

Kornei - Warr. Frances
boy. Paula
Principle - Wes
Zuyev - David
Timosha - Jackie
Munija - Conrad
Sasha - Petrena

Zuzya - Robyn
Nadya - Helen
Alexander - Peter
Stranger - Jenni

THE TELEGRAPH

by Kornei Chukovsky

Setting: classroom in Odessa, Russia, 1893; ten children hard at work at desks.

Enter narrator (Kornei as an older person.)

Narr: And so ... this is how it was, years ago, when I was a child in the Old Land, back home in Odessa, Russia. See there, my friend Zuyev, he is pulling pictures of Saints out of his schoolbag - copper ones, tin ones, wood and paper ones - and kissing them in such a businesslike way. He won't skip even one for fear that a particular saint might get insulted and play some nasty trick on him.

And it's not for nothing that Zuyev is praying. In another few minutes our class is going to be given a test - a very scary test in dictation - that we have been expecting for eleven days. Eleven days ago Mr. Burgmeister came into our room and read us an announcement:

Lights dim out for an instant and come up again.

Mr. Burgmeister: The honorable Trustee of the Educational District, His Excellency Count Nikolai Ferdinandovich von Lustig, will shortly afford our class the honor of a visit and may perhaps express the desire to attend the Russian lesson during the period of dictation.

Lights dim out and come up again.

Narr: And now the day had come. I felt especially sorry for my best friend, Timosha Makarov, who sat behind me. She was just back in school after being sick with typhoid fever and was way behind the rest of us. Look how frightened she is. Suddenly I had a brilliant idea. I had been the champion dictation taker in our class for years, why I don't know. From the age of seven I could write the most complicated phrases without a mistake. And now I had a brain wave.

Kornei: Timosha - wait a minute - I have it! - a great idea.

(pulls out a string and ties it to her shoe)

Now, tie this to your leg. Make it tight. If I pull the string once, that means comma. Two pulls is an exclamation mark. Three pulls - question mark. Four pulls is a colon. Get it?

Munija (sitting next): Hey, tie me on to. I can't flunk out again this year! (ties himself on)

Sasha: Me too. I'm not missing out on this one. (pulls out string and hitches up)

Timosha: Here, we had better tie on Zuzya too. If we don't she make such a fuss old hatchet head will find us out. (ties on Zuzya)

Nadya and Maxim (from back of classroom): Ok, ok, don't think we're going to be left of this. Come on, hitch us up too. (They get tied on.)

Kornei: Now remember, One jerk: comma. Two: exclamation mark. Three: question mark. Four: colon. Got it straight?

Zuyev (throwing his saints into the bookbag) yanks out a string and dives under desk to tie it to Kornei's shoe.

(door opens and in walks stranger! children snap to attention; stranger begins dictation.)

Stranger: On that day (Kornei gives violent jerk), when valiant Igor (jerk), leading the troops out of the forests and swamps (jerk), noticed that in the field (jerk), where the enemy was standing (jerk), an ominous cloud of dust had risen (jerk), he said (jerk, jerk, jerk, jerk): "How glorious to serve one's country (jerk, jerk)!"

(stranger continues to dictate quietly as Narrator speaks)

Narr: Our desks were shaking as if they had convulsions. I kept sending signals to Zuyev, Timosha and Munya. Timosha passed them on to Sasha, and Munya to Zuzya and Nadya and Alexander.

(stranger ends dictation, collects books and leaves; children leap up and enthusiastically thank Kornei.)

Lights dim and up.

Narr: The next week the stranger returned. It turned out that she was an important official from Count von Lustig's office. She enters with our principal.

enter Principal and stranger

Principal: By order of the Honorable Trustee of the Educational District, His Excellency Count von Lustig, the Commission of Verification of Educational Progress has examined the notebooks in which your dictations were written and presents to you:

Stranger: Ahem, ah, yes... the Commission has taken notice of a certain very peculiar thing.... (looks through notebooks).... ah yes, let us take for example the case of

Zuyev and Timosha. Might I invite them up to the blackboard?

Zuyev and Timosha run eagerly up and wait with an air of dignified modesty, waiting to be praised. - stranger looks at them and suddenly smiles - turns to the board and writes the following:

On the day when: valiant Igor leading? the troops out of the forests and swamps noticed that in the field where? the enemy, was standing an ominous cloud, of dust! had risen?

Stranger: That is the way third-year student Timosha wrote his dictation. For such a dictation a mark of 1 is too high. We hereby give Timosha, just like Zuyev, a zero.

(children laugh and whistle; stranger taps desk and continues)

Stranger: But there are some students among you who are unworthy even to receive a zero. They are Nadya and Alexander Babenchikov. Nadya Babenchikov wrote down her dictation like this:

On that day when valiant Igor leading the troops out of the forest and swamps noticed that in the field where the enemy was standing an ominous? cloud of dust had! risen he said how glorious to serve: one's country?

(Stranger surveys children sternly and stalks out)

Kornei leaps up, stares wildly around her; the other children make a rush at her and she flees off stage followed by the others.

Narr. And so it was all my fault. I gave the signals as I wrote and the others, trusting blindly in my telegraph, stopped using their brains altogether. After that day was over it was a long time before I could cough, laugh or sneeze or sigh. That was how much my ribs hurt after my pals expressed their gratitude to me for my services. It was no use at all trying to make them understand that even the greatest invention on earth isn't perfect the first time it is tried.

It was four days before I was in condition to come back to school.