

Ivan
Turgenev

First Love





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first love

*Translated from the Russian by Isaiah Berlin
With an Introduction by V. S. Pritchett*



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FIRST LOVE

Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev was born in 1818 in the province of Oryol, and suffered during his childhood with a tyrannical mother. After the family had moved to Moscow in 1827 he entered St Petersburg University where he studied philosophy. When he was nineteen he published his first poems and, convinced that Europe contained the source of real knowledge, went to the University of Berlin. After two years he returned to Russia and took his degree at the University of Moscow. In 1844 he fell in love with Pauline Garcia-Viardot, a young Spanish singer, who influenced the rest of his life. He followed her on her singing tours in Europe and spent long periods in the French house of herself and her husband, both of whom accepted him as a family friend. After 1856 he lived mostly abroad, and he became the first Russian writer to gain a wide reputation in Europe; he was a well-known figure in Parisian literary circles, where his friends included Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers, and an honorary degree was conferred on him at Oxford. His series of six novels, which reflects a period of Russian life from the 1830s to the 1870s, are *Rudin* (1856), *Home of the Gentry* (1859), *On the Eve* (1860), *Fathers and Sons* (1862), *Smoke* (1867) and *Virgin Soil* (1877). He also wrote plays, which include the comedy *A Month in the Country*, short stories and novellas, of which *First Love* (1860, written at the height of his powers) is the most famous, and the influential *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1852), as well as literary essays and memoirs. He died in Paris in 1883 after being ill for a year, and was buried in Russia.

Isaiah Berlin Om was President of the British Academy; at Oxford University he was a Fellow of All Souls College, Professor of Social and Political Theory, the first President of Wolfson College, and an Honorary Fellow of four other Colleges. He received many other honours and awards including the Jerusalem Prize in 1977, the Erasmus Prize in 1983 and the Agnelli Prize in 1987. His superb translations of Turgenev's *First Love* and *A Month in the Country* are both published in the Penguin Classics, and his 1970 Romanes Lecture on Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* appears in the Penguin Classics edition of that novel. Among his many other publications are *Karl Marx* (1939), *Russian Thinkers* (1978), *Against the Current* (1979), *Personal Impressions* (1980), *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (2000) and *Liberty* (2002). Sir Isaiah Berlin died 6 November 1997. On the occasion of his death he was described by *The Times* as 'one of the most influential figures in the intellectual life of the country'.

Sir Victor Pritchett was Visiting Professor at several American universities and President of the Society of Authors. He received an Honorary Litt.D. from Leeds University in 1972 and from Columbia University, New York, in 1978. He was made a Companion of Honour in 1993. Apart from his critical writings, he wrote a large number of short stories and novels, notably *Mr Beluncle* and *Dead Man Leading*, as well as *The Gentle Barbarian*, a life of Turgenev. The first part of his autobiography, *A Cab at the Door* (1968), received a Royal Society of Literature Award and was followed by *Midnight Oil* (1971). A volume of *The Complete Short Stories* was published in 1990 and *The Complete Essays* in 1991. V. S. Pritchett died in March 1997 and in its obituary the *Guardian* eulogized him as 'one of the towering English literary figures of the century'.

Introduction

In Turgenev's *Home of the Gentry* there is a minor but remarkable scene which marks a difference between what the Russian and European reader expected from their novelists. We see the troubled and practical landowner Lavretsky sitting up all night in dispute with an old university acquaintance who has dropped in, a naive fellow called Mikhalevich, who has failed to achieve the hopes of his romantic youth and has gone downhill to become the clerk to a contractor who collects the tax on spirits. Eagerly Mikhalevich cries out to Lavretsky:

'I want above all to know what you are like, what are your views, your convictions, what you have become, what life has taught you.'

Drily Lavretsky-Turgenev notes that his friend 'still preserved the phraseology of 1830'.

The call to bare the breast and state one's absolute convictions is fundamental to the Russian novelists of that century. It is still a demand in our own – except that where there was once a choice now none is permitted. The State has settled the matter.

We note the irony of Lavretsky-Turgenev's comment on his friend. Turgenev is very much the outsider, a diagnostician and collector of convictions. His own were those of Western liberal humanism and he believed strongly in the values of Western civilization. As a writer and as a person he struck our grandfathers as the most European of Russians: in the Goncourt phrase: 'le doux géant, l'aimable barbare'. He had passed long periods of his life in France and Germany as an expatriate. He had the allure for us of the aristocrat, sportsman and poet in an industrial age. He was a vast reader in English, French, German and Spanish literature: he worshipped Goethe; he had even translated plays of Shakespeare and had been eccentric enough to translate Burns and Crabbe. Henry James was enchanted by 'his beautiful mind', and Flaubert loved his conversation.

Yet, somewhere about the turn of the century, the great figures of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky replaced him in European esteem. He was older than they: despite the world-wide success of his last novel, *Virgin Soil*, in the late seventies, he seemed old-fashioned. He evoked a Russia which was long dead and gone, lacked the range and urgency of his successors and, unlike these preachers, he was thought of – quite wrongly – as a painter of miniatures and, unfashionably, the pure artist. Yet like Dostoyevsky he believed that 'art must not be burdened with all kinds of aims', that 'without art men might not wish to live on earth', and that 'art will always live man's real life with him'.

