

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

White Nights

N° 118



Fyodor Dostoyevsky

WHITE NIGHTS

Translated by
Ronald Meyer



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FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

Born 1821, Moscow, Russia
Died 1881, Saint Petersburg, Russia

'White Nights' was first published in its original Russian as *Belye Nochi* in 1848. 'Bobok' first appeared in 1873; the title means 'little bean.' Both are taken from the *The Gambler and Other Stories*, translated by Ronald Meyer.

DOSTOYEVSKY IN PENGUIN CLASSICS

Crime and Punishment

The Idiot

Demons

The Double

The Gambler and Other Stories

The Grand Inquisitor

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Netochka Nezvanova

The House of the Dead

The Brothers Karamazov

The Village of Stepanchikovo

Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida

‘My God!
A whole minute
of bliss! Is that
really so little
for the whole of
a man’s life?’



White Nights

A SENTIMENTAL LOVE STORY
(FROM THE MEMOIRS OF A DREAMER)

... Or was his destiny from the start
To be but just one moment
Near your heart? ...

– Ivan Turgenev

THE FIRST NIGHT

It was a wonderful night, the kind of night, dear reader, which is only possible when we are young. The sky was so starry, it was such a bright sky that looking at it you could not help but ask yourself: is it really possible for bad-tempered and capricious people to live under such a sky? That is also a young person's question, dear reader, a very young person's question, but may the Lord ask it of your heart more often! ... Speaking of capricious and sundry bad-tempered gentlemen, I could not help but recall my own commendable conduct throughout the whole day. From early morning an astonishing melancholy had started to torment me. It suddenly seemed that I, so alone, was being abandoned by everyone – that everyone was deserting me. Well, of course, anyone is entitled to ask: who is 'everyone'? Because I've been living in Petersburg eight years now and I've hardly been able to make a single acquaintance. But what do I need acquaintances for? I'm acquainted

with all of Petersburg as it is; that's why it seemed to me that everyone was abandoning me when all of Petersburg suddenly up and left for their dachas. I was terrified of being left alone, and for three whole days I wandered about the city in a state of deep melancholy, not understanding in the least what was happening to me. No matter whether I went to Nevsky Prospekt, or the park, or wandered along the embankment – there wasn't a single person of those whom I have been accustomed to meet for a year now in the same place, at a certain time. Of course, they don't know me, but I know them. I know them intimately; I have practically learned their faces by heart – and I admire them when they are cheerful, and I'm crestfallen when they grow sad. I almost struck up a friendship with a certain little old man, whom I meet every blessed day, at a certain hour on the Fontanka. His face is so dignified and thoughtful; he's always whispering under his breath and gesticulating with his left hand, while in his right hand he holds a long gnarled walking-stick with a golden knob. He's even noticed me and shows a cordial concern for me. Should it happen that I'm not at the same place on the Fontanka at a certain hour, I'm positive that he would be crestfallen. That's why we sometimes almost greet each other, particularly when we're both in a good mood. The other day, when we had not seen each other for two whole days and met on the third day, we almost reached for our hats, but, thank goodness, we came to our senses in time, lowered our hands and passed each other by in sympathy. I also have houses that are my acquaintances. As I walk, it's as if each one I come to runs out into the street in front of me, looks out at me with its windows wide open and almost says: 'Hello, how do you do? And I, thank God, am well, but in May they're going to add a floor to me.' Or: 'How do you do? And I'm having some repairs done tomorrow.' Or: 'I almost burned down and I was so scared', and so forth. I have favourites among them, some are intimate friends; one of them intends to be treated by an architect this summer. I'll make it a point to drop by every day so that, God forbid, they don't kill it in the process! ... But I will never forget what happened to a certain very pretty, light-pink little house. It was such a sweet little stone house; it looked at me so cordially, and so haughtily at its ungainly neighbours, that my heart would rejoice when I chanced to walk past. Suddenly, last week, I was walking down the street and upon turning to look at my friend – I heard a plaintive cry: 'But they're going to paint me yellow!' The scoundrels! Barbarians! They spared nothing:

neither the columns, nor the cornices, and my friend had turned as yellow as a canary. I almost had an attack of jaundice myself, and to this day I do not have the strength to see my poor disfigured friend who was painted the colour of the Celestial Empire.

