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The Eternal Husband

A Story
Summer arrived, and Velchaninov, beyond expectation, remained in St Petersburg. His trip to the south of Russia fell through, and no end was to be expected to his case. This case—a lawsuit concerning an estate—was taking an extremely bad turn. Only three months before it had looked not at all complicated, almost indisputable; but everything had somehow suddenly changed. “And everything generally has started changing for the worse too!” was a phrase Velchaninov had started repeating to himself often and with malicious glee. He was employing a lawyer who was cunning, expensive and well known, and he was unsparing with his money; but in impatience and out of mistrust he had got into the habit of dealing with the case himself as well: he read and wrote documents which the lawyer entirely rejected; he ran from one office to another, made enquiries and probably hindered everything greatly; at least, the lawyer complained and urged him away to a dacha. But he could not even make up his mind to leave for a dacha. Dust, stifling heat, the white St Petersburg nights irritating his nerves—that is what he enjoyed in St Petersburg. His apartment, somewhere near the Grand Theatre, was newly rented by him, and was not a success either—“Nothing was a success!” His hypochondria increased with every day; but he had already long been inclined to hypochondria.

He was a man who, already far from young—thirty-eight or thirty-nine—had lived a lot and widely, and all of this “old age”—as he himself put it—had come upon him “almost completely unexpectedly”; but he himself understood that he had grown
old not so much in quantity, but rather, so to speak, in quality of years, and that, if his infirmities really had begun, then it was rather from within than from without. To look at, he was even now a fine fellow. He was a tall and stocky chap with thick light-brown hair and without a single fleck of grey on his head or in the long brown beard that reached almost halfway down his chest; at first glance it seemed he was somewhat awkward and had let himself go; but if you scrutinized him more closely, you could immediately distinguish in him a splendidly self-possessed gentleman who had once had the upbringing of the very highest society. Velchaninov’s movements were still now free and easy, bold and even graceful, in spite of all the grumpiness and gaucheness he had acquired. And even now he was full of the most unshakable, the most brazen high-society self-confidence, the extent of which he did not perhaps even himself suspect, despite the fact that he was not only an intelligent man, but sometimes even sensible, almost educated and with undoubted gifts. His complexion, open and ruddy, had been distinguished in days of old by a feminine delicacy and had brought him to the attention of women; and even now some people would look at him and say: “What a strapping fellow, the very picture of health!” But nonetheless, this “strapping fellow” was cruelly stricken with hypochondria. His eyes, large and blue, had also had much that was masterful about them ten years or so ago; they had been such bright, such merry and carefree eyes, that they unwittingly drew absolutely everyone he met to them. Now, as he approached his forties, the clarity and kindness had almost gone out in those eyes, already surrounded by slight little wrinkles; in them had appeared, on the contrary, the cynicism of a not entirely moral and a weary man, slyness – most often of all mockery – and a new note too, that had not been there before: a note of sadness and pain – a diffused sort of sadness, seemingly objectless, but powerful. This sadness manifested itself in particular when he remained alone. And strangely, this man who had been boisterous, merry
and dissipated only a couple of years before, who had told such funny stories so splendidly, liked nothing so much now as to remain completely alone. He had deliberately given up a multitude of acquaintanceships which he might even now not have given up, despite the complete derangement of his financial circumstances. True, vanity helped in this: with his mistrustfulness and vanity it was impossible to endure his former acquaintanceships. But his vanity too began little by little to change in isolation. It did not decrease – on the contrary even – but it began to degenerate into a special sort of vanity which had not been there before: it sometimes began to suffer for reasons completely different to the usual ones before – for unexpected reasons that would before have been utterly unthinkable, for reasons “loftier” than hitherto – “if one can only express oneself that way, if there actually are loftier and baser reasons…” That bit he would add himself.

