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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

Uncle's Dream

*(From the Chronicles of Mordasov)**

Chapter 1

MARIA ALEXANDROVNA MOSKALYOVA is of course the first lady of Mordasov – of that there cannot be the slightest doubt. She behaves in a way that seems to suggest she has no need of anyone, but that on the contrary everyone needs her. True, hardly anybody loves her, and there are even very many who genuinely detest her – but on the other hand everyone is afraid of her, and that is precisely what she needs. Such a requirement is a clear sign of manipulative behaviour. How is it, for example, that Maria Alexandrovna, with her inordinate fondness for gossip, is unable to fall asleep at night unless she has heard something new the day before – how is it that she is nevertheless able to conduct herself so that, looking at her, you would never think that this grand lady was herself the greatest gossip in the world – or in Mordasov, at least? Quite the opposite: it seems that gossip has no choice but to melt away in her presence; that all the scandalmongers themselves can do is to go red in the face and quiver from fear, like schoolboys in front of their teacher, and that the conversation must turn only to topics of the highest possible tone. She knows such serious and outrageous things about one or two of the Mordasov residents, for example, that, were she to relate them at an opportune moment and substantiate them in a way of which only she is capable, Mordasov would experience the equivalent of the Lisbon earthquake.* She keeps these secrets very much to herself, however, and will divulge them only at exceptional moments, and even then only to her closest acquaintances. She will scare people by teasingly hinting at what she knows, preferring to keep the gentleman or lady

in perpetual suspense rather than shocking them once and for all. What a mind – what a brilliant tactical brain! Maria Alexandrovna has always been distinguished among us for her exemplary *comme il faut*,* which everyone strives to imitate. As far as her *comme il faut* is concerned, no other Mordasov lady comes close to her. As we can testify, she is able, for example, to destroy, rip to pieces, annihilate a female rival with a single word, while at the same time pretending not to be aware she has said anything. Everyone knows that the ability to do this is a characteristic of the most exalted society. Generally speaking, with such tricks she surpasses Chevalier Pinetti* himself. She is enormously well connected. Many visitors to Mordasov have left the town in raptures at the way she has received them, and have even continued to correspond with her. People have even written poems to her – poems which Maria Alexandrovna will proudly show everyone. One visiting writer once dedicated a short story to her, reading it to her at a soirée and prompting an extraordinarily positive response. One German scientist, who had come from Karlsruhe to investigate a particular species of horned worm that can be found in our province and who had written four volumes in quarto about it, was so enchanted by Maria Alexandrovna's kind hospitality that to this day he continues writing to her from Karlsruhe in the most respectful and tactful manner. Maria Alexandrovna used to be compared in certain respects to Napoleon. Her enemies naturally used to turn this into a joke, but more for caricature's sake than out of regard for the truth. But while fully recognizing how strange such a comparison was, I venture nevertheless to pose an innocent question: can anyone tell me why it was that Napoleon's head began to swim once he had risen to such a great height? The advocates of the *Ancien Régime* maintained it was not only because Napoleon was not of royal lineage, but that he was not even a *gentilhomme* of good breeding. He therefore took fright at the thought of how high he had

climbed and remembered his true place in life. Despite the self-evident ingenuity of such a surmise, so suggestive of the former French court at its most brilliant, I shall venture to append my own comment: why is it that Maria Alexandrovna never ever allows her head to swim and always remains the first lady of Mordasov? There have, for example, been occasions when people have wondered how Maria Alexandrovna is going to react to certain difficult circumstances. But the difficult circumstances have come and gone and... they have not affected her at all! Everything has stayed just as it was before – one might almost say they are even better than before. Everybody remembers, for example, the occasion when her husband, Afanasy Matveich, lost his job as a result of incompetence and feeble-mindedness, having provoked the anger of a visiting government inspector. Everyone thought that Maria Alexandrovna would become dejected and stoop to begging and imploring – in short, passively accept her fate. Nothing of the sort: Maria Alexandrovna realized there would be no point in trying to implore anyone, and arranged matters so that her influence on society remained totally undiminished, with her house continuing to be seen as Mordasov's leading residence. The public prosecutor's wife, Anna Nikolayevna Antipova, Maria Alexandrovna's sworn enemy (although ostensibly her friend) was already trumpeting victory, but when people saw how difficult it was to put Maria Alexandrovna off her stride, they realized she had put down roots much more deeply than they had previously thought.

Incidentally, now that we have mentioned him, let us say a few words about Afanasy Matveich, Maria Alexandrovna's husband. Firstly, he is a man of very imposing appearance and highly respectable principles. But at critical moments he gets flustered, with the dumb look of a sheep who cannot believe what he is seeing. He looks unusually imposing, especially when he is wearing his white bow tie at name-day celebrations.

