Notes from Underground FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY PART I Underground* *The author of the diary and the diary itself are, of course, i
that such persons as the writer of these notes may, but positively must, exist in our society, when we consider the circum
society is formed. I have tried to expose to the public more distinctly than is commonly done, one of the characters of the re
tatives of a generation still living. In this fragment d "Underground," this person introduces himself and his views, and, as it we re, tr
which he has made his appearance and was bo e his appearance in our midst. In the second fragment there are added the act ual note
events in his life.--AUTHOR'S NOTE. I I am a si m a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased. How ever, I kno
e, and do not know for certain what ails me. I do or for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Be sides, I am ex
tly so to respect medicine, anyway (I am well-ed not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious). No, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite. That
d. Well, I understand it, though. Of course, I can't ho it is precisely that I am mortifying in this case by my spite: I am perfectly we ll aware that I canno
sulting them; I know better than anyone that by al only injuring myself and no one else. But still, if I don't consult a doctor it is fr om spite. My liver is ba
going on like that for a long time--twenty years. No rty. I used to be in the government service, but am no longer. I was a spiteful o fficial. I was rude and too
ribes, you see, so I was bound to find a recompen t, at least. (A poor jest, but I will not scratch it out. I wrote it thinking it would so und very witty; but now that
o show off in a despicable way, I will not scratch it urpose!) When petitioners used to come for information to the table at which I s at, I used to grind my teeth at th
cceeded in making anybody unhappy. I almost did d. For the most part they were all timid people--of course, they were petitioners. But of the uppish ones there was
e simply would not be humble, and clanked his swo disgusting way. I carried on a feud with him for eighteen months over that sword. At last I got the better of him. He left
ugh. But do you know, gentlemen, what was the chie about my spite? Why, the whole point, the real sting of it lay in the fact that continually, even in the moment of the acute
hame that I was not only not a spiteful but not even a ittered man, that I was simply scaring sparrows at random and amusing myself by it. I might foam at the mouth, but bring m
th sugar in it, and maybe I should be appeased. I mig n be genuinely touched, though probably I should grind my teeth at myself afterwards and lie awake at night with shame for
when I said just now that I was a spiteful official. I wa g from spite. I was simply amusing myself with the petitioners an d with th e officer, and in reality I never could become spite
of many, very many elements absolutely opposite to t felt them positively swarming in me, these opposite elements. I knew that they had been swarming in me all my life and cra
em, would not let them, purposely would not let them me out. They tormented me till I was ashamed: they drove me to convulsions and--sickened me, at last, how they sickened m e! Now
essing remorse for something now, that I am asking r forgiveness for something? I am sure you are fancying that ... However, I assure you I do not care if you are.... It was not on ly th at I co
ome anything; neither spiteful nor kind, neither a ras nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect. Now, I am livi ng out my life in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and us
me anything seriously, and it is only the fool who bec es anything. Yes, a man in the nineteenth century must and m orally ought to be pre-eminently a characterless creature; a m an of
ure. That is my conviction of forty years. I am forty ye s old now, and you know forty years is a whole lifetime; you k now it is extreme old age. To live longer than forty years is ba
y? Answer that, sincerely and honestly I will tell you who do: fools and worthless fellows. I tell all old men that to their f ace, all these venerable old men, all these silver-haired and re ving senior s! I tell the whole world that to its face! I have
a right to say so, for I shall go on living to sixty myse lf. To seventy! To eighty! ... Stay, let me take breath ... You imagine no doubt, gentlemen, that I want to amuse you. You are mista n that, too. I am by no means such a mirthful person as you
imagine, or as you may imagine; however, irritated b y all this babble (and I feel that you are irritated) you think fit to ask me who I am--then my answer is, I am a collegiate assess ken i n the service that I might have something to eat (and solely
for that reason), and when last year a distant relation left me six thousand roubles in his will I immediately retired fr om the service and settled down in my corner. I used to live in or. I was i efore, but now I have settled down in it. My room is a wretc