So now you understand, reader, how I am acquainted with all of Petersburg.

I have already said that for three whole days I was tormented with anxiety until I guessed the reason for it. And on the street I was in a bad way (this one's gone, that one's gone, where's so-and-so got to?) – and I wasn't myself at home either. For two evenings I tried to put a finger on what it was I found wanting in my room. Why was I so uncomfortable staying there? And with bewilderment I examined my green, sooty walls, and the ceiling from which hung a cobweb that Matryona had been cultivating with such resounding success; I looked over all my furniture, examined every chair, wondering if that was the problem (because I'm not myself if even one chair isn't in the same place as it was the day before); I looked out the window, but it was all in vain ... I didn't feel any better. I even took it into my head to summon Matryona and give her there and then a fatherly reprimand for the cobweb and for her slovenliness in general; but she merely looked at me in amazement and walked away without a word in response, so that the cobweb hangs there safe and sound to this day. It was only this morning that I finally guessed what the matter was! Oh! Why, they're all making off to their dachas and leaving me behind! Forgive the trivial style, but I'm not up to lofty turns of speech ... because, you see, everybody in Petersburg had either moved or is moving to their dacha; because after hiring a cab, every venerable gentleman of a solid appearance was immediately transformed before my eyes into a venerable father of a family, who after his daily official duties sets off without luggage to the bosom of his family, at the dacha; because every passer-by now has a quite special air about him, which all but says to every person he meets: 'Gentlemen, I'm only here in passing, but in two hours I'm leaving for my dacha.' If a window opens, upon which slender fingers as white as sugar had just drummed, and out leans the head of a pretty girl, who calls to a pedlar with jugs of flowers – I immediately, there and then, imagine that these flowers are being bought not simply so as to take pleasure in the spring and flowers in a stuffy city apartment, but because everybody is moving to their dacha and they'll be taking the flowers with them. Moreover,

I had already made such strides in my new, special sort of discovery that I could already unerringly identify on the basis of appearance alone where their dacha was located. The residents of Kamenny and Aptekarsky islands or the Peterhof Road were distinguished by the studied elegance of their movements, their foppish summer suits and the handsome carriages that brought them to the city. The inhabitants of Pargolovo and further out at first glance 'inspired' one with their prudence and respectability; the visitor to Krestovsky Island was distinguished by his unruffled, cheerful air. Whether I managed to run into a long procession of carters holding the reins as they lazily walked alongside their carts, loaded with whole mountains of furniture of every description – tables, chairs, couches both Turkish and non-Turkish – and other household goods and chattels, on which, on top of everything, frequently would be sitting at the very summit of the load, the wizened cook, keeping watch over her master's goods as the apple of her eye; whether I looked at the boats, heavily laden with household utensils, as they glided down the Neva or Fontanka to Chernaya River or the islands – the carts and boats increased tenfold, a hundredfold before my very eyes, it seemed as though everything had up and left, that whole caravans had moved to the dacha; it seemed that all of Petersburg threatened to turn into a desert, so that in the end I became ashamed, hurt and sad: I had absolutely nowhere to go and no reason to go to a dacha. I was ready to leave with every cart, to drive off with every gentleman of venerable appearance who was hiring a cabbie, but no one, absolutely no one invited me; it was as if I indeed was a stranger to them!

I had been walking a lot and for a long time, and I had already completely succeeded, as was my wont, in forgetting where I was, when I suddenly found myself at the city gates. I cheered up in an instant, and stepped to the other side of the barrier, walked between the sown fields and the meadows, oblivious of any fatigue, but sensing with all my being that some burden was being lifted from my soul. All the passers-by looked at me so cordially that we practically bowed to one another; everybody was so happy about something, every last one was smoking a cigar. And I was happy as I had never been before. It was as if I had suddenly found myself in Italy – nature had so strongly affected me, a semi-invalid city dweller who had almost died of suffocation within the city's walls.

