

At that time Aunt Vasilisa Kashporovna was about fifty. She had never married and used to say she valued a spinster's life more than anything else. Still, if my memory serves me right, no one had ever courted her. This was because she made everyone feel shy and no one could pluck up the courage to propose. Her suitors used to say, 'Vasilisa Kashporovna has a *very strong* character.' And they were right, since Vasilisa Kashporovna always wore the trousers. She could transform the drunken miller (who was not fit for anything) into a perfect treasure, just by pulling him by his curly tuft of hair every day with her own very manly hands. She looked like a giant and in fact had

the proportions and strength of one. It seemed as if Nature had committed some unforgivable blunder in decreeing she should wear a dark-brown cloak with flounces on weekdays and a red cashmere shawl on Easter Sundays and her name-day, when a dragoon's moustache and high jackboots would have suited her much better. And the way she spent her time was a perfect reflection of what she wore: she went boating, wielding the oars even more skilfully than any fisherman; she went shooting wild game, and was for ever standing over the reapers at work; she could tell you exactly how many melons there were in the kitchen garden, and she made anybody who crossed her pastures in their wagon pay a toll of five copecks; she climbed trees and shook the plums down; she beat her lazy vassals with that awesome hand of hers - and that same terrible hand would offer a glass of vodka to those who earned it. Almost simultaneously she would tell everyone off, dye yarn, run into the kitchen, make kvass, preserves from honey, bustle around the whole day, and still manage to get everything done. As a result, Ivan Fyodorovich's little estate (according to the last census there were eighteen serfs) was flourishing in the true meaning of the word. What's more, Auntie was extremely fond of her nephew and carefully put away every copeck she could save for him.

After his arrival Ivan Fyodorovich's life was transformed and and took a completely new turn. It seemed as if Nature had created him specially to run that farm with its eighteen serfs. Even Auntie remarked that he would make a good farmer, but all the same did not let him have a say in *everything* to do with running the estate. Although Ivan Fyodorovich was not far short of forty she used to say: 'He's only a *young boy*, so how can you expect him to know everything?'

However, he was always to be found in the fields with the reapers and haymakers, something which brought inestimable pleasure to his gentle soul. The sweep of more than ten shining scythes in unison; the noise of grass falling in orderly rows; the reapers breaking into song now and then - gay songs for welcoming guests, sad ones for farewells; calm, fresh evenings - and what evenings! How free and pure the air is then! How

everything springs to life! The steppe flames with red, then blue, simply burning with the colours of the flowers. Quails, bustards, gulls, grasshoppers, thousands of insects - all of them whistling, buzzing and chirping away, then suddenly breaking into one melodious chorus! Nothing is silent for one moment and the sun sets and hides below the horizon. Ah, how fresh and good it is! Here and there fires are lit in the fields, copper cauldrons are set up and the reapers with their big moustaches gather round them. Steam rises from the dumplings. Dark turns to grey... It is hard to say how Ivan Fyodorovich felt at these times. He would stand next to the reapers and forget to help himself to dumplings, a dish he was very fond of, standing motionless and following the flight of a gull disappearing into the heavens, or counting the sheaves of harvested wheat strung out over the fields like beads.

IVAN F AND HIS AUNT

86th Martober, between day and night

One of the administrative clerks called today, saying it was time I went to the office and that I hadn't been for three weeks. So I went - just for a joke. The head clerk thought I would bow to him and start apologizing, but I gave him a cool look, not too hostile, but not too friendly either. I sat down at my desk as though no one else existed. As I looked at all that clerical scum I thought: 'If only you knew who's sitting in the same office with you... God, what a fuss you'd make! Even the head clerk himself would start bowing and scraping, just as he does when the Director's there.' They put some papers in front of me, from which I was supposed to make an abstract. But I didn't so much as lift a finger. A few minutes later everyone was rushing around like mad. They said the Director was coming. Many of the clerks jostled each other as they tried to be first to bow to him as he came in. But I didn't budge. Everyone buttoned up his jacket as the Director walked across the office, but I didn't make a move. Stand up when he comes in - *never!* So what if he's a departmental director. He's really a *cork*, not a director. And an ordinary cork at that - a common or garden cork, and nothing else, the kind used for stopping bottles. What tickled me more than anything else was when they shoved a paper in front of me to sign. Of course, they were thinking I would sign myself as: Clerk No. So-and-so, right at the very bottom of the page. Well, let them think again! In the most important place, just where the Director puts his signature, I wrote 'Ferdinand VIII'. The awed silence that descended on everyone was amazing; but I merely waved my hand and said: 'There's really no need for this show of loyalty,' and I walked out.