Fortunately there are many signs that this diminution of Turgenev's achievement is no longer acceptable. Those who read his first novel *Rudin* in our own 1930s could see Russian social history of a hundred years before, transplanted in our own century. English Rudins abounded in the Spanish Civil War; and when today we read *Fathers and Sons* we meet Bazarov the anarchist, even the incipient terrorist of today. We too are acquiring the habit of those 'convictions' we smiled at and may even see

ourselves in Turgenev's own situation. The warring movements in the nineteenth century no longer seem to be peculiar to Russia but to have reappeared in the modern world. As Isaiah Berlin in his eloquent introduction to that novel wrote:

The situation that [Turgenev] diagnosed in novel after novel, the painful predicament of the believer in Western values, a predicament one thought peculiarly Russian is today familiar everywhere. So too is his own oscillating, uncertain position, his horror of reactionaries, his fear of the barbarous radicals, mingled with passionate anxiety to be understood and approved by the ardent young. Still more familiar is his inability, despite his greater sympathy for the party of protest, to cross over unreservedly to either side in the conflict of ideas, classes and, above all, generations. The figure of the well-meaning, troubled, self-questioning liberal witness to the complex truth, which, as a literary type, Turgenev virtually created in his own image, has today become universal... The doubts Turgenev raised have not been stilled. The dilemma of morally sensitive, honest and intellectually responsible men at a time of acute polarization of opinion has, since his time, become world-wide.

What has been forgotten until recent years is that Turgenev was more than a master of Russian prose, and that, although he described himself as apolitical in the sense that he hesitated in politics, his convictions or moral concern were strong. To understand the foundation of his complex character we must go back to his early life and upbringing.

Turgenev was born in 1818 in the provincial capital of Orel some 300 miles south-west of Moscow and grew up in a period when all hope of liberal reform was repressed. The family lived on the estate his mother, Varvara Petrovna Lutinov, had brought to her marriage with a handsome penniless cavalry officer who had been forced to marry her for her wealth. Varvara Petrovna was one of those Russian Cinderellas who turn into arrogant viragos avenging their early miseries. Short, ugly, with glaring eyes under heavy brows, her mouth large, sensual and cruel, like many ugly women she could be charming, but her nature was violent and capricious. She ruled her huge estate of 5,000 serfs, which was almost a remote nation in itself, like an absolute sovereign. Her serfs could not marry without her permission; she could send any of them to a 'settlement', to prison or Siberia, for a trifle. In two of Turgenev's short stories – and his stories rather than his novels tell us everything about his early life we see his mother in action, persecuting a servant in *Mumu* and in *Punin and Baburin* brutally dismissing a gardener's boy because he did not give the required smile and her serf clerk for protesting. The dismissal meant they would become vagrants. She had forty house serfs in her mansion at Spasskoye and they included not only her maids and butler, but tutors, her doctor, her clerks, her tanners, shoemakers, dressmakers and paper-makers, and her orchestra. She came of a brutal family, less distinguished than her husband's. The Lutinovs were a barbarous lot who had robbed their way to fortune. Murder had been known among them: a grandmother had suffocated her page – Turgenev tells us – and there is a strong suggestion that Varvara Petrovna ran away from her stepfather's house when she was a girl because he had tried to rape her.

The Turgenevs were a distinguished family with a long tradition of service to the Tsar and of success in intellectual and diplomatic life, but their money had melted, their estate was not much more than a farm. After his marriage, Turgenev's father resigned his commission and settled to the idle life of a country gentleman. Riding, shooting birds and pursuing women were his passions. He did not love his ugly wife who, like his son, adored him. All women were drawn by his charm and his fashionably feminine good looks. *First Love*, one of Turgenev's most powerful stories, gives the following portrait of his father, a man of small education who spoke Russian badly – family conversation was in French – and whose character was 'elaborately serene'.

He took scarcely any interest in my education, but never hurt my feelings; he respected my freedom; he displayed – if one can put it that way – a certain courtesy towards me; only he never let me come at all close to him. I loved him...he seemed to me the ideal man – and God knows how passionately attached to him I should have been if I had not felt constantly the presence of his restraining hand. Yet he could, whenever he wished, with a single word, a single gesture, instantly make me feel complete trust in him.

He remembered two of his father's sayings: 'Take what you can yourself, and don't let others get you into their hands; to belong to oneself, that is the whole thing in life.' And on another occasion he uttered words that the son would have reason to dwell on later in his life: 'Beware of the love of women; beware of that ecstasy-that slow poison.' What did he mean by that? Did he mean that he had let 'others' put him into the hands of this domineering woman and that he was perforce a spectator in his own family? In this role of spectator and in his susceptibility to young women, Ivan was his father's son.

The father died young. The love Ivan had now to fear was his mother's: she poured her frustrated love of her husband upon her two sons, upon Ivan the favourite especially. This did not prevent her from birching the boys – indeed once she fainted while doing so. As he grew up she flirted with him; he became the intermediary between her and the servants she tormented and the peacemaker of the terrorized household. Her tyrannies became more extravagant: as the boys grew up she tried to rule them by keeping them short of money, indeed when they became men and she was dying she plotted to swindle them out of their inheritance. If Ivan was thought of as an evasive, irresolute and will-less man in later years, one has to suppose that his mother had broken his will.

But not in the deepest part of his nature: there were two gains from his life at Spasskoye. As we know from the story of *Punin and Baburin* – a late story – his early awakening to literature came from the company of the serfs and in his life as a sportsman when he went out shooting with them on the vast estate: he became the passionate observer of nature and the enemy of serfdom. The famous album, *A Sportsman's Sketches*, which he began to write in his late twenties and thirties, did more for the emancipation of the serfs than any other piece of Russian protest.

Before the sketches were written Turgenev went through the conventional education given to gifted young men of the Russian upper class, at the universities of Moscow, St Petersburg and Berlin. He declared himself a Westerner and was soaked in romantic German idealism: Russia must learn from the West. When he returned from his travels in Europe he became known as a dandy of the fashionable drawing-rooms of St Petersburg and as a minor Romantic poet, his head full of Byron and Italianate themes. The gnome-like little boy had grown into a tall and lazily heavy giant. His chestnut hair and his stone-blue eyes, his wit, the flow of malicious stories that came from him, his elegance and manners enchanted the women and indeed all his life these graces, and his lisping voice which grew ridiculously shrill when he was excited, gave him a spell even when the shrillness aroused mockery. But he had intellectual qualities far beyond those of the poetaster and it was largely due to the influence of the great Radical critic Belinsky that he eventually found his direction: a committal to the realities of Russian life.

