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WHAT
IS TO BE DONE?

Tales

ABOUT NEW PEOPLE

BY

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LUDMILLA B. TURKEVICH

NEW  YORK

VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House

: VIII :

TEST À LA HAMLET

One day Mária Alexévna said, while taking tea, that she had a severe headache; after having drunk the tea and locked up the sugar-bowl, she went to lie down. Vérochka and Lopukhóv remained alone in the parlor, which adjoined Mária Alexévna's bedroom. A few moments later, the sick woman called Fédyá.

"Tell your sister that their conversation prevents me from sleeping; let them go into another room; but say it politely, in order that Dmítý Sergéich is not offended. He takes such care of you!" Fédyá did the errand.

"Let us go into my room, Dmítý Sergéich," said Véra Pávlovna, "it is away from the bedroom, and there we won't prevent Mamma from sleeping."

That was precisely what Mária Alexévna expected. A quarter of an hour later she approached with stealthy step the door of Vérochka's room. The door was partly open, and between it and the casing was a crack which left nothing to be desired. There Mária Alexévna applied her eyes and opened her ears.

And this is what she saw:

Vérochka's room had two windows; between the windows was a writing-table. Near one window, at one end of the table, sat Vérochka; she was knitting a worsted waistcoat for her father, thus strictly carrying out Mária Alexévna's recommendation. Near the other window, at the other end of the table, sat Lopukhóv: supporting one elbow on the table, he held a cigar in his hand, and had thrust the other hand into his pocket—between him and Vérochka was a distance of two *archines*,* if not more. Vérochka looked principally at her knitting, and Lopukhóv looked principally at his cigar. A satisfactory disposition of affairs.

And this is what she heard:

... "And is it thus, then, that life must be regarded?" Such were the first words that reached the ears of Mária Alexévna.

"Yes, Véra Pávlovna, precisely thus."

* Two and one-third feet.

"Practical and cold men are therefore right in saying that man is governed exclusively by self-interest?"

"They are right. What are called elevated sentiments, ideal aspirations,—all that, in the general course of affairs, is absolutely null, and is eclipsed by individual interest; these very sentiments are nothing but self-interest clearly understood."

"But you, for example,—are you too thus governed?"

"How else should I be, Véra Pávlovna? Just consider what is the essential motive of my whole life. The essential business of my life so far has consisted in study; I was preparing to be a doctor. Why did my father send me to school? Over and over again he said to me: 'Study, Mitya; then you will become an office-holder; you will support us, myself and your mother, and you will be comfortable yourself.' That, then, was why I studied; if they had not had that interest in view, my father would not have sent me to school: the family needed a laborer. Now, for my part, although science interests me now, I should not have spent so much time upon it if I had not thought that this expense would be largely rewarded. My studies at school were drawing to an end; I prevailed upon my father to allow me to enter the Academy of Medicine instead of becoming an office-holder. How did that happen? We saw, my father and I, that doctors live much better than government functionaries and heads of bureaus, above whom I could not expect to rise. That is the reason why I entered the Academy,—the hope of a bigger piece of bread. If I had not had that interest in view, I should not have entered."

"But you liked to study in college, and the medical sciences attracted you?"

"Yes. But that is ornamental; it helps in the achievement of success. But success is ordinarily achieved without it; never without interest as a motive. Love of science is only a result; the cause is self-interest."

"Supposing that you are right. All the actions, that I understand, can be explained by self-interest. But this theory seems to me very cold."

"Theory in itself should be cold. The mind should judge things coldly."

"But it is pitiless."

"For senseless and mischievous fancies."

"It is very prosaic."

"The poetic form is not suited to science."

"So this theory, which I do not see my way to accept, condemns men to a cold, pitiless, prosaic life?"

"No, Véra Pávlovna: this theory is cold, but it teaches man to procure warmth. Matches are cold, the side of the box against which we scratch them is cold, kindling is cold; but the fire which prepares warm nourishment for man and keeps him warm none the less springs from them; this theory is pitiless, but by following it men cease to be wretched objects of the compassion of the idle."

"Well, I too shall be pitiless, Dmítry Sergéich," said Vérochka, smiling; "do not flatter yourself with the idea that you have had in me an obstinate opponent of your theory of self-interest, and that now you have gained a new disciple. For my part, I thought so long before I ever heard of you or read your book. But I believed that these thoughts were my own, and that the wise and learned thought differently; that is why my mind hesitated. All that I read was contrary to what went on within me and made my thought the object of blame and sarcasm. Nature, life, intelligence lead one way; books lead another, saying: This is bad, that is base. Do you know, the objections which I have raised seemed to me a little ridiculous."

"They are indeed ridiculous, Véra Pávlovna."

"But," said she, laughing, "we are paying each other very pretty compliments!"

"Ah! Yes!" said he, smiling also, "we have no interest in being polite to each other, and so we are not."

"Good, Dmítry Sergéich; men are egoists, are they not? There, you have talked about yourself; now I wish to talk a little about myself."

"You are perfectly right; every one thinks of himself first."

"I have a rich suitor. I do not like him. Should I accept his proposal?"

"Calculate that which is the most useful to you."

"That which is the most useful to me? You know I am poor enough. On the one hand, lack of sympathy with the man; on the other, domination over him, an enviable position in society, money, a multitude of admirers."

"Weigh all considerations, and choose the course most advantageous for you."

