Fyodor Dostoevsky

A Gentle Creature

and Other Stories

A new translation by Alan Myers

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A GENTLE CREATURE
AND OTHER STORIES

FYODOR MIKHAILOVICH DOSTOEVSKY was born in Moscow in 1821, the second in a family of seven children. His mother died of consumption in 1837 and his father, a generally disliked army physician, was murdered on his estate two years later. In 1844 he left the College of Military Engineering in St Petersburg and devoted himself to writing. *Poor Folk* (1846) met with great success from the literary critics of the day. In 1849 he was imprisoned and sentenced to death on account of his involvement with a group of utopian socialists, the Petrashevsky circle. The sentence was commuted at the last moment to penal servitude and exile, but the experience radically altered his political and personal ideology and led directly to *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* (1861–2). In 1857, while still in exile, he married his first wife, Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva, returning to St Petersburg in 1859. In the early 1860s he founded two new literary journals, *Vremia* and *Epokha*, and proved himself to be a brilliant journalist. He travelled in Europe, which served to strengthen his anti-European sentiment. During this period abroad he had an affair with Polina Suslova, the model for many of his literary heroines, including Polina in *The Gambler*. Central to their relationship was their mutual passion for gambling—an obsession which brought financial chaos to his affairs. Both his wife and his much-loved brother, Mikhail, died in 1864, the same year in which *Notes from the Underground* was published; *Crime and Punishment* and *The Gambler* followed in 1866 and in 1867 he married his stenographer, Anna Snitkina, who managed to bring an element of stability into his frenetic life. His other major novels, *The Idiot* (1868), *Devils* (1871), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) met with varying degrees of success. In 1880 he was hailed as a saint, prophet, and genius by the audience to whom he delivered an address at the unveiling of the Pushkin memorial. He died seven months later in 1881; at the funeral thirty thousand people accompanied his coffin and his death was mourned throughout Russia.

ALAN MYERS has translated a wide variety of contemporary Russian prose and poetry, including poems, essays, and plays by Joseph Brodsky. He has also produced a volume of facsimile versions from the golden age of Russian poetry, *An Age Ago*. His translations of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades and Other Stories* are also in Oxford World's Classics.

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FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

White Nights
A Gentle Creature
The Dream of a Ridiculous Man

Translated by
ALAN MYERS

With an Introduction and Notes by
W. J. LEATHERBARROW

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INTRODUCTION

NOTE: Readers who would prefer not to know the details of the stories beforehand are advised to read this Introduction after the book itself.

The publication of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk*, in January 1846 was a most striking literary début. This apparently slight and sentimental exchange of letters between a poor, middle-aged government clerk and the young seamstress he loves saw its author elevated practically overnight from obscurity to literary celebrity. The periodical press received the work with widespread acclaim (although the more conservative newspapers and journals were lukewarm). The poet Nekrasov, in whose almanac *Poor Folk* first appeared, insisted that 'a new Gogol has appeared', referring to the strange prose-poet Nikolai Gogol (1809–52), whose grotesque masterpieces are among the finest achievements of nineteenth-century Russian prose; and the leading literary critic of the time and the rallying point for progressive opinion in Russia, Vissarion Belinsky (1811–48), recognizing at once Dostoevsky's promise, summoned him to his presence and told him to his face that he would be a great writer.

The reader who approaches *Poor Folk* today will perhaps wonder what the fuss was about, but it is important to recognize that Dostoevsky's novel, with its implicit affirmation of the humanity and value of even the lowest person and its delicate exploration of the complex psychological effects wrought by poverty and wounded self-esteem, carried the hopes of progressive intellectuals like Belinsky, who saw in emergent Russian literature a 'Natural School' of social realism imbued with humanitarian compassion and civic responsibility—a powerful weapon in the struggle for social reform. For Belinsky the naïve and sentimental hero of *Poor Folk*, Makar Devushkin, articulated the pain of the whole of Russia's underclass of the humiliated and the wronged.