And there was one more decisive, yet in some ways calamitous, influence. Turgenev described himself as a man 'saturated with femininity', unable to write unless he experienced what he called *l'épanouissement de l'être* brought about by love. He had had his sexual adventures with serf women and had even had children by two of them; with women of his own class he was given to the

sentimental *amitié amoureuse*. Now, in St Petersburg he suddenly felt passion. He fell in love with a young married woman, a Spanish opera singer, Pauline Viardot. She may have become briefly his mistress when he followed her and her husband to Paris; it was largely on her account that he became an expatriate for long periods of his life and for this Russian critics never forgave him. His friends were mystified by his blind devotion to her, her husband and their children. It was noted that she was as ugly and domineering as his mother and strictly conventional. He seems to have drawn on the early years of the affair for his play *A Month in the Country*, although the characters and scene have been transformed. In that play Rakitin-Turgenev talks of putting an end to this 'consumptive' passion. That it lasted all his life seems a perversity: he had become, perhaps, a Narcissus in love with his own love. One advantage of the early years at Courtavenel, her house outside Paris, was that he was confronted by a fellow artist who put her art before everything: the example awakened his will to write. He called Courtavenel 'the cradle of his fame', for it was there that he began to write *A Sportsman's Sketches*. At least two of them, *The Singers* and *Byezhin Prairie*, are masterly studies of peasant character and wonderfully observant of the landscape on the edge of the steppe. The problem of serfdom usually lies off the scene; in presenting the serfs as natural, feeling, changing human beings his art liberates them. Each one is more alive and human than his 'situation'. To call their lot 'a problem' would have dehumanized them.

When he was a boy Turgenev disturbed people by his prolonged, solitary staring. He was looking at people, at skies, fields, trees and birds as they moved and changed from moment to moment. Nothing is still. There is a line in *Byezhin Prairie* in which he catches even the moment between seeing and not seeing:

The moon at last had risen: I did not notice it at first: it was such a tiny crescent.

And in his portraits of the people they are real because he seems to show the hour of the day passing through them as he watches.

There was no settled or established tradition of storytelling and novel-writing in Russian prose literature when Turgenev began to write in the forties. He is one of the disparate founders and innovators. Just before him there were two very different guiding lights: the superb verse narrative of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* which offered to novelists the classic Russian love story and, far less spontaneous, Pushkin's prose tales. After Pushkin there was Gogol whose realism broke into chaotic or poetic fantasy: he dived into comic disorder and the grotesque – his language was malign, rich, his imagination was so secretive, devious and conniving that it spread into the underground of character and situation. Turgenev's talent was for the classical and concise. He was, by his upbringing, the detached spectator and, above all, his work was shaped. He sought to tell the observable truth. Another contemporary was Lermontov who was killed in a duel, a violent and romantic Byron. There was no violence, no taste for danger, for romantic *actes gratuites* or dramatic pungency in Turgenev – though one sees touches of Lermontov in early stories, like *The Jew* and *The Duellist*, and of Gogol, too, in others.

The central preoccupation, deeply rooted in Turgenev's mind, was with establishing the idea of civilization – which he eventually spelled out letter by letter – and the autonomy of art. As a novelist his part was to see the Russian situation in terms of living human beings, to begin with them and watch how philosophic and political ideas affected them, truthfully and not as a preacher. At the

beginning he saw that the gentry class to which he belonged was prolific in ‘superfluous’ or unnecessary men who did not pull their weight and he was later to conclude that their character, like his own, contained a continuous struggle between Hamlet’s scepticism and Don Quixote’s chivalrous and reckless idealism. The first of his Hamlets appears in *The Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District*, which has a good deal of Gogol-like farce in it. We see the characters assembled at an all-male party and we hear the absurd Hamlet’s confession of his burning incompetence in growing up, marrying, his troubles as a landowner and as a widower who cannot even be sad. We laugh and are half ashamed of our laughter. The story reveals one of Turgenev’s chief gifts: he is able to convey how everyone is aware of everyone else as if they were in telepathic communication with one another’s passing thoughts. Turgenev’s prose has a liquid quality which links mind and feelings, and conveys how much we glide in and out of one another’s minds; this seems to be a projection of his astonishing conversational gifts and is important because, without such gifts, the serious discussions about convictions would become stodgy and sermon-like set pieces: they never are. Turgenev’s liquidity is beautifully serpentine and is prophetic of the manner of Proust. Another story, written in the old-fashioned form of an exchange of letters, this between a man and woman who have failed in love, is on a similar theme. It is called *A Correspondence* and contains a diagnosis:

We Russians have set ourselves no other task but the cultivation of our personalities – so we get one monster more in the world, one more of those worthless creatures in whom habits of self-consciousness distort the very striving for truth.

Turgenev’s stories run to five volumes and there is no doubt that, accomplished as the early period is, his finest work belongs to the period that opens with *First Love*.

First Love is a study of the awakening from innocence: of how a boy of sixteen becomes aware of the nature of adult love. As is usual in Turgenev’s stories, the tale turns on the growth of knowledge of the heart. Love is not a simple yet tormenting rapture of adolescence; it is revealed as an awe-inspiring complex passion which leaves its trail of jealousies and guilt and a completely changed view of the meaning of life. Like the later love stories in *Torrents of Spring* and in *Smoke*, it has a psychological and animal force, rare in Turgenev’s early work because of his romantic idealism or the conventions of the time. He once told the Goncourts when they were discussing the sexual act that, afterwards, he did not feel sadness or relief – as they said they did – but, rather, felt *en rapport* with his surroundings. ‘Things take on a reality which they lacked a moment before. I am aware of myself, the table becomes a table again. The relationship between myself and nature is restored, re-established and begins again.’ The boy in this story does not experience the act, but he becomes aware of an aspect of reality that he had not conceived to be possible.