I went straight to the Director's flat. He wasn't at home. The footman wouldn't let me in at first, but what I said to him made his arms drop limply to his side. I made my way straight to *her*

boudoir. She was sitting in front of the mirror and she jumped up and stepped backwards. I didn't tell her, however, that I was the King of Spain. All I said was that happiness such as she had never imagined awaited her, and that we would be together, in spite of hostile plots against us. Then I thought I'd said enough and left. But how crafty women can be! Only then did it dawn on me what they are really like. So far, no one has ever discovered whom women are in love with. I was the first to solve this mystery: they are in love with the devil. And I'm not joking. While physicians write a lot of nonsense, saying they are this and that, the truth is, women are in love with the devil, and no one else. Can you see that woman raising her lorgnette in the first tier of a theatre box? Do you think she's looking at that fat man with a medal? Far from it - she's looking at the devil standing behind his back. Now he's over there, hiding in his frock-coat and beckoning her with his finger! She'll marry him, that's for certain!

Diary of a Madman

His thoughts wandered even further. 'No one knows me,' he told himself. 'Besides, why should anyone be concerned about me? And I have nothing to do with anyone either. If she shows genuine remorse and changes her life I will marry her. I *must* marry her. That way I would be acting far better than many who marry their housekeepers - and even the most despicable creatures. But my course of action will be disinterested and might even be noble. I shall return to the world its finest embellishment.'

After drawing up this light-headed plan, he felt his cheeks flush. He went over to the mirror and was alarmed when he saw those hollow cheeks and how pale his face was. He started to dress and groom himself with the utmost care. He washed, smoothed his hair, put on a new tail-coat and a smart waistcoat, threw his cloak over his shoulders and went out into the street. He breathed fresh air and felt totally invigorated, like a convalescent who has gone out for the first time after a long illness. His heart pounded as he drew near the street where he had not set foot since that fateful encounter. He spent a long time looking for the house and his memory seemed to have played him false. Twice he walked up and down the street, unsure in front of which house to stop. Finally one of them looked the likely one. He dashed up the stairs and knocked at the door. It opened - and who should come out to greet him? His ideal, his mysterious image, the original of those visions in his dreams - she, in whom he had lived so terribly and painfully - and so sweetly. Yes, she was standing before him! He shuddered and

could barely keep to his feet for weakness, simply overwhelmed by a surge of joy. She looked as beautiful as ever, although her eyes seemed sleepy, although a pallor had crept over her face that was no longer so fresh - but she was still lovely.

'Ah!' she cried, seeing Piskarev and rubbing her eyes (it was already two o'clock in the afternoon). 'Why did you run away from us that day?'

'Weak with exhaustion he sat on a chair and looked at her. 'I've only just woken up. This morning they brought me home at seven - I was dead drunk,' she added, smiling.

'Oh, better you were dumb, quite unable to say a thing, than utter such words! She had suddenly shown him her whole life, as if in a panorama. Despite all, he summoned up courage and decided to try and see if his exhortations would have any effect on her. He pulled himself together and in a trembling but passionate voice began by explaining her appalling position to her. She listened to him with an attentive look and with the same feeling of wonderment we display at the sight of something unexpected and strange. Faintly smiling, she looked at her friend who was sitting in one corner and stopped cleaning her comb to give her full attention to this new preacher.

'Yes, it's true I'm poor,' Piskarev finally said after a lengthy and instructive homily, 'but we shall work. We shall vie with one another to improve our lives. Nothing is more agreeable than to be one's own master. I shall sit at my painting while you will sit at my side, inspiring me in my work, busy with embroidering or some other handicraft. And we shall want for nothing!'

'You don't say!' she interrupted in a rather contemptuous voice. 'I'm no laundrymaid or seamstress that I should have to work!'

God! In these words her whole vile, despicable life was summed up - a life of emptiness and idleness, those loyal companions of depravity.

'Will you marry *me!*' her friend chimed in with a brazen air - until then she had been silently sitting in one corner. 'When I'm your wife I'll sit like this!'

