

# The ADOLESCENT

NEW TRANSLATION



Fyodor  
DOSTOEVSKY

*The Adolescent*

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Translated by Dora O'Brien

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*The Adolescent* first published in 1875

This translation first published by Alma Classics Ltd in 2016

Translation and Notes © Dora O'Brien

Extra Material © Alma Classics Ltd

Cover design: [nathanburtondesign.com](http://nathanburtondesign.com)

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84749-499-3

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# List of Main Characters

Russians have three names: a first name, a patronymic (from the father's first name) and a surname. The polite or formal way to address someone is by his or her first name and patronymic. When on intimate terms or within close family the first name is used, but then mostly in the form of a diminutive (for example, Arkady becomes Arkasha or Arkashka). Some characters are only mentioned by their surname, e.g. Stebelkov, to underline distance. Arkady refers to Andrei Petrovich Versilov as Versilov when feeling distant or antagonistic towards him and as Andrei Petrovich, as would be expected (he refuses to call him father), when showing proper respect for him.

Arkady Makarovich Dolgoruky: the adolescent, who is legally Makar Ivanovich Dolgoruky's son and Andrei Petrovich Versilov's illegitimate son. Diminutives are Arkasha, Arkashka or Arkashenka.

Andrei Petrovich Versilov: Arkady and Liza's father.

Sofia Andreyevna Dolgoruky: wife of Makar Ivanovich Dolgoruky and mother of Arkady and Liza. Also called Sonia by Andrei Petrovich Versilov.

Lizaveta Makarovna: Arkady's sister, legally Makar Ivanovich Dolgoruky's daughter and Andrei Petrovich Versilov's illegitimate daughter. Known as Liza within the family, also called Lizochka, Lizok.

Anna Andreyevna Versilova: Arkady and Liza's half-sister; Versilov's daughter by his first marriage.

Andrei Andreyevich Versilov: Arkady and Liza's half-brother; Versilov's son by his first marriage.

Makar Ivanovich Dolgoruky: Arkady's "legal" father, husband of Sofia Andreyevna and former household serf on the Versilov estate. Also addressed as Makarushka by Tatyana Pavlovna.

Tatyana Pavlovna Prutkova: known as "auntie" in the Versilov household.

Nikolai Semyonovich: Arkady's guardian in Moscow during Arkady's time in grammar school.

Marya Ivanovna: wife of Nikolai Semyonovich and also a favourite of Andronikov.

Alexei Nikanorovich Andronikov: lawyer; involved in Versilov's affairs. Arkady lived in the Andronikov household when he was a small boy in Moscow.

Alexander Semyonovich: the doctor who attends to Arkady and Makar Ivanovich.

Pyotr Ippolitovich: Arkady's landlord in St Petersburg.

Olya (diminutive of Olga): young girl living next door to Vasin.

Darya Onisimovna: mother of Olya.

Prince Nikolai Ivanovich Sokolsky: the “old prince”; father of Katerina Nikolayevna.

Katerina Nikolayevna Akhmakova: the old Prince Sokolsky’s daughter and widow of General Akhmakov. Her father calls her Katia.

Lidia Akhmakova: no patronymic given. Daughter of the late General Akhmakov and Katerina Nikolayevna Akhmakova’s stepdaughter.

Baron Bjoring: German baron who is engaged to Katerina Nikolayevna Akhmakova.

Prince Sergei Petrovich Sokolsky: the “young prince”; also known as Prince Seryozha. Not related to the old Prince Sokolsky, even though he has the same surname.

Alexei Vladimirovich Darzan: acquaintance of the young Prince Sokolsky.

Dergachev: no other names given. Leader of a “socialist” group.

Efim Zverev: no patronymic given. Arkady’s school friend who introduces him to the Dergachev group.

Vasin: member of the Dergachev group. Stebelkov calls him Grisha, as he is his stepfather.

Kraft: only name given. Member of the Dergachev group.

