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Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81)

Mikhail Andreyevich
Dostoevsky, Fyodor's father

Maria Fyodorovna
Dostoevskaya, Fyodor's mother

Mikhail Mikhailovich
Dostoevsky, Fyodor's brother

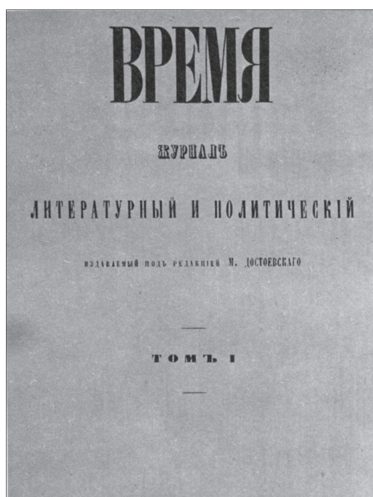
Maria Dmitrievna
Dostoevskaya, Fyodor's first wife

Anna Grigoryevna Dostoevskaya,
Fyodor's second wife

Apollinaria Suslova,
Fyodor's mistress

The Mariinsky Hospital in Moscow, where
Dostoevsky was born in 1821

The Dostoevskys' dacha in Darovoye (above), the apartment where Dostoevsky lived from 1861 to 1863 (bottom left), and which housed the offices of his journal *Vremya* (bottom right)



ВРЕМЯ

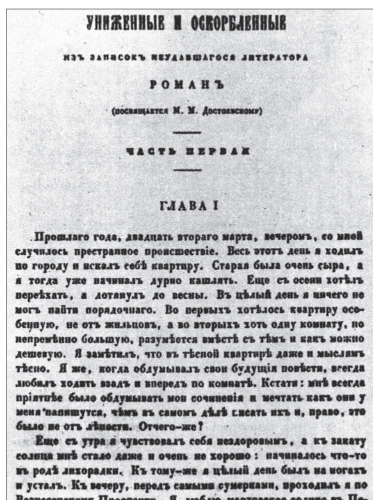
ЖУРНАЛЪ

ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЙ И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКІЙ

ИЗДАВАЕМЫЙ ПОДЪ РЕДАКЦІЕЙ М. ДОСТОЕВСКАГО

ТОМЪ I

Dostoevsky's letter to his brother Mikhail,
dated 22nd December 1849



УНИЖЕННЫЕ И ОСКОРБЛЕННЫЕ

ИЗЪ ЗАПИСОКЪ НЕУДАВШАГОСЯ ЛИТЕРАТОРА

РОМАНЪ

(посвящается М. М. Достоевскому)

ЧАСТЬ ПЕРВАЯ

ГЛАВА I

Прошлаго года, двадцать втораго марта, вечеромъ, со мной случилось престранное происшествіе. Весь этотъ день я ходилъ по городу и искалъ себѣ квартиру. Старая была очень сыра, а я тогда уже начиналъ дурно кашлять. Еще съ осени хотѣлъ переѣхать, а дотянулъ до весны. Въ цѣлый день я ничего не могъ найти порядочнаго. Во первыхъ хотѣлось квартиру особенную, не отъ жильцовъ, а во вторыхъ хоть одну комнату, но непремѣнно большую, разумѣется вмѣстѣ съ тѣмъ и какъ можно дешевую. Я замѣтилъ, что въ тѣсной квартирѣ даже и мыслямъ тѣсно. Я же, когда обдумывалъ свои будущія повѣсти, всегда любилъ ходить взадъ и впередъ по комнатѣ. Кстати: мнѣ всегда пріятнѣе было обдумывать мои сочиненія и мечтать какъ они у меня напишутся, чѣмъ въ самомъ дѣлѣ писать ихъ и, право, это было не отъ лѣности. Отчего-же?