Then her pathetic face assumed a stupid grin, which greatly amused the beauty.

Nevsky
Prospekt

I must confess that I have no idea how women can grab us by the nose as deftly as they take hold of a teapot handle. Either their hands are adapted for this, or else that is all our noses are fit for. And although Ivan Nikiforovich's nose looked rather like a plum, she would catch hold of it and lead him around like a dog. When she was around he couldn't help altering his normal routine: he would not lie in the sun so long, and when he did he would never lie in the nude, but would always wear a shirt and his broad velveteen trousers, although Agafiya Fedoseyevna never requested him to. On the contrary, she did not like ceremony and when Ivan Nikiforovich felt feverish, she would wash him from head to foot with turpentine and vinegar, with her own hands. Agafiya Fedoseyevna wore a cap and a coffee-coloured cloak with yellowish flowers, and she had three warts on her nose. She had a figure like a small tub and it was just about as difficult to make out where her waist was as trying to see one's own nose without a mirror. Her little feet were shaped like cushions. She loved scanda mongering, ate boiled beetroot in the mornings, swore like a trooper – and whichever one of these varied activities she happened to be engaged in her expression never altered for one second. This is a gift that normally only *women* are blessed with.

The moment she arrived everything was turned inside out. 'You mustn't apologize to him, Ivan Nikiforovich, or try and make it up – he wants to ruin you, he's that kind of man! You don't really know him at all.' The wretched woman babbled on and on, until in the end Ivan Nikiforovich didn't want to know any more about Ivan Ivanovich.

Sweeping changes took place: if a neighbour's dog strayed into the yard it was beaten with the first thing that came to hand; children who climbed over the fence came back howling, their shirts lifted up to show where they had been thrashed. Even the old peasant woman, when Ivan Ivanovich wanted to ask her something or other, gave such an obscene reply that Ivan Ivanovich, being an extremely sensitive person, spat on the ground and muttered: 'What a filthy woman! Worse than her master!'

Finally, to add insult to injury, his hateful neighbour had a goose shed built just where he used to climb over the fence, apparently with the specific intention of making the insult even worse. This shed that Ivan Ivanovich found perfectly hideous was built with devilish speed – in a single day.

All this filled Ivan Ivanovich with malice and a longing for vengeance. However, he did not show any signs of annoyance, despite the fact that the shed actually encroached on his land. But his heart began to beat so fast that he found it very difficult to keep up this outward show of calm. This was how he spent the rest of the day.

Night came. Oh, if only I were a painter I could portray to wonderful effect all the enchantment of night! I would paint the whole of Mirgorod as it slept; the countless motionless stars looking down upon it; the almost visible distance; the love-lorn sexton rushing past and climbing over the fence with the boldness of knights of old; the white walls of the houses caught by moonlight becoming even whiter, and the overhanging trees turning even darker and casting even deeper shadows; the flowers and silent grass smelling more fragrant; and the crickets, those restless cavaliers of the night, singing their friendly chirruping songs in unison in every corner.

Ivan Fyodorovich plucked up a little courage and tried to start a conversation. But all the words seemed to have got lost on the way. Not a single thought came into his head. The silence lasted about a quarter of an hour. All this time the young lady just sat there.

Finally Ivan Fyodorovich made a great effort and said in a slightly trembling voice:

'There's a great many flies this summer, Miss.'

'An extraordinary number,' she answered. 'My little brother made a swatter out of one of Mama's old shoes; but the place is still full of them.'

The conversation came to an end once more. Ivan Fyodorovich just could not think of anything to say at all.

Finally the old lady, Auntie, and the dark-haired sister returned. After chatting a little while longer Vasilisa Kashporovna took her leave, despite repeated invitations to stay the night. The old lady and the sisters came out on to the front steps with their guests to say goodbye, and for a long time stood there curtsying to Auntie and her nephew, who kept on looking back out of the departing carriage.

'Well, Ivan Fyodorovich, what did you talk about when you were with the young lady?' Auntie asked as they drove along.

'She's a very unpretentious, well-bred young lady, Marya Grigoryevna!'

'Listen, Ivan Fyodorovich, I want to have a serious talk with you. Good God, you're thirty-eight now. You have a good position. It's time to think about having children. You must get yourself a wife...'

'What, Auntie!' Ivan Fyodorovich cried out in horror. 'A wife! No, Auntie, please! You're making me blush!... I've never been married before, I just wouldn't know what to do with a wife!'

