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The Story of a Nobody

FOR REASONS WHICH it is not now the time to discuss in detail, it was necessary for me to become manservant to a certain official in St Petersburg by the name of Orlov. He was about thirty-five years old and was called Georgy Ivanych.

I entered the service of this Orlov because of his father, the famous statesman, whom I considered a serious enemy of my cause. I reckoned that by living in the son's home, from the conversations I would hear and from the papers and notes I would find on the desk, I could study in detail the plans and intentions of the father.

At about eleven o'clock in the morning the electric bell in the servants' hall would usually crackle to let me know that the master was awake. When I entered the bedroom with clean clothes and boots, Georgy Ivanych would be sitting motionless in bed, not so much still sleepy as wearied by his sleep, gazing into space and displaying no pleasure at having woken up. I helped him to dress, and he submitted to me grudgingly, silently, and without acknowledging my presence; then, with his head wet from washing, and smelling of fresh scent, he went to the dining room to have coffee. He sat at the table, drinking his coffee and leafing through the newspapers, while the housemaid, Polya, and I stood by the door watching him. Two adults were obliged to watch with the gravest attention while a third drank coffee and gnawed at rusks. In all probability this was silly and

very odd, but I saw nothing humiliating for myself in having to stand by the door, although I was just as much an educated man and gentleman as Orlov himself.

My consumptive illness was then just beginning, and with it something else too that was perhaps rather more important than consumption. I do not know whether it was under the influence of the illness or of a change that, as yet unnoticed, was already under way in my outlook, but I was increasingly possessed from day to day by a passionate, nagging desire for the ordinary life of an ordinary person. I wanted peace of mind, health, good air, a full stomach. I was becoming a dreamer, and, like a dreamer, did not know what it was that I actually required. At times I wanted to retreat to a monastery, sit there for days on end by a window and gaze at the trees and fields; at other times I imagined myself buying a few acres of land and living like a country squire; at others I swore to myself that I would take up academic work and be sure to become a professor at some provincial university. I am a retired lieutenant of the Russian navy, and I dreamt of the sea, our squadron and the corvette on which I had sailed all around the world. I wanted to experience once more that inexpressible feeling when, while walking through a tropical forest or watching the sunset in the Bay of Bengal, you are transfixed in rapture, yet at the same time yearn for your homeland. I dreamt of mountains, women, music, and with curiosity, like a boy, I looked closely at people's faces and listened intently to their voices. And when I stood by the door watching Orlov drinking his coffee, I felt myself to be not a servant, but a man for whom everything in the world was of interest, even Orlov.

Orlov's looks were typical for St Petersburg: narrow shoulders, an elongated waist, sunken temples, eyes of indefinite colour, and meagre growth, sombrelly tinted, on head, beard and moustache. His face was sleek, scrubbed and unpleasant. It was especially unpleasant when he was deep in thought or asleep. But there is no real need to describe commonplace looks; what is more, St Petersburg is not Spain, men's looks have no great significance here, even in matters of love, and only imposing servants and coachmen need them. I mentioned Orlov's face and hair merely because there was one thing worthy of comment in his looks: that is, whenever Orlov picked up a newspaper or a book, no matter what it was, or whenever he met people, no matter who they were, there would appear in his eyes an ironic smile, and his entire face would take on an expression of light, unmalicious mockery. Before reading or hearing anything, he would always have irony at the ready, like the shield of a savage. This was an habitual irony, long-held, and it had recently begun to appear on his face without any participation of his will, as if, it seemed, by reflex action. But more on this later.

After midday, with an ironic expression, he would pick up his briefcase stuffed with papers and leave for the office. He dined out and returned after eight. I lit the lamp and the candles in the study and he sat down in his armchair, stretched his feet out onto another chair and, sprawling in this fashion, began reading. Almost every day he brought new books home with him or they would be sent from the shops, and in the servants' hall, in the corners and under my bed there lay a mass of books in three languages, not counting Russian, that had been read and discarded. He read with unusual speed. Tell me what you read, they say, and I will tell you who you are. That may be

so, but to judge anything about Orlov from the books he read is absolutely impossible. It was just a mishmash. Philosophy and French novels, political economy and finance, new poets and cheap “Intermediary” editions* – and he read everything equally quickly and always with that same ironic expression in his eyes.

After ten he would dress carefully, often in a tailcoat, very rarely in the court uniform of a Gentleman of the Bedchamber,* and go out. He would return towards morning.

We lived together quietly and peaceably and we had no misunderstandings. He did not usually notice my presence, and when he did speak to me there was no ironic expression on his face – he evidently did not consider me a person.

Only once did I see him angry. One day – it was a week after I entered his service – he returned from some dinner at about nine o’clock looking tired and pettish. When I followed him into the study to light the candles he said to me, “There’s some sort of stink in the flat.”

“No, the air is quite fresh,” I replied.

“And I’m telling you there’s a stink,” he repeated irritably.

“I open the windows every day.”