Dostoevsky's success with *Poor Folk* was, however, short-

lived. His second novel, *The Double*, also published in 1846, received a frosty reception, and by the time of his arrest and imprisonment for conspiracy in 1849 his reputation was in decline. Even Belinsky reacted with growing suspicion, and eventually hostility, to a string of works in which the humanitarianism and social significance he had so admired in *Poor Folk* were submerged in Dostoevsky's increasing preoccupation with abnormal psychology and grotesquely disordered character types. The writer himself sensed the need for a change of direction as early as October 1846, when he wrote to his brother Mikhail announcing his decision to discontinue work on 'The Shaved Whiskers', another tale dealing with a lowly civil servant lost in the bureaucratic hierarchy of the St Petersburg civil service:

> I have abandoned everything, for all this is nothing more than a repetition of old ideas which I have long ago expressed. Now I am compelled to put more original, lively and lucid ideas on to paper. When I had finished 'The Shaved Whiskers' all this became clear to me. In my position uniformity means ruin.

In works such as *The Double* and *Mister Prokharchin* (also 1846) Dostoevsky had employed the figure of the lowly civil servant in order to explore the extreme and sometimes perverse psychological distress experienced by the individual who seeks to assert his independence and individuality within the circumscribed identity allocated to him by society. This had not always succeeded, since the hero's limited imagination and lack of understanding of the forces at work in his own being had inhibited the reader's own comprehension and willingness to share the texture of the character's inner world. The hero's psychological confusion in, for example, *The Double* was reflected in a narrative confusion that rendered the novel tedious and incomprehensible to many of its readers. Dostoevsky's letter to Mikhail signals his intention to adopt a new kind of hero, the 'gentleman-dreamer', socially and intellectually superior to the earlier characters, capable of greater introspection, endowed with a richer imaginative capacity, but hopelessly alienated from reality. If

Devushkin had been the hapless victim of reality, the dreamer was to be fugitive from it.

The choice of such a new hero is not as fortuitous as it might seem: the young Dostoevsky knew only too well the seductive power of romantic dreaming. He too had been a dreamer, and as a student at the St Petersburg Academy of Military Engineering he had conceived a consuming passion for German Romanticism and the works of Friedrich Schiller. This and a sentimental friendship with an unworldly Romantic poet, Ivan Shidlovsky, had facilitated Dostoevsky's withdrawal from real life into a gossamer world of the Romantic imagination. Subsequently the down-to-earth authenticity of *Poor Folk* and its author's growing admiration for the great European social realists like Balzac, Dickens, and George Sand had marked a turn in Dostoevsky's own personal development: a retreat from bootless idealism and a dawning awareness of the problems of the real world. Dostoevsky's own discovery of reality had taught him that the dreamer absorbed in his dreams had 'blunted his talent for real life' and had embarked on a path leading to illusion, solipsism, and spiritual disintegration. A comment of 1847 to the effect that man must 'realize, fulfil and justify his Self in real life' discloses not only the zeal of a reformed dreamer, but also Dostoevsky's recognition of the tragedy of the individual who has sacrificed to abstraction all sense of living life. It is precisely this tragedy that is to be fully explored in Dostoevsky's later novels, in characters such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866), who murders a fellow human being for the sake of a theory; in Ivan Karamazov in *The Karamazov Brothers* (1880), whose imaginative constructs compel him to reject life; and in the hero of *Notes from the Underground* (1864), who is reduced to inertia and non-being by a paralysing introspection.

The tragedy of the dreamer lies in his inability to establish a balanced relationship between the external world of reality and the inner world of fantasy, as Dostoevsky explained to his brother in a letter of early 1847: 'The *exterior* must keep in steady balance with the *interior*. Otherwise, in the absence

of exterior phenomena, the interior will assume too dangerous an upper hand. Nerves and fantasy will occupy a very large place in one's being.' That Dostoevsky considered the dreamer to be a signicant social phenomenon is indicated not only by the author's adoption of this type as his new hero, but also by an article he published in the *St Petersburg Gazette* in June 1847. In this piece Dostoevsky ironically draws attention to the dreamer as a characteristic Petersburg type, entirely in tune with a city that seemed to the author to encourage withdrawal and alienation and which the hero of *Notes from the Underground* was later to describe as 'the most abstract and premeditated city on earth':

