Notes from Underground

I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think it is my liver that hurts. However, I haven't the faintest idea about my illness and don't know for certain what hurts. I don't treat myself and never have, though I respect medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious; well, at least enough to respect medicine. (I am educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious.) No, sir, I don't want to be treated out of spite. Perhaps you won't understand that. Well, but I do understand. Of course, I won't be able to explain to you just whom I will spite in this case with my spite; I know perfectly well that I can't possibly "make a mess" for the doctors by not being treated by them; I know better than anyone that by all this I only harm myself and no one else. But still, if I don't get treated, it is out of spite. My liver hurts, so let it hurt even more!

I have been living like this for a long time now — twenty years. Now I am forty. I used to serve, but now I don't. I was a spiteful official. I was rude and found pleasure in it. After all, I didn't take bribes, so I had to reward myself somehow with that. (A bad joke; but I won't cross it out. I wrote it thinking it would come out very sharp; and now, when I saw for myself that I only wanted to show off disgustingly, I deliberately won't cross it out!) When petitioners for certificates used to come to the desk where I sat, I would grind my teeth at them and feel implacable delight when I managed to upset someone. Almost always I managed. For the most part they were all timid people: petitioners, you know. But among the dandies I especially couldn't stand one officer. He absolutely refused to submit and rattled his saber disgustingly. I waged a year-and-a-half war with him over that saber. I finally prevailed. He stopped rattling. However, this happened back in my youth. But do you know, gentlemen, what was the main point of my spite? Yes, that was the whole thing, that was where the greatest vileness lay: that I constantly, even at the moment of the strongest bile, shamefully realized in myself that I was not only not spiteful, but not even embittered, that I was only scaring sparrows for nothing and amusing myself with it. I have foam at my mouth, but bring me some little doll, give me some tea with sugar, and I will probably calm down. I will even be touched in my soul, though afterwards, of course, I will grind my teeth at myself and suffer insomnia for several months from shame. That is my habit.

That was a lie I told about myself just now, that I was a spiteful official. I lied out of spite. I was simply amusing myself with both the petitioners and the officer, and in essence I could never become spiteful. I constantly realized in myself very many elements most opposite to that. I felt that they were swarming in me, these

opposite elements. I knew that they had been swarming in me all my life and were trying to get out of me, but I didn't let them out, didn't let them, deliberately didn't let them out. They tormented me to shame; they drove me to convulsions and — finally bored me, as they bored me! Surely it doesn't seem to you, gentlemen, that I am now repenting of something before you, that I am asking your forgiveness for something?.. I am sure it seems so to you... But anyway, I assure you that I don't care if it does seem so...

I not only failed to become spiteful, but failed to become anything at all: neither spiteful, nor kind, neither a scoundrel, nor an honest man, neither a hero, nor an insect. Now I am living out my days in my corner, teasing myself with a spiteful and useless consolation that an intelligent man cannot seriously become anything, while only a fool becomes something. Yes, sir, an intelligent man of the nineteenth century must and is morally obliged to be a creature essentially without character; a man of character, an active man, is essentially a limited creature. This is my forty-year-old conviction. I am forty now, and forty years is a whole life; it is the deepest old age. It is indecent, vulgar, immoral to live beyond forty! Who lives beyond forty, answer me sincerely, honestly? I will tell you who lives: fools and scoundrels live. I will say this to the faces of all old men, all these venerable old men, all these silver-haired and fragrant old men! I will say it to the whole world's face! I have the right to say so, because I myself will live to sixty. I will live to seventy! I will live to eighty!.. Wait! Let me catch my breath...

You probably think, gentlemen, that I want to amuse you? You are mistaken in that too. I am by no means such a cheerful person as you think or as you perhaps think; however, if you, irritated by all this chatter (and I already feel that you are irritated), decide to ask me: who exactly am I? — then I will answer you: I am a collegiate assessor. I served in order to have something to eat (but solely for that), and when last year one of my distant relatives left me six thousand rubles by will, I immediately resigned and settled in my corner. I lived in this corner before, too, but now I have settled in this corner. My room is shabby, nasty, on the edge of the city. My servant is a country woman, old, spiteful from stupidity, and besides she always smells bad. They tell me that the Petersburg climate is becoming harmful to me and that with my meager means it is very expensive to live in Petersburg. I know all this, better than all these experienced and very wise advisers and nodders I know. But I remain in Petersburg; I will not leave Petersburg! That is why I will not leave... Eh! but after all it is completely the same whether I leave or don't leave.

But anyway: what can a decent man talk about with the greatest pleasure?

Answer: about himself.

Well, so will I talk about myself.

And the author of the notes and the "Notes" themselves, of course, are fictitious. Nevertheless, such persons as the author of such notes not only can, but even must exist in our society, taking into account the circumstances under which our society was generally formed. I wanted to bring before the public eye, more clearly than usual, one of the characters of the recent past. This is one of the representatives of the still dying-out generation. In this excerpt, entitled "The Underground," this person introduces himself, his outlook, and as it were wants to clarify the reasons why he appeared and had to appear in our milieu. In the next excerpt will come the actual "notes" of this person about some events of his life.