

WHAT
IS
TO BE
DONE?

Nikolai Chernyshevsky

Introduction by
Kathryn Feuer

Introduction by Kathryn Feuer
Translated by N. Dole & S. S. Skidelsky

Ardis, Ann Arbor

"Then, don't he try to convert folks into the papistry?"

"I don't think so, Marya Alekséyevna; if he had been a Catholic bishop, then, of course, he would have tried to make converts; but a king would not spend his time that way. As a wise ruler and politician he'd simply teach virtue."

"What else?"

Marya Alekséyevna could not help seeing that Mikhaïl Ivanuitch, with all his narrow mind, argued the case very skilfully; but for all that she cleared up the matter with perfect satisfaction. Two or three days later she suddenly said to Lopukhóf, while playing with him rather than with Mikhaïl Ivanuitch:—

"Tell me, Dmitri Sergéitch; I want to ask you something. The father of the last French king, the very man in whose shoes the present Napoleon is reigning, did he make folks git converted into the religion of the Pope?"

"No, he did not, Marya Alekséyevna."

"Is the Pope's religion good, Dmitri Sergéitch?"

"No, it is not, Marya Alekséyevna. I play seven of diamonds."

"I just asked out of curiosity, Dmitri Sergéitch, being as I'm an ignorant woman, and it is interesting to know. You are taking a good many tricks, Dmitri Sergéitch."

"It can't be helped, Marya Alekséyevna. We are taught at the medical school to play cards well. A doctor must know how to take tricks."

Lopukhóf is puzzled to this day to know why Marya Alekséyevna wanted to know whether Philippe Egalité ordered folks to be baptized in the religion of the Pope.

Well, how, after all this, could it be wondered at that Marya Alekséyevna stopped wearying herself by perpetual supervision? He keeps his eyes where they should be, his face has shown no amorous susceptibilities; he gives her theological books to read; that ought to be enough. But no, Marya Alekséyevna was not satisfied; but she even managed to put him to a test, as though she had studied the logic which I have learned by heart, and which says, "the observations of phenomena must be made by means of experiments, carried on in a skilful plan, if one would have the most thorough penetration into the secrets of such relations"; and she so managed to bring about this trial, as though she had read Sakson's grammar, which tells how Hamlet was tempted by Ophelia in the grove.

VIII.

THE TEMPTATION OF HAMLET.

ONE day at tea, Marya Alekséyevna said that she had a headache; after serving the tea, and locking up the sugar-bowl she went away and retired. Viéra and Lopukhóf remained sitting in the tea-room, which adjoined the bed-room where Marya Alekséyevna had gone.

After a few minutes she sent a message by Feódor: "Tell your sister that their talk keeps me from going to sleep; let 'em go somewhere else so as not to bother me. Say it politely, so as not to offend Dmitri Sergéitch; you see what good care he takes of you." Feódor went and told what his mother wanted.

"Let us go to my room, Dmitri Sergéitch; it is away from mother's bed-room, and we shall not be disturbed."

Of course this was what Marya Alekséyevna expected. At the end of a quarter of an hour she crept in her stocking feet up to the door of Viérotchka's room. The door was ajar; between the door and the jamb was a splendid crack: Marya Alekséyevna applied her eyes to it and strained her ears.

This was the sight that she saw:—

In Viérotchka's rooms were two windows; between them stood a writing-table. Viérotchka was sitting near one window, knitting a woollen chest-protector for her father, religiously fulfilling Marya Alekséyevna's command. At the other window, at the other end of the table, Lopukhóf was sitting: he was leaning with one elbow on the table; he had a cigar in his hand; his other hand was thrust in his pocket; the distance between Viérotchka and him was not less than two arshíns (4.6 feet). Viérotchka was looking most of the time at her knitting; Lopukhóf was looking most of the time at his cigar. This was a gratifying state of things.

The conversation that she overheard was as follows:—

"Is it necessary to look at life in this way?" These were the first words that Marya Alekséyevna caught.

"Yes, Viéra Pavlovna, it is necessary."

"Then cold, practical people must tell the truth, when they say that men are governed only by selfish motives?"

"They tell the truth. What are called the higher feelings, ideal aspirations; all these in the general course of life are absolutely nothing in comparison with the inspiration felt by every one to do things for his own interest. At bottom, the impulse even for the others is caused by selfishness."

"*Da!* are you, for example, of the same sort?"

"What do you suppose, *Viéra Pavlovna*? Just listen and see what is the essential motive of all my life. The essence of my life, hitherto, has consisted in study and preparation to be a doctor. Excellent! Why did my father send me to school? He used constantly to repeat to me: 'Study, *Mitya*; when you have finished your course you will be a *tchinovnik*; you will be able to support me and your mother, and it will be good for you, too.' And that was the reason that I studied; without that motive, my father would never have let me study: you see my family was in need of a wage-winner. *Da!* and I myself, though I am fond of study, would not have spent time on it, would I, if I had not thought that the expenditure would have been paid back with interest? After I got through school, I urged my father to send me to the medical academy instead of making me a *tchinovnik*. How did that come about? Father and I saw that medical men live much better than civil *tchinovniks* and the heads of departments, and I could not get any higher rank than that. And that was why I got the means and went to the medical school; it stood for bread and butter. Without this in view I should not have gone to the medical school and should not have stayed in it."