Yes, he had even come to this; he was struggling now with lofty reasons of some sort, to which he would not even have given a thought before. In his consciousness and in good conscience he called lofty all the “reasons” at which (to his surprise) he was quite unable to laugh to himself – something which had never yet happened hitherto – to himself, of course; oh, in company it was a different matter! He knew perfectly well that if only the circumstances were right, he would on the very next day, out loud, in spite of all the mysterious and reverential decisions of his conscience, quite calmly renounce all those “lofty reasons” and himself be the first to ridicule them, without, of course, admitting a thing. And it really was so, despite the certain, even very significant measure of independence of thought that he had won back of late from the “baser reasons” that had possessed him hitherto. And how many times had he himself, rising from his bed in the morning, begun to be ashamed of the thoughts and feelings he had gone through in his nocturnal insomnia! (And he had suffered from insomnia absolutely all the time of late.) He had already
noticed long ago that he was becoming extremely mistrustful in everything, both in what was important and in trifles, and it was for that reason he had tried proposing to trust himself as little as possible. But facts, however, stood out which it was quite impossible not to acknowledge as actually existing. Of late, sometimes in the night, his thoughts and sensations altered almost completely in comparison with his customary ones, and did not for the most part by any means resemble those which came to him in the first half of the day. This amazed him, and he even sought advice from a well-known doctor – true, a man he knew; of course, he brought it up as a joke. He got the reply that the fact of a change and even of a bifurcation in thoughts and sensations at night during insomnia, and at night generally, is a universal fact among those “who think strongly and feel strongly”, that the convictions of an entire life sometimes changed all of a sudden under the melancholic influence of the night and insomnia; suddenly the most fateful decisions were taken quite out of the blue; but that it was, of course, all to a certain degree – and if, finally, a subject experienced this tendency to bifurcation too much in himself, so that it became a matter of suffering, then this was unarguably a sign that a sickness had already developed; and it was therefore necessary to undertake something right away. And best of all would be to alter radically the way of life, alter the diet, or even undertake a journey. Helpful, of course, would be a purgative.

Velchaninov did not bother listening any further; but the sickness had been proved to him completely.

“And so it’s all just a sickness, all this ‘lofty’ stuff is only a sickness and nothing more!” he would sometimes exclaim to himself caustically. He really did not want to agree with this.

Soon, though, the same thing that occurred in the exceptional hours of the night began to be repeated in the mornings too, only with greater bile than in the night, with anger instead of repentance, with mockery instead of tenderness. In essence, it was certain events from his past and long-past life that more
and more frequently came to mind, “suddenly and God knows why”, but which did so in some particular way. Velchaninov had already long been complaining, for example, of memory loss: he forgot the faces of people he knew – who, when they met him, took offence at him over it; a book he had read six months before was sometimes completely forgotten in that time. But what do you think? Despite this obvious daily loss of memory (about which he was very worried), everything that concerned the distant past, everything that for ten, for fifteen years could even have been completely forgotten, it would all suddenly come to mind sometimes now, but with such amazing precision in impressions and details that it was as if he were experiencing them anew. Some of the remembered things were so forgotten that just the fact itself that they could be remembered seemed to him a miracle. But that was not yet all: and who of those people who have lived widely does not have memories of some kind? But the point was that all these remembered things returned now as if a fact were being seen from a point of view that had been prepared by someone else, that was completely new, unexpected and previously quite unthinkable. Why did some memories now seem to him utter crimes? And it was not only a matter of the verdicts of his mind: he would not even have trusted his gloomy, solitary and sick mind; but it would come to curses and all but to tears – if not outward, then inner ones. Just two years before he would not even have believed it if he had been told he would some day start to cry! At first, though, it was not sensitive things that were remembered more, but caustic ones: some social failures were remembered, humiliations; he remembered how, for example, he had been “slandered by a certain intriguer”, in consequence of which he had ceased to be received in a certain house; how, for example, and not even so very long ago, he had been positively and publicly offended, but had not issued a challenge to a duel; how he had once been put in his place by an extremely witty epigram in a circle of the loveliest
women, and he had been at a loss what reply to make. Even two or three unpaid debts were remembered – trifling ones, true, but debts of honour, and to people with whom he had ceased to associate and of whom he already spoke badly. He was also tormented (but only at his most malicious moments) by memories of two fortunes squandered in the silliest manner, each of which had been significant. But soon things began to be remembered from the “lofty” side too.

