

Alyosha and Lise¹

by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Alyosha, a young teenage monk who lives in a monastery, is one of the brothers in the Karamazov family of Dostoevsky's novel 'Brothers Karamazov'. In this excerpt he visits Lise, also a young teenager, and the daughter of a rather silly, flighty woman named Madame Hohlakov. After his brief conversation with Lise's mother, Alyosha goes to Lise, who brings up an incident in which Alyosha attempted to bring 200 rubles to a proud poor man who refused to take his offer of money, which the young monk was directed to give by a wealthy woman. Previous to this excerpt, Lise wrote a letter to Alyosha openly expressing her affection for him. As you read the passage take special note of Dostoevsky's characterization of the two youth.

Madame Hohlakov was again the first to meet Alyosha. She was flustered; something important had happened. Katerina Ivanovna's hysterics had ended in a fainting fit, and then "a terrible, awful weakness had followed; she lay with her eyes turned up and was delirious. Now she was in a fever. They had sent for Herzenstube; they had sent for the aunts. The aunts were already here, but Herzenstube had not yet come. They were all sitting in her room, waiting. She was unconscious now, and what if it turned to brain fever!"

Madame Hohlakov looked gravely alarmed. "This is serious, serious," she added at every word, as though nothing that had happened to her before had been serious. Alyosha listened with distress, and was beginning to describe his adventures, but she interrupted him at the first words. She had not time to listen. She begged him to sit with Lise and wait for her there.

"Lise," she whispered almost in his ear, "Lise has greatly surprised me just now, dear Alexey Fyodorovitch. She touched me, too, and so my heart forgives her everything. Only fancy, as soon as you had gone, she began to be truly remorseful for having laughed at you today and yesterday, though she was not laughing at you, but only joking. But she was seriously sorry for it, almost ready to cry, so that I was quite surprised. She has never been really sorry for laughing at me, but has only made a joke of it. And you know she is laughing at me every minute. But this time she was in earnest. She thinks a great deal of your opinion, Alexey Fyodorovitch, and don't take offense or be wounded by her if you can help it. I am never hard upon her, for she's such a clever little thing. Would you believe it? She said just now that you were a friend of her childhood, 'the greatest friend of her childhood'—just think of that—'greatest friend'—and what about me? She has very strong feelings and memories, and, what's more, she uses these phrases, most

¹ "The Engagement" from Book 5, Chapter I of *Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett, edited by William Walter

unexpected words, which come out all of a sudden when you least expect them. She spoke lately about a pine tree, for instance. There used to be a pine tree standing in our garden in her early childhood. Very likely it's standing there still, so there's no need to speak in the past tense. Pine trees are not like people, Alexey Fyodorovitch, they don't change quickly. 'Mamma,' she said, 'I remember this pine tree as in a dream,' only she said something so original about it that I can't repeat it. Besides, I've forgotten it. Well, good-bye! I am so worried I feel I shall go out of my mind. Ah! Alexey Fyodorovitch, I've been out of my mind twice in my life. Go to Lise, cheer her up, as you always can so charmingly. Lise," she cried, going to her door, "here I've brought you Alexey Fyodorovitch, whom you insulted so. He is not at all angry, I assure you. On the contrary, he is surprised that you could suppose so."

"Merci, maman. Come in, Alexey Fyodorovitch."

Alyosha went in. Lise looked rather embarrassed, and at once flushed crimson. She was evidently ashamed of something, and, as people always do in such cases, she began immediately talking of other things, as though they were of absorbing interest to her at the moment.

"Mamma has just told me all about the two hundred roubles, Alexey Fyodorovitch, and your taking them to that poor officer . . . and she told me all the awful story of how he had been insulted . . . and you know, although mamma muddles things . . . she always rushes from one thing to another . . . I cried when I heard. Well, did you give him the money and how is that poor man getting on?"

"The fact is I didn't give it to him, and it's a long story," answered Alyosha, as though he, too, could think of nothing but his regret at having failed, yet Lise saw perfectly well that he, too, looked away, and that he, too, was trying to talk of other things.

