

Oblomov

Ivan Goncharov

Translated by Stephen Pearl



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London House
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
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Introduction

The name of Ivan Alexandrovich Goncharov, the author of three novels in Russian, is today virtually synonymous with just one of them, *Obломov*, an indisputable classic of enduring artistic stature and cultural significance. This achievement is even more remarkable when one remembers how many other “single masterpieces” were quickly obscured in the golden age of Russian prose which was the second half of the nineteenth century. Among Goncharov’s most ardent fans were, in fact, two Russian literary giants, Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, the latter once stating that Goncharov was “ten heads above me in talent”.

Goncharov is often referred to as one of the major Russian Realists. This formulation, however, tends to overlook the rich ambiguity of his works, the psychological complexity of his characters and the surprising sophistication of some of his literary techniques, which appear to anticipate twentieth-century Modernism. He was likewise precocious and refreshingly frank in probing both male and female sexuality and, above all, even to the modern readers accustomed to the ambiguity of twentieth-century literature, Goncharov still stands out as a great master of presenting ambivalent impulses and inextricable conflicts.

And, yet, Goncharov’s fame was slow to penetrate every corner of the globe. In 1946 Peggy Guggenheim published her memoirs, *Out of This Century*, where, appalled by the apathy and lack of zest for life in one of her former lovers, she gave him a name which was both fictitious and fictional: “Obломov”. This thinly disguised lover was Samuel Beckett, who, in turn, gladly turned the nickname into a moniker, using it to sign many of his letters. It is sad but safe to assume that very few people in the United States reading Ms Guggenheim’s reminiscences at the time knew who the “real” Obломov was. Sigmund Freud, alas, never discovered Goncharov, which some may consider a missed opportunity and others a blessing. Had he done so, Obломov’s complicated,

angst-ridden, phobic and dream-obsessed personality could have easily provided a great resource for Freud's pet theories. Among other things, Freud would have probably immediately seized on Oblomov as a classic example of the struggle between the ego-driven "reality principle" and the id-driven "pleasure principle".

Another reason why *Oblomov's* reputation in the West remained unheralded was that the book was a latecomer: it took the novel fifty-five years to reach its first English-speaking readers. For reasons not entirely clear, Constance Garnett, who made many Russian masterpieces available to the English public at the turn of the twentieth century, and who actually started her career in 1894 by translating Goncharov's earlier novel, *A Common Story*, passed over it. It was translated instead by C.J. Hogarth, and came out both in England and the United States in 1915.

It is a very different story in Russia, of course. There *Oblomov* is as well known and as widely read as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, while its protagonist has become an essential part of what many Russians consider their collective national psyche. As such, he is arguably the most recognized Russian literary archetype. Just as, in English-speaking countries, even people who have never read Dickens know what it means to be "a Scrooge", everyone in Russia, whether they have read Goncharov or not, knows what being "an Oblomov" is all about.

Since few countries are as addicted to politics as Russia, it should not come as a surprise that the fictional Oblomov, who is quite averse to politics and politicking of any kind, has become an integral part of Russian political discourse as well. Already in the nineteenth century, Oblomov was frequently used – and abused – as a tool of ridicule; but the apogee of his political infamy came with Lenin, who could hardly make a speech without conjuring his image. To Lenin, Oblomov was someone "who typified Russian life... always lolling on his bed and mentally drawing up schemes", and therefore a total antithesis to the very spirit of dialectical change for which Lenin and his cohorts stood. Before the Revolution, Lenin would hurl Oblomov in the faces of his political opponents, claiming that they were "making ready to lay themselves down to sleep on the sofa graciously provided to all Russian

Oblomovs... when suddenly the proletariat squared its shoulders and impolitely shook [them] off". After the Revolution, he lamented that, despite a new regime, Russian Oblomovs still abounded, "for there were Oblomovs not only among the landowners but also among the peasants; not only among the peasants, but among the intellectuals too; and not only among the intellectuals, but also among the workers and Communists".

