

Contents

The Confusions of Young Master Törless	I
Note on the Text	180
Translator's Afterword	181

The Confusions of Young Master Törless

The moment we express something in words, in a strange way we devalue it. We think that we have descended into the depths of the abyss, yet when we return to the surface, the drops of water on our pale fingertips no longer resemble the ocean from which they came. We imagine that we have discovered a priceless treasure, but when we are in the daylight again we realize that all we have brought back is worthless stones and fragments of glass – and yet the treasure, unchanged, still glitters in the darkness.

MAETERLINCK

A SMALL RAILWAY STATION on the line that leads to Russia.

For as far as the eye could see in both directions, four parallel tracks stretched into the distance along the yellowish gravel of the wide embankment; on the ground beside each line, like a dirty shadow, was a dark trace left by jets of burning-hot steam.

The wide road that led to the platform and the low, oil-painted station building was full of ruts. Its edges would have been indistinguishable from the trampled ground all around, had it not been for two rows of acacia trees that ran forlornly alongside, their parched leaves suffocating beneath layers of dust and soot.

Perhaps it was the dismal colours, or the pale, feeble light of the late-afternoon sun struggling to shine through the mist, but everything and everyone had something lacklustre, lifeless and mechanical about them, as if they had been transported here from a puppet theatre. At regular intervals the station-master came out of his office, and, his head always at the same angle, turned to look down the long stretch of track towards the little signal box, which was still not giving any indication of the approach of the express train that had been seriously delayed at the border; then with exactly the same movement of his arm he took out his pocket watch, shook his head and disappeared inside again, like one of the little figures on an old-fashioned clock tower which go in and out whenever it chimes the hour.

On a wide strip of beaten earth between the track and the station building, a collection of merry young people were milling excitedly around an older married couple who were at the centre of an animated conversation. Yet the cheerfulness of this group didn't appear genuine either; before it had carried even a short distance, their laughter seemed to die away and fall to the ground, as if it had run up against an invisible obstacle.

Frau Törless, the wife of Court Counsellor Törless – for this was the name of the woman of perhaps forty years old – hid her sad eyes, which were still red from weeping, behind a heavy veil. The moment had come to say goodbye. It was painful to have to let her only son go back and live among strangers for such a long time without being able to watch over and protect her little darling.

For the small town was in the eastern part of the Empire, far from the Imperial Capital, in an arid, agricultural region where few people lived.

The reason why Frau Törless was forced to suffer from knowing that her son was in such a distant and uninviting place was that in this town there was a famous military boarding school which had been built in the last century on land belonging to a religious order, no doubt in the hope that it would protect impressionable youth from the corrupting influence of the city.

This was where the sons of the country's best families were educated, after which they could enter the university, the army or the civil service, and whichever they chose – and the same applied to moving in the grandest social circles – there was no better recommendation than having been a pupil at W.

So, four years earlier, Törless's parents had given in to their boy's ambitious entreaties and arranged for him to attend this institution.

This decision had since been the cause of many tears. Hardly had the gates of the school closed irrevocably behind him than young Törless was seized by the most terrible and intense homesickness. Neither his lessons, nor the games on the large, lush playing fields in the grounds, nor any of the other activities that the boarding school provided succeeded in capturing his interest; he barely even took part. He seemed to see everything through a haze, and during the day he often found it difficult to fight back a desire to sob, while every night he cried himself to sleep.

He wrote home almost every day, lived only for these letters; everything else seemed unreal, trivial incidents, insignificant stages like the numerals on a clock face. But whenever he wrote he sensed he was in some way marked out, distinguished; something welled up inside him, like an island full of colour, miraculous suns shining in the midst of the sea of grey sensations that constantly surrounded him, hemming him in with its cold indifference. During the day, on the playing field or in the classroom, whenever he remembered that that evening he was going to write a letter it was as if he were wearing a golden key on an invisible chain round his neck, with which, when no one was looking, he could open the gate to a garden full of wonder.