hed, horrid one in the outskirts of the town. My serv ant is an old country-woman, ill-natured from stupidity, and, m oreover, there is always a nasty smell about her. I am told tha this corner b t the Petersburg cl imate is bad for me, and that with my small means it is very expe
nsive to live in Petersburg. I know all that better than all these sage and experienced counsellors and mon itors.... But I am remaining in Petersburg; I am not going aw ay from Petersburg! I am not going away because ... ech! Why, it is absolutely no matter wh
ether I am going away or not going away. But what c an a decent man speak of with most pleasure? Answer: O f himself. Well, so I will talk about myself. II I want now to tell you, g entlemen, whether you care to hear it or not, why I could not even become an insect. I tell you sole
mnly, that I have many times tried to become an ins t. But I was not equal even to that. I swear, gentlemen, t hat to be too conscious is an illness--a real thorough-going illness. For man's everyday needs, it wou ld have been quite enough to have the ordinary human consciousness,
that is, half or a quarter of the amount which falls to he lot of a cultivated man of our unhappy nineteenth ce ntury, especially one who has the fatal ill-luck to inhabit Petersburg, the most theoretical and intent ional tow n on the whole terrestrial globe. (There are intentional an
d unintentional towns.) It would have been quite en o ugh, for instance, to have the consciousness by which all so-called direct persons and men of action live. I bet you think I am writing all this from affect ation, to be witty at the expense of men of action; and what is m
ore, that from ill-bred affectation, I am clanking a sw ord like my officer. But, gentlemen, whoever can pride himself on his diseases and even swagger over them? Though, after all, everyone does do tha t; peopl e do pride themselves on their diseases, and I do, may b
e, more than anyone. We will not dispute it; my co ntention was absurd. But yet I am firmly persuaded th at a great deal of consciousness, every sort of consciousness, in fact, is a disease. I stick t o that. Let us leave that, too, for a minute. Tell me this: why does it hap
pen that at the very, yes, at the very moments wh en I am most capable of feeling every refine ment of all t hat is "sublime and beautiful," as they used to say at one time, it would, as though of de sign, happen to me not only to feel but to do such ugly things, such tha t ..
. Well, in short, actions that all, perhaps, co mmit; but which, as though purposely, occurred to me a t the very time when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed. The more conscious I was of goodness and of all that was "sublime and be autifu
l," the more deeply I sank into my mire and th e mo re ready I was to sink in it altogether. But the c hief point was that all this was, as it were, not accidental in me, but as though it w ere bound to be so. It was as though it were my most normal conditi on,
and not in the least disease or depravity, so tha t at last all desire in me to struggle against this d epravity p assed. It ended by my almost believing (perhaps actually be lievi ng) that this was perhaps my normal conditio n. But at first, in
the beginning, what agonies I endured in that stru ggle! I did not believe it was the same with other people, a nd all my life I hid this fact about myself as a secret. I wa s as hamed (even now, perhaps, I am ashamed): I got t
o the point of feeling a sort of secret abnormal, desp icab le enjoyment in returning home to my corner o n so me disgu sting Petersburg night, acutely conscious th at day I had committed a loathsome ac
tion again, that what was done could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at myself for it, tearing a nd c onsumin g myself till at last the bitterness t urned into a sort of shameful accursed sw
eetness, and at last--into positive real enjoyment! Yes, into enjoyment, into en joyment! I insist upon that. I have spoken o f this bec ause I keep wanting to know fo r a f act whether other people feel s
uch enjoyment? I will explain; the enjoyment was just from the too intense con scio usness of one's own degradation; it was from fe eling on eself that one had reached the ast barrier, that it was horrible
, but that it could not be otherwise; that there was no escape for you; that you ne ver could become a different man; that even if ti me and f aith were still left you to chang e into s omething different you would most likely not w
ish to change; or if you did wish to, even then you would do nothing; becaus e p erhaps in reality there was nothing for you to c hange in to. And the worst of it was, and th e r oot of it all, that it was all in accord with the n
ormal fundamental laws of over-acute consciousness, and with the inerti a that was the direct result of those laws, and that conseq uently one was not o nly u able to change but could do absolutely not
hing. Thus it would f ollow, as the result of acute conscio usne ss, that one is not to blame in being a scou ndrel; as though that were any consolation to the scoundrel once he