First Love begins as a comedy. A sordid and down-at-heel Princess has come to the neighbourhood bringing with her a wild and capricious daughter, Zinaida, who is obviously used as bait to young men by the mother. The youth is faintly aware that she is not, as his mother says, ‘comme il faut’ but he is entranced by Zinaida. Love, for Turgenev, is like some brief summer whirlwind or storm that sweeps through his people and transforms them. Such a storm, a freak of indifferent nature, catches the boy. His head is turned by the girl and by her antics as she plays off her comic suitors one against another. All is quietly set out in the leisurely manner of Turgenev’s comedies until the moment when, in his sulky jealousy, the boy supposes she has made a decision and has chosen a lover. Who is he? He watches her from his parents’ garden at night, carrying a knife with him and determined to kill the

man who is visiting her. The man is his own father. Melodrama – but no, that is not Turgenev's way. We see him drop the knife, his jealousy turning to horror, to despair, then to awe and admiration. No, he understands the situation of the girl, her embarrassed tenderness with him, the quarrels that are beginning between his parents. One evening when he goes out riding with his father outside the town he is told to dismount while the father rides on. The wait is long. The boy looks for his father and finds him standing in the street at an open window of a strange house, talking to Zinaida. He listens. She is obviously refusing his father something, possibly telling him to break with her mother or her ludicrous, cynical circle of admirers. There is one of those moments of stillness or timelessness which Turgenev knows perfectly how to catch: it is the mark of all his tales that they proceed from one point of test to the next, like the acts of a play.

My father gave a shrug of his shoulders, and set his hat straight on his head, which with him was always a sign of impatience...then I could hear the words '*Vous devez vous séparer de cette...*' Zinaida straightened herself and held out her hand. Then something unbelievable took place before my eyes. My father suddenly lifted his riding-crop, with which he had been flicking the dust off the folds of his coat, and I heard the sound of a sharp blow struck across her arm which was bared to the elbow. It was all I could do to prevent myself from crying out. Zinaida quivered – looked silently at my father – and raising her arm slowly to her lips, kissed the scar which glowed crimson upon it.

The boy slinks away as the father bounds into the house. 'This is love, this is passion,' the boy thinks. 'But how could one bear to be struck by any hand, however dear – and yet, it seems, one can.'

We have seen the caprices, the comic antics and mooning aspect of love; we have seen feelings change into their opposite. Even the boy's worship of his father dissolves in the events of his ordinary life as a student. Life is affirmed not only in its intense moments but in its continuing: the fact that the boy cannot know all, indeed that no one knows all, gives Turgenev's realism its truth-telling quality. In this his realism is finer than Tolstoy's assertion of all knowledge and absolute judgement. A few months later the father has a stroke, persuades his wife to send 'a considerable sum of money' to someone in Moscow. We are left with a surmise and then he dies.

But for Turgenev, surmise is never the end: the storm sends out its ripples long after the climax has passed and they seem even to pass into timelessness and to spend themselves in a haunting sense of an endless space that appears to surround us and where we become nothing:

During the past month, I had suddenly grown much older, and my love, with all its violent excitements and its torments, now seemed even to me so very puny and childish and trivial beside that other unknown something which I could hardly begin to guess at, but which struck terror into me like an unfamiliar, beautiful but awe-inspiring face whose features one strains in vain to discern in the gathering darkness.

We hear of Zinaida's death in childbirth:

So that was the final goal towards which this young life, all glitter and ardour and excitement...went hurrying along.

The love stories of Turgenev cannot be dismissed as 'fairy stories' remote from his concern with the 'Russian situation', though it is true that he became increasingly concerned with the frontiers of consciousness and with the imagination as it exists for its own disturbing sake. The habit of social diagnosis remains. Zinaida is a hapless *déclassée*, obliged to gamble with her beauty; she is not as worldly or as dishonest as the climbing Irina of *Smoke* – the daughter of a corrupt General – whose behaviour caused her to be written off contemptuously by the latest slang word 'fantasque'. Nor is Zinaida an overwhelming intriguer in lust, like Maria Polozov in *Torrents of Spring* who has serf blood in her and has married a cynical landowner who is impotent and thinks only of his belly. Maria

is *Vénus toute entière a sa proie attachée*, indifferent to those she destroys. She represents the anarchy inherent in society and her sexual passion is the poison that is the corrupter of conscience. She will drag her lover to Paris, away from his responsibilities to the people on his Russian estate.

Turgenev's love stories are a progress through the aspects of love as it changes from generation to generation among the Russians of his time. The central character of *A Lear of the Steppes* is a free peasant who gives his property to his daughters and we see love in them connected with the greed for power and property. There is a period in which Turgenev is fascinated, both rationally and irrationally by the vogue of spiritualism: but this has links with ancient Russian superstition, particularly with bewitchment in the sense of this being the hypnotizing power of the imagination. Such stories, like the excellent *Faust* and the strange *Klara Militch*, are examples of a moral curiosity about the part played by the unconscious. In his love stories he is deeply aware of love as a spell; he is the poet with a sensibility open to the value his people give to their own strangeness. He speaks for them as the great artist must, whether they are innocent, fated, self-sacrificing or grossly triumphant in sensual greed and without conscience. His gift is self-effacement and for a transparency through which they can be seen as inwardly and outwardly they are. One can almost say that one *hears* them, as if they were the notes of a haunting sonata passing from one movement to the next. Perhaps there – and not in his own self-love or his masochism – lay the strange bond with Pauline Viardot, and it is the great merit of Isaiah Berlin's translation of *First Love* that the notes of the sonata are clearly and truthfully struck, by a writer whose knowledge of his own language and ours is impeccable.