Lenin may have had a special soft spot for Oblomov also because he and Oblomov's creator shared – albeit almost sixty years apart – the same birthplace, the city of Simbirsk, where Ivan Alexandrovich Goncharov was born on 6th June 1812. As the birthplace of both Goncharov and Lenin (as well as another famous Russian writer and historian, Nikolai Karamzin), this medium-sized Volga town may have a certain claim to fame, but there was little else that was dynamic about the place at the time Goncharov, and later Lenin, spent their childhoods there. It, in fact, struck many a visitor as one of the "quietest, sleepest and most stagnant" towns in all of Russia, its legendary sloth rendered immortal in an 1836 poem by one of Russia's greatest poets, Mikhail Lermontov: "Sleep and laziness had overtaken Simbirsk. Even the Volga rolled here slower and smoother." Goncharov, though fond of Simbirsk, described it in similarly somnolent terms. "The whole appearance of my home town," he said in 1887, "was a perfect picture of sleepiness and stagnation... One wanted to fall asleep as well while looking at all this immobility, at sleepy windows with their curtains and blinds drawn, at sleepy faces one saw inside the houses or on streets. 'We have nothing to do!' – they seemed to be saying while yawning and lazily looking at you. 'We are in no hurry...'" Simbirsk, therefore, did not just beget Goncharov, it went a long way to beget his Oblomov as well.

Goncharov's father, Alexander Ivanovich Goncharov, was a wealthy grain merchant and the owner of a candle factory. As such he was much respected in Simbirsk, whose citizens stayed awake long enough to elect him several times to the post of mayor. He was fifty years old and a childless widower when he married the writer's mother, the nineteen-year-old daughter of another merchant. Alexander Goncharov's paternal ambitions still took a long time to come to fruition, though, for it was

not till fully five years into the marriage that the couple's first child, Nikolai, was born. Five more children followed (of which only three, Ivan and his two sisters, survived infancy), and the still-young mother would have undoubtedly borne more had Alexander Goncharov not died in 1819, at the age of sixty-five. Avdotya Matveyevna Goncharova was thus left with four small children, the youngest less than two years old. Ivan was seven. Understandably, in later years Goncharov could hardly remember his father. On the other hand, his attachment to and his memory of his mother remained profound for the rest of his life and was probably largely responsible for making the character of Oblomov, whom some critics see as "a classic example of a man suffering from a severe mother complex", so believable.

Avdotya Matveyevna never remarried, but soon after her husband's death an old friend of the family, Nikolai Tregubov, a rich and well-educated retired naval officer who was the godfather of all her children, joined the household as a "tenant" and quickly assumed the role of the surrogate father, guardian and, in all probability, husband (which may explain why Avdotya Matveyevna's name and patronymic appear to be echoed in "Agafya Matveyevna", Oblomov's common-law wife). Tregubov was, according to Goncharov, honest, honourable and noble, but also quite an Oblomov-like figure who spent most of his days indoors, wearing a dressing gown and reclining after each rich meal. He was equally laid back about his young charges' education.

After several years of incompetent and often abusive local tutors, Ivan and his brother were sent to study in Moscow's School of Commerce. For sons of merchants it was of course a natural place to attend, but for Goncharov, an avid reader whose mind inhabited imaginary worlds, this was a very poor fit. The situation was made even more miserable by the fact that, unlike his brother, who was four years older, Ivan was not even the right age to be enrolled there – remaining in the same elementary year for the first four years. The experience was so traumatic that Goncharov would try hard to forget those long eight years, marked as they were by the cruelty and stupidity of his alcoholic teachers and a general atmosphere of boredom and gloom. And this was supposed to be his joyful and carefree youth! "If only you knew how much dirt,

indecenty, pettiness... I had to go through since birth,” he lamented to a friend later in life. “What to others is given by nature and by their surroundings... had all been ruined by the lack of early, careful education.”

Finally unable to take it any more, Goncharov quit the School of Commerce and persuaded his mother and Tregubov to get a special dispensation so he could enter the Moscow University, which usually accepted only members of the Russian nobility. The request was granted, and the nineteen-year-old Goncharov was finally on his way to a career more worthy of his intellect and talents. Upon graduating in 1835, Goncharov moved to St Petersburg and began working as a translator in the Department of Foreign Trade of the Ministry of Finances.

In addition to being famous for *Oblomov*, Ivan Goncharov is also legendary in Russia for the fact that all of his three novels start with the same two letters – an O followed by a B. It all began with *Obyknovennaia istoriia*, usually translated as *A Common Story* (1847), culminated in *Oblomov* (1859) and ended with *Obryv*, known to English-speaking readers as *The Precipice* (1869). It was probably at least somewhat intentional. Like *Oblomov*, Goncharov was just superstitious enough to think that since his first novel became successful beyond his wildest dreams, it behoved him to embody at least some of its lucky letters into the titles of the successive novels. And *A Common Story* was, indeed, a success of the magnitude that few literary novices ever experience.