has come to realise that he actually is a sc oundrel. But enough.... Ech, I have talke d a lot of nonse nse, but what have I explained? How is enjoy ment i
n this to be explained? But I will explain i t. I will get to the bottom of it! That is why I have taken up my pen.... I, for instance, h ave a great deal of AMOUR PR OPRE. I am as suspicious and prone to take offence as a humpback or a dwarf. But upon my word I sometimes have had moments when if I had happened to be slapped in the face I should, perha
ps, have been positively glad of it. I say , in earnest, that I should probably have been ab le to discover even in that a peculiar sort of enjoyment--the enjoym ent, of course, of despair; but in despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is very acutely conscious of the hopelessness of one's position. And when one is slapped in the
face--why then the consciousness of being rubbed into a pulp would positively overw helm one. The worst of it is, look at i t which way one will, it still turn s out that I was always the most to blame in everything. And what is most humiliating of all, to blame for no fault of my own but, so to say, through the laws of nature. In the first place, to blame becaus
e I am cleverer than any of the peop le surrounding me. (I have always considered my self cleverer than any of the people s urrounding me, and sometimes, would you believe it, have been positively ashamed of it. At any rate, I have all my life, as it were, turned my eyes away and never could look people straight in the face.) To blame, finally, because even if
I had had magnanimity, I should only have had more suffe ring from the sense o f its uselessness. I should certainly h ave never been able to do anythi ng from being magnanimous--neither to forgiv e, for my assailant would perhaps have slapped me from the laws of nature, and one cannot forgive the laws of nature; nor to forget, for even if it were owi
ng to the laws of nature, it is in sulting all the same. Fina lly, even if I had wa nted to be anything but magnanimou s, had desired on the contrary to revenge myself on my assailant, I could not have revenged myself on any one for anything because I should certainly never have made up my mind to do anything, even if I had been able to. Why should I
not have made up my mind? About that in particular I w ant to say a few w ords. Ill With people who know how to revenge themselves and to stand up for themselves in general, how is it done? Why, when they are possessed, let us suppose, by the feeling of revenge, then for the time there is nothing else but that feeling left in their whole being. Such a gentl
eman simply dashes straigh t for his object like an infuriated bull with its horn s down, and nothing but a wall will sto p him. (By the way: facing the wal l, such gentlemen--that is, the "direct" persons and men of action--are genuinely nonplussed. For them a wall is not an evasion, as for us people who think and consequently do nothing; it is not an excuse for turnin
g aside, an excuse for wh ich we are always very glad, though we scarcely b elieve in it ourselves, as a rule. No, they are nonplussed in all sincerity. T he wall has for them something tranquillising, morally soothing, final--maybe even something mysterious ... but of the wall later.) Well, such a direct person I regard as the real normal man, as his tender mother nature
wished to see him when she graciously brought him into being on the eart h. I envy such a man till I am green in the face. He is stupid. I am not disp uting that, but perhaps the normal man should be stupid, how do you know? Perhaps it is very beautiful, in fact. And I am the more persuaded of that suspicion, if one can call it so, by the fact that if you take, for instance,
the antithesis of the n ormal man, that is, the man of acute consciousnes s, who has come, of course, not out of the lap of nature but out of a retor t (this is almost mysticism, gentlemen, but I suspect this, too), this retort-made man is sometimes so nonplussed in the presence of his antithesis that with all his exaggerated consciousness he genuinely thinks of him
self as a mouse and not a man. It may be an acutely conscious mouse, yet it is a mouse, while the other is a man, and therefore, et caetera, et caetera. And the worst of it is, he himself, his very own self, looks on himself as a mouse; no one asks him to do so; and that is an important point. Now let us look at this mouse in action. Let us suppose, for instance, t
hat it feels insulted, too (and it almost always does feel insulted), and wants to revenge itself, too. Ther e may even be a greater accumulation of spite in it than in L'HOMM E DE LA NATURE ET DE LA VERITE. The base and nasty desire to vent that spite on its assailant rankles perhaps even more nastily in it than in L'HOMME DE LA NATURE ET DE LA VERITE. Fo
r through his innate stupidity the latter looks upon his revenge as j ustice pure and simple; while in co nsequence of his acute consciousness the mouse does not believe in the justice of it. To come at last to the deed itself, to the very act of revenge. Apart from the one fundamental nastiness the luckless mouse succeeds in creating around it so many other nastiness