V. S. PRITCHETT

The guests had left long ago. The clock struck half-past twelve. Only the host, Sergey Nicolayevich and Vladimir Petrovich remained in the room.

The host rang the bell and ordered supper to be taken away.

‘Well then, that’s agreed,’ he said, settling himself more deeply into his armchair and lighting a cigar. ‘Each of us is to tell the story of his first love. You begin, Sergey Nicolayevich.’

Sergey Nicolayevich, a round little man with a fair, plump face, looked first at his host and then up at the ceiling.

‘In my case,’ he finally said, ‘there was no first love. I began with the second.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Oh, it’s quite simple. I was eighteen when I first began to court a very charming young girl, but I did this as if it was nothing new to me, exactly as I later flirted with others. Actually I fell in love for the first and last time when I was about six, with my nurse, but that was a very long time ago. I do not now remember the details of our relationship – and even if I did, how could they possibly interest anyone?’

‘Well then, what are we to do?’ the host began. ‘There was nothing very remarkable about my first love either: I didn’t fall in love with anyone until I met Anna Ivanovna, my present wife, and then it all went perfectly smoothly. Our fathers arranged the whole thing. We soon grew fond of one another and married shortly after. My tale is soon told. But I must admit, gentlemen, that when I brought up the topic of first love, I was really relying on you old bachelors; not that you are really old – but you’re not exactly young, are you? Vladimir Petrovich, won’t you regale us with something?’

‘My first love was certainly not at all ordinary,’ replied Vladimir Petrovich, after a moment’s hesitation. He was a man of about forty with dark, slightly greying hair.

‘Ah!’ said the host and Sergey Nicolayevich with one voice. ‘That’s much better, tell us the story.’

‘Why, certainly...no; I’d rather not. I’m not good at telling stories. They come out either too bald and dry, or else much too long and quite unreal; but if you’ll allow me, I will write down all I can remember and then read it to you.’

At first they would not agree, but Vladimir Petrovich finally had his way. A fortnight later they met again, and Vladimir Petrovich kept his word.

This is what he had written down:

I was sixteen at the time. It happened in the summer of 1833.

I was living in Moscow, with my parents. They used to take a house for the summer near the Kaluzhskaya Toll-gate, opposite the Neskootchny Park – I was preparing for the University, but worked little and slowly.

Nobody interfered with my freedom. I did what I liked, particularly after the departure of my last tutor – a Frenchman who had never got used to the idea that he had been dropped ‘like a bomb’ (so he said) into Russia; he used to lie in bed helplessly for days on end, with an exasperated expression on his face. My father treated me with good-humoured indifference; my mother scarcely noticed me, although she had no other children; she was absorbed by other cares. My father, who was still young and very handsome, had not married her for love. He was ten years younger than my mother; she led a gloomy life, was in a constant state of irritation and always anxious and jealous – though never in my father’s presence. She was very frightened of him – his manner was severely cold and aloof...I have never seen anyone more exquisitely calm, more self-assured or more imperious.

I shall never forget the first weeks I spent in the country. The weather was magnificent – we left Moscow on the ninth of May, St Nicholas’ Day. I used to go for walks in our garden, or in the Neskootchny Park, or sometimes beyond the Toll-gate; I would take a book with me – Kaidanov’s lectures, for example – though I seldom opened it, and spent most of the time repeating lines of poetry aloud to myself – I knew a great many by heart then. My blood was in a ferment within me, my heart was full of longing, sweetly and foolishly; I was all expectancy and wonder; I was tremulous and waiting; my fancy fluttered and circled about the same images like martins round a bell-tower at dawn; I dreamed and was sad and sometimes cried. But through the tears and the melancholy, inspired by the music of the verse or the beauty of the evening, there always rose upwards, like the grasses of early spring, shoots of happy feeling, of young and surging life.

I had a horse of my own; I used to saddle it myself and go riding to some distant place. At times I would break into a gallop, and imagine myself a knight riding in a tournament (how gaily the wind whistled in my ears!) – or, lifting my face up, receive into myself the whole blue radiance of the sky.

I remember that at that time the image of woman, the shadowy vision of feminine love, scarcely ever took definite shape in my mind: but in every thought, in every sensation, there lay hidden a half-conscious, shy, timid awareness of something new, inexpressibly sweet, feminine...This presentiment, this sense of expectancy, penetrated my whole being; I breathed it, it was in every drop of blood that flowed through my veins – soon it was to be fulfilled.

The house we had taken was a wooden building with pillars and had two small, low lodges. In the lodge on the left was a tiny factory for the manufacture of cheap wall-paper. Occasionally I used to

wander over to it and watch a dozen or so village boys, lean, tousle-headed, with pinched faces, in long greasy smocks, as they jumped on to wooden levers and forced them down on to the square blocks of the presses, and in this way, by the weight of their shrunken bodies, stamped the brightly coloured patterns on the paper. The other lodge was empty and to let. One day, about three weeks after the ninth of May, the shutters of this lodge were opened and women's faces appeared in the windows: a family had evidently moved in. I remember how that day at dinner my mother asked the butler who our neighbours were, and hearing the name of Princess Zasyekin, first said, not disrespectfully, 'Ah, princess...', but then she added, 'A poor one, I expect.' 'They came in three cabs, ma'am, and the furniture isn't worth mentioning.' 'Well,' replied my mother, 'it might have been worse.' My father gave her a cold look which silenced her.

