

## *The Idiot*



“The real nineteenth-century prophet was  
Dostoevsky, not Karl Marx.”

*Albert Camus*

“Dostoevsky gives me more than any  
scientist, more than Gauss!”

*Albert Einstein*

“The only psychologist from whom I  
have anything to learn.”

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

“The novels of Dostoevsky are seething whirlpools,  
gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil  
and suck us in. They are composed purely and wholly  
of the stuff of the soul. Against our wills we are drawn in,  
whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same  
time filled with a giddy rapture. Out of Shakespeare  
there is no more exciting reading.”

*Virginia Woolf*

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*The Idiot*

Fyodor Dostoevsky



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Richmond  
Surrey TW9 2LL  
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[www.oneworldclassics.com](http://www.oneworldclassics.com)

*The Idiot* first published in 1869  
This translation first published by Oneworld Classics Limited in 2010  
Translation, Apparatus and Notes © Ignat Avsey, 2010

Front cover image © Getty Images

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, Berkshire

ISBN: 978-1-84749-150-3

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Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81)



Mikhail Andreyevich  
Dostoevsky, Fyodor's father



Maria Fyodorovna  
Dostoevskaya, Fyodor's mother



Mikhail Mikhailovich  
Dostoevsky, Fyodor's brother



Maria Dmitrievna  
Dostoevskaya, Fyodor's first wife

*The Idiot*

*Part One*

# 1

AT ABOUT NINE IN THE MORNING at the end of November in melting snow, the Warsaw train was steaming fast towards St Petersburg. It was so damp and foggy that the dawn light struggled to break through; nothing much was visible out of the windows ten paces either side of the track. Some passengers were homeward bound from abroad, but the third-class carriages were particularly crowded, in the main, with small-town, short-distance business travellers. All were, as is usual on such journeys, dog-tired and bleary-eyed; all were freezing cold with pallid faces to match the fog.

In one of the third-class compartments by the window two people had found themselves opposite each other from the small hours: both were young, travelling light; neither was too smartly dressed; both had rather distinctive features and – finally – both were ready to enter into conversation. Had either of them been aware of what it was that united them, they'd have wondered how it was that pure chance had brought them face to face in this third-class compartment of the Warsaw-St Petersburg train. One was short, about twenty-seven, with almost jet-black, wavy hair, and small, grey but fiery eyes. His nose was flat and wide, his cheekbones high; his thin lips were permanently curled into an arrogant, mocking, well-nigh malevolent smirk; his brow, however, was high and well formed, and more than made up for the ungainly, jutting lower part of his face. What was most remarkable about this face though was its deathly pallor, lending the young man an emaciated look even despite his rather powerful build; along with everything else, he exuded an ardour that bordered on anguish and did not accord at all well with his arrogant, almost truculent smile and the impudent smugness of his gaze. He was warmly dressed in a lined, black, wide-fitting sheepskin that kept him warm through the night, whereas his fellow traveller had endured the full rigour of a damp Russian November night totally unprepared. All the latter man wore was a fairly wide, coarse cloak with a huge hood, as is not infrequently worn by travellers wintering in distant parts, in Switzerland or even northern Italy, but something

hardly designed for a journey such as that from Eydtkuhnen\* to St Petersburg. What was suitable and perfectly adequate for Italy was not nearly sufficient for Russia. The wearer of the cloak and hood was also about twenty-six or -seven, slightly taller than average, with a very fair complexion, a good head of hair, sunken cheeks and a sparse, barely noticeable, very pale goatee beard. His eyes were large, sky-blue and intense; his gaze was calm and brooding, suffused with that strange glow which some people immediately recognize as a sure symptom of the falling sickness. On the whole, however, his face was pleasant, fine and lean, but drained of colour, especially now that it was livid with cold. On his knees he cradled a pathetic little bundle, fashioned from a piece of worn, faded raw-silk fabric, evidently comprising all his worldly possessions. He wore a pair of thick-soled boots with cross-laced gaiters – all very un-Russian. His dark-haired travelling companion in the lined sheepskin, partly from want of anything better to do, took all this in and, smiling that indiscreet smile which so often betrays man's delight in the discomfort of others, finally enquired, "Feeling the cold, eh?" And he jerked his shoulders.

"Indeed," the other replied with extreme readiness, "and, surprisingly, it's thawing. I hate to think what it's like when it's freezing! I had no idea it could be so cold here in Russia. Comes as quite a shock."

"Are you from abroad, or what?"

"Yes, from Switzerland."

"Ha! Some people!..." The man made a whistling sound and burst out laughing.

A conversation ensued. The alacrity and candour with which the fair-haired young man in the Swiss cloak took to answering all the prying, indiscreet and at times obviously idle questions of his swarthy interlocutor was nothing short of remarkable. In the process, he openly admitted that he had not been back to Russia for a long time – over four years – and that he'd been sent abroad for health reasons, with some strange nervous ailment like the falling sickness or St Vitus's dance, with nervous contractions and spasms. Listening to him, the dark-haired man smirked a few times, particularly broadly when, in answer to his question, "And did they cure you?" the blond man replied, "No, not really."

"Ha! I thought as much," the dark man observed cuttingly, "but you paid through the nose, and we here trust that lot."

“You’re quite right!” a badly dressed passenger, something like a lowly copy clerk, sitting nearby, butted in; he was a strongly built man of about forty, red-nosed, with a face marked by blotches. “The truth is, they suck the lifeblood out of us Russians!”

“Oh, how wrong you are, gentlemen, as far as I’m concerned anyway,” the patient from Switzerland hastened to observe in a mild and conciliatory tone. “Of course, I’m in no position to argue because I don’t know how it is with other people, but my doctor gave all he had to help me with my fare and besides he supported me for close on two years at his own expense.”