Еще съ утра я чувствовалъ себя нездоровымъ, а къ закату солнца мнѣ стало даже и очень не хорошо: начиналось что-то въ родѣ лихорадки. Къ тому-же я цѣлый день былъ на ногахъ и усталъ. Къ вечеру, передъ самыми сумерками, проходилъ я по Вознесенскому Проспекту. Я люблю мартовское солнце въ Пе-

First page of the original 1861 serialization of *Humiliated and Insulted* (top left), illustrations to the novel by V. Beskaravainy (top right), V. Knyazev (bottom left) and N. Vereshchagina (bottom right)

Humiliated and Insulted

Principal Characters

Alexandra Semyonovna: Masloboyev's mistress
Alexander Petrovich: Vanya's publisher
Alyosha, Alexei, Alexei Petrovich: Prince Valkovsky's son
Anna Andreyevna: Ikhmenev's wife
Arkhipov: a debauchee and paedophile
Bubnova, Anna Trifonovna: a brothel keeper and landlady
Count Nainsky: Prince Valkovsky's relative, a St Petersburg grandee
Countess Zinaida Fyodorovna: Prince Valkovsky's mistress
Ikhmenev, Nikolai Sergeich: a landowner, owner of Ikhmenevka
Katya, Katerina Fyodorovna Filimonova: the Countess's step-daughter
Masloboyev, Filip Filipych: Vanya's old school friend and sleuth
Matryona: Ikhmenevs' maidservant
Mavra: Natasha's maidservant
Natasha, Natalya Nikolayevna: Ikhmenevs' daughter
Nelly, Yelena, Lenochka: Smith's granddaughter
Prince Valkovsky, Pyotr Alexandrovich: owner of Vasilevskoye
Sizobryukhov, Stepan Terentych: Arkhipov's companion
Jeremiah Smith: an impoverished industrialist
Vanya, Ivan Petrovich: the narrator, a young author

Part One

1

Last year, on the evening of 22nd March, I had a most unusual experience. All day I'd been tramping the city in search of lodgings. The place I was then living in was very damp, and I was already starting to develop a nasty cough. I'd been meaning to move the previous autumn, but ended up putting it off till spring. I couldn't find anything suitable. First, I wanted self-contained accommodation, not a room in someone else's house – and secondly, even if it were only a single room, it would definitely have to be a large one and, it goes without saying, as cheap as possible. I have noticed that in a cramped space one's thoughts too tend to be cramped. Also, while planning my novels, I like to pace up and down the room. Incidentally, I've always found mulling over my compositions and imagining how they are likely to turn out more enjoyable than actually committing them to paper, and not just out of laziness. I wonder why that is!

I had been feeling unwell since morning, and by evening I was distinctly worse, with a fever coming on. Besides, I had been on my feet all day and was tired. Evening came, and just before dusk I happened to be walking along Voznesensky Prospect. I love the sun, especially the setting March sun in St Petersburg on a clear frosty evening. The whole street is suddenly bathed in brilliant light. All the houses glow. For a time, the grey, yellow and dull-green façades lose their drabness; there's a sense of euphoria, of awakening, as though someone had poked you in the ribs. A new vista, new ideas… marvellous what a single ray of sunshine can do to a man's soul!

But the sun's rays vanished. The frost was getting sharper and beginning to numb my nose. Dusk was falling. Up and down the street the gas lamps were being lit in the shop windows. As I drew level with Müller's coffee house I came to a dead halt and gazed across the street as though expecting something out of the ordinary to occur, and at that very instant I caught sight of the old man and his dog on the

opposite side. I recall very well that my heart sank with some awful presentiment – but of what, for the life of me I couldn't fathom.

I'm not a mystic; I'm no believer in premonitions or fortune-telling. However, possibly like everyone else, I have experienced incidents in my life that were somewhat inexplicable. Take this old man for instance. Why did I, seeing him on that occasion, immediately feel that something rather unusual would happen to me that night? Mind you, I was ill, and feverish impressions are nearly always deceptive.

