

**FYODOR**

**DOSTOYEVSKY**



**A DISGRACEFUL  
AFFAIR**

**STORIES**



# A DISGRACEFUL AFFAIR

---

Stories

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

 HarperCollins e-books



## CONTENTS

White Nights	1
A Disgraceful Affair	77
The Dream of a Ridiculous Man	153
About the Author	
Credits	
Cover	
Copyright	
About the Publisher	



# WHITE NIGHTS

A Sentimental Love Story  
(From the Memoirs of a Dreamer)

TRANSLATED BY DAVID MAGARSHACK



And was it his destined part  
Only one moment in his life  
To be close to your heart? . . .

—Ivan Turgenev



## First Night

It was a lovely night, one of those nights, dear reader, which can only happen when you are young. The sky was so bright and starry that when you looked at it the first question that came into your mind was whether it was really possible that all sorts of bad-tempered and unstable people could live under such a glorious sky. It is a question, dear reader, that would occur only to a young man, but may the good Lord put it into your head as often as possible! . . . The mention of bad-tempered and unstable people reminds me that during the whole of this day my behaviour has been above reproach. When I woke up in the morning I felt strangely depressed, a feeling I could not shake off for the better part of the day. All of a sudden it seemed to me as though I, the solitary one, had been forsaken by the whole world, and

that the whole world would have nothing to do with me. You may ask who "the whole world" is. For, I am afraid, I have not been lucky in acquiring a single acquaintance in Petersburg during the eight years I have been living there. But what do I want acquaintances for? I know the whole of Petersburg without them, and that, indeed, was the reason why it seemed to me that the whole world had forsaken me when the whole town suddenly arose and left for the country. I was terrified to be left alone, and for three days I wandered about the town plunged into gloom and absolutely at a loss to understand what was the matter with me. Neither on Nevsky Avenue, nor in the park, nor on the embankment did I meet the old familiar faces that I used to meet in the same place and at the same time all through the year. It is true I am a complete stranger to these people, but they are not strangers to me. I know them rather intimately, in fact; I have made a very thorough study of their faces; I am happy when they are happy, and I am sad when they are overcast with care. Why, there is an old gentleman I see every day on the Fontanka Embankment with whom I have practically struck up a friendship. He looks so thoughtful and dignified, and he always mutters under his breath, waving his left hand and holding a big knotty walking-stick with a gold top in his right. I have, I believe, attracted his attention, and I should not be surprised if he took a most friendly interest in me. In fact, I am sure that if he did not meet me at a certain hour on the Fontanka Embankment he would be terribly upset. That is why we sometimes almost bow to one another, especially when we are both in a good humour. Recently we had not seen each other for two days, and on the third day, when we met, we were just about to raise our hats in salute, but fortunately we recollected

ourselves in time and, dropping our hands, passed one another in complete understanding and amity. The houses, too, are familiar to me. When I walk along the street, each of them seems to run before me, gazing at me out of all its windows, and practically saying to me, “Good morning, sir! How are you? I’m very well, thank you. They’re going to add another storey to me in May”; or, “How do you do, sir? I’m going to be repaired tomorrow”; or, “Dear me, I nearly got burnt down, and, goodness, how I was scared!” and so on and so on. Some of them are great favourites of mine, while others are my good friends. One of them is thinking of undergoing a cure with an architect this summer. I shall certainly make a point of coming to see it every day to make sure that its cure does not prove fatal (which God forbid!). And I shall never forget the incident with a pretty little house of a pale pink hue. It was such a dear little house; it always welcomed me with such a friendly smile, and it looked on its clumsy neighbours with such an air of condescension, that my heart leapt with joy every time I passed it. But when I happened to walk along the street only a week ago and looked up at my friend, I was welcomed with a most plaintive cry, “They are going to paint me yellow!” Fiends! Savages! They spared nothing, neither cornices, nor columns, and my poor friend turned as yellow as a canary. I nearly had an attack of jaundice myself, and even to this day I have not been able to screw up my courage to go and see my mutilated friend, painted in the national colour of the Celestial Empire!

So now you see, dear reader, how it is that I know the whole of Petersburg.