Goncharov started working on it in 1843 with few hopes that it would even be published. As a novel of education, *A Common Story* is reminiscent of both Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale*, which was to come later, and Balzac’s *Illusions perdues*, which had preceded it by several years. The work was simultaneously intensely personal, insofar as much of its material came from Goncharov’s own life in Simbirsk and St Petersburg, and pointedly universal, since, as the title suggests, Goncharov believed he was presenting “a common story” of his entire generation. Anticipating the dramatic pairing in *Oblomov* of Oblomov and his lifelong friend, Stoltz, *A Common Story* depicted a duo consisting of an idealistic nephew, Alexander Aduyev, an aspiring writer both blessed and burdened with a protected and indolent childhood, and

To Brigitte – and all she stands for.

*And to Ed “It’s Doable” Lavitt – faithful friend who toiled
so indefatigably in the vineyard, but, sadly, “left the picture”,
before the grapes ripened.*

Oblomov

PART ONE

Chapter I

ONE MORNING IN HIS APARTMENT in one of those big houses on Gorokhovaya Street,* which could have accommodated the whole population of a country town, Ilya Ilyich Oblomov lay in bed.

A man of thirty-two or thirty-three years of age, of medium height and pleasant appearance, with dark-grey eyes, his features left absolutely no definite impression except that of vagueness itself. A thought would flit, bird-like, randomly across his face, glint briefly in his eyes, light on his gently parted lips, hide in the furrows of his brow, and suddenly vanish; then his whole face would radiate an even glow of unconcern. This unconcern would pass from his face into the lineaments of his body, into the very folds of his dressing gown.

Sometimes an expression of something like weariness or boredom would darken his brow; but neither the weariness nor the boredom could for a minute erase the mildness, which was not merely the dominant expression of his face, but the very essence of his whole being – an essence that glowed naked and clear in his eyes, in his smile, in the least movement of his head or his hand. A casual observer taking a cold detached glance at Oblomov might have said: “A good-natured, simple soul, no doubt of it.” A more sympathetic observer taking a longer and closer look at his face would have come away with a good feeling and a contemplative smile on his lips.

Ilya Ilyich’s complexion was neither rosy nor swarthy nor even positively pale, but rather, nothing in particular, or at least that was how it seemed, perhaps because Oblomov had grown flabby beyond his years, through either lack of exercise or lack of fresh air – or maybe both. His whole body, in fact, to judge by the lustreless, unnatural whiteness of the skin of his neck, his small pudgy hands and soft shoulders, seemed altogether too delicate and pampered for a man. His movements, whenever he was in the least perturbed, were somehow subdued by the same mildness and

a lethargy that was not without its own grace. If ever a dark cloud of concern – issuing from deep within him – drifted over his face, his eyes would dim, his brow would furrow, and his face would begin to show traces of doubt, gloom or fear. Rarely, however, would such perturbation harden into an idea of any definite kind, much less an actual intention. The tremor of anxiety would resolve itself into a sigh and die away into a torpid doze. Oblomov's clothing was a perfect match for his tranquil features and his delicate, pampered body. He wore a dressing gown of Persian cloth, a real oriental robe without the slightest European touch. No tassels, no velvet, no waist, and so capacious that two Oblomovs could have wrapped themselves in it. The sleeves, in true Asiatic fashion, were much wider at the shoulder than at the wrist. Although the dressing gown had lost its pristine freshness and had in places shed its original lustre, which had been replaced by a shine born of honest wear and tear, it still preserved the brightness of its oriental colours and the cloth had worn well.

In Oblomov's eyes, the dressing gown possessed a multitude of priceless merits. It was so soft and supple that it could barely be felt, and yielded with slavish obedience to his slightest movement. At home, Oblomov never wore a tie or a waistcoat, because he loved to feel free and unconfined as he moved about. His slippers offered a target so wide, long and soft that even without his troubling to look, his feet were sure to find them every time he lowered them from the bed to the floor.

For an invalid or for someone trying to sleep, lying down is a sheer necessity, for someone who is tired, it is an occasional need, while, for the congenitally lazy, it is the sheer pleasure of the sensation; but for Ilya Ilyich, it was simply his normal state. When he was at home – and he was almost always at home – he was always lying down and always in the same room, the very one where we discovered him, a room that served at once as bedroom, study and drawing room. He had three other rooms where he hardly ever even poked his head: in the morning, at a pinch, and not every day at that, and only when his servant was sweeping his study – by no means an everyday occurrence. In these other rooms, the furniture was covered with dust sheets and the blinds were lowered. The room where Ilya Ilyich lay seemed, at first glance, beautifully furnished. There was a mahogany desk, two couches upholstered in silk

and handsome screens embroidered with birds and fruits impossible to find in nature. There were silk curtains, carpets, pictures, bronzes, porcelain and a great deal of pretty bric-a-brac.

