The Village of Stepanchikovo and Its Inhabitants

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Translated by Roger Cockrell
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* (abolished in 1834)
The Village of Stepanchikovo and Its Inhabitants

FROM AN ANONYMOUS NOTEBOOK
List of Characters

Colonel Yegor Ilyich Rostanev (Yegorushka)
Foma Fomich Opiskin
Praskovya Ilyinichna Rostaneva, the colonel’s sister
The colonel’s children: Ilyusha and Sasha (Sashenka, Sashurka, Alexandra Yegorovna)
Sergei Alexandrovich (Seryozha), the colonel’s nephew and the narrator
Agafya Timofeyevna Krakhotkina (the “general’s lady”), the colonel’s mother
Nastasya Yevgrafovna Yezhevikina (Nastenka, Nastya), the children’s governess
Yevgraf Larionovich Yezhevikin, Nastenka’s father
Anna Nilovna Perepelitsyna, confidante to the general’s lady
Pavel Semyonovich Obnoskin (Paul)
Anfisa Petrovna Obnoskina, Pavel’s mother
Ivan Ivanovich Mizinchikov
Tatyana Ivanovna, distant relative of the colonel
Stepan Alexeyevich Bakhcheyev, neighbouring landowner
Falaley, house boy
Grigory Vidoplyasov, the colonel’s lackey
Gavrila, the colonel’s personal valet
FIRST PART
Introduction

When my uncle, Colonel Yegor Ilyich Rostanev, retired, he went to live in the village of Stepanchikovo, which he had inherited and where he settled down so effortlessly that it seemed as if he had spent his entire life on the estate without ever once having left it. There are certain particular natures for whom life holds no challenges whatsoever, and who are able to adapt to any circumstance; the retired colonel possessed just such a nature. It was difficult to conceive of a more submissive and compliant person. If someone had asked him in all seriousness to give him a ride on his back for several hundred yards or so, he would probably have agreed: he was such an obliging man that, as the occasion arose, he would not have been averse to parting with anything as soon as he were asked, down almost to his very last shirt. He was very powerfully built: tall, slim, ruddy-cheeked, with teeth as white as ivory, a full, reddish-brown moustache, a strong, resonant voice and a natural, booming laugh; whenever he spoke, it was always in a rather abrupt, hurried way. When he retired, he was about forty years old, and he had spent his entire life, from the age of sixteen practically, serving in the hussars. He had married at a very young age and been head over heels in love with his wife, but she had died, leaving him with a heart full of lasting, very pleasant memories. Finally, having inherited Stepanchikovo – increasing his estate to six hundred serfs – he retired from army service and, as has already been said, settled down in the village with his children: eight-year-old Ilyusha (whose arrival in the world had cost his mother her life) and his daughter Sashenka, a girl of about fifteen, who, on her mother’s death, had been educated in a boarding school in Moscow. But
very soon my uncle’s house turned into a veritable Noah’s ark. This was what happened.

At the time he inherited the estate and went into retirement, his mother, the wife of General Krakhotkin, lost her husband. This had been her second marriage, which had taken place some sixteen years earlier, when my uncle had still been a cornet, but nevertheless thinking of getting married himself. His mother had been very reluctant to give her blessing to such an idea, weeping bitter tears for ages, reproaching him for his selfishness, ingratitude and lack of respect. She was determined to prove to him that even his estate of two hundred and fifty serfs was barely sufficient to support his family (to support, that is, his mother, together with her clique of hangers-on, pug dogs, spitzes, Chinese cats and so on) – and then suddenly, totally unexpectedly, while engaged in all these rebukes, reproaches and hysterical outbursts, she herself got married, at the age of forty-two, before her son did. But even here she was able to find a pretext to attack my poor uncle, maintaining she was getting married only to guarantee herself some security in her old age – something which was denied her by her disrespectful, selfish son, who had behaved with such unpardonable insolence by setting up his own home.