Alyosha sat down to the table and began to tell his story, but at the first words he lost his embarrassment and gained the whole of Lise's attention as well. He spoke with deep feeling, under the influence of the strong impression he had just received, and he succeeded in telling his story well and circumstantially. In old days in Moscow he had been fond of coming to Lise and describing to her what had just happened to him, what he had read, or what he remembered of his childhood. Sometimes they had made daydreams and woven whole romances together—generally cheerful and amusing ones. Now they both felt suddenly transported to the old days in Moscow, two years before. Lise was extremely touched by his story. Alyosha described Ilusha with warm feeling. When he finished describing how the luckless man trampled on the money, Lise could not help clasping her hands and crying out, "So you didn't give him the money! So you let him run away! Oh, dear, you ought to have run after him!"

"No, Lise. It's better I didn't run after him," said Alyosha, getting up from his

chair and walking thoughtfully across the room.

“How so? How is it better? Now they are without food and their case is hopeless?”

“Not hopeless, for the two hundred roubles will still come to them. He’ll take the money tomorrow. Tomorrow he will be sure to take it,” said Alyosha, pacing up and down, pondering. “You see, Lise,” he went on, stopping suddenly before her, “I made one blunder, but that, even that, is all for the best.”

“What blunder, and why is it for the best?”

“I’ll tell you. He is a man of weak and timorous character. He has suffered so much and is very good-natured. I keep wondering why he took offense so suddenly, for I assure you, up to the last minute, he did not know that he was going to trample on the notes. And I think now that there was a great deal to offend him ..and it could not have been otherwise in his position. To begin with, he was sore at having been so glad of the money in my presence and not having concealed it from me. If he had been pleased, but not so much; if he had not shown it; if he had begun affecting scruples and difficulties, as other people do when they take money, he might still endure to take it. But he was too genuinely delighted, and that was mortifying. Ah, Lise, he is a good and truthful man—that’s the worst of the whole business. All the while he talked, his voice was so weak, so broken, he talked so fast, so fast, he kept laughing such a laugh, or perhaps he was crying—yes, I am sure he was crying, he was so delighted—and he talked about his daughters—and about the situation he could get in another town. And when he had poured out his heart, he felt ashamed at having shown me his inmost soul like that. So he began to hate me at once. He is one of those awfully sensitive poor people. What had made him feel most ashamed was that he had given in too soon and accepted me as a friend, you see. At first he almost flew at me and tried to intimidate me, but as soon as he saw the money he had begun embracing me; he kept touching me with his hands. This must have been how he came to feel it all so humiliating, and then I made that blunder, a very important one. I suddenly said to him that if he had not money enough to move to another town, we would give it to him, and, indeed, I myself would give him as much as he wanted out of my own money. That struck him all at once. Why, he thought, did I put myself forward to help him? You know, Lise, it’s awfully hard for a man who has been injured, when other people look at him as though they were his benefactors. I’ve heard that. Father Zossima told me so. I don’t know how to put it, but I have often seen it myself. And I feel like that myself, too. And the worst of it was that though he did not know, up to the very last minute, that he would trample on the notes, he had a kind of presentiment of it, I am sure of that. That’s just what made him so ecstatic, that he had that presentiment. And though it’s so dreadful, it’s all for the best. In fact, I believe nothing better could have happened.”

“Why, why could nothing better have happened?” cried Lise, looking with great surprise at Alyosha.

“Because if he had taken the money, in an hour after getting home, he would be crying with mortification, that’s just what would have happened. And most likely he would have come to me early tomorrow, and perhaps have flung the notes at me and trampled upon them as he did just now. But now he has gone home awfully proud and triumphant, though he knows he has ‘ruined himself.’ So now nothing could be easier than to make him accept the two hundred roubles by to-morrow, for he has already vindicated his honor, tossed away the money, and trampled it under foot.... He couldn’t know when he did it that I should bring it to him again to-morrow, and yet he is in terrible need of that money. Though he is proud of himself now, yet even to-day he’ll be thinking what a help he has lost. He will think of it more than ever at night, will dream of it, and by tomorrow morning he may be ready to run to me to ask forgiveness. It’s just then that I’ll appear. ‘Here, you are a proud man,’ I shall say: ‘you have shown it; but now take the money and forgive us!’ And then he will take it!”

Alyosha was carried away with joy as he uttered his last words, “And then he will take it!” Lise clapped her hands.

“Ah, that’s true! I understand that perfectly now. Ah, Alyosha, how do you know all this? So young and yet he knows what’s in the heart. I should never have worked it out.”