The stooped old man, with his slow, faltering gait, moved his almost rigid legs like stilts, tapping the paving stones lightly with his stick as he approached the coffee house. In all my life, I've never met such a strange and incongruous figure. Even before this particular occasion, when we happened to come across each other at Müller's, he had never failed to give me a feeling of unease. His tall frame, his crooked back, his cadaverous octogenarian face, his shabby old coat coming apart at the seams, his crumpled twenty-year-old stovepipe hat barely covering his bald head – on the back of which a single tuft of, well, not even grey but yellowish-white hair still survived – his movements which seemed to be performed mechanically, as if by clockwork – all this could not fail to astonish anyone who met him for the first time. It was really strange to see such a decrepit figure on his own, without anyone to help him, especially since he had the look of a mental patient who had fled from his carers. I also couldn't get over how extraordinarily thin he was. There was hardly any flesh on him – his skin appeared to be stretched tight over his bones. His large rheumy eyes circled by dark blue rings were always staring fixedly ahead, never deviating and totally unseeing – of that I'm certain – even if he was looking at you, he went on walking straight at you as if you weren't there. I had observed this several times. It was only quite recently that he had begun to frequent Müller's, appearing from goodness knows where, and always accompanied by his dog. Nobody in the coffee house dared to engage him in conversation, nor did he himself ever speak to anyone.

"Why on earth does he keep going to Müller's? What's the attraction?" I wondered as I stood on the opposite side of the street staring at him compulsively. A kind of despondency – the effect of illness and fatigue – was welling up inside me. "What's he thinking about?" I kept asking myself. "What's on his mind – that is, if he's got anything at all on his mind?" His face was so lifeless that it expressed absolutely nothing.

And where did he get that wretched dog which stuck to him like a limpet and was so much like him?

The miserable animal must have been about eighty itself; yes, that surely was the case. To begin with, it looked old like no other dog in the world – moreover, why was it that as soon as I set eyes on it, I immediately sensed that it was like no other dog; that it was an extraordinary dog; that there must be something fantastical, something enchanted about it; that it was some kind of a Mephistopheles* in canine form and that its fate was in some inexplicable manner linked to its master's? Looking at it, you would have immediately concluded that it must have been about twenty years since it had last had anything to eat. It was as emaciated as a skeleton or, to go no further, as its master. It had lost its fur almost everywhere – including its tail, which dangled like a stick, always drawn tightly between its legs; its head, with ears drooping, hung despondently down. I had never in my life seen a more repugnant beast. When the two of them were walking along the street – master in front, and dog behind – its nose would be touching the hem of his coat as though glued to it. Both their gait and their general appearance seemed almost to be saying, "How old, O God, how old we both are!"

I seem to remember thinking that the old man and his dog had somehow stepped out of a Gavarni illustration to a tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann,* wandering the world like perambulating publishers' advertisements. I crossed the street and followed the old man into the coffee house.

There the old man always behaved rather oddly, and lately the proprietor had begun to screw up his face disapprovingly from behind the counter every time the unwelcome customer entered his premises. For a start, the strange visitor never ordered anything. He would always go straight to the corner by the stove and sit down. If that place was taken, he would stand for a time in dumb consternation in front of the person sitting there, after which he would move off, seeming deeply puzzled, to another corner by the window. There he would pick a chair, lower himself slowly onto it, take off his hat, place it and his stick on the floor nearby, and then, leaning back, sit almost motionless for the next three or four hours. He had never been known to take up a newspaper, say a single word or even utter a sound. He would just sit there, staring straight ahead, but with such lifeless, expressionless

eyes that one might have confidently wagered he neither saw nor heard anything around him. The dog, after turning around once or twice on the spot, would settle disconsolately at his feet, stick its muzzle between his boots, breathe deeply and stretch out to its full length, oblivious of all the world. These two might have been lying stone dead somewhere all day, and come to life at dusk merely to visit Müller's coffee house, to act out some mysterious ritual. After sitting for his customary three or four hours, the old man would suddenly rise, pick up his hat and make for home – wherever that might be. The dog too would get up and, as always, head hung low and tail between its legs, automatically follow him at a slow pace. In the end the regulars began to avoid the old man as much as possible; they wouldn't even sit near him, as though he produced a feeling of revulsion in them. He himself remained completely unaware of it all.