I have never been able to understand what it was exactly that persuaded such an apparently sensible person as the late General Krakhotkin to marry a forty-two-year-old widow. It can only be assumed that he suspected her of having money. There were some who thought he simply needed someone to take care of him, as even then he could foresee the myriad of illnesses which would beset him later, in his old age. One thing was certain: the general demonstrated a profound lack of respect for his wife during the whole of their married life together and callously mocked her at every available opportunity. He was a strange man. Semi-educated but far from stupid, he had a decided contempt for all and sundry, living entirely without principle, jeering at everything and everybody, and as the result of ill health – the consequence of a not entirely correct and upright life – turning
into a malevolent, irritable and ruthless old man. He had had a successful army career, but, following an “unpleasant incident”, he had been forced to resign his commission in a very untimely fashion, only just managing to avoid being taken to court and stripped of his pension. He was never to get over the feeling of embitterment. Almost totally penniless, the owner of a hundred or so impoverished serfs, he simply gave up, spending the rest of his life, an entire twelve years, never bothering to enquire what he was living on or who was providing for him, and yet insisting on enjoying all life’s comforts, maintaining his expensive lifestyle and keeping a carriage. He soon lost the use of his legs, and spent the remaining ten years of his life in a wheelchair, rocked whenever necessary by two enormous lackeys, who never heard a single word from him, apart from all kinds of profanities. The carriage, lackeys and wheelchairs were the responsibility of the insolent son, who sent his mother all that he possessed, constantly mortgaging and remortgaging his estate, denying himself essentials, incurring debts which he had hardly any hope of repaying from his income at the time, while continuing to be regarded by his mother as an incorrigibly selfish and ungrateful son. But my uncle’s character was such that he himself finally came to believe in his own egotism, and so, in self-flagellation and in order to prove he was not selfish at all, he carried on sending more and more money.

The “general’s lady”, as she came to be known, worshipped her husband. But most of all she liked the fact that he was a general and that she, as a result, was a general’s wife. She had her own part of the house where, throughout the whole of her husband’s semi-existence, she led a flourishing life, surrounded by her hangers-on, gossips and lapdogs. In her little town she was a figure of some consequence. Tittle-tattle, invitations to christenings and weddings, games of preference for trivial stakes – all such activities, combined with the respect shown to her as the wife of a general, more than compensated for the constraints of her domestic existence. Gossips visited her regularly with all the latest rumours; everywhere she went, she was always given
pride of place – in short, she was able to exploit to the full all the advantages that her husband’s title entailed. Although the general himself didn’t interfere in any of this, he taunted her heartlessly in public, openly asking himself, for example, why he had ever married “such a holier-than-thou prig of a woman”. And nobody ever dared to stand up for her. Gradually, one after the other, all his acquaintances abandoned him – and yet, at the same time, he craved other people’s company: he loved to chat and argue and relished the fact that there was always someone there, sitting and listening to him. As a freethinker and atheist of the old school, he much enjoyed holding forth on lofty matters.

But the numbers of people from the town of N—— who had any time at all to listen to lofty matters grew smaller and smaller. There was an attempt to introduce preference whist to members of the household, but each game usually ended with the general having such fits of rage that his terrified good lady and her minions would light candles and offer up prayers, divine fortunes from beads and cards, distribute alms outside prisons and anxiously await the after-dinner hour, when they would once again have to make up a party for whist and prepare for every mistake to be met by shouts, yells, curses and practically physical assault. Every time the general found something not to his liking, he could never contain himself: he would shriek like an old woman, swear like a coachman, and sometimes even, as he ripped up the cards and hurled them down on the floor, chasing his partners out of the room, burst into tears from irritation and anger, merely because someone had put down a jack instead of a nine. Eventually, as his sight deteriorated, he needed someone who would read to him. This signalled the arrival on the scene of Foma Fomich Opiskin.

I must confess that it is with a certain sense of awe that I introduce this new figure. He is, without any doubt, one of the most important characters in my story. But I will not begin to conjecture the extent to which he claims the reader’s attention: it would be more proper to leave the reader to make up his own mind on the subject.
Foma Fomich became part of General Krakhotkin’s household as a sponger, in need of a crust of bread – no more, no less. Exactly where he came from is shrouded in mystery. I have nonetheless deliberately made some enquiries and found out one or two details about this remarkable man’s earlier life. People said, in the first place, that he had once been in government service, and that he had endured some kind of hardship – for a “good cause”, naturally. It was also said that he had once embarked on a literary career in Moscow. There is nothing surprising in that: the fact that Foma Fomich was appallingly ignorant could not of course in any way have served as an impediment to such a pursuit. All that has been established beyond doubt was that he had been a failure at everything and that he had finally been compelled to endure the ordeal of becoming the general’s reader. There wasn’t a humiliation he didn’t have to suffer for the sake of his board and lodging. True, subsequently, once the general had died and Foma himself had totally unexpectedly become a figure of extraordinary significance, he would keep on assuring us all that, in agreeing to act as a clown, he had magnanimously sacrificed himself for the sake of friendship; that the general had been his benefactor, someone who had in fact been an exceptional person, misunderstood by all, and that he alone, Foma, had been privy to the innermost secrets of the general’s soul; and, finally, that if he, Foma, had been forced to play the role of various wild beasts and so on, it had been only to entertain and amuse a dear suffering friend who had become depressed by his illnesses. But such assurances and explanations on Foma’s part must be taken with a pinch of salt. While playing the fool, this very same Foma Fomich was acting out a very different role in the women’s section of the general’s house. How he managed to do this is difficult for the non-specialist in such matters to imagine. The general’s wife regarded him with a particular kind of mystical reverence – why this should have been so, I have no idea. Little by little he managed to wheedle himself into a position of astonishing dominance over the entire female section of the general’s house, not dissimilar to
that of the sundry Ivan Yakovleviches* and other such sages and soothsayers, whom certain well-born lady admirers like to visit in lunatic asylums. He would read them edifying books aloud, and expound, his eyes filled with eloquent tears, the various Christian virtues; tell them all about his life and his achievements; attend church services, such as vespers and even matins, and partly fore-tell the future. The general had some idea of what was going on in the rooms at the back of the house and adopted an even more tyrannical and callous attitude towards his hapless victim. But Foma’s tortured suffering only increased the respect shown him by the general’s wife and all her retinue.