'You'll find out,' she said, smiling, 'you'll find out.' Then she said to herself: 'Whatever next? He's just like a little child, he

doesn't know a thing!' Then she continued aloud: 'Yes, Ivan Fyodorovich, you couldn't find a better wife than Marya Grigoryevna. And you're quite attracted to her, I know. I've had a good talk about it already with the old lady, and she'll be more than delighted to have you as her son-in-law. Of course, we still don't know what that old devil Grigory Grigoryevich will have to say. But let's not think about him. And if he doesn't give her a dowry, we can always take him to court...'

At this moment the carriage was approaching the yard and the ancient steeds livened up, sensing they were not far from their stalls.

'Listen, Omelko, don't take the horses to the watering-trough straight away – they're hot from the journey.' Auntie climbed down and continued: 'Ivan Fyodorovich, I advise you to consider this very carefully. Right this minute I'm needed in the kitchen. I forgot to tell Solokha about dinner and that lazy bitch won't have thought of doing anything herself.'

But Ivan Fyodorovich stood there thunderstruck. True, Marya Grigoryevna was quite pretty; but to get *married!* The idea seemed so strange, so far from his world, that he just could not think about it without a profound feeling of terror. Live with a *wife!* It was just inconceivable! He would never be alone in his room any more, because there would always be *two* of them, together, everywhere! The more engrossed he became in these thoughts, the more the sweat poured off his face.

An interminable conversation dragged on at table, but it was conducted rather oddly. One squire who had served in the 1812 campaign told of a battle that had certainly never taken place

and then, for some mysterious reason, removed the stopper from a decanter and stuck it in the pudding. In brief, by the time the party started to break up it was already three in the morning and the coachmen had to carry several of the guests in their arms as if they were parcels from some shopping expedition. Despite his aristocratic pretensions, Chertokutsky bowed so low and with such a broad sweep of the head as he climbed into his carriage that he later found he had brought home with him two thistles in his moustache.

At home everyone was fast asleep. The coachman had difficulty finding a footman, who conducted his master across the drawing-room and handed him over to a chambermaid, whom Chertokutsky somehow managed to follow to the bedroom, and he lay down beside his pretty young wife, who was sleeping in the most enchanting posture in her snow-white nightdress. The jolt made by him falling on the bed woke her. Stretching, raising her eyelashes and blinking three times in quick succession, she opened her eyes with a half-angry smile, but when she realized that her husband had no intention of showing her any kind of endearment, turned over on her other side in pique. Resting her fresh cheek on her hand she fell asleep soon after him.

When the young mistress of the house awoke beside her snoring spouse it was at an hour that country folk would not consider early. Mindful that he had returned after three o'clock in the morning, she did not have the heart to wake him and so, donning her bedroom slippers that her husband had specially ordered from St Petersburg, her white nightdress draped around her like a flowing stream, she went to her dressing-room, washed herself in water as fresh as herself and went over to her dressing-table. After a couple of glances in the mirror she saw that she was looking really quite pretty that morning. This apparently insignificant circumstance led her to sit in front of her mirror exactly two hours longer than usual. Finally she dressed herself very charmingly and went out into the garden for some fresh air. As if by design, the weather was glorious, as only a summer's day in the south of Russia can be. The noonday sun beat down fiercely, but it was cool walking down the shady paths with their overarching foliage; the flowers were three

times as fragrant in the warmth of the sun. The pretty young wife forgot that it was already twelve o'clock and that her husband was still asleep. The post-prandial snores of the two coachmen and the postilion, who were fast asleep in the stable behind the garden, already reached her ears, but she continued to sit in the shady avenue from which the totally deserted high road was clearly visible. Suddenly a cloud of dust in the distance caught her attention.

Straining her eyes, she soon made out several carriages, headed by an open two-seater trap, in which were sitting the general, his thick epaulettes glinting in the sun, with the colonel at his side. This was followed by a four-seater carriage with the major and the general's adjutant, with two other officers sitting opposite. This carriage was followed by the regimental droshky, familiar to all and which was then in the stout major's possession. The droshky was followed by a *bonvoyage* in which four officers were seated, with a fifth squeezed in. After the *bonvoyage* three officers on their fine dappled bays came into view.

How Ivan Ivanovich
quarrelled

Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and
his Aunt

The Carriage