“There was no one else to pay, is that it?” the swarthy man enquired.

“Yes, Mr Pavlishchev, who funded me, died two years ago. I wrote to General Yepanchin’s spouse, a distant relative of mine, but received no reply. So I simply upped sticks and came over.”

“Over where?”

“You mean, where am I going to stay?... I must say, I still don’t know... but...”

“It’s yet to be arranged!”

Both men burst out laughing.

“Is that bundle all you have?” the swarthy man asked.

“I bet it is,” the red-nosed clerk observed, utterly pleased with himself, “and that he has nothing in the luggage compartment – poverty of course is not the end of the world, but there you go...”

As it turned out, that was very much the case. The fair-haired young man made no bones about it, and owned up immediately with the utmost readiness.

“All the same, your bundle is not to be written off entirely,” the clerk continued after they had all had their fill of laughter (remarkably, the owner of the bundle too began to laugh in the end at the mere sight of them, which added to the general merriment), “and though I wouldn’t mind betting that it isn’t stuffed with your rolls of gold napoleons\* or *fredericks*,\* or even our very own Dutch ducats,\* which is all too easy to conjecture just from the state of those gaiters over your foreign-looking boots, all the same... combine it with a putative relative, such as Madame la Générale Yepanchina, and your bundle immediately becomes a totally different proposition, unless of course you’re wrong in styling her as your relative, which too is always possible in

consequence of – shall we say – absent-mindedness... engendered by, let's say... too fertile an imagination, an in itself quite human trait if you ask me."

"Oh, you're perfectly right again," the fair-haired young man responded, "my mistake – she is altogether too distant to qualify as a relative. As a matter of fact, I was not at all surprised when there was no reply. I never really expected one."

"Just wasted postage. Hm... at least you're honest and above board about it, which is commendable! Hm... as for General Yepanchin, of course I know him, he's pretty well known. And the late Mr Pavlishchev, who maintained you in Switzerland, I knew him too, assuming of course it was Nikolai Andreyevich Pavlishchev, because there were two – cousins. The other one still resides in the Crimea, and as for Nikolai Andreyevich, he was a respectable gentleman, well connected too, and in his time the owner of four thousand souls—"

"Quite right, he was called Nikolai Andreyevich Pavlishchev," the young man said, and gave the know-all nosy parker an intent, probing look.

Such inquisitive gentlemen are an almost universal occurrence, in certain circles that is. They know everything, all their restless mental inquisitiveness and prying faculties are without exception directed to one goal only, this of course in the absence of any more important interests or preoccupations as a thinker of today might have put it. The word "everything", it must be said, has to be understood in a very restricted sense: where so-and-so works, whom he knows, what he's worth, where he was a governor, if at all, whom he was married to, how much his wife brought in, who his first and second cousins were, and so on and so forth. For the most part these individuals walk about ragged at the elbow and subsist on seventeen roubles per month. People of whom they know every last detail would never suspect what the force motivating these gentlemen was; all the same, having procured their knowledge – a truly encyclopaedic one, it must be owned – they are well pleased with themselves; they are filled with self-respect and even the joy of supreme spiritual contentment. To be sure, the practice is most enticing. I have observed men of learning, men of letters, poets, politicians, who all strove for and attained, in this well-nigh scientific pursuit, their highest aspirations and personal fulfilment, to the point that they owed their entire careers to it.

During the course of this conversation the swarthy young man kept yawning and glancing aimlessly out of the window, obviously wishing the journey would come to an end. He was self-absorbed to the point of being distracted and even odd; now he listened, now he didn't; he looked about vacantly, and laughed at the most inappropriate moments without rhyme or reason.

"May I enquire, whom do I have the honour of?... " the blotchy man enquired, turning to the fair-haired young man with the bundle.

"Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin," the young man responded with complete alacrity.

"Prince Myshkin? Lev Nikolayevich? Now you have me," the clerk replied in puzzlement. "As a matter of fact I've never heard of him. I don't mean the name, it's sure to be in Karamzin's *History*,\* it's just that these days one hardly comes across any Myshkins, no one ever hears of any."

"That's very true," the Prince replied immediately. "There are no more Myshkins these days, apart from me. I think I'm the last of them. As for the past, some of my family were indeed of peasant stock. My father, incidentally, happened to be an army man, a sub lieutenant, with a military upbringing. I'm not entirely sure how it is that Madame Yepanchina came to be a Myshkin, also the last of her line, if you follow my line, so to speak..."

"Ha ha ha, I like the way you doubled up your lines!" the clerk remarked with a broad grin.

The swarthy young man could not forbear a smile either, whereas the fair one appeared to be taken totally by surprise for having managed to come up with a pun, albeit a pretty weak one.

"You know, it was quite unintentional on my part," he tried to make up for it at last, very sheepishly.

"Never mind, never mind," the clerk rubbed it in good humouredly.

"And did you do any studying with this professor of yours?" the dark-haired man asked suddenly.

"Yes... I did—"

"I never studied a thing in my life."

"Well, it was nothing much, just bits and pieces," the Prince added as though apologizing. "Due to my illness I was in no fit state to undertake a regular course of studies."

"Do you know the Rogozhins?" the dark-haired man asked abruptly.

“No, I can’t say I do. I know very few people in Russia. Are you Mr Rogozhin by any chance?”

“Yes, I am Rogozhin, Parfyon.”

“Parfyon Rogozhin? Would that be the Rogozhins who—” the clerk was about to launch forth pompously.