But this impression of a grand, commanding presence lasts only until the moment he opens his mouth. Forgive me, but at this point you have to cover your ears. The general opinion is that he is totally unworthy of being Maria Alexandrovna's husband. He is where he is solely because of Maria Alexandrovna's brilliance. In my radical opinion, he should have gone off long ago and become a scarecrow – only then would he have been able to perform a useful service for his countrymen. It was therefore a brilliant idea for Maria Alexandrovna to dispatch Afanasy Matveich off to her out-of-town estate of one hundred and twenty serfs, some three versts from Mordasov. Let me say in passing that this estate was her only source of income, enabling her to maintain the high aristocratic standards of her town house with such dignity. Everyone understood that the only reason she had kept Afanasy Matveich by her side was because he had an official position and received a salary, together with... other income. But as soon as he stopped receiving a salary and this other income, he was immediately dismissed as being ineffectual and totally useless. And everyone praised Maria Alexandrovna for her decisiveness and clear judgement. In his country house Afanasy Matveich is in seventh heaven. I have driven out to see him, and spent a rather pleasant whole hour with him. He tries on his white bow ties, and cleans his own boots – not because he has to, but only from the aesthetic pleasure it gives him, as he loves his boots to be gleaming. He drinks tea three times a day, is extremely fond of his visits to the bathhouse and is in general very satisfied. Do you remember the vile story that caused such a to-do here about a year and a half ago – the story concerning Zinaida Afanasyevna, the only daughter of Maria Alexandrovna and Afanasy Matveich? Zinaida is an undoubted beauty, excellently educated, but she is twenty-three years old and still unmarried. Among the reasons explaining why Zinaida is still unmarried, one of the most important is thought to be the dark rumours that surfaced a

year and a half ago relating to certain mysterious links with a less than impressive district schoolteacher – rumours which are still circulating as I write. There is still talk of some love note, written by Zina, which was supposed to have been passed from hand to hand in Mordasov. But tell me: who has seen this note? If it has been passed from hand to hand, where has it got to now? Everybody has heard about it, but nobody has seen it. I, for one, have never met a single person who has actually ever seen this note. Mention it to Maria Alexandrovna, and she will simply have no idea what you're talking about. Now, imagine that there actually was something and that Zina did write a note (I myself think there is no doubt that she did): what skill on Maria Alexandrovna's part! To be able to suppress, to put an end to such an embarrassing, scandalous matter! Not a trace, not a hint! Maria Alexandrovna totally ignores such base accusations now, yet God knows how much effort she must have made to protect the unsullied honour of her only daughter! The fact that Zina is still unmarried is perfectly understandable: where can you find eligible bachelors in this place? She would be fit only for a sovereign prince. Have you ever seen such a beauty in all your life? True, she is proud – too proud. People say that Mozglyakov is seeking her hand, but a wedding is hardly likely. What can one say about Mozglyakov? True, he is young, not bad-looking, a Petersburg dandy with one hundred and fifty unmortgaged serfs. But, first of all, he's not quite all there upstairs. A fly-by-night and gasbag, with some new ideas or other! And in any case, what are one hundred and fifty serfs, especially when you have all the latest ideas? Such a wedding is out of the question!

Everything that my gracious readers have read up to this point was written some five months ago, purely for emotional reasons. I must confess in advance I have a soft spot for Maria Alexandrovna. I wanted to write something along the lines of a hymn of praise to this magnificent lady, setting it all out in

the form of a playful letter to a friend – the kind of letter that used to be published in the glorious but happily never-to-be-repeated days of the *Northern Bee* and other such periodicals.* But since I don't have any friends – and since, moreover, I am possessed of an innate literary timidity – this composition of mine has remained in my desk as a literary experiment and a memento of many peaceful, satisfying hours spent at leisure. Five months have gone by and, suddenly, Mordasov was witness to an astonishing event: early one morning Prince K— drove into town and stayed in Maria Alexandrovna's house. The consequences of his arrival are incalculable. The prince spent only three days in Mordasov, but those fateful three days were to become indelibly etched on people's memory. Let me put it even more strongly: in a certain sense, the prince was responsible for a radical transformation of our town. The story of this transformation constitutes, of course, one of the most highly significant pages in the annals of Mordasov. It is this page which I, after some hesitation, have finally decided to develop in literary form – and I present it to our highly respected public for their verdict on the matter. My story will include a full and remarkable account of the rise, fame and momentous fall of Maria Alexandrovna and all her Mordasov household – such a worthy and alluring topic for a writer.* First of all, I will of course need to explain what exactly it was that was so astonishing about Prince K—'s arrival in Mordasov and his stay in Maria Alexandrovna's house – and in order to do that, I will naturally need to say a few words about Prince K— himself. That is what I shall set out to do. Besides, an account of this man's life will be totally indispensable if we are to make any further progress with our story. Let me therefore begin.