The strange thing was that this sudden, overwhelming attachment to his parents came as something unexpected and slightly disconcerting. Far from having foreseen it, he had come to the school voluntarily and even gladly; in fact the first time he said goodbye to his mother he had laughed at her for not being able to hold back her tears. It was only after he had been alone for a few days, during which time he felt relatively happy, that it suddenly struck him with full force.

He told himself that it was simply homesickness, that he was missing his parents. In reality it was something more ill-defined and multifaceted. Because the "object" of this yearning, the photograph of his mother and father, played no part in it. By this

I mean the tangible, not quite present but nonetheless physical memory of a loved one which speaks to our every sense and is preserved by each of those senses, so that in everything we do we feel that person by our side, a silent, unseen presence. This soon dies away, like an overtone that vibrates barely longer than its fundamental note. For example, he could no longer conjure up the image of those who – at least to himself – he usually referred to as his “dearest darling parents”. Whenever he tried, an endless agony would well up in him, a longing that tormented and yet perversely sustained him, because its searing flames brought both pain and rapture at once. As a result his parents were soon no more than a pretext for awakening this egotistical suffering, which imprisoned him in his voluptuous pride as if in a chapel, where, among hundreds of candles and the gaze of countless saints, incense floated above the agony of the flagellants.

As his “homesickness” became less intense and gradually faded, it still retained much of its distinct, particular character. Instead of bringing a sense of relief as he had expected, its going just left an empty space in young Törless’s soul. And it was this void, this absence, that made him realize that it was not only a yearning that he had lost but something positive, an inner strength, something that had blossomed within him in the guise of suffering.

But now it was gone, and before he could become aware of the source of this, his first true feeling of happiness, it had had to run dry.

Around this time, the traces of fiery passion that his awakening soul had once left in his letters gave way to detailed descriptions of life at school and the new friends he was making.

As a result he felt impoverished and despoiled, like a young tree which after flowering in vain has to face its first winter.

His parents, however, were delighted. They loved him with a powerful, unthinking, animal affection. Every time he returned

to school at the end of the holidays, to Frau Törless the house always seemed empty and lifeless, and for several days afterwards she would wander from room to room with tears in her eyes, occasionally caressing an object on which her child's eyes had rested or that his fingers had touched. For his sake, both she and his father would have let themselves be torn limb from limb.

The awkward emotions and passionate, defiant sadness of his letters caused them much pain and left them emotionally drawn; and so the serene, happy heedlessness that followed made them all the more glad and, believing that a crisis had been averted, they did their utmost to encourage him.

Assuming that suffering, like the healing process that followed, was a natural consequence of the current circumstances, neither of them recognized the symptoms of a specific psychological evolution. That it was the first, albeit unsuccessful attempt by a young person left to his own devices to develop his inner powers completely escaped them.

Törless was dissatisfied with life, and fumbled around in a vain attempt to find something new that might act as a foothold.

Around this time there was an episode that was indicative of the changes that were simmering inside him.

One day, young Prince H. arrived at the school. He came from one of the oldest, most influential and conservative families in the Empire.

The other boys found his gentle eyes soppy and affected; the way he had of swaying his hips as he stood up and fluttering his fingers when he spoke struck them as effeminate, and made them laugh. What amused them most of all, however, was that it was not his parents who had brought him to school, but his private tutor, who was a doctor of theology and a member of a religious order.

But from the outset he made a deep impression on Törless. Perhaps it was the fact that he was a prince who would one day be a member of the Court; whatever the case, this was a quite different breed of human being that he had discovered.

The Prince seemed to be infused with the tranquillity of old country houses and pious devotions. He walked with soft, graceful movements, in an almost timid way, as if trying to become smaller and less noticeable, a habit acquired from holding himself upright as he walked through a succession of large, empty rooms where all the other people seemed to be struggling with invisible obstacles.

