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Malinovka Heights

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

SOMEWHERE IN ONE OF ST PETERSBURG'S major thoroughfares, in an apartment whose furnishings showed signs of casual neglect, there sat two gentlemen, one aged about thirty-five and the other about forty-five.

The first was Boris Pavlovich Raisky, and the second Ivan Ivanovich Ayanov.

Boris Pavlovich's features were lively and extremely mobile. At first glance, he appeared younger than his years. His broad white brow gleamed with a youthful freshness, and the expression in his eyes would change from one moment to another. At one moment they would be alive with thought, feeling and high spirits, and the very next moment would turn sombre and meditative, and then a moment later simply youthful, almost juvenile. At times, they would convey a mature, weary, abstracted impression typical of someone of his host's age. At the corners of his eyes there were even early traces of three crow's feet, ineradicable signs of age and experience. His straight black hair covered the back of his head and his ears, and a few silver strands flecked his temples. His cheeks as well as his brow still preserved the sheen of youth, especially around the eyes and mouth, but yellowish smudges could be discerned on his temples and chin.

Altogether it was not hard to detect from his features that he was at that time of life when youth had given up the struggle to fend off maturity, a time when a man has entered that second stage of life where every one of his experiences, feelings and ailments has left its mark on him. It was his mouth alone that had retained, in the barely perceptible movements of his delicate lips and his smile, a youthful, fresh and at times almost childlike expression.

Raisky was dressed in an informal greyish coat and sat with his legs up on the divan. Ivan Ivanovich by contrast was wearing a tailcoat and a pair of white gloves; his hat lay on a nearby table. His expression was one of calm, or rather of equanimity in the face of whatever might occur in his vicinity.

His eyes conveyed lucidity, his lips intelligence, and his complexion was on the sallow side. His hair and side whiskers were elegantly trimmed and shot with grey. His movements were controlled, his speech restrained and his clothes impeccable. And with this you have a complete picture of his appearance.

His eyes projected a sense of quiet self-confidence and an understanding of others. An observer would conclude: "That's a man who has been around, seen a lot of life and understands human nature." And although he might not rank him as an exceptional or exemplary human being, he would certainly not regard him as one of the world's innocents.

He was a true representative of those born and bred in the universal St Petersburg – what you would call "a man of the world". He belonged to St Petersburg and its society, and it would have been hard to imagine him in any other city, or in any other circles except its fashionable society, that is to say its elite. He does have a career, and has business to attend to, but more often than not you would find him in drawing rooms – visits in the morning, dinners and parties in the evening, where he was always at the card table. He was not striking in any way – not exactly a strong character, although not lacking in character; not exactly knowledgeable, but certainly not ignorant; and while he lacked convictions, he was no sceptic.

In him, lack of knowledge and the absence of conviction took the form of a mild, superficial, all-round negativism, and his attitude to everything was one of detached indifference. He was committed to nothing, had no deep beliefs and showed no inclinations in any direction. He viewed things with a mildly ironic scepticism, and was detached and cool in his personal relationships, favoured no one with deep and lasting friendship, nor did he trouble anyone with implacable hostility.

He was born, grew up, was educated and had lived a long life in St Petersburg, never travelling farther than Lakhta and Oranienbaum in one direction, and Toksov and Srednaya Rogatka in the other. In the same way that a single drop of water can reflect the sun, so he reflected the whole of the life of St Petersburg: its practicality, its mores, its tone, its nature and its careers – which were its second nature – and nothing more than that. He had no views and no conception of any other kind of life, except for what he read in Russian and foreign newspapers. His entire life revolved around St Petersburg's passions: its views, its yearly round of virtues and vices, thoughts, doings, politics and, for all I know, its poetry. Never did he break out of that charmed circle, finding within it enough and to spare to satisfy his every need.

Every year for forty years he had looked on with utter indifference as crowds of people he dismissed as "naive" set off hopefully on their travels. Some

crowded aboard steamers bound for foreign parts, others aboard coaches – and later trains – bound for distant parts of Russia, and all this in search of new impressions and distractions, in order to breathe the air of some other place and to see something different. He himself never felt the slightest need of this kind, and refused to recognize this need in others, and just regarded these “others” with calm indifference, with a politely benign expression on his face, as if to say: “They’re welcome to do what they want, but it’s not for me.”