“Yes, it would, yes,” the swarthy man cut him off in exasperation, never having addressed him previously, taking care to speak to the Prince only.

“Well... I never!” the clerk exclaimed, dumbfounded, his eyes nearly popping out in amazement as his face dissolved into something ingratiating and submissive, verging on the awestruck. “So you’re the son of that same Semyon Rogozhin, of venerable ancient lineage, who died not a month ago leaving behind a round two and a half million?”

“And how the deuce do you know he left two and a half million?” the dark-haired man interposed, not deigning even to look at the clerk now. “It beats me” (he winked at the Prince) “what these people hope to gain by their toadying! But it’s true, my father died, and a month later here I am on my way back from Pskov without a penny to my name! Neither my brother, a right scoundrel, nor mother breathed a word, informed me of anything or sent me anything! Treated me like a dog! I lay a month on my sickbed in Pskov.”

“And now there’s a cool million and a bit at the very least waiting for you. Oh, Lord!” the clerk clasped his hands in agitation.

“Can anyone tell me, please, what business it is of his?” Rogozhin again nodded at him in angry irritation. “Don’t you realize, you’re not going to get a single copeck from me even if you do a handstand right here in front of me.”

“And I will, I will.”

“Look at him! I won’t give you anything, nothing at all, you can dance for a week in front of me for all the good it’ll do you.”

“Don’t then! It’ll serve me right! Don’t give me a thing, but I’ll dance all the same! I’ll leave my wife, my small children, just to dance in front of you. Flattery gets you everywhere!”

“Get lost!” Rogozhin said in disgust. “Five weeks ago,” he continued, turning to the Prince, “I, like you, with just a bundle on my back, ran away from my father to my aunt’s in Pskov, where I went down with a fever, and lo and behold the old boy went and died on me in my absence. An apoplectic fit! God rest his soul, but he came within an ace

of killing me at the time! Believe me, Prince, as God is my witness, if I hadn't scarpered, I'd have been done for."

"You must have really incensed him!" the Prince observed, looking at the millionaire in the sheepskin with unfeigned curiosity. But even if there was something curious in a man with a million-rouble inheritance, the Prince was intrigued and fascinated by something else besides. As for Rogozhin, he too for some reason was only too willing to talk to the Prince, even though his wish to converse appeared not to be motivated by any deep spiritual need, but seemed rather mechanical; more the result of distraction and agitation than inner compulsion – just so as to have something to look at and keep his tongue wagging. He still appeared to be feverish, or at least in early convalescence. As for the clerk, he hovered around Rogozhin and hung on his every word with abject sycophancy.

"Incensed, yes, he was incensed all right, and perhaps with reason," Rogozhin replied, "but it was my brother who got my dander up. I don't blame my mother, she's old, set in her ways, reads the Church Calendar\* and has no mind of her own. Whatever anybody says, goes. But why didn't he let me know in time? Can anyone tell me that? True enough, I was comatose at the time. They say there was a telegram, and who should get it but my aunt. The woman's been widowed these past thirty years, and is surrounded from dawn to dusk by a gaggle of church-going biddies and holy fools.\* She's half-sorceress, half-nun herself. The telegram put her in a right old tizzy, and off she ran with it unopened to the copper's shanty, where she left it. It was only thanks to Vasily Vasilych Konev, who wrote to me, bless him, that I got wise to everything. Under cover of night my brother had snipped all the heavy gilt tassels off the coffin pall. "They're worth a fortune!" he says. I could have had him packed off to Siberia for that, it's sheer sacrilege. Listen, eyesore!" he turned to the clerk. "Is it sacrilege legally?"

"Sacrilege, yes of course, it's sacrilege," the clerk confirmed at once. "Hanging offence?"

"On the nearest lamp-post, straight away! No questions asked!"

"They think I'm still ill," Rogozhin continued, addressing the Prince, "but without a word, I got up from my sickbed, caught the train on the quiet, and here I come, dear brother Semyon Semyonich! Open up the gate! You were setting the old man against me, that I know. But that

I also upset the old boy mightily over Nastasya Filippovna is equally true. And that's all down to me. No one else is to blame."

"Over Nastasya Filippovna?" the clerk repeated obsequiously, as though adding two and two together.

"You know nothing about it!" Rogozhin snapped at him impatiently.

"And what if I do?" the clerk replied triumphantly.

"A likely story! There's no end of women by that name! And if you want to know my opinion, you're an arrogant, misbegotten swine! I knew it," he said, turning to the Prince, "sooner or later some such nasty piece of work was bound to cross my path."

"Well, perhaps I really do know, sir!" the clerk bustled. "Lebedev knows everything. It's all very well for you to reproach me, kind sir, but what if I were to prove it to you? Wouldn't she be the same Nastasya Filippovna because of whom your father belaboured you with a stout stick, she being the selfsame Miss Barashkova, a well-born lady indeed, perhaps of princely stock in a manner of speaking, but certainly well in with a certain Mr Totsky, Afanasy Ivanovich, a highly distinguished gentleman, landowner and the veritable father of all capitalists, chairman of any number of companies and organizations, and the esteemed General Yepanchin's bosom pal..."

"My word," Rogozhin seemed genuinely surprised, "the man really knows something, dammit!"

"He does indeed! Lebedev knows it all. My dear sir, I've even been in contact with old Alexander Likhachev for close on two months, also following the death of his father. We explored every establishment in town, every nook and cranny, so that in the end it reached a stage where Lebedev was simply indispensable to him. Now the man's languishing in the debtors' jail, but back then I even had occasion to make the acquaintance of Nastasya Filippovna, and not only her – what were they all called?... Armanche, Coralie, Princess Patskaya, I got to know a whole bunch of them."

