Contents

The Mother

PART ONE

I

Every day above the workers' settlement the factory siren quivered and roared in the smoky, oily air, and, obedient to the call, out into the street from the small grey houses there ran, like frightened cockroaches, morose people who had as yet been unable to refresh their muscles with sleep. They walked in the cold gloom down the unpaved street towards the tall, stone cells of the factory, and it awaited them with indifferent certainty, lighting the muddy road with dozens of greasy square eyes. Mud squelched underfoot. The hoarse exclamations of sleepy voices rang out, coarse abuse tore angrily through the air, while towards the people floated other sounds – the heavy commotion of machines, the grumbling of steam. Morose and stern loomed the tall black chimneys, rising above the settlement like fat sticks.

In the evening, when the sun was setting, and its red rays shone wearily on the houses' window panes, the factory would toss the people out from its stone depths like waste slag, and again they would walk down the streets, smoke-begrimed, black-faced, spreading the sticky smell of machine oil through the air and with their hungry teeth shining. In their voices now there was the sound of animation and even joy – the penal servitude of labour was over for the day, and waiting at home were dinner and rest.

The day had been swallowed by the factory, and the machines had sucked as much strength as they needed from men's muscles. The day had been expunged from life without trace, each man had taken one more step towards his grave, but he could see not far ahead of him the pleasure of rest, the joys of the smoky tavern, and he was content.

On days off people would sleep until about ten o'clock, then the solid and married ones would dress in their best clothes and go to hear the Liturgy, criticizing youngsters on the way for their indifference to the

church. From church they would return home, eat pies and go back to bed again until evening.

Tiredness which had accumulated over years deprived men of their appetite, and in order to eat they would have a lot to drink, irritating their stomachs with the sharp burning of vodka.

In the evening they would stroll lazily around the streets, and anyone who had galoshes put them on, even if it was dry, and if they had an umbrella they carried it with them, even though the sun might be shining.

Meeting with one another, they would talk about the factory, about the machines, and criticize the foremen: they talked and thought only about things connected with work. Solitary sparks of clumsy, impotent thought barely glimmered in the boring monotony of their days. Returning home, they would quarrel with their wives and often beat them, not sparing their fists. The youngsters sat in taverns or organized parties at each other's homes; they played accordions, sang smutty, ugly songs, danced, used foul language and drank. Exhausted by labour, men got drunk quickly, and in every breast an incomprehensible, morbid irritation was awakened. It demanded an outlet. And grasping tenaciously at every opportunity to discharge this alarming feeling, people threw themselves upon one another over trifles with the animosity of beasts. Bloody fights broke out. At times they ended in serious mutilation, occasionally in murder.

Most of all in people's relations there was a sense of watchful malice, and it was just as chronic as the incurable tiredness of their muscles. People were born with this sickness of the soul, inheriting it from their fathers, and it accompanied them like a black shadow to the grave, prompting them during their lives to a series of deeds, repellent in their aimless cruelty.

On days off, youngsters would arrive home late at night in ripped clothing, covered in dirt and dust and with battered faces, boasting with malicious delight of the blows inflicted upon their comrades, or else insulted, in a rage or in tears of resentment, drunk and wretched, unhappy and offensive. Sometimes lads were brought home by their mothers or fathers. They would seek them out, drunk and insensible, somewhere beside a fence in the street or in the taverns; they would curse

them with foul words and use their fists to beat the soft bodies, diluted with vodka, of their children, then put them to bed, more or less solicitously, only to wake them early in the morning, when the angry roar of the siren flowed in a dark stream through the air, for work.

They cursed and beat their children hard, but the drunkenness and fights of the youngsters seemed to the old men a perfectly legitimate phenomenon – when the fathers were young, they too had drunk and fought, they too had been beaten by their mothers and fathers. Life had always been thus: evenly and slowly, year after year, it kept on flowing away somewhere in a turbid stream, and it was all bound together by strong, ancient habits of thinking and doing one and the same thing day in, day out. And no one had any desire to try to change it.

Outsiders would occasionally come to the settlement from elsewhere. At first they attracted attention simply because they were strangers, next they aroused a slight, superficial interest with stories about the places where they had worked, and then their novelty wore off, people grew accustomed to them, and they became insignificant. From their stories it was clear: the life of a worker was the same everywhere. And if that was the case, then what was there to talk about?