The regulars were predominantly German. They gathered there from the whole of Voznesensky Prospect; all of them had their own businesses – locksmiths, bakers, painters, milliners, saddlers – every one a patrician in the German sense of the word;* generally speaking, respectability was the thing at Müller's. Not infrequently the proprietor himself would come over to his acquaintances, join them at their table, and a good quantity of punch would be consumed. His dogs and children would sometimes join them too, and the customers would pat them, both dogs and children. They all knew one another, and there was an atmosphere of mutual respect. And when the customers settled down to read German newspapers, the strains of 'Ach, du lieber Augustin!'* could be heard from the adjoining room, played on a tinkly upright piano by the proprietor's eldest daughter, a curly fair-haired wisp of a German girl who bore a close resemblance to a white mouse. The waltz was a great favourite. I was in the habit of going to Müller's at the beginning of each month to read the Russian magazines that were available there.

When I entered the coffee house that March evening, I saw that the old man was already seated at the window, with the dog as usual stretched out at his feet. I took a seat in the corner, wondering to myself, "Why on earth did I come here? There was absolutely no need. I'm ill and ought to be off home to have a glass of tea and go to bed! Did I really come here just to stare at this old man?" I was suddenly irritated. "Why should I care about him?" I thought, recalling the

strange feeling of disgust that I'd felt towards him while we were still outside. "And why should I bother about all these tedious Germans? Why this feeling of unreality? Why this groundless, pointless anxiety I've lately been aware of within myself and which has been plaguing me and – a point that had already been made by a deeply perceptive critic in a scathing review of my latest novel – preventing me from seeing things in their true light?" But even as I was fretfully turning all this over in my mind, I made no attempt to move; meanwhile my fever was rising so violently that in the end I was simply unwilling to leave the warmth of the room. I picked up a Frankfurt newspaper, read a couple of lines, and dozed off. The presence of the Germans did not bother me. They went on reading and smoking, and only occasionally, about every half-hour, would exchange with one another, in a hushed, disjointed manner, some snippet of Frankfurt news or some aphorism or joke by the famous wit Saphir* – after which they would again immerse their German selves in their reading, with a redoubled sense of national propriety.

I had been dozing for about half an hour and woke up shivering with cold. I really had to be getting home. But at that moment a dumb scene took place in the room, riveting my attention once more. I have already mentioned that as soon as the old man settled in his chair he would immediately fix his gaze on some object and hold it there the whole evening. Sometimes he would stare at me too in this mindlessly persistent, totally undiscerning manner, which gave me a most unpleasant sensation bordering on the unbearable, and I would hurriedly change my seat. This time the old man's victim was a diminutive, stocky and very smartly dressed German with an upturned stiffly starched collar and an extraordinarily florid complexion. He was a trader who had just arrived from Riga, rejoicing in the name of Adam Ivanych Schulz – as I discovered later, a close friend of Müller's, but who did not yet know the old man or many of the clientele. Happily engrossed in the pages of *The Illustrated Village Barber* and sipping his punch, he suddenly looked up and met the old man's stare. This nonplussed him. Adam Ivanych was very touchy and uncompromising, as all *self-respecting* Germans are. It struck him as peculiarly offensive to be subjected to such close and unceremonious scrutiny. But, suppressing his indignation, he averted his eyes from the insistent gaze, mumbled something under his breath, and lapsed into silent refuge behind his

