

## THE IDIOT

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

'It's exactly one minute before death,' the prince began quite readily, carried away by his memories and apparently forgetting everything else in an instant – the moment he has mounted the ladder and stepped on the scaffold. Just then he glanced in my direction. I looked at his face and understood everything. But how am I to tell you about it? I'd be awfully glad if you or someone else would paint it – awfully! You most of all I thought at the time that such a picture would do a lot of good. You see, you must show everything that happened before – everything, everything. He has been in prison, waiting for his execution for a week at least; he had been counting on the usual red-tape, on the paper with his sentence having to be forwarded somewhere and coming back only after a week. But for some reason the usual procedure was cut short. At five o'clock in the morning he was asleep. It was at the end of October; at five o'clock it was still cold and dark. The governor of the prison came in quietly with the guard and touched him gently on the shoulder. He sat up, leaning on his elbow, and saw the light. "What's the matter?" "The execution will take place at ten o'clock." He was still too sleepy to believe it. He began arguing that the paper with his sentence would not be ready for a week, but when he was wide awake he stopped arguing and fell silent – so I have heard it told. Then he said: "All the same, it's very hard that it should be so sudden," and fell silent again, and wouldn't say another word. The next three or four hours were spent on the usual things: the priest, the breakfast at which he was given wine, coffee, and boiled beef. (Isn't that a mockery? Just think how cruel it is, and yet, on the other hand, these innocent people do it out of pure kindness of heart and are convinced that it's an act of humanity.) Then he was dressed for execution (do you know what the dressing of a condemned criminal is like?), and at last they took him through the town to the scaffold. I cannot help thinking that while he was being driven through the town he must have felt that he had still an eternity to live. I think he must have thought on the way, "I've still a long, long time; there are still three streets more to live. As soon as I pass through this, there will be that one, and then that one with the bakery on the right – oh, it'll be ages before we get to the bakery!" All round him there were crowds of people yelling, shouting, ten thousand faces, ten thousand eyes – and all this had to be endured, and, worst of all, the thought "There are ten thousand of them, and none of them is being executed, but I'm going to be executed!"