A person of impeccable taste, running a practised eye over the room and its contents, would have seen in them only an attempt on the part of the owner somehow or other to preserve the decorum of the normal conventions, if only to be able to wash his hands of them – and this was indeed Oblomov's sole concern in furnishing the room. A more refined taste would not have been happy with those heavy, cumbersome mahogany chairs, or the rickety bookshelves. The back of one couch had collapsed and the wood veneer had come unstuck in places. The pictures, vases and bric-a-brac were in exactly the same state.

Whenever their owner absently cast an indifferent glance at these furnishings, his eyes seemed to be wondering: "Who could have dumped all this stuff in here?" Because of this indifference of Oblomov towards his own property, and perhaps also because of the even greater indifference of his servant, Zakhar, the whole study, on closer inspection, created an overwhelming impression of neglect and disarray. The pictures on the walls were festooned with dust-covered cobwebs; the mirrors had ceased to reflect anything and could have been put to better use as writing tablets for scrawling messages in the dust. The carpets were covered with stains. A long-forgotten towel lay on the couch, and it was a rare morning that did not find on the table a dirty plate with a salt cellar and a gnawed bone left over from the night before – not to mention a scattering of breadcrumbs. Had it not been for the plate and the still smouldering pipe by the bed and Oblomov himself lying on it, one might have thought that no one was living there, everything was so dusty, worn and faded and the room simply bore no trace of human habitation. There were, it is true, two or three books open on the shelves and a discarded newspaper lying around, there was even an inkwell with pens on top of the desk; but the pages at which the books were open had yellowed, were covered in dust and had clearly been discarded long ago; the newspaper was last year's and if you tried to dip a pen in the inkwell, only a startled fly would come buzzing out of it.

Ilya Ilyich had woken up at about eight o'clock, an unusually early hour for him. Something was really worrying him. His face showed alarm, distress and annoyance by turns. Obviously, he was in the throes of an internal struggle, and his mind had not yet come to his rescue.

What had happened was that the evening before Oblomov had received a letter from the bailiff of his country estate containing unpleasant news. Everyone knows the kind of unpleasant news a bailiff is liable to send: a bad harvest, arrears, a drop in revenue, etc. Even though the year before and the year before that the bailiff had written identical letters to his master, this latest letter had still had just as strong an impact as any other unpleasant surprise. He was faced with the grim prospect of having to think of some way of doing something about it. However, it would be doing less than justice to the trouble taken by Ilya Ilyich in the management of his affairs not to mention that several years before, after receiving the first unpleasant letter from the bailiff, he had already begun, mentally, to draw up a plan for various changes and improvements in the management of his estate.

The plan provided for a number of new economic, judicial and other measures. The plan, however, was still far from complete, and the bailiff's unpleasant letters kept on coming every year, rousing him to action and thus interfering with his peace and quiet. Oblomov realized that, pending completion of the plan, something decisive had to be done. The moment he woke up, he made up his mind to get up right away, wash, and, after his cup of tea, get down to some serious thinking, come up with some ideas, put them down on paper, and really get to work on the problem. For fully half an hour he lay there, tormented by his decision, but then he began to reason that he would still have time for everything even after his cup of tea, and that he could just as well have his tea in bed, just as he always did, especially since there was nothing to say he couldn't think just as well lying down.

So that is exactly what he did. After his tea, he actually raised himself into a sitting position and was practically on the point of getting out of bed; he looked at his slippers and even began to lower one foot from the bed towards them, but immediately drew it back again. The clock struck half-past nine; Ilya Ilyich started. "What am I thinking of?" he

said aloud, with some irritation. "I've got to snap out of it and get right down to business! I just have to pull myself together and..."

"Zakhar!" he called.

From the room that was separated from Ilya Ilyich's study only by the distance of a small corridor, there first issued a growling like that of a roused watchdog, followed by the sound of feet hitting the floor. It was Zakhar jumping down from his place on top of the stove on which he spent most of his time slumped in a drowsy stupor.

An elderly man entered the room. He wore a grey tailcoat and his shirt was poking through a tear in the armpit. His waistcoat was of the same grey, with brass buttons, and his pate was as bald as your kneecap. The colour of burnt straw and streaked with grey, his sideburns grew so thick and luxuriant on either side of his face as to provide enough material for three beards each. Zakhar had made no attempt to alter either his God-given appearance or the clothes he was used to wearing in the country. His clothes were still made from a pattern he had brought with him from the country. He favoured the grey tailcoat and waistcoat, because he saw in these uniform-like garments a faint reminder of the livery he had sported in the old days when he escorted his long-dead master's family to church or on social calls; and in his mind the livery was the sole lingering emblem of the glory of the house of Oblomov.