He kept his conversation simple, jumping from one topic to another, and kept abreast with everything that was going on in the world, in the city and in society. If there was a war going on, he knew all the details. He learnt of changes in some British or French ministry, which meant absolutely nothing to him, and read the latest speech in Parliament or in the French Chamber of Deputies. He knew about every new play, and who had been murdered the night before on the Vyborg side of the Neva. He knew the genealogy, the fortunes, the estates and scandals of every great house in the capital. He kept up to the minute with everything going on in the government – changes, promotions, decorations, as well as all the gossip going around town – in a word, he knew his world inside out.

He spent his mornings doing the rounds of the drawing rooms, partly on business. Quite often, he began his evenings in the theatre, and always ended them playing cards at the English Club or visiting friends – and there was no one he didn’t know. His conduct at the card table was immaculate, and he enjoyed a reputation as an affable companion, because he was indulgent to the mistakes of others and never betrayed any irritation or made a critical remark, and treated bad play and good play with the same good humour. Moreover, he played for high stakes as well as low, and with seasoned players as well as those scatterbrained ladies.

He had a good record of military service, and had toiled through fifteen years of government service in the execution of the projects of others. He was quick to divine the thoughts of his chief, whoever it might be at any given time, and shared his views regarding the work. Ayanov was adept at drafting projects in keeping with these views, and his memoranda always succeeded in pleasing any minister under whom he served.

At this time, he was on a special assignment for one of them. He spent the mornings in close attendance on the minister, and then reported to the minister’s wife, whose assignments it was that he was actually carrying out. In the evenings, on appointed days, he was always being entertained at one house or another. He had attained a respectable rank and enjoyed an equally respectable salary – without any actual work.

If you were able to peer into another's soul, then in Ivan Ivanovich's you would find no dark places, no secrets, no mysteries, and Macbeth's witches themselves would have been unable to find any more glittering fate with which to tempt him, or to strip him of that towards which he was already so proudly and consciously headed – promotion from Councillor of State to the rank of Active Councillor of State, and finally for his long and commendable service and tireless efforts both in his ministry and at the card table, to the rank of Privy Councillor, and at the very end, dropping anchor in the safe harbour of some standing committee or commission with the appropriate emoluments. And there he would remain, unscathed and untouched, no matter how turbulent the world's oceans, how violent the changes wrought by time, how many kingdoms rose or fell. Nothing could alter the course of his life, until it was ended by an apoplectic stroke or some other fatal event.

Ayanov had been married and was now a widower with a twenty-year-old daughter who was a student in an institute, her fees paid by the state. His affairs arranged to his satisfaction, he led the untroubled and carefree life of an elderly bachelor.

There was only one irritant – haemorrhoids, as the result of his sedentary life. His doctor had threatened him with the unpleasant prospect of having to interrupt his comfortable existence in order to travel to some place to take the waters.

“Isn't it time we got ready to leave – it's a quarter past four!” said Ayanov.

“Yes, it is,” replied Raisky, rousing himself from his reverie.

“What were you thinking about?” asked Ayanov.

“You mean ‘who?’” Raisky corrected him. “About Sofya – who else?”

“Not still?” said Ayanov.

While Raisky was putting his coat on, he asked: “You don't mind my dragging you there?”

“Not at all. Might just as well play there as at the Ivlevys, no? Only I feel a little ashamed about parting those old women from their money: there's Anna Vasilyevna who absent-mindedly trumps her partner's winning cards, and Nadezhda Vasilyevna who always talks aloud when she plays a card and reveals the one she's about to play.”

“Don't worry: you'll only be taking them for a few copecks. Those two old ladies have an annual income of some sixty thousand.”

“I know, and I suppose all that will be coming to Sofya Nikolayevna?”

“Yes, it will, she's their niece. But who knows when? They're stingy, and they'll outlive her.”