There is something inexplicably touching in our Petersburg nature, when with the advent of spring she suddenly displays all her might, all the powers granted her by heaven, when she bursts into leaves, dresses herself up and decks herself out in colourful flowers ... Somehow I can't help but be reminded of that weak and sickly girl, at whom you sometimes look with pity, sometimes with a compassionate love, and sometimes you simply do not notice her, but then suddenly, for a moment, she somehow, unexpectedly, becomes inexplicably, wonderfully beautiful, and you, startled and intoxicated, unwittingly ask yourself: What power caused those sad, thoughtful eyes to shine with such fire? What summoned the blood to those pale, sunken cheeks? What has suffused those tender features of her face with passion? Why does that breast heave so? What was it that so suddenly summoned strength, life and beauty to the poor girl's face that it began to shine with such a smile, came to life with such a sparkling, effervescent laugh? You look around, you search for someone, you hazard a guess ... But the moment passes and perhaps tomorrow you will once again meet the same thoughtful and distracted gaze as before, the same pale face, the same submissive and timid movements, and even repentance, even traces of some sort of deadening melancholy and annoyance at the short-lived exhilaration ... And you regret that the momentary beauty faded so quickly, so irretrievably, that it flashed before you so deceptively and in vain – you regret this because there was not time for you even to fall in love with her ...

But nevertheless my night was better than my day! Here's what happened:

I arrived back in the city very late, and it had already struck ten o'clock as I approached my apartment. My path ran along the embankment of the canal, where at that hour you will not find a living soul. True, I live in a very remote part of the city. I was walking and singing, because when I am happy I am sure to hum something to myself, like every other happy man who has neither friends nor good acquaintances and who in a joyful moment has nobody with whom he can share his joy. Suddenly the most unexpected adventure happened to me.

Somewhat to the side, leaning against the railing of the canal, stood a woman. With her elbows resting on the railing, she seemed to be looking very attentively at the canal's turbid water. She was wearing a very pretty yellow hat and a bewitching black mantilla. 'She's a young girl, she just has to be a brunette,' I thought. It seems she had not heard my steps; she didn't

even stir when I walked past, with bated breath, and with my heart beating violently. 'Strange!' I thought, 'she must be completely absorbed by something', and suddenly I stopped, rooted to the ground. I had heard a muffled sob. Yes! I hadn't been deceived: the girl was crying and a minute later there was another whimper and then another. My God! My heart sank. And no matter how great my timidity with women, this was hardly the time! ... I turned around, took a step in her direction and would certainly have uttered the word 'Madam', but for the fact that I knew that this exclamation had already been uttered a thousand times in all our Russian society novels. That was the only thing that stopped me. But while I was searching for a word, the girl came to her senses, glanced back, recollected where she was, cast her eyes down and slipped past me along the embankment. I set off after her at once, but when she realized this, she quit the embankment, crossed the street and set out walking down the pavement. My heart was fluttering, like a captured little bird. Suddenly a certain incident came to my aid.

On the sidewalk across the street, not far from my unknown girl, there suddenly appeared a gentleman in evening dress, a man with a solid number of years behind him, but whose gait was anything but solid. He walked, reeling, and carefully leaning against the wall. The girl meanwhile walked as straight as an arrow, hurriedly and timidly, as girls generally do when they don't want someone to offer to see them home at night, and of course, the teetering gentleman would never have caught up with her if my good fortune had not given him the idea of looking to unnatural methods. Suddenly, without saying a word to anyone, my gentleman darts off and flies as fast as his legs will carry him; and running, he catches up with my unknown girl. She was moving along like the wind, but the staggering gentleman was overtaking her, he had overtaken her, the girl cried out – and ... I thank my good fortune for my excellent knotty walking-stick, which just happened to be in my right hand on this occasion. In an instant I found myself on the sidewalk across the street; in an instant the uninvited gentleman understood what was what, took into account my incontrovertible reasoning, fell silent and dropped behind, and only when we were already quite far away did he reproach me in rather energetic terms. But his words scarcely reached us.

'Give me your hand,' I said to my unknown girl, 'and he won't dare bother us anymore.'

In silence she gave me her hand, which was still trembling from nervousness and fright. Oh, unbidden gentleman! How grateful I was to you at that moment! I cast a cursory glance at her: she was very pretty and a brunette – I had guessed right; on her black eyelashes still shone the tears of her recent fright or former sorrow – I don't know which. But on her lips a smile already sparkled. She also cast a furtive glance at me, blushed and looked down.

