First Love Dedicated to P. V. Annenkov

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The guests had long since gone. The clock struck half past twelve. Only the host, Sergei Nikolaevich, and Vladimir Petrovich remained in the room.

The host rang and ordered the remains of the supper to be cleared away.

"So, this is settled," he said, settling deeper into his armchair and lighting a cigar, "each of us is obliged to tell the story of his first love. It is your turn, Sergei Nikolaevich."

Sergei Nikolaevich, a round little man with a plump fair face, looked first at the host, then raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"I never had a first love," he said at last, "I started straight away with the second."

"How is that?"

"Very simply. I was eighteen when I first started courting a very pretty young lady; but I courted her as if the thing were no novelty to me: exactly as I courted others afterwards. Strictly speaking, I fell in love for the first and last time at six years old with my nurse; but that was a very long time ago. The details of our relations have faded from my memory, and even if I remembered them, who could be interested in them?"

"What is to be done, then?" began the host. "There is not much interesting in my first love either; I did not fall in love with anyone until I met Anna Ivanovna, my present wife, and everything went smoothly with us: our fathers arranged the match, we very soon fell in love with each other and married without delay. My tale is told in two words. I confess, gentlemen, in raising the question of first love, I was counting on you, not old, I won't say, but not young bachelors either. Surely you will entertain us somehow, Vladimir Petrovich?"

"My first love really belongs to the number of not quite ordinary ones," answered Vladimir Petrovich with a slight hesitation, a man of about forty, dark-haired, with gray at the temples.

"Ah!" said the host and Sergei Nikolaevich in unison. "So much the better... Tell us."

"Very well... or no: I will not tell it; I am no master at storytelling: it comes out dry and short or long-winded and false; but if you will allow me, I will write down everything I remember in a notebook and read it to you."

The friends at first did not agree, but Vladimir Petrovich insisted on his own way. Two weeks later they met again, and Vladimir Petrovich kept his promise.

This is what was written in his notebook:

I was sixteen at the time. It happened in the summer of 1833.

I lived in Moscow with my parents. They rented a country house near the Kaluga Gate, opposite Neskuchny. I was preparing for the university, but worked very little and without hurrying.

No one restricted my freedom. I did what I wanted, especially since I had parted with my last tutor, a Frenchman, who could never get used to the idea that he had fallen "like a bomb" (comme une bombe) into Russia, and with a fierce expression on his face lay on his bed for whole days. My father treated me with indifferent affection; my mother hardly paid any attention to me, although she had no other children besides me: other cares absorbed her. My father, a still young and very handsome man, had married her by calculation; she was ten years older than him. My mother led a sad life: she was constantly agitated, jealous, angry — but not in my father's presence; she was very afraid of him, and he kept himself strict, cold, distant... I had never seen a man more exquisitely calm, self-confident, and domineering.

I will never forget the first weeks I spent at the country house. The weather was wonderful; we moved from the city on May ninth, on St. Nicholas's Day itself. I walked — now in the garden of our country house, now in Neskuchny, now beyond the gate; I took some book with me — Kaidanov's course, for example — but rarely opened it, and mostly read aloud verses, of which I knew a great many by heart; my blood fermented in me, and my heart ached — so sweetly and funnily: I kept waiting, was timid of something, wondered at everything, and was all on the alert; my imagination played and darted quickly around the same ideas, like swifts around a belfry at dawn; I grew thoughtful, sad, and even wept; but even through the tears and through the sadness evoked now by a melodious verse, now by the beauty of the evening, there shone through, like spring grass, the joyful feeling of young, bubbling life.

I had a riding horse; I saddled it myself and rode away alone somewhere far off, galloped and imagined myself a knight at a tournament — how merrily the wind

blew in my ears! — or, turning my face to the sky, received its shining light and azure into my open soul.

I remember that at that time the image of a woman, the phantom of feminine love, almost never arose in definite outlines in my mind; but in everything I thought, in everything I felt, there lurked a half-conscious, shy presentiment of something new, unspeakably sweet, feminine...

This presentiment, this expectation permeated my whole being: I breathed it, it rolled through my veins in every drop of blood... it was destined soon to come true.

Our country house consisted of a wooden manor house with columns and two low wings; in the left wing was housed a tiny factory of cheap wallpaper... I more than once went there to watch how a dozen thin and disheveled boys in greasy dressing-gowns and with worn faces kept jumping on wooden levers that pressed the square blocks of the press, and thus by the weight of their frail bodies pulled out the variegated patterns of wallpaper. The right wing stood empty and was let out. One day — three weeks after the ninth of May — the shutters in the windows of this wing opened, women's faces appeared in them — some family had settled there. I remember that on the same day at dinner my mother inquired of the butler who our new neighbors were, and, hearing the name of Princess Zasekina, first said not without some respect: "Ah! a princess..." — and then added: "She must be poor, I suppose."

"They arrived in three hired carriages, sir," remarked the butler, respectfully handing a dish, "they have no carriage of their own, sir, and the furniture is the most meager."

"Yes," replied my mother, "and yet it is better."

My father looked coldly at her: she fell silent.

Indeed, Princess Zasekina could not be a wealthy woman: the wing she had rented was so dilapidated, small, and low that people, even somewhat well-to-do, would not have agreed to settle in it. However, I let all this pass me by at the time. The princely title had little effect on me: I had recently read Schiller's "Robbers."