Törless's acquaintanceship with the Prince was the source of a subtle psychological pleasure. It introduced him to the art of judging human nature, from which we learn to recognize a person by the timbre of their voice, the way they pick something up, even the tone of their silences, the manner in which their presence relates to the space around them; in short, that constantly changing, elusive and yet fundamental way of being a human being with a soul, which envelops all that is essential and tangible in the way flesh covers the skeleton, so that by coming to understand and appreciate the external we are able to discern the inner man.

For Törless this brief period was idyllic. He wasn't put off by his new friend's religious beliefs, although, as he was the product of a freethinking bourgeois family, they were unfamiliar to him. He accepted them without hesitation; in fact to him this was another of the Prince's merits, because they enhanced the singular nature of this person, who he sensed were completely different to himself, as well as being beyond compare.

When he was in the Prince's company he felt as if he had strayed into a chapel that stood a little way off the beaten track, yet the idea that he didn't really belong there disappeared into the sensual delight that came from suddenly seeing daylight through

the chapel windows and letting his gaze run over the vain, gilt ornaments which had accumulated in the soul of this person, so much so that he could only see a confused image of it, as if his finger were unconsciously tracing the lines of a beautiful arabesque whose interwindings followed the most bizarre rules.

Then suddenly they quarrelled and fell out.

Over a stupid thing, as Törless himself would later admit.

To be precise, they argued about religion. And from that moment on everything was over between them. As if deliberately disregarding his true feelings, Törless's reasoning mind launched a relentless assault on the Prince's sensibilities. He heaped his rational man's scorn on him, brutally tore down the filigree edifice in which his friend's soul felt at home, and the two of them parted company in a rage.

They never spoke to each other again. Törless was probably dimly aware that he had done something very foolish, and a hazy intuition told him that the crude, unbending criteria of intellect had, in the most untimely fashion, shattered something fine and precious. But there was nothing he could do about it. A form of nostalgia for what had gone before probably remained, yet it was as if he were caught up by a different current that was carrying him farther and farther away.

Not long afterwards the Prince left the school, where he had never really felt happy.

For Törless the world now consisted of boredom and emptiness. Yet he had grown, and the first obscure stirrings of adolescent sexuality were gradually awakening in him. At this stage he struck up a few friendships, of the type that suited someone of his age, and which later on were to be of great importance to him. Among them were Beineberg, Reiting, Moté and Hofmeier, the same boys who had been with him and his parents at the station.

Oddly enough they were the worst elements of his year, obviously from good families and no doubt gifted, but inclined to be unruly and boisterous to the point of cruelty. That Törless should have felt himself drawn to them in particular was probably due to a lack of self-confidence, which since his falling-out with the Prince had become more marked. In fact his choice of friends flowed directly from this estrangement, because, as that had been, it reflected a fear of finer feelings to which his new companions, with their rude health and heartiness, provided a powerful antidote.

Now at a certain stage in his intellectual development, he allowed himself to fall completely under their influence. At a school of this kind, a boy of his age has by now read Goethe, Schiller and Shakespeare, perhaps even a few modern authors. These are then regurgitated, half-digested, in various attempts at writing. From this emerge classical tragedies or sentimental verse clothed in page after page of rarefied language and syntax that resemble the finest lace. Such efforts may be ludicrous in themselves, yet they play an invaluable part in our inner evolution. Borrowed emotions or associations assimilated from external sources help a young person to find his way through the psychological quicksand of this time of life, when he longs to be someone but is not yet ready to take that step. Ultimately, it matters little if one individual retains something while another doesn't; each comes to terms with himself later in life, and so the risk only exists during this period of transition. If it were possible to make a young person see how ridiculous his character is the ground would open up beneath him, or he would collapse like a sleepwalker who suddenly wakes and sees nothing but a void.

