

WHITE NIGHTS

A SENTIMENTAL NOVEL

(From the Memoirs of a Dreamer)

Or was he fated from the start,
to live for just one fleeting instant
within the purlieus of your heart?

Ivan Turgenev

THE FIRST NIGHT

IT was a wonderful night, the sort of night that can only occur when we are young, dear reader. The sky was so starry and bright, that one glance was enough to make you ask yourself: surely, ill-natured and peevish people can't possibly exist under a sky like that, can they? That's a young person's question too, dear reader, very much so, but may the good Lord visit it upon you ever and anon! ...

Speaking of sundry peevish and ill-natured gentlemen, I couldn't help recalling my own impeccable behaviour over the whole of that day. From first thing that morning, I had been tormented by a singular feeling of despondency. All of a sudden, I had started to imagine that everyone was abandoning me, steering clear of me, solitary fellow that I am. Of course, you may well ask: who on earth was this 'everyone', since by then I had been living in Petersburg for eight years and had barely managed to make a single acquaintance. Still, what need had I of acquaintances? I was acquainted with all Petersburg in any event; that was why I imagined I was being abandoned when all Petersburg abruptly packed up and left for the country. I felt terrified of being left on my own, and drifted about the city for three days on end in a state of profound misery, without the least notion of what was the matter with me. Whether I went to Nevsky Prospect, or the Summer Garden or wandered along the embankment—not a single face among all those I had got used to encountering there at a given time in the course of the year. They don't know me, of course, but I certainly know them. I know them intimately; I have come to know their every expression—I

feast my eyes when they are cheerful and feel downcast when they are sad. I have practically struck up a friendship with the old fellow I meet every blessed day, at a certain time, by the Fontanka Canal. Such a grave, thoughtful countenance he has, perpetually whispering to himself as he brandishes his left arm. In his other hand, he carries a gold-topped cane, long and knotty. He's actually become aware of me and takes a cordial interest. If I did not happen to be at that spot at the appropriate time, I am convinced he would mope. For this reason we sometimes almost greet one another, especially when we are both in good humour. Not long ago, when we hadn't seen each other for all of two days, and met on the third, we were on the point of snatching at our hats, but happily bethought ourselves in time, let our hands fall, and passed by one another with all solicitude.

The very houses are known to me. When I am walking along, each of them seems to slip out into the street ahead and look at me, all windows, as if to say: 'Good day; how are you keeping? I'm quite well for my part, praise be, in fact I'm having a new storey added in May.' Or: 'How are you? I'm having repairs done tomorrow.' Or again: 'I

almost burned down, what a fright I got!' and so on. I have my favourites among them, indeed intimate friends; one of them intends to have treatment from an architect this summer. I'll make a point of dropping by every day to make sure he doesn't overdo things, Lord preserve it ... I'll never forget what happened to one ever so pretty rose-pink cottage. It was such a sweet little stone cottage and it looked so benignly at me and so proudly at its ungainly neighbours, that my heart positively rejoiced whenever I chanced to pass by. Then all of a sudden, last week, as I was walking along the street and glancing over at my friend, I heard a plaintive cry: 'They're painting me yellow!' Villains! Barbarians! They spared nothing, neither column nor cornice, and my friend turned as yellow as a canary. The incident fairly sickened me and ever since then I've not felt up to seeing my poor, disfigured friend, now painted the colour of the celestial empire.

So now you understand, dear reader, in what way I am acquainted with all Petersburg.

I have said already that I was tormented by anxiety for all of three days until I divined what was causing it. I felt on

edge out of doors (this and that person was absent, where had so-and-so gone?) nor was I myself at home. I spent two evenings trying to decide what was amiss in my little nook. Why did I feel so ill at ease there? Baffled, I surveyed my green, smoke-begrimed walls, and the ceiling hung about with the cobwebs Matryona cultivated so successfully. I looked over all my furniture, inspecting every chair, wondering if that was where the trouble lay (because I lose my bearings if so much as a single chair is in a different place from yesterday), then looked out of the window. All in vain ... it made not an atom of difference. I even took it into my head to summon Matryona, and gave her a fatherly dressing-down on the spot about the cobwebs and her general slovenliness, but she simply gave me an astonished look and went off without a word; so the cobwebs have hung there ever since, safe and sound. It was only this morning that I finally realized what the trouble was. Why of course, they were leaving me and clearing off to their dachas! Do excuse the vulgar parlance, but I was in no mood for lofty phrases ... after all, every single person in Petersburg had either moved or was in the process of moving to their country villa. In my eyes every worthy

man of respectable appearance hiring a cab, at once became transformed into a worthy paterfamilias, travelling unencumbered after his daily official duties, back to the bosom of his family at the dacha. This was because every passer-by now had a most peculiar air about him, which virtually spoke out loud to anyone he encountered: 'We, gentlemen, are only here in passing, you know, and in two hours' time, we're off to the dacha.' If a window opened, after a preliminary tattoo of little sugar-white fingers, and a pretty girl's head emerged, calling out to a flower-seller, I at once jumped to the conclusion that the reason for purchase was not so as to enjoy the spring and its flowers in a stuffy urban apartment, but that they were all on the point of leaving for their dacha and taking the flowers with them. I had, moreover, developed such expertise in my new and singular mode of enquiry that just by looking at them I could infallibly deduce the sort of dacha they possessed. The denizens of Kamenny or Aptekarsky Islands, or the Peterhof Road, were distinguished by their studied elegance of manner, their fashionable summer dress, and the splendid carriages in which they drove into town. Those who lived in Pargolovo and the more outly-

ing parts struck one immediately with their solid air of worldly wisdom, while the sojourner on Krestovsky Island was notable for an appearance of imperturbable good humour. If I happened to come across a long procession of carters, walking lazily, reins in hand, alongside waggons piled high with furniture of every kind—tables, chairs, Turkish and non-Turkish sofas, and other domestic goods and chattels, on the very summit of which often presided a skinny cook, guarding the master's goods like the apple of her eye; or if I watched boats heavy-laden with household effects, gliding along the Neva or the Fontanka towards the Black River and the islands—those waggons and boats multiplied tenfold, a hundredfold in my imagination; it seemed as if everything had just upped and left, everything had migrated in whole caravans to the dacha; it seemed as if Petersburg was threatening to turn into a desert, so much so that eventually I began to feel ashamed, and miserably resentful; I had no dacha and no pretext to go to one. I was ready to leave with every load, with every worthy individual of respectable appearance hiring a cab; but absolutely nobody invited me, not one; it was as if they had forgotten me, as if I was actually some-

thing alien to them!

I walked a great deal and for long periods at a time, contriving, as was my wont, to become totally oblivious to my surroundings. All of a sudden, I found myself at one of the city gates. On the instant, my spirits rose and I strode through the barrier, taking my way past cultivated fields and meadows. I felt no hint of fatigue, merely sensing with every fibre of my being that a burden was slipping from my mind. All the passers-by regarded me in such an amiable fashion that they actually seemed on the point of greeting me; they were all so pleased about something that to a man they were smoking cigars. And I was glad too in a way I had never been before. It was just as if I had suddenly found myself in Italy, so powerful an effect did the natural scene produce in me, a semi-invalid townee, almost suffocated by being pent within the city.

There is something ineffably touching about our Petersburg countryside when, with the onset of spring, nature suddenly puts forth all her strength, all the power bestowed on her by heaven; she decks herself out in all her finery, gay with flowers ... It puts you in mind of some frail and sickly girl you sometimes note with pity, even a

sort of compassionate love—and at others simply fail to notice at all, who suddenly, in an instant, becomes inexplicably, marvellously beautiful, while you, overwhelmed and enraptured, are forced to ask yourself what power has made those sad, pensive eyes glitter with such fire; what power has summoned up the blood to those wan, pinched cheeks; what has infused passion into those gentle features; why is her bosom heaving so; what has suddenly conjured up animation, strength, and beauty in the face of that poor girl, to make it glow with such a smile, and come alive with flashing, sparkling laughter like that? You glance round, filled with surmise, looking for someone ... But the moment has passed and next day perhaps you will encounter once again the same abstracted, brooding glance as before, the same wan face, the same meek and diffident movements; possibly accompanied by a feeling of remorse, traces even of a sort of numb, aching vexation at having been momentarily carried away ... You regret that this fleeting beauty should have faded so swiftly and irrevocably, that it had flashed so beguilingly, so vainly before you—regret that there had been no time for you to fall in love with it...

Yet all the same, my night was even better than my day! This is what happened.

I got back to the city very late and it had already struck ten by the time I was approaching my apartment. My way led along a canal embankment where not a living soul is to be encountered at that hour. Of course, I do live in a very far-flung district of the city. I was walking along and singing, because when I'm happy, I always hum something to myself, like any other happy individual who has neither friends nor close acquaintances, and so no one to share his joy in a moment of gladness. All at once, I became caught up in a most unexpected adventure.

Just to one side of me, leaning up against the canal railing, stood a woman; with her elbows pressed against the ironwork, she was evidently staring intently at the turbid waters of the canal. She was wearing the sweetest yellow cap and a fetching little black mantilla. 'She's a young girl and bound to have dark hair', thought I. However, she had seemingly not heard my footsteps and didn't even stir when I walked by with bated breath and thudding heart. 'That's odd', I thought, 'she must be very preoccupied about something'; then I suddenly halted, transfixed. I had

caught the sound of muffled weeping. Yes! My ears had not deceived me; the girl was crying and a moment later came more and more sobbing. Good heavens! My heart shrank. I might be shy as far as women were concerned, but at such a moment! ... I turned back and stepped towards her; I would certainly have brought out 'Madam!' had I not been aware that the exclamation had been used a thousand times in every Russian high society novel. That alone prevented me. But while I was searching for words, the girl recollected herself, looked round, realized the situation and, with lowered eyes, slipped past me along the embankment. I at once made to follow, but she divined my intention and, quitting the embankment, crossed the street and set off along the pavement. I did not dare to cross after her. My heart was fluttering like an imprisoned bird. All of a sudden, a chance incident came to my aid.

On the other side of the street, not far from my unknown lady, there suddenly appeared a gentleman in a frock coat. He was of respectable years, but far from respectable gait. He came along, staggering a little and leaning cautiously against the wall. The girl meanwhile was walking as straight as an arrow, swiftly and nervously

as all girls do who are disinclined to have anyone volunteering to escort them home at night; of course there was no chance of the swaying gentleman catching her up, had not my muffed attempt prompted him to resort to special measures. Abruptly, without a word to anyone, my gentleman sprang forward and ran as fast as his legs would carry him to catch up with the unknown girl. She was walking along like the wind, but the swaying gentleman drew closer, then overtook her. The girl screamed—and ... I bless the fates for the excellent knotted stick which chanced to be in my right hand on that occasion. In a flash I found myself on the far side of the street; the unwanted gentleman realized the situation instantly, took cognizance of the irresistible force of reason, and silently dropped back. Only when we were a considerable distance away did he start voicing protestations against me in rather vigorous terms. But his words barely reached us.

'Give me your hand', I said to my mysterious lady, 'and he won't dare pester us again.'

She gave me her hand wordlessly, still shaking with anxiety and alarm. Ah, how I blessed the unwanted gentleman at that moment! I gave her a fleeting glance: I

had guessed right, she had dark hair—and was extremely pretty; teardrops still glistened on her dark eyelashes, but whether from her recent fright or her previous grief, I don't know. However, a smile was now playing on her lips. She also took a covert glance at me, flushed slightly, and dropped her eyes.

'There you are, why on earth did you turn me away just now? If I'd been with you nothing would have happened ...'