And indeed Princess Zasyekin could not have been a rich woman; the house she had taken was so decrepit and narrow and low that no one of even moderate means would have been willing to live there. Actually all this meant nothing to me at the time. The princely title had little effect on me. I had just been reading Schiller's *The Robbers*.

I was in the habit of wandering about our garden every evening with a gun looking for crows. I had an inveterate loathing for these wary, cunning and predatory birds. On the day in question I strolled as usual into the garden and, having scoured every walk in vain (the crows knew me and only cawed harshly now and then from afar), I happened to come near the low fence which divided 'our' property from the narrow strip of garden which ran to the right beyond the lodge and belonged to it. I was walking with my head bowed when suddenly I heard the sound of voices. I looked across the fence – and stood transfixed. A strange sight met my gaze.

A few paces from me – on a lawn flanked by green raspberry canes – stood a tall, slender girl in a striped pink dress with a white kerchief on her head. Four young men clustered round her, and she was tapping them one by one on the forehead with those small grey flowers – I do not know their name, but they are well known to children: these flowers form little bags and burst loudly if you strike them against anything hard. The young men offered their foreheads so eagerly, and there was in the girl's movements (I saw her in profile) something so enchanting, imperious and caressing, so mocking and charming, that I nearly cried out with wonder and delight, and should, I suppose, at that moment, have given everything in the world to have those lovely fingers tap my forehead too. My rifle slipped to the grass; I forgot everything; my eyes devoured the graceful figure, the lovely neck, the beautiful arms, the slightly dishevelled fair hair under the white kerchief – and the half-closed, perceptive eye, the lashes, the soft cheek beneath them...

'Young man! Hey, young man!' suddenly cried a voice near me. 'Is it proper to stare at unknown young ladies like that?'

I started violently, and almost fainted: near me, on the other side of the fence, stood a man with close-cropped dark hair, looking at me ironically. At the same moment the girl too turned towards me...I saw large grey eyes in a bright, lively face, and suddenly this face began to quiver and laugh. There was a gleam of white teeth, a droll lift of the eyebrows...I blushed terribly, snatched up my gun and pursued by resonant but not unkind laughter, fled to my room, threw myself on the bed and covered my face with my hands. My heart leaped within me. I felt very ashamed and unusually gay. I was extraordinarily excited.

After a rest I combed my hair, brushed myself, and came down to tea. The image of the young girl floated before me. My heart was leaping no longer but felt somehow deliciously constricted. 'What is the matter with you,' my father asked suddenly. 'Shot a crow?' I nearly told him everything, but checked the impulse and only smiled to myself. As I was going to bed, without quite knowing why, I spun round two or three times on one foot; then I put pomade on my hair, lay down, and slept like a top all night. Before morning I woke up for an instant, lifted my head, looked round me in ecstasy and

fell asleep again.

‘How can I make their acquaintance?’ was my first thought when I woke in the morning. I strolled in the garden before breakfast, but did not go too near the fence and saw no one. After breakfast, I walked several times up and down the street in front of our house – and, from a distance, glanced once or twice at the windows...I fancied I could see her face behind the curtain; this alarmed me. I hurried away. ‘Still, I must get to know her,’ I kept thinking, as I paced uncertainly up and down the sandy stretch in front of the Neskootchny Park. ‘But how? That is the question.’ I recalled the smallest details of yesterday’s meeting. For some reason I had a particularly clear image of the way in which she had laughed at me. But as I was frantically making one plan after another, fate was already providing for me.

While I was out, my mother had received from her new neighbour a letter on grey paper, sealed with the sort of brown wax which is only used on Post Office forms, or on the corks of bottles of cheap wine. In this letter, illiterate and badly written, the princess begged my mother for her protection: my mother, the princess wrote, enjoyed the intimate acquaintance of important persons, upon whose favour depended the fortunes of herself and of her children, involved as she was in several vital lawsuits: ‘I turn to you,’ she wrote, ‘as one gentlewoman to another; moreover, I am delighted to make use of this opportunity.’ Finally, she begged my mother’s permission to call upon her. I found my mother in a disagreeable frame of mind: my father was not at home, and she had no one to consult. Not to reply to ‘the gentlewoman’ – and she was a princess too – was impossible. But how to reply? That worried my mother. To write in French seemed inappropriate – on the other hand, her own Russian spelling was not too certain; she knew this and was not anxious to take the risk. She welcomed my return, therefore, and at once told me to call on the princess and explain to her by word of mouth that she would, of course, at all times be ready to offer any help within her power to her Ladyship, and begged the princess to do her the honour of calling upon her towards two o’clock. This swift and sudden fulfilment of my secret desire at once delighted and alarmed me. I did not, however, show any sign of my inner turmoil; I went first to my room in order to put on my new neck-tie and frock-coat: at home I still went about in a short jacket and turned-down collar – which I simply hated.

In the poky and untidy hall of the lodge, which I entered trembling in every limb, I was met by a grey-haired old servant with a face the colour of dark copper, surly little pig's eyes, and the deepest wrinkles on his forehead and temples I had ever seen in my life. He was carrying a plate on which there was a half-picked herring bone; shutting the door which led into the other room with his foot, he snapped: 'What do you want?'

'Is the Princess Zasyekin at home?' I asked.

'Vonifaty!' a cracked female voice screamed from within.

The servant turned without a word, revealing as he did so the threadbare back of his livery with a solitary rusted crested button; he went away, leaving the plate on the floor.

'Have you been to the police station?' said the same female voice. The servant muttered something in reply. 'Eh? Is there somebody there?' said the voice again.

'The young gentleman from next door.'

'Well, show him in.'

'Will you step into the drawing-room, sir,' said the servant, reappearing and picking up the plate from the floor. I collected myself and went into the drawing-room. I found myself in a small and not very tidy room. The furniture was shabby and looked as if no one had bothered to arrange it. By the window, in an armchair with a broken arm, sat a woman of about fifty, plain, her hair uncovered, in an old green dress with a gaudy worsted shawl round her neck; her small, black eyes pierced into me. I went up to her and bowed. 'Have I the honour to address the Princess Zasyekin?'