Yet the art of illusion, that ploy which is of such benefit to human development, was something in which the school was not versed. On the shelves of its library there was no lack of classical

literature, but this was regarded as dull, while the rest of the books were sentimental novellas or penny-dreadful war stories.

In his craving for literature, young Törless no doubt read every one of them, and a few trite, mawkish images might have made a passing impression on him, but none had what could be called a lasting influence on his character.

Yet at the time it didn't seem as if he had any character.

Every so often, for instance, influenced by books he had read, he would try his hand at writing a short story or a Romantic epic. Aroused by his heroes' unhappy love affairs his cheeks would blush scarlet, his pulse would race and his eyes would glaze over.

The moment he put the pen down, however, it was over; in a sense his mind only came alive when it was in a state of movement. Which is why he would have been able to dash off a poem or a short story, had he been asked to do so. He would set to with a will, although he never took it seriously: to him it didn't seem a worthwhile occupation. His personality contributed nothing to it, nor did it contribute anything to his personality. The only thing that could rouse him from his apathy and make him experience emotions was an external compulsion, in the way an actor has to have a part to play.

These were mental reactions. But at the time, what we experience as character or the soul, the outline or tonal colours of a human being – or at least those of them that show our thoughts, decisions and actions to be insignificant, incidental and interchangeable, such as what, outside of any intellectual considerations, had made him feel bound to the Prince – that ultimate and unchanging hinterland seemed to be something Törless didn't possess.

As for his friends, the delight they took in sport and life's more creaturely pleasures meant that they didn't feel the need for such things which are provided by a schoolboy's passing affair with literature.

But Törless was too intellectually inclined for the first of these, while in the case of the second, life at boarding school, which required everyone continually to defend his opinions, if necessary with his fists, had made him acutely sensitive to the ridicule that such second-hand emotions could attract. This bred a state of indecisiveness, an inner anguish that prevented him from discovering his true self.

He joined in with his new friends because their brutishness imposed itself on him. And, because he was ambitious, there were even times when he tried to outdo them. But he could never go the whole way, thus earning himself nothing but scorn. This left him all the more intimidated. During this critical period his whole existence was one constant attempt to emulate his boorish, virile friends, while deep down he was indifferent to these efforts.

Whenever his parents came to visit now, as long as he was alone with them he was shy and said little. Every time he found a different excuse to avoid his mother's affectionate embraces. If the truth were known he would have liked to return them, but felt ashamed, as if his classmates were watching.

His parents just took this as the awkwardness of adolescence.

In the afternoon the whole unruly gang appeared. They played cards, ate, drank, told jokes about the masters and smoked the cigarettes that Court Counsellor Törless had brought with him from the Imperial Capital.

Such high spirits delighted and reassured his parents.

They were unaware that for Törless there were times when things were very different here; and that recently these had become more frequent. At such moments, school life left him utterly indifferent. The cement that held his everyday cares and concerns together simply crumbled, and without this inner anchorage the different elements of his life fell apart.

Often he would sit for hours on end, lost in dark, gloomy thoughts, as if hunched over himself.

As on previous visits, his mother and father had stayed for two days. They had gone out for meals together, smoked, made a short local excursion; but now the express train was about to take his parents back to the capital.

A faint tremor in the line announced its approach, and to Frau Törless's ears the sound of the bell ringing on the station roof seemed as if it would never end.

"Well then, my dear Beineberg, you'll promise to keep an eye on my boy for me?" said Court Counsellor Törless, turning to young Baron Beineberg, a lanky, bony fellow with protruding ears, whose eyes were nonetheless expressive and intelligent.

Hearing himself treated as a child, Törless's face took on a disgruntled expression, while Beineberg gave a flattered and slightly gloating smirk that bore traces of malice.

"Actually," continued the Court Counsellor, turning to the others, "I might ask all of you to be so kind as to inform me straight away if anything should happen to my son."