Stebelkov: no other names given. Stepfather of Vasin and a moneylender.

Maurice Lambert: Arkady’s school friend. Of French origin.

Alphonsine Karlovna de Verdègne: Lambert’s French mistress; also known as Alphonsinka.

Nikolai Semyonovich Andreyev: referred to either as Andreyev or more often as *le grand dadais*. One of Lambert’s band.

Pyotr Trishatov: or Petia, also part of Lambert’s band and also referred to as “the boy”.

Semyon Sidorovich: better known as “the pockmarked one”; also part of Lambert’s band.

Maxim Ivanovich Skotoboinikov (the surname means “cattle slaughterer”): chief protagonist in Makar Ivanovich’s story about a cruel merchant.

# The Adolescent

# Part One



# Chapter One

## 1

NABLE TO HOLD BACK, I've sat down to record the story of my first steps on life's path, when I could actually get by without doing so. There's one thing I know for sure: I'll never again sit down to write my autobiography, even if I live to be a hundred. A person must be all too miserably enamoured of his own self to write about himself without shame. My only excuse is that I'm not writing for the reason everyone else writes, in other words, to win the reader's acclaim. If I've suddenly taken it into my head to note down word for word every single thing that's happened to me since last year, I've done so out of an inner urge: that's how affected I am by all that's happened. I'm just recording the events, doing my utmost to avoid irrelevancies and, above all, any literary frills. A writer writes for thirty years and in the end hasn't a clue why he's been writing for so long. I'm not a writer, nor do I want to be one, and I would consider it indecent and vulgar to drag the innermost workings of my soul and a fine description of my feelings out into the literary marketplace. Annoyingly, however, I sense that it will be impossible to get by entirely without describing feelings or recording personal thoughts (maybe even banal ones), such is the corrupting effect of any literary endeavour on a person, even if undertaken only for one's own benefit. Thoughts can actually be absolutely banal because what you value very possibly holds no value at all in someone else's eyes. But all that is by the way. This is the introduction, anyhow: there will be nothing else of the sort. To the task in hand – although there's nothing harder than to get started on some tasks, or maybe even on any task.

## 2

BEGIN, OR RATHER I'D LIKE TO BEGIN, my notes on 19th September of last year, that is, on the very day I first met...  
I But it would be banal to explain so early on who it was I met when no one knows anything yet. I think even the tone is banal – having vowed to keep away from literary frills I lapse into those frills from the very start. Besides, writing intelligibly apparently requires more than just wanting to. I'll also comment that writing in Russian is harder than in any other European language. I've now read through what I've just written and see that I'm a lot more intelligent than appears

from my writing. How is it that what a clever man says turns out to be a lot more stupid than what he leaves unsaid? I've noticed this more than once about myself, and in my verbal relations with people throughout the whole of this last momentous year, and have agonized over it.

Although I'll start from 19th September, I'll still put down a word or two about who I am, where I'd been until that day and therefore at least some of what might have been going on in my head on the morning of 19th September, to clarify things for the reader and perhaps even for myself.

### 3

I'VE COMPLETED MY GRAMMAR-SCHOOL EDUCATION and am now twenty years old.

My surname is Dolgoruky\* and my legal father is Makar Ivanovich Dolgoruky, a former serf in the Versilov household. In this way I am born legitimate, although I am undeniably an illegitimate son, and there's absolutely no **I**doubting my parentage. This is how it happened: twenty-two years ago the landowner Versilov – my father – at the age of twenty-five, paid a visit to his estate in Tula province. I imagine that at that time he was still rather lacking individuality. It's curious that this man, who has so affected me since earliest childhood and has had such a huge influence on my entire spiritual outlook and may even have infected my entire future, this man largely remains even now a complete mystery to me. Actually, more about this later. This is not the way to go about it. As it is, my whole notebook will be full of this man.