'But you were a stranger: I thought you might...'

'But you don't know me now, do you?'

'A little bit. Why are you trembling for example?'

'Ah, you've guessed straight away!' I responded, elated that my girl was so perceptive: in a pretty girl that never comes amiss. 'Yes, you guessed immediately the sort of man I am. It's true, I am shy with girls; I'm as nervous as you were a minute ago, when that man frightened you, I won't deny it ... I'm the one who's full of nerves now. It's just like a dream, and even in dreams I never imagined I would ever be talking with a woman.'

'What? Really?'

'Yes, if my hand is trembling, it's because it's never been

held by such a pretty little hand as yours. I've got out of the habit of women; that is to say, I've never been in the habit; I'm on my own, you see ... I don't so much as know how to talk to them. Even now, I don't know if I've said something idiotic to you. Tell me honestly; I assure you, I won't be offended ...'

'No, not at all, not at all, quite the contrary. And if you really insist on my being frank, I'll tell you that women like that sort of shyness; and if you want me to go on, it appeals very much to me as well, and I shan't turn you away till we get right to the house.'

'You'll soon make me stop being shy', I began, breathless with rapture, 'and farewell to all my resources! ...'

'Resources? What resources, what for? Now that's not nice at all.'

'I'm sorry, it won't happen again, it was a slip of the tongue; but at a moment like this you can't expect me not to want to...'

'Make a favourable impression, you mean?'

'Well, yes; but do have pity, I implore you. Consider the person I am! Here I am 26 already and I've never seen anybody. How on earth am I supposed to be silver-

tongued and say just the right things? In any case, it's in your interest for everything to be open and above board ... I don't know how to keep quiet when my heart speaks within me. Well, never mind ... Can you credit it, not one woman, never ever! Not even an acquaintance! It's all I dream about every day, that eventually I'll meet someone, sometime. Ah, if you only knew how many times I've been in love that way! ...'

'What way do you mean, who on earth with? ...'

'Oh, nobody, an ideal, the woman I dream about. I invent whole love-affairs in my dreams. Ah, how little you know me! Of course I couldn't help coming across one or two women, but not real women, they were all landladies and that sort of thing ... But you'll laugh when I tell you that there have been times when I thought I would strike up a conversation, just like that, with some upper-class lady in the street, when she was unattended, naturally; without presumption of course, respectfully, with feeling; tell her I was a lost soul on my own, that she was not to turn me away, that I had no means of meeting any woman at all; impress upon her that it was positively a woman's duty not to spurn the humble plea of an unfortunate like

me. That ultimately all I asked was to hear a word or two of human kindness, a show of concern, for her not to dismiss me at once, but believe what I was saying and hear me out, laugh at me if she pleased, inspire me with hope, just say a word or two, that's all, even if we never met again! ... But you're laughing ... Still, that's why I'm telling you all this ...'

'Don't be annoyed; I'm only laughing because you're your own worst enemy, and if you'd only made the attempt you might perhaps have succeeded, even in the open street; the simplest way is always best ... unless she was silly or particularly cross about something just at that point, no decent woman could bring herself to send you away without those few words you begged for so timidly ... or no, what am I saying! Of course she would assume you were some madman. I was judging by myself. I know a lot about the way people go on!'

'Oh, thank you!' I exclaimed. 'You've no idea what you've just done for me!'

'All right now, that's all right. But tell me how you realized I was the kind of woman with whom ... well, whom you considered worthy of ... consideration and friendship

... in a word, not a landlady as you call them. Why did you make up your mind to approach me?’

‘Why? Why? But you were alone and that man was too audacious—and it’s dark: you must agree, it was my bounden duty...’

‘No, no, before that, on the other side. You did intend to speak to me, didn’t you?’

‘On the other side? I honestly don’t know what to say; I’m afraid ... You know, I was feeling really happy today, I was singing as I walked along; I’d been outside the city; I’d never experienced such moments of happiness before. You ... perhaps I imagined ... Oh, forgive me for reminding you: I thought you were crying, and I ... I couldn’t bear that ... my heart shrank within me ... Heavens! Surely I was allowed to feel sorry for you? Surely it wasn’t a sin to feel a human compassion towards you? ... I’m sorry, I said compassion ... Well, what I mean is, surely my involuntary impulse to speak to you couldn’t have caused you offence? ...’

‘Don’t remind me; that’s enough, don’t go on’, said the girl, lowering her eyes and squeezing my hand. ‘I’m the one to blame for bringing the subject up; but I’m glad I

wasn’t mistaken in you ... still I’m home now; I go this way into the lane; it’s only a step ... Goodbye and thank you ...’

‘Oh but surely, surely we’ll meet again? ... Surely we can’t leave it at this?’

‘There you are’, said the girl, laughing. ‘At first you just wanted a few words, and now ... well, anyway, I’m saying nothing either way ... Perhaps we will meet again ...’

‘I’ll come here tomorrow’, I said. ‘Oh, do forgive me, I’m starting to insist...’

‘Yes, you are impatient... almost insistent...’

‘Listen to me, do listen’, I broke in. ‘Forgive me if I say the wrong thing again ... But the fact is: I can’t stay away tomorrow. I’m a dreamer; I have so little actual life that I regard moments like this one as rare indeed and I can’t help repeating them in my dreams. I will dream about you all night, all week, all year. I will come here tomorrow without fail, here to this very spot, at this precise time, and be happy as I recall the events of today. I cherish this place. I have two or three such places in Petersburg already. Once I even began weeping over my memories, like you ... Who knows, perhaps you too were weeping

over your memories ten minutes or so back ... I'm sorry, I forgot myself again; perhaps you were once particularly happy here.'

'Very well', said the girl. 'I may well come here tomorrow, at ten o'clock as well. I can see that there's no keeping you away ... The fact is, I have to be here; don't think I'm arranging a rendezvous; I'm letting you know in advance that I have to be here on business of my own. But... well I will tell you frankly, then: it will be just as well if you do come; in the first place there may be more unpleasantness like tonight, but leaving that aside ... what I mean to say is, I just feel like seeing you ... to say a word or two. But see that you don't think badly of me now—don't go thinking that I arrange meetings just like that... I wouldn't even be doing it if... But let that be my secret! One proviso in advance ...'

'Proviso! Go on, tell me, tell me everything in advance; I agree to it all, I'm ready to do anything', I cried ecstatically. 'I can guarantee—I will be respectful and do as you say ... you know me ...'

'It's precisely because I do know you that I'm inviting you tomorrow', said the girl, laughing. 'I know you

through and through. But see that you observe one condition: above all (just be good enough to do as I ask, I mean what I say, you know), don't fall in love with me ... You must not do that, believe me. I'm ready to be friends, there's my hand ... But no falling in love, I beg you!'

'I swear to you', I cried, seizing her little hand ...

'Come now, don't swear, I'm well aware you're capable of flaring up like gunpowder. Don't think badly of me for speaking like that. If you only knew ... I have no one to talk with, no one to ask for advice. Of course one doesn't find confidants on the streets, but you're an exception. I know you as if we had been friends for twenty years ... You won't let me down will you?'

'You'll see ... but I don't know how I'm going to survive the next twenty-four hours.'

'Get a good night's sleep; good night—and remember that I've already put my faith in you. You came out with something really fine just now: surely one doesn't have to account for every emotion, even human sympathy! You know, that was so well said that the idea of confiding in you came to me at once...'

'Of course, but confide what? What is this about?'

'Till tomorrow. Let it remain a secret for the time being. That will suit you; it will give the thing a touch of romance. I may tell you tomorrow, but perhaps not... I'll talk a little bit more with you, we'll get to know each other better ...'

'Oh, I'll tell you all about myself tomorrow! But what's happening? Really it's as if a miracle were taking place ... Good lord, where am I? Don't tell me that you're angry with yourself for not turning me away in the first place, as some other woman might have done? Two minutes and you have made me happy for ever. Yes, happy; who can tell, you may have reconciled me with myself, resolved all

my doubts ... Perhaps moments such as these do come upon me ... Well, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, you'll find out everything, everything...'

'Very well, I accept; you tell first...'

'Agreed.'

'*Au revoir!*'

'*Au revoir!*'

And we parted. I walked about all night; I could not bring myself to return home. I was so happy ... Till tomorrow!

THE SECOND NIGHT

'THERE, you see, you've survived!' she said to me, laughing and taking both my hands.

'I've already been here two hours; you don't know what I've been through all day!'

'I do, I do ... but let's get on. You know why I've come? Not to talk nonsense like yesterday. From now on, we have to act more sensibly. I thought all this over for ages last night.'

'About what though? Act more sensibly about what? I'm willing enough for my part, but honestly, what's happening now is the most sensible action of my life.'

'Do you really mean that? Well for a start, I beg you not to squeeze my hand so; secondly, I have to announce that I have been devoting a lot of thought to you today.'

'Well, and what was the end result?'

'The end result? That we have to start all over from the beginning, because I decided today that I still don't know you at all; that I acted like a child yesterday, like some lit-

tle girl, and naturally it transpired that it was all the fault of my good nature, I mean I ended up praising myself as always happens when we start analysing our own actions. So, to rectify my error, I decided to make the most detailed enquiries about you. However, since there's no one to ask about you, you're the one who has to tell me all there is to know. What sort of man are you? Come along now, do make a start and tell me your life story.'

'Life story!' I cried, alarmed. 'Life story! But how do you know I have one? I haven't got a life story ...'

'So how have you lived without a life story?' she interposed, laughing.

'Without a story of any kind, that's how; as the saying goes, I've kept myself to myself, I mean completely on my own, utterly alone—you understand what that means?'

'But what do you mean—alone? You've never seen anybody ever?'

'Oh no, I see them to set eyes on, but I'm alone just the same.'

'What, you mean you actually don't talk to a soul?'

'Strictly speaking, no I don't.'

'Now just who are you, explain yourself! Wait, I can

guess: you probably have a grandmother, like I have. She's blind, and for my entire life she hasn't let me go anywhere, so that I've practically forgotten how to talk at all. And when I was misbehaving myself a couple of years ago, she saw there was no holding me, so she called me to her and pinned my dress to hers. And so we sit for days on end together: she knits stockings, blind as she is; I sit next to her sewing or reading aloud to her. It's a strange way of going on but I've been fastened to her for two years now—'

'Oh, good heavens, that's awful! Oh no, indeed, I have no grandmother like that.'

'Well if not, how is it you can just sit at home?...'

'Listen, do you want to know the sort of person I am?'

'Yes, yes, I do!'

'In the strict sense of the word?'

'In the strictest sense of the word!'

'If you must know, I'm a character.'

'A character? What sort of a character?' the girl cried, breaking into laughter as if she hadn't done the like for a year. 'You really are a joy to be with! Look: here's a bench; let's sit down. Nobody comes by here, nobody will overhear us and—well, do start your story! Because you can't

talk me out of it; you do have a story to tell and you're just trying to keep it dark. In the first place, what do you mean by character?'

'Character? A character is an eccentric, a ridiculous individual!' I replied, laughing heartily in the wake of her childlike hilarity. 'That's what a character is. Listen: do you know what a dreamer is?'

'A dreamer! Well, of course I do! I'm a dreamer myself. Sometimes, when I'm sitting next to granny, all sorts of things cross my mind. Once you start daydreaming, you get so carried away—I might easily be marrying a Chinese prince ... But sometimes it can be a good thing—to dream. Still, who knows if it is really—especially if you have other things on your mind as well', added the girl, this time rather gravely.