Although he was used to being submitted to these displays of excessive concern every time they said goodbye, this last remark provoked an outburst of bored exasperation from Törless: "But Papa, whatever do you think could happen to me?"

Meanwhile the others clicked their heels, holding their elegant rapiers smartly to their sides, and the Court Counsellor added: "You never know what might happen, and the thought that I would be informed immediately is a source of great reassurance to me; after all, you may not be in a position to write yourself."

The train drew into the station. Court Counsellor Törless embraced his son, Frau von Törless drew her veil closer to her face to hide her tears, one after the other his friends expressed their thanks, and then the conductor closed the door of the carriage.

One last time Herr and Frau Törless looked at the tall, bleak rear façade of the main school building, the endless and

imposing wall that surrounded the grounds, and then on either side only brownish-grey fields and the occasional fruit tree.

In the meantime the boys had left the station and, walking in single file in two ranks on either side of the road to avoid the worst and most persistent dust, made their way into the town, hardly saying a word to each other.

It was already past five o'clock, and the fields were taking on a chill and solemn appearance, as if heralding the approach of evening.

Törless suddenly felt very unhappy.

Perhaps it was because his parents had gone, or perhaps it was the dull, cheerless melancholy that hung over the surrounding countryside, blurring the outline of things only a short distance away with dark, lifeless colours.

The same terrible indifference that had weighed on the landscape all afternoon was now creeping across the plain, while the mist that followed behind it seemed to cling to the ploughed fields and leaden-coloured beet crops like a trail of mucus.

Without looking right or left, Törless could still feel it. One foot in front of the other he followed the path left in the dust by the boy ahead of him – and that was what he felt: that this was what he had to do, that a rigid, iron constraint was imprisoning him, forcing his whole life into this forward movement, step by step along this single straight line, along this narrow beaten track through the dust.

When they stopped at a crossroads where the road was joined by another at a small, circular patch of beaten earth, and a rotten wooden signpost sprung up lopsidedly, the contrast between this straight line and the surroundings was so strong that to him it had the effect of a cry of despair.

Then they set off again. He thought about his parents, about people he knew, about life. It was the time of day

when one dressed for an evening reception or a trip to the theatre. Afterwards one went to a restaurant, listened to an orchestra, called in at the coffee house. One had an interesting encounter. An amorous adventure kept one's hopes up till daybreak. And life kept on turning like a miraculous fairground wheel, forever bringing something new, unexpected...

These thoughts made him sigh, and with every step that brought him closer to the restrictions of institutional life something deep down inside him knotted itself tighter and tighter together.

The bell was already ringing in his ears. There was nothing he feared quite as much as the sound of this bell, which announced the end of the day as if with a sharp, irrevocable blow of a knife.

No doubt his life would be uneventful, it would probably fade into the twilight of permanent apathy, but the ringing of this bell added its mocking voice to the emptiness, making him quiver with helpless rage at himself, at fate, at yet another day that was gone, dead and buried.

You're not permitted to live any more, for the next twelve hours you're not allowed to live, for the next twelve hours you're dead... that was what the bell was saying.

As the group of young men came to the first houses, which were low shacks, Törless's dark, brooding thoughts left him. As if his interest had suddenly been aroused he shot curious glances into the smoke-filled rooms of the grimy little buildings as they walked past.

On most of the doorsteps stood women wearing smocks and coarsely woven shirts, with large dirty feet and bare brown arms.

The younger, more strapping ones hurled vulgar witticisms in some Slavic dialect. They nudged each other and giggled at the

“young gentlemen”; now and then one of them let out a shriek as her breasts were stroked rather too brazenly in passing, or responded to a slap on the thigh with a laugh and a curse. Many of them just watched with grave, angry expressions as the boys strode past; and if the peasant husband happened to appear he gave an awkward grin, half uneasy, half good-natured.

Törless didn't join in with his companions' displays of precocious masculinity.