Do you know, ladies and gentlemen, what a dreamer is? It is a Petersburg nightmare, it is sin incarnate, it is a tragedy ... They [the dreamers] usually live in complete solitude, in some inaccessible quarters, as though they were hiding from people and the world, and, generally, there is something melodramatic about them at first sight. They are gloomy and taciturn with their own people, they are absorbed in themselves and are very fond of anything that does not require any effort, anything light and contemplative, everything that has a tender effect on their feelings or excites their sensations. They are fond of reading and they read all sorts of books, even serious scientific books, but they usually lay the book down after reading two or three pages, for they feel completely satisfied. Their imagination, mobile, volatile, light, is already excited, their senses are attuned, and a whole dream-like world, with its joys and sorrows, with its heaven and hell, its ravishing women, heroic deeds ... suddenly possesses the entire being of the dreamer ... Sometimes whole nights pass unnoticed in undescribed joys; sometimes a paradise of love or a whole lifetime ... is experienced in a few hours ... The moments of sobering up are terrible; the poor unfortunate cannot bear them and he immediately takes more of his poison in new increased doses.

Towards the end of his article Dostoevsky comments on the true dangers of such dreaming:

Little by little our curious fellow begins to withdraw from crowds, from common interests, and gradually and imperceptibly he begins to blunt his talent for real life. It begins to seem natural to him that the pleasures attainable through his capricious fantasy are fuller, richer and dearer than life itself. Finally, in his delusion he

completely loses that moral sense through which man is capable of appreciating all the beauty of reality. He goes astray, loses himself, lets slip those moments of real happiness; and, in a state of apathy, he folds his arms and does not wish to know that man's life consists in constant contemplation of oneself in nature and in day-to-day reality.

The hero of *White Nights* (1848) is readily identifiable in the picture Dostoevsky draws of the Petersburg dreamer, but the other stories contained in this present volume also illustrate the tragedy that ensues when man loses his sense of 'living life' and sacrifices his being on the altar of abstraction. *White Nights* was not, however, the first of Dostoevsky's artistic works to deal with the theme of the alienated dreamer: the strange tale *The Landlady* (1847) had charted the intellectual disintegration of Ordynov, a solitary young man whose fantasy transforms the grey Petersburg reality into a fairy-tale world populated by beautiful princesses and evil sorcerers. Belinsky was unimpressed by *The Landlady* and dismissed it as 'terrible rubbish', but it is in fact a highly sophisticated artistic structure in which an unstable narrative viewpoint recreates for the reader the same uncertainty experienced by the hero. Dostoevsky was to use the same device again in creating the strange, hallucinatory world of Raskolnikov.

* * *

There is no doubt, though, that Dostoevsky was affected by Belinsky's criticisms of *The Landlady*, and it is possible to see *White Nights* as the author's attempt to re-work the theme of the dreamer in a more lucid fashion. Gone from it is the grotesque and threatening atmosphere of the earlier tale, which derived from Ordynov's inability to distinguish fantasy from reality. The greater clarity of mind of the hero/narrator of *White Nights* invests the work with a new sobriety and detachment. Indeed, the world of the dreamer seems at first to be seductively ideal. Freed from the shackles of reality by 'the Goddess of Imagination', he becomes 'the artist of his own life', living out in his relationship with Nastenka a romantic and sentimental idyll, reinforced by the magic of the early summer white nights when the sun never sets on

the beauty of the northern city. The atmosphere of the tale is poetic, lyrical, and immensely touching. It is a hymn sung in praise of youth, springtime, and love, all of which have the power to transfigure mundane reality:

> It was a wonderful night, the sort of night that can only occur when we are young, dear reader. The sky was so starry and bright, that one glance was enough to make you ask yourself: surely, ill-natured and peevish people can't possibly exist under a sky like that, can they? That's a young person's question too, dear reader, very much so, but may the good Lord visit it upon you ever and anon!
>
> (p. 3)

It seems that in the unabashed lyricism of *White Nights* and its hero Dostoevsky has distilled all the beauty of his own youthful Romantic idealism, of which he later wrote: 'What did I not dream about in my youth . . . In my whole life there have been no fuller, holier and purer moments than those.' Here Dostoevsky recognizes the enormous *aesthetic* value of such idealistic dreaming. And, as an artist, so he must, for such creative meditation is the crucible in which artistic creation itself is forged. But there is a heavy price to be paid for such uncritical adoration of 'the Goddess of Imagination': the possibility of a wasted life and eventual disillusionment. Dostoevsky had paid some of this price himself, as he admitted when describing his earlier life in an essay of 1861: 'I fell into such a reverie that I overlooked the whole of my youth.'