'Splendid! Seeing as you've married a Chinese prince, it follows that you will understand me completely. So, listen to me ... But forgive me: I still don't know your name.

'At long last! You took your time about that, didn't you?'

'Oh lord, it never even entered my head, I was enjoying myself so...'

'My name is Nastenka.'

'Nastenka! And is that all?'

'All? Isn't it enough, you insatiable man!'

'Enough? It's a great deal, on the contrary, a very great deal, Nastenka, kind-hearted girl that you are to let me call you Nastenka straight away!'

'I should just think so! Well?'

'Well then, Nastenka, just listen to this ridiculous tale.'

I seated myself next to her, struck a pompously pedantic attitude, and began as if I were reading aloud:

'In Petersburg, Nastenka, if you aren't already aware of it, there are some moderately strange nooks and crannies. Such places seem not to be visited by the sun that shines for all the folk of Petersburg, but by another sun altogether, specially created for such corners, a sun that shines with a quite different, peculiar light. In these corners, sweet Nastenka, a totally different sort of life exists, quite unlike that which flourishes around us here; the kind that might exist in some never-never land, not here in the oh-so-serious age we live in. That other life is a mixture of the purely fantastic, the fervently idealistic, and at the same time (alas, Nastenka!) the dully prosaic and commonplace, if not the incredibly banal.'

'Heavens above! What a preamble! What on earth are you leading up to?'

'You shall hear, Nastenka (I believe I shall never tire of calling you Nastenka), you shall hear that strange people dwell in these corners—dreamers. The dreamer—if a precise definition is required—is not a person, but a sort of genderless creature. He usually prefers to settle in some inaccessible spot, as if to hide from the very daylight, and once he has taken up residence, he grows attached to it like a snail, or at least like that amusing creature which is both animal and house, and is called a tortoise. Why do you think he is so enamoured of his four walls, inevitably painted green, smoke-begrimed, dismal, and unpardonably fouled by tobacco? Why does this ridiculous individual, when one of his few acquaintances comes to see him (the upshot being that all such acquaintances make themselves scarce), greet him in such an embarrassed fashion, adopt a totally different expression—so flustered that he might have committed some crime within his four walls, taken up counterfeiting banknotes or scribbling verses to a magazine, with an anonymous letter announcing that the real poet has died, and that his friend regards it as his sacred

duty to publish his effusions? Tell me, Nastenka, why is it that conversation cannot get started between the two of them? Why is there no laughter, no spirited repartee darting from the tongue of this casual visitor and his perplexed friend, who on other occasions enjoys both repartee and a good laugh, as well as talk of the fair sex and other light-hearted topics? And why is it, for goodness' sake, that this friend, no doubt a recent acquaintance on his first visit—because, things being what they are, there won't be a second—why is this friend in turn so embarrassed, so awkward, for all his wit (assuming he has any), as he gazes at the averted face of the host? The latter, for his part, is now completely at a loss, fairly at his wits' end after titanically vain efforts to ease things along and brighten up the conversation, to show that he too is capable of being worldly, talking of the fair sex and hoping through this effort at ingratiation to make a good impression on the poor man who has so grievously erred in paying him a visit. Why, for heaven's sake, does the visitor make a sudden grab for his hat and hastily take his leave, suddenly recalling some business of unprecedented urgency, somehow extricating his hand from the hot pressure of his host, who is trying all he knows

to demonstrate his remorse, and salvage what has gone amiss? Why does the departing friend chuckle as he goes out of the door, vowing to himself on the spot never to come and see this odd fish again, even though the odd fish is at bottom the most capital of fellows? And yet at the same time he is unable to deny his fancy a little indulgence, namely to compare, however remotely, the countenance of his recent host during the entire time of their encounter to the look of a wretched kitten, rumped, terrified, and generally ill-treated to the point of utter bewilderment by the children who have treacherously ensnared it, and which has eventually taken refuge in the darkness under a chair? There for a whole hour at leisure it must bristle and snort its fill and wash its aggrieved little muzzle with both paws and for long afterwards take a jaundiced view of nature and life—even the scraps from the master's dinner, saved for it by a compassionate housekeeper.'

'Look here', interrupted Nastenka, who had been absorbing all this in wide-eyed and open-mouthed astonishment. 'Now listen: I am absolutely in the dark as to why all that took place and why exactly you're putting such absurd questions; but what I do know for certain is that all these

incidents happened to you without a shadow of doubt, word for word.'

'Absolutely true', I replied with the gravest of expressions.

'Well, if it's absolutely true, go on with the story', responded Nastenka, 'because I would very much like to know how all this is going to end.'

'You want to know, Nastenka, what our hero did in his corner, or rather—I, because the hero of this whole business is me—my very own humble self; you want to know why I was agitated and thrown off balance all day after the sudden visit of a friend? You want to know why I was in a flutter, blushing when my room door was opened, why I couldn't cope with my visitor and broke down so shamefully under the weight of my own hospitality?'

'Yes, yes I do', Nastenka replied. 'That's the whole point. But one thing: you tell the story beautifully, but couldn't you make it just a little less so? It's as if you were reading from a book.'

'Nastenka!' I said in a tone of stern solemnity, trying hard not to laugh. 'Sweet Nastenka, I know I tell the tale beautifully, but I'm sorry, I can't tell it any other way. At this

moment, sweet Nastenka, at this moment, I am like that spirit of King Solomon's, who was in an earthenware jar for a thousand years, under seven seals, and who at length had those seals removed. Sweet Nastenka, now that we have come together again after such a lengthy separation—because I have known you for ever so long, Nastenka, I have been searching for someone for ever so long, and this is a sign that it was you I was seeking and it was fated that we should meet—at this moment, a thousand valves have opened within my brain, and I must pour forth a river of words or I shall suffocate. And so, I beg you not to interrupt me, Nastenka, just listen, meekly and obediently; otherwise I won't go on.'

'Oh, no—no—no, God forbid! Go on! I shan't say a word from now on.'

'Very well: there is in my day, dear Nastenka, one hour which I cherish above all others. It is precisely that hour when all business, duties, and engagements cease, and everyone hurries off home to have dinner, or to lie down, and while on the way entertains other cheerful notions touching the evening, the night, and the rest of the free time he has at his disposal. At this time of day, our hero too—allow me,

Nastenka, to tell this in the third person, because it would be horribly embarrassing to do so in the first—so then, our hero too, who has not been without occupation, goes striding along after the others at this hour. But an odd hint of pleasure flits across his pale, almost haggard face. He gazes, a prey to emotion, at the evening sunset, slowly fading in the cold Petersburg sky. I say gazes, but that's not true: rather, he contemplates in a detached fashion, as if weary or simultaneously preoccupied with some other, more engrossing matter, and so only able to spare fleeting, almost involuntary attention to his surroundings. He is pleased because, until the morrow, he has done with the *business* he finds so irksome, happy as a schoolboy released from the classroom back to his favourite games and pranks. Take a sideways look at him Nastenka: you'll see at once that this glad feeling has already soothed his feeble nerves and morbidly irritable imagination. Now he's deep in thought ... About his dinner you think? The evening ahead? What his eye has lighted upon? Yonder gentleman of respectable appearance who has just bowed so elaborately to the lady riding past in that glittering carriage drawn by swift-footed steeds? No, Nastenka, what are such

trifles to him now? By now he is revelling in the richness of *his own inner life*; somehow he has acquired sudden wealth, and it is fitting that the valedictory ray of the dying sun should sparkle so blithely before him and evoke from his kindled heart a veritable swarm of answering sensations. Now he barely notices the road where previously the most trivial incident would strike him. Now "The Goddess of Imagination" (if you've read your Zhukovsky, dear Nastenka) has woven her golden warp with capricious hand, unfolding before him patterns of fantastic chimerical life—who knows, perhaps translated him with that capricious hand from the excellent granite pavement, along which he was making his way homeward, to the seventh crystalline heaven. Try stopping him now and asking him suddenly where he is standing, what streets he has traversed. He would most likely remember nothing about where he has been or where he is standing now; red with annoyance, he would be sure to come out with some lie just to save his face. That's why he started so, almost crying out as he cast about him in alarm, when a most respectable old lady, having lost her way, politely stopped him in the middle of the pavement and began asking him for directions.

'Scowling with vexation, he strides onward, scarcely aware that several passers-by have smiled at the sight of him and followed him with their eyes, or that a little girl, timorously making way for him, laughed out loud as she stared, all eyes, at his broad preoccupied smile and gesticulating arms. But that same power of imagination has caught up the old woman too in its frolicsome flight, along with the curious passers-by, the laughing girl; and the men who spend the night on their barges at this spot, blocking the Fontanka (supposing our hero to be walking along it); everything and everyone has been impishly woven into its design like flies in a spider's web, and with this new acquisition of his the eccentric has now entered his comforting den, sat down to dinner, dined, and come down to earth only when his servant, the melancholy and ever-doleful Matryona, has cleared the table and fetched him his pipe; come down to earth and recalled with astonishment that he has had his dinner while remaining totally oblivious as to how that had come about. It has got darker in the room; his heart is sad and forlorn; his entire realm of reverie has collapsed about him, crumbled away without trace, noiselessly and without fuss, passed away like a dream, and even he

cannot call back the vision to his mind. But there is a vague kind of sensation which prompts a faint, aching perturbation in his breast, a novel sort of tantalizing desire which tickles and excites his imagination, conjuring up unnoticed a whole host of new phantoms. Silence reigns in the little room; solitude and idleness nurture the fancy; it flares up a little, seething gently like the water in old Matryona's coffee-pot, as she placidly busies herself nearby in the kitchen brewing up her cook's coffee. Now here it comes, starting to break through in flashes; the book, taken up pointlessly, at random, falls from my dreamer's hand before he reaches the third page. His imagination is roused up and attuned once more, then, all of a sudden, a new enchanting world, with all its glittering vistas, once more shines before him. A new dream, new happiness! A new draught of subtle, sensual poison! Ah, what did our real life hold for him? In his corrupted view, our lives, yours and mine, Nastenka, are so slow, so indolent, so sluggish; in his view we are all discontented with our lot, wearied-out by our lives! And actually it really is true; see how at first sight we treat each other so coldly and sullenly, almost angrily. "Poor things!" thinks my dreamer. And no wonder! Just look at these magical fig-

ments, taking shape before him, so fascinatingly intricate, stretching out before him, so boundlessly wide, an entrancing, animated spectacle, where the hero in the foreground is of course our dreamer in propria persona. See the variety of incident, the endless stream of rapturous visions. Perhaps you ask what he is dreaming about? Why ask? He dreams about everything ... the role of the poet, at first unacknowledged, afterwards crowned with bays; friendship with Hoffman; Saint Bartholomew's night; Diana Vernon; Ivan the Terrible's heroic part in the taking of Kazan; Clara Mowbray; Effie Deans; Huss before the council of prelates; the rising of the dead men in *Robert the Devil* (remember the music? It smells of the cemetery!); about Minna and Brenda; the battle on the Berezina; the reading of an epic at the home of the Countess V—D—; Danton; Cleopatra e *I suoi amanti*; the little house in Kolomna; and about his own little burrow, and the dear creature who listens to him on a winter's evening, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, as you are listening to me at this moment, my little angel... No, Nastenka, what is there, what can there be for an indolent sensualist like him in the sort of life that you and I so long for? It is an impoverished, pitiable existence, so he

thinks, failing to foresee that for him too, perhaps, the dismal hour will strike when he would exchange all his fantasy-ridden years for one day of this pitiable life—and do it without expectation of any joy or happiness; nor in that hour of sadness, remorse, and boundless grief, will he be concerned to choose. But until it arrives, that grim time, he desires nothing, because he is above desire, he has everything because he is surfeited, because he is the artist of his own life and creates it for himself by the hour as the mood takes him. And how easily, how naturally this fabulous fantasy-world is brought into being! As if it were not a figment at all! If truth be told, at times he is ready to believe that this life is not a product of emotional excitement at all, no mirage, no delusion of the imagination, but the true reality, the genuine article, the actual! Tell me why, Nastenka, pray tell me, why breathing becomes so difficult at such moments? Why does some magical or mysterious force quicken the dreamer's pulse, force tears to his eyes, and flame to his pale, damp cheeks, his every fibre suffused with an irresistible joy? Tell me why entire sleepless nights flash by in an inexhaustible blithe happiness, and when the dawn shines in through the windows, pink and radiant, and day-

break illumines the cheerless room with that uncertain fantastical light we know in Petersburg, does our dreamer, worn out and weary, throw himself on to his bed and fall asleep amid the blissful afterglow of his painfully shaken spirit and with such a languishingly sweet pain about his heart?