"And if I should choose the husband's wealth and a multitude of adorers?"

"I shall say that you have chosen that which seemed to you most in harmony with your interests."

"But will not my choice deserve blame?"

"People who talk nonsense may say what they will; but people who have a correct idea of life will say that you have acted as you had to act. If your action is such and such, that means that you are such an individual that you could not act otherwise under the circumstances. They will say that your action was dictated by the force of events, and that you had no other choice."

"And no blame will be cast upon my actions?"

"Who has a right to blame the consequences of a fact, if the fact exists? Your person under given circumstances is a fact; your actions are the necessary consequences of this fact, consequences arising from the nature of things. You are not responsible for them; therefore, to blame them would be stupid."

"So you do not recoil from the consequences of your theory. Then, I shall not deserve your blame, if I accept my suitor's proposal?"

"I should be stupid to blame you."

"So I have permission, perhaps even sanction, perhaps even direct advice to take the action of which I speak?"

"The advice is always the same: figure out what's useful for you. If you follow this advice, you will have approval."

"I thank you. Now, my personal matters are settled. Let us return to the general question with which we started. We began with the proposition that man acts by the force of events, that his actions are determined by the influences under which they occur. If stronger influences overcome others, that shows that we have changed our reasoning; when the action is one of real importance, the motives are called interests and their play in man a combination or calculation of interests, and consequently man always acts by reason of his interest. Do I sum up your ideas correctly?"

"Yes."

"See what a good pupil I am. Now this particular question concerning actions of vital importance is settled. But as to the general question some difficulties yet remain. Your book says that man acts from necessity. But there are cases

where it depends upon my good pleasure whether I act in one way or another. For example, in playing, I turn the leaves of my music book; sometimes I turn them with the left hand, sometimes with the right. Suppose, now, that I turn with the right hand; might I not have turned them with the left? Does not that depend on my good pleasure?"

"No, Véra Pávlovna; if you turn without thinking about it, you turn with the hand which it is more convenient for you to use. There is no good pleasure in that. But if you say: 'I am going to turn with the right hand,' you will turn with the right hand under the influence of that idea; now that idea sprang not from your good pleasure but necessarily from another thought."

Here Mária Alexévna stopped listening.

"Now they are going into learned questions; those are not what I am after, and furthermore I care nothing about them. What a wise, positive, I might say noble, young man! What prudent rules he instils in Vérochka's mind! That is what a learned man can do: when I say these things, she does not listen, she is offended; she is very obstinate with me, because I cannot speak in a learned way. But when he speaks in this way, she listens, sees that he is right, and admits it."

This conversation, to which Mária Alexévna had listened, produced in her then the definitive conviction that the interviews between the two young people were not only not dangerous to Vérochka (she had been of that opinion for some time), but that they would be even useful to her in inducing her to abandon, as her mother desired, the foolish ideas which she had adopted as an inexperienced girl, and in thus hastening her marriage to Mikhaíl Iványch.

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Mária Alexévna's attitude towards Lopukhóv is not without a certain comic side, and Mária Alexévna is represented here under a somewhat ridiculous light. But really it is against my will that things present themselves in this aspect. If I had seen fit to act in accordance with the rules of what we call art, I should have carefully glided over these incidents which give the romance a tinge of the *vaudeville*. To hide them would have been easy. The general progress of the

a poor excuse for poor art?
 story might well be explained without them. But I tell this story, not to win a reputation as a man of talent, but just as it happened. As a novelist, I am sorry to have written a few pages that touch the level of the comic.

My determination to tell things, not in the easiest way, but as they actually occurred, causes me still another embarrassment: I am not at all contented to have Mária Alexévna represented in a ridiculous light by her reflections upon the sweetheart which her fancy had pictured as Lopukhóv's; by her fantastic way of guessing the contents of the books given by Lopukhóv to Vérochka; by her questions about Philippe Egalité and his supposed Papist absolutism and about the works of Louis XIV. Every one is liable to make mistakes. The errors may be absurd, when one tries to judge in matters of which he is ignorant; but it would be unjust to infer from Mária Alexévna's blunders that these were the sole cause of her unfavorable attitude towards Lopukhóv. No, her queer ideas about the rich sweetheart and the piety of Philippe Egalité would not have obscured her good sense for a moment, if she had only noticed anything suspicious in Lopukhóv's acts and words. But he so conducted himself that really there was nothing to be said. Though naturally bold, he did not cast indiscreet glances at a very pretty young girl; he did not follow her assiduously; he sat down without ceremony to play cards with Mária Alexévna without betraying any sign that it would give him greater pleasure to be with Véra; when left with Véra, he held such conversations with her that Mária Alexévna regarded them as the expression of her own thought. Like her, he said that self-interest is the motive of human actions; that there is no sense in getting angry with a rascal and reminding him of the principles of honor, inasmuch as the rascal acts in accordance with the laws of his own nature under the pressure of circumstances; that, given his individuality, he could not help being a rascal, and that to pretend otherwise would be an absurdity. Yes, Mária Alexévna had reason to think that she had found in Lopukhóv a kindred spirit.

I realize how greatly Lopukhóv is compromised in the eyes of the enlightened public by Mária Alexévna's sympathy for his way of thinking. But I conceal nothing. In fact, I take it upon myself to explain that he really deserved Mária Alexévna's favor.

but
 it is for
 enlightened
 self-interest