But there were times when some of them would say something unheard of in the settlement. People did not argue with them, but listened to their strange speeches with distrust. These speeches excited blind irritation in some, in others vague anxiety, while a third group were disturbed by a slight shadow of hope for something unclear, and they would start drinking more to expel the needless, troubling anxiety.

Having noticed something unusual in a stranger, the people of the settlement were long unable to forgive him for it and responded to the man who did not resemble them with unaccountable apprehension. It was as if they were afraid that the man would throw something into their life that would disturb its cheerlessly proper progress, hard, maybe, but serene. People were accustomed to life crushing them with always identical force and, not expecting any changes for the better, considered all changes capable only of increasing their oppression.

People who said new things were silently shunned by the settlement-dwellers. Those people would then disappear, going away elsewhere once more, but if they did remain at the factory, and if they did not know how to merge into a single whole with the monotonous mass of the settlement-dwellers, then they lived apart…

Having lived such a life for some fifty years, a man would die.

II

And thus lived Mikhail Vlasov, a metalworker, hirsute and morose, with small eyes; they looked out suspiciously from beneath thick brows with an unpleasant smirk. The best metalworker in the factory and the number-one strong man in the settlement, he conducted himself rudely with the management, and for that reason earned but little; every day off he would beat someone up, and everyone disliked and feared him. People tried to beat him up too, but without success. When Vlasov saw there were men coming for him, he would grab a stone or a piece of wood or iron, and, setting his feet wide apart, would wait in silence for his enemies. His face – overgrown with a black beard from eyes to neck – and his hairy arms instilled fear in everyone. People were especially afraid of his eyes – small and sharp, they drilled into you like steel gimlets, and all who met his gaze felt before them a savage strength, impervious to fear, prepared to beat without mercy.

"Right, scum, break it up!" he would say in muffled tones. Through the thick hair on his face gleamed large yellow teeth. The men would break up, cursing him in cowardly fashion with howls of abuse.

"Scum!" he would say tersely in their wake, his eyes shining with a smirk as sharp as an awl. Then, holding his head provocatively high, he would go after them and challenge them:

"Well, who wants to die?"

Nobody did.

He said little, and "scum" was his favourite word. It was what he called the factory management and the police, and he used it to address his wife.

"You, scum, can't you see – my trousers are torn!"

When Pavel, his son, was fourteen, Vlasov tried pulling him out of his way by the hair. But Pavel picked up a heavy hammer and said tersely:

"Don't touch me."

"What?" asked his father, advancing on the tall, slim figure of his son like a shadow on a birch tree.

"Enough!" said Pavel. "I'm not taking any more…"

And he brandished the hammer.

His father looked at him, put his shaggy arms behind his back and said with a smirk:

"All right…"

Then, with a heavy sigh, he added:

"Oh you scum…"

Soon after this he said to his wife:

"Don't ask me for money any more, Pashka can keep you fed…"

"And are you going to spend it all on drink?" she took the liberty of asking.

"None of your business, scum! I'm going to find myself a lover…"

Find himself a lover he did not, but from then on, for almost two years, right up until his death, he never took any notice of his son and never spoke to him.

He had a dog, just as big and shaggy as he himself was. It walked him to the factory every day, and would be waiting every evening by the gates. On days off, Vlasov would set off to go round the taverns. He walked in silence and, as if trying to find someone, would scratch at people's faces with his eyes. And the dog would follow him all day, with its big, fluffy tail drooping. Returning home drunk, he would sit down to have dinner and feed the dog from his own cup. He did not beat it, did not curse it, but never showed it any affection either. After dinner, he would throw the crockery from the table onto the floor, if his wife had not managed to clear it away in time, set a bottle of vodka down in front of him and, leaning his back against the wall, in an indistinct, depressing voice, would howl out a song, opening his mouth wide and closing his eyes. The doleful, ugly sounds got caught in his moustache,

knocking the breadcrumbs out of it; the metalworker smoothed the hair of his beard and moustache with his thick fingers and sang. The words of the song were incomprehensible and long-winded, the melody reminiscent of the howling of wolves in winter. He sang for as long as there was vodka in the bottle, then toppled sideways onto the bench or lowered his head onto the table and slept like that until the siren. The dog would lie alongside him.