‘Yes, Nastenka, he surrenders to the illusion and cannot but believe that a real and genuine passion is agitating his soul, that there is something vital and tangible in his disembodied visions! And what an illusion it is—take for example the love which has entered his breast with all its inexhaustible joy, all its wearying torments ... One glance at him will convince you! Would you believe it to look at him, sweet Nastenka, that he has never actually met the woman he has loved so much in his ecstatic daydreaming? Can it really be that he has only seen her in seductive visions and was this passion but a dream? Have they not really and truly passed so many years of their lives hand in hand—the two of them alone, the world well lost, linking their own world, their own life each to each? Can it be that she, late in the day, when the hour of parting was at hand, did not lie miserably weeping on his breast, oblivious of

the storm breaking beneath the grim heavens, deaf to the winds that snatched and bore away the teardrops from her dark lashes? Surely all that was no dream—and the garden, bleak, desolate, and wild, with its moss-grown paths, sequestered, mournful, where they had walked so often together, “so long and tenderly”! And this strange ancestral house in which she lived for so long, alone and sad with her morose old husband, forever taciturn and peevish, frightening them, as, childlike and timorous, they concealed their love from one another in joyless apprehension? The agonies they endured, the terror they felt in the chaste innocence of their affection, and (naturally, dear Nastenka) the malice they endured from other people. Ye gods, did he really not encounter her subsequently, far from their native shores, under the hot noonday of an alien southern sky, in the wondrous eternal city, at a glittering ball, to the thunderous sound of music, in a palazzo (certainly a palazzo), drowned in a sea of lights, on that balcony entwined with myrtle and roses, where she, recognizing him, removed her mask with such haste, and whispering “I am free” fell trembling into his arms, as with a cry of ecstasy they clung to each other, instantly forgetting their grief, their separation,

and all the torments, the gloomy mansion and the old man, the cheerless garden in their distant homeland, and the bench where, after a final passionate kiss, she had torn herself from his arms, numb with tortured despair?...

'Ah, you must agree Nastenka, you too would start up and blush with embarrassment, like a schoolboy who has just stuffed into his pocket an apple stolen from a neighbour's garden, if a tall, strapping lad, a breezy clown of a friend dropping in unannounced, opened your door and shouted, all innocent: "I've just got here this minute from Pavlovsk, old man!" God in heaven! The old count has died, unspeakable happiness is at hand—and enter a person from Pavlovsk!'

I lapsed into an emotional silence, having concluded my emotional outpourings. I remember feeling a terrible urge to laugh out loud, whatever the consequences, because I already sensed a malevolent imp stirring within me, I had got a lump in my throat, my chin started trembling, and my eyes grew ever moister ... I expected Nastenka, who had been listening to me with her intelligent eyes open wide, to burst out irrepressibly into her gay childlike laughter, and was regretting that I had gone so far; I shouldn't have told

her of what had been so long raging within my heart I could recite it like a book. I had long since passed sentence on myself, and now couldn't help reading it out, to make a clean breast of things, though not with any expectation of being understood; but to my astonishment, she said nothing, and after a pause pressed my hand lightly and asked with a certain diffident concern:

'You don't mean that you have really lived all your life like that?'

'All my life, Nastenka', I replied. 'All my life, and it seems I will end it the same way!'

'No, you mustn't', she said, troubled. 'That will not happen; that way I might spend all my life with my grandmother. Look, you know living like that's not good for you?'

'I do, Nastenka, I do!' I exclaimed, giving vent to my emotions at last. 'And now I know more than ever that I have squandered all my best years! I realize that now, and the knowledge is the more painful because God has sent you to me, my good angel, to tell me and demonstrate the fact. Now, as I sit next to you and talk with you, I feel positively terrified of the future, because in that future loneliness lurks once more, again that musty, pointless existence;

and what will there be for me to dream about, when close to you I have already been so happy in the real world. Ah, be gracious, dear girl that you are, for not turning me away at once, so that I can say I have lived at least two evenings in my life!

'Oh, no, no!' cried Nastenka, tears starting to shine in her eyes. 'No, it won't be like that any more. We won't part this way! What are two evenings!'

'Ah, Nastenka, Nastenka! Do you realize how you have reconciled me to myself? Do you realize that I will no longer think so badly of myself as I have done at times? Do you realize that I will perhaps no longer agonize over having sinned and committed crimes during my life, because that sort of life is a sin and a crime in itself! And don't think I have exaggerated anything to you, please don't think that Nastenka, because sometimes such anguish overwhelms me, such anguish ... because at moments like that I start to think that I am incapable of living a proper life, I seem already to have lost any sort of judgement, any apprehension of the real and actual; because after all, I have cursed my very self; because after my nights of fantasy come moments of sobriety which are appalling! Meanwhile you hear the

human crowd thundering and eddying around you in a living whirlwind, you hear and see people living—living in reality, you see that for them life is not something forbidden, their life does not fly asunder like dreams, like visions; it perpetually renews itself, is forever young, and no one hour is like any other; meanwhile how dreary and monotonously commonplace is this faint-hearted fantasy, the slave of a shadow, an idea, a slave of the first cloud that suddenly obscures the sun and afflicts with misery the heart of the true Petersburger who so cherishes his sun—and what fantasy can there possibly be in misery? You sense that it will at length grow weary, that it is exhausting itself in constant tension, this *inexhaustible* fantasy, because after all one matures, outgrows one's former ideals: they are shattered into dust and fragments; and if you have no other life, it behoves you to construct one from those same fragments.

'Meanwhile, the soul demands and seeks out something quite other! And the dreamer vainly rakes through his old longings like ashes, seeking in those ashes at least a few sparks that might be fanned into a fire to warm his chilled heart and resurrect anew in him that which was formerly so sweet, that which touched his soul, stirred his blood, tore

the tears from his eyes, and so richly deceived him! Do you realize, Nastenka what things have come to? Do you know that I am compelled to celebrate the anniversary of my own sensations, the anniversary of what was formerly so precious to me, but never actually existed—because that anniversary is celebrated in memory of those same silly, disembodied dreamings—and do this because even those silly dreams are no more, since I lack the wherewithal to earn them: even dreams have to be earned, haven't they? Do you realize that on certain dates I enjoy recalling and visiting those places where I was once happy after my own fashion? I enjoy constructing my present in accord with things now irrevocably past and gone, and I often drift like a shadow, morose and sad, without need or purpose, through the streets and alleyways of Petersburg. What memories there are! I recall, for instance, that it was exactly one year ago, here at this precise time, that I wandered along the same pavement as lonely and depressed as I am now. I remember that even then my dreams were sad, and although things were no better back then, there's still the feeling that living was somehow easier and more restful, that there wasn't this black thought which clings to me now; there were none of

these pangs of conscience, bleak, and gloom-laden which give me no peace by day or night. You ask yourself: where are your dreams now? And you shake your head and say how swiftly the years fly by! And you ask yourself again: what have you done with your best years, then? Where have you buried the best days of your life? Have you lived or not? Look, you tell yourself, look how cold the world is becoming. The years will pass and after them will come grim loneliness, and old age, quaking on its stick, and after them misery and despair. Your fantasy world will grow pale, your dreams will fade and die, falling away like the yellow leaves from the trees ... Ah, Nastenka! Will it not be miserable to be left alone, utterly alone, and have nothing even to regret—nothing, not a single thing ... because everything I have lost was nothing, stupid, a round zero, all dreaming and no more!

'Come, don't make me feel any more sorry for you!' said Nastenka, wiping away a teardrop which had rolled from her eye. 'That's all done with! Now we will be together; now, whatever happens to me, we shall never part. Listen to me. I'm a simple girl, with not much schooling, although my grandmother did hire a tutor for me; but I really do un-

derstand you because everything that you have recounted to me just now I lived through myself when granny fastened me to her dress. Of course, I couldn't have told it as well as you, I've not had much schooling', she added shyly, still feeling a certain respect for my pathetic discourse and high-flown style. 'But I'm very glad that you have been completely frank with me. Now I do know you properly, through and through. And do you know what? I want to tell you my story too, all of it, keeping nothing back, and afterwards you will give me your advice. You're a very intelligent man; do you promise to advise me?'

'Ah, Nastenka', I responded, 'although I've never acted as an adviser before, let alone an intelligent one, I can see now that if we are to live like this always, that would be a most intelligent thing to do, and we will give one another lots and lots of intelligent advice! Now, my pretty Nastenka, what advice do you need then? Tell me straight out; I'm in such a good mood, happy, brave, and clever, I'll have lots to say.'

'No, no!' Nastenka interposed, laughing. 'It's not one bit of sound advice I need. What I need is warm, human advice as if you had loved me all your life!'

'Agreed, Nastenka, agreed!' I exclaimed rapturously. 'And if I had loved you for twenty years, I couldn't love you more than I do now!'

'Your hand!' said Nastenka.

'There it is', I responded, giving her my hand.

'So then, let us begin my story!'

Nastenka's Story

HALF the story you already know, that is, you know that I have an old grandmother ...'

'If the second half is as brief as that ...' I broke in, laughing.

'Be quiet and pay attention. Before I start, one condition; don't interrupt or I could easily lose track. So, do listen quietly.

'I have an old grandmother. I came to her when I was just a little girl, because my mother and father had both died. I presume she must have been better off at one time, because even now she keeps recalling better days. It was she who taught me French and afterwards hired a tutor. When I was 15 (I'm 17 now), our lessons came to an end. That was the

time when I was naughty: what it was I did I shan't tell you: suffice it to say that it was only a minor misdemeanour. But grandma called me to her one morning and said that as she was blind, she wouldn't be able to keep an eye on me. Then she took a pin and fastened my dress to hers and there and then said that was how we should sit ever after, unless of course, I mended my ways. At all events, I simply couldn't get away at first: working, reading or doing lessons, I was always at her side. Once I attempted to trick her and talked Fekla into taking my place. Fekla is our housemaid and she's deaf. She sat down where I normally did, while grandma fell asleep in her armchair and I set off to see a girlfriend not far away. Well, it all ended in tears. Granny woke up in my absence and asked some question, thinking I was still sitting quietly in my place. Fekla could see she was asking something, but couldn't hear what it was, and after much cogitation over what to do, unfastened the pin and took to her heels ...'

At this point Nastenka broke off and started to rock with laughter. I joined in, whereupon she stopped at once.

'Look, you mustn't make mock of granny. I'm laughing because it's ridiculous ... what on earth can I do if granny

really is like that? I still love her a little bit. Well, I really got into trouble that time: I was sat down next to her at once and God forbid I should budge an inch.