Chapter 2

LET ME SAY FIRST OF ALL that Prince K— was not yet a really old man. But, looking at him, you might involuntarily think that at any moment he was about to fall to bits – he was such a rickety, or rather totally decrepit figure. People in Mordasov always used to recount the most extraordinary things about this prince – things that almost beggared belief. It was even said that the dear old fellow had gone out of his mind. Everyone thought it especially strange that this landowner with four thousand serfs – someone of impeccable pedigree who could, had he so wished, have been a figure of considerable influence in our province – was choosing to live on his magnificent estate in isolation, as a total recluse. Many who had known the prince during his stay in Mordasov some six or seven years earlier maintained that the thought of isolation had then been utterly alien to him, and that he was the total opposite of a recluse. Here, however, are the only reliable facts I have been able to find out about him.

At one time, in his younger years (that was a very long time ago, however), the prince made a dazzling entry into society, leading a life of idleness and leisure, chasing after women, often spending time abroad, singing romances, making witty remarks without ever being distinguished for his brilliant intellect. It goes without saying that he squandered his entire fortune, finding himself in his old age with hardly a copeck to his name. Someone advised him he should go to his estate, which was in the process of being sold at a public auction. So off he went, and arrived in Mordasov, where he lived for exactly six months. He found provincial life extraordinarily to his liking,

and during these six months he frittered away everything he had left, down to the very last scraps, continuing his frivolous lifestyle and striking up various intimate relationships with the local young ladies. He was, of course, the most good-natured of people, not without certain princely mannerisms – which, however, were considered in Mordasov to be a sign of the highest society, and which, therefore, instead of being irritating, created a certain effect. The ladies especially were in constant raptures over their dear guest. He was to be remembered for his distinctly odd behaviour. It was said, among other things, that he used to spend more than half of every day preening himself, and he seemed to be entirely made up of various different bits and pieces. No one knew where and when he had managed to become such a crumbling wreck. He wore a wig, a moustache, whiskers – even a Spanish beard – that were all false, down to the very last hair, and all of a magnificent black colour. He would whiten and rouge his face every day. It was maintained that he somehow managed to smooth out the wrinkles on his face with a set of little springs, with such springs being cunningly concealed in his hair. It was also claimed he wore a corset, having lost a rib somewhere in Italy while leaping out of a window during one of his amorous adventures. He limped on his left leg, with people again claiming that this leg was false (the real one having been broken during yet another escapade, this time in Paris), and that a new, very special cork leg had been affixed to his body. But then people will say all kinds of things, won't they? One thing, however, was certain: his right eye was of glass, although extremely skilfully made. His teeth were also false. He would spend whole days washing himself with various patented liquids, spraying on perfumes and applying pomades. People can remember, however, that the prince was becoming noticeably more and more decrepit, as well as being an insufferable chatterbox. It looked as if he might be approaching the end of his career. Everyone knew he was

totally destitute. And then suddenly, completely unexpectedly, one of his closest relatives – an extraordinarily ancient lady who was a long-time resident of Paris, and someone from whom he could never have expected to receive any inheritance – died, having buried her legal heir exactly a month before. Totally unexpectedly, therefore, the prince became her legal heir. He became the sole owner of a truly magnificent estate with four thousand serfs situated some sixty versts from Mordasov. He immediately decided to set off for Petersburg to settle his affairs. In saying goodbye to their guest, our ladies organized a wonderful dinner for him, on a subscription basis. People remember the prince being in charmingly good humour at this final dinner – punning, making everyone laugh, telling the most original stories, promising that he would be coming back to Dukhanovo (his newly acquired estate) as soon as possible, and that, on his return, he would be organizing endless fêtes, picnics, balls and firework displays. For a whole year after his departure the ladies talked about these promised festivities, looking forward to seeing their wonderful old prince again with desperate impatience. In anticipation of his return, trips were even arranged to Dukhanovo, where there was an ancient manor house and garden, featuring lions clipped out of acacias, artificial mounds, ponds containing boats complete with carved wooden models of Turks playing pipes, summer houses, pavilions, bijou gazebos and other such conceits.

Finally the prince returned – but, to everyone’s surprise and disappointment, rather than call in at Mordasov, he settled down in his Dukhanovo estate as a total recluse. Strange rumours began to circulate about him and, on the whole, the story of this period of the prince’s life takes on a rather hazy and fantastic character. In the first place, it was said that his stay in Petersburg hadn’t met with total success, in that certain relatives, also heirs to the old woman’s fortune, wanted to wrest the trusteeship of the money from him, citing his

unsoundness of mind – almost certainly concerned he would fritter it all away once more. That was not all: others added that these relatives wanted to send him off to a lunatic asylum, but that one of them, a figure of some consequence, apparently interceded on his behalf, convincingly arguing that, as someone who already had one foot in the grave and who was in any case half artificial, the poor prince would almost certainly soon be fully deceased – in which case the estate would become theirs without any need for a lunatic asylum. Let me repeat: people will say all kinds of things, won't they, especially in a place such as Mordasov! All this, they said, so terrified the prince that he completely changed and became a recluse. Some of the Mordasov inhabitants went to see him out of curiosity to congratulate him, but either he wouldn't agree to see them or they would be received in the oddest way – the prince actually refusing to recognize his former acquaintances. It was even claimed he simply had no wish to recognize them.