He died of a hernia. He turned all black and tossed on his bed with his eyes tightly closed, grinding his teeth, for about five days. Sometimes he would say to his wife:

"Give me arsenic, poison me…"

The doctor ordered that Mikhail have poultices applied, but said an operation was essential and the sick man should be taken to hospital that very day.

"Go to hell, I'll die by myself!… Scum!…" wheezed Mikhail.

And when the doctor had gone and his wife began tearfully trying to persuade him to consent to the operation, he clenched his fist and, shaking it, declared:

"If I get better, it'll be the worse for you!"

He died in the morning, in those moments when the siren was calling men to work. He lay in the coffin with his mouth open, but his brows were knitted angrily. He was buried by his wife, son and dog, and Danila Vesovshchikov – an old drunkard and thief dismissed from the factory – and a few of the settlement's beggars. His wife cried quietly and just a little; Pavel did not cry. Meeting the coffin in the street, the settlement-dwellers stopped and, crossing themselves, said to one another:

"I expect Palageya must be happy as a sandboy that he's passed away…"

Some made a correction:

"Not 'passed away', snuffed it…"

When the coffin had been buried, the people left, but the dog remained and, sitting on the fresh earth, spent a long time sniffing silently at the grave. A few days later, somebody killed it…

III

On a Sunday about two weeks after his father's death, Pavel Vlasov came home very drunk. Staggering, he squeezed into the corner where the icons were and, banging his fist on the table as his father had, he shouted to his mother:

"Dinner!"

His mother went over to him, sat down beside him and put her arms around her son, drawing his head onto her breast. He resisted, with his hand pushing against her shoulder, and shouted:

"Mamasha – hurry up!…"

"You little idiot!" said his mother, sadly and lovingly, overcoming his resistance.

"And I'm going to have a smoke! Give me my father's pipe…" Pavel mumbled, moving his disobedient tongue with difficulty.

It was the first time he had had too much to drink. The vodka had weakened his body but had not smothered his consciousness, and there was a question hammering in his head:

"Drunk? Drunk?"

He was embarrassed by his mother's caresses and touched by the sadness in her eyes. He felt like crying, and to suppress this desire he started pretending to be drunker than he was.

And his mother stroked his sweaty, tangled hair with her hand and said quietly:

"You didn't need to do this…"

He began to feel sick. After a violent attack of vomiting, his mother put him to bed, covering his pale forehead with a damp towel. He had sobered up a little, but everything beneath him and around him was undulating, his eyelids were heavy and, with a foul, bitter taste in his mouth, he looked through his eyelashes at his mother's big face and thought incoherently:

"It must still be too soon for me. Others drink and they're all right, but it makes me sick…"

From somewhere far away came his mother's soft voice:

"What sort of breadwinner are you going to be for me if you start drinking?…"

Shutting his eyes tight, he said:

"Everybody drinks."

His mother heaved a heavy sigh. He was right. She herself knew that, apart from the tavern, there was nowhere for people to find any joy. But she said nonetheless:

"Well, you can choose *not* to drink! Your father drank enough for you as well. And he gave me enough of a hard time… so you might show your mother some pity, eh?"

Listening to the sad, soft words, Pavel recalled that in his father's lifetime his mother had been inconspicuous in the house, taciturn, and had always lived in anxious expectation of a beating. Avoiding encounters with his father, he had spent little time at home of late and had grown unused to his mother, so now, gradually sobering up, he looked at her closely.

She was tall, a little stooped, and her body, jaded from long hours of work and her husband's blows, moved noiselessly and somehow sideways, as if she were always afraid of knocking into something. Her broad, oval face, puffy and deeply lined with wrinkles, was lit up by dark eyes, anxious and sad, like those of the majority of the women in the settlement. Above the right eyebrow was a deep scar which drew the eyebrow up a little, and her right ear, too, seemed higher than the left one, lending her face an expression that suggested she was always listening out fearfully. Grey strands shone in her dense, dark hair. Overall, she was soft, sad and submissive…

And tears flowed slowly down her cheeks.

"Don't cry!" her son begged quietly. "Give me something to drink."