“But her father must be worth something?...”

“No, he squandered the lot.”

“But how? He practically never plays cards.”

“What do you mean ‘how’? Women, of course. He’s always on the go, *petites soupers* and all that kind of thing. Last winter he gave a dinner service worth five thousand to Armance, and she even forgot to invite him to supper...”

“Yes, I heard, and what for? What’s he doing hanging around her?” They both started laughing. “Sofya Nikolayevna’s late husband also lost most of his fortune!”

“No, he had seven thousand a year coming in – just pocket money for her. All the rest will be coming from her aunts.”

“Time to go! I want to walk along the Nevsky Prospekt a little before supper.”

Ayanov and Raisky walked along, nodding, bowing here and there, and shaking hands left and right.

“Will you be staying long at Belovodova’s?”

“Until she throws me out – as usual. Why, do you find it dull?”

“No, I was thinking maybe there’ll be time to get to the Ivlevys. Me – I’m never bored.”

“Lucky man!” said Raisky enviously. “If only there were no such thing as boredom; there’s nothing worse!”

“Please don’t say that!” Ayanov stopped him because of a superstitious fear.

“There you go again, just asking for trouble! My haemorrhoids are trouble enough! The only thing that doctors know is to send you off somewhere. If you made *them* spend their lives sitting down, they would see it as a major disaster.”

He sniffed the air with satisfaction. “And as for that business of the air, what could be better than the air we have here? Now I’ve found myself a nicer quack who proposes to treat me with sour milk – I mean you know about my piles? So, boredom will drive you to your cousin?”

“What a question! Of course it will! Isn’t boredom the reason why you play cards? That’s why people do anything – they avoid boredom like the plague.”

“Well, what a pitiful remedy you’ve found for it – fleeing boredom and seeking refuge in the tedium of a woman’s company; every day the very same thing!”

“Well, isn’t playing cards doing the same thing over and over again? That’s how you take refuge from boredom...”

“No, it’s not the same thing at all; some Englishman has worked it out that the same hand will be dealt again only once in a thousand years... What are the chances of that? And what about the different temperaments of the players, their different styles of play, and mistakes? No, it’s not the same thing at all! But to put up with a woman day in and day out, all through the winter and the spring... that’s something I simply don’t understand!”

“You don’t appreciate beauty. Well, there’s no help for it. I mean, one person doesn’t understand music, another person doesn’t understand painting – it’s just a kind of immaturity.”

“Yes, precisely – *a kind of* immaturity. Take this Ivan Petrovich, who was an assistant in my department; he had eyes for every woman in the department, even the cleaning women – of course, they had to be pretty. Always paying them compliments, offering them sweets and flowers – and you would describe him as mature?”

“Let’s change the subject,” said Raisky, “otherwise we’ll both get worked up and get into a fight. I don’t understand anything about your cards, so you’re free to call me an ignoramus, but don’t start hectoring and lecturing me about beauty. Everyone takes pleasure in their own thing; it could be painting, sculpture, or the living beauty of women; that Ivan Petrovich of yours reacts in one way and I in another, while you’re totally indifferent. But what’s it to you, anyway!”

“You treat women as if it’s a game to you, as far as I can see,” said Ayanov.

“Well, so what if I do? You also play games, and almost always win, but I always lose – and what’s wrong with that?”

“Yes, Sofya Nikolayevna is a beauty, and a rich prospect into the bargain, so marry her, and that will be the end of everything.”

“Yes, it will be, and also the beginning of boredom!” Raisky added pensively. “But it’s an end I don’t want! But don’t worry; they wouldn’t let me marry her anyway!”

“In that case, as I see it, there’s no point in going round there. You’re just a Don Juan!”

“Yes, a Don Juan, a shallow character – that’s what you think, isn’t it?”

“Of course, but what’s your view of him?”

“Just like Byron and Goethe, and all those others, sculptors and painters – shallow, the lot of them.”

“And you, what are you, Byron or Goethe?”

Raisky turned away from Ayanov in his annoyance.

