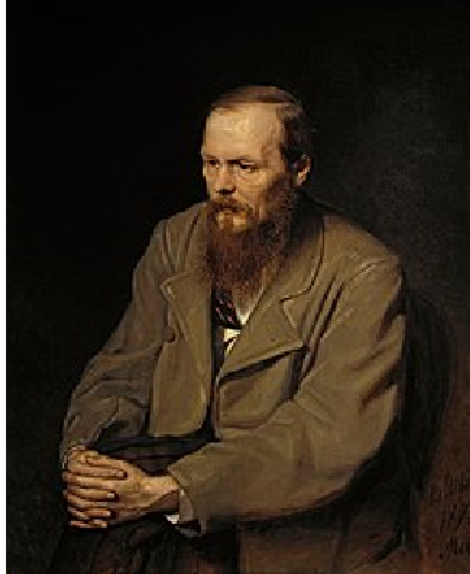
Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya and Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya (1843-1887) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881). Proposal rejected, 1865.



Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya and Fyodor Dostoyevsky
The painting of Dostoyevsky is by Vasil Perov, 1872

This is the only item in this collection narrated by a third party; consequently, only a small part of the actual proposal is recorded. However, it is much too good a story to leave out.

The account here is taken from memoirs of Anna's younger sister, Sofya Kovalevskaya (1850-1891), *A Russian Childhod*. Kovalevskaya herself was a extraordinary woman. She was a mathematician and a physicist, arguably the greatest woman mathematician, or even the greatest woman scientist, before the twentieth century. She was the first woman in the nineteenth century to earn a Ph.D. and the first woman to hold a university professorship (there were earlier women who did both in eighteenth-century Italy). She was also, as will become clear, an accomplished writer; *A Russian Childhood* was an immediate success and was translated into Swedish, French, German, Dutch, Danish, Polish, Czech, Japanese, and English.

Kovalevskaya's account of her own and her sister's relation with Dostoyevsky occupies a chapter and a half — forty pages — in her memoir. It is altogether worthwhile reading in full, but out of scale here, so I will summarize and present excerpts. My summaries are in small font.

To start with the epilogue: After rejecting Dostoyevsky's proposal,, Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya became increasingly involved with the radical politics of the time, as a socialist and feminist activist. In 1869 she went to Paris, and began a common-law marriage with Victor Jaclard, a member of the National Guard during the Paris Commune; consequently, she is generally known historically as Anne Jaclard. She was active in many ways — working as a paramedic, serving on the committee supervising the education of girls, founded a newspaper, and so on. When the Commune was suppressed, her husband was arrested, but he managed to escape or was rescued (it is not clear) and got to Switzerland. Anna went to England, where she stayed at the house of Karl Marx. The Jaclards moved back to Russia in 1874, where they were involved in revolutionary politics. She died in 1887.

Despite her rejection of Dostoyevsky's proposal, and despite the wide divergence in their politics, the Jaclards remained on friendly terms with him and his wife. In fact, in 1887, six years after Dostoyevsky's death, his widow did the Jaclards an enormous service, intervening on their behalf with Ministry of Internal Affairs, who had ordered them to leave the country in two days, after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. It is thought that the character Aglaya Epanchina in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* is based on Anna.[1]

Returning to the story of the proposal: Anna and Sofya Korvin-Krukovskaya were brought up in a wealthy, aristocratic family. Their father was a general and very conservative; Sofya was taught by a governess, but her father would not allow her to be taught science or math beyond basic arithmetic, so she had to study them in secret. In 1864 Anna wrote a story and sent it to Dostoyevsky's journal, *The Epoch*. (Anna was twenty-one, Sofya was fourteen, Dostoyevsky was forty-three.) He accepted it for publication and wrote to her warmly, encouraging her to continue to write. She wrote a second story, which he also accepted, but unfortunately his second letter back, with payment for the stories, was intercepted by her father, who threw a fit:

He summoned Anyuta to his study and upbraided her mercilessly. One sentence in particular etched itself very deeply in her memory: "Anything can be expected from a girl who, in secret from her father and mother, is capable of entering into a correspondence with a strange man and taking money from him. Now you are selling your stories, but the time will come — mark my words — when you'll sell yourself."

...

At first, in the heat of his anger, he demanded that his daughter promise to stop writing and would agree to forgive her only under this condition. Anyuta, it goes without saying, would not agree to give any such promise. Consequently they did not speak to one another for days on end, and Anyuta did not even appear at dinner.

[1] I hope it is OK for me to refer to Anna by her first name and Dostoyevsky by his last, but "Korvin-Krukovskaya" is a mouthful, and there are two of them.

Finally, Father capitulated. The first step on the road to conciliation was his agreement to have Anyuta's story read to him. The reading proceeded in great solemnity. The entire family was present. Fully aware of the importance of the moment, Anyuta read in a voice trembling with excitement. . . .

