Prince Lyov Nikolayevitch Myshkin is one of the great characters in Russian literature. Is he a saint or just naïve? Is he an idealist or, as many in General Epanchin’s society feel, an ‘idiot’? Certainly his return to St Petersburg after years in a Swiss clinic has a dramatic effect on the beautiful Aglaia, youngest of the Epanchin daughters, and on the charismatic but wilful Nastasya Filippovna. As he paints a vivid picture of Russian society, Dostoyevsky shows how principles conflict with emotions – with tragic results.

Constantine Gregory is an actor, dialogue coach and ‘voice’. Constantine has more than 30 years’ experience in all these capacities on international projects with many major film directors, including Danny Boyle, Bernardo Bertolucci, Terry Gilliam, Neil Jordan and Julie Taymor and with actors such as Anthony Hopkins, Jessica Lange, Nicole Kidman, George Clooney, Gerard Depardieu, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Keanu Reeves, Eva Green and many, many others. With Edmund Caldecott, Constantine runs the website Spoken Ink, dedicated to short audios for download, and for which he has recorded a number of short stories himself.

Myshkin turned round quickly… 12:04
Chapter 8 11:32
The other gentleman… 10:30
Varya came back into the room… 9:36
Chapter 9 11:25
Ferdyshtchenko took hold of the general… 11:32
Chapter 10 8:40
Nastasya Filippovna suddenly laughed… 7:22
Chapter 11 11:18
Ganya smiled sarcastically to himself… 6:19
Chapter 12 12:56
The meeting with Kolya… 10:40
Chapter 13 11:33
At the door of the drawing room… 12:47
Chapter 14 6:24
‘It has happened to me, friends, as to everyone…’ 6:47
Chapter 15 6:27
With an extraordinary air of dignity… 6:27
Chapter 16 8:40
Ptitisyn bent his head and looked on the ground… 9:23
Chapter 12: Conclusion

The key was already in his hand.

Rogozhin had not come back…

Chapter 11

At this point, without mincing matters…

Aglaia paused for a moment as though amazed.

Chapter 8

As he was continually mixing one thing up…

Myshkin was in a fever all night.

'And again, that evening, there was something…'

The upshot of it was that they must keep calm…

Chapter 7

At that moment Kolya entered the verandah…

There was a moment at the end of that long…

Chapter 6

He thought this, sitting on a seat under a tree…

Chapter 5

The excitement and expectation was general…

Chapter 4

The girls stood on one side, almost scared..

Chapter 3

Late in the evening, after ten o’clock…

Myshkin began at last to feel not exactly sorry…

Chapter 2

He broke off in confusion.

Myshkin really was almost pale…

Chapter 1

At the beginning of our narrative we mentioned…

Myshkin was almost pale…

Chapter 10

'Now he is choking!’ Lizaveta Prokofyevna…

'Tt’s late!’ Ippolit suddenly got up…

Chapter 9

Liza Prokofyevna spoke with excitement…

Lizaveta Prokofyevna flushed.

Chapter 8

The key was already in his hand.

Chapter 7

Mutual courtesies were exchanged…

The excitement and expectation was general…

Chapter 6

'That – that passes my comprehension!’

When Kolya had finished reading…

Chapter 5

He thought this, sitting on a seat under a tree…

Chapter 4

'Tell me, if you will, Parfyon,' said Myshkin…

Chapter 3

It was a big room, lofty and dark…

Chapter 2

And Lebedyev took Myshkin’s hand…

Chapter 1

It was a big room, lofty and dark…

Chapter 4

Vera looked in alarm at the coin…

Chapter 12

The reading began at last.

Chapter 6

‘Gentlemen,’ said Ippolit, suddenly breaking off…

Chapter 5

‘There are people who derive extraordinary…’

Chapter 4

‘Anyone who attacks individual charity,’…

Chapter 3

‘The picture represented Christ…'

Chapter 2

There is, in extreme cases, a pitch…

Chapter 1

‘I am very glad of that, Parfyon,’ said Myshkin…

Chapter 10

‘I tell you it was so,’ Rogozhin repeated quietly…

Chapter 9

It was a big room, lofty and dark…

Chapter 8

‘I must admit, Lebedyev, this distresses me…’

Chapter 7

‘What folly!’ Myshkin said, almost angrily…

Chapter 6

‘For the sake of clearness, I will explain to you…’

Chapter 5

‘All that is extremely interesting,’…

Chapter 4

At that moment Kolya set a chair for him…

Chapter 3

Ippolit too felt a qualm…

Chapter 2

At that moment Kolya set a chair for him…

Chapter 1

Ippolit too felt a qualm…

Chapter 10

‘Here, my fellow citizens, we have…’

Chapter 9

‘And again, that evening, there was something…’
On arriving in Petersburg, the prince, penniless and bedraggled, is invited to a party at the home of the notorious Nastasya Filippovna who is living under the protection of Totsky, a man she does not love. Prince Myshkin pities this neurotic and emotional woman and, during a bizarre incident at her birthday party, offers to marry her. Instead, she runs off with Rogozhin who also turns up at the party. Later, when Nastasya leaves Rogozhin, he swears to kill Prince Myshkin, as he is convinced that Nastasya is in love with him.

Prince Myshkin becomes the victim of an extortion attempt, but when he successfully refutes the charges, he offers to give money to his accuser, thus confirming Mrs Epanchin's view that he is 'an idiot'. Meanwhile, Aglaia falls in love with Prince Myshkin and, after hiding her feelings at first, she is eventually engaged to him. At a party to celebrate the betrothal, Prince Myshkin commits the ultimate social blunder of having an epileptic fit. Aglaia and Nastasya strike up a correspondence, and Aglaia asks Prince Myshkin to visit Nastasya with her. After a hectic and turbulent argument, Nastasya faints, Prince Myshkin runs to her aid and Aglaia, feeling rejected, flees and refuses to see Prince Myshkin.

Nastasya agrees to marry Prince Myshkin, but at the very last moment, she is swept away by Rogozhin. Prince Myshkin pursues them to Petersburg. After a long search, he finds Rogozhin and although he fears for his life, nothing could have prepared him for the final brutal end. Even then he is still able to forgive, but at a very high price.

Dostoyevsky desperately wanted to write a novel about a 'good' man, but feared he was not up to the task; in the initial plan Myshkin was a proud and demonic figure. Dostoyevsky's notebooks show an author desperately in search of a subject through countless changes of plot and characterisation, but it was in its seventh plan that he finally found his 'beautiful' idiot. However, the character retains layers of ambiguity that remain from the complicated process of his creation. His humility can be seen as overbearing and, in the end, destructive and Myshkin is finally left devoid of being: a demented idiot. His epilepsy is also crucial. It is both his salvation and a limitation; it prevents him from following his ideas through completely, and from being taken as a fully participating member of the society in which he finds himself. He is both part of the world, and yet part of another metaphysical plane, revealed to him at the onset of a seizure. So baffling and opaque is the character of Prince Myshkin that he embodies the whole range of human existence, and readers will puzzle over him and the true meaning of this book for many years to come.

Notes by Heather Godwin