“Don Juanism in humans is the same as Don Quixotism, only deeper, an even more innate need,” he said. “If it’s that deep a need, then get married... I’m telling you.”

Raisky groaned almost in despair. “I mean, you can get married once, twice, even three times. Why can’t I just enjoy that beauty in the same way that I would enjoy the beauty of a statue? For Don Juan it was primarily an aesthetic pleasure, but degraded; he was a child of his time, his upbringing

and the mores of his environment, and was carried away beyond the bounds of mere admiration – and that’s it. But what’s the use of talking to you?”

“Well, if you don’t want to marry her, then there’s no point in going round there,” Ayanov repeated listlessly.

“You know, you’re half right. First of all, I want to tell you that these infatuations of mine are always sincere, and without ulterior motives – I’m not a skirt chaser. Let me make that clear once and for all. And when my idol approaches the ideal in just one single respect, an ideal which my fantasy has created for me, then the picture of perfection simply completes itself independently of my volition, and that’s how my imagination generates an ideal of happiness – family happiness.”

“Well, in that case, just get married,” Ayanov remarked.

“Hold on, wait a minute! The ideal has never survived until the date of the wedding – it always fades away and expires, and I simply cool off and go on my way. What fantasy creates, analysis destroys like a house of cards. Or perhaps what happens is that the ideal simply leaves me before the cooling off.”

“All the same, how can you spend every day sitting and chattering with a woman?” Ayanov persisted, shaking his head. “Like today, for example, what are you going to talk about? What do you want from her if they don’t let you marry her?”

“Well, let me ask you, what do you want from her aunts? What hands will you be dealt? Will you win or lose? You surely don’t think that by going there you’ll relieve them of their whole income of sixty thousand? You go just for the fun of playing – and winning a little on the side.”

“I’ve no particular intentions that I know of; I just do it for... well, for the pleasure of it.”

“From... well, out of sheer boredom, and I too for the pleasure I get – with no particular intentions in mind either. But the plain fact of the matter is that neither you nor that Ivan Petrovich of yours will ever understand the pleasure I get from contemplating beauty – no offence to either of you, of course. After all, there are those who engage in passionate prayer, while others have absolutely no such need, and—”

“Passionate! That’s just it; it’s passions that interfere with life. Work, now that’s another antidote to emptiness – business!” Ayanov asserted forcefully.

Raisky, having been interrupted, stopped Ayanov in turn, smiled caustically and asked: “Do you mind telling what precisely is this work, or business, you’re talking about? I’m curious.”

“What do you mean ‘what work’? Go into government service!”

“Do you really call that ‘work’? Tell me what it is you do in those ministries that, with rare exceptions, is so indispensable?”

Ayanov just whistled, he was so surprised. “Well, what about him, for example?” he said, looking around him and pointing to a police officer looking fixedly in one direction.

“Well, ask him what exactly he’s doing standing there, and who exactly he’s watching, and what he’s waiting for! Some general? And while he’s not looking at us, there’s nothing to stop anyone passing by from snatching a handkerchief from our pockets. You don’t seriously think that those papers of yours are ‘work’... Let’s not go on about this, but I want to tell you that I have no doubt that I’m doing more ‘work’ than you when I’m dabbing away at my paintings, strumming away at my piano, and even when I’m just admiring beauty.”

“And what in particular, apart from beauty, have you found in your cousin?”

“What do you mean ‘apart from beauty’? Isn’t that enough? And anyway, I don’t know her very well, and it’s precisely that, apart from the beauty, which attracts me to her...”

“So, you’re with her every day, and still don’t know much about her?”

“Yes, not much. I don’t know what’s hidden behind that calm exterior; I don’t know anything about her past and can’t guess her future. Is she a woman or a doll – is she really alive or just pretending to be? That’s what torments me. Look, over there,” Raisky continued, “you see that woman?”

“You mean the stout one getting into a cab with a bundle?”

“Yes, and that one looking out of the window of a carriage? And the one just turning the corner and coming towards us?”

“Well, what of it?”