'So then, I forgot to tell you that we have, that is my grandmother has, a house of her own, just a little one, only three windows; it's all made of wood and as old as granny is; there's an attic upstairs. Well, one day a new lodger moved in...'

'So there must have been an old lodger?' I remarked in passing.

'Yes, of course there was', responded Nastenka. 'And he could keep quiet better than you. Actually, he could hardly move his tongue. He was a wizened old fellow, dumb, blind, and lame, so that eventually he couldn't go on living in this world, and he died; then we had to get a new lodger, because otherwise we couldn't get by: that and grandmother's pension is virtually all the income we have. As luck would have it, the new lodger was a young man, a stranger, not a local man. Since he didn't haggle over terms, grandmother accepted him, then asked: "Well, Nastenka, is our lodger young or what?" I had no intention of lying: "He's not exactly young, grandmother, but, you know, not

an old man." "Well, is he good-looking?" enquired grandmother.

'Again I didn't want to tell a lie. "Yes, he is, grandmother!" But granny said: "Dear me, that's a nuisance, that's a nuisance! Now I'm telling you granddaughter, don't go getting carried away. What is the world coming to! Just a paltry lodger, shouldn't wonder, but good-looking too: wasn't like that in the old days!"

'It was always the old days with granny. She was younger back then. And the sun was warmer, cream stayed fresher longer—everything was wonderful then. So there I sat quietly thinking to myself: why on earth was grandma giving me ideas, asking whether the lodger was young and handsome? But that was all, just a thought, then I started counting stitches again, knitting a stocking, and forgot all about it.

'So, one morning the lodger came in to remind us that we had promised to wallpaper his room. Granny is fond of her own voice and took her time about getting round to: "Go to my bedroom, Nastenka, and fetch my abacus." I jumped up at once, going quite red for some reason, and quite forgetting that I was still pinned to her; I didn't think

to unfasten myself quietly so that the lodger wouldn't see—I tore myself away, disturbing granny's chair. When I saw that the lodger now knew all about me, I blushed and stood there transfixed before bursting into tears—so painfully ashamed I could have died. Granny shouted: "Well, what are you standing there for?" which made me feel still worse ... When the lodger saw that I was embarrassed at his being there, he excused himself and went away at once.

'After that, I died at every noise out in the passage. There, I thought, that would be the lodger coming; and just in case I would quietly unfasten the pin. But it never was him. He never came. A fortnight went by; the lodger sent word through Fekla that he had a lot of good French books, so I could read them if I wished; and might not grandmother like me to read them to her and keep her amused? Granny gratefully fell in with this, though she kept asking whether they were suitably moral ones because if they were immoral, then you can't possibly read them Nastenka, she said, you'll learn wicked things.

"What will I learn, granny? What do they have in them?"

"Oh", she said, "they describe how young men lead decent girls astray; how they pretend they want to marry them

and carry them off from their parents' house, then cast these wretched girls to the mercy of the fates and they perish in the most lamentable fashion. I've read lots of books like that", said granny, "and it's all so beautifully described that you could sit up all night reading them on the sly. So", says she, "just see you don't read them Nastenka. What sort of books has he sent then?"

"They're all Walter Scott novels, granny."

"Walter Scott novels! You mean he's not been up to anything? Have a good look now, make sure he hasn't slipped some love-note in there."

"No", I said. "There's no note, granny."

"Now you just look inside the binding; they sometimes tuck them inside the binding, the rascals!"

"No, granny, there's nothing inside the bindings either."

"Well, I should think not indeed!"

'So we started reading Walter Scott and got through nearly half of them in a month or so. After that he kept sending more and more, including Pushkin, so that eventually I doted on my books and stopped dreaming about marrying a Chinese prince.

'That was how matters stood when I chanced to run into

our lodger on the stairs. Granny had sent me to fetch something. He came to a halt; I blushed and so did he; then he laughed and said hello and asked after granny's health. "Well, have you read the books?" he enquired. I replied: "Yes." "Which one did you like best, then?" So I said: "I enjoyed *Ivanhoe* and Pushkin the best of all." That was all on that occasion.

'A week later I bumped into him again on the staircase. This time, granny had not sent me; I had gone of my own accord for some reason. It was after two and the lodger was just coming home. "Hello", said he. "Hello", I replied.

"Don't you find it dull sitting all day next to your grandmother?"

'I don't know why, but as soon as he asked me that, I grew flustered and went red; once more I felt annoyed, doubtless because others had started plying me with questions about that as well. I made to go off without answering, but the effort was too great.

"Listen", he said. "You're a nice girl. I apologize for talking to you like this but I assure you I have more concern for you than your grandmother has. Have you no girlfriends at all you can go out and visit?"

'I told him I hadn't. There had been Mashenka, but she had gone away to Pskov.

"Look", said he, 'would you like to go to the theatre with me?"

"The theatre? But what about granny?"

"Well, you just quietly ..."

"No", I said, "I wouldn't want to deceive her. Goodbye, sir!"

"Well, goodbye then", he said. Nothing more was said.

'But after dinner he came to us; he sat down and talked with granny for a long time, enquiring whether she ever went out anywhere, of whether she had any friends—then he suddenly brought out: "I took a box at the opera today: they're doing *The Barber of Seville*; some friends were going but they cried off and I'm left with a spare ticket."

"*The Barber of Seville!*" cried granny. "Was that the barber they used to do in the old days?"

"Yes", said he. "It's the self-same barber", this said with a glance at me. I had realized his intentions and flushed as my heart leapt with anticipation!

"Well of course", said granny, 'of course I know it! In the old days I played Rosina myself in our home theatricals!"

"Would you like to come today then?" said the lodger. "My ticket will go to waste if not."

"Yes, we could well go", said granny. 'Why not, after all? My Nastenka here has never been to the theatre."

'Heavens, how marvellous! We at once sorted out everything we needed, got ourselves ready, and set off. Granny might be blind but she did feel like listening to the music, and besides, she is a kind-hearted old thing: she really did it for my sake, we'd never have made the effort on our own. I can't begin to tell you the effect *The Barber of Seville* had on me, but all that evening our lodger kept giving me such sweet looks and talked so agreeably, that I realized at once he meant to try me out next day and see if I would go with him alone. Well, how wonderful! I went to bed so proud and elated, and my heart beat so that I felt a little feverish and dreamed all night of *The Barber of Seville*.

'I imagined that after that he would drop in more and more often—but not a bit of it. His visits ceased almost entirely. He would call in something like once a month, and then only to invite us to the theatre. We went with him once or twice, but I wasn't at all happy about that. I could see that he was just sorry for me because I was so much under

granny's thumb, and there was no more to it than that. As time went on something came over me: I couldn't sit still, I couldn't read or work at anything; sometimes I would laugh and do something to spite granny. At other times I just cried. Eventually I lost weight and was on the verge of becoming really ill. The opera season ended and our lodger stopped coming altogether; whenever we met—always on that same staircase of course—he would bow silently, so gravely it seemed he had no wish to say anything, and be out on the porch while I was still standing half-way up the stairs, red as a beetroot, because the blood rushed to my head whenever I encountered him.

'The end came. Exactly a year ago in May, the lodger came to tell my grandmother that he had finished his business here and had to go off to Moscow again for a year. As soon as I heard that, I went ashen and dropped on to my chair like a dead thing. Grandma noticed nothing, while he, after announcing that he was leaving us, said his goodbyes and left the room.

'What was I to do? I thought and thought in mounting despair until I finally made up my mind. He was due to leave the next day and I resolved to bring matters to a head

when granny had gone to bed. And so I did. I made all my dresses up into a bundle, all the underthings I needed, then, with bundle in hand and feeling more dead than alive, I made my way up to our lodger in the attic. It seemed to take me all of an hour to climb those stairs. When I opened his door, he cried out on seeing me. He thought I was a ghost and rushed to get me a drink of water, because I could barely stand up. My heart was beating so fast that my head ached, and I couldn't think clearly. When I did finally recover myself, I began by placing my bundle squarely on his bed, seated myself next to it, covered my face, and wept floods of tears. He seemed to understand everything in a flash and stood pale before me, his gaze so sad my heart fairly broke.

"'Look", he began. 'Look, Nastenka, there's nothing I can do; I'm a poor man; at the moment I have nothing, not even a decent job; how on earth would we live if I married you?"

'We talked for a long time, but eventually I worked up to a frenzy and said that I couldn't live with granny, that I would run away, I didn't want to be fastened to her, and that I could go to Moscow if he wanted me to, because I couldn't live without him. Everything within me spoke at

once—shame, pride, and love. I almost fell on to the bed in convulsions. I was so terrified of a refusal!

‘He sat for some minutes in silence, then got up, came over to me and took my hand.

“Listen my good, sweet Nastenka”, he began, as tearful as I was. “Listen to me. I swear to you that if ever I am able to marry, you will certainly be the one to complete my happiness. Look: I’m going to Moscow and I’ll be there exactly a year. I am hoping to put my affairs in order. When I come back, and if you still love me, I vow to you that we shall be happy. At the moment, it’s just impossible, I simply can’t—I haven’t the right to make any sort of promise. Still, I repeat, it will certainly happen if not in a year, then sometime; naturally, that depends on your not preferring someone else to me, because I cannot presume to bind you with any form of words.”

‘That was what he said to me, and he left the next day. We had both agreed that no word was to be said to granny. That was his wish. So, then, my story’s nearly all done. Exactly one year has passed. He’s come back, he’s been here three whole days and ... and ...’

‘And what?’ I cried, eager to hear the outcome.

‘He hasn’t been to see me!’ Nastenka replied, seeming to brace herself. ‘Not a sign of him ...’

Here she stopped and, after a pause, dropped her head, covered her face with her hands, and began weeping in a way that wrung my heart.

I was utterly taken aback by the upshot of all this.

‘Nastenka!’ I began, in a diffident, ingratiating tone. ‘Nastenka, for heaven’s sake, don’t cry! How do you know? Perhaps he isn’t here yet...’

‘He is! He is!’ Nastenka returned. ‘He’s here, I know that. We arranged things back then, that evening before he went away: after we had said all that I have just now told you, and after making the arrangements, we came out here for a walk, along this same embankment. It was ten o’ clock: we sat on this bench; I wasn’t crying any more, it was lovely listening to him ... He said, that as soon as he returned, he would come and see us, and if I didn’t reject him, we would tell granny everything. Now he’s come back, I know, and he hasn’t been, he hasn’t!’

And she broke down in tears once more.

‘Good God, is there no way I can help in your misery?’ I cried, leaping up from the bench in utter despair. ‘Look,

Nastenka, couldn't I at least go and see him?...

'How could you possibly do that?' said she, raising her head suddenly.

'No, no, of course not!' I said, recollecting myself. 'I know: write him a letter.'

'No, that's impossible, I couldn't do that!' she replied firmly, but she had lowered her head and her eyes were averted.

'How can't you do it? Why on earth is it impossible?' I persisted, seizing on this idea. 'You know the sort of letter I mean, Nastenka! There are letters and letters and ... Oh, Nastenka, it's true! Trust me, just trust me! You can rely on my advice. It can all be arranged. You took the initiative yourself—why do you now ...'

'I can't, I can't! It would look as if I were pestering him ...'