"I'll bring you some water with ice…"

But when she returned, he had already fallen asleep. She stood over him for a moment, the *kovsh** in her hand trembled, and the ice struck quietly against the tinplate. Putting the *kovsh* down on the table, she silently sank to her knees in front of the icons. Beating against the window panes were the sounds of drunken life. In the darkness and damp of the autumn evening there was an accordion squealing, someone's

loud singing, someone cursing with foul words and the anxious sound of women's tired, irritated voices…

Life in the Vlasovs' little house flowed more quietly and serenely than before, and somewhat differently to everywhere else in the settlement. Their house stood on the edge of the settlement, by a short but steep descent to a marsh. A third of the house was occupied by the kitchen and, separated from it by a thin partition, the small room where the mother slept. The remaining two thirds were a square room with two windows; in one corner of it was Pavel's bed, in the corner with the icons a table and two benches. A few chairs, a chest of drawers for linen, on top of it a small mirror, a chest for clothes, a clock on the wall and two icons in the corner – and that was it.

Pavel did everything a young lad needs to: he bought an accordion, a shirt with a starched front, a bright tie, galoshes, a walking stick, and he became just the same as all adolescents of his age. He went to parties, learnt to dance the quadrille and the polka, returned home on holidays the worse for drink and always suffered a lot from the vodka. In the morning he would have a headache, heartburn would be a torment, and his face would be pale and miserable.

One day his mother asked him:

"Well, did you have fun yesterday?"

He replied with morose irritation:

"I was bored stiff! I'd be better off going fishing. Or else I'll buy myself a gun."

He worked zealously, without taking extra days off or being fined, he was taciturn, and his blue eyes, big, like his mother's, had a discontented look. He did not buy himself a gun, nor did he take up fishing, but he began diverging noticeably from everyone else's beaten track: he attended parties more rarely, and although he would go off out somewhere on holidays, he would come back sober. Keeping a vigilant eye on him, his mother saw that her son's swarthy face was becoming sharper, the look in his eyes was more and more serious, and his lips were tightly compressed with a strange severity. It seemed as if he was silently angry with something or some illness was nagging at him. His comrades used

to drop in to see him before, but now, never finding him at home, they stopped coming. It was nice for the mother to see her son becoming different from the youngsters at the factory, but when she noticed he was fixedly and stubbornly swimming off somewhere away from the dark stream of life, this elicited a feeling of vague apprehension in her soul.

"Are you, perhaps, unwell, Pavlusha?" she sometimes asked him.

"No, I'm well!" he replied.

"You're very thin!" his mother would say with a sigh.

He began bringing books home and tried to read them unnoticed, and when he had read them, he would hide them somewhere. Sometimes he would copy things out of the books onto a separate piece of paper, and he would hide that too…

They spoke little and saw little of one another. In the morning he would drink his tea in silence and go off to work; at noon he would come to have dinner, and they would toss some insignificant words about at the table, and again he would disappear until evening. And in the evening he would wash thoroughly, have dinner and afterwards spend a long time reading his books. On holidays he would go off early in the morning and return late at night. She knew that he went into town, that there he was sometimes at the theatre, but nobody came from town to see him. It seemed to her that with the passage of time her son was talking less and less, but at the same time she noticed that he occasionally used new words of some sort, incomprehensible to her, while the rude and abrupt expressions she was used to were disappearing from his speech. A lot of little things appeared in his behaviour that caught her attention: he gave up foppishness, began to be more concerned with the cleanliness of his body and clothing, moved with greater freedom and agility and, becoming outwardly more plain and simple and soft, he aroused his mother's anxious attention. And there was something new in his attitude to his mother: he sometimes swept the floor in his room, on holidays he tidied up his bedding himself, and he tried to make her work easier in general. Nobody in the settlement did that…

One day he brought home a picture and hung it on the wall – three people in conversation were walking somewhere, easy and cheerful.

"It's the risen Christ going to Emmaus!"* Pavel explained.

His mother liked the picture, but she thought:

"You respect Christ, yet you don't go to church…"

There were more and more books appearing on the shelf that had been nicely made for Pavel by a comrade who was a carpenter. The room acquired a pleasant appearance.

He addressed her formally and politely called her "Mamasha", but sometimes, suddenly, he would speak to her lovingly:

"Please don't worry yourself, Mother – I'll be back home late…"

She liked this: she could sense in his words something serious and powerful.

But her anxiety grew. Without becoming clearer over time, it touched her heart ever more sharply with a presentiment of something unusual. At times the mother would feel discontented with her son and think:

"Everyone's like everyone else, but he's like a monk. Really very severe. It's wrong at his age…"

Sometimes she thought:

"Maybe he's found himself some girl or other?"

But running around with girls demands money, and he gave almost his entire earnings to her.