"Nastasya Filippovna!" Rogozhin exclaimed, his lips whitening and twitching, as he darted a stern look at Lebedev. "Do you mean she's with Likhachev?..."

"N-n-nothing to get upset about! N-nothing! Nothing at all!" Lebedev began to backtrack hurriedly in nervous agitation. "Likhachev hasn't got a chance in hell! Totsky is the only one. Of an evening he's usually

ensconced in his private box at the Bolshoy or the French Theatre. Let the gentlemen officers talk their hearts out amongst themselves, but even they can't prove anything. All they can do is point and say, 'There, that's that selfsame Nastasya Filippovna!' and that's all. As for anything else – not a sausage! Cross my heart."

"That's exactly how it is," Rogozhin confirmed with a grim scowl. "Zalyozhev said the same thing. I remember, Prince, I was crossing the Nevsky at the time in my father's shabby old coat and she was stepping out of a shop, straight into a coach. I nearly died. Zalyozhev happened to be passing by, full of airs and graces, a lorgnette in his eye, and there was I in my greasy peasant boots, reeking of sour cabbage soup. 'She's not for you, my lad,' he reckons. 'She's quality. They call her Nastasya Filippovna, surname Barashkova, and she lives with Totsky, who doesn't know quite what to do with her now. He's reached the ripe old age of fifty-five and wants to marry the foremost beauty in all St Petersburg.' That's when he told me that I could see her that same day sitting in her private box at a ballet at the Bolshoy. If I'd mentioned to my old man about going to the ballet, he'd have killed me on the spot! However, I sneaked out for an hour or so, and had a good look at her. Couldn't sleep a wink that night. Next morning the old man, God rest his soul, gave me two loan bonds worth five thousand roubles each to sell, to pay seven and a half to the Andreyevs at their office and deliver the balance directly into his hands – he'd be waiting for me. I sold the bonds, took the money, but gave the Andreyev office a miss, and made a beeline for the jeweller's, where I blew the lot on a pair of diamond earrings, each stone the size of a nut. I was four hundred short, I left my name, and they trusted me. I went straight to Zalyozhev with the earrings. 'Come on, let's go to Nastasya Filippovna's!' I said. We set off. I can't remember where we were going, what was ahead, what was either side of me, or how we got there, it's a complete blank. But she received us both in her sitting room. At the time I didn't identify myself. Zalyozhev simply said, 'This is from Parfyon Rogozhin, he saw you at the theatre last night. Be so gracious as to accept this as a memento.' She undid the wrapping, had a look, and smiled: 'Thank your friend Mr Rogozhin for his thoughtfulness.' She made a graceful nod with her head, and left. I ask you, why didn't I die there and then! If I went there in the first place, it was because I didn't expect to come out of it alive! But what needled me most was the thought that that

scoundrel Zalyozhev had taken all the glory. I'm hardly God's gift to women, dressed like a tramp, standing there dumbstruck, staring at her wide-eyed, dying of embarrassment, but he's your real toff, dressed to the nines according to the latest fashion, hair curled and oiled, fresh looking, chequered necktie – never lost for a word, and full of answers to everything. He puts me in the shade entirely! 'You watch your step!' I said to him when we left. He laughed it off. 'I'd like to see what you'll have to say to your father, Semyon Parfyonych.' I had a good mind to jump in the river there and then without even going home, but then I thought better of it. 'Well, so what!' And slunk back home with my tail between my legs."

"My, oh my!" the clerk continued to play the fool, twitching in every limb and winking at the Prince. "If I knew my Semyon Parfyonych right, he'd send you to kingdom come for ten, never mind ten thousand roubles."

The Prince studied Rogozhin intently, who seemed to have gone even paler than before.

"That he would!" Rogozhin said. "What's it to you? He got wise to everything in no time," he continued, addressing the Prince, "and then Zalyozhev went blabbing about it all over the town. The old man locked me in upstairs, and read the riot act to me. 'That's just to begin with,' he reckons, 'but I'll be back to kiss you goodnight before dark.' Guess what? The old devil went straight to Nastasya Filippovna's, bowed deep to her, cried his eyes out and implored her to have mercy on him. She brought the little box out at last. 'Here, take your earrings, old man. They're ten times as valuable to me now that I know what it cost Parfyon to get them. Give Parfyon Semyonych my regards and thank him for me.' Meanwhile, with my mother's blessing, I cadged twenty roubles from Sergey Protushin and set off for Pskov by rail. Got there in a stinking fever. The old church biddies nearly did for me with their incantations, and there was I sozzled, plastered, blotto, but I still had it in me to crawl round the taverns of the town on my last legs, blowing all I had, and ended up lying in the street senseless till the morning, wracked with fever and covered in dog bites. I don't know how I ever survived."

"Well, well, well," the clerk exulted, rubbing his hands in glee. "It'll be Nastasya Filippovna's turn now. The earrings are nothing! It's the reward she'll bestow for them—"

“If you just say another word about Nastasya Filippovna,” Rogozhin exclaimed, gripping him by the hand tightly, “I swear, I’ll horsewhip you even though you are a pal of Likhachev.”

“If you do, you won’t send me packing! Whip me, go ahead, you’ll remember me all the better for that... There you are, we’ve arrived!”

True enough, the train was pulling into the station. Even though Rogozhin had said that he had departed on the quiet, there were already several people waiting for him. They were shouting and waving their caps about.

