

Expensive Lessons

Anton Chekhov

FOR a cultivated man to be ignorant of foreign languages is a great inconvenience. Vorotov became acutely conscious of it when, after taking his degree, he began upon a piece of research work.

"It's awful," he said, breathing hard (although he was only twenty-six he was fat, heavy, and suffered from shortness of breath).

"It's awful! Without languages I'm like a bird without wings. I might just as well give up the work."

And he made up his mind at all costs to overcome his innate laziness, and to learn French and German; and began to look out for a teacher.

One winter noon, as Vorotov was sitting in his study at work, the servant told him that a young lady was inquiring for him.

"Ask her in," said Vorotov.

And a young lady elaborately dressed in the last fashion walked in. She introduced herself as a teacher of French, Alice Osipovna Enquête, and told Vorotov that she had been sent to him by one of his friends.

"Delighted! Please sit down," said Vorotov, breathing hard and putting his hand over the collar of his nightshirt (to breathe more freely he always wore a nightshirt at work instead of a stiff linen one with collar). "It was Pyotr Sergeitch sent you? Yes, yes . . . I asked him about it. Delighted!"

As he talked to Mdlle. Enquête he looked at her shyly and with curiosity. She was a genuine Frenchwoman, very elegant and still quite young. Judging from her pale, languid face, her short curly hair, and her unnaturally slim waist, she might have been eighteen; but looking at her broad, well-developed shoulders, the elegant lines of her back and her severe eyes, Vorotov thought that she was not less than three-and-twenty and might be twenty-five; but then again he began to think she was not more than eighteen. Her face looked as cold and business-like as the face of a person who has come to speak about money. She did not once smile or frown, and only once a look of perplexity flitted over her face when she learnt that she was not required to teach children, but a stout grown-up man.

"So, Alice Osipovna," said Vorotov, "we'll have a lesson every evening from seven to eight. As regards your terms -- a rouble a lesson -- I've nothing to say against that. By all means let it be a rouble. . . ."

And he asked her if she would not have some tea or coffee, whether it was a fine day, and with a good-natured smile, stroking the baize of the table, he inquired in a friendly voice who she was, where she had studied, and what she lived on.

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With a cold, business-like expression, Alice Osipovna answered that she had completed her studies at a private school and had the diploma of a private teacher, that her father had died lately of scarlet fever, that her mother was alive and made artificial flowers; that she, Mdlle. Enquête, taught in a private school till dinnertime, and after dinner was busy till evening giving lessons in different good families.

She went away leaving behind her the faint fragrance of a woman's clothes. For a long time afterwards Vorotov could not settle to work, but, sitting at the table stroking its green baize surface, he meditated.

"It's very pleasant to see a girl working to earn her own living," he thought. "On the other hand, it's very unpleasant to think that poverty should not spare such elegant and pretty girls as Alice Osipovna, and that she, too, should have to struggle for existence. It's a sad thing!"

Having never seen virtuous Frenchwomen before, he reflected also that this elegantly dressed young lady with her well-developed shoulders and exaggeratedly small waist in all probability followed another calling as well as giving French lessons.

The next evening when the clock pointed to five minutes to seven, Mdlle. Enquête appeared, rosy from the frost. She opened Margot, which she had brought with her, and without introduction began:

"French grammar has twenty-six letters. The first letter is called A, the second B . . ."

"Excuse me," Vorotov interrupted, smiling. "I must warn you, mademoiselle, that you must change your method a little in my case. You see, I know Russian, Greek, and Latin well. . . . I've studied comparative philology, and I think we might omit Margot and pass straight to reading some author."

And he explained to the French girl how grown-up people learn languages.

"A friend of mine," he said, "wanting to learn modern languages, laid before him the French, German, and Latin gospels, and read them side by side, carefully analysing each word, and would you believe it, he attained his object in less than a year. Let us do the same. We'll take some author and read him."

The French girl looked at him in perplexity. Evidently the suggestion seemed to her very naïve and ridiculous. If this strange proposal had been made to her by a child, she would certainly have been angry and have scolded it, but as he was a grown-up man and very stout and she could not scold him, she only shrugged her shoulders hardly perceptibly and said:

"As you please."

Vorotov rummaged in his bookcase and picked out a dog's-eared French book.

"Will this do?"

"It's all the same," she said.

"In that case let us begin, and good luck to it! Let's begin with the title . . . 'Mémoires.' "

"Reminiscences," Mdlle. Enquête translated.

With a good-natured smile, breathing hard, he spent a quarter of an hour over the word "Mémoires," and as much over the word de, and this wearied the young lady. She answered his questions languidly, grew confused, and evidently did not understand her pupil well, and did not attempt to understand him. Vorotov asked her questions, and at the same time kept looking at her fair hair and thinking:

"Her hair isn't naturally curly; she curls it. It's a strange thing! She works from morning to night, and yet she has time to curl her hair."

At eight o'clock precisely she got up, and saying coldly and dryly, "Au revoir, monsieur," walked out of the study, leaving behind her the same tender, delicate, disturbing fragrance. For a long time again her pupil did nothing; he sat at the table meditating.

During the days that followed he became convinced that his teacher was a charming, conscientious, and precise young lady, but that she was very badly educated, and incapable of teaching grown-up people, and he made up his mind not to waste his time, to get rid of her, and to engage another teacher. When she came the seventh time he took out of his pocket an envelope with seven roubles in it, and holding it in his hand, became very confused and began:

"Excuse me, Alice Osipovna, but I ought to tell you . . . I'm under painful necessity . . ."