'I am Princess Zasyekin. And you are the son of Mr V--?'

'That is so, ma'am. I have come to you with a message from my mother.'

'Won't you sit down? Vonifaty, where are my keys? You haven't seen them, have you?'

I conveyed to Mme Zasyekin my mother's reply to her note. She listened to me, drumming upon the window-sill with her fat, red fingers, and when I had finished, once again fixed her eyes upon me.

'Very good. I'll be sure to call,' she remarked at last. 'But how young you are! How old are you, if I might ask?'

'Sixteen,' I replied with a slight falter. The princess extracted from her pocket a bundle of greasy papers covered with writing, lifted them to her nose and began going through them.

'A good age,' she suddenly observed, turning and shifting in her chair. 'Please make yourself at home! We are very simple here.'

'Too simple,' I could not help thinking with disgust, as I took in her unsightly figure.

At that instant, another door flew open and in the doorway there appeared the girl I had seen in the garden the evening before. She lifted her hand, and a mocking smile flitted across her face. 'And

here's my daughter,' said the princess, indicating her with her elbow. 'Zinochka, the son of our neighbour, Mr V--. What is your name, if I might ask?'

'Vladimir,' I replied, rising, and stuttering from sheer excitement.

'And your patronym?'

'Petrovich.'

'Yes, I once knew a Chief Constable. He was Vladimir Petrovich too. Vonifaty, don't look for the keys. They are in my pocket.'

The young woman continued to look at me with the same mocking smile, narrowing her eyes a little, and inclining her head slightly.

'I have already seen Monsieur Woldemar,' she began (the silver sound of her voice ran through me with a sort of sweet shiver). 'You will let me call you so?'

'Do, please,' I stammered.

'Where was that?' asked the princess. Her daughter did not answer.

'Are you busy at this moment?' the young woman asked, without taking her eyes off me.

'Oh no, no.'

'Would you like to help me wind my wool? Come with me.' She gave me a little nod and left the drawing-room. I followed her.

In the room we entered, the furniture was a little better and arranged with more taste; though actually, at that moment, I was scarcely able to notice anything. I moved as in a dream, and felt through my entire being an intense, almost imbecile, sense of well-being. The young princess sat down, took a skein of red wool, and pointing to a chair beside her, carefully undid the skein and laid it across my hands. All this she did without a word, with a kind of amused deliberation, and with the same bright, sly smile on her slightly parted lips. She began to wind the wool round a bent card, and then suddenly cast a look at me, a look so swift and radiant that I could not help lowering my eyes for an instant. When her eyes, for the most part half closed, opened to their full extent, her face would be utterly transformed, as if flooded with light. 'What did you think of me yesterday, Monsieur Woldemar?' she asked, after a short pause. 'You disapproved of me, I suppose.'

'I?...Princess...I didn't think anything...How could I?' I replied in confusion.

'Listen,' she said. 'You don't know me yet. I am very strange. I wish to be told the truth always. You are sixteen, I hear, and I am twenty-one. You see, I am much older than you. That is why you must always tell me the truth...and do what I tell you,' she added. 'Look at me...Why don't you look at me?'

I was plunged into even deeper confusion; however, I did raise my eyes and look at her. She smiled not as before, but as if to encourage me. 'Look at me,' she said, lowering her voice caressingly. 'I do not find it disagreeable. I like your face. I have a feeling that we shall be friends. And do you like me?' she added archly.

'Princess,' I was beginning.

'First of all, you must call me Zinaida Alexandrovna, and secondly, how queer that children' (she corrected herself), 'that young gentlemen do not say straight out what they feel. That is all very well for grown-ups. You do like me, don't you?'

Although I was very pleased that she should be talking so frankly to me, still, I was a little hurt. I

wished to show her that she was not dealing with a mere boy, and so, putting on as solemn a manner as I could, I said as casually as I was able: 'Of course I like you very much, Zinaida Alexandrovna. I have no wish to conceal it.'

She shook her head with deliberation. 'Have you a tutor?' she suddenly asked.

'No, I haven't had one for a long time.' This was a lie. Scarcely a month had passed since I had parted with my Frenchman.

'Yes, I see; you are quite grown up.' She rapped me lightly over the fingers.

'Hold your hands straight.' And she busily began to wind the ball of wool.

I took advantage of the fact that her eyes remained lowered, to scrutinize her features, at first stealthily and then more and more boldly. Her face appeared to me even more lovely than on the previous day. Everything in it was so delicate, clever and charming. She was sitting with her back to the window which was shaded by a white blind. A sunbeam filtering through the blind shed a gentle light on her soft golden hair, on her pure throat, on her tranquil breast. I gazed at her, and how dear she already was to me, and how near. It seemed to me that I had known her for a long time, and that before her I had known nothing and had not lived... She was wearing a dark rather worn dress with an apron. How gladly would I have caressed every fold of that apron. The tips of her shoes looked out from under her skirt. I could have knelt in adoration to those shoes. 'And here I am sitting opposite her,' I was thinking, 'I have met her; I know her. God, what happiness!' I almost leapt from my chair in ecstasy, but in fact I only swung my legs a little, like a child enjoying a sweet. I was as happy as a fish in water. I could have stayed in that room – I could have remained in it for ever.

Her eyes softly opened, and once more her clear eyes shone sweetly upon me, and again she gave me a gentle little smile.

'How you do stare at me,' she said slowly, and shook her finger.

I blushed. 'She understands everything; she sees everything,' flashed through my brain, and how could she fail to see it all and understand it all? Suddenly there was a sound from the next room – the clank of a sabre.