es in the fo rm of doubts and questions, adds to the one quest ion so many unsettled questions that there inevitably works up around it a sort of fatal brew, a stinking mess, made up of its doubts, emotions, and of the contempt spat upon it by the direct men of action who stand solemnly about it as judges and arbitrators, laughing at it till their healthy sides ache. Of co
urse the only thing left for it is to dismiss all that with a wave of its paw, and, with a smile of assumed contempt in which it does not even itself believe, creep ignominiously into its mouse-hole. There in its nasty, stinking, underground home our insulted, crushed and ridiculed mouse promptly becomes absorbed in cold, malignant and, above all, everlasting spite. For
forty years together it will remember its injury down to the smallest, most ignominious details, and every time will add, of itself, details still more ignominious, spitefully teasing and tormenting itself with its own imagination. It will itself be ashamed of its imaginings, but yet it will recall it all, it will go over and over every detail, it will invent unheard of things against itself, p
retending that those things might happen, and will forgive nothing. Maybe it will begin to revenge itself, too, but, as it were, piecemeal, in trivial ways, from behind the stove, incognito, without believing either in its own right to vengeance, or in the success of its revenge, knowing that from all its efforts at revenge it will suffer a hundred times more than he on whom it reven
ges itself, while he, I daresay, will not even scratch himself. On its deathbed it will recall it all over again, with interest acc umulated over all the years and ... But it is just in that cold, abominable half despair, half belief, in that conscious burying oneself alive for grief in the underworld for forty years, in that acutely recognised and yet partly doubtful hopelessness of one
's position, in that hell of unsatisfied desires turned inward, in that fever of oscillations, of resolutions determined for ever and repented of again a minute later--that the savour of that strange enj oyment of which I have spoken lies. It is so subtle, so difficult of analysis, that persons who are a little limited, or even simply persons of strong nerves, will not understa
nd a single atom of it. "Possibly," you will add on your own account with a gri n, "people will not understand it either who have never received a slap in the face," and in that way you will politel y hint to me that I, too, perhaps, have had the experience of a slap in the face in my life, and so I speak as one who knows. I bet that you are thinking that. But set
your minds at rest, gentlemen, I have not received a slap in the face, though it is absolutely a matter of indifference to me what you may think about it. Possibly, I even regret, myself, that I hav e given so few slaps in the face during my life. But enough ... not another word on that subject of such extreme interest to you. I will continue calmly concerni
ng persons with strong nerves who do not und erstand a certain refinement of enjoyment. Though in certain circumstances these gentlemen bellow their loudest like bulls, though this, let u s suppose, does them the greatest credit, yet, as I have said already, confronted with the impossible they subside at once. The impossible means the ston
e wall! What stone wall? Why, of course, the la ws of nature, the deductions of natural science, mathematics. As soon as they prove to you, for instance, that you are descended from a monk ey, then it is no use scowling, accept it for a fact. When they prove to you that in reality one drop of your own fat must be dearer to you than a hundr
ed thousand of your fellow-creatures, and that this conclusion is the final solution of all so-called virtues and duties and all such prejudices and fancies, then you have just to accept it, ther e is no help for it, for twice two is a law of mathematics. Just try refuting it. "Upon my word, they will shout at you, it is no use protesting: it is a ca
se of twice two makes four! Nature does not ask your permission, she has nothing to do with your wishes, and whether you like her laws or dislike them, you are bound to accept he r as she is, and consequently all her conclusions. A wall, you see, is a wall ... and so on, and so on." Merciful Heavens! but what do I care for the l
aws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason I dislike those laws and the fact that twice two makes four? Of course I cannot break through the wall by battering my head against it if I r eally have not the strength to knock it down, but I am not going to be reconciled to it simply because it is a stone wall and I have not the strength
. As though such a stone wall really were a consolation, and really did contain some word of conciliation, simply because it is as true as twice two makes four. Oh, absurdity of a b surdities! How much better it is to understand it all, to recognise it all, all the impossibilities and the stone wall; not to be reconciled to one of tho