He'd just become a widower at that time, that is, at the age of twenty-five. He'd been married to Miss Fanariotova, a lady from high society but not that rich, by whom he had a son and a daughter. I have very little information about this wife, who left him so early, and it's lost among my papers; indeed many private details of Versilov's life have eluded me, as he has always been so proud, arrogant, withdrawn and casual with me, despite some moments when he's shown staggering humility before me. I'll mention, however, as a reference for the future, that he has run through three fortunes in his lifetime, substantial ones too, four hundred thousand roubles or so, and maybe more. Of course he hasn't got a single copeck now...

He went to the country at that time, "God knows why" – at least that's how he put it to me later. His young children were, as usual, not with him, but with relatives; that's how he dealt with his children, legitimate or otherwise, his entire life. There was a considerable number of serfs on the estate, among them the gardener Makar Ivanovich Dolgoruky. I'll mention here, in order to be rid of it

once and for all, that rarely can anyone have been so infuriated by his surname as I have been by mine all my life. It's been foolish of course, but that's how it's been. Every single time I went into a school or met individuals to whom, because of my age, I had to explain myself – in a word, every pathetic little teacher, tutor, inspector, priest, anyone you like – would, when asking my name and, hearing that it was Dolgoruky, invariably find it necessary to add:

“Prince Dolgoruky?”

And each time I had to explain to all those useless people:

“No, *simply* Dolgoruky.”

That *simply* began to drive me mad in the end. I want to put on record the fact that I don't recollect a single exception to this: they all asked the same thing. It was of course completely irrelevant to some; I actually can't think why the devil it might be relevant to anyone. But they all asked, every single one of them. When hearing that I was *simply* Dolgoruky, the asker would usually size me up with a vacant, stupidly indifferent look, evidence that he himself didn't know why he'd asked, and then he'd move away. My schoolmates were the most offensive in their questioning. How does a schoolboy question a new boy? The new boy, lost and confused on his first day at school – any school – is everyone's victim: he gets ordered about, made fun of and treated like a servant. A robust chubby little brat suddenly stops right in front of his victim, checks him out for a few minutes with a long, stern and arrogant stare. The new boy stands silently in front of him and, if he's no coward, looks at him out of the corner of his eye, waiting for what comes next.

“What's your name?”

“Dolgoruky.”

“Prince Dolgoruky?”

“No, *simply* Dolgoruky.”

“Ah, *simply*! You fool!”

And he'd be right: there's nothing more foolish than to be called Dolgoruky if you're not a prince. Through no fault of mine I have to drag this foolishness along with me. Later on, when I became even angrier, my reply to the question: “Are you a prince?” would be:

“No, I'm the son of a household servant, a former serf.”

And once, when I'd already reached the end of my tether, my answer to “Are you a prince?” was a firm:

“No, *simply* Dolgoruky, the illegitimate son of my former master, Mr Versilov.”

I'd already come up with this reply by the time I was in the sixth form\* of the grammar school and although I soon realized that this was stupid I didn't immediately stop behaving like a fool. I remember that one of the teachers – the

only one, by the way – found that I was filled with “ideas of of a vengeful and civic nature”. On the whole, they gave this reply some careful thought, which I resented. In the end, one of my classmates, a very sarcastic lad with whom I’d exchange words only once a year, said to me with a serious air and a sidelong glance:

“Such feelings do you honour of course, and you undoubtedly have something to be proud of; but I wouldn’t make too much of being illegitimate if I were you... you act as though you’re celebrating!”

I stopped *boasting* of being illegitimate after that.

I’ll say it again: it’s very hard to write in Russian: see, I’ve written three pages about being infuriated by my surname and the reader has probably already come to the conclusion that I’m angry that I’m not a prince but simply Dolgoruky. To have to explain and justify myself yet again would be demeaning.

