

NIKOLAI  
CHERNYSHEVSKY

What Is to Be Done?

Tales of New People  
A Novel

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standing, was sound; nonetheless, she was determined to get this right the way settled. Three days later, over a hand of preference with Storeshnikov and Lopukhov, she turned suddenly to the latter and said:

"Something I've been meaning to ask you, sir. The last French king's father, the one Bonaparte took over from, was he for making everyone Catholic?"

"No he wasn't, Marya Alexevna."

"But is the Church of Rome a good one, Dmitri Sergeich?"

"No it's not, Marya Alexevna. I'm leading seven of diamonds."

"Just curious, Dmitri Sergeich, seeking as how I haven't the booklearning 'n I did so want to know. My, you *have* written off a lot this round!"

"Can't help but, Marya Alexevna. The Academy's seen to that. A man in the medical profession has to know his cards."

And to this very day he cannot think why she should have asked about the proselytising habits of Philippe Egalité.

After all that she had every right to let down her guard, or didn't she? When he neither leered at Vera's corset nor betrayed the slightest emotion, when the books he had her read were full of the fear of God, what more could she want? But no, she wouldn't leave it at that; she would see her observations tested, as though she'd studied the logic I too have by heart to demand that "phenomena observed to occur spontaneously be confirmed in experimental conditions designed to shed maximum light on the mysteries of the given correlation", and would do it all according to Saxo Grammaticus'<sup>14</sup> account of Hamlet's trial in the forest by feminine wiles.

## VIII

### HAMLET'S TRIAL

One day at tea she claimed a splitting head, poured the brew, locked the sugar-bowl away and went to bed, leaving Vera and Lopukhov alone in

the parlour, which happened to be right next to the sufferer's bedroom. Moments later she summoned Fedya. "Tell you sister I can't get to sleep with them talking. Say they can go off away, anywhere they won't disturb me. And say it nice so's not to get Dmitri Sergeich's back up, you *know* how he looks out for you." Fedya relayed his mother's message. "Let's go into my room, Dmitri Sergeich, it's far enough off we shan't disturb anyone." Just as she'd figured! One quarter of an hour later she crept, in stocking feet, up to Vera's door. It was ajar, to which splendid chink between post and jam she applied an eye, pricked up both ears and saw:

The two windows of Vera's room and between them her writing desk, Vera seated at one window or one end of the desk dutifully knitting her father the woollen comforter her mother had ordered, Lopukhov at the other window and across the desk, on which he'd propped the elbow of one, cigar-holding hand while the other lay shoved in a pocket and a good yard and a half if not more between the two—Vera and Lopukhov, that is, she intent on her knitting and he on his cigar, in short, a most reassuring arrangement.

And this is what she heard, coming in on:

"... that's the way to look at life?"

"Yes, Vera Pavlovna, I'm sure of it."

"So those cold and practical minds are telling the truth then? Man acts exclusively in his own interest?"

"That's the truth. Compared to self-interest and taking all in all, what is commonly called the sublime or the pursuit of the ideal is absolutely nothing. In fact it too springs from self-interest."

"In your case as well?"

"How would you have it, Vera Pavlovna? What is my *raison d'être*, you ask? Up to now my whole life has revolved around my studies. Fine. But what ever persuaded my father to send me to grammar school in the first place? He was forever urging me to 'ply the books, Mitya, get into government service so's you can support your old parents and enjoy the

good life'. That's how I got my chance to study, otherwise he'd never have let the extra bread-winner go. Nor would I have wasted the time, much as I enjoyed it, if I hadn't thought the investment would pay off, at a premium. In my senior year I persuaded my father to let me bypass service for the Academy. How was that? We both realised the doctor's life was far better than that led by the office drudge or even his boss, which was as high as I could then hope to get. That then is why I enrolled in medical school, for the money. Were it not for the money I'd be out in a second."

"But you liked grammar school, just as you like medicine now?"

"True. But that's the icing on the cake and while it can be of use, it's seldom seen, whereas self-interest is always served. My loving my work is only an after-the-fact, the real motive has always been purely selfish."

"I suppose you're right, no you *are* right. Everything I can think of is grounded in self-interest. Even so, it's a horribly chilling thought."

"Theory is meant to be cold. Judgments must be made in cold blood."

"But it has no pity."

"Not for chimeras, which have nothing and do nothing but harm."

"But it's all so prosaic."