se impossibilities and stone walls if it disgusts you to be reconciled to it; by the way of the most inevitable, logical combinations to reach the m ost revolting con clusions on the everlasting theme, that even for the stone wall you are yourself somehow to blame, though again it is as clear as day you are not
to blame in the least, and therefore grinding your teeth in silent impotence to sink into luxurious inertia, brooding on the fact that there i s no one even for yo u to f eel vindictive against, that you have not, and perhaps never will have, an object for your spite, that it is a sleight of hand, a bit of juggling, a c
ard-sharper's trick, that it is simply a mess, no knowing what and no knowing who, but in spite of all these uncertainties and juggli ngs, still there is an a che in you, and the more you do not know, the worse the ache. IV "Ha, ha, ha! You will be finding enjoyment in toothache next," you cry, with a la
ugh. "Well, even in toothache there is enjoyment," I answer. I had toothache for a whole month and I know there is. In that cas e, of course, people ar e no t spit eful in silence, but moan; but they are not candid moans, they are malignant moans, and the malignancy is the whole point. The enjoyment
of the sufferer finds expression in those moans; if he did not feel enjoyment in them he would not moan. It is a goo d example, gentlemen, a nd I will d ev elop it. Thos e moans express in the first place all the aimlessness of your pain, which is so humiliating to your consciousness; the
whole legal system of nature on which you spit disda infully, of course, but from which you suffer all the s ame while she does n ot. T he y e xpress the cons ciousness that you have no enemy to punish, but that you have pain; the consciousness that in spite of all
possible Wagenheims you are in complete slaver y to your teeth; that if someone wishes it, your te eth will leave off achi ng, an d i f he d oes not, they will go on aching another three months; and that finally if you are still contumaciou
s and still protest, all that is left yo u fo r y our o wn gratification i s to t hrash yourself o r bea t your w all with yo ur fi st as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more. Well, these mortal ins
ults, these jeers on the pa r t of s ome on e unknown, end at la st in an enjoyme nt whic h sometim es reach es th e highest degree of voluptuousness. I ask you, gentl
emen, listen someti me s to the moans of a n e du cated m a n o f the nineteenth cen tury suffering from toothache, o n the sec ond o r third day of the attack, when
he is beginn ing to moa n, no t as he m oan ed on the first day, th at is, not simply because he has to othache, not ju st as any coa rse peas ant, but as a man affe
cted by pr ogr ess an d Eu rop ean civilis ation, a man who is "divorced from the soil and the nati onal element s," as th ey exp ress i t now-a-days. His
moans b eco me nast y, disgustingly malignant, and go on fo r whole days and nights. And of c o urse h e know s him self that
he i s doing hi m sel f n o sort of good with his moans; he kno ws better th an an yon
e th at he is on l y laceratin g and harassing himself and other s for n ot hi
ng ; h e know s th at even the audie nce before whom he is making his eff orts, and his whole fa mily , listen to hi m w
ith lo athing, d o n ot put a ha'porth of faith in him, and inwardly understand that he might moan differently, more simply, wit hout tri lls and flo
uri shes, and t hat he is only amusi ng himself like that from ill-humour, from malignancy. Well, in all these recognitions and disgraces it is that the re lies a volupt uou
s p leasure. A s th ou gh he would say: "I am worrying you, I am lacerating your hearts, I am kee ping everyone in the house awake. Well, stay awake the n, you, too, feel ever
y minute th at I h ave toothache. I am not a hero to you no w, as I tried to seem before, but simply a nasty per son, an im postor. Well, so be it, then! I am ver y glad that you
se e t hr ough me . It is nasty for you to hear my de spicable moans: wel sty; here I will let you have a nastier flourish in a min ute...." You do not understand eve l, let it be na
n n ow , gentle m en? No, it seems our development and our conscio usness mus t go f urther t o understand all the intricacies of this pleasu re. You laugh? Delighted. My jests, gentlemen, are of course in ba d taste, je
rk y, involved, lac king self-confidence. But of course t cause I do not respect myself. Can a man of perception respect himself at all? V Come, can a man who attempts to find enjoyment in t he very feeling of h
i s own degrada tion possibly have a spark of respect for him self? I am not saying this now from any mawkish kind of remorse. And, indeed, I could never endure saying, "Forgive me, Papa, I won't do it again," not bec
ause I a m in ca pable of saying that--on the contrary, pe rhaps just because I have been too capable of it, and in what a way, too. As though of design I used to get into trouble in cases when I was not to blame in any way.