#### 4

O, AMONG THE HOUSEHOLD SERVANTS, of whom there were many besides Makar Ivanovich, there was a young girl, and she was about eighteen when fifty-year-old Makar Dolgoruky suddenly revealed his intention of marrying her. In the days of serfdom, as we know, marriages among servants took place with the masters’ permission, and sometimes even at their bidding. Living on the estate at the time was an auntie. She wasn’t actually my auntie and she was a landowner in her own right; but for some reason she’d been known all her life as Auntie, not just my auntie, but in general, and also in the Versilov family, to whom she was in fact just about related. This was Tatyana Pavlovna Prutkova.

At the time she still owned thirty-five souls\* in the same province and same district. She didn’t exactly manage, but kept a neighbourly eye on Versilov’s estate (of five hundred souls) and, as I heard, did this with the competence of an experienced steward. Still, I’ve no interest at all in her expertise. I simply want to add, setting aside any thought of flattery or favouritism, that Tatyana Pavlovna is a noble and even an original individual.

Not only did she not discourage the sombre Makar Dolgoruky (I’m told he was sombre back then) from his marital leanings but, on the contrary, she fully encouraged him for some reason. Sofia Andreyevna, the eighteen-year-old serf girl – that is to say, my mother – had, several years before, lost both her parents. Her late father, also a serf, who had extraordinary respect for Makar Dolgoruky and was indebted to him in some way, had, six years before, as he lay on his deathbed – they even say it was fifteen minutes before he drew his last breath, so that what followed could have been interpreted as delirium, had he not, being a serf, been

regarded as legally powerless anyway – summoned Makar Dolgoruky, in front of all the servants and in the presence of the priest, and loudly and insistently bequeathed him his daughter, pointing at her: “Raise her and take her for your wife.” Everyone heard it. As for Makar Ivanovich, I don’t know in what spirit he eventually married her, whether with great pleasure or simply to fulfil an obligation. He most probably looked completely detached. This was a man who even then knew how to “present himself”. It’s not that he was an expert interpreter of theological works or literate – although he knew the whole liturgy and especially the lives of some saints, mainly through hearsay – it’s not that he was, so to speak, a courtyard philosopher; he was just obstinate by nature, even reckless at times. He spoke arrogantly, his judgements were irrevocable and in conclusion he “lived respectfully” – which was his own rather surprising way of putting it. Anyway, that’s how he was back then. He, of course, commanded universal respect, but they do say that everyone found him insufferable. Things changed after he left the household: by then he was remembered only as some kind of saint, and a long-suffering one at that. I know this for certain.

As far as my mother is concerned, Tatyana Pavlovna kept her with her until she reached eighteen, despite the steward’s insistence on her being sent to Moscow for training. She gave her some education; that is, she taught her to sew, to cut out garments, to walk in a ladylike way and even to read a little. My mother could never write well. In her eyes her marriage to Makar Ivanovich had been settled long ago, and so she found everything that happened to her just wonderful and as good as could be: she walked to the altar with the most serene expression possible on such an occasion, so that Tatyana Pavlovna herself called her a cold fish. It is from Tatyana Pavlovna that I’ve had all this information regarding my mother’s disposition at that time. Versilov arrived at the estate exactly six months after the wedding.

## 5

JUST WANT TO SAY THAT I’VE NEVER been able to find out or work out to my satisfaction precisely how it all started between him and my mother. I’m absolutely prepared to believe what he himself, blushing, assured me of last year, even though he told me all about it with a most casual and “facetious” air: that there hadn’t been any romance at all and that it happened “just like that”. I believe that and find the expression “just like that” a delight; but I’ve still always wanted to know what might indeed have occurred between them. I’ve always hated and still hate such vile acts. This is of course not just shameless curiosity on my