paper. However, he was unable to resist peering suspiciously round the paper a couple of minutes later, only to meet the same steadfast gaze, the same absurd scrutiny. Adam Ivanych said nothing this time either. But when the whole thing was repeated a third time, he took umbrage and, in order to uphold the name of the fair city of Riga – of which he probably considered himself to be the rightful representative – and defend his own dignity, he braced himself for battle before this worthy gathering. He threw down his paper in annoyance and rapped the table sharply with the cane to which it was attached. Then, bursting with self-importance and crimson-faced – as much from the punch as from his sense of outrage – he fixed his small bloodshot eyes upon this disturbing old man. It seemed the two were trying to outstare each other, to see which one would be the first to lose his nerve and look away. The rap of the cane and the oddity of Adam Ivanych's bearing attracted the attention of the other customers, who immediately stopped whatever they were doing and looked expectantly and in respectful silence at the two adversaries. The scene was becoming very comical. But the intensity of the flushed Adam Ivanych's provocative gaze was totally wasted. The old man, oblivious of everything around him, continued to look straight at the furious Herr Schulz, and seemed quite unaware that he had become the centre of general attention; the man before him might as well have been on the moon. Adam Ivanych's patience finally snapped, and he gave vent to his emotions.

"Why you look at me with so much attention?" he shouted menacingly, in his shrill, penetrating German.

But his adversary remained quite silent, as though he had not understood or even heard the question. Adam Ivanych decided to switch to Russian.

"I have you asked, why you look upon me with so much attention?" he yelled with redoubled rage. "I am at Court known and you are not at Court known!" he added, jumping to his feet.

But the old man didn't turn a hair. A murmur of indignation rose from the ranks of the Germans. Attracted by the commotion, Müller himself appeared. Having ascertained what the trouble was, and thinking the old man was deaf, he put his mouth close to his ear.

"Herr Schulz have asked you with consideration not to look so upon him," he said as loudly as possible, looking hard at the inscrutable visitor.

The old man glanced listlessly at Müller, and his features, which had remained immobile till then, suddenly betrayed signs of some inner alarm, some acute anxiety. He became agitated, bent down with a croak to pick up his hat, snatched it up hurriedly together with his stick, and rising from the chair with a pathetic smile – the pathetic smile of a beggar who is being evicted from the spot he has occupied in error – prepared to leave the room. The old man's humble readiness to oblige was somehow so pitiful, so distressing, that the whole company, headed by Adam Ivanych, immediately underwent a collective change of heart. It was clear that the old man was not only not out to offend anyone, but was himself only too aware that he could be thrown out of any establishment, being a beggar.

Müller was a kind and compassionate man.

"No, no," he said, patting him consolingly on the back, "do not get up! *Aber** Herr Schulz asked very much for you not to look upon him with so much attention. He is at Court known."

But the poor wretch still failed to understand. He began to fuss even more, bent down to pick up his handkerchief, an old blue rag full of holes which had fallen out of his hat, and began to speak to his dog, which was lying motionless on the floor, its muzzle between its paws, apparently fast asleep.

"Azorka, Azorka!" he mumbled in his tremulous elderly voice, "Azorka!"

Azorka did not move.

"Azorka, Azorka!" the old man repeated despondently, prodding the dog with his stick. The animal did not stir.

The stick fell from the old man's grasp. He bent over, knelt down and took Azorka's head in his hands, lifting it slightly. Poor Azorka! The dog was dead. It had died without a sound at its master's feet, perhaps of old age, perhaps of hunger. The old man gazed down at it for a minute or so as though thunderstruck, unable to comprehend that Azorka was dead; then bending down over his former servant and friend, he pressed his sallow face up against the dead creature's muzzle. There was a minute's silence. We were all moved. After a time the poor devil rose to his feet. He was very pale, and trembling all over as if he were having an attack of the shakes.

"We can make a stuffing," the compassionate Müller said, breaking the silence and wishing to give the old man whatever comfort he could.

(He meant the animal could be stuffed.) "We can make a good stuffing. Fyodor Karlovich Krüger makes good stuffings. Fyodor Karlovich Krüger is a Master Stuffer." Müller picked up the old man's stick from the floor and passed it to him.