That w as the n asti est part of it. At the same time I was g enuinely touc hed and penitent, I used to shed tears and, of course, deceived myself, though I was not acting in the least and there was a sick feeling in my heart at t
he time.. .. For t h at one could not blame even the laws of nature, though the laws o f nature have co ntinually all my life offended me more than anything. It is loathsome to remember it all, but it was loathsome even then. Of course, a minute or so later
I would realise w rat hf ully tha t it was all a lie, a revolting lie, an affected lie, that is, all this p enitence, this emoti on, these vows of reform. You will ask why did I worry myself with such antics: answer, because it was very dull to sit with one's hands folded, and so
on e b egan cu t tin g cape rs. That is really it. Observe yourselves more carefully, gen tlemen, then you will u nderstand that it is so. I invented adventures for myself and made up a life, so as at least to live in some way. How many times it has happened to me--
well , fo r in sta nce, to ta ke offence simply on purpose, for nothing; and one knows oneself, of cour se, that one is offended at nothing; that one is putting it on, but yet one brings oneself at last to the point of being really offended. All my life I have ha
d an im pul se to play such pranks, so that in the end I could not control it in myself. Another time, tw ice, in fact, I tried hard to be in love. I suffered, too, gentlemen, I assure you. In the depth of my heart there was no faith in my suffering, only a faint s
tir o f m oc kery, but yet I did s uffer, and in the real, orthodox way; I was jealous, beside myself ... and it was all from ENNUI, gentlemen, all from ENNUI; inertia overcame me. You know the direct, legitimate fruit of consciousness is inerti
a, that is, conscious sitting-w it h-the-hands-fol ded. I have refer red to this already. I repeat, I r epeat with emphasis: all "direct" persons and men of action are active just because they are stupid and limited. How explain that? I will tell you: in
consequence of their li mitation they take immediate and seconda ry causes for primary ones, and in that way persuade themselv es more quickly and easily than othe r people do that they have found an infallible foundation for their activity, and their minds are at ease and y
ou know that is the chief thing. To be gin to act, you know, you must first have your mind completely at ease and no trace of do ubt left in it. Why, how am I, for e xample, to set my m ind at rest? Where are the primary causes on which I am to build? Where are my foundations? Where am I to
get them from? I exercise myself in reflection, and c onsequently with me every primary cause at once draws after itself another still more pr imary, and so on to infinity. That is j ust the essence of every sort of consciousness and reflection. It must be a case of the laws of nature again. What is the r
es ult of it in the end? W hy, just the same. Remember I spoke just now of vengeance. (I am sure you did not take it in.) I said that a man revenge s himself because he sees justice in it. Therefore he has found a primary cause, that is, justice. And so he is at rest on all
sides, an d consequent ly he carries out his revenge calmly and successfully, b eing persuad ed that he is doing a just and honest thing. But I see n o ju stice in it, I find no sort of virtue in it either, and consequently if I attempt to revenge myself, it is only out of spite. Spite, of co
urse, migh t overcome everything, all m y doubts, and so might serve quite successfully in place of a primary cause, precisely because it is not a cause. But what is to be done if I have not even spite (I began with that just now, you know). In consequence again of those accursed laws of consciousn
ess, anger in me is subject to chemical disintegration. You look into it, the object flies off into air, your reas ons evaporate, the criminal is not to be found, the wrong becomes not a wrong but a phantom, something like the toothache, for which no one is to blame, and consequently there is only the same outlet left again--that is, t
o beat the wall as hard as you can. So you give it up with a wave of the hand because you have not found a fundamental cause. And try letting yourself be carried away by your feelings, blindly, without reflection, without a primary cause, repelling consciousness at least for a time; hate or love, if only not to sit with your hands folded. The day after tomorrow, at the latest, yo
