Short Stories

A Peculiar Man

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BETWEEN twelve and one at night a tall gentleman, wearing a top-hat and a coat with a hood, stops before the door of Marya Petrovna Koshkin, a midwife and an old maid. Neither face nor hand can be distinguished in the autumn darkness, but in the very manner of his coughing and the ringing of the bell a certain solidity, positiveness, and even impressiveness can be discerned. After the third ring the door opens and Marya Petrovna herself appears. She has a manâ€™s overcoat flung on over her white petticoat. The little lamp with the green shade which she holds in her hand throws a greenish light over her sleepy, freckled face, her scraggy neck, and the lank, reddish hair that strays from under her cap.

â€œCan I see the midwife?â€ asks the gentleman.

â€œI am the midwife. What do you want?â€

The gentleman walks into the entry and Marya Petrovna sees facing her a tall, well-made man, no longer young, but with a handsome, severe face and bushy whiskers.

â€œI am a collegiate assessor, my name is Kiryakov,â€ he says. â€œI came to fetch you to my wife. Only please make haste.â€

â€œVery good . . .â€ the midwife assents. â€œIâ€™ll dress at once, and I must trouble you to wait for me in the parlour.â€

Kiryakov takes off his overcoat and goes into the parlour. The greenish light of the lamp lies sparsely on the cheap furniture in patched white covers, on the pitiful flowers and the posts on which ivy is trained. . . . There is a smell of geranium and carbolic. The little clock on the wall ticks timidly, as though abashed at the presence of a strange man.

â€œI am ready,â€ says Marya Petrovna, coming into the room five minutes later, dressed, washed, and ready for action. â€œLet us go.â€

â€œYes, you must make haste,â€ says Kiryakov. â€œAnd, by the way, it is not out of place to enquireâ€”what do you ask for your services?â€

â€œI really donâ€™t know . . .â€ says Marya Petrovna with an embarrassed smile. â€œAs much as you will give.â€

â€œNo, I donâ€™t like that,â€ says Kiryakov, looking coldly and steadily at the midwife. â€œAn arrangement beforehand is best. I donâ€™t want to take advantage of you and you donâ€™t want to take advantage of me. To avoid misunderstandings it is more sensible for us to make an arrangement beforehand.â€

â€œI really donâ€™t knowâ€”there is no fixed price.â€

â€œI work myself and am accustomed to respect the work of others. I donâ€™t like injustice. It will be equally unpleasant to me if I pay you too little, or if you demand from me too much, and so I insist on your naming your charge.â€

â€œWell, there are such different charges.â€

â€œHâ€™m. In view of your hesitation, which I fail to understand, I am constrained to fix the sum myself. I can give you two roubles.â€

â€œGood gracious! . . . Upon my word! . . .â€ says Marya Petrovna, turning crimson and stepping back. â€œI am really ashamed. Rather than take two roubles I will come for nothing . . . . Five roubles, if you like.â€

â€œTwo roubles, not a kopeck more. I donâ€™t want to take advantage of you, but I do not intend to be overcharged.â€

â€œAs you please, but I am not coming for two roubles. . . .â€

â€œBut by law you have not the right to refuse.â€

â€œVery well, I will come for nothing.â€

â€œI wonâ€™t have you for nothing. All work ought to receive remuneration. I work myself and I understand that. . . .â€

â€œI wonâ€™t come for two roubles,â€ Marya Petrovna answers mildly. â€œIâ€™ll come for nothing if you like.â€

â€œIn that case I regret that I have troubled you for nothing. . . . I have the honour to wish you good-bye.â€

â€œWell, you are a man!â€ says Marya Petrovna, seeing him into the entry. â€œI will come for three roubles if that will satisfy you.â€

Kiryakov frowns and ponders for two full minutes, looking with concentration on the floor, then he says resolutely, â€œNo,â€ and goes out into the street. The astonished and disconcerted midwife fastens the door after him and goes back into her bedroom.

â€œHeâ€™s good-looking, respectable, but how queer, God bless the man! . . .â€ she thinks as she gets into bed.

But in less than half an hour she hears another ring; she gets up and sees the same Kiryakov again.