part. I'll point out that right up until last year I hardly knew my mother. They sent me away early on, for Versilov's convenience, but more of that later. That's why I can't ever imagine what she might have looked like back then. If she really wasn't that pretty, what had a man like Versilov been seduced by at the time? For me this is an important question, because it highlights an extremely curious side to this man. That's why I'm asking this and not out of depravity. That sombre, reserved man, with that sweet candour he produced from the devil knows where (as if from his pocket) whenever he saw the need, told me himself that he was a very "foolish young pup" in those days, and not really sentimental, but that, "just like that", he'd only recently read *Anton the Unlucky* and *Polinka Saks*\* – two literary works that had an immensely civilizing influence on our younger generation of that time. He'd added – in total earnest – that he perhaps came to his country estate because of *Anton the Unlucky*. In what way could this "foolish pup" have started something with my mother? I've just envisaged that if I had at least one reader he'd probably roar with laughter at me, a most ridiculous adolescent who, having held on to his silly innocence, butts in to judge and decide things he doesn't understand. Yes, it's true, I still don't understand, though I admit this not at all with pride, because I know how idiotic such inexperience must appear in a lanky twenty-year-old; I'd only say to that gentleman that he doesn't get it either and I'll prove it to him. I know nothing about women, it's true, nor do I want to, because I'll never give a damn and have given my word. But I do know, however, that some women seduce you with their beauty, or whatever it is, in a split second, while with others you need to chew things over for six months before understanding what it is they have in them. To consider and fall in love with one of the latter is not simply a matter of looking and being open to whatever happens; you also have to have a gift for it. I'm convinced of this, despite the fact that I know nothing on the subject, and if this weren't so, all females would promptly have to be reduced to the level of household pets and kept by one's side purely in that way. Perhaps this would appeal to many.

I do know for sure from several sources that my mother was no beauty, although there is somewhere a portrait of her at that time that I haven't seen. In that case he can't have fallen in love at first sight. If it was just for "fun", Versilov could have chosen someone else, and there was such a young girl, a housemaid, Anfisa Konstantinovna Sapozhkova, who was still unmarried. But a man who had arrived armed with *Anton the Unlucky* and violated, on the grounds of his seigniorial rights, the sanctity of a marriage, even if it were that of one of his serfs, would have felt very ashamed of himself, because, I repeat, only a few months ago – twenty years later – he spoke in total earnest about *Anton the Unlucky*. Yet Anton had only had his horse taken away from him, and in this case it was someone's

wife. Therefore something out of the ordinary must have occurred, which meant that Mademoiselle Sapozhkova lost out (I regard it a victory). I nagged him once or twice last year when it was possible to have a conversation with him – because it wasn't always possible to do so – and with all those questions I noticed that, despite his worldliness and the twenty-year lapse, he grimaced very markedly. But I insisted. Anyway, with that air of worldly fastidiousness that he repeatedly put on in my presence, he once mumbled, I remember, something rather strange: that my mother was one of those “defenceless” creatures, whom you don't actually fall in love with – far from it – but somehow all of a sudden “take pity on”, for their meekness, perhaps – you can't tell. No one knows why, but you pity them for a long time and grow attached... “In a word, my dear boy, it sometimes happens that you can't shake it off.” That's what he said to me; and if it was indeed so, then I'm forced to consider him anything but the foolish pup he made himself out to be back then. That's how I wanted it to be.

However, he then began to assure me that my mother fell in love with him through “submissiveness”: he could have dreamt up that it was because she was a serf! He lied for show, lied against his conscience, against honour and nobility!

I've recorded all this, of course, as if in some praise of my mother, but I've already declared that I knew nothing about the person she was in those days. Besides, I really do know how impenetrable the world she belonged to was, with its pathetic notions, and how inured she'd become to it, ever since childhood, and remained so for the rest of her life. The misfortune happened nevertheless. By the way, I must correct myself here: with my head in the clouds I forgot what I should have mentioned first of all, namely: that it all began between them with *a misfortune*. (I hope the reader won't pretend that he did not immediately get what I'm talking about.) In short, with them it began as a consequence of his seigniorial rights, in spite of Mademoiselle Sapozhkova being ignored. At this point I'll stand up for myself and declare that I'm not at all contradicting myself, because what, O Lord, could such a man as Versilov was at the time talk about with such a creature as my mother, even if he had been irresistibly in love? I've heard from depraved people that more often than not the man, when first becoming intimate with a woman, proceeds in absolute silence, which is of course utterly monstrous and sickening; nevertheless, Versilov, even had he wanted to, couldn't have begun any differently with my mother. Could he possibly have begun by explaining *Polinka Saks* to her? Besides, they were not at all into Russian literature at that point. Quite the opposite, according to him (he did open up once). They would hide in corners, lie in wait for each other on stairways, bounce back, red-faced, like rubber balls, if anyone came by, and the “tyrant landlord” would tremble at the sight of