'Now then, you see, why did you drive me away? If I'd been there, nothing would have happened ...'

'But I didn't know you: I thought that you too ...'

'But do you really know me now?'

'A little bit. Now then, for example, why are you trembling?'

'Oh, you guessed right from the very first!' I answered, delighted that my girl was clever: that is never a bad thing where beauty is concerned. 'Yes, you guessed from the very first glance the sort of person you're dealing with. Yes, it's true, it's true, I'm timid with women, I'm nervous, I won't deny it – no less than you were a moment ago when that gentleman frightened you ... I'm frightened now. It's like a dream, but even in my dreams I never guessed that I would ever talk with a woman.'

'What? Really? ...'

'Yes, if my hand is trembling, then it's because such a pretty small hand like yours has never clasped it before. I've grown quite unused to women; that is, I never became used to them; you see, I'm alone ... I don't even know how to talk to them. Even now I don't know whether I've said something stupid to you. Tell me frankly; I should tell you that I don't take offence easily ...'

'No, nothing, nothing; on the contrary. And since you're already asking me to be candid, then I will tell you that women like such timidity; and if you want to know more, then I like it as well, and I won't send you away until we reach my house.'

'You'll make it so,' I began, gasping with delight, 'that at once I'll stop being my timid self, and then – farewell, all my methods! ...'

'Methods? What sort of methods, for what? Now that's not very nice.'

'Guilty, I won't do it anymore, it was a slip of the tongue; but how do you expect me at a moment like this to have no desire ...'

'To be liked, is that it?'

‘Well, yes; yes, for God’s sake, be kind. Consider who I am! You see, I’m already twenty-six years old, but I don’t ever see anyone. So then, how can I speak well, cleverly and to the point? It will be to your advantage if everything comes out in the open ... I don’t know how to keep quiet when my heart is speaking inside me. Well, it doesn’t matter ... Believe it or not, not a single woman, ever, ever! No acquaintances at all! And all I dream of every day is that at long last I will finally meet someone. Oh, if only you knew how many times I’ve fallen in love like that! ...’

‘But how, with whom? ...’

‘Why with nobody, with an ideal, with the one I see in my dreams. I create entire love stories in my dreams. Oh, you don’t know me! It’s true, of course, I couldn’t help meeting two or three women, but what sort of women were they? They were all landladies or something like that. But I’ll make you laugh, when I tell you that several times I have thought of striking up a conversation just like that, without ceremony, with some aristocratic lady on the street, when she is alone, it goes without saying; to speak, of course, timidly, respectfully, deferentially, ardently; to say that I am perishing all alone, so that she wouldn’t drive me away, that I don’t have the means to get to know any woman; to suggest to her that a woman is duty-bound not to spurn the timid entreaty of such an unfortunate man as I. That in the end all that I’m asking her for is merely to say a few brotherly words to me, with sympathy, not to drive me away at the very first moment, to take me at my word, to listen to what I have to say, to laugh at me if she likes, to give me hope, to say a few words to me, just a few words, even if we never meet again afterwards! ... You’re laughing ... But then that’s why I’m telling you ...’

‘Don’t be annoyed; I’m laughing at the fact that you are your own worst enemy, and if you had tried, perhaps you might have succeeded, even though it was all taking place on the street; the simpler, the better ... Not a single kind-hearted woman, provided she wasn’t silly or particularly angry about something at that moment, could have brought herself to send you away without those few words that you pleaded for so timidly ... But what am I saying! Of course, she would have taken you for a madman. You see, I was judging by myself. But I know a lot about how people on this earth live!’

‘Oh, thank you!’ I cried out, ‘you don’t know what you’ve done for me today!’

‘Very well, very well! But tell me, how did you recognize me to be the sort of woman, with whom ... well, whom you considered worthy ... of attention and friendship ... in a word, not a landlady, as you put it. Why did you make up your mind to approach me?’

‘Why? Why? But you were alone, that gentleman was too brazen, it’s night now: you must agree that it was my duty ...’

‘No, no, even earlier, there, on the other side. You wanted to approach me then, didn’t you?’