Nothing more remained to remind the old man of those old spacious and tranquil days in his master's house in the depths of the country. The old master and mistress were dead now, and the family portraits had remained at home, probably gathering dust in some attic. Memories of the old ways and glories of the house of Oblomov were growing dim and lived on only in the minds of the few remaining old people in the village. This is why Zakhar was so attached to the grey tailcoat. It was the grey tailcoat together with one or two other things about the face and manner of his master that brought his parents to mind, as well as his master's whims, which, although they made him grumble both aloud and privately to himself, at bottom actually commanded his respect as the right and proper exercise of a master's power and served Zakhar as reminders, however pale, of past glories. Without these whims he did not really feel he had a master over him, without them there was

nothing to bring back his youth, the village they had left so long ago or the stories about the old place that were the only records, kept alive by the old servants, nannies and wet nurses and passed on from generation to generation.

The house of Oblomov had at one time enjoyed wealth and distinction within the surrounding area; but later, for some reason, it fell into decline and impoverishment and by imperceptible degrees became indistinguishable from the newer noble houses. Only the ageing servants preserved and shared with each other authentic memories of the past that they cherished and kept holy. That is why Zakhar was so fond of his grey tailcoat. He may even have prized his sideburns so highly because in his childhood he had seen so many old servants sporting these antique, aristocratic adornments.

Ilya Ilyich, wrapped in his thoughts, was oblivious to Zakhar standing silently before him. Finally Zakhar gave a little cough.

“What is it?” asked Ilya Ilyich.

“You called, didn’t you?”

“Called? What on earth for? I really don’t remember,” he replied, stretching. “Anyway, go back to your room for now, while I try to remember.”

Zakhar went, and Ilya Ilyich went on lying there, thinking about the damned letter.

A quarter of an hour went by.

“Well, that’s enough lying down, it’s really time to get up,” he said. “Still, what if I just read the bailiff’s letter through carefully once more and then get up.

“Zakhar!”

Again, the same sound of feet slapping the floor and the growling – only this time louder. Zakhar came in to find Oblomov in the same trance-like state. Zakhar stood there for a couple of minutes surveying his master with some displeasure out of the corner of his eye and finally headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” asked Oblomov suddenly.

“You don’t say anything, so what’s the point of standing here?” Zakhar wheezed. According to him, it was the only voice he had left. He claimed

to have lost his normal one while out one day riding to hounds with the old master because the high wind had given him a cold in his throat. He stood in the middle of the room at right angles to his master, swivelling his eyes to look at him.

“Have your legs withered away or something, so that a little standing is too much for you? You can see I’ve got something on my mind, so just wait! You’ve done plenty of lying around over there! Find the letter I got from the bailiff yesterday. Where did you put it?”

“What letter? I haven’t seen any letter.”

“But you took it from the postman, it was all dirty!”

“How should I know where it was put?” said Zakhar, patting the papers and various objects lying on the table.

“You never know anything; take a look in the waste-paper basket there. Or maybe it’s slipped down behind the couch – the back still needs mending, by the way. Why can’t you call the carpenter and get it repaired? You’re the one who broke it. You never think of anything!”

“I didn’t break it,” replied Zakhar, “it just collapsed, you can’t expect things to last for ever – it had to go sometime!”

Ilya Ilyich did not feel it necessary to contest the point and asked only: “Found it yet?”

“Here’s some letters.”

“They’re not the ones.”

“Well, that’s all there are,” said Zakhar.

“All right, leave it then!” said Ilya Ilyich impatiently. “I’ll get up and find them myself.”

Zakhar had gone back to his room and had barely put his hands on the edge of the stove in order to lever himself up onto it, when once again there came the impatient shout: “Zakhar, Zakhar!”

“Lord in heaven,” Zakhar grumbled as he made his way back to the study. “This is killing me, I’d sooner be dead!”

“What is it?” he said, with one hand on the study door and his head averted at such an angle – as a mark of his displeasure – that he could only see Oblomov out of the corner of his eye, thus presenting his master with a view of an immense thicket of whiskers out of which you wouldn’t have been at all surprised to see a couple of birds come flying.

“My handkerchief, quick! You could see for yourself that I need it, you just don’t look!” Ilya Ilyich snapped.

Zakhar saw nothing particularly surprising or unpleasant about his master’s command or his reproach; indeed for his part he found both entirely natural.

“How should I know where it is?” he grumbled, going around the room, feeling for it on every chair, although anyone could see there was nothing on any of them.