"Yes, I make excellent stuffing," Herr Krüger himself now spoke up modestly, stepping forwards into the limelight. He was a tall, gaunt, kindly-looking man with uneven tufts of ginger hair, wearing a pair of glasses on his aquiline nose.

"Fyodor Karlovich Krüger has big talent to make every kind of excellent stuffing," Müller added, getting more and more excited by the idea.

"Yes, I have big talent to make every kind of excellent stuffing," Herr Krüger again confirmed. "And," he added in an outburst of exuberant generosity, "I will make a stuffing from your dog for nothing."

"No, I will pay everything for you making this stuffing!" Adam Ivanych Schulz cried out, his face getting redder and redder, and also overcome by the occasion, in the genuine belief that he was the cause of the whole calamity.

The old man obviously understood nothing of all this, and continued to shake in every limb.

"*Moment!* Drink *ein Glas** good brandy!" Müller exclaimed, realizing that the mysterious visitor was about to depart.

The brandy was brought. The old man reached out listlessly for the glass, but his hands were unsteady, and before he had brought it to his lips he had spilt a good half of it. Without drinking a drop, he put it back on the tray. Then, smiling awkwardly and quite inappropriately, he left the coffee house with hurried uneven steps, leaving Azorka behind. Everyone was dumbfounded; then there were one or two exclamations.

"*Schwernot! Was für eine Geschichte!*"* the Germans said, looking at one another in astonishment.

I dashed out after the old man. A few yards to the right of the coffee house was a dark narrow side street with huge houses on each side. Something told me the old man had turned down that street. The second house on the right was still under construction and was covered in scaffolding. An enclosing fence jutted out almost into the middle of the street, and wooden planks had been laid down alongside it for the convenience of pedestrians. I found the old man in a dark corner

between the house and the fence. He was sitting on a step which led to the wooden walkway, head in hands, elbows resting on his knees. I sat down next to him.

"Listen," I said, hardly knowing how to begin, "don't be upset about Azorka. Come now, let me take you home. Don't worry. I'll get a cab. Where do you live?"

The old man made no reply. I was rather at a loss to know what to do. There were no passers-by. Suddenly he started tugging at my arm.

"Air!" he croaked in a barely audible voice. "Air!"

"Let me take you home!" I exclaimed, getting up and trying to raise him to his feet. "You can have some tea and go to bed… Just let me get a cab – we'll be there in no time. I'll call a doctor… There's one I know…"

I can't remember what else I said to him. He made as if to stand up, but after a slight effort collapsed again on the ground and once more started mumbling something in the same croaky, breathless voice. I bent down closer to listen.

"Vasìlevsky,"* the old man wheezed, "Sixth… Sixth Lane…"

He fell silent.

"You live on Vasìlevsky Island? But you were going the wrong way. It's to the left from here, not the right. I'll take you."

The old man did not move. I reached for his hand; it was limp and lifeless. I looked into his face, then touched it. He was dead. It seemed like a bad dream.

This whole episode disturbed me greatly – though by the end of it my fever had been shaken off. I discovered where the old man had lived. It wasn't on Vasìlevsky Island, however, but just a few yards from where he had died, in a house belonging to a man named Klugen, on the fourth floor right under the eaves, in a self-contained garret consisting of a small hallway and one large room with a very low ceiling and three slits that passed for windows. He had lived in extreme poverty. The furniture consisted of a table, two chairs and an old settee, hard as a rock, with tufts of horsehair sticking out of it – all of it belonging to the landlord. The stove looked as if it hadn't been lit for ages, nor were there any candles about. I'm strongly inclined to think now that the old man had gone to sit at Müller's simply for light and warmth. On the table there was an empty earthenware jug and a stale crust of bread. As for money, not a kopeck could be found. There wasn't even