Finally everything changed – with the death of the general. His death was rather out of the ordinary. As a one-time freethinker, this atheist was an extraordinary coward. He wept, repented, raised icons to his lips, summoned priests. Liturgies were held, extreme unctions administered. The poor wretch shouted that he didn’t want to die, and even tearfully begged Foma Fomich for forgiveness – thereby lending considerable weight to the latter’s prestige. However, just before the general’s soul departed from his body, the following incident occurred. The general’s wife’s daughter from her first marriage, my aunt Praskovya Ilyinichna – a confirmed spinster and long-time resident in the general’s house, one of the general’s favourite victims throughout the whole of his ten-year wheelchair-bound existence, someone who, in her simple-hearted and humble way, was the only person capable of pleasing him by attending to his every need – approached his bedside weeping bitterly and was just attempting to straighten the pillow under the invalid’s head when he managed to grab her hair and tug at it three times, practically foaming with rage. Ten minutes or so later he was dead. The colonel was informed, although the general’s wife declared she didn’t wish to see him and that she would rather die than allow him to be anywhere near her at such a moment. There was a magnificent funeral – paid for, naturally, by the impertinent son, the very person she didn’t want to let into her sight.
In the bankrupt estate of Knyazyovka, the joint possession of a number of landowners, including the general with his hundred or so serfs, stands a mausoleum of white marble, the walls covered in inscriptions, testifying to the wit, talent, nobility of soul, awards and military exploits of the general. Foma Fomich was to a large extent responsible for these inscriptions. For a long time after the general’s death, his widow persisted in refusing to forgive her disobedient son. Surrounded by her cohort of minions and lapdogs, she continued to declare, sobbing and shrieking, that she would sooner resort to living on dry crusts (washed down, naturally, “by her tears”), sooner go round people’s houses hobbling on a stick and begging for alms, than agree to the request of “that disobedient man” to move to Stepanchikovo – and that she would never, never so much as set foot in his house! That expression, set foot, when used in a general sense, can be uttered in a particularly effective way by some well-born ladies. The general’s widow used it with unsurpassed artistry... In short, there were no limits to her eloquence. It would, however, be remiss to forget to mention that, in the midst of all this shrieking and raving, the preparations were gradually being put into place for her move to Stepanchikovo. The colonel wore all his horses out, going back and forth practically every day, covering the twenty-five miles or so from Stepanchikovo to the town, and it wasn’t until two weeks after the general’s funeral that he was allowed to appear in front of his indignant parent. Foma Fomich was charged with overseeing the discussions. Throughout these two weeks he reproached and attacked the reprobate son for his “heartless” behaviour, reducing him to real tears, almost to despair. This marked the beginning of Foma Fomich’s incomprehensible and inhumanly despotic domination of my poor uncle. Foma intuitively grasped the kind of person he was dealing with, immediately realizing that his role as a clown was over and that in the land of the blind even he, Foma, could be king. It was now, indeed, that he could make up for the past.

“Just imagine what you would feel,” Foma would say to him, “if your own mother, the very person responsible for your existence,
so to speak, actually had to hobble around everywhere clutching a stick and, leaning on it with her trembling hands, withered from starvation, asking for charity? Would that not be a monstrous thought, bearing in mind, in the first place, her status as a general’s wife and, in the second, her many virtues? What would you feel if she were suddenly to come – mistakenly, of course (but after all, such a thing could happen) – to your window, holding out her hand begging for charity, while you, her very own son, were perhaps at that very moment lounging in some feather bed? How awful that would be – so awful! But the worst thing of all, if I may be quite frank, colonel, the worst thing of all is that you are now standing here in front of me like some mindless block of wood, your mouth hanging open and your eyes popping out – it’s positively indecent, when just the thought of such a circumstance should be making you tear your hair out and weep floods of tears… yes, I’m telling you: rivers, lakes, seas, oceans of tears!…”