I have already said that until I realised what was the trouble with me, I had been very worried and upset for three whole

days. In the street I felt out of sorts (this one had gone, that one had gone, and where on earth had the other one got to?), and at home I was not my old self, either. For two evenings I had been racking my brains trying hard to discover what was wrong with my room. What was it made me so peevish when I stayed there? And, greatly perplexed, I began examining my grimy green walls and the ceiling covered with cobwebs which Matryona was such a genius at cultivating. I went over my furniture and looked at each chair in turn, wondering whether the trouble lay there (for it upsets me to see even one chair not in its usual place); I looked at the window—but all to no purpose: it did not make me feel a bit better! I even went so far as to call in Matryona and rebuke her in a fatherly sort of way about the cobwebs and her untidiness in general. But she just gave me a surprised look and stalked out of the room without saying a word, so that the cobwebs still remain cheerfully in their old places. It was only this morning that at last I discovered the real cause of my unhappiness. Oh, so they are all running away from me to the country, are they? I'm afraid I must apologise for the use of this rather homely word, but I'm not in the mood now for the more exquisite refinements of style, for everybody in Petersburg has either left or is about to leave for the country; for every worthy gentleman of a solidly-prosperous and dignified position who hails a cab in the street is at once transformed in my mind into a worthy parent of a family who, after his usual office duties, immediately leaves town and, unencumbered by luggage, hastens to the bosom of his family—to the country; for every passer-by now wears quite a different look, a look which almost seems to say to every person he meets, "As a matter of fact, sir, I'm here by sheer chance, just passing through, you understand, and in a few hours I shall be on

the way to the country.” If a window is thrown open and a most ravishing young girl, who at a moment ago had been drumming on it with her lovely white fingers, pokes out her pretty head and calls to the man selling pots of plants in the street, I immediately jump to the conclusion that the flowers are bought not for the purpose of enjoying the spring and the flowers in a stuffy old flat in town, for very soon everybody will anyway be leaving for the country and will take even the flowers with them. Why, I’ve got so far in my new discovery (quite a unique discovery, you must admit) that I can tell at once, just by looking at a man, in what sort of a cottage he lives in the country. The residents of the Stone and Apothecary Islands can be recognised by their studied exquisiteness of manners, their smart summer clothes, and their wonderful carriages in which they come to town. The inhabitants of Pargolov and places beyond “inspire” your confidence at the first glance by their solidly prosperous position and their general air of sobriety and common sense; while the householder of Krestovsky Island is distinguished by his imper-turbably cheerful look. Whether I happen to come across a long procession of carters, each walking leisurely, reins in hand, beside his cart, laden with whole mountains of furniture of every description—tables, chairs, Turkish and non-Turkish divans, and other household chattels—and, moreover, often presided over by a frail-looking cook who, perched on the very top of the cart, guards the property of her master as though it were the apple of her eye; or whether I look at the barges, heavily laden with all sorts of domestic junk, sailing on the Neva or the Fontanka, as far as the Black River or the Islands—both carts and barges multiply tenfold, nay, a hundredfold in my eyes. It really seems as though everything had arisen and set off on a journey

as though everything were moving off in caravan after caravan into the country; it seems as though the whole of Petersburg were about to turn into a desert, and it is hardly surprising that in the end I am overwhelmed with shame, humiliation, and sadness. For I have no possible excuse for going to the country; neither have I any country cottage I can go to. I am willing to leave with every cart or every gentleman of respectable appearance who hails a cab; but no one, absolutely no one, invites me to go with him, as though they had all forgotten me, as though I were no more than a stranger to them!

I walked for hours and hours, and, as usual, had for some time been completely oblivious of my surroundings, when I suddenly found myself near the toll-gate. I felt cheerful at once, and, stepping beyond the bar, walked along the road between fields of corn and meadows of lush grass, unconscious of any fatigue, and feeling with every breath I drew that a heavy weight was being lifted from my heart. All the travellers I met looked so genially at me that it seemed that in another moment they would most assuredly bow to me. All of them seemed to be happy about something, and every one of them without exception smoked a cigar. And I, too, was happy as never before in my life. As though I had suddenly found myself in Italy—so strong was the impact of nature upon me, a semi-invalid townsman who had all but been stifled within the walls of the city.

There is something indescribably moving in the way nature in Petersburg, suddenly with the coming of spring, reveals herself in all her might and glory, in all the splendour with which heaven has endowed her, in the way she blossoms out, dresses up, decks herself out with flowers. . . . She reminds me somehow rather forcibly of that girl, ailing and faded, upon whom

you sometimes look with pity or with a certain compassionate affection, or whom you simply do not notice at all, but who in the twinkling of an eye and only for one fleeting moment becomes by some magic freak of chance indescribably fair and beautiful; and, stunned and fascinated, you ask yourself what power it was that made those sad and wistful eyes blaze forth with such a fire? What caused the rush of blood to her pale and hollow cheeks? What brought passion to that sweet face? Why did her bosom heave so wildly? What was it that so instantaneously suffused the face of the poor girl with life, vigour, and beauty? What forced it to light up with so brilliant a smile? What animated it with so warm, so infectious a laugh? You look round; you wonder who it could have been; you begin to suspect the truth. But the brief moment passes, and tomorrow perhaps you will again encounter the same wistful and forlorn gaze, the same wan face, the same resignation and diffidence in her movements, and, yes, even remorse, even traces of some benumbing vexation and despondency for that brief outburst of passion. And you feel sorry that the beauty, so momentarily evoked, should have faded so quickly and so irrevocably, that she should have burst upon your sight so deceptively and to so little purpose—that she should not have given you time even to fall in love with her. . . .