u will begin despising yourself for having knowingly deceived yourself. Result: a soap-bubble and inertia. Oh, gentlemen, do you know, perhaps I consider myself an intelligent man, only because all my life I have been able neither to begin nor to finish anything. Granted I am a babbler, a harmless vexatious babbler, like all of us. But what is to be done if the direct and sole
vocation of every intelligent man is babble, that is, the intentional pouring of water through a sieve? VI Oh, if I had done nothing simply from laziness! Heavens, how I should have respected myself, then. I should have respected myself because I should at least have been capable of being lazy; there would at least have been one quality, as it were, positive in me, in which I c
ould have believed myself. Question: What is he? Answer: A sluggard; how very pleasant it would have been to hear that of oneself! It would mean that I was positively defined, it would mean that there was something to say about me. "Sluggard"--why, it is a calling and vocation, it is a career. Do not jest, it is so. I should then be a member of the best club by right, and shou
ld find my occupation in continually respecting myself. I knew a gentleman who prided himself all his life on being a connoisseur of Lafitte. He considered this as his positive virtue, and never doubted himself. He died, not simply with a tranquil, but with a triumphant conscience, and he was quite right, too. Then I should have chosen a career for myself, I should have been
a sluggard and a glutton, not a simple one, but, for instance, one with sympathies for everything sublime and beautiful. How do you like that? I have long had visions of it. That "sublime and beautiful" weighs heavily on my mind at forty But that is at forty; then--oh, then it would have been different! I should have found for myself a form of activity in keeping with it, to be pre
cise, drinking to the health of everything "sublime and beautiful." I should have snatched at every opportunity to drop a tear into my glass and then to drain it to all that is "sublime and beautiful." I should then have turned everything into the sublime and the beautiful; in the nastiest, unquestionable trash, I should have sought out the sublime and the beautiful. I should have
exuded tears like a wet sponge. An artist, for instance, paints a picture worthy of Gay. At once I drink to the health of the artist who painted the picture worthy of Gay, because I love all that is "sublime and beautiful." An author has written AS YOU WILL: at once I drink to the health of "anyone you will" because I love all that is "sublime and beautiful." I should claim respect
for doing so. I should persecute anyone who would not show me respect. I should live at ease, I should die with dignity, why, it is charming, perfectly charming! And what a good round belly I should have grown, what a treble chin I should have established, what a ruby nose I should have coloured for myself, so that everyone would have said, looking at me: "Here is an ass
et! Here is something real and solid!" And, say what you like, it is very agreeable to hear such remarks about oneself in this negative age. VII But these are all golden dreams. Oh, tell me, who was it first announced, who was it first proclaimed, that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were open
ed to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble because, being enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would see his own advantage in the good and nothing else, and we all know that not one man can, consciously, act against his own interests, consequently, so to say, through necessity, h
e would begin doing good? Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure, innocent child! Why, in the first place, when in all these thousands of years has there been a time when man has acted only from his own interest? What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that men, CONSCIOUSLY, that is fully understanding their real interests, have left them in the background an
d have rushed headlong on another path, to meet peril and danger, compelled to this course by nobody and by nothing, but, as it were, simply disliking the beaten track, and have obstinately, wilfully, struck out another difficult, absurd way, seeking it almost in the darkness. So, I suppose, this obstinacy and perversity were pleasanter to them than any advantage.... Advanta
ge! What is advantage? And will you take it upon yourself to define with perfect accuracy in what the advantage of man consists? And what if it so happens that a man's advantage, SOMETIMES, not only may, but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous. And if so, if there can be such a case, the whole principle fall