'Oh, dear little Nastenka that you are', I interrupted, unable to suppress a smile. 'No, of course you're not; you are within your rights, since he made you a promise. Besides, I get the general impression that he is a man of tact, who conducted himself well', I pursued, with mounting elation at the logic of my own arguments and convictions. 'How did he act? He bound himself with a promise. He said he

wouldn't marry anybody but you, if he married at all; he left you complete freedom to reject him even now ... That being the case, you can make the first move, you have the right, you have the advantage over him, if only because, if you wanted to release him from his word ...'

'Listen, how would you write?'

'Write what?'

'This letter of course.'

'I would start like this: "Dear Sir ..."

'Does it have to be "Dear Sir ..."'

'Most certainly! Still, why should it? I think ...'

'All right! Go on, go on!'

"Dear Sir! Forgive me for ..." No, come to think of it, no apologies necessary! The bare fact justifies everything in this case, just write:

"Forgive my impatience in writing to you, but for a whole year, my happiness has been borne up by hope. Am I at fault in being unable to bear even one day of uncertainty? Now that you have come back, perhaps you have altered your intentions. In that case this letter will tell you that I do not complain or blame you. I do not blame you for the fact that I am powerless to guide your heart; such is my fate!

“You are a gentleman. Do not smile or take offence at these eager lines of mine. Remember they are written by a poor girl, who is alone with no one to teach or advise her and that she has never been able to master her own heart. But do forgive me that even a moment’s doubt should have stolen into my heart. You are incapable even in thought of hurting the one who loved you so and loves you still.”

‘Yes, yes! That’s exactly what I thought!’ Nastenka cried, and gladness shone in her eyes. ‘Oh, you have resolved my doubts, God must have sent you to me! Thank you. Oh, thank you!’

‘For what? because God sent me?’ I replied, gazing delightedly at her radiant little face.

‘That, for one thing.’

‘Ah, Nastenka, we thank some people just for living alongside us. I thank you for the fact that you met me, and that I will remember you all my days!’

‘Well all right, all right! And now, just listen carefully: we arranged back then that as soon as he returned, he would let me know by leaving me a letter in a certain place, with some friends of mine, decent, ordinary folk, who know nothing about all this; if he can’t write me a letter, because

you can’t always say everything in a letter, then he would come here that very day at ten o’clock, where we arranged to meet. I already know he’s arrived; but this is the third day and there has been no letter, nor any sign of him. I can’t possibly get away from granny in the mornings. Tomorrow, please give my letter to those good people I told you of: they will forward it on and if there is an answer, bring it here in the evening at ten o’clock.’

‘But the letter, the letter! The letter has to be written first! So all this can only be managed the day after tomorrow.’

‘The letter ...’ replied Nastenka, slightly flustered. ‘The letter ... but...’

But she left the sentence unfinished. At first she averted her little face, blushed pink as a rose, and suddenly I felt a letter in my hand, evidently written long in advance, all ready and sealed. A familiar, sweet, graceful recollection stirred in my brain.

‘R ,o – Ro, s,i – śi, n,a – na, I began.

‘Rosina!’ we both began singing, I almost embracing her out of sheer delight, she blushing furiously as only she could, laughing through her tears, which trembled like pearls on her dark eyelashes.

'Dear me, that's enough, that's enough! Goodbye then!' she said hastily. 'There's the letter, there's the address to take it to. Goodbye, *au revoir!* Till tomorrow!'

She squeezed both my hands, bobbed her head, and flitted away along the lane like an arrow. I stood there for a long time following her with my eyes.

'Till tomorrow! Till tomorrow!' echoed in my brain as she disappeared from view.

THE THIRD NIGHT

TODAY has been dreary and rain-sodden, without a ray of hope, like my approaching old age. Such strange ideas oppress me, such dark sensations, such vague questions seething in my brain—and somehow I have neither strength nor desire to resolve them. It's beyond me to make sense of it all!

We shall not see each other today. When we parted last night the sky was starting to cloud over and a mist was rising. I told her that today would be nasty; she made no reply, she was disinclined to force herself to speak; for her this day was both bright and fine, without a single cloud to dim her felicity.

'If it rains, we shan't see each other!' she said. 'I shan't come.'

I had thought she would not even notice today's rain, but still she has not come.

Yesterday was our third rendezvous, our third white night...

Heavens, how joy and happiness lend beauty to a person! How the heart overflows with love! You seem to want to pour all it holds into the heart of another, so that everything turns to gaiety and laughter. And how infectious that gladness is! Yesterday the words held so much comfort, such kindness towards me in her heart ... how she danced attendance on me, so affectionate, how she cheered and soothed my heart! Ah, how flirtatious sheer happiness can be! And I took it all at face value; I thought she ...

Good lord, though, how on earth could I have thought such a thing? How could I have been so blind, when it had all been appropriated by another, none of it was mine; when eventually even that same gentleness of hers, her solicitude, her love ... yes, love for me—was nothing but gladness at the imminent prospect of a tryst with another, an urge to thrust her happiness on to me too? ... When he failed to arrive, after we had waited in vain, she fell to frowning, she quailed and lost heart. Every movement, every word lost its former ease and playful high spirits. And, oddly enough, she redoubled her attentions towards me, as if sensing an instinctive urge to pour out on me what she sought for herself, and what she feared might not come

about. My Nastenka was so timorous, so terrified that she seemed at last to realize that I was in love with her, and took pity on this wretched love of mine. So it is that when we are unhappy we sense more acutely the unhappiness of others; rather than dispersing, the emotion becomes focused ...

I had come to her with a full heart and could barely wait for our meeting. I had no inkling of the feelings I have now, no thought that it might all go wrong. She was radiantly happy in her expectation of a reply. The reply was to be the man himself. He was supposed to come running at her call. She had arrived a whole hour before I did. At first she laughed loudly at everything, every word of mine amused her. I made as if to speak, then remained silent.

'Do you know why I am so happy, so happy to look at you? So fond of you today?'

'Well?' I asked, my heart trembling.

'The reason I like you is that you haven't fallen in love with me. You know, in your place, any one else might have started being a nuisance, badgering me with his sighing and moaning, but you're so sweet!'

At this, she gave my hand such a squeeze I almost cried out. She broke into a laugh.

'Goodness, such a friend!' she began a moment later, now quite grave. 'Really God must have sent you to me! I mean what would have become of me if you hadn't been with me? How unselfish you are! How fond you are of me! When I am married we'll be ever such good friends, more than brother and sister. I will love you almost as much as him ...'

I suddenly felt an immense sadness at that moment; on the other hand, something like laughter began to stir in my heart.

'You're all on edge', said I. 'You're afraid; you're thinking he won't come.'

'Get away with you!' she rejoined. 'If I weren't so happy, I would most likely weep at your reproaches and lack of faith. Still, you've made me reflect and think deeply, but I'll leave that till later, and admit for now that you have spoken no more than the truth. Yes! I'm not myself somehow; I'm all anticipation and over-sensitive to everything. Still, that's enough about emotions! ...'

Just at that moment there came the sound of footsteps and a passer-by loomed out of the darkness, walking towards us. We both started, and she barely kept from crying

out. I dropped her hand and made as if to move off. But we were mistaken: it was not him.

'What are you afraid of? Why did you let go my hand?' she asked, proffering it once more. 'Well, why not? We'll meet him together. I want him to see our love for one another.'

'Our love for one another?' I cried.

'Ah, Nastenka, Nastenka!' I thought, 'How much you have said with that word. Love like that, Nastenka, can sometimes chill the heart and lie heavy on the soul. Your hand is cold, mine burns like fire. How blind you are, Nastenka! ... Ah! How unbearable a happy person can be sometimes. But I cannot be angry with you! ...'

At length my heart simply overflowed.

'Listen, Nastenka!' I cried. 'Do you know what has been the matter with me all day?'

'What then, what do you mean? Out with it now! What's been keeping you so quiet all this while?'

'Well firstly, Nastenka, when I had carried out all your commissions, handed over the letter, went to see your good people, afterwards ... afterwards I came home and lay down.'

'Is that all, then?' she broke in, laughing.

'Yes, more or less', I returned, uneasily aware that my eyes were already filling with silly tears. 'I woke up an hour before we were due to meet, feeling that I hadn't slept at all. I don't know what was the matter with me. I was coming here intending to tell you all about it, as if time had stopped for me, as if the same emotion, the same feeling would stay with me for ever from that moment on, as if that one minute would stay with me for the whole of eternity, as if the whole of life had come to a halt for me ... When I awoke, I imagined that some long-familiar musical motif, heard somewhere, a forgotten delight, had now recurred to me. It seemed to have been demanding release from my soul for all my life and only now ...'

'Oh heavens above!' Nastenka broke in. 'What was all that supposed to mean? I can't understand a word you're saying.'

'Oh, Nastenka! I was trying to convey something of this weird feeling ...' I began in a plaintive tone, which still harboured a flicker of hope, utterly forlorn though it might be.

'Oh enough of that, stop it, do!' said she, seeing through it all instantly, the little minx!

All at once, she became unusually talkative, high-spirited, and flirtatious. She linked arms, laughing to make me laugh as well, and each embarrassed word of mine evoked such prolonged ringing laughter ... I began to lose all patience with her coquettish act.

'Look', she said. 'I really am a little annoyed that you haven't fallen in love with me. Make sense of the man after that! But still, Mister Unbending, you must give me credit for my straightforwardness. I keep telling you every passing silliness that comes into my head!

'Listen! Isn't that eleven o'clock?' I said, as a bell began its measured tolling from a distant city tower. She at once halted, ceased her laughing, and began to count.

'Yes, eleven', she said at length in a timid, irresolute voice.

I instantly repented of having frightened her by forcing her to count the chimes and cursed myself for my fit of spite. I felt miserable for her, without knowing how to redeem my transgression. I began reassuring her, deploying all manner of argument and evidence in devising excuses for his absence. Nobody could have been easier to deceive than she was at that moment; of course, anyone at such a juncture is glad to listen to any sort of reassurance, and

doubly so if it contains even a hint of plausibility.

'Well, this is a ridiculous situation', I began, increasingly carried away, and marvelling at the extraordinary clarity of my arguments. 'He couldn't have come, anyway; you've hoodwinked me, Nastenka, and led me up the garden path so much I've even lost track of the time ... Just look at it this way: he can scarcely have got the letter yet; let's say he's prevented from coming, say he's writing a reply, the letter can't possibly get there earlier than tomorrow. I'll call for it at the crack of dawn and let you know straight away. A thousand and one things may have happened: he might have been out when the letter came and not even read it yet. It could be anything.'

'Yes, that's it!' responded Nastenka. 'I never thought of that; of course anything might have happened', she pursued, her voice all acquiescence, though there was another, more remote thought present, like an irritating dissonance. 'This is what you do', she went on. 'Tomorrow, go as soon as may be, and if you find anything let me know at once. You know where I live, don't you?' She began to repeat her address to me.

After that, she suddenly became so shyly affectionate

towards me ... She seemed to listen closely to what I was saying to her, but when I asked her a question, she would make no reply, grow confused, and turn her little head away. I glanced at her eyes—I knew it, she was crying.

‘Now then, what’s this, what’s this? Oh, what a baby you are! Behaving like a child! ... That’s enough now!’

She tried to smile and recover herself, but her chin was quivering and her breast still heaved.

‘I keep thinking of you’, she said after a moment’s pause. ‘You are so kind, I would have to be made of stone not to feel that... You know what crossed my mind just now? I was comparing you both. Why is he—not you? Why is he not like you? He’s worse than you, even though I love him more than you.’

I made no reply. She seemed to expect me to say something.