Despite Konstantin Mochulsky's assertion in his biography of Dostoevsky that 'there is nothing stale or musty' in the image of the young dreamer of *White Nights*, Dostoevsky does use this figure to express his own ambiguous attitude to Romantic idealism. As has been suggested earlier, what distinguishes this dreamer from Ordynov in *The Landlady* is his clarity of vision and ability to regard himself and his existence dispassionately. One of the striking features of his confession to Nastenka, when he describes his life of isolated fantasy, is his tendency to speak of himself *in the third person.*

> 'No, Nastenka, what is there, what can there be for an indolent sensualist like him in the sort of life that you and I so long for? It is

an impoverished, pitiable existence, so he thinks, failing to foresee that for him too, perhaps, the dismal hour will strike when he would exchange all his fantasy-ridden years for one day of this pitiable life . . .'

(p. 22)

Such detachment clearly reveals the hero's dilemma: hopelessly alienated from and afraid of life, he retreats into dreams; but he acknowledges the tenuousness of such dreams, which sooner or later must fade in the face of the implacable reality of life itself:

'And now I know more than ever that I have squandered all my best years! I realize that now . . . Now, as I sit next to you and talk with you, I feel positively terrified of the future, because in that future loneliness lurks once more, again that musty, pointless existence.

(p. 25)

'Look, you tell yourself, look how cold the world is becoming. The years will pass and after them will come grim loneliness, and old age, quaking on its stick, and after them misery and despair. Your fantasy world will grow pale, your dreams will fade and die, falling away like the yellow leaves from the trees . . .'

(p. 27)

The apparent idyll of *White Nights* is an illusion. Beneath the dreamer's Romantic idealism there already lurks suppressed despair and the spectre of the Underground, that twilight zone between fact and fiction where the hero of *Notes from the Underground* is to carve out his sterile existence of perverted idealism some fifteen or so years later. *White Nights* ends on a prophetic note: on returning to his room after losing Nastenka to his rival, the dreamer experiences a strange hallucination:

I glanced at Matryona [the maid] . . . She was still a sprightly, *young* old woman, but I don't know why, she suddenly seemed to me stooped and decrepit, her eyes dimmed, her face wrinkled . . . I don't know why, but my room had aged just like the old woman. The walls and floor had faded, everything had grown dingy; there were more cobwebs than ever. I don't know why, but when I glanced out of the window, it seemed that the house opposite had also grown decrepit and dingy, the stucco on the columns peeling and dropping

off, the cornices darkened and cracked, the dark-ochre walls patchy and mottled . . .

Either a darting ray of sunshine had suddenly vanished behind a rain-cloud and rendered everything dull before my eyes; or perhaps, the entire perspective of my future had flashed before me, so miserable and uninviting, and I saw myself just as I was now, fifteen years on, growing old, in the same room, alone as now with the same old Matryona, grown not a whit more intelligent over the years.

(pp. 55–6)

This 'time warp', by means of which the hero is carried fifteen years into an uninviting future, establishes the relationship of the dreamer of the 1840s to that later grotesquely disillusioned dreamer, the Underground Man, and thus to the heroes of Dostoevsky's mature works. But *White Nights* is linked to the themes of the later works, including the other works in the present volume, in yet another way. It was conceived and written at a time when Dostoevsky was attending meetings of the Petrashevsky Circle, a group of political idealists who met to discuss the ideas of the European utopian socialists. Paramount among such ideas was the dream of a future social order erected upon the ideal of the brotherhood of man. It is difficult to judge whether Dostoevsky shared the political utopianism of the Petrashevsky Circle or was drawn into the conspiracy through naïvety. What is certain is that by the time he returned from imprisonment and exile he was an implacable opponent of all political idealism and all utopian systems that promised to deliver paradise on earth. His Siberian experiences among the criminal classes had convinced him that man's nature was not capable of brotherhood, and that a future secular Golden Age erected on humanism and fraternity was an illusion, albeit a seductive one. As he later remarked in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (1863): 'you only need the finest filament to fall into the machine, and everything at once cracks and falls to pieces. . . . In order to make hare stew, you must first have a hare. But we don't have the hare; that is, we don't have a nature capable of brotherhood.' The Dostoevsky who returned from Siberia in December 1859 was a devout

Orthodox Christian, convinced of the powerlessness of utopian idealism in the face of human evil. Salvation was to be erected not on the basis of humanism or a transformed political order, but on the religious rebirth of the individual.