the meanest of scrubbing maids, despite his seignorial rights. And though it began with a landlord taking advantage of these rights, it didn't end up that way; it's actually impossible to explain and makes it all the more obscure. Even the rate at which their love developed remains a mystery, because the first rule of such men as Versilov is immediately to discard the woman once their objective has been achieved. And that's not what happened. To go astray with a pretty flirtatious serf girl (and my mother wasn't flirtatious) was for a depraved "young pup" (and they were actually all depraved, every single one of them, liberals and reactionaries alike), not only possible but inevitable, especially considering his romantic situation as a young widower as well as his idle lifestyle. But to love her all his life, that just about beats everything. I can't guarantee that he loved her, but what is true is that he's dragged her along with him all his life.

I've asked a lot of questions, but there's one most important one which, I'll note, I've not dared put to my mother, despite the fact that I've grown close to her this last year and have besides, like a rude and ungrateful pup who believes that *he's been wronged*, been quite blunt with her. My question is this: how could she herself, married for six months by then and still weighed down by all the notions of the legality of marriage, weighed down like a helpless fly, she who respected her Makar Ivanovich no less than a god, how could she, in a matter of two weeks, have been drawn into such a sin? My mother wasn't a depraved woman, was she? Far from it: I'll tell you now that it would be hard to imagine a purer soul than she has been her entire life. Perhaps it can be put down to her not being fully herself – not in the way lawyers nowadays use this explanation in reference to murderers and thieves – but in the way a strong sensation can fatally and tragically overwhelm certain simple-hearted victims. Who knows, maybe she fell hopelessly in love with... the style of his clothes, the Parisian parting in his hair, his French accent – yes, French, of which she didn't understand a word – a romance he sang at the piano; she fell in love with something she'd never seen or heard before (and he was very handsome) and in one go she fell desperately in love with him as a whole, his style and his romances. I've heard that in the days of serfdom this did sometimes happen to household maids, even to the most upright ones. I do understand that, and anyone who puts this solely down to serfdom and "submissiveness" is a scoundrel! So, could that young man have had such sheer seductive power in him to be able to attract such a hitherto pure creature and, above all, one so alien to him, from an entirely different world, towards such obvious ruin? That it would lead to ruin I do hope my mother always understood; though she probably didn't think of ruin at all when she first went to him. But that's how it always is with "defenceless" creatures: they know that it means ruin, but they still leap into it.

Having sinned, they immediately repented. He told me, with some humour, that



he sobbed on Makar Ivanovich's shoulder after he'd summoned him to his study for that purpose and she... she meanwhile lay somewhere unconscious, in her closet in the servants' quarters...

6

UT ENOUGH OF QUESTIONS and scandalous details. Versilov, having acquired my mother from Makar Ivanovich, soon left, and from then on, as I mentioned above, began to drag her along with him almost everywhere he went, except on those occasions when he went away for long periods of time. Then he left her mostly in the care of Auntie, Tatyana Pavlovna Prutkova, that is, who always appeared out of nowhere at such moments. They lived in Moscow; they lived on other country estates and in towns, even abroad and in the end in St Petersburg. More of that later, if it's even worth mentioning. I'll simply say that a year after she left Makar Ivanovich I appeared, and a year after that my sister, and, about ten or eleven years on, a sickly little boy, my younger brother, was born and died a few months later. My mother's good looks disappeared after the latest agonizing childbirth – at least so I was told: she soon began to age and grow sickly.