"But you loved to study while you were at school, and have you not liked medical science?"

"Yes. It is an ornament, and it is also profitable; but success is generally won without this ornament, while without a motive, never! Love for science was only a result arising from a certain state of things; it was not its cause; the cause was just one thing,—self-interest" [*vui-goda*, profit].

"Let us suppose that you are right; yes, you are right! All actions that I can remember can be explained by self-interest. But this theory is cold!"

"Theory must by necessity be cold. The mind must judge of things coldly."

"But it is merciless."

"Yes, to fancies that are empty and injurious."

"But it is prosaic."

"Science does not care for a poetical form."

"And so this theory, which I cannot help admitting, brings people into a cold, merciless, and prosaic life?"

"No, *Viéra Pavlovna*; this theory is cold, but it teaches a man to bring out the warmth. A match is cold, the match-box on which you scratch the match is also cold; but there is fire in them which gets a man warm food, and warms him also. This theory is merciless; but if it is followed, people will not become the wretched objects of idle charity. The lancet must not bend; otherwise it will be necessary to pity the patient, who will suffer none the less because of your sympathy. This theory is prosaic, but it reveals true motives of life and poetry in the truth of life. Why is *Shakspeare* the greatest poet? Because he is true to life, and has less illusion than other poets."

"So am I, also, going to be pitiless, *Dmitri Sergéitch*," said *Viérotchka*, smiling. "Don't be drawn away by the thought that you have in me an obstinate opponent of your self-interest theory, and that you have converted me to be a new disciple. I myself long ago felt the same thing, especially after I read your book and heard it from you. But I thought that these were my individual ideas, that clever and scientific men thought otherwise, and so I was in doubt. All that we used to read was written in a spirit of contrariety; it was full of adverse criticisms, of sarcastic attacks upon what we used to see in ourselves and others. Nature, life, reason, lead you one direction; books drag you the other: they say, 'This is mean, contemptible.' Do you know, I myself saw the absurdity of the arguments which I myself brought up!"

"Yes, so they were absurd, *Viéra Pavlovna*."

"Well then," said she, laughing, "we are making each other wonderful compliments. I say to you, 'You, *Dmitri Sergéitch*, please don't lift your nose so high.' You say to me, 'You are ridiculous with your doubts, *Viéra Pavlovna*.'"

"At any rate," said he, also laughing, "we have no selfish interest in making love to each other, and therefore, we don't make love."

"All right, *Dmitri Sergéitch*; people are egotistical, aren't they? You were speaking about yourself, and now I want to speak about myself."

"Of course, men must think about themselves most of all."

"Very good. Now let us see if you will put this into practice."

"Let us see."

"A rich man wants to marry me. I don't like him. Must I accept his offer?"

"Consider what is for your best advantage."

"My best advantage! You know that I am very poor. On one side is my dislike of the man; on the other, I should have the upper hand of him, an enviable position in society, money, a crowd of worshippers!"

"Weigh everything; choose what would be most advantageous."

"And if I choose the husband's wealth and the crowd of worshippers?"

"I shall say that you have chosen that which seemed more correspondent with your interests."

"And what ought to be said about myself?"

"If you have acted coolly, after mature deliberation, it will have to be said that you have done wisely, and probably you will not be sorry for it."

"But would my choice deserve condemnation?"

"People who talk all sorts of nonsense will speak about it as they please; but people who look upon life from a reasonable standpoint will say that you have done as you ought. If you have done so, it will show that such was your individuality, that you could not have acted otherwise, circumstances being as they are; they will say that you have acted under the necessity of things, that properly speaking you could not have had any other choice."

"And no condemnation whatever for my actions?"

"Who has the right to condemn the results of a fact when the fact itself is in existence? Your individuality in the given circumstances is a fact; your actions are the essential, unavoidable results of this fact, arising from the nature of things. You are not responsible for them, and to condemn them is absurd."

"Well, I see you stick to your theory. And so I shall not deserve your condemnation, if I accept the rich man's offer?"

"I should be a fool if I condemned it."

"And so your permission, — I might say, your approval

— I might even say, your direct advice — is to do as I have said?"

"There is always one thing to advise, — 'reason out what is for your best'; if you do that, you have my approval."

"Thank you. Now the personal case is decided. Let us return to the first, that is, the general question. We began by saying that a man acts from necessity; his actions are determined by the influences from which they take their rise, the stronger motives always predominating. Our arguments went thus: when an action has vital importance, the stimulus is called self-interest; its interaction in man is the calculation of self-interests, and therefore a man must always act in accordance with the motive of self-interest. Do I express the thread of the thought?"

"Perfectly."

"You see what a good pupil I am. Now this private question about the actions that have an important bearing upon life is settled. But in the general question there remain some difficulties yet. Your book says that a man acts from necessity; but there are cases when it seems that it depends upon my will to act in this way or in that. For instance, I am playing, and I turn the leaves of the music. I turn them sometimes with my left hand, sometimes with my right hand. Let us suppose that I have turned them now with the right hand; why could I not have done it with my left hand? Does it not depend upon my own will?"