“You’re always losing things,” he muttered, opening the door to the living room to see if it was there.

“Not there! Look in here! I haven’t been in there since the day before yesterday! And hurry up!” said Ilya Ilyich.

“Where is it? I can’t see any handkerchief!” said Zakhar, spreading his hands helplessly and peering into every corner. Suddenly he spotted it. “Look, there it is!” he croaked indignantly. “It’s right underneath you! The end of it’s sticking out, you’re lying right on it and asking me where it is!” And without waiting for an answer, Zakhar made for the door.

Oblomov felt a little embarrassed at having been made to look so stupid, but soon found another pretext for putting Zakhar in the wrong.

“Is this what you call clean? Look at all this dust and dirt; good God! Just look in the corners; you don’t do a thing!”

“You call it doing nothing.” Zakhar was offended. “I practically work myself to death here; why, I dust – and almost every day, I sweep!...”

He pointed to the middle of the floor and the table at which Oblomov ate.

“Just look, it’s all swept and tidy, you could hold a wedding here. What more could you want?”

“And what about this?” Ilya Ilyich broke in, pointing to the walls and ceiling. “And this? And this?” He pointed to a discarded towel from the day before and a plate with a piece of bread on it that had been left on the table.

“Yes, well that I’ll clear away,” Zakhar conceded, picking up the plate.

“What about the rest, the dust on the walls, the cobwebs?” said Oblomov, pointing to the walls.

“Well, that I do for Easter, cleaning the icon* and clearing away the cobwebs.”

“And what about dusting the books and pictures?”

“The books and pictures I do for Christmas; Anisya helps me and we clear out all the cupboards. Now there’s never any chance of clearing up, you’re always sitting around at home.”

“Sometimes I go to the theatre or I’m invited out, you could—”

“You expect me to clean up at night?”

Oblomov looked at him reproachfully, shook his head and sighed, but Zakhar just looked out of the window indifferently and also sighed. His master looked at him as if to say, “You know, you’re even more of an Oblomov than I am myself,” while Zakhar was thinking to himself something like: “Don’t expect me to believe all that! Oh yes, you’re very good at thinking up clever things to say – not that they add up to anything – but when it comes to things like dust and cobwebs, you couldn’t care less.”

“Don’t you know,” said Ilya Ilyich, “that dust breeds moths? I sometimes even see bugs on the walls.”

“I even have fleas in my room,” Zakhar responded, unruffled.

“Is that something to be proud of? It’s disgusting,” said Oblomov.

A grin spread all over Zakhar’s face taking in even his eyebrows and whiskers that jutted out even farther on either side; it was like a red stain covering his whole face right up to the hairline.

“Why is it my fault if there are bugs in the world?” he said with unfeigned surprise. “Was it me who invented them?”

“It’s because of dirt,” Oblomov broke in. “Why are you telling me all this rubbish?”

“I didn’t invent dirt either!”

“You have mice running around your room all night, I know, I can hear them.”

“I didn’t invent mice either. There’s a lot of creatures everywhere, mice, cats, bugs.”

“How come other people don’t have moths or bugs?” An expression of disbelief appeared on Zakhar’s face, or, more accurately, of quiet conviction that such things simply don’t happen.

"I always have a lot," he persisted. "You can't watch every single bug or crawl into their crannies after them." Privately, he was probably thinking: "Who can sleep without bedbugs?"

"Just take a broom and sweep the dirt out of the corners and there won't be any at all!" Oblomov admonished him.

"Clear it away and the next day it all piles up again," said Zakhar.

"No, it doesn't, or at least it shouldn't," his master put in.

"Yes it does, I know," asserted the servant.

"Well, if it piles up, sweep it away again!"

"What do you mean? Clean out all the corners every day?" asked Zakhar. "What kind of life is that? I'd sooner the Good Lord took me to his bosom!"

"How come other people's places are clean?" Oblomov objected. "Just take a look at the piano tuner's apartment opposite; it's a pleasure to see, and just one girl..."

"How do you expect Germans to collect dirt?" Zakhar objected. "Just see how they live! One bone feeds the whole family for an entire week. A coat goes back and forth between the father and the son. The wife and daughters wear these short little dresses and sit with their legs tucked up under them like geese. So where is their dirt going to come from? They don't let their worn-out old clothes pile up in cupboards for years the way we do, or throw bread crusts onto a heap in a corner for the winter. They don't waste even a single crust; they save them and use them as rusks to go with their beer!"

The thought of such a cheese-separating existence so disgusted Zakhar that he actually spat through his teeth.

"All this talk is getting us nowhere," Ilya Ilyich intervened, "you'd better start cleaning up!"