That the sort of utopianism he had encountered at Petrashevsky's was linked to the naïve and sentimental idealism of the Petersburg dreamer is clarified by Dostoevsky in a passage in *White Nights* when Nastenka appears to flirt with the illusion of the brotherhood of man. Moved by sentiment, she cries out to the dreamer: 'but, you know what crossed my mind just now? I won't talk about that now, though, just, you know, in general; it's been in my mind for a long time. Listen, why can't we all behave like brothers to one another? Why does even the best of men always keep something back, something unspoken from the other?' Her subsequent unwitting destruction of the dreamer's hopes of happiness, when she leaves him for her lover, betrays the naïvety of such idealism, which overlooks the egoism, sensualism, and will to power that drive human behaviour. Dostoevsky recognized that in this imperfect world human relations are based not on mutual love, but on the clash of egos. This truth was to be revealed in his later works, and nowhere more emphatically than in the second story in this volume, *A Gentle Creature.*

* * *

A Gentle Creature was first published as the November issue of Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer* for 1876, and the author's preface to the tale contains an apology for this change to the *Diary*'s format. Dostoevsky had begun his *Diary of a Writer* in 1873 when he was editor of the reactionary periodical *The Citizen*, and he took it up again in 1876, long after he had broken off relations with that periodical. Publication continued intermittently right up until the author's death in early 1881. The *Diary* is a unique literary achievement, and a very important one in Dostoevsky's œuvre. In one sense, it is a continuation of those *feuilletons* he wrote in the 1840s and 1860s, in which the figure of the dreamer was first introduced. In another, it is a uniquely candid revelation of the author's own personality and views on a wide variety of

contemporary issues at a time when he was engaged in the writing of some of his greatest novels. Finally, the deliberately provisional and off-the-cuff nature of the work gives us an intimate glimpse into Dostoevsky's creative processes: it is the workshop in which *The Karamazov Brothers* was wrought.

In previous entries in the *Diary* Dostoevsky had been much exercised by what he considered to be an epidemic of suicides amongst Russians, including that of the daughter of the great Russian socialist Alexander Herzen. For Dostoevsky such suicides were extreme symptoms of a loss of meaning and spiritual bankruptcy in contemporary life. 'The Russian land seems to have lost the force to hold people on it', he wrote. 'The so-called life force, the vital feeling of being, without which no society can exist and the land is liable to fall, is decidedly disappearing.' Central to the loss of meaning in contemporary society was the erosion of religious belief; modern scientific rationalism and materialism had based existence on a narrow positivism and stripped away the rich mysteries of the spirit. Herzen's daughter, infected by her father's lack of spiritual faith, had, according to Dostoevsky, been crushed by the 'rectilinearity of phenomena' which reduced life to 'cold darkness and boredom'. It was not, however, the suicide of Herzen's daughter that provided the immediate inspiration for *A Gentle Creature*. In the October 1876 issue of the *Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky had described a young girl's suicide that had been widely reported in the press:

A month or so ago all the Petersburg newspapers carried a few brief lines in small type about a certain Petersburg suicide: a certain poor young girl, a seamstress, threw herself from a fourth-floor window—'because she had been quite unable to find work for her livelihood'. The reports went on to say that she jumped out and fell to the ground *holding in her hands an icon*. This icon in the hands is a strange and unheard-of feature in a suicide! This is a sort of meek, humble suicide. It would appear that there was no fuss or reproach here: it simply became impossible to go on living; 'God did not wish it'—and she died, having said her prayers. There are certain things, no matter how *simple* they seem at first, that you cannot get out of