Father listened without saying a word all through the reading. But when Anyuta reached the final pages and, barely holding back her own sobs, started reading about Lilenka on her death bed, bewailing her wasted youth, big tears suddenly appeared in his eyes. He got up without a word and walked out of the room. Neither that evening nor in the days following did he say anything to Anyuta about her story. He only addressed her with amazing gentleness and tenderness, and everyone in the family understood that her cause was won. . . .

Father gave Anyuta permission to write to Dostoevsky with the single condition that she show him the letters. Moreover, he promised that on the next trip to Petersburg he would meet Dostoevsky personally.

> In January, the whole family travelled from their country estate to their house in St. Petersburg. Anna immediately arranged for Dostoyevsky to be invited to the house. Father was still unenthusiastic.

"Dostoevsky is not a man of our social world. What do we know about him? Only that he's a journalist and a former convict. Fine recommendation, I don't think! You'll have to be extremely careful about him."

> The first visit was not a success; Dostoyevsky barely said anything, and her mother was unable to draw him out. However,

About five days later, however, Dostoevsky came to see us once again, and this time things worked out as beautifully as could be. Neither my mother nor my aunts were at home. My sister and I were alone together, and somehow the ice melted right away. Fyodor Mikhailovich took Anyuta by the hand, they sat down side by side on the couch and immediately began talking together like two old friends. The conversation didn't drag as it had on the previous occasion, moving stiffly from one boring subject to another. Now both Anyuta and Dostoevsky seemed in a rush to express their thoughts, interrupted each other, joked and laughed.

. . .

From that day on he was very much at home in our house and, inasmuch as our stay in Petersburg would not last for long, he began coming to visit very often, three or four times a week.

. . .

Toward the end of our stay in Petersburg Mama planned to give a farewell party and to invite all our friends. Dostoevsky, of course, was also invited.

That was a disaster. Dostoyevsky was no good in large parties.

My mother was quick to introduce him to our guests, but instead of greeting them he muttered something inaudible that sounded like a grumble, and turned his back. Even worse, he immediately stated his claim to Anyuta's total attention. He took her off to a corner of the drawing room, revealing the obvious intention of keeping her there. This, of course, was contrary to all the social amenities. On top of that, his manner toward her was very far from what was acceptable in polite society. He took her hand. When he talked with her he bent down to her very ear.

And then things got even worse.

Among the guests was one who had made himself especially hateful to Fyodor Mikhailovich from the first moment. This was a distant relative of ours . . . a young German and an officer of one of the Regiments of the Guard. He was regarded as a very brilliant young man. He was handsome and intelligent and cultivated and received in the very highest society, and all this in the proper measure, in moderation and without excess. Even his career was proceeding in the proper measure, not with arrogant speed, but solidly, estimably. He knew how to make himself pleasing to the proper parties, but without over-eagerness or sycophancy.

By his rights as a relative, he paid a good deal of attention to his cousin Anyuta when he met her at the aunts', but this too was in proper measure, not conspicuously, but merely letting it be known that he had "intentions." As always happens in such cases, everyone in the family knew that he was a potential and eligible suitor, but they all pretended not even to suspect such a possibility.

. . .

Dostoevsky had only to take one look at this handsome, strapping, self-satisfied figure to conceive a dislike for him verging on frenzy.

. . .

Fyodor Mikhailovich looked at this pair, and a whole story composed itself in his mind: Anyuta loathes and despises this "cheeky little German," this "smug braggart," but her parents want to marry her off to him and are bringing them together in every way possible. The whole evening, of course, was arranged with this sole aim.

The fashionable topic of conversation that winter was a book published by an English clergyman discussing the parallels between Russian Orthodoxy and Protestantism. In that Russo-German circle this was a theme of interest to all, and when the conversation touched on it the atmosphere livened up a little. Mama, herself of German origin, remarked that one of the advantages of the Protestants over the Orthodox consisted in the fact that they read the Gospel more.

“But was the Gospel written for society ladies?” suddenly blurted out Dostoevsky, who had remained stubbornly silent until then. “The Gospel says, ‘First God created man and woman,’ and further, ‘Let a man forsake his father and mother and cleave to his wife.’ That was how Christ understood the meaning of marriage! But what will the mamas say to that, when their only idea is how to marry their daughters off profitably?”

. . .

Dostoevsky’s relationship with Anyuta was somehow transformed after that evening, as though it had entered a new phase of its existence. He no longer overawed her in the least. On the contrary, she developed a desire to contradict him, to tease him.

. . .

“Where were you yesterday?” he would ask crossly.

“”At a ball,” she would answer with indifference.

“And did you dance?”

“Naturally.”

“With that second cousin of yours?”

“Yes, with him and with others too.”

“And does that amuse you?” the interrogation would continue.

Anyuta shrugged her shoulders. “For lack of anything better, even that is amusing,” she would answer, and pick up her needlework again.

Dostoevsky looked at her for a few moments in silence. “Then you’re an empty-headed girl, you’re a foolish little brat, that’s what you are!” he would conclude.

. . .

“All the young people nowadays are stupid and uncultured! Dostoevsky would shout. ”For them, blacked boots are worth more than Pushkin!”