“In a flash you can read in their faces some mood or other: worry, yearning, joy, or a thought, a trace of will – in a word, something happening, something living. You don’t need much to pick up a clue, and to tell that over there there’s a family and children, that she has a past. And over here, this one projects passion or a lively trace of sympathy – that is, she has a present; and just here, this young face ripples with hopes and betrays desires which portend a troubled future...”

“Well?”

“Well, everywhere there’s something alive, in motion, calling out to life and responding to it... But there, there’s nothing like that, not a damned thing! Not even apathy or boredom, from which you could at least deduce that there had once been some life before it died – nothing! It shines and glitters, asks nothing and gives nothing! And I know nothing! And yet you’re surprised that I’m thrashing about?”

“If only you had told me this long ago, I would have stopped being surprised, because that’s just the way I am myself,” said Ayanov, stopping suddenly. “Why don’t you come to me instead of her?...”

“You?”

“Yes, me.”

“What – are you a ravishing beauty or something?”

“I’m ravishingly calm, and revel in it – just like her. But why do you care?”

“I don’t, well, not about you, but as for her – sheer beauty!”

“Get married, and if you don’t want to, or can’t, then forget it, and do something useful...”

“First you should embark on some worthwhile endeavour, something which a lively mind and a passionate soul sick of spiritual stagnation and mortification could throw itself into, and show me how to commit myself to a task worthy of the effort. But as for your cards, your social round, your receptions, your ministry – you can go to hell!”

“You have a restless temperament,” said Ayanov. “You’ve never been treated with a firm hand or known hardship – and that’s why you lead such a turbulent existence. Do you remember, you used to tell me, when your Natasha was alive...”

Raisky stopped suddenly and, sad-faced, grasped his companion’s hand. “Natasha!” he repeated softly. “She is the only thing that weighs my spirit down so heavily – don’t mix up her memory with these passing whims and distractions of mine...” He sighed, and they walked in silence to St Vladimir’s church, turned into a side street and disappeared into the entrance of a mansion.

CHAPTER 2

IT WAS ABOUT ONE YEAR EARLIER that Raisky had met Sofya Nikolayevna Belovodova, who had been left a widow at the age of twenty-five after her relatively brief marriage to Belovodov, who had been in the diplomatic service.

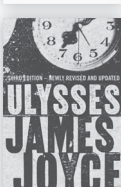
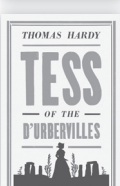
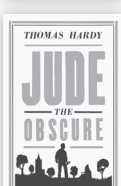
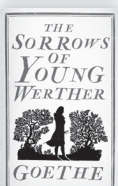
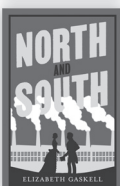
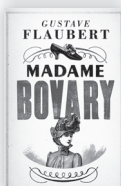
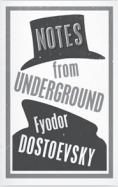
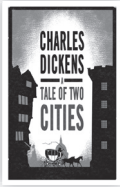
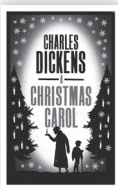
She belonged to the old and wealthy Pakhotin family. She had lost her mother before her marriage, and her father, who had spent his marriage at the beck and call of his wife, felt himself liberated. However, he suddenly woke up to the fact that his marriage had robbed him of his youth, and he had never really been able to enjoy life. He aspired to the life of a bachelor in defiance of his years and nature itself, but, suffering as he did from indigestion, found himself only able to look on while others ate and drank – and, by this time, he had dealt a mortal blow to his fortune.

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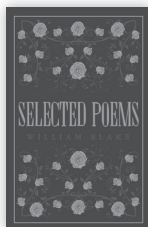
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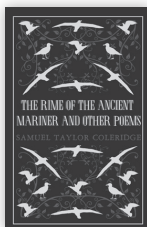
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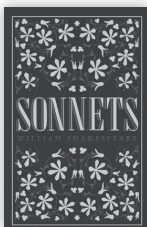
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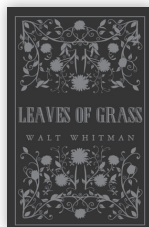
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