a change of underwear – someone donated one of his own shirts to bury him in. It was clear he couldn't have survived like this completely on his own, and someone had probably been visiting him from time to time, albeit infrequently. In the table drawer we came across his passport. It turned out the dead man was of foreign descent, but a Russian subject – one Jeremiah Smith, an engineer, aged seventy-eight. On the table lay two books: an elementary geography course and a New Testament in Russian, full of pencilled annotations in the margins and words underscored with thumbnail marks. I kept these for myself. The tenants and the landlord were questioned, but no one really knew anything about the deceased. Lots of people lodged in the building, almost all either artisans or German housewives subletting serviced accommodation with full board. The manager of the house, a well-spoken man, couldn't say much about his former tenant either, except that the garret had been let to him at six roubles a month, and that he had lived in it for four months but hadn't paid a kopeck for the last two, with the result that he had been given notice to move out. No one could answer clearly whether anyone came to see him. The house was large – any number of people could pass through such a Noah's Ark of a place, one couldn't keep track of them all. The caretaker, who had worked there for the past five years and might have shed some light on the matter, had gone home on holiday a fortnight earlier, leaving his nephew to stand in for him, a young lad who hadn't yet got to know even half the tenants personally. I'm not sure what the upshot of all these enquiries was, but eventually the old man was buried. In the intervening days I managed amongst other things to make a visit to Sixth Lane on Vasìlevsky Island. It was only when I got there that it struck me as ridiculous that I should have expected to find anything but a row of ordinary houses! But why on earth, I wondered, had the old man mentioned Sixth Lane on Vasìlevsky Island when he was dying? Had he been raving?

I inspected Smith's empty garret and decided I liked it. So I took it. The main thing, the room was large, though its ceiling was so low that at first it seemed I'd always be bumping my head against it. But I soon got used to it. After all, what could one expect for six roubles a month? I liked the fact that it was self-contained; all that remained was to find some daily help because I wouldn't be able to cope by myself. The caretaker promised to look in at least once a day, if only to begin with,

to give me a hand in case I needed something urgently. And who knows, I thought to myself – perhaps someone might come to enquire after the old man? However, five days after his death still no one had come.

2

At that time, a year ago, I was still writing short articles for journals, firmly convinced that eventually I'd manage to turn out something substantial and successful. I was also working on a long novel – but as it happens, I've ended up in hospital, and shall probably soon be dead. So if I am going to die soon, I ask myself, why should I bother to write anything at all?

I cannot stop myself constantly recalling the whole of that difficult past year in my life. I want to record everything now, and if I had not devised this occupation for myself I think I'd have died of misery. All these impressions from the past sometimes afflict me painfully, to the point of torment. But once they've been written down, they will take on a calmer, more orderly aspect; they will be less of a delirium and a nightmare to me. At least I believe so. The act of writing itself is such a relief. It will relax and calm me down, revive my writer's instincts, transform my memories and feverish imaginings into something tangible, a task accomplished… Yes, it's a splendid idea. Besides, I could always bequeath my notes to my doctor – who, if the worst came to the worst, could use them in winter to seal the cracks in his windows.

However, for some reason I've started my story in the middle. If I'm going to continue, I should begin again at the beginning. Yes, I'll do that. First, some details about myself.

I wasn't born locally, but far from here, in the district of ***. I've no reason to doubt that my parents were good people, but I was left an orphan at an early age, and brought up in the home of Nikolai Sergeich Ikhmenev, a small landowner who took me in out of compassion. He had one daughter, Natasha, who was three years younger than me. We grew up together as brother and sister. Oh, my glorious childhood! How futile it is to yearn for its return at the age of twenty-four, and to have nothing else to recall with gratitude and exhilaration on one's deathbed! The sun shone so brightly then, so unlike what we see in