‘Of course it may be that I don’t understand him properly as yet, haven’t got to know him properly. You know, I seem always to have been afraid of him; he was always so grave, such an air of dignity. Of course I know that’s just the outside; in his heart there’s more affection than in mine ... I remember the way he looked at me that time, when I came

to him with my bundle that time; but I still seem to feel too much respect for him; doesn’t that show we’re not equals?’

‘No, Nastenka, no’, I replied. ‘It means that you love him more than anything in the world and a great deal more than yourself.’

‘Yes, I suppose that’s so’, responded Nastenka naively, ‘but, you know what crossed my mind just now? I won’t talk about that now, though, just, you know, in general; it’s been in my mind for a long time. Listen, why can’t we all behave like brothers to one another? Why does even the best of men always keep something back, something unspoken from the other? Why not come straight out with what’s in his mind, if it’s something worth saying? As it is, everybody looks grimmer than he really is, as if everyone was afraid of bruising their own feelings if they divulge them too soon ...’

‘Oh, Nastenka! That’s the truth of it; it stems from a number of reasons, doesn’t it?’ I interrupted, keeping a tighter grip on my feelings at that moment than I had ever done.

‘No, no!’ she returned, deeply stirred. ‘Take you, for instance, you’re not like the others! I really don’t know how to describe to you what my feelings are about this; but I think that you for instance ... if only at this moment... I

feel you are sacrificing something for my sake', she added shyly, with a swift glance at me. 'Do forgive me for talking to you like this: I'm only a simple girl, after all; I haven't seen much of the world yet, I mean, and really I can't put things properly sometimes', she added, her voice trembling for some concealed emotion, yet trying to smile at the same time. 'I just meant to tell you that I am grateful and that I feel all these things as well ... Oh, may God grant you happiness for it! All that you were telling me about that dreamer of yours is completely untrue, or rather, I mean it doesn't apply to you. You're getting better, really you're quite a different person from the self you described. If you ever fall in love, may God give you happiness with her! I don't wish anything for her because I know she'll be happy with you. I know, I'm a woman myself, and you must believe what I tell you ...'

She stopped talking and gave my hand a firm squeeze. Emotion prevented me from speaking either. Several minutes passed.

'Yes it's obvious he won't be coming today!' she said at length, lifting her head. 'It's too late! ...'

'He'll come tomorrow', said I in my firmest and most re-

assuring voice.

'Yes', she broke in, brightening. 'I can see myself that he could only come tomorrow. So *au revoir!* Till tomorrow then! If it's raining I might not come. But I will the day after, come what may; be sure to be here; I want to see you and tell you all about it.'

As we were saying goodbye, she gave me her hand and said, gazing brightly at me:

'After all, we are together for always now, aren't we?'

Ah, Nastenka, Nastenka! If you only knew the loneliness I endure now!

When nine struck, I could not stay in my room; I got dressed and went out, the bad weather notwithstanding. I was there, sitting on our bench. I meant to go into their lane but fought shy of it and came back after a couple of steps, without a glance at their windows. I came back home in a depression such as I have never experienced. A dank and tedious time! If the weather had been fine I would have walked about there the whole night...

But till tomorrow, till tomorrow! Tomorrow she will tell me all about it.

There was no letter today, however. Still, that was bound

to be the case. They are together by now.

THE FOURTH NIGHT

GOOD God! The way all this turned out! The upshot of it all!

I came at nine o'clock. She was already there. I saw her in the distance; she was standing as she had done then, the first time, leaning on the embankment railing, oblivious of my approach.

'Nastenka!' I called out, fighting to suppress my agitation. She swiftly turned to me.

'Well?' she said. 'Well, quickly now!'

I looked at her in bewilderment.

'Where's the letter, then? You've brought the letter, haven't you?' she repeated, clutching at the rail.

'No, I haven't got any letter', I said at length. 'You mean he hasn't been here?'

She went horribly pale and stared at me for a long time without moving. I had shattered her final hope.

'Well, so be it!' she said finally, her voice breaking. 'Good luck to him, if he's leaving me in the lurch like this.'

She dropped her eyes, then made to look at me but

couldn't. She fought down her agitation for another few minutes, then abruptly turned, leant on the balustrade, and dissolved into tears.

'There, there, that's enough now', I made to say, but as I looked at her, I hadn't the strength to go on—and what could I have said anyway?

'Don't try to console me', she said, as she wept. 'Don't say anything about him, don't tell me that he'll come and that he hasn't thrown me over in the cruel inhuman way he has. Why, for what reason? Surely there wasn't anything in my letter, that wretched letter? ...'

At this point, her voice was choked with sobs; it was heartbreaking to look at her.

'Ah, how inhumanly cruel it is!' she resumed. 'And not a line, not a line! He could have replied at least, that he did not need me, that he was rejecting me; but not a single line in three whole days! How easy he finds it to insult and hurt a poor, defenceless girl, whose only fault is that she loves him! What I've gone through these last three days! Good God, good God! When I remember how I went to him of my own accord that first time, how I abased myself, and wept, implored him for the merest drop of love ... And after

all that! ... Listen', she said, turning to me, her small dark eyes a-glitter. 'It just can't be! It's impossible; it's not natural! Either you or I have been deceived; it could be that he didn't get the letter? Perhaps he knows nothing about it yet? How on earth can that be, judge for yourself and tell me, for heaven's sake, explain—because I can't understand it—how anyone can be as brutally cruel as he has been towards me! Not one word! The lowliest person in the world would be treated with more compassion. Perhaps he's heard something, perhaps someone has been telling him things about me?' she cried, addressing the question to me. 'What do you think? Tell me.'

'Listen Nastenka, I'll go and see him tomorrow on your behalf.

'Oh!

'I'll ask him about the whole business, and tell him everything.'

'Oh, come now!'

'You'll have to write a letter. Don't say no, Nastenka, don't say no! I'll make him appreciate what you've done, he'll know all about it, and if...'

'No, my friend, no', she broke in. 'No more of that! Not

a word, not one word from me, not a line—that's over and done with! I don't know him and I don't love him any more. I shall for—get him ...'

She did not finish.

'Compose yourself, compose yourself, do! Sit down here, Nastenka', I said, seating her on the bench.

'I am perfectly composed. That's enough! It's all right! Just tears, they'll soon dry. Are you thinking I'll do away with myself, throw myself in the canal?...

My heart was full; I made to speak but could not do it.

'Listen!' she went on, taking my hand. 'Would you have acted like that? Would you have abandoned a girl who came to you of her own accord, would you have sneered openly and brazenly at her frail, silly heart? You'd have taken care of her? You'd have realized that she was all alone and unable to look out for herself, couldn't prevent herself from loving you, she was not to blame, that she wasn't to blame for goodness' sake ... she had done nothing! ... Oh, good grief, good grief...'

'Nastenka! I cried out at length, unable to suppress my agitation. 'Nastenka! You are tormenting me! You are wounding my heart, you're killing me, Nastenka! I can't keep

silent! I have to speak out at last, and tell you what has been raging here in my heart...'

In saying this, I had half risen from the bench. She took my hand and stared at me in astonishment.

'What's the matter?' she said at length.

'Listen to me!' I said firmly. 'Listen to me, Nastenka! What I am about to tell you is just silliness, it can never be, just nonsense! I know nothing can come of it, but I simply cannot keep quiet any longer. In the name of that which is causing your present suffering, I plead forgiveness in advance! ...'

'What is it then? Well?' she said, no longer crying and staring fixedly at me, while a strange curiosity shone from her astonished eyes. 'What's the matter with you?'

'It can never be, but I love you, Nastenka! That's what! There, it's all out now!' I said, with a gesture. 'Now you will see whether you can talk to me as you have been just now, whether you can listen to what I have to tell you, for goodness' sake ...'

'Well what of it? What of it?' Nastenka interrupted. 'What about it, then? I've known for ages that you loved me, but I always thought it was just in a general sort of way ... Oh

good heavens, good lord!'

'It was just like that at first, Nastenka, but now, now ... I'm in exactly the state you were in when you went to him with your bundle. Worse in fact, Nastenka, because then he didn't love anybody else, but you do ...'

'What is it you're trying to say? I really don't understand you at all. Look, what on earth are you telling me this for? No, I don't mean that, I mean why are you going on like this—and so sudden ... God! I'm talking nonsense! But you...'

And Nastenka became totally confused. Her cheeks flamed; she dropped her eyes.

'What can I do, Nastenka, what on earth can I do? It's all my fault, I've abused your ... No, never, I'm not to blame, Nastenka: I sense it, feel it because my heart tells me I'm right, because I couldn't possibly hurt or offend you! I was your friend; well, I remain a friend; I haven't changed at all. Now it's my tears that are flowing, Nastenka. Let them flow, let them—they're not hurting anyone. They'll dry, Nastenka...'

'Oh, sit down, do, sit down', said she, tugging me down on to the bench. 'Oh, good lord in heaven!'

'No, Nastenka! I won't sit down; I can't stay here any

longer, you mustn't see me any more; I'll say what I have to say, then go. I just want to tell you, that you would never have realized I loved you. I would have preserved my secret. I wouldn't have tormented you at this moment with my selfishness. No! But just now I couldn't stand it any more; you brought it up yourself, it's your fault, it's all your fault, not mine. You can't drive me away from you ...'

'No, no, of course not, I'm not driving you away, no!' said Nastenka, concealing her embarrassment as best she could, poor thing.

'Not driving me away? And I was ready to run away myself. I will go, though, but first I'll tell you everything from the beginning, because when you were talking just now, I just couldn't sit still, when you were crying, when you were in agonies because of, well, because of (I have to say it, Nastenka) because you had been spurned, because your love had been rejected, I sensed, I felt so much love in my heart for you, Nastenka, so much love ... my heart just broke, and I ... I simply couldn't stay silent, I had to speak out, Nastenka, I had to speak!'

'Yes, yes! Speak to me, speak to me like that!' said Nastenka with an enigmatic gesture. 'You may think it odd my

telling you like this, but... go on! I'll explain afterwards! I'll explain everything!'

'You're taking pity on me, Nastenka; you're just sorry for me, my dear! What's done is done! What's said can't be unsaid! That's so, isn't it? Well then, now you know it all. Let that be the starting point. All right, then. Now everything's fine; listen though. When you were sitting there weeping, I was thinking to myself (ah, do let me tell you what I was thinking!), I thought (well of course I know it was impossible, Nastenka), I thought that you ... I thought that somehow you ... I mean, in some completely fortuitous fashion, might have ceased to love him. In which case—I was thinking this yesterday, and the day before that, Nastenka—in that case I would have made you fall in love with me, I most certainly would: you did say, didn't you, you said it yourself, that you had almost fallen in love with me in earnest. Well, what else? That's really about all I wanted to say; it just remains to tell you how it would have been if you had fallen in love with me, just that, nothing more! Listen to me, dear friend, because you are still my friend after all—of course, I am just an ordinary, impoverished individual, a nobody, but that's irrelevant (I'm straying from the point,

but that's out of embarrassment, Nastenka), but I would have loved you, loved you so much that even if you had loved and gone on loving that unknown him, you would not have noticed my love as irksome in the slightest. All you would have sensed, all you would have felt every moment, would have been a grateful, grateful heart beating beside you, a burning heart which for you ... Ah, Nastenka, Nastenka, what have you done to me! ...'

'Oh, don't weep, I don't want you to cry', said Nastenka, rising swiftly from the bench. 'Let's go, get up and go together, don't cry though, don't cry', she kept saying, wiping away my tears with her handkerchief. 'Come, let's go now; I may have something to tell you ... Yes, since he has abandoned and forgotten me now, although I still love him (I would not wish to delude you) ... but listen, tell me. If, for example, I were to fall in love with you, I mean if I only ... Ah, my friend, my friend! When I think, when I think of how I was hurting you when I laughed at your love, and praised you for not falling in love! ... O God! How on earth didn't I foresee such a thing, how could I have been so stupid, but ... well, all right, I've made up my mind, I'll tell you everything...'