‘There, on the other side? But I truly don’t know how to answer; I’m afraid ... Do you know, today I was happy; I was walking, singing; I’d been on the outskirts of the city; I’d never experienced such happy moments before. You ... it seemed to me, perhaps ... Well, forgive me for reminding you: it seemed to me that you were crying, and I ... I couldn’t bear to hear it ... it made my heart ache ... Oh, my God! Surely I might feel pangs of anguish for you? Surely it was not a sin to experience brotherly compassion for you! ... Forgive me, I said compassion ... Well, yes, in a word, could I really have offended you by impulsively taking it into my head to approach you? ...’

‘Stop, enough, don’t speak ...’ the girl said, having cast her eyes downward and squeezing my hand. ‘I’m the one who’s guilty for bringing it up; but I’m glad that I wasn’t mistaken about you ... But here, I’m already home; I need to go that way, down the lane, it’s only a stone’s throw away ... Goodbye, thank you ...’

‘But is it possible, is it really possible that we shall never see each other again? ... Is it possible it will end like this?’

‘There, you see,’ the girl said, laughing, ‘at first you wanted just two words, and now ... However, I won’t say anything ... Perhaps we’ll meet ...’

‘I’ll come here tomorrow,’ I said. ‘Oh, forgive me, I’m already making demands ...’

‘Yes, you’re impatient ... you are practically demanding ...’

‘Listen, listen!’ I interrupted her. ‘Forgive me if I again say something not quite ... But here it is: I can’t help coming here tomorrow. I’m a dreamer; I have so little real life that I regard such moments as this one, now, to be so rare that I can’t help repeating these moments in my dreams. I will dream of you all night, for an entire week, all year long. I will come here tomorrow without fail, exactly here, to this very spot, exactly at this time, and I’ll be happy as I recall what happened yesterday. This place is already dear to me.

I already have two or three such places in Petersburg. Once I even shed tears, because of a memory, like you ... Who knows, perhaps ten minutes ago you, too, were crying because of a memory ... But forgive me, I've forgotten myself again; perhaps at one time you were particularly happy here ...'

'Very well,' the girl said, 'perhaps I will come here tomorrow, also at ten o'clock. I see that I can't forbid you ... The fact of the matter is that I have to be here; don't think that I'm arranging a meeting with you; I'm warning you in advance that I need to be here for myself. But, you see ... Well, I'll tell you frankly: it would be nice if you did come; in the first place, there might be some more unpleasantness like today, but that's beside the point ... in a word, I'd simply like to see you ... so I could say a few words to you. Only please don't think ill of me now. Don't think that I arrange meetings so casually ... I would have made one, if ... But let that be my secret! Only we must make an agreement in advance ...'

'An agreement! Speak, tell me, tell me all beforehand; I'll agree to everything, I'm ready for anything,' I exclaimed in delight, 'I'll answer for myself – I will be obedient, respectful ... you know me ...'

'It's precisely because I do know you that I'm inviting you to come tomorrow,' the girl said, laughing. 'I know you completely. But see that you come on the following condition: first (only be so kind as to do what I ask – you see, I'm speaking candidly), don't fall in love with me ... That's impossible, I assure you. I'm prepared to be your friend, here's my hand ... But falling in love is impossible, I beg you!'

'I swear,' I cried, as I clasped her hand ...

'Come, come, don't swear, you see, I know that you're capable of flaring up like gunpowder. Don't condemn me for speaking like this. If you only knew ... I also have no one to whom I can say a word, from whom I can ask advice. Of course, the street is not the place to look for advisers, but you're an exception. I know you so well, as if we had been friends for twenty years ... You won't betray me, will you? ...'

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

'Sleep well; good night – and remember that I have already put myself into your hands. But your exclamation just now put it so nicely: must one really account for every feeling, even for brotherly sympathy! Do you know, that was put so nicely that I suddenly thought I might confide in you ...'

‘By all means, but about what? What’s it about?’

‘Until tomorrow. Let it be a secret in the meantime. It will be better for you that way; although from a distance it will look like a love story. Maybe I’ll tell you tomorrow and maybe not ... I’ll talk with you a bit more first, we’ll get to know each other better ...’