However, the relationship with Makar Ivanovich never ended. Wherever the Versilovs were, whether they stayed in one place for a few years or moved on, Makar Ivanovich never failed to give the “family” news about himself. A strange kind of relationship developed, partly solemn and almost formal. Among the gentry such a relationship would certainly have had a comical side to it, I know that; but it wasn't the case here. Twice a year, no more, no less, letters were sent, all extraordinarily alike. I've seen them; there was little that was personal in them; on the contrary, as far as possible there was only solemn news about the most general events and general feelings, if feelings can be described that way. At first there was news about his own health, followed by enquiries about their health, then good wishes, solemn regards and blessings – that was all. It seems that the appropriate tone and a good knowledge of how to behave was, in that milieu, reliant precisely on that general and impersonal approach. “To our dear and esteemed wife Sofia Andreyevna I send my humblest regards...” “To our dear children I send a father's inviolable blessing.” All the children were named in turn as their numbers grew, myself included. I must add that Makar Ivanovich was sharp-witted enough never to name “His Honour the most esteemed Mr Andrei Petrovich” “his benefactor”, although he never failed to send him his humblest regards in every letter, asking for his favour and God's blessing. My mother always

promptly sent her replies to Makar Ivanovich and they were all written in that same vein. It goes without saying that Versilov took no part in that correspondence. Makar Ivanovich wrote from various corners of Russia, from towns and monasteries, where he sometimes stayed for long periods of time. He became what is known as a wanderer.\* He never asked for anything, but every three years he invariably came home for a visit and would stay with my mother, who, as was always the case, had her own lodgings, separate from Versilov's apartment. I'll have to say something about that later, but at this point all I'll mention is that Makar Ivanovich didn't spend his time lounging on sofas in the living room, but would modestly settle somewhere behind a screen. He never stayed long, five days perhaps, or a week.

I've failed to mention that he adored and respected his surname "Dolgoruky". That's ludicrously stupid, of course. The most stupid thing about it is that he liked the name so much because there were princes named Dolgoruky. An odd, quite topsy-turvy notion!

If I've said that the whole family was always together, this didn't include me, of course. I was rejected, in a way, and almost from birth handed over to strangers. There wasn't a particular intention behind this, it just happened to work out that way. My mother, after giving birth to me, was still young and pretty, and he therefore needed her with him, and a screaming baby was of course a hindrance, especially when travelling. That's why I hardly ever saw my mother until I was twenty, except for fleeting occasions. This wasn't because of my mother's feelings, but because of Versilov's haughty disregard for others.

## 7

OW FOR SOMETHING completely different.

A month earlier, that is to say a month before 19th September, I'd taken the decision in Moscow to break off all ties with them and to withdraw into my idea for good. That's how I record it: "withdraw into my idea", because it best describes my main idea – the one that I live for. What my "idea" consists of will be explored more than enough later. In the isolation of my many years spent daydreaming in Moscow, the idea came to me in the sixth form of grammar school, and it has probably not left me even for an instant since. It has swallowed up my whole existence. Before then I'd lived among dreams, I'd lived from very early childhood in the usual realm of fantasies, but with the appearance of this all-consuming idea of mine my dreams gained focus and took on a certain form; my foolish dreams turned into rational ones. School didn't

