

A Theory in a Fever

In a stifling Petersburg summer, the impoverished former student Raskolnikov turns humiliation into a dangerous theory: exceptional people may cross moral law for a higher purpose. CRIME AND PUNISHMENT By Fyodor Dostoevsky Translated By Constance Garnett TRANSLATOR’S PREFACE A few words about Dostoevsky himself may help the English reader to understand his work. Dostoevsky was the son of a doctor. His parents were very hard-working and deeply religious people, but so poor that they lived with their five children in only two rooms. The father and mother spent their evenings in reading aloud to their children, generally from books of a serious character. Though always sickly and delicate Dostoevsky came out third in the final examination of the Petersburg school of Engineering. There he had already begun his first work, “Poor Folk.” This story was published by the poet Nekrassov in his review and was received with acclamations. The shy, unknown youth found himself instantly something of a celebrity. A brilliant and successful career seemed to open before him, but those hopes were soon dashed. In 1849 he was arrested. Though neither by temperament nor conviction a revolutionist, Dostoevsky was one of a little group of young men who met together to read Fourier and Proudhon. He was accused of “taking part in conversations against the censorship, of reading a letter from Byelinsky to Gogol, and of knowing of the intention to set up a printing press.” Under Nicholas I. (that “stern and just man,” as Maurice Baring calls him) this was enough, and he was condemned to death. After eight months’ imprisonment he was with twenty-one others taken out to the Semyonovsky Square to be shot. Writing to his brother Mihail, Dostoevsky says: “They snapped words over our heads, and they made us put on the white shirts worn by persons condemned to death. Thereupon we were bound in threes to stakes, to suffer execution. Being the third in the row, I



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concluded I had only a few minutes of life before me. I thought of you and your dear ones and I contrived to kiss Plestcheiev and Dourov, who were next to me, and to bid them farewell. Suddenly the troops beat a tattoo, we were unbound, brought back upon the scaffold, and informed that his Majesty had spared us our lives." The sentence was commuted to hard labour. One of the prisoners, Grigoryev, went mad as soon as he was untied, and never regained his sanity. The intense suffering of this experience left a lasting stamp on Dostoevsky's mind. Though his religious temper led him in the end to accept every suffering with resignation and to regard it as a blessing in his own case, he constantly recurs to the subject in his writings. He describes the awful agony of the condemned man and insists on the cruelty of inflicting such torture. Then followed four years of penal servitude, spent in the company of common criminals in Siberia, where he began the "Dead House," and some years of service in a disciplinary battalion. He had shown signs of some obscure nervous disease before his arrest and this now developed into violent attacks of epilepsy, from which he suffered for the rest of his life. The fits occurred three or four times a year and were more frequent in periods of great strain. In 1859 he was allowed to return to Russia. He started a journal--"Vremya," which was forbidden by the Censorship through a misunderstanding. In 1864 he lost his first wife and his brother Mihail. He was in terrible poverty, yet he took upon himself the payment of his brother's debts. He started another journal--"The Epoch," which within a few months was also prohibited. He was weighed down by debt, his brother's family was dependent on him, he was forced to write at heart-breaking speed, and is said never to have corrected his



The Crime

He murders the pawnbroker Alyona, then kills the innocent Lizaveta when she surprises him. The money remains hidden; the real experiment concerns his own supposed greatness. in the distance smartly dressed women on the verandahs and balconies, and children running in the gardens. The flowers especially caught his attention; he gazed at them longer than at anything. He was met, too, by luxurious carriages and by men and women on horseback; he watched them with curious eyes and forgot about them before they had vanished from his sight. Once he stood still and counted his money; he found he had thirty copecks. “Twenty to the policeman, three to Nastasya for the letter, so I must have given forty-seven or fifty to the Marmeladovs yesterday,” he thought, reckoning it up for some unknown reason, but he soon forgot with what object he had taken the money out of his pocket. He recalled it on passing an eating-house or tavern, and felt that he was hungry.... Going into the tavern he drank a glass of vodka and ate a pie of some sort. He finished eating it as he walked away. It was a long while since he had taken vodka and it had an effect upon him at once, though he only drank a wineglassful. His legs felt suddenly heavy and a great drowsiness came upon him. He turned homewards, but reaching Petrovsky Ostrov he stopped completely exhausted, turned off the road into the bushes, sank down upon the grass and instantly fell asleep. In a morbid condition of the brain, dreams often have a singular actuality, vividness, and extraordinary semblance of reality. At times monstrous images are created, but the setting and the whole picture are so truth-like and filled with details so delicate, so unexpectedly, but so artistically consistent, that the dreamer, were he an artist like Pushkin or Turgenev even, could never have invented them in the waking state. Such sick



The Crime

dreams always remain long in the memory and make a powerful impression on the overwrought and deranged nervous system. Raskolnikov had a fearful dream. He dreamt he was back in his childhood in the little town of his birth. He was a child about seven years old, walking into the country with his father on the evening of a holiday. It was a grey and heavy day, the country was exactly as he remembered it; indeed he recalled it far more vividly in his dream than he had done in memory. The little town stood on a level flat as bare as the hand, not even a willow near it; only in the far distance, a copse lay, a dark blur on the very edge of the horizon. A few paces beyond the last market garden stood a tavern, a big tavern, which had always aroused in him a feeling of aversion, even of fear, when he walked by it with his father. There was always a crowd there, always shouting, laughter and abuse, hideous hoarse singing and often fighting. Drunken and horrible-looking figures were hanging about the tavern. He used to cling close to his father, trembling all over when he met them. Near the tavern the road became a dusty track, the dust of which was always black. It was a winding road, and about a hundred paces further on, it turned to the right to the graveyard. In the middle of the graveyard stood a stone church with a green cupola where he used to go to mass two or three times a year with his father and mother, when a service was held in memory of his grandmother, who had long been dead, and whom he had never seen. On these occasions they used to take on a white dish tied up in a table napkin a special sort of rice pudding with raisins stuck in it in the