‘Oh, and tomorrow I’ll tell you everything about myself! But what is this? It’s as though a miracle were happening to me ... My God, where am I? Well, tell me, aren’t you glad that you didn’t get angry as another woman would have done and drive me away from the very beginning? Two minutes and you have made me happy forever. Yes! happy; who knows, perhaps you have reconciled me with myself, resolved my doubts ... Perhaps such moments overwhelm me ... Well, I’ll tell you everything tomorrow, you’ll learn everything about me, everything ...’

‘Very well, I accept; and you’ll start first ...’

‘Agreed.’

‘Goodbye!’

‘Goodbye!’

And we parted. I walked all night long; I couldn’t make up my mind to go home. I was so happy ... until tomorrow!

THE SECOND NIGHT

‘Well, so you survived!’ she said to me, laughing and taking hold of both my hands.

‘I’ve been here for two hours already; you have no idea what I’ve been through today!’

‘I know, I know ... But now to the matter at hand. Do you know why I’ve come? Not to talk nonsense like yesterday, you know. Here’s why: we need to act more sensibly from now on. I thought about all this for a long time last night.’

‘But how, how are we to be more sensible? For my part, I’m ready; but really nothing more sensible has ever happened to me in all my life than what is happening now.’

‘Is that so? First of all, please don’t squeeze my hands like that; and second, I want to tell you that I thought about you long and hard today.’

‘Well, and what conclusion did you reach?’

‘Conclusion? I concluded that we must begin all over again, because today I came to the conclusion that I don’t know you at all, that yesterday I acted like a child, like a little girl, and it goes without saying that it turned out that my kind heart was to blame for it all; that is, I praised myself, which is how it always ends when we start examining our actions. And that’s why, in order to correct this mistake, I’ve decided to find out everything I can about you in the most detailed manner. But since there’s no one from whom I can find out anything about you, you must tell me everything yourself, everything that there is to know. Well, what sort of person are you? Quickly – begin, tell me the story of your life.’

‘The story of my life!’ I cried out, frightened. ‘My story! But who told you that I have a story to tell? I don’t have a story ...’

‘But how have you lived if there’s no story?’ she interrupted, smiling.

‘Absolutely without stories of any kind! I lived, as they say, on my own, that is, absolutely alone – alone, completely alone – do you understand what it means to be alone?’

‘But what do you mean by alone? Do you mean you never see anyone?’

‘Oh, no, of course I see people, but nevertheless I am alone.’

‘But can it really be that you don’t talk to anyone?’

‘Strictly speaking, to nobody.’

‘So who are you, then, explain yourself! Wait, I’ll hazard a guess: you probably have a grandmother, like I do. She’s blind, and for as long as I can remember she has never let me go anywhere, so that I’ve practically forgotten how to talk. A couple of years ago I got into a lot of mischief and she saw that she couldn’t control me, so she called me over and pinned my dress to hers with a safety pin – and ever since we sit like that for days on end; she knits a stocking, even though she’s blind; and I sit beside her, sewing or reading a book to her out loud – it’s such a strange way to live, and I’ve been pinned to her like that now for two years already ...’

‘Oh, my God, how dreadful! But no, I don’t have a grandmother like that.’

‘But if you don’t, then how is it that you stay at home? ...’

‘Listen, do you want to know what sort of person I am?’

‘Well, yes, yes!’

‘In the strict sense of the word?’

‘In the very strictest sense of the word!’

‘Well, then, I’m a type.’

‘Type, type! What sort of type?’ the girl cried out, laughing as if she had not had a chance to laugh for a whole year. ‘You’re certainly very amusing company! Look: there’s a bench here; let’s sit down! No one walks by here, no one will hear us, and – you can begin your story! Because you won’t succeed in persuading me otherwise, you do have a story, only you’re concealing it. First of all, what is a type?’

‘A type? A type is an eccentric, a ridiculous person!’ I answered, and burst out laughing myself in response to her childish laughter. ‘He’s a real character. Listen: do you know what a dreamer is?’

‘A dreamer? Excuse me, but of course I do! I’m a dreamer myself! What doesn’t enter my head sometimes when I’m sitting beside my grandmother. Well, then you begin to dream, and you become so lost in your thoughts that before you know it you’re marrying a Chinese prince ... But sometimes dreaming is a good thing! But then, God only knows! Particularly if there’s something to think about without dreaming,’ the girl added, quite serious now.