Seeing the envelope, the French girl guessed what was meant, and for the first time during their lessons her face quivered and her cold, business-like expression vanished. She coloured a little, and dropping her eyes, began nervously fingering her slender gold chain. And Vorotov, seeing her perturbation, realised how much a rouble meant to her, and how bitter it would be to her to lose what she was earning.

"I ought to tell you," he muttered, growing more and more confused, and quivering inwardly; he hurriedly stuffed the envelope into his pocket and went on: "Excuse me, I . . . I must leave you for ten minutes."

And trying to appear as though he had not in the least meant to get rid of her, but only to ask her permission to leave her for a short time, he went into the next room and sat there for ten minutes. And then he returned more embarrassed than ever: it struck him that she might have interpreted his brief absence in some way of her own, and he felt awkward.

The lessons began again. Vorotov felt no interest in them. Realising that he would gain nothing from the lessons, he gave the French girl liberty to do as she liked, asking her nothing and not interrupting her. She translated away as she pleased ten pages during a lesson, and he did not listen, breathed hard, and having nothing better to do, gazed at her curly head, or her soft white hands or her neck and sniffed the fragrance of her clothes. He caught himself thinking very unsuitable thoughts, and felt ashamed, or he was moved to tenderness, and then he felt vexed and wounded that she was so cold and business-like with

him, and treated him as a pupil, never smiling and seeming afraid that he might accidentally touch her. He kept wondering how to inspire her with confidence and get to know her better, and to help her, to make her understand how badly she taught, poor thing.

One day Mdlle. Enquête came to the lesson in a smart pink dress, slightly décolleté, and surrounded by such a fragrance that she seemed to be wrapped in a cloud, and, if one blew upon her, ready to fly away into the air or melt away like smoke. She apologised and said she could stay only half an hour for the lesson, as she was going straight from the lesson to a dance.

He looked at her throat and the back of her bare neck, and thought he understood why Frenchwomen had the reputation of frivolous creatures easily seduced; he was carried away by this cloud of fragrance, beauty, and bare flesh, while she, unconscious of his thoughts and probably not in the least interested in them, rapidly turned over the pages and translated at full steam:

"He was walking the street and meeting a gentleman his friend and saying, "Where are you striving to seeing your face so pale it makes me sad." ' "

The "Mémoires" had long been finished, and now Alice was translating some other book. One day she came an hour too early for the lesson, apologizing and saying that she wanted to leave at seven and go to the Little Theatre. Seeing her out after the lesson, Vorotov dressed and went to the theatre himself. He went, and fancied that he was going simply for change and amusement, and that he was not thinking about Alice at all. He could not admit that a serious man, preparing for a learned career, lethargic in his habits, could fling up his work and go to the theatre simply to meet there a girl he knew very little, who was unintelligent and utterly unintellectual.

Yet for some reason his heart was beating during the intervals, and without realizing what he was doing, he raced about the corridors and foyer like a boy impatiently looking for some one, and he was disappointed when the interval was over. And when he saw the familiar pink dress and the handsome shoulders under the tulle, his heart quivered as though with a foretaste of happiness; he smiled joyfully, and for the first time in his life experienced the sensation of jealousy.

Alice was walking with two unattractive-looking students and an officer. She was laughing, talking loudly, and obviously flirting. Vorotov had never seen her like that. She was evidently happy, contented, warm, sincere. What for? Why? Perhaps because these men were her friends and belonged to her own circle. And Vorotov felt there was a terrible gulf between himself and that circle. He bowed to his teacher, but she gave him a chilly nod and walked quickly by; she evidently did not care for her friends to know that she had pupils, and that she had to give lessons to earn money.

After the meeting at the theatre Vorotov realised that he was in love. . . . During the subsequent lessons he feasted his eyes on his elegant teacher, and without struggling with himself, gave full rein to his imaginations, pure and impure. Mdlle. Enquête's face did not cease to be cold; precisely at eight o'clock every evening she said coldly, "Au revoir, monsieur," and he felt she cared nothing about him, and never would care anything about him, and that his position was hopeless.

Sometimes in the middle of a lesson he would begin dreaming, hoping, making plans. He inwardly composed declarations of love, remembered that Frenchwomen were frivolous and easily won, but it was enough for him to glance at the face of his teacher for his ideas to be extinguished as a candle is blown out when you bring it into the wind on the verandah. Once, overcome, forgetting himself as though in delirium, he could not restrain himself, and barred her way as she was going from the study into the entry after the lesson, and, gasping for breath and stammering, began to declare his love:

"You are dear to me! I . . . I love you! Allow me to speak."

And Alice turned pale -- probably from dismay, reflecting that after this declaration she could not come here again and get a rouble a lesson. With a frightened look in her eyes she said in a loud whisper:

"Ach, you mustn't! Don't speak, I entreat you! You mustn't!"

And Vorotov did not sleep all night afterwards; he was tortured by shame; he blamed himself and thought intensely. It seemed to him that he had insulted the girl by his declaration, that she would not come to him again.

He resolved to find out her address from the address bureau in the morning, and to write her a letter of apology. But Alice came without a letter. For the first minute she felt uncomfortable, then she opened a book and began briskly and rapidly translating as usual:

"'Oh, young gentleman, don't tear those flowers in my garden which I want to be giving to my ill daughter. . . .'"

She still comes to this day. Four books have already been translated, but Vorotov knows no French but the word "Mémoires," and when he is asked about his literary researches, he waves his hand, and without answering, turns the conversation to the weather.

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