“I see Zalyozhev’s here too!” Rogozhin muttered, looking at the crowd with a triumphant, somewhat hostile smile. Suddenly he turned towards the Prince. “Prince, I find it strange, but I’ve come to like you. Maybe it’s down to the mood of the moment, but then I met him (he pointed at Lebedev) too at the same time, and I feel nothing for him. Come and see me, Prince. We’ll get rid of these gaiters of yours. I’ll dress you up in the best fur coat there is, fit you out with a tailcoat, a white waistcoat or whatever kind you wish, stuff your pockets full of money, and... we’ll go and call on Nastasya Filippovna! Will you come?”

“Say yes, Prince Lev Nikolayevich!” Lebedev urged fervently and persuasively. “This is the chance of a lifetime! Don’t let it slip!...”

Prince Myshkin rose to his feet, stretched out his hand cordially and said with deference, “I shall be delighted to come and am very happy you have found my company agreeable. If I can manage it, I might perhaps come this very day. Because, let me be frank, I too have come to like you, especially after your story about the diamond earrings, though I liked you from the first, earrings or no earrings, and in spite of your gruffness. Many thanks for the offer of the clothes and the fur coat, because really I shall soon be in need of both. As for money, I must confess, I have hardly anything at the moment.”

“There’ll be money enough by nightfall, there will! Be sure to come!”

“There will, there will,” the clerk echoed, “even before nightfall, there will!”

“How about the fair sex, Prince? Are you much of a ladies’ man? Might as well tell me now!”

“Me, n-n-no! You see... Perhaps you’re not aware, but as a result of my illness, I’ve had no contact with women.”

“If that’s so, Prince,” Rogozhin exclaimed, “you are truly a holy man, one of God’s favoured!”

“God’s favoured indeed,” the clerk affirmed.

“Well, come along then, you creep,” Rogozhin said to Lebedev, and they all left the carriage.

Lebedev was triumphant. The noisy crowd moved off in the direction of the Voznesensky Prospect. The Prince’s way lay towards the Liteiny. It was raw and dank. The Prince asked passers-by for directions. It was about three versts to where he wanted to go, and he decided to take a cab.

## 2

GENERAL YEPANCHIN was the owner of a house close by the Liteiny Prospect, on the side of the Preobrazhensky Cathedral. As well as this splendid residence, five-sixths of which were let out, he had another spacious house in Sadovaya Street, which also brought in a huge income. Besides these two houses, he had on the very edge of St Petersburg a large, very profitable estate; and there was also a factory somewhere or other in the district. In times gone by, General Yepanchin, as everybody knows, dabbled in the wine trade. More recently, he took pride in being a very influential member on the board of several established public companies. He had the reputation of being very wealthy, very enterprising and very well connected. In some quarters, not least in the government department in which he worked, he had become totally indispensable. And yet it was also common knowledge that General Yepanchin had no formal education and came from a humble military background, which of course could not but redound to his honour; but the General, though undoubtedly a highly gifted man, was not without his foibles, and was not particularly pleased if these were ever alluded to. But that he was gifted and worldly-wise, there could be no doubt whatsoever. For instance, he knew instinctively never to overreach himself – in fact, where necessary, to vacate the scene altogether – and the thing that people valued him for in particular was his artlessness, the knack of always knowing his place.

If only these judges of his character had a mere inkling of what sometimes went on deep in the soul of Ivan Fyodorovich, who knew his place so well!

Though he was well versed and practised in worldly affairs, and not devoid of unusual natural gifts, it suited him best to present himself as the executor of other people's ideas, rather than the promulgator of his own, "to serve *sans servility*"\* and – in line with modern trends – even to parade his Russianness, but one with a human face. There had been some amusing anecdotes on this score; but for all that, the General always took them, even the most scurrilous ones, in good part; incidentally, luck always seemed to favour him, particularly at cards, and he played for high stakes, deliberately not only not concealing this allegedly trifling weakness of his, but indulging it to the full for all the benefits it frequently bestowed upon him. He kept mixed company, but his predilection was for the cream of society. As to his future prospects, he was more than sanguine: everything would come in its season and its time. Regarding his age, the General was, as it were, at the very peak, that is a round fifty-six, when life *in earnest* just begins. He looked healthy and fit: his teeth, though not too white, were strong; his build squat and sturdy; his mien businesslike at work in the mornings, relaxed and happy after hours at cards or at His Highness's. In a word, life for His Excellency, the General, was just a bowl of cherries!

The General was blessed with a flourishing family. Admittedly, there were some problems in that department, but for the most part it had already long been the focal point of all his most cherished hopes and aspirations. And, true enough, what could be dearer and nearer than one's family? What could be a better mainstay than one's own flesh and blood? The family comprised his wife and three grown-up daughters. He had married early, while still a subaltern, a girl almost his own age, distinguished neither by beauty nor education, who brought him only fifty souls\* which, however, happened to be the basis of his subsequent good fortune. The General never regretted his early marriage, never referred to it as the result of the infatuation of impulsive youth, but respected his spouse so much and was sometimes so much in awe of her that it could easily pass for love. The lady herself was from the princely Myshkin line which, though not particularly illustrious, went back a long way and of which she was duly proud. It so happened that in earlier days a certain patron of hers, incidentally one of those whose patronage did not cost him a copeck, took an interest in the young couple. He opened the door to future prospects for the young officer and aided his path, although a wink and a nod would have

sufficed just as well. With a few exceptions, the couple's long-standing marriage knew no discord. In the very first years of their marriage the General's Lady, as a born princess and the last of her line, but perhaps due to personal accomplishments too, had contrived to find some very influential patronesses. Subsequently, relying on her husband's wealth and professional status, she began to adjust fully to the elevated circles in which she moved.