“The great thing now is to persuade him that he is on an equal footing with us, in spite of his taking money from us,” Alyosha went on in his excitement, “and not only on an equal, but even on a higher footing.”

“‘On a higher footing’ is charming, Alexey Fyodorovitch; but go on, go on!”

“You mean there isn’t such an expression as ‘on a higher footing’; but that doesn’t matter because—”

“Oh, no, of course it doesn’t matter. Forgive me, Alyosha, dear. You know, I scarcely respected you till now—that is I respected you but on an equal footing. But now I shall begin to respect you on a higher footing. Don’t be angry, dear, at my joking,” she put in at once, with strong feeling. “I am absurd and small, but you, you! Listen, Alexey Fyodorovitch. Isn’t there in all our analysis—I mean your analysis . . . no, better call it ours—aren’t we showing contempt for him, for that poor man—in analyzing his soul like this, as it were, from above, eh? In deciding so certainly that he will take the money?”

“No, Lise, it’s not contempt,” Alyosha answered, as though he had prepared himself for the question. “I was thinking of that on the way here. How can it be contempt when we are all like him, when we are all just the same as he is? For you know we are just the same, no better. If we are better, we should have been just the same in his place. I don’t know about you, Lise, but I consider that I have a sordid

soul in many ways, and his soul is not sordid; on the contrary, full of fine feeling. No, Lise, I have no contempt for him. Do you know, Lise, my elder told me once to care for most people exactly as one would for children, and for some of them as one would for the sick in hospitals.”

“Ah, Alexey Fyodorovitch, dear, let us care for people as we would for the sick!”

“Let us, Lise; I am ready. Though I am not altogether ready in myself. I am sometimes very impatient and at other times I don’t see things. It’s different with you.”

“Ah, I don’t believe it! Alexey Fyodorovitch, how happy I am!”

“I am so glad you say so, Lise.”

“Alexey Fyodorovitch, you are wonderfully good, but you are sometimes sort of formal. And yet you are not a bit formal really. Go to the door, open it gently, and see whether mamma is listening,” said Lise, in a nervous, hurried whisper.

Alyosha went, opened the door, and reported that no one was listening.

“Come here, Alexey Fyodorovitch,” Lise went on, flushing redder and redder. “Give me your hand—that’s right. I have to make a great confession, I didn’t write to you yesterday in joke, but in earnest,” and she hid her eyes with her hand. It was evident that she was greatly ashamed of the confession.

Suddenly she snatched his hand and impulsively kissed it three times.

“Ah, Lise, what a good thing!” cried Alyosha joyfully. “You know, I was perfectly sure you were in earnest.”

“Sure? Upon my word!” She put aside his hand, but did not leave go of it, blushing hotly, and laughing a little happy laugh. “I kiss his hand and he says, ‘What a good thing!’ ”

But her reproach was undeserved. Alyosha, too, was greatly overcome.

“I should like to please you always, Lise, but I don’t know how to do it,” he muttered, blushing too.

“Alyosha, dear, you are cold and rude. Do you see? He has chosen me as his wife and is quite settled about it. He is sure I was in earnest. What a thing to say! Why, that’s impertinence—that’s what it is.”

“Why, was it wrong of me to feel sure?” Alyosha asked, laughing suddenly.

“Ah, Alyosha, on the contrary, it was delightfully right,” cried Lise, looking tenderly and happily at him.

Alyosha stood still, holding her hand in his. Suddenly he stooped down and kissed her on her lips.

“Oh, what are you doing?” cried Lise. Alyosha was terribly abashed.

“Oh, forgive me if I shouldn’t . . . Perhaps I’m awfully stupid. You said I was cold, so I kissed you. But I see it was stupid.”

Lise laughed, and hid her face in her hands. “And in that dress!” she ejaculated

in the midst of her mirth. But she suddenly ceased laughing and became serious, almost stern.

“Alyosha, we must put off kissing. We are not ready for that yet, and we shall have a long time to wait,” she ended suddenly. “Tell me rather why you who are so clever, so intellectual, so observant, choose a little idiot, an invalid like me? Ah, Alyosha, I am awfully happy, for I don’t deserve you a bit.”