This was no doubt due in part to the shyness in sexual matters that is characteristic of only children, but mostly to the particular nature of his sensuality, which was more covert, more powerful and of a darker complexion than that of his friends, less inclined to speak its name.

While the others treated the women with deliberate effrontery, probably more in an attempt to show form than out of actual desire, Törless was troubled and tormented by what was genuine shamelessness.

He threw such burning glances through the small windows and along the narrow, twisting passageways of the houses that it was as if a fine net were constantly dancing before his eyes.

Half-naked children were rolling around in the muck in the yards; now and then a woman's skirt rucked up as she was working, exposing her calves, or an ample bosom strained the seams of a bodice. And, as if all this were taking place in a quite different atmosphere, where an overpowering bestiality reigned, from the doors of the houses poured waves of stagnant air that Törless gulped down avidly.

It made him think of old paintings that he had seen in museums without really understanding them. He was waiting for something, just as he had stared at those paintings and waited for something, something that never happened. Such as... what? Something extraordinary and unheard of; an incredible sight that

he couldn't begin to imagine; something of a sensual nature, terrifying and bestial, which would seize him in its claws, tear his eyes out, so to speak; an experience that in some as yet obscure way was connected with these women's grimy smocks, their rough hands, with... with him being defiled by the filth in the yards... No, no! And again all he could feel was the fiery net in front of his eyes; it couldn't be expressed in words, words made it seem more terrible than it really was; it was something mute, unspoken, a choking sensation in the throat, a passing thought, and only when it was put into words did it take shape; and even then it only bore a distant resemblance to it, like in an enormous enlargement in which not only can everything be seen in minute detail but also things that aren't there... which was still something to be ashamed of.

"Is the little boy homesick then?" von Reiting suddenly asked sarcastically. He was tall, two years older than Törless, and hadn't failed to notice his silence and sombre expression. Törless just gave a forced, self-conscious smile; it was as if the spiteful Reiting had read his mind.

He didn't reply. In the meantime they came to the church square of the little town, which was paved with cobblestones in the shape of cats' heads. Here they went their separate ways.

Törless and Beineberg didn't want to go back yet, but the others hadn't been given leave to be out after lock-up, and headed off towards the school.

2

THE TWO OF THEM went into the patisserie. They sat at a small, round table next to a window that looked onto the garden, beneath a gas lamp whose flame hissed faintly inside the opaque glass sphere of its shade.

ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS aims to publish mainstream and lesser-known European classics in an innovative and striking way, while employing the highest editorial and production standards. By way of a unique approach the range offers much more, both visually and textually, than readers have come to expect from contemporary classics publishing.

LATEST TITLES PUBLISHED BY ALMA CLASSICS

434. Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*
435. Rudyard Kipling, *The Call of the Wild*
436. Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*
437. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Life of Castruccio Castracani*
438. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*
439. Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Heretic of Soana*
440. Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*
441. Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*
442. Anthony Trollope, *The Warden*
443. William S. Burroughs, *Dead Fingers Talk*
444. E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Mademoiselle de Scudéri*
445. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*
446. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*
447. Alexander Pushkin, *Lyrics Vol. 3*
448. Alexander Afanasyev, *Tales from Russian Folklore*
449. E. Nesbit, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*
450. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*
451. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *With the Flow*
452. Ivan Goncharov, *Malinovka Heights*
453. William Blake, *Selected Poetical Works*
454. H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*
455. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*
456. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
457. George Orwell, *Animal Farm*
458. D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*
459. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*
460. Théophile Gautier, *Jettatura*
461. George Eliot, *Silas Marner*
462. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*
463. George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*
464. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*
465. Heinrich von Kleist, *The Marquise of O—*
466. George Orwell, *Keep the Aspидistra Flying*
467. Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*
468. Henry James, *Daisy Miller*
469. Virginia Woolf, *The Years*
470. Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives*
471. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poems*
472. Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*