In the past few years, the three daughters – Alexandra, Adelaida and Aglaya – had matured and blossomed visibly. Though they were styled plain Yepanchins, on the mother's side they were titled; they had sizeable dowries and their father's career promised to be meteoric, but – and this is rather important – their most brilliant asset was their beauty, not excepting Alexandra, who was already twenty-five. The middle one was twenty-three, and the youngest, Aglaya, had just turned twenty. This baby sister was in fact exceptionally attractive, and was beginning to enjoy a great deal of admiring attention from all quarters. Besides, all three were gifted, intelligent and had a good upbringing. It was generally known that all three were very close and supportive of one another. There was even talk of some kind of a pact on the part of the elder two to benefit the youngest – the undisputed idol of the household. In society they liked to keep themselves to themselves and not be forward in any way. No one could accuse them of being arrogant or opinionated, and yet it was common knowledge that they lacked nothing in pride and could well stand up for themselves. The eldest was musical, the middle one painted exceedingly well – which fact hardly anyone became aware of for many years until quite recently, and fortuitously at that. In a word, the reports that circulated about them were highly complimentary. But they had their detractors too. Some people for instance were aghast at the number of books the threesome had read. Marriage was not their chief priority. They cultivated the company of some people, but only in moderation. This was all the more remarkable, considering the natural bent and ambition of their father.

It was already approaching eleven o'clock when the Prince rang the General's doorbell. The General resided on the first floor, and occupied rooms which were far from ostentatious, but in keeping with his status. The door was opened by a liveried valet, and there ensued a protracted conversation, from the very start of which the Prince and his little

bundle were subjected to a great deal of suspicious scrutiny. Finally, in response to his repeated and clear-cut assurances that he was indeed Prince Myshkin and that he must, come what may, see the General on a pressing business matter, the mistrustful servant conducted him into a small lobby, right next to the waiting room that adjoined the study, and handed him over to another servant, a valet, on morning shift, charged with announcing visitors to the General. He was fitted out in tails, was over forty and had a sour mien; being at his master's beck and call somehow lent the man a great sense of self-importance.

"Please wait in the waiting room, and leave your bundle here," he said, with slow deliberation, making himself comfortable in his chair and casting disapproving glances at the Prince, who had settled right next to him, clutching his little bundle.

"If it's all right with you," the Prince said, "I'd rather wait here than on my own over there."

"You can't stay in the lobby, because you're a visitor, a personal caller. Is it the General himself you want to see?" Evidently, the valet could not bring himself to admit such a caller, and therefore decided to repeat his question.

"Yes, I'm here on a business matter..." the Prince returned.

"I am not asking what the purpose of your call is – my duty is just to announce you. But, as I said, I am not doing it without the secretary."

The man was evidently consumed with mistrust. The Prince was too unlike the usual run of day-to-day visitors, and although the General was obliged to see the strangest assortment of people at the appointed hour almost daily, on business that would have inured the valet to the oddest of them, he nevertheless hesitated even though his instructions for admission were somewhat flexible. The secretary's mediation was indispensable.

"Are you really... from abroad?" he finally enquired somewhat irresolutely, and stopped. Perhaps he intended to ask, "Are you really Prince Myshkin?"

"Yes, I've come straight from the station. I have a feeling you wanted to ask if I really am Prince Myshkin, but were too polite to do so."

"Hm..." the valet grunted, rather taken aback.

"I assure you, I told you the truth, and you should have no qualms about it. As to my appearance and this bundle, I can explain. My circumstances at present are very reduced indeed."

“Hm. That’s not what I’m worried about, as it happens. It’s my duty to announce you, and the secretary will come shortly, unless... Well, that’s the point, ‘unless’. You haven’t come to trouble the General for money, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“Oh no, you needn’t worry about that at all. I have other business.”

“I beg your pardon, but I was going by your appearance. You must wait for the secretary. The General himself is now in conference with a colonel, but the secretary is due shortly... the company’s.”

“Well, if it’s going to be a long wait, may I ask if I could smoke here somewhere? I have my pipe and tobacco with me.”

“S-smoke?” The valet gazed at him with astonished disdain as though he had misheard him. “Smoke? Certainly not, and I am surprised to hear you ask such a thing. Really!...”

“Oh, I didn’t mean in this room. I quite understand. I’d be happy to go wherever’s convenient. I’ve not had a smoke for the last three hours, and I’m dying for one now. Still, if that’s the rule of the house...”

“What shall I do with you?” the valet mumbled involuntarily. “To begin with, you shouldn’t be here at all. You should be sitting in the waiting room, being a visitor, and I shall be answerable... Anyhow, are you hoping to stay here permanently or something?” he added, casting another sidelong glance at the Prince’s bundle, which continued to arouse his unease.

“No, I’m not, even if I were invited to, I wouldn’t. I only came to introduce myself, that’s all.”

“What do you mean, introduce yourself?” the valet enquired in utter astonishment. “Why is it then you first said you were on business?”

“Well, not really! That is, there is a specific matter in the way of advice if you like, but my main mission is to convey my respects, because I am Prince Myshkin, and the General’s Lady is the last of the Myshkins in the feminine line, and apart from us two, there are no more Myshkins left.”

“So you’re related too?” the valet exclaimed almost in alarm.

“Well that’s as may be. At a stretch you might, of course, say we’re related, but then again it’s so distant, it’s hardly worth mentioning. I once appealed to the General’s Lady by letter from abroad, but she didn’t reply. All the same, I thought I’d better get in touch on my return. I’m explaining all this to you now so as to put your mind at rest, because I can see you’re still uneasy. Just say it’s Prince Myshkin, and that in

itself should explain the reason for my visit. If they see me – all well and good, if not – equally so, perhaps. Only I don't think they could refuse an audience. I'm sure the General's Lady would as a matter of course want to see the elder and last remaining male representative of her line, inasmuch as she takes particular pride in her lineage, or so I've heard."