"What about the times I'm all ready to clean up and you don't let me!" said Zakhar.

"There you go again, it's always me who is in the way."

"Yes it is! How do you expect me to clean with you always sitting around at home? Go out for a whole day, then I'll clean up."

"Another one of your ideas, 'go out'. Why don't you just go back to your room?"

“No, I mean it!” Zakhar persisted. “Just go out today and Anisya and me’ll have the place cleaned up, though maybe the two of us won’t be enough; we’ll have to get in some women to scrub the place out.”

“Get in some women! Where do you get these ideas?” said Ilya Ilyich. “Back to your room!” By now he was sorry he had provoked this whole conversation with Zakhar. He was always forgetting that the slightest reference to this delicate subject was liable to stir up a hornets’ nest.

Oblomov would actually have liked to see everything clean, only he wanted it to happen somehow by itself, spontaneously and in a flash, but if you so much as raised the question of asking Zakhar to dust or sweep or anything like that, he would always give you this tremendous argument. He would make it clear that there was no way of avoiding major domestic upheaval, knowing full well how the very prospect of it would horrify his master.

Zakhar went out, leaving Oblomov in a brown study. After a few minutes the half-hour struck again.

“Oh, no!” Ilya Ilyich exclaimed in dismay. “Almost eleven and I haven’t even got up, and still haven’t washed!

“Zakhar, Zakhar!”

“Oh God! There you go again! Well?” Zakhar’s voice carried into the room from the hallway, the words followed by the familiar sound of feet hitting the floor.

“I want to wash, is everything ready?”

“Yes, and it has been for ages! And you’re still lying there!”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me? I would have been up long ago. You can go, and I’ll be right with you. I have work to do. I’m going to sit down and write!”

Zakhar went out, but a minute later returned carrying some scraps of paper and a notebook all smudged and soiled and covered in writing.

“Here, as long as you’re going to be writing, you might as well check the accounts; we have bills to pay.”

“What accounts, what bills?” Ilya Ilyich asked unhappily.

“There’s the butcher, the greengrocer, the laundress, the baker. They all want to be paid.”

“That’s the only thing they care about – money!” Ilya Ilyich grumbled. “And you, why don’t you give me the bills a little at a time instead of all at once?”

“But you always throw me out, it’s always, ‘Come back tomorrow.’”

“All right, why don’t I just tell you ‘Come back tomorrow’ right now?”

“No, this time they really mean it – no more credit. It’s already the first of the month.”

“Another problem!” Oblomov said dejectedly. “Well, what are you standing there for? Put it on the table! I’m getting up right away. I’ll wash and look at it. You’re sure everything’s ready?”

“It’s ready!” replied Zakhar.

“All right, here goes!”

Groaning, he was on the point of levering himself up into a sitting position when Zakhar broke in.

“Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you, just now while you were still sleeping, the manager sent the porter over with a message; he wants you to move out right away, they need the apartment.”

“What of it? If they need it, we’ll just move out. What’s the problem? You don’t have to nag, it’s the third time you’ve told me!”

“Yes, but they’re nagging me!”

“Tell them we’re leaving!”

“Yes, but they say you’ve been promising to move for a month now but you don’t do anything about it; they say they’re going to call the police.”

“Let them!” Oblomov said decisively. “We’ll be leaving ourselves anyway in three weeks or so, as soon as it begins to get a little warmer!”

“What three weeks? The manager says that in two weeks he’s sending in the workmen; they’re going to tear the place apart. He says you have to leave tomorrow – or the day after at the latest!”

“You see, now they’re trying to rush me out! Why wait? Why not tell me to get out right now? I forbid you to mention the apartment to me. I told you the same thing last time, and now you come and mention it anyway!”

“What do you want me to do?” Zakhar responded.

“What do I want you to do?” Ilya Ilyich came back. “See how he tries to get out of it! He’s asking me! It’s not my business. Don’t bother me!”

You work it out any way you want, just so long as we don't have to move. Try to help your master out a little!"

"But, Ilya Ilyich, how am I going to work it out?" Zakhar wheezed softly. "It's not as if it's my house; if you're in someone else's house and they want you out – that's it, you just have to leave! Now if it was my house, then with the greatest of pleasure—"

"I'm sure you can find some way of bringing them around. For instance, something like: 'We're old tenants and we pay the rent regularly.'"

"I told them," said Zakhar.

"Well, what did they say?"

"The same old thing, what else? 'You have to move out. We need to do the whole apartment over completely.' They're going to make this one and the doctor's into one big apartment so that the landlord's son can move in after his wedding."