“You do, Lise. I shall be leaving the monastery altogether in a few days. If I go into the world, I must marry. I know that. *He* told me to marry, too. Whom could I marry better than you—and who would have me except you? I have been thinking it over. In the first place, you’ve known me from a child and you’ve a great many qualities I haven’t. You are more light-hearted than I am; above all, you are more innocent than I am. I have been brought into contact with many, many things already. Ah, you don’t know, but I, too, am a Karamazov. What does it matter if you do laugh and make jokes, and at me, too? Go on laughing. I am so glad you do. You laugh like a little child, but you think like a martyr.”

“Like a martyr? How?”

“Yes, Lise, your question just now: whether we weren’t showing contempt for that poor man by dissecting his soul—that was the question of a sufferer. You see, I don’t know how to express it, but any one who thinks of such questions is capable of suffering. Sitting in your invalid chair you must have thought over many things already.”

“Alyosha, give me your hand. Why are you taking it away?” murmured Lise in a failing voice, weak with happiness. “Listen, Alyosha. What will you wear when you come out of the monastery? What sort of suit? Don’t laugh, don’t be angry, it’s very, very important to me.”

“I haven’t thought about the suit, Lise; but I’ll wear whatever you like.”

“I should like you to have a dark blue velvet coat, a white piqué waistcoat, and a soft gray felt hat. Tell me, did you believe that I didn’t care for you when I said I didn’t mean what I wrote?”

“No, I didn’t believe it.”

“Oh, you insupportable person, you are incorrigible.”

“You see, I knew that you—seemed to care for me, but I pretended to believe that you didn’t care for me to make it—easier for you.”

“That makes it worse! Worse and better than all! Alyosha, I am awfully fond of you. Just before you came this morning, I tried my fortune. I decided I would ask you for my letter, and if you brought it out calmly and gave it to me (as might have been expected from you) it would mean that you did not love me at all, that you felt nothing, and were simply a stupid boy, good for nothing, and that I am ruined. But you left the letter at home and that cheered me. You left it behind on purpose, so as not to give it back, because you knew I would ask for it? That was it,

wasn't it?"

"Ah, Lise, it was not so a bit. The letter is with me now, and it was this morning, in this pocket. Here it is."

Alyosha pulled the letter out laughing, and showed it her at a distance.

"But I am not going to give it to you. Look at it from here."

"Why, then you told a lie? You, a monk, told a lie!"

"I told a lie if you like," Alyosha laughed, too. "I told a lie so as not to give you back the letter. It's very precious to me," he added suddenly, with strong feeling, and again he flushed. "It always will be, and I won't give it up to any one!"

Lise looked at him joyfully. "Alyosha," she murmured again, "look at the door. Isn't mamma listening?"

"Very well, Lise, I'll look. But wouldn't it be better not to look? Why suspect your mother of such meanness?"

"What meanness? As for her spying on her daughter, it's her right. It's not meanness!" cried Lise, firing up. "You may be sure, Alexey Fyodorovitch, that when I am a mother, if I have a daughter like myself I shall certainly spy on her!"

"Really, Lise? That's not right."

"Oh, what has meanness to do with it? If she were listening to some ordinary worldly conversation, it would be meanness, but when her own daughter is shut up with a young man. Listen, Alyosha, do you know I shall spy on you as soon as we are married, and let me tell you I shall open all your letters and read them, so you may as well be prepared."

"Yes, of course, if so—" muttered Alyosha, "only it's not right."

"Ah, how contemptuous! Alyosha, dear, we won't quarrel the very first day. I'd better tell you the whole truth. Of course, it's very wrong to spy on people, and, of course, I am not right and you are, only I shall spy on you all the same."

"Do, then. You won't find out anything," laughed Alyosha.

"And, Alyosha, will you give in to me? We must decide that too."

"I shall be delighted to, Lise, and certain to, only not in the most important things. Even if you don't agree with me, I shall do my duty in the most important things."

"That's right. But let me tell you I am ready to give in to you not only in the most important matters, but in everything. And I am ready to vow to do so now—in everything, and for all my life!" cried Lise fervently, "and I'll do it gladly, gladly! What's more, I'll swear never to spy on you, never once, never to read one of your letters. For you are right and I am not. And though I shall be awfully tempted to spy, I know that I won't do it since you consider it dishonorable. You are my conscience now. Listen, Alexey Fyodorovitch, why have you been so sad lately—both yesterday and today? I know you have a lot of anxiety and trouble, but I see you have some special grief besides, some secret one, perhaps?"