"Poetry is not the language for science."

"To conclude, then, your theory, which I cannot but accept, condemns us all to a cold, pitiless, poetry-less existence."

"Not so, Vera Pavlovna. The theory is cold but it shows us how to create warmth. The match is cold, as is the strip on the matchbox it is struck against and the wood it is set to light; together, however, they produce the fire which heats our food and warms our bodies. The theory is pitiless but if followed will rid mankind of the pitiful burden of idle sympathy. The lancet is inflexible; were it not we'd have to pity the patient, who has nothing to gain from it. Prosaic as the theory may be, it strips life to its truest well springs and poetry dwells in

truth. Why is Shakespeare the poet supreme? Because he has more of the truth of this life and less of its delusions than other rhymester past or present."

"If that's pitiless, Dmitri Sergeich, count me in." Vera smiled. "Don't flatter yourself that you've convinced your doctrine's most adamant opponent to convert. I was thinking along the same lines long before I met you or read your book. But because I assumed I stood alone and apart from what intelligent, educated people were thinking, I wavered. Most everything you read has it all backwards and riddled with sarcastic strictures against what is to be found in every one of us. Life, nature and common sense pull in one direction and books, with all their fulminations, another. You know even I can see the objections I raised just now were, in part, laughable."

"They were at that, Vera Pavlovna."

"Honestly!" she laughed, "what compliments we trade! Me with my 'don't congratulate yourself too heartily, Dmitri Sergeich' and you telling me I'm ridiculous to entertain such doubts."

"So?" He too smiled. "As it's not in our interests to toy with the niceties, we don't."

"Very well, Dmitri Sergeich. We're all egotists, right? You've told me all about you, now I want to talk about me."

"And so you should; every one concentrates most on himself."

"Very well. We'll see if I can't catch you out on my personal affairs."

"Shall we?"

"A rich man has asked me to marry him. I do not care for him. Should I accept his proposal?"

"You must decide what's best for you."

"What's best! You know I'm very badly off. On the one hand I dislike the man, on the other I stand to gain authority, his money, a much-coveted social standing and hordes of admirers."

"Weigh all the pros and cons, then choose in your own best interests."

"And if I choose a rich husband and hordes of admirers?"

"I'll say you did as you thought best."

"What will you say of *me*?"

"If your choice is dispassionate and well thought out, I'll have to say it was reasonable and not likely to be regretted."

"But would be it called reprehensible?"

"Gibbering tongues will gibber as they please; anyone with the right outlook will say you did as you ought, that what you did was determined by your character and the circumstances then obtaining; in fine, that you had no other choice."

"I wouldn't be called to account?"

"What right does anyone have to denounce a consequence of fact in the teeth of that same fact. Your character and your circumstances stand as fact, your actions as consequences required by the order of things. You do not answer for them and it would be absurd to think you should."

"You won't be budged, will you? And you wouldn't think badly of me if I were to marry?"

"I wouldn't be so absurd."

"Then I have your permission, your blessing perhaps and possibly even a point-blank recommendation to do as I say."

"My advice will never change: act in your own best interests. Follow that advice and you'll have my blessing."

"Thank you. That settles my personal affairs. To return to more general matters. We began by saying man follows the dictates of necessity, that his actions are determined by their attendant influences of which the stronger take precedence. We then digressed to note that where the action bears on the mundane these motive forces are to be called the various considerations of self-interest and their interplay in the individual the function of self-interest *per se*, which, seen in this light, guides our every step. Have I got it right?"

"You have."

"See what a good pupil I am. We've now dealt with the specific question of practical transactions. There are still some rough edges on the general level, though. Your book says man follows the

dictates of necessity. In some cases, however, it seems to be more a matter of individual whim. For example, when I play the piano I can and do turn the pages of my sheet music with either hand. If one time it happens to be, oh, the left, say, I could just as easily have used the right, could I not? doesn't it depend on my whim?"

"No, Vera Pavlovna, it doesn't. If you turn your page without pausing to reflect which hand you'll use, you will choose for convenience and not on whim; if you stop to think 'let's make it the right this time' you'll do so as a consequence of that thought, which is not a product of your whim but the necessary outgrowth of a host of other..."