the St Petersburg sky of today, and our young hearts beat with such vigour, such joy! We were surrounded by fields and forests then, not these lifeless piles of stone. There was such a wonderful park and orchard on Vasilevskoye Estate, where Nikolai Sergeich was steward! Natasha and I used to go for walks in the orchard, and beyond that there was a vast dank forest, where we once got lost… Unforgettable, golden days! Life was just beginning to assert itself, mysteriously and alluringly – and it was a sweet experience. It seemed then that behind every bush, every tree, some mysterious and unknowable being lurked; the fairy-tale world merged into the real one, and when the evening mist thickened in the deep valleys and its grey, sinuous wisps reached out towards the brambles clinging to the rocky ridges of our great gorge, Natasha and I would stand hand in hand on the edge, peering with bated breath into the depths, expecting at any moment to see someone emerge or call out to us from the mist at the bottom and turn our nursery stories into manifest reality. Once, much later, I reminded Natasha how on one occasion someone had given us a copy of *The Children's Reader*,* and we had immediately dashed into the orchard to our favourite green bench, under the thick canopy of an old maple tree by the pond, and sat down together to read the magical tale of Alphonse and Dalinda. Even now, every time I think of this story my heart misses a beat, and when about a year ago I happened to remind Natasha of the first two lines, "Alphonse, the hero of my tale, was born in Portugal; Don Ramiro, his father…" and so on, I nearly burst into tears. I'm afraid it was very silly of me, which is probably why Natasha smiled so awkwardly at my display of emotion. Of course, she immediately checked herself – I remember that – and to comfort me started to reminisce too. Little by little she entered into the spirit of it. What a glorious evening that was! We went back over everything, from the time I was sent to boarding school in the provincial capital – God, how she wept then! – to our last farewell, when I was taking my leave of Vasilevskoye for ever. I had left boarding school and was about to set off for St Petersburg to prepare myself for university. I was seventeen at the time, and Natasha had just turned fourteen. I was so clumsy and ungainly, she said, that it was impossible for anyone to keep a straight face when they saw me. When the time came to say goodbye, I took her aside to say something very important to her, but became suddenly tongue-tied. Natasha remembered that I had been

very agitated. Needless to say, our conversation floundered. I didn't know what to say, and she probably wouldn't have understood me anyway. I just burst into tears, and left without saying anything more. We met again, much later, in St Petersburg. That was two years ago. Ikhmenev had arrived on some business connected with his lawsuit, and I'd just managed to get myself into print.

3

Nikolai Sergeich Ikhmenev came of a good family which had long since been reduced to poverty. However, after his parents' death he came into possession of a sizeable piece of property with some hundred and fifty souls.* At about the age of twenty he decided to enlist in the Hussars. Everything went well until one disastrous evening in the sixth year of his commission when he gambled away his whole fortune at cards. He didn't sleep that night. The next evening he again turned up at the gaming table and staked his horse – his last possession – on one card. He won, then a second time, then a third, and half an hour later he had recouped one of his hamlets, Ikhmenevka, an estate which at the last census had numbered some fifty souls. He decided to cut his losses, and the very next day resigned his commission. He was irretrievably poorer by a hundred souls. Two months later he was discharged with the rank of lieutenant, and retired to his country seat. Never again in his life did he speak of his gambling loss and, despite his good humour – for which he was well known – he would undoubtedly have had a row with anyone who dared to remind him of it. Once in the country, he settled there to run his estate assiduously, and at the age of thirty-five married Anna Andreyevna Shumilova, a completely dowryless daughter of a titled but impoverished family, who had nevertheless managed to send her to a provincial finishing school for young ladies run by a French émigrée, Mme Mont-Revechet – something that Anna Andreyevna was proud of all her life, though no one could ascertain what she had actually learnt there. Nikolai Sergeich managed his estate with consummate skill. Other landowners in the neighbourhood learnt from his example. Some years had passed when quite unexpectedly the adjoining estate, Vasilevskoye, which numbered nine hundred souls, saw the arrival of its owner from St Petersburg, one Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich Valkovsky.