Another visitor was the provincial governor. He returned with the news that, in his opinion, the prince was indeed a touch insane, and whenever the subject of his visit to Dukhanovo subsequently came up, he would make a sour face. The ladies voiced their strong irritation. Finally they had some very important news about him: that he had fallen into the clutches of a certain unknown lady by the name of Stepanida Matveyevna; that this lady was of Heaven knows what provenance, but had come with him from Petersburg; that she was an elderly plump lady who went around wearing a cotton dress and carrying a bunch of keys; that the prince did exactly what she told him to do, as if he were a little child, not daring to take a step without her permission; that she even washed him with her own hands, spoiling him, carrying him about and entertaining him, again as if he were a little child; and that, finally, she was the one who had refused to let him see any visitors, and in particular any relatives who might, little by little, start visiting Dukhanovo

simply to nose around the place. There was a lot of talk in Mordasov, particularly from the ladies, about the mysterious relationship between these two. In addition to all this, it was said that Stepanida Matveyevna ruled the prince's estate with a rod of iron, like a tyrant; that she dismissed bailiffs, stewards and servants, and collected the income herself; but that she managed things so well that the peasants blessed their good fortune. As for the prince himself, people learnt that he spent practically the entire day preening himself and trying on his wigs and frock-coats; that he spent the rest of the time with Stepanida Matveyevna playing cards, telling fortunes, sometimes going out riding on a mild-mannered English mare, invariably accompanied by Stepanida Matveyevna in a closed droshky in case of any eventuality – because the prince went riding more out of coquettishness and was barely able to stay in the saddle. He could also sometimes be seen on foot, in a coat and a broad-brimmed straw hat, with a pink ladies' shawl round his neck, wearing his glass eye and carrying a straw basket in his left hand for gathering mushrooms, wild flowers and cornflowers. Stepanida Matveyevna, for her part, always went with him on these occasions, with two strapping footmen walking behind, followed by a carriage, in case anything should happen. Whenever a peasant met him, the peasant would stand to one side, remove his cap, bow down and say: "Greetings, great prince, Your Highness, our glorious sun!" And the prince would immediately turn his lorgnette on him, give him a benevolent nod and reply in a friendly tone: "*Bonjour, mon ami, bonjour!*"* There were many such reports circulating in Mordasov, and it was impossible to forget about the prince – he was a close neighbour, after all! But how astonished everyone was when, one fine morning, the news spread that the prince, this eccentric recluse, had arrived in Mordasov in person and was staying at Maria Alexandrovna's house! There was such pandemonium and excitement! Everyone waited for an

explanation, everyone wondered what it could possibly mean. Some people even planned to go to Maria Alexandrovna's. The prince's arrival struck everyone as being a totally bizarre event. The ladies exchanged notes with each other, prepared to go visiting, sent their maids and husbands to snoop around. What seemed particularly odd was that the prince had chosen to stay with Maria Alexandrovna rather than with someone else. The person who was the most indignant about this was Anna Nikolayevna Antipova, as she was a very distant relative of the prince. But in order to resolve all these problems we absolutely have to call in to see Maria Alexandrovna herself and extend a welcoming hand to our gracious readers to join us. True, it is now ten o'clock in the morning, but I am sure she will not refuse to receive her closest acquaintances – in any event, I have no doubt she will be happy to welcome us.

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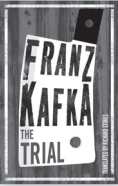
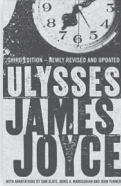
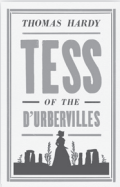
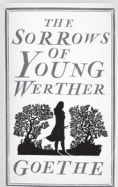
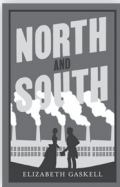
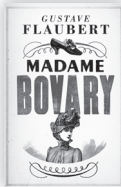
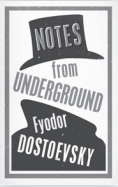
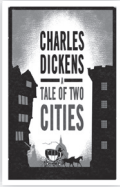
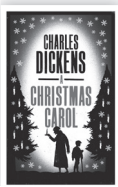
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