“Don’t argue, you idiot!” he shouted.

I was offended and was about to protest, and God knows how it would have ended had Poly, who knew her master better than I, not intervened.

“It’s true, what a horrible smell!” she said, raising her eyebrows. “Where can it be coming from? Stepan, open the windows in the drawing room and stoke up the fire.”

She began to huff and puff and set off walking through all the rooms, rustling her skirts and hissing with an airspray.

But Orlov was still in a bad mood; he was clearly restraining himself from raging out loud, sitting at his desk and writing a letter at speed. After writing a few lines he snorted angrily and tore the letter up, then began writing again.

“Damn them!” he muttered. “I’m expected to have an unbelievable memory!”

Finally the letter was written; he rose from the desk and, turning to me, said, “You’ll go to Znamenskaya Street and hand this letter to Zinaida Fyodorovna Krasnovskaya in person. But first of all ask the doorman whether her husband has returned, Mr Krasnovsky, that is. If he has, then hold on to the letter and come back. Wait!... If she should ask whether I have guests, then you’ll tell her that two gentlemen of some sort have been sitting with me since eight o’clock writing something.”

I went to Znamenskaya Street. The doorman told me that Mr Krasnovsky had not yet returned, and I set off for the second floor. The door was opened by a tall, fat, swarthy servant with black side-whiskers, and in the sleepy, sluggish and rude manner that only a servant can use when speaking to another one, he asked me what I wanted. Before I had time to reply, a lady in a black dress walked rapidly into the hall from the drawing room. She squinted at me.

“Is Zinaida Fyodorovna at home?” I asked.

“That’s me,” said the lady.

“A letter from Georgy Ivanych.”

She opened the letter impatiently and, holding it in both hands, which allowed me to see her diamond rings, she started to read. I examined her white face with its soft lines, a prominent chin and long, dark eyelashes. Looking

at her, I would have guessed this lady to be no older than twenty-five.

“Convey my greetings and thanks,” she said when she had finished reading. “Does Georgy Ivanych have guests?” she asked, gently, joyfully, and as though ashamed of her distrust.

“Two gentlemen of some sort,” I replied. “They’re writing something.”

“Convey my greetings and thanks,” she repeated and, with her head tilted to one side and reading the letter as she went, she noiselessly left the room.

I met few women at that time, and this lady, whom I saw but fleetingly, made an impression on me. While returning home on foot, I recalled her face and the smell of her subtle perfume, and I dreamt. When I got back, Orlov had already gone out.

2

AND SO I LIVED quietly and peaceably with my master, but nevertheless, the dishonour and insult that I so feared when going into service were to be seen and made themselves felt every day. I did not get on with Polya. She was a well-fed, spoilt creature who adored Orlov because he was the master and despised me because I was the servant. From the point of view of a genuine servant or a cook she was probably quite seductive: rosy cheeks, an upturned nose, narrowed eyes and a fullness of figure already turning to plumpness. She used powder, painted her eyebrows and lips, laced herself into a corset, and wore a bustle and a coin bracelet. She took short, bouncy steps; as she walked, she rotated or, as they say, waggled her shoulders

and backside. The rustling of her skirts, the cracking of her corset and the ringing of her bracelet, and that common smell of lipstick, toilet vinegar and scent, stolen from the master, aroused in me, when I cleaned the flat with her in the mornings, the feeling that I was doing something disgusting with her.

Whether because I did not join her in thieving, or did not express any desire to become her lover, which probably insulted her, or perhaps because she sensed in me a different sort of person, she hated me from the very first day. My clumsiness, my appearance, not befitting a servant, and my illness seemed to her pitiful and evoked in her a feeling of aversion. I was coughing a lot then, and it was sometimes the case that I prevented her sleeping at night, as her room and mine were separated by just a single wooden partition, and every morning she would say to me, "I couldn't sleep again because of you. You should be in hospital, not living in gentlemen's houses."

She believed so sincerely that I was not a person, but something immeasurably inferior to her, that, like matrons in Ancient Rome, who felt no shame at bathing in the presence of slaves, she sometimes walked about in front of me wearing just a chemise.

One day at dinner (every day we received soup and roast meat from a porterhouse), when I was in an excellent, dreamy mood, I asked, "Polya, do you believe in God?"

"Well of course!"

"I suppose you believe in the Last Judgement," I continued, "and that we'll be answerable to God for each of our misdeeds?"

She did not reply and only gave a scornful grimace. Looking on this occasion at her smug, cold eyes, I realized that for this compact, fully-rounded nature there existed no God, no conscience, no laws, and that if I needed to murder, commit arson or steal, then no money could find me a better accomplice.