The Prince's arguments seemed straightforward enough; but the more straightforward they were, the more outlandish they sounded in the circumstances, and the experienced valet could not but conclude that what could easily pass man to man, was totally inappropriate man to servant. And since servants are far sharper than their masters give them credit, the valet immediately concluded that there were two possibilities: either the Prince was some kind of a knight of the road and had come expressly to seek charity, or a Simple Simon with no self-respect, because no normal nobleman with any self-respect would spend his time sitting in a lobby talking about his personal affairs to a servant; in either case there loomed the danger of subsequently being held answerable for him.

"I think you had better step into the waiting room after all," he observed as authoritatively as he could.

"Had I sat there in the first place," the Prince said with a hearty laugh, "I'd not have been able to explain anything to you at all, and you'd still have been worried stiff looking at my cloak and bundle. Perhaps there's no need to wait for the secretary. Why not just go and announce me yourself?"

"I cannot announce someone like you without the secretary. Besides, His Excellency expressly gave orders not to be disturbed while he is in conference with the Colonel. Only Gavril Ardalionych can enter unannounced."

"Is that a clerk?"

"Gavril Ardalionych? No, he's employed by the company as a freelance. But why don't you at least leave your bundle here?"

"That's just what I was thinking. If you don't mind, I'll do just that. And you know, I'd better take my coat off too."

"I should think so, you can hardly go in with that coat on."

The Prince got up, hurriedly took off his cloak to reveal a rather smart jacket, of good quality though slightly the worse for wear. A steel fob chain passed across his waistcoat. At the end of it was a silver Swiss watch.

Though the Prince was certainly not all there – the valet no longer entertained any doubts on that score – the General’s employee did not deem it proper to continue a personal conversation with him; besides, he struck him as really quite likeable, in his own way, of course. For the most part, however, the valet’s feelings were mixed, but markedly inclined towards a strong and unmitigated exasperation.

“And when does the General’s Lady receive visitors?” the Prince asked, resuming his former place.

“That I wouldn’t know. She has no fixed hours, depends on the person. Her dressmaker may be admitted as early as eleven. Gavril Ardalionych too is allowed in ahead of others, sometimes even for breakfast.”

“You keep your rooms warmer here than is customary abroad in winter,” the Prince observed. “But then it’s warmer there outside, whereas indoors it’s almost unbearably cold for us Russians.”

“Haven’t they got any heating?”

“Yes they have, but the houses are built differently, I mean the windows and stoves.”

“Hm! And how long have you been travelling?”

“Four years. But I stayed mainly in one place in the country.”

“Do things seem strange to you here?”

“I suppose they do. You might not believe me, but it’s a wonder I haven’t forgotten my Russian. There I am talking to you now and I can’t help feeling, ‘I’m not making a bad job of it.’ Maybe that’s why I can’t stop talking. Truly, since yesterday I’ve not been able to speak Russian enough.”

“Hm! Hm! Did you live in St Petersburg before?” Quite despite himself the valet found it impossible not to maintain such a cordial and agreeable conversation.

“In St Petersburg? Hardly at all, only in passing. And I knew nothing of the place before, and now there are so many new things going on that, I hear, even those who knew what it was like previously have to start all over again. There’s much talk about the courts here.”

“Ahem!... The courts. The courts, yes, yes, the courts. And what about over there, is there more justice in the courts, or not?”

“I don’t know. I heard a lot of good things about ours. For one thing, we haven’t got capital punishment.”\*

“And they have, have they?”

“Yes. I saw it in France, in Lyons. Schneider took me there.”

“They hang them, do they?”

“No, in France they chop their heads off, as a rule.”

“Do they scream?”

“Good Lord, no! It only takes a second. They lay the condemned out flat, and a broad blade – they call it a guillotine – comes down heavily, powerfully... the head flies off in the blink of an eye. The worst part is the preliminaries. When the sentence is read out, the machine is set up, the prisoner is bound, taken up the scaffold, that’s the awful bit! People come running to gape, even women, though they try to discourage them from looking.”

“None of their business!”

“Quite! Quite! The suffering of it all!... The condemned man I saw was an intelligent, fearless, powerful chap, getting on in years, by the name of Legros. Well, I tell you, you don’t have to believe me, he was walking up the scaffold – crying, white as a candle. Is that possible? Isn’t that dreadful? How can one cry from fear? It never occurred to me that anyone other than a child could cry from fear – and this a man who has never cried in his life, a man of forty-five. What was going on in his soul at the time, what torment was it being subjected to? It was being violated, there’s no other word for it! It is written, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ So, because he killed, he must be killed? No, that won’t do. It’s been a month, and I can still see it all. I’ve had countless dreams.”

As he talked, the Prince became more animated and his pale cheeks flushed slightly, though he kept his voice down as before. The valet observed him with compassionate interest and listened with rapt attention; he was clearly a man with imagination and a reflective mind.

“It’s as well that the suffering is not so great,” he remarked, “if the head is severed so quickly.”