'Zina!' cried the old princess from the drawing-room. 'Byelovzorov has brought you a kitten.'

'A kitten,' cried Zinaida and, darting from her chair, threw the ball of wool into my lap, and ran out of the room. I, too, got up, left the skein of wool and the ball on the window-sill and stopped in amazement. In the middle of the room a small tabby cat was lying on its back, stretching out its paws. Zinaida was on her knees before it, cautiously lifting up its little face. By the side of the old princess, filling almost the entire space between the windows, stood a blond, curly-haired young officer, a magnificent figure with a pink face and protruding eyes.

'What a funny little thing,' Zinaida kept repeating, 'and its eyes aren't grey, they're green, and what large ears. I do thank you, Victor Yegorych. It is very sweet of you.'

The soldier, whom I recognized as one of the young men I had seen the evening before, smiled and bowed with a clink of his spurs and a jingle of his sabre rings.

'You were kind enough to say yesterday that you wanted a tabby kitten with large ears...and here, you see, I have procured one. Your word is law.' And he bowed again.

The kitten uttered a feeble squeak and began to sniff the floor.

'It's hungry!' exclaimed Zinaida. 'Vonifaty, Sonia, bring some milk.'

The maid, in a shabby yellow dress, with a faded kerchief round her neck, came in with a saucer of milk in her hands, and set it before the kitten. The kitten started, screwed up its eyes, and began to lap.

‘What a pink little tongue,’ observed Zinaida, almost touching the floor with her head, and peering at the kitten sideways under its very nose. The kitten drank its fill and began to purr, delicately kneading with its paws. Zinaida rose, and turning to the maid said casually: ‘Take it away’.

‘In return for the kitten – your hand,’ said the soldier with a simper and a great shrug of his powerful body tightly encased in a new uniform.

‘Both of them,’ Zinaida replied, and held out her hands to him. While he kissed them, she looked at me over his shoulder. I stood stock still and did not know whether to laugh, to say something, or to remain silent. Suddenly I saw through the open door in the hall, the figure of our footman, Fyodor. He was making signs to me. Mechanically I went out to him.

‘What is the matter?’ I asked.

‘Your Mama has sent for you,’ he replied in a whisper. ‘Madam is annoyed because you haven’t come back with the answer.’

‘Why, have I been here long?’

‘Over an hour.’

‘Over an hour!’ I repeated automatically, and returning to the drawing-room, I began to take my leave, bowing and clicking my heels.

‘Where are you off to?’ asked the young princess, glancing at me over the officer’s back.

‘I am afraid I must go home. So I am to say,’ I added, turning to the old princess, ‘that you will honour us at about two o’clock?’

‘Yes, my dear sir, please say just that,’ she said.

The old princess hastily reached for a snuff box and took the snuff so noisily that I almost jumped. ‘That’s right, say precisely that,’ she wheezily repeated, blinking tearfully.

I bowed again, turned and walked out of the room with that uncomfortable sensation in my back which a very young man feels when he knows he is being watched from behind.

‘Now, Monsieur Woldemar, mind you come and see us again,’ cried Zinaida, and laughed once more.

Why is she always laughing, I thought, as I returned home, accompanied by Fyodor who said nothing to me, but walked behind me with a disapproving air. My mother scolded me and expressed surprise. Whatever could have kept me so long with the princess? I gave no answer and went off to my room. Suddenly, I felt extremely depressed...I tried hard not to cry...I was jealous of the soldier!

The old princess, as she had promised, called on my mother who did not take to her. I was not present at their meeting, but at table my mother told my father that this Princess Zasyekin seemed to her ‘*une femme très vulgaire*’, that she had found her very tiresome, with her requests to do something for her with Prince Sergey; that she seemed to have endless lawsuits and affairs, ‘*des vilaines affaires d’argent*’, and that she must be a very troublesome woman. But my mother did add that she had asked her and her daughter to dinner next day (when I heard the words ‘and her daughter’ I buried my face in my plate) for she was, after all, a neighbour, and a titled one, too.

My father thereupon informed my mother that he now remembered who this lady was: that in his youth he had known the late Prince Zasyekin, a very well-bred, but empty and ridiculous man; he said that he was called ‘*le Parisien*’ in society because he had lived in Paris for a long time; that he had been very rich, but had gambled away all his property, and then, for no known reason – it might even have been for money, though he might, even so, have chosen better, my father added with a cold smile – he married the daughter of some minor official and, after his marriage, had begun to speculate in a large way, and had finally completely ruined himself.

‘I only hope she won’t try to borrow money,’ put in my mother.

‘That is quite possible,’ said my father calmly. ‘Does she speak French?’

‘Very badly.’

‘H’m. Anyway, that does not matter. I think you said you had asked the daughter too? Somebody was telling me that she is a very charming and cultivated girl.’

‘Ah, she can’t take after her mother, then.’

‘No, nor after her father,’ my father said. ‘He was very cultivated too, but a fool.’

My mother sighed, and returned to her own thoughts. My father said no more. I felt very uncomfortable during this conversation.

After dinner, I went into the garden, but without a gun. I promised myself not to go near the Zasyekins’ garden, but an uncontrollable force drew me thither – and not in vain. I had hardly reached the fence when I saw Zinaida. This time she was alone. She was walking slowly along the path, holding a book in her hands. She did not notice me. I very nearly let her pass by, but suddenly collected myself, and coughed. She turned round, but did not stop. With her hand she pushed back the broad blue ribbon of her round straw hat, looked at me, smiled gently, and again turned her gaze to the book.

I took off my cap and after shuffling a little, walked away with a heavy heart. ‘*Quis suis-je pour elle?*’ I thought (goodness knows why) in French.

I heard familiar footsteps behind me. I looked round and saw my father walking towards me with

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