interfere with my dreams or with my idea. I will add, however, that I ended my last school year badly, while up till the seventh form I'd always come among the first; but this resulted from that idea and the possibly false conclusion that I drew from it. So it wasn't school that interfered with my idea, but my idea that interfered with my schooling, as it did with my going to university. After graduating from grammar school, I promptly decided to break radically not only with everybody, but if need be with the entire world, even though I was only nineteen at the time. I wrote to the person concerned in St Petersburg, using the appropriate channels, to leave me in peace for good, not to send me money any longer for my keep and, if possible, to forget me altogether – if, of course, anyone did remember me – and finally that “under no circumstances” would I go to university. I was faced with an indisputable dilemma: either university and further education or the postponement of an immediate implementation of my idea for another four years. I opted for the idea without a qualm because it made mathematical sense to me. Versilov, my father, whom I'd only seen once in my life and only for an instant when I was ten years old – yet in that instant he'd managed to affect me deeply – Versilov, in answer to my letter, which, by the way, had not been sent to him personally, summoned me to St Petersburg with a letter written in his own hand, promising me a private position. A summons from this proud and cold man, haughty and neglectful of me, and who, having brought me into this world and sent me off to live with strangers, not only didn't know me at all, but never even showed any remorse (who knows, perhaps he only had a vague notion of my existence, as it later transpired that he wasn't the one who'd paid for my keep in Moscow, but others) – a summons from this man, I tell you, who'd all of a sudden remembered me and deigned to write to me in his own hand – this summons tempted me and sealed my fate. I was strangely pleased, by the way, that in his note (just one small page) he didn't mention a word about university, didn't ask me to reconsider my decision, didn't reproach me for not wanting to study – in a word, he didn't put forth any parental claptrap as is usually the case, and yet this wasn't really any good either on his part in that it accentuated his neglect of me. I also decided to go because it didn't in the least stand in the way of my main dream. “I'll see what happens,” I reflected. “At any rate, I'm only getting involved with them for a while, even perhaps for a very short time. But the moment I see that this step, albeit a conditional and small one, takes me away from what is *paramount* I'll instantly break with them, give it all up and withdraw into my shell.” Specifically into my shell! “I'll hide in it like a tortoise.” I was very fond of that comparison. “I won't be on my own,” I went on considering as I rushed about like a madman during those last few days in Moscow. “I'll never be on my own again, as I've been for so many horrible years before now: I'll have ‘my idea’, which I'll never betray, even if I

were to like them all so much and they made me happy and I spent even ten years living with them!” It’s this impression, I’ll mention straight away – it’s this very ambivalence of my plans and goals which first took shape in Moscow and was not to leave me for even an instant in St Petersburg – for I don’t know whether there ever was a single day in St Petersburg when I didn’t set myself a deadline for breaking with them and moving away – this ambivalence, I tell you, was apparently one of the main reasons for the many careless steps I took that year, for my many vile, even petty acts and, naturally, foolish ones.

Of course I had all of a sudden a father who’d never been there before. I was intoxicated with the thought as I got ready in Moscow and then again on the train. A father didn’t mean much, and I wasn’t fond of affectionate displays, but this man had not wanted to know me and had humiliated me when all those years I’d been rapturously absorbed in dreams of him (if dreaming can be described in that way). Every daydream of mine, since childhood, spoke of him: each one hovered around him, and ultimately led to him. I don’t know whether I hated him or loved him, but he filled my entire future, all the expectations of my life – and this happened of its own accord, as I grew up.

There was yet another powerful circumstance, another temptation that influenced my leaving Moscow and that had made my heart leap and pound already three months before my actual departure – so before there’d been any mention of St Petersburg! I was drawn to that uncharted ocean because I could actually enter it as lord and master of other people’s destinies – and what people they were! But the feelings churning inside me were unstinting, not despotic – I forewarn you of this, so that my words may not be misinterpreted. Versilov might also have thought (if he even deigned to think of me) that on his way to him was a small boy, just out of school, an adolescent in awe of the world. Yet I already knew everything there was to know about him, and I had on me a most important document for which he (I now know this for certain) would have given some years of his life if I were to disclose the secret to him. But I realize that I’ve been writing in riddles. Feelings can’t be described without giving the facts. There’ll be more than enough about all this in due course, which is why I’ve picked up my pen. But writing like this always results in gibberish or haziness.

## 8

T LAST, IN ORDER TO MOVE once and for all on to the 19th, I’ll just briefly say in passing, so to speak, that I found them all, that is Versilov, my mother and my sister (whom I saw for the first time in my life), in very difficult circumstances,