“There you’ve said it!” the Prince responded fervently. “Everyone makes the same observation, and the machine – the guillotine – was invented for that very purpose. But it occurred to me then – supposing it’s actually worse? You may find this strange and ridiculous, but if you stop and think about it there may be something in it. Just think – torture, the resulting suffering and injuries, the pain – it’s all physical, and a distraction from the mental agony. As a result, right up to the moment of death, one only has one’s physical injuries to contend

with. But what if the greatest pain is not in injuries, but rather in the knowledge that in an hour, in ten minutes, then in half a minute, finally *now* – this instant – you’ll be decapitated, and that’ll be the end of you as a human being, and that it’s irrevocable. *Irrevocable*, mark you! As you put your head under the blade, and you hear the swish from above, that fraction of a second is the most terrifying of all. You know, it’s not just my imagination, many people have said as much. I’m so convinced of this that I’ll be frank with you. To punish murder by death is an immensely worse crime than the original murder. Death by edict is far more gruesome than normal murder. He who faces death in the dead of night on the highway, or wherever, still clings to the hope right up to the final moment that he’ll survive. There have been cases when, even after a man’s throat had been cut, he still didn’t lose hope, but tried to escape or pleaded for mercy. Whereas here, that sweetener of death – one’s last hope – is taken away in advance. The sentence has been passed, and the knowledge that it is irrevocable is the greatest torture of all, and there can be none greater in the world. Stand a soldier in front of a cannon and shoot point-blank at him, and he will continue to hope, but read out to the same soldier the *irrevocable* sentence of death, and he will either go out of his mind or begin to cry. Who will claim that human nature can endure such torment without loss of sanity? What is the reason for such abuse – outrageous, senseless, pointless? Perhaps there is a man who has been condemned, made to suffer, and later told, ‘Go, you’ve been reprieved!’ Perhaps such a one could provide an answer. Christ spoke of this agony and terror. No, man must not be subjected to such outrage!”

Though the valet could not have put all this quite like the Prince, he took in most of it as was to be seen by the transformed expression on his face.

“If you really must have a smoke,” he said, “I don’t see why not, only if you’re quick about it. You must be here when you’re called. See that door under the stairs? Go through, and you’ll find a boxroom on the right where you can have your smoke, only don’t forget to open the window, it’s against the rules...”

But the Prince was too late to have his smoke. A young man with a bunch of papers in his hand entered the antechamber. The valet began to help him off with his fur coat. The young man looked askance at the Prince.

“This gentleman, Gavril Ardalionych,” the valet began deferentially, but with a note of familiarity, “tells me that he is a Prince Myshkin and the Lady’s relation. He has just arrived by rail from abroad and that bundle he is holding is the only...”

The Prince did not hear the rest, because the valet lowered his tone to a whisper. Gavril Ardalionych listened attentively and kept looking at the Prince with great curiosity. Finally, he stopped listening and rather abruptly turned towards the Prince.

“You are Prince Myshkin?” he asked with the utmost politeness and cordiality. He was very good-looking, about twenty-eight, slim, blond, above average height, with a goatee beard, and intelligent, very handsome features. Only his smile, however welcoming, was somewhat too refined; his pearl-white teeth just a little too even to be true; and the look in his eyes, despite their welcoming lustre and lively sparkle, was just a shade too sharp and inquisitive for comfort.

“That’s not the way he is when he’s alone,” the Prince thought to himself, “and I doubt if he ever laughs.”

The Prince repeated hurriedly as best he could almost verbatim what he had previously told Rogozhin and later the valet. Gavril Ardalionych seemed to recall something.

“Was it you by any chance,” he asked, “who sent a letter, was it from Switzerland, to Lizaveta Prokofyevna?”

“Yes, it was.”

“In that case she should remember who you are. You have come to see His Excellency? I’ll announce you directly... He will be free shortly. Only... would you mind waiting in the waiting room... Why is the gentleman here?” he asked the valet sharply.

“He wanted to stay here...”

The door to the study opened suddenly and a military man with a portfolio emerged, talking loudly as he took his leave.

“Is that you, Ganya?” a voice from the study called. “Come here a moment, please!”

Gavril Ardalionych, with a nod at the Prince, disappeared through the door of the study.

A couple of minutes later the door opened again and Gavril Ardalionych in a clear and cordial tone bade the Prince come in.

## 3

GENERAL IVAN FYODOROVICH YEPANCHIN stood in the middle of his study and regarded the Prince with the utmost curiosity as he entered. He even took a step or two towards him. The Prince approached and introduced himself.

“So,” the General responded, “how can I help you?”

“It’s nothing urgent. All I wanted was to introduce myself. I’d hate to disturb you as I know you’ve already got a lot of prior engagements... But I’ve just got off the train... from Switzerland...”

A faint smile crossed the General’s features; he thought awhile, then paused and thought again, frowned, measured his visitor once more up and down, pointed firmly to a chair, took a seat himself diagonally opposite and turned to the Prince with a show of impatient expectation. Ganya stood in one corner of the study by a writing desk sorting through some papers.

“On the whole I tend not to have an awful lot of time for social calls,” the General said. “But, as no doubt, you have a specific reason, in this case—”

“That’s just what I was afraid of,” the Prince interjected, “that you would read into my visit some kind of ulterior motive. But, I assure you, apart from the pleasure of making your acquaintance, I have no other personal reason.”

“The pleasure is all mine, of course, but life is not like that. Pleasures apart however, there are the odd duties, you know... Besides, I still fail to see what it is we have in common... that is, the reason...”

“Quite so, there is no reason, nor, I must admit, have we much in common. Being a Myshkin, the same as your wife, is neither here nor there, it goes without saying. I understand. However, that is the only reason I have. You see, it’s four years since I was last in Russia. And I was not altogether of sound mind when I left! I knew precious little then, and much less now. I need some kind people to advise me. As a matter of fact, there is something I wanted to discuss, but have no idea whom to turn to. It occurred to me way back in Berlin, ‘Why not start with them, after all we’re as good as related. Perhaps we could be useful to one another – they help me, I help them, provided we can get along.’ And from what I’ve heard, you are easy to get along with.”