right. You are not forced to write compositions!"

"Alas, Lisotcha, I am. Only you are forced by your master, and I by circumstances. We wear my which is worse off. But don't cry; I will write your composition. What is the theme?"

"Water, its importance in Nature and in Human Life." Write it! Dear! Get me five marks!

"I will try!"

The reason I offered to write her composition so unhesitatingly was that that kind of work was familiar to me. On one occasion a teacher of literature awarded me two marks for a composition written for a fifth class schoolgirl on the subject of "The Positive Traits in the Character of Skoloub and Moltchala." On another occasion I received one mark for a composition written for a sixth class boy, on the theme, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of Respect for Parents," or something of that kind.

But though I knew the task I had undertaken, I thought for a moment before beginning. I desired that my little girl should gain full marks. How must I write it so that she should receive the whole five?

After a moment's thought I decided. Before writing a word, I must convince myself that I was not a giant six feet high, but a little rosy-cheeked schoolgirl twelve years old.

It seemed beyond doubt that when the teacher names the theme he takes into account the child's knowledge of the subject, its psychology, its style, and finally, its idealistic view of and relation to the subject. That was beyond doubt. The conclusion was that I, as far as I possibly could, should imitate a child. Admirable!

And we conversed together on the subject of the elasticity of friendship's bonds; how it happens that you walk away from a friend's house, and yet come to him, and prevent him sleeping. Then we spoke of wine and of people who drink wine, and we made the following discovery: People who have money in their pockets or credit at a wine merchant's may buy wine, whereas those who have neither cannot.

When I returned home I lay on the sofa, lighted a cigarette, and fell asleep—a thing I did not intend to do. I was awakened by a friend who came to call—a thing which it appeared he had no intention of doing. He had left his house without having any thought of coming to me; yet came. When my friend left it was too late to write about Water.

The composition was to be ready by Saturday, so there remained two days. But on the following day I again failed, not through friendship, but through wine, which this time proved itself an enemy. When the last day came, I sat down to write of

Water is a wet liquid, the first appearance of which on earth is prehistoric. At first there was only a little water in the world, but since the Flood came by order of God, there has been more water than land; and from that time the water, never flowing away, remains in marshes, lakes, and seas. Water exists only in low-lying places but it cannot exist in high places because it is a liquid. If you pour it on the top of a hill it will soon flow to the bottom; and that reason the bases of hills are always surrounded by seas, lakes, and marshes. If you pour it on an arched bridge it will also run off, although the arch is round as an orange. All the rivers also flow downwards because they begin on the tops of hills, and because water is liquid. When it runs down it is on the floor, it will flow to the lower parts, not to the higher. It can easily be distinguished from butter because it never gets solid. Fat-butter (oil) is more like water. In marshes water is dirty, it is not salt; and therefore such water is not drunk; people drink river-water, and even that only where there are no water-works. It is dangerous to drink water, so you may wish cold; better drink tea or coffee. Water also serves as a medium of communication, and those countries which have much water have great resources; such is ancient times were Phoenicia and Greece, and in modern times, England. Fishes like to live in water. Water is very convenient for transporting merchandise on special ships which are called boats; but you cannot walk on it as it is a liquid and slips from under your feet so that you drown. In Nature water appears when it is summer in the form of rain which makes a great deal of mud. When rain falls, it first falls on the roofs of houses, and thence flows in rivulets on to the ground. When it is raining grown up people go out in galoshes, and umbrellas, while children sit at home and read it very tedious. In winter, rain freezes and falls on the earth in the form of snow, which makes it very cold. In human life, water has several uses; it is used for making tea and soup and for washing; and when it is washing it is used with soap, it gets into the eyes, and makes them smart. Soap and water are used for making bubbles. To make bubbles you should melt some soap in the water, take a straw, and after dipping it in the mixture, blow very carefully. At the end of the straw will grow a big, pretty bubble of varied colors; and, breaking away from the straw it will fly through the air until it bursts. Water is also used for washing clothes, washing the floors of rooms and it gives you cold if you drink it when you are very hot. People also bathe in water and some are drowned. Thus we see that the importance of Water in Nature and in Human Life is very great.

Elisabeth Plonk:

Such was my composition. I confess that on reading it over I felt satisfied because I found that it was written quite in the style of the fourth class of the grammar, and not without knowledge of a child's psychology. I knew that soap bubbles are nearer to the interest of a twelve-year-old child than the commerce of the Phoenicians; and I had therefore dealt more with soap bubbles, than with the sea as a factor of culture. I did not attempt to show the superiority of wine over water, although I might have proved it brilliantly. I did not attempt to show how necessary it was in the interests of the revenue to place an excise duty on water—though why should I not have done so. I have even it proved by men with highly developed tastes of patriotism!

"What a beautiful composition!" said the teacher, and he looked at me with a smile. "You have done very well. What a beautiful composition!"

"Thank you very much," I said, and I felt a little ashamed to see how the teacher looked at me. "What a beautiful composition!"

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