"No, Viéra Pavlovna; when you are turning the leaves, not thinking which hand you use, you turn them with the hand that is most convenient; there is no will about it. If you think, 'Let me turn them with my right hand,' you then turn them under the influence of this thought; but this thought itself was not a matter of your will, but was engendered unavoidably by others."

At this word Marya Alekséyevna ceased to listen. "Nu! they are spending their time over science; that ain't in my line, it ain't necessary either. What a wise, intelligent, and I may say noble, young man he is! What reasonable advice he gives Viérotchka! And that shows that he is a learned man: now here I go and tells her the same things; she does not listen, she gets offended; I can't suit her because I don't know how to speak scientific enough. But here when he speaks scientific, she listens and sees that it is the truth, and she agrees with it. *Da!* it is said not in vain, 'knowledge

is light; ignorance, darkness.' If I had been a well-educated woman, would it have been with me as it is now? I'd have got my husband into favor with the generals; I would have got a place for him in the department of supplies, or somewhere else just as good! *Nu!* of course I should have done the business myself with the contractors! the idea of his doing it — rubbish! I'd have built a much better house than this. I'd have bought more than a thousand souls [*dushi*, serfs]. But now I cannot. It is necessary to get a recommendation first in the society of generals; and how can I do that? I can't speak French, nor any other language of theirs. They'll say, 'She hain't got any manners; all she's good for is to make an uproar on the hay-market!' So I am no good! 'Ignorance is darkness.' Indeed 'knowledge is light; ignorance is darkness.'"

Now it was just this conversation that Marya Alekséyevna had overheard that brought her to the conviction that Dmitri Sergéitch's conversation was not only not dangerous for Viérotchka, — she had been inclined to think that before, — but was even likely to do her good, to lighten her own labors in overcoming Viérotchka's foolish, inexperienced, girlish, thoughts, and hasten the mystical benediction in the affair with Mikhaïl Ivanuitch.

IX.

THE relations of Marya Alekséyevna to Lopukhóf resemble a farce; Marya Alekséyevna's character is exposed by them in a ridiculous way. Both these facts are quite against my will. If I had wanted to preserve a high standard of art, I should have concealed Marya Alekséyevna's relations to Lopukhóf, the description of which gives this part of my story the nature of a vaudeville. To hide them would have been easy. The essential element of the matter could have been expressed without them. Would it have been at all surprising if the tutor, even if he had not entered into this friendship with Marya Alekséyevna, had found occasion sometimes, though seldom, to say a few words with the daughter of a family where he is giving lessons? Does it take many words to engender love? There was no need of Marya Alekséyevna putting in a hand to help along this result which was brought about by the meeting of Viérotchka with Lopukhóf. But I am telling this story, not as it would be necessary if I wanted to win an artistic reputation, but simply in

accordance with the facts. As a novelist, I am very sorry because I have written several pages which are on the low level of a vaudeville.

My design of relating the case as it was, and not as it would have been if I had followed my inclinations, also causes me another unpleasantness. I am very much dissatisfied because Marya Alekséyevna is represented in a ridiculous way with her conceptions of Lopukhóf's bride as he described her, with her fantastic guessing about the contents of the books which Lopukhóf gave Viérotchka, with her reasoning about Philippe Egalité trying to convert folks to the faith of the Pope, and her ideas of the works written by King Louis XIV. Every one is liable to error; mistakes may be stupid if a man judges of matters which are foreign to his experience; but it would be unjust to conclude from these stupid blunders made by Marya Alekséyevna that her disposition to Lopukhóf was founded entirely on these blunders; not at all, not for a moment would any fantastic ideas of a rich bride or the goodness of Philippe Egalité have obscured her common sense, if in Lopukhóf's actual words and actions had anything suspicious been noticeable. But in point of fact, he behaved himself in such a way that, according to Marya Alekséyevna's opinion, only a man after her own heart could behave himself; now here was a brave young man, who did not allow his eyes to gaze impudently at a very pretty young girl; he did not pay her ambiguous attentions, he was always willing to play cards with Marya Alekséyevna, he never said that he would rather sit with Viéra Pavlovna, he discussed matters in a spirit that seemed to Marya Alekséyevna in accordance with her own spirit; like her, he said that everything in the world is done for self-interest, that when a cheat cheats (*plut plutuyet*), there is no need of getting excited and crying out about the principles of honesty which such a cheat is bound to observe, that a cheat is not a cheat without good reason, that he was made such by his environment, that not to be a cheat — leaving aside the impossibility of not being a cheat — would have been stupid, that is, simply foolish on his part. Yes, Marya Alekséyevna was right, when she found a resemblance between her and Lopukhóf.

I appreciate how deeply Lopukhóf is compromised in the eyes of the civilized public by the sympathy shown by Marya Alekséyevna in his way of thinking. But I do not want to flatter any one, and I don't conceal this circumstance, though