Here Marya Alexevna's eavesdropping came to an end. "They've got onto highbrow turf now, way off my own, not that I need it anyways. What a smart, solid young man, what a prince, I'd say! What terrific good sense he's talking into Vera too! That's edjimization for you. Why if I was to say the exact same thing she'd pay it no mind, she'd get all huffed up; no I can't oblige her cause I can't talk fancy. But he sure can, she laps it up, takes it all for gospel and gives it the nod. Yup, that's why they say the fool walks in darkness and in wisdom lies the light. If I had me any booklearning now, now that'd change everything, you bet. I'd have got Rozalsky into a generalship, into provisions say, or some such like. Course, I'd be the one handling all them contractors, he can't do sweet nothing, Rozalsky can't. And I'd have this house ten times fancier. And more than one thousand head of serfs. But I can't do nothing about it, not now. You got to impress the big wigs first thing, only how can I without no français or whatchamacall their parlay-vooz. They'll say I got no class or naught but the one for yowling with the fishwives. I'm just not good enough. Ignorance is darkness. Yup, you said it. Learning brings the light."

It was this bit of reconnaissance work that convinced her there was nothing to fear from Lopukhov's socialising with her daughter (that she had known already) and everything to gain besides

in support of her own concern that Vera drop her girlishly naive notions and bring things to a swift happy end at the altar rail.

## IX

Marya Alexevna's attitude to Lopukhov verges on the farcical and reflects farcically on the beholder herself. Neither was my intention. Had I cared anything for what we Russians call the aesthetic effect, I'd have camouflaged their relations and thereby avoided the slapstick overtones to these chapters. It would have been only too simple. They are not essential to the basic plot development, for there is nothing so unusual in a tutor snatching, in or out of his employer's good graces, the odd, even the rare chat with her daughter. After all, how many words does a budding love need to flower? Marya Alexevna's cooperation was decidedly dispensable to what lies ahead in the Vera-Lopukhov encounter. In any case, my narrative method is not geared to critical acclaim but simply the way it was. And the novelist in me very much regrets having stooped, at such great length, to the burlesque.

Resolving to present this as it happened and not as convenient to me, creates yet another problem. I'm not a bit happy with the ludicrous image of Marya Alexevna speculating on Lopukhov's make-believe bride or just as wildly on the books he gave her daughter to read, wondering whether Philippe Egalité had his Frenchmen converted or what sort of author was Louis Quatorze. We all make mistakes, some of them ridiculous when out of our depth. Still, it would not be fair to take Marya Alexevna's howling blunders as the sole basis for her tolerance; no fantastical dowries or pious Philippes could have clouded common sense for a moment had she glimpsed anything smacking of the suspicious in Lopukhov's conduct. Instead, he behaved precisely as she believed only a bird of her own feather could: forbearing, despite his youth and drive, to ogle or trail after a very pretty girl or decline a single game

of cards with her mother to plea "I'll just sit this one out with Vera Pavlovna." His outlook on life seemed to match her own: like her he insisted the world turned on self-interest, that a scoundrel acting scandalous was no call for foaming at the mouth for the principles he should have had, that a dastard was a dastard for very good reason in the force of circumstance and to expect any different was, besides being impossible, absurd, not to say simply preposterous. Yes, Marya Alexevna quite rightly found they had a great deal in common.

I am aware of how seriously her sympathy compromises Lopukhov in the eyes of my enlightened readers. Nevertheless, I will not play favourites, I will not suppress this evidence—and I have just proven how easily I could have—whatever the damage to my hero; what is more, I shall now demonstrate that he came by her favour honestly.

Indeed, as is evident from the debate with Vera, his opinions appeal much more readily to the Marya Alexevna's of this world than to the eloquent advocates of elegant ideals. He saw things the way they are seen by the great mass of humanity, excluding the aforementioned champions of the ideal. Where Marya Alexevna was only too happy to crib from his arguments on the Storeshnikov proposal, he would have gladly endorsed her drunken confession to Vera. So closely do their viewpoints coincide, our eminent enlightened novelists, journalists and every other mentor of public opinion have long since proclaimed the two types identical. If that is the way our very best writers and thinkers see men of Lopukhov's mold, we can hardly blame Marya Alexevna for failing to judge him any differently.

To be sure, given a mere half of what these writing fellows know, she would have had the werewithal to realise she and Lopukhov were singularly mismatched. Ignorance, however, was not her sole excuse: Lopukhov had left her with a great deal unsaid. A propagandist he may have been, but not of the sort found among those exultant lovers of the sublime obsessed with pumping the same into