“Yes, Lise, I have a secret one, too,” answered Alyosha mournfully. “I see you love me, since you guessed that.”

“What grief? What about? Can you tell me?” asked Lise with timid entreaty.

“I’ll tell you later, Lise—afterwards,” said Alyosha, confused. “Now you wouldn’t understand it perhaps—and perhaps I couldn’t explain it.”

“I know your brothers and your father are worrying you, too.”

“Yes, my brothers too,” murmured Alyosha, pondering.

“I don’t like your brother Ivan, Alyosha,” said Lise suddenly.

He noticed this remark with some surprise, but did not answer it.

“My brothers are destroying themselves,” he went on, “my father, too. And they are destroying others with them. It’s ‘the primitive force of the Karamazovs,’ as Father Païssy said the other day, a crude, unbridled, earthly force. Does the spirit of God move above that force? Even that I don’t know. I only know that I, too, am a Karamazov. Me a monk, a monk! Am I a monk, Lise? You said just now that I was.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And perhaps I don’t even believe in God.”

“You don’t believe? What is the matter?” said Lise quietly and gently. But Alyosha did not answer. There was something too mysterious, too subjective in these last words of his, perhaps obscure to himself, but yet torturing him.

“And now on the top of it all, my friend, the best man in the world, is going, is leaving the earth! If you knew, Lise, how bound up in soul I am with him! And then I shall be left alone. I shall come to you, Lise. For the future we will be together.”

“Yes, together, together! Henceforward we shall be always together, all our lives! Listen, kiss me, I allow you.”

Alyosha kissed her.

“Come, now go. Christ be with you!” and she made the sign of the cross over him. “Make haste back to *him* while he is alive. I see I’ve kept you cruelly. I’ll pray today for him and you. Alyosha, we shall be happy! Shall we be happy, shall we?”

“I believe we shall, Lise.”

Alyosha thought it better not to go in to Madame Hohlakov and was going out of the house without saying good-by to her. But no sooner had he opened the door than he found Madame Hohlakov standing before him. From the first word Alyosha guessed that she had been waiting on purpose to meet him.

“Alexey Fyodorovitch, this is awful. This is all childish nonsense and ridiculous. I trust you won’t dream—It’s foolishness, nothing but foolishness!” she said, attacking him at once.

“Only don’t tell her that,” said Alyosha, “or she will be upset, and that’s bad for her now.”

“Sensible advice from a sensible young man. Am I to understand that you only agreed with her from compassion for her invalid state, because you didn’t want to irritate her by contradiction?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I was quite serious in what I said,” Alyosha declared stoutly.

“To be serious about it is impossible, unthinkable, and in the first place I shall never be at home to you again, and I shall take her away. You may be sure of that.”

“But why?” asked Alyosha. “It’s all so far off. We may have to wait another year and a half.”

“Ah, Alexey Fyodorovitch, that’s true, of course, and you’ll have time to quarrel and separate a thousand times in a year and a half. But I am so unhappy! Though it’s such nonsense, it’s a great blow to me. I feel like Famusov in the last scene of *Sorrow from Wit*— You are Tchatsky and she is Sofya, and, only fancy, I’ve run down to meet you on the stairs, and in the play the fatal scene takes place on the staircase. I heard it all. I almost dropped. So this is the explanation of her dreadful night and her hysterics of late! It means love to the daughter but death to the mother. I might as well be in my grave at once. And a more serious matter still, what is this letter she has written? Show it me at once, at once!”

“No, there’s no need. Tell me, how is Katerina Ivanovna now? I must know.”

“She still lies in delirium. She has not regained consciousness. Her aunts are here, but they do nothing but sigh and give themselves airs. Herzenstube came, and he was so alarmed that I didn’t know what to do for him. I nearly sent for a doctor to look after him. He was driven home in my carriage. And on the top of it all, you and this letter! It’s true nothing can happen for a year and a half. In the name of all that’s holy, in the name of your dying elder, show me that letter, Alexey Fyodorovitch. I’m her mother. Hold it in your hand, if you like, and I will read it so.”

“No, I won’t show it to you. Even if she sanctioned it, I wouldn’t. I am coming tomorrow, and if you like, we can talk over many things, but now good-by!”

And Alyosha ran downstairs and into the street.