But all the same my night was much better than the day! This is how it happened:

I came back to town very late, and, as I was approaching the street where I lived, it struck ten. My way lay along a canal embankment where not a single living soul could be seen at that hour. It is true, I live in a very remote part of the town. I was walking along and singing, for when I am happy I always hum

some tune to myself like every happy man who has neither friends nor good acquaintances, and who has no one to share his joy with in a moment of happiness. Suddenly I became involved in a most unexpected adventure.

A little distance away, leaning against the railing of the canal, a woman was standing with her elbows on the rail; she seemed to be engrossed in looking at the muddy water of the canal. She wore a most enchanting yellow hat and a very charming black cloak. "She's young," I thought, "and I'm sure she is dark." She did not seem to hear my footsteps, for she did not stir when I walked past her with bated breath and a thumping heart. "Funny!" I thought, "she must be thinking about something very important." Suddenly I stopped dead, rooted to the spot. The sound of suppressed weeping reached me. No, I was not mistaken. The girl was crying, for a minute later I distinctly heard her sobbing again. Good gracious! My heart contracted with pity. And timid though I am with women, this was too good a chance to be missed! . . . I retraced my steps, walked up to her, and in another moment would have certainly said "Madam!" if I had not known that that exclamation had been made a thousand times before in all Russian novels of high life. It was that alone that stopped me. But while I was searching for the right word with which to address the girl, she had recovered her composure, recollected herself, lowered her eyes, and darted past me along the embankment. I immediately set off in pursuit of her, but she must have guessed my intention, for she left the embankment and, crossing the road, walked along the pavement. I did not dare to cross the road. My heart was fluttering like the heart of a captured bird. But quite an unexpected incident came to my assistance.

A gentleman in evening dress suddenly appeared a few yards away from the girl on the other side of the street. He had reached the age of discretion, but there was no discretion in his unsteady gait. He was walking along, swaying from side to side, and leaning cautiously against a wall. The girl, on the other hand, walked as straight as an arrow, quickly and apprehensively, as girls usually walk at night when they do not want any man to offer to accompany them home. And the reeling gentleman would most certainly not have caught up with her, if my good luck had not prompted him to resort to a stratagem. Without uttering a word, he suddenly set off in pursuit of the girl at an amazing speed. She was running away from him as fast as her legs would carry her, but the staggering gentleman was getting nearer and nearer, and then caught up with her. The girl uttered a shriek and—I have to thank my good genius for the excellent knobbly walking-stick which, as it happened, I was at the time clutching in my right hand. In less than no time I found myself on the other side of the street, and in less than no time the unwelcome gentleman took in the situation, took into account the undeniable fact of my superior weapons, grew quiet, dropped behind, and it was only when we were far away that he bethought himself of protesting against my action in rather forceful terms. But his words hardly reached us.

“Give me your arm,” I said to the girl, “and he won’t dare to molest you any more.”

She silently gave me her arm, which was still trembling with excitement and terror. Oh, unwelcome stranger! How I blessed you at that moment! I stole a glance at her—I was right! She was a most charming girl and dark, too. On her black eyelashes there still glistened the tears of her recent fright or her recent

unhappiness—I did not know which. But there was already a gleam of a smile on her lips. She, too, stole a glance at me, blushed a little, and dropped her eyes.

“Well, you see, you shouldn’t have driven me away before, should you? If I’d been here, nothing would have happened.”

“But I didn’t know you. I thought that you too . . .”

“But what makes you think you know me now?”

“Well, I know you a little. Now why, for instance, are you trembling?”

“So you’ve guessed at once the sort of man I am,” I replied, overjoyed that the girl was so intelligent (this is never a fault in a beautiful girl). “Yes, you’ve guessed at once the sort of man I am. It’s quite true, I’m afraid, I’m awfully shy with women, and I don’t want to deny that I’m a little excited now, no less than you were a moment ago when that fellow scared you. Yes, I seem to be scared now. It’s as though it were all happening to me in a dream, except that even in a dream I did not expect ever to be talking to any woman.”

“How do you mean? Not really?”

“Yes, really. You see, if my arm is trembling now, it’s because it has never before been clasped by such a pretty little hand as yours. I’ve entirely lost the habit of talking to women. I mean, I never really was in the habit of talking to them. You see, I’m such a lonely creature. Come to think of it, I don’t believe I know how to talk to women. Even now I haven’t the faintest idea whether I’ve said anything to you that I shouldn’t. Please tell me frankly if I ever do. I promise you I shan’t take offence.”

“No, I don’t think you’ve said anything you shouldn’t. And if you really want me to be frank with you, I don’t mind telling you that women rather like shy men like you. And if you want