Suddenly, for example, “from out of the blue”, he remembered the forgotten figure – and one he had forgotten to the highest degree – of a kind little old clerk, grey and ridiculous, whom he had once insulted long, long ago, publicly and unpunished, and solely to brag; just so that a funny and apt play on words did not go to waste, one which had brought him renown and which had later been repeated. He had forgotten the fact to such an extent that he could not even remember the old man’s name, although all the circumstances of the escapade immediately presented themselves to him in incredible clarity. He remembered vividly that the old man had then been standing up for his daughter, who lived with him and had been left on the shelf, and about whom certain rumours had started circulating in town. The little old man had been on the point of responding and getting angry, but had suddenly burst out sobbing in front of the whole company, which even made a certain impression. They had then ended up giving him champagne to drink for a laugh, and had laughed all they wanted. And when Velchaninov now remembered “out of the blue” how the poor old man had sobbed and covered himself up with his hands like a child, it suddenly seemed to him as though he had actually never forgotten it. And strangely, it had all seemed very funny to him then; but now not at all, and specifically the details, specifically the covering of the face with the hands. Next he remembered how, solely for a joke, he had slandered the very pretty wife of a schoolteacher, and the slander had reached her husband. Velchaninov had soon left that little town and did
not know what the consequences of his slander had come to, but now he suddenly started imagining what the consequences had come to – and God knows where his imagination would have taken him, had he not been suddenly presented with a much more immediate memory about a young girl, a simple towns-woman, whom he had not even found attractive and of whom, to tell the truth, he was even ashamed, but with whom, without knowing why himself, he had had a child, and how he had simply abandoned her, together with the child, without even saying goodbye (true, there had been no time), when he had left St Petersburg. He had spent a whole year hunting for the girl later on, but was already quite unable to find her. Moreover, there proved to be all but hundreds of such memories – and it was even as if each memory dragged dozens of others along after it. Little by little his vanity began to suffer too.

We have already said that his vanity had degenerated into something special. That was fair. There were moments (though rare) when he sometimes reached such a degree of self-forgetfulness that he was not ashamed even of not having his own carriage, of mooching around on foot from one office to another, of having become rather careless about his clothes – and if one of his old acquaintances had happened to measure him up with a mocking glance on the street or had simply taken it into his head not to recognize him, then he would truly have had sufficient arrogance not even to have pulled a face. Seriously not to have pulled a face, genuinely, and not just for appearances. Of course, this happened rarely, these were only moments of self-forgetfulness and irritation, but all the same, his vanity began little by little to move away from its former grounds and to be concentrated around one question that continually crossed his mind.

“I mean, here we have,” he would sometimes begin to think satirically (and he almost always began, when thinking about himself, with the satirical), “I mean, here we have someone worrying about the correction of my morals and sending me
these damned memories and “tears of repentance”. So be it, but, I mean, it’s all to no purpose! I mean, all the shooting’s done with blank cartridges. Why, don’t I know for certain, more surely than for certain, that regardless of all these tearful repentances and self-condemnations, there isn’t so much as a drop of independence in me, in spite of all my quite ridiculous forty years! I mean, if just such a temptation should take place tomorrow – well, if, for example, the circumstances were again right, such that it would be advantageous for me to start a rumour to the effect that the schoolteacher’s wife was accepting presents from me – I mean, I’d start it for certain, I wouldn’t hesitate – and the thing would turn out even worse, more foul than the first time, because this time would already be the second time and not the first. Why, if he insulted me again now, that little prince, his mother’s only son, whose leg I shot off eleven years ago, I’d challenge him immediately and put him on a wooden stump again. Well then, aren’t they, therefore, blank cartridges, and what’s the sense of them? And why remind me, when I don’t even know how to have done with myself respectably to any extent at all!

And although the fact with the schoolteacher’s wife had not been repeated again, although he had not put anyone else on a wooden stump, still the thought alone that this would be sure to have to be repeated if the circumstances were right, almost killed him... sometimes. You really don’t suffer from memories all the time; you can relax and take a walk – in the intervals.

And that is what Velchaninov did: he was prepared to take a walk in the intervals; but all the same, the further it went, the more unpleasant his existence in St Petersburg was becoming. And now July was approaching. Sometimes there would be a flash of resolution in him to drop everything, even the lawsuit itself, and to go away somewhere without looking back, suddenly somehow, unexpectedly, if only off to the Crimea, for example. But an hour later he usually already despised his idea and mocked it: “These vile thoughts won’t cease – not
somewhere in the south, not if they’ve once begun and if I’m at least to some extent a decent man – and so it’s no good running away from them, and there’s no point either.”

“And why run anyway?” he continued to philosophize woefully. “It’s so dusty here, so stifling, everything in this house is so stained; in these offices I mooch around to, among all these businesslike people, there’s so much of the most pointless fussing over nothing, so much of the most flustered concern; in all these people who’ve remained in town, in all these faces that are glimpsed from morning till evening, all their egotism is told so naively and frankly – all their simple-hearted effrontery, all the cowardliness of their petty little souls, all their chicken-heartedness – that this is truly paradise for a hypochondriac, speaking in the most serious way! Everything’s frank, everything’s clear; it’s not considered at all necessary even to cover up, like somewhere at our fine ladies’ dachas or abroad at the spas; and everything is therefore much more worthy of the most total respect, in return for just the frankness and simplicity alone… I’m not going anywhere! I may burst here, but I’m not going anywhere!...”
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