“Pushkin really is passé for our times,” my sister would remark calmly, well aware that nothing in the world could infuriate Dostoevsky more than a disrespectful attitude toward Pushkin.

. . .

As the relationship between my sister and Dostoevsky was, to all appearances, deteriorating, my own friendship with him kept growing. With each passing day I admired him more and more and fell completely under his spell. He could not help noticing my boundless admiration, and he found it pleasant. He held me up as a constant example to my sister.

If he happened to express some profound idea or brilliant paradox which went counter to conventional morality, Anyuta would suddenly take it into her head to pretend not to understand. My eyes would blaze rapturously, but she, deliberately, in order to exasperate him, would offer some threadbare platitude in response.

"You have a worthless, petty little soul!" Fyodor Mikhailovich would flare up then. "Your sister is quite another thing! She is still a child, but how she understands me! Because she has a sensitive spirit!"

I would flush bright red with pleasure. I would have let myself be cut to pieces if necessary to prove to him how well I understood him.

...

Among those agreeable talents whose cultivation Dostoevsky encouraged was music. Up to then I had taken piano lessons the same as most girls do, without any special partiality or dislike for them.

...

Now I prepared a surprise for Dostoevsky. He had once told us that of all musical works, his favorite was Beethoven's *Sonata Pathéthique,* and that this sonata never failed to plunge him into a whole world of forgotten sensations. Although the sonata was much more advanced than anything thing I had played up to that time, I resolved to learn it no matter what. And, as it turned out, after expending untold hours of labor on it, I reached the point of playing it fairly tolerably. Now I awaited only a fitting occasion to gladden Dostoevsky with it. That occasion presented itself very soon.

...

Mama and all the aunts had been invited to an important dinner party at the Swedish embassy, for the Ambassador was an old friend of the family. Anyuta, who by this time had had enough of visits and dinner parties, excused herself on the ground of a headache. The two of us were alone in the house. That evening Dostoevsky came to see us.

So this, then, was the perfect time to play him his favorite sonata! I rejoiced in advance at the thought of all the pleasure I was going to give him.

I began to play. The difficulty of the piece, the necessity of following every note, the fear of striking a wrong note soon engulfed my attention so completely that I blotted out my surroundings and didn't notice anything that was happening around me. I finished the sonata with the self-satisfied awareness of having played well. There was an enjoyable tiredness in my fingers. Still under the spell of the music and the stimulus of the pleasurable excitement which always takes hold of one after a piece of work well done, I waited for my well-deserved praise. But there was only silence. I looked around: there was no one in the room.

My heart sank. Having as yet no definite suspicion but feeling a dim presentiment of something wrong, I went into the next room. It, too, was empty. Finally I lifted the portiere draped over the door to a little corner salon, and saw that Fyodor Mikhailovich was there with Anyuta. But Lord, what did I see!

They were sitting side by side on a small settee. The room was dimly lit by a lamp with a big shade. The shadow fell directly on my sister so that I couldn't make out her face, but I saw Dostoevsky's face distinctly. It was white and agitated. He was holding Anyuta's hand in his. Leaning toward her, he spoke in the same passionate, spasmodic whisper I knew and loved so well.

"My darling Anna Vasilievna, try to understand ... I fell in love from the first minute I saw you. Even before that. I had an intimation even from your letters. And it's not in friendship that I love you but in passion, with all my being."

My eyes blurred. A feeling of bitter loneliness, of deadly insult suddenly gripped me and there was a rush of blood, first, it seemed, to my heart, and then surging in a hot stream to my head.

I dropped the curtain and ran out of the room.

. . .

Feelings I had never experienced before filled and overflowed my heart: bitterness, hurt, shame. Mostly, it was shame and hurt. Up to that moment I had not acknowledged even in my most secret thoughts how I felt about Dostoevsky and had not admitted even to myself that I was in love with him.

> Sofya assumed that they were engaged, but she was so angry and hurt that she would not talk to Anna. She was surprised that the next day Dostoyevsky did not come and Anna went cheerfully to a concert. That evening, Anna explained the situation to her:

"Then you don't really love him?" I whispered, almost suffocating with excitement.

Anyuta grew thoughtful. "Well, it's like this . . ." she began, evidently searching for the right words and having difficulty finding them. "Of course I love him very much and I respect him, I respect him terrifically! He's so kind, so intelligent ... he's a genius!"

She was quite animated, and again I felt my heart pinch. "But ... how shall I explain it to you? I don't love him the way that he ... well, anyway, I don't love him the way you love somebody you want to marry!" she suddenly concluded.

"You see, I'm even surprised myself sometimes that I can't love him! He's such a wonderful person. In the beginning I thought I might come to love him. But he needs an entirely different kind of wife from me. His wife will have to dedicate herself

to him utterly, utterly, to give up her whole life to him, to think about nothing but him. And I can't do that ... I want to live myself! And then, he's so nervous and demanding. He always seems to be taking possession of me and sucking me up into himself. When I'm with him I can never be myself."

From Sofya Kovalevskaya, *A Russian Childhood,* trans. Beatrice Stillman