

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you except a corn of wheat fall into
the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.”
John 12:24*

FROM THE AUTHOR

In the beginning the life story of my hero, Alexey Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in somewhat of a quandary. Namely, though I call Alexey Fyodorovich my hero, I myself know that he is by no means a great man, and hence I foresee such unavoidable questions as these: “What is so remarkable about your Alexey Fyodorovich, that you have chosen him as your hero? What has he accomplished? What is he known for, and by whom? Why should I, the reader, spend time learning the facts of his life?”

The last question is the most fateful, for to it I can only answer: “Perhaps you will see for yourself from the novel.” Well, suppose you read the novel, and fail to see, and so do not agree to the remarkability of my Alexey Fyodorovich? I say this because unhappily I anticipate it. For me he is remarkable, but I doubt strongly whether I shall succeed in proving this to the reader. The fact is, if you please, that he is a protagonist, but a protagonist vague and undefined. And, in truth, in times such as ours it would be strange to require clarity of people. One thing, I dare say, is fairly certain: this man is odd, even eccentric. But oddness and eccentricity interfere with rather than help in the uniting of the strands and in the finding of some sort of common meaning in the general confusion. In most cases the eccentric is a particularity, a separate element. Isn’t that so?

Now if you do not agree with this last thesis, and answer, “It isn’t so,” or “It isn’t always so,” then I, if you please, might become encouraged about the significance of my hero, Alexey Fyodorovich. For not only is an eccentric “not always” a particularity and a separate element, but, on the contrary, it happens sometimes that such a person, I dare say, carries within himself the very heart of the universal, and the rest of the men of his epoch have for some reason been temporarily torn from it, as if by a gust of wind . . .

Still, I should not have plunged into these eternally uninteresting and confused explanations and should have begun quite simply, without introduction: “If they like it, they will read it”; but the trouble is that I have two tales, and only one life story. The main narrative is the second—it is the action of my hero in our day, at the very present time. The first tale takes place thirteen years ago, and it is hardly even a novel, but only a period in my hero’s early youth. I cannot do without this first tale, because much in the second tale would be unintelligible without it. But in this way my original difficulty is rendered still more complicated: if I, that is, the biographer himself, find that even one tale would perhaps be superfluous for such a modest and undefined hero, how ever can I appear with two, and how from my point of view can I justify such presumption?

Finding myself lost in the solution of these questions, I decide to by-pass them with no solution at all. Of course, the astute reader has long since guessed that from the very first I was leading up to this, and was vexed with me for wasting fruitless words and precious time. To this, I shall answer explicitly: I was spending fruitless words and precious time, first, out of courtesy, and second, out of shrewdness: “Still,” the reader might say, “he has forewarned us of something.” Indeed, I am actually glad that my book has of itself split into two narratives, “with essential unity of the whole”: having become acquainted with the first tale, the reader will then decide for himself whether it is worth his while to attempt the second. Of course, one is not bound by anything—the book can be abandoned at the second page of the first tale, never to be opened again. But then, you know, there are those considerate readers who have a compulsion to read to the end, so as not to be mistaken in their impartial judgment; such, for example, are all the Russian critics. It is before this type of person that my heart somehow becomes lighter: despite all their careful exactness and conscientiousness, I nevertheless give them a perfectly legitimate pretext to abandon the tale at the novel’s first episode. Well, there is the whole foreword. I completely agree that it is needless, but since it has already been written, let it stand.

And now the matter at hand.