'Listen, Nastenka, you know what? I'm going to leave you, so there! I'm just a torment to you. You've pangs of conscience because you laughed at me, but I don't want you, on top of your own grief ... I certainly don't want that! Of course it's all my fault. Well, it's goodbye, Nastenka!'

'Stop a moment and listen to me: can you wait?'

'For what? What do you mean?'

'I love him; but that will pass, it's bound to, it can't help but pass; it's already passing, I can sense it... Who knows, it may be over this very day, because I detest him, because he was laughing at me, while you were weeping here with me, because you would not have spurned me like him, because you love me and he did not, because, last but not least, I love you myself... yes, love, love, the way you love me; I did say it first, you heard me didn't you? I love you because you are better than he is, because you're nobler, because he ...'

The poor girl's agitation was too intense for her to finish. She placed her head on my shoulder, then on my chest, and gave way to bitter weeping. I tried to console her, talk her round, but she couldn't help herself; she kept squeezing my hand and saying between sobs: 'Wait a moment, wait a moment; I'll stop in a minute! I want to tell you ... Don't

imagine these tears—they're nothing, just a sign of weakness, just wait till they pass.' At length she stopped and wiped away the tears and we resumed our walk. I made to say something but she kept begging me to wait. We were both silent ... Eventually she nerved herself and began to speak ...

'This is the way of it', she began. Her voice was weak and quavering, but it held a ring that pierced me straight to the heart and ached there sweetly. 'You mustn't think I am so fickle and inconstant, that I find it easy to forget and betray ... I loved him for a whole year and swear to God that I was never ever unfaithful to him, even in thought. He despised that; he laughed at me—so be it! But he has wounded me and insulted my feelings. I—I don't love him, because I can only love someone who is chivalrous and high-minded and understands me; because I am like that myself and he is unworthy of me—well, never mind. It's better this way than being deceived in my expectations later on and realizing the kind of man he was ... Well, of course! Still who knows, my dear friend', she went on, pressing my hand, 'who knows, perhaps all this love of mine was a figment of my imagination, perhaps it all began as a trivial piece of

mischievousness, because I was under granny's surveillance? Perhaps I ought to love another, not him, not a man like that, some other, who would have pity on me and, and ... Well, enough of that', she broke off, panting with agitation. 'I only wanted to tell you that... I meant to say, that if, despite the fact that I love him (no, loved him), if despite that, you still say ... if you feel that your love is so great that it can eventually displace the former love in my heart... if you wish to take pity upon me, and do not mean to abandon me to my fate, without hope or consolation, if you mean to love me for ever the way you do now, then I swear that my gratitude ... that my love will eventually be worthy of your own ... Will you take my hand now?'

'Nastenka!' I cried, choking with sobs. 'Nastenka! ... Ah, Nastenka! ...

'Well, that's enough, that's enough now. Quite enough!' she said, keeping her self-control with difficulty. 'Now everything's been said, hasn't it? Yes? And you're happy and I'm happy; not another word about it; wait a while; spare me ... Talk about something else, for pity's sake! ...

'Yes, Nastenka, I will! No more of this, now I'm happy, I ... well, Nastenka, we'll talk about something else, quickly

now, quickly; right! I'm ready ...'

And neither of us knew what to say, we laughed, we cried, we spoke a thousand inane, incoherent words; we walked along the pavement, then suddenly came back and set off across the street; then came to a halt and re-crossed to the embankment; we were like children ...

'I am living on my own at the moment', I said, 'but tomorrow ... Well, of course, Nastenka, you know I'm a poor man, I only have twelve hundred, but that doesn't matter...'

'Of course not, and grandma has her pension; she won't be a burden. She has to be with us.'

'Of course she has ... But there's Matryona ...'

'Ah yes, and we've got Fekla as well.'

'Matryona's a good old soul. She's only got one drawback: she has no imagination, absolutely none at all; but that's all right! ...

'It doesn't matter; they can live together; but you must move in with us tomorrow.'

'What do you mean? In with you? Very well, I'm ready ...'

'Yes, you can be our lodger. We've got the attic upstairs; it's vacant. We did have a lady there, an old woman of noble family, but she's moved on and I know that granny wants to

let the room to a young man; I said: "Why a young man?" And she said: "Well you know, I'm getting on, but don't go thinking I want to marry you off to him." I just knew that was what she had in mind ...'

'Oh, Nastenka! ...'

And we both laughed.

'That's enough now, that's enough. But where do you live? I've gone and forgotten.'

'Near —sky Bridge. The Barannikov house.'

'That big building?'

'Yes, that's the one.'

'Oh yes, I know it, it's a fine place; still, you know, do be quick and move in with us ...'

'Tomorrow it shall be, Nastenka, tomorrow; I owe a little there for the flat, but it's all right... I get my salary soon ...'

'And you know what, I might start giving lessons; I'll study and then give lessons ...'

'Well that's really marvellous ... and I'll be getting a bonus soon, Nastenka ...'

'So then, tomorrow you will be my lodger ...'

'Yes and we'll go and see *The Barber of Seville*, because

it's going to be on again soon.'

'Yes, we'll do that', said Nastenka, laughing. 'No, best if we see something other than *The Barber of Seville* ...'

'Well, all right, something else; of course that would be better, I just wasn't thinking...'

So saying, we both walked along in a sort of daze, a fog, as if we didn't know ourselves what was happening to us. We would stop and talk for ages on one spot, then we would set off again lord knows where, more laughter, more tears ... Nastenka would suddenly want to go home and I didn't venture to prevent her, intending to see her all the way home; we would set off and inside a quarter of an hour find ourselves on the embankment, near our bench. Now she would heave a sigh and tears would start from her eyes again; I would lose heart, feel a chill ... But she squeezed my hand at once and tugged me off again to walk and chatter and talk ...

'Time I went home now; I think it's very late', said Nastenka at length. 'Enough of such childish behaviour!'

'Yes, Nastenka, though I'm sure I shan't be able to get to sleep; I shan't go home.'

'I don't think I'll get to sleep either, but see me to the

house ...'

'Of course I will!'

'But this time we'll go all the way to our apartment.'

'Of course we will, of course ...'

'Word of honour? Because I do have to get back home sometime!'

'Word of honour', I replied, laughing ...

'Let's go then!'

'Let's.'

'Just look at that sky, Nastenka, just look! Tomorrow is going to be a wonderful day; the sky so blue, and what a moon! Look at that yellow cloud blotting it out, look, look! ... No, it's slipped by. Look, look there! ...'

But Nastenka was not looking at the cloud, she was standing mutely rooted to the spot; a moment later she started pressing timidly against me. Her hand began to tremble in mine; I glanced at her ... she pressed harder against me.

At that moment, a young man walked past us. He came to an abrupt halt, gazed intently at us, then walked on a few paces. My heart quivered within me ...

'Nastenka', I said in a low voice. 'Who is it, Nastenka?'

'It's him!' she whispered, pressing still closer and shaking against me ... I could barely keep my feet.

'Nastenka! Nastenka! It's you!' came a voice from behind us, and at that moment, the young man came several steps nearer...

Lord, what a shriek she uttered! How she shuddered! She tore herself from my arms and went fluttering to meet him! ... I stood and watched them, crushed. But she had scarcely

given him her hand, scarcely flung herself into his arms, when she turned to me and was suddenly by my side, like lightning, like the wind, and before I could recollect myself, she put both arms round my neck and kissed me firmly and ardently. Then without saying a word, she ran to him again, took his arm, and tugged him along after her.

I stood there for a long time, looking after them ... Eventually they disappeared from view.

MORNING

MY nights ended with the morning. It was a nasty day. Rain was falling and beat dismally against my window panes; it was dark in my little room and heavily overcast outside. My aching head fairly swam; a fever was stealing through my limbs.

'A letter for you, master, by the town post, the postman brought it', Matryona was pronouncing over me.

'A letter! Who from?' I shouted, leaping from my chair.

'That I don't know, master, have a look, maybe it says who it's from.'

I broke the seal. It was from her!

'Ah forgive me, forgive me!' Nastenka had written. 'I beg you on my knees to forgive me! I deluded both myself and you. It was a dream, a phantom ... I have longed for you today; forgive me, oh forgive me! ...

'Do not reproach me: I have not changed in the least towards you; I said I would love you, and so I do, more than love you. Oh God! If I could only love you both at once! Ah,

if only you were he!'

'Ah, if only he were you!' flashed through my brain. I recalled your own words, Nastenka!

'God understands what I would do for you now! I know you feel miserable and sad. I have hurt you, but you know—if one loves, the pain is soon forgotten. And you do love me!

'Thank you! Yes! I thank you for that love of yours, because it is stamped on my memory like a sweet dream, long remembered after waking; because I will remember for ever that moment when you opened your heart to me like a brother, and so generously accepted my own, crushed as it was, to guard, cherish, and heal ... If you forgive me, the memory of you will be exalted within me into an eternal sense of gratitude towards you which will never be erased from my soul ... I will preserve that memory, be ever faithful to it, never betray it or my heart: it is too steadfast. Yesterday indeed, it returned so swiftly to the one to whom it forever belongs.

'We shall meet, you will visit us, you won't desert us, you will always be my friend and brother ... And when you see me, you will give me your hand ... yes? You will give it

to me, you have forgiven me, haven't you? You love me as before?

'Ah, do love me, do not forsake me, because I love you so much at this moment, because I am worthy of your love, because I deserve it ... my dear friend! Next week I am getting married to him. He came back as a lover, he had never forgotten me ... Don't be angry that I have written about him. But I want to come with him to see you; you will take to him, won't you?

'Forgive us, remember and love your

Nastenka.'

I read the letter over and over for a long time as tears welled up in my eyes. At length it dropped from my hands and I covered my face.

'Deary!' Matryona began.

'What is it, old woman?'

'Those cobwebs, I've got rid of them all off the ceiling; you can get married, or invite guests round, just the time for it ...'

I glanced at Matryona ... She was still a sprightly, young old woman, but I don't know why, she suddenly seemed to

me stooped and decrepit, her eyes dimmed, her face wrinkled ... I don't know why, but my room had aged just like the old woman. The walls and floor had faded, everything had grown dingy; there were more cobwebs than ever. I don't know why, but when I glanced out of the window, it seemed that the house opposite had also grown decrepit and dingy, the stucco on the columns peeling and dropping off, the cornices darkened and cracked, the dark-ochre walls patchy and mottled ...

Either a darting ray of sunshine had suddenly vanished behind a rain-cloud and rendered everything dull before my eyes, or perhaps the entire perspective of my future had flashed before me, so miserable and uninviting, and I saw myself just as I was now, fifteen years on, growing old, in the same room, alone as now with the same old Matryona, grown not a whit more intelligent over the years.

As if I would nurse my resentment, Nastenka! As if I would drive a dark cloud across your bright, serene happiness, as if I would inflict misery on your heart with my bitter reproaches, wound it with covert pangs and make it beat anxiously in your moment of bliss, or crush even one of those tender blossoms woven into your dark curls, when

you go with him to the altar ... Oh, never, never! May your sky be clear, may your sweet smile be bright and serene, may you be blessed for the moment of bliss and happiness, which you gave to another, a lonely, grateful heart!

God in heaven! A whole moment of bliss! Is that not sufficient even for a man's entire life?...