Thus the weeks and months went by, and there passed, unnoticed, two years of this strange, silent life, full of vague thoughts and apprehensions that were forever growing.

IV

One day after dinner, Pavel lowered the blind at the window, sat down in the corner and started reading, having hung a tin lamp on the wall above his head. His mother cleared away the crockery and, coming out of the kitchen, approached him cautiously. He raised his head and looked into her face enquiringly.

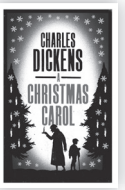
"It's all right, Pasha, it's nothing!" she said hurriedly, walking away with her brows shifting in embarrassment. But after standing motionless

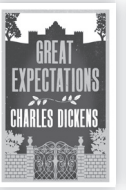
EVERGREENS SERIES

Beautifully produced classics, affordably priced

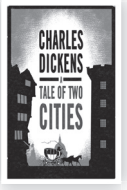
Alma Classics is committed to making available a wide range of literature from around the globe. Most of the titles are enriched by an extensive critical apparatus, notes and extra reading material, as well as a selection of photographs. The texts are based on the most authoritative editions and edited using a fresh, accessible editorial approach. With an emphasis on production, editorial and typographical values, Alma Classics aspires to revitalize the whole experience of reading classics.


On the ORIGIN of SPECIES
Charles DARWIN

Daniel Defoe
Moll Flanders

CHARLES DICKENS
A CHRISTMAS CAROL

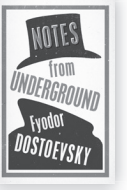
DAVID COPPERFIELD
CHARLES DICKENS

GREAT EXPECTATIONS
CHARLES DICKENS

HARD TIMES
CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES DICKENS
OLIVER TWIST

CHARLES DICKENS
A TALE OF TWO CITIES

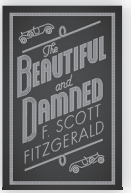
The DOUBLE
Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY

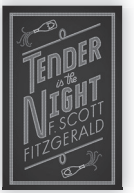
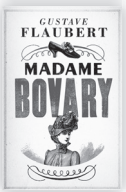
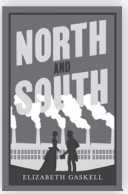
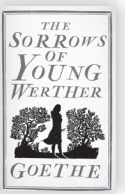
Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY
The GAMBLER

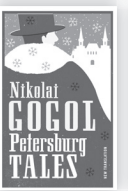
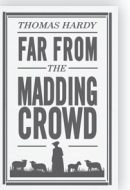
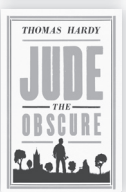
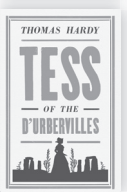
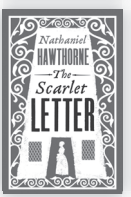
The IDIOT
Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY

NOTES from UNDERGROUND
Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY

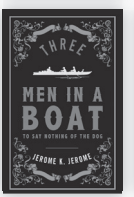
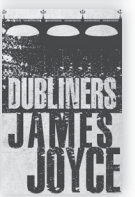
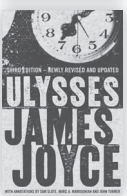
Middlemarch
GEORGE ELIOT

The MILL on the FLOSS
George Eliot

PRAISE of FOLLY
ERASMUS

The BEAUTIFUL and DAMNED
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The GREAT GATSBY
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

TENDER is the NIGHT
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
MADAME BOVARY

NORTH AND SOUTH
ELIZABETH GASKELL

THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER
GOETHE

Dead SOULS
Nikolai GOGOL

Nikolai GOGOL
Petersburg TALES

THOMAS HARDY
FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

THOMAS HARDY
JUDE THE OBSCURE

THOMAS HARDY
TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

Nathaniel HAWTHORNE
The Scarlet LETTER

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY
HENRY JAMES

THREE MEN IN A BOAT
TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG
JEROME K. JEROME

DUBLINERS
JAMES JOYCE

ULYSSES
JAMES JOYCE

FRANZ KAFKA
METAMORPHOSIS
KAFKA

FRANZ KAFKA
THE TRIAL

LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER
D.H. LAWRENCE

SONS AND LOVERS
D.H. LAWRENCE

Mikhail Lermontov
A Hero of Our Time

For our complete list and latest offers

visit

almabooks.com/evergreens