"Good God, to think that there are idiots around who want to get married!" said Oblomov in annoyance. He turned over onto his back.

"Maybe you yourself, begging your pardon, could write to the landlord, perhaps he would leave you alone and tell them to start work on the other apartment first." Zakhar gestured vaguely to his right.

"All right, I'll get up and write. You can go now and I'll think about it. You can't do the slightest thing – even nonsense like this I have to be bothered with."

Zakhar went out and Oblomov began to think. The problem was that he did not know what to think about first. The letter to the bailiff? Moving to a new apartment? Do the accounts? He was overwhelmed by the rising tide of practical problems and just lay there twisting and turning from side to side. From time to time a disconnected exclamation would escape him: "God, how life reaches out and grabs you – nowhere to hide!"

There is no telling how long he would have lain there in a torment of indecision if the doorbell had not rung.

"Oh no! Someone already here?" said Oblomov, wrapping his dressing gown around him. "And I'm not even up yet. It's a disgrace! Who could it be so early?"

He lay there looking at the door, wondering who it could be.

Chapter 2

A YOUNG MAN OF ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE entered, aglow with health, his cheeks, lips and eyes smiling. It made one positively envious to see him. He was immaculately groomed and attired and there was a dazzling freshness about his face, linen, gloves and tailcoat. He wore a watch chain on his waistcoat, festooned with tiny trinkets. He drew out a handkerchief of the finest cambric, perfumed with oriental fragrances, took a sniff, passed it nonchalantly over his face and glossy hat and dusted off his patent-leather boots.

“Ah, Volkov, good morning!” said Ilya Ilyich.

“Good morning, Oblomov,” said this dazzling personage, moving towards him.

“Stop! Stop! You’re just in from the cold!” said Oblomov.

“How pampered you are! What self-indulgence!” said Volkov, looking for somewhere to put his hat, but, seeing dust everywhere, kept it in his hand. Parting the tails of his coat he was about to sit down, but after taking a close look at the armchair, he decided to remain standing.

“Not up yet! What’s that dressing gown you’ve got on? No one has been wearing that kind for years now,” said Volkov, to Oblomov’s discomfiture.

“It’s not a dressing gown – it’s more of a kimono,” said Oblomov, wrapping the voluminous folds of the gown lovingly about himself.

“Keeping well?” asked Volkov.

“Well!” said Oblomov, yawning. “Anything but; the blood pressure is killing me. How about you?”

“Me? Fine, absolutely on top of the world as a matter of fact,” the young man added exuberantly.

“What are you doing up and about so early?” asked Oblomov.

“I’ve just come from the tailor’s. How do you like my tailcoat?” he said, turning around for Oblomov to see.

“Perfect! Beautifully tailored,” said Ilya Ilyich. “But why is it so wide at the back?”

“It’s a riding habit.”

“Oh! So that’s it, do you ride then?”

“Of course, what do you mean? I ordered it especially for today. Today’s the first of May; I’m riding out with Goryunov to Yekateringof.* But maybe you didn’t know, Misha Goryunov’s been commissioned, so it’s our big day!”

“It certainly is!” said Oblomov.

“He has a ‘chestnut’,” Volkov went on, “they all have chestnuts in his regiment; mine is a black. What about you? Are you walking or driving?”

“Well, neither really,” said Oblomov.

“You mean you’re not going to Yekateringof on the first of May? Really! Ilya Ilyich. Why, everyone will be there!”

“What do you mean ‘everyone’? Don’t exaggerate!” Oblomov observed lazily.

“My dear fellow, you really must come! Sofya Nikolayevna and Lidia will be the only two in their carriage and the little jump seat facing them will be empty, so you could—”

“No, I won’t fit, I’m not sitting on any little jump seat. And what would I do there anyway?”

“Well, if you like, Misha will find another horse for you.”

“God knows what he will come up with next!” said Oblomov in a kind of private aside. “You seem to have the Goryunovs on the brain.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Volkov excitedly. “Can I tell you?”

“Out with it!”

“But not a word to anyone – you promise?” said Volkov, sitting beside Oblomov on the divan.

“Yes, all right.”

“I’m... in love with Lidia,” he whispered.

“Good for you! When did it happen? I hear she’s very nice.”

“Three weeks ago,” Volkov answered with a deep sigh, “and Misha is in love with Dashenka.”

“What Dashenka?”

“Where have you been, Oblomov? You don’t know Dashenka? The whole town is raving about her dancing. I’m going with him to the ballet today, he’s going to throw a bouquet. He has to be encouraged; he’s shy, still just a novice... Oh! Yes, we still have to go for camellias.”