In a strange environment, and particularly as I was unused to over-familiar modes of address and continual lying (saying "the master is out" when he is at home), I found things difficult during my first week with Orlov. Wearing a servant's tailcoat, I felt as if I were in armour. But then I got used to it. Like a genuine servant I served, tidied the flat, ran and rode around on various errands. When Orlov did not feel like going to a rendezvous with Zinaida Fyodorovna or when he forgot that he had promised to visit her, I would go to Znamenskaya Street, hand a letter to her there in person and lie. And as a result things turned out completely differently to the way I had expected when becoming a servant; each day of this new life of mine turned out to be wasted, both for me and for my cause, since Orlov never spoke about his father, and neither did his guests, and of the activities of the famous statesman I knew only what I succeeded in gleaning, as previously, from newspapers and correspondence with comrades. The hundreds of notes and papers which I found and read in the study bore not even a distant relation to what I was seeking. Orlov was utterly indifferent to the grand deeds of his father and looked as if he had never heard of them, or as if his father were long dead.

ON THURSDAYS we had guests. I would order a piece of roast beef from a restaurant and speak on the telephone with the Yeliseyev delicatessen to get them to send us caviar, cheese, oysters and so on. I would buy playing cards. As early as the morning, Polya would start preparing the crockery for tea and the dinner service. To tell the truth, this little bit of activity added some variety to our idle life, and Thursdays were the most interesting days for us.

Only three guests ever came. The most substantial, and perhaps the most interesting, was the one by the name of Pekarsky, a tall, lean man of about forty-five with a long hooked nose, a bushy black beard and a bald head. His eyes were large and bulging and he had the serious, pensive expression of a Greek philosopher. He served on the board of a railway and in a bank, he was a legal consultant in some important official organization and engaged in business relations with a large number of private individuals as a guardian, competition chairman and so on. The rank he held was not at all a high one, and he modestly called himself a barrister, yet his influence was enormous. His visiting card or note was sufficient to get you seen out of turn by an eminent doctor, the director of a railway or an important civil servant; it was said that with his patronage it was possible to get a government post even as high as the fourth grade and to hush up any unpleasant business whatsoever. He was considered a very intelligent man, but his was a rather particular, strange intelligence. He could multiply 213 by 373 in his head in a flash or convert sterling

to marks without the aid of a pencil and tables, he had an excellent knowledge of the railway business and finance, and he knew all there was to know about anything concerning administration; in civil cases, so they said, he was a most skilled lawyer, and arguing a suit with him was a difficult business. And yet for this extraordinary intelligence many things that even a stupid man knows were quite incomprehensible. Thus he could not understand at all why it is that people get bored, cry, shoot themselves and even kill others, why they worry about things and events that do not affect them personally, and why they laugh when they read Gogol or Saltykov-Shchedrin... * Everything abstract and evanescent in the sphere of thought and feeling was incomprehensible to him and boring, like music for someone who has no ear. He looked at people only from a business point of view and divided them into the capable and the incapable. No other division existed for him. Honesty and decency are simply a sign of capability. Carousing, card-playing and debauchery are permissible, so long as they do not interfere with business. It is not sensible to believe in God, but religion should be protected as it is essential for the people to have some restraining principle, otherwise they will not work. Punishments are necessary only as a deterrent. There is no reason to make the trip out to a country house, as it is fine in town too. And so on. He was a widower and had no children, yet lived his life on an expansive family scale and paid three thousand a year for his flat.

The second guest, Kukushkin, a youthful fourth-grade civil servant, was a short man distinguished by an extremely unpleasant expression, given him by the disproportion of his fat, flabby

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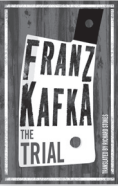
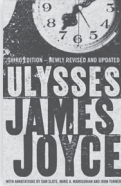
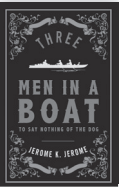
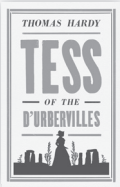
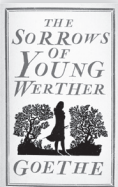
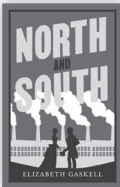
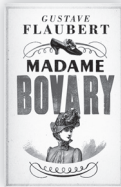
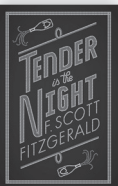
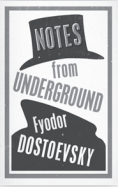
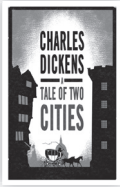
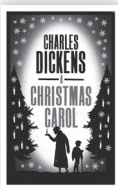


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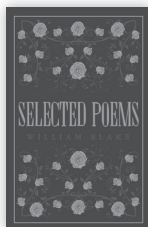
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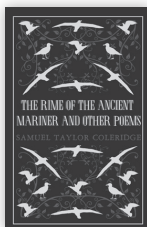
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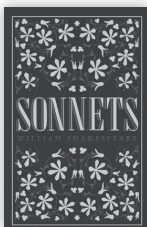
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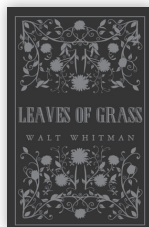
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