â€œExtraordinary the way things are mismanaged. Neither the chemist, nor the police, nor the house-porters can give me the address of a midwife, and so I am under the necessity of assenting to your terms. I will give you three roubles, but . . . I warn you beforehand that when I engage servants or receive any kind of services, I make an arrangement beforehand in order that when I pay there may be no talk of extras, tips, or anything of the sort. Everyone ought to receive what is his due.â€

Marya Petrovna has not listened to Kiryakov for long, but already she feels that she is bored and repelled by him, that his even, measured speech lies like a weight on her soul. She dresses and goes out into the street with him. The air is still but cold, and the sky is so overcast that the light of the street lamps is hardly visible. The sloshy snow squelches under their feet. The midwife looks intently but does not see a cab.

â€œI suppose it is not far?â€ she asks.

â€œNo, not far,â€ Kiryakov answers grimly.

They walk down one turning, a second, a third. . . . Kiryakov strides along, and even in his step his respectability and positiveness is apparent.

â€œWhat awful weather!â€ the midwife observes to him.

But he preserves a dignified silence, and it is noticeable that he tries to step on the smooth stones to avoid spoiling his goloshes. At last after a long walk the midwife steps into the entry; from which she can see a big decently furnished drawing-room. There is not a soul in the rooms, even in the bedroom where the woman is lying in labour. . . . The old women and relations who flock in crowds to every confinement are not to be seen. The cook rushes about alone, with a scared and vacant face. There is a sound of loud groans.

Three hours pass. Marya Petrovna sits by the motherâ€™s bedside and whispers to her. The two women have already had time to make friends, they have got to know each other, they gossip, they sigh together. . . .

â€œYou mustnâ€™t talk,â€ says the midwife anxiously, and at the same time she showers questions on her.

Then the door opens and Kiryakov himself comes quietly and stolidly into the room. He sits down in the chair and strokes his whiskers. Silence reigns. Marya Petrovna looks timidly at his handsome, passionless, wooden face and waits for him to begin to talk, but he remains absolutely silent and absorbed in thought. After waiting in vain, the midwife makes up her mind to begin herself, and utters a phrase commonly used at confinements.

â€œWell now, thank God, there is one human being more in the world!â€

â€œYes, thatâ€™s agreeable,â€ said Kiryakov, preserving the wooden expression of his face, â€œthough indeed, on the other hand, to have more children you must have more money. The baby is not born fed and clothed.â€

A guilty expression comes into the motherâ€™s face, as though she had brought a creature into the world without permission or through idle caprice. Kiryakov gets up with a sigh and walks with solid dignity out of the room.

â€œWhat a man, bless him!â€ says the midwife to the mother. â€œHeâ€™s so stern and does not smile.â€

The mother tells her that *he* is always like that. . . . He is honest, fair, prudent, sensibly economical, but all that to such an exceptional degree that simple mortals feel suffocated by it. His relations have parted from him, the servants will not stay more than a month; they have no friends; his wife and children are always on tenterhooks from terror over every step they take. He does not shout at them nor beat them, his virtues are far more numerous than his defects, but when he goes out of the house they all feel better, and more at ease. Why it is so the woman herself cannot say.

â€œThe basins must be properly washed and put away in the store cupboard,â€ says Kiryakov, coming into the bedroom. â€œThese bottles must be put away too: they may come in handy.â€

What he says is very simple and ordinary, but the midwife for some reason feels flustered. She begins to be afraid of the man and shudders every time she hears his footsteps. In the morning as she is preparing to depart she sees Kiryakovâ€™s little son, a pale, close-cropped schoolboy, in the dining-room drinking his tea. . . . Kiryakov is standing opposite him, saying in his flat, even voice:

â€œYou know how to eat, you must know how to work too. You have just swallowed a mouthful but have not probably reflected that that mouthful costs money and money is obtained by work. You must eat and reflect. . . .â€

The midwife looks at the boyâ€™s dull face, and it seems to her as though the very air is heavy, that a little more and the very walls will fall, unable to endure the crushing presence of the peculiar man. Beside herself with terror, and by now feeling a violent hatred for the man, Marya Petrovna gathers up her bundles and hurriedly departs.

Half-way home she remembers that she has forgotten to ask for her three roubles, but after stopping and thinking for a minute, with a wave of her hand, she goes on.

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