In short, Foma would get carried away by the heat of the moment. But that always happened whenever he waxed eloquent. The outcome of it all, of course, was that the general’s lady, together with her entire entourage of minions and lapdogs, with Foma Fomich and her main confidante Miss Perepelitsyna, finally graced Stepanchikovo with her presence. She announced that her decision to live with her son was only a test to see if he was truly devoted to her. You can imagine what the colonel had to endure in undergoing such an appraisal of his devotion to her! At first, as befitting someone who has been recently widowed, the general’s lady saw it as her duty to collapse in despair two or three times a week as she remembered her departed husband, and each time it was always the colonel who was on the receiving end. On certain occasions, especially when there were visitors present, the general’s lady would summon her little grandson Ilyusha and her fifteen-year-old granddaughter Sashenka, sit them down by her side, look at them fixedly with her sad, tormented eyes, as at children who had been ruined at the hands of such a father, give a deep, heavy sigh and finally burst into floods of silent and
inexplicable tears for a whole hour at the very least. Woe to the colonel, if he should prove unable to understand these tears! But he, the poor man, could almost never understand their import, and, in his naivety, would happen to turn up practically every time at such tearful moments and find himself perforce subject to her scrutiny. But his respectful devotion for her remained as strong as ever, eventually breaking all bounds. In short, both of them, the general’s widow and Foma Fomich, had finally grasped that the storm in the shape of General Krakhotkin that had been threatening them for so many years had passed – passed, never to return. There were occasions when the general’s widow would suddenly, for no reason, collapse in a fainting fit onto the sofa, turning the whole place into confusion and uproar. The colonel would stand there dumbfounded, trembling like an aspen leaf.

“You heartless son, you!” the general’s widow would cry as she came to. “You have ripped out my entrails… mes entrailles, mes entrailles!”

“But how on earth, Mother, could I have ripped out your entrails?” the colonel would object meekly.

“But you have, you have positively ripped them out! Listen to him, making excuses! Such insolence! You cruel, heartless man! I’m dying!…”

The colonel of course would be totally shattered.

But somehow or other the general’s lady would always recover. And within half an hour the colonel would be buttonholing someone and giving his version of events:

“But you need to understand, my dear fellow, that she is a grande dame, the wife of a general! She’s such a kind old lady – it’s just that she’s used to living such a refined life, you see… I’m nothing but a bumptious clod in comparison! She’s now really angry with me. It’s all my fault, of course. I’ve still no idea, my dear chap, exactly what it is I’ve done wrong, but I’m certainly to blame…”

On occasion it would be the spinster Miss Perepelitsyna – a crabbed and petulant old woman well past her prime, with her hair done up in a chignon, with sharp, predatory little eyes without
eyebrows, thin pursed lips, hands that had been washed in pickled-gherkin juice – on occasion she would be the one who saw it as her duty to lecture the colonel:

“It is all because you show her no respect. It is because you think only of yourself, and therefore you insult your dear mother, sir; her ladyship is not accustomed to such behaviour, sir. She is the wife of a general, and you, sir, are still only a mere colonel.”

“That Miss Perepelitsyna, my dear chap, is the most excellent of women, the most wonderful support for Mother! Such an admirable lady! Don’t you go thinking that she’s some sponger or other; she herself, my dear fellow, is a lieutenant colonel’s daughter. Yes, really!”

But, of course, these were only the opening shots. That very same general’s lady, who was capable of playing such silly tricks, would in her turn shake like a little mouse in fear before the person who was once dependent on her. She had fallen under the spell of Foma Fomich once and for all. She hung on his every word, heard everything through his ears, saw everything through his eyes. One of my distant cousins, also a retired hussar, still a young man but unbelievably worn out by years of reckless behaviour, and who at one time had taken refuge in my uncle’s house, confided in me his profound conviction that the general’s lady was in an improper relationship with Foma Fomich. Naturally, at the time I angrily rejected such an idea as being far too coarse and naive. No, it was something else – something I could only explain by making some preliminary remarks to the reader concerning the character of Foma Fomich, as I myself was subsequently to come to know it.

Picture to yourself the most insignificant, the most faint-hearted little man, an outcast from society, superfluous to requirements, utterly useless, totally vile, but immeasurably vain and, moreover, endowed with precisely nothing that could remotely justify his pathologically warped vanity. I must warn you in advance: Foma Fomich is the embodiment of the most boundless (yet very special) kind of vanity – in other words, a vanity that goes hand in hand with the uttermost insignificance, and, as is usually the case in
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