

III

"We remained looking at each other for a time."

"Do you know who he is?"

Miss Haldin, coming forward, put this question to me in English.

I took her offered hand.

"Everybody knows. He is a revolutionary feminist, a great writer, if you like, and--how shall I say it--the--the familiar guest of Madame de S--'s mystic revolutionary salon."

Miss Haldin passed her hand over her forehead.

"You know, he was with me for more than an hour before you came in. I was so glad mother was lying down. She has many nights without sleep, and then sometimes in the middle of the day she gets a rest of several hours. It is sheer exhaustion--but still, I am thankful.... If it were not for these intervals...."

She looked at me and, with that extraordinary penetration which used to disconcert me, shook her head.

"No. She would not go mad."

"My dear young lady," I cried, by way of protest, the more shocked because in my heart I was far from thinking Mrs. Haldin quite sane.

"You don't know what a fine, lucid intellect mother had," continued Nathalie Haldin, with her calm, clear-eyed simplicity, which seemed to me always to have a quality of heroism.

"I am sure...." I murmured.

"I darkened mother's room and came out here. I've wanted for so long to think quietly."

She paused, then, without giving any sign of distress, added, "It's so difficult," and looked at me with a strange fixity, as if watching for a sign of dissent or surprise.

I gave neither. I was irresistibly impelled to say--

"The visit from that gentleman has not made it any easier, I fear."

Miss Haldin stood before me with a peculiar expression in her eyes.

"I don't pretend to understand completely. Some guide one must have, even if one does not wholly give up the direction of one's conduct to him. I am an inexperienced girl, but I am not slavish, There has been too much of that in Russia. Why should I not listen to him? There is no harm in having one's thoughts directed. But I don't mind confessing to you that I have not been completely candid with Peter Ivanovitch. I don't quite know what prevented me at the moment...."

She walked away suddenly from me to a distant part of the room; but it was only to open and shut a drawer in a bureau. She returned with a piece of paper in her hand. It was thin and blackened with close handwriting. It was obviously a letter.

"I wanted to read you the very words," she said. "This is one of my poor brother's letters. He never doubted. How could he doubt? They make only such a small handful, these miserable oppressors, before the unanimous will of our people."

"Your brother believed in the power of a people's will to achieve anything?"

"It was his religion," declared Miss Haldin.

I looked at her calm face and her animated eyes.

"Of course the will must be awakened, inspired, concentrated," she went on. "That is the true task of real agitators. One has got to give up one's life to it. The degradation of servitude, the absolutist lies must be uprooted and swept out. Reform is impossible. There is nothing to reform. There is no legality, there are no institutions. There are only arbitrary decrees. There is only a handful of cruel--perhaps blind--officials against a nation."

The letter rustled slightly in her hand. I glanced down at the flimsy blackened pages whose very handwriting seemed cabalistic, incomprehensible to the experience of Western Europe.

"Stated like this," I confessed, "the problem seems simple enough. But I fear I shall not see it solved. And if you go back to Russia I know that I shall not see you again. Yet once more I say: go back! Don't suppose that I am thinking of your

preservation. No! I know that you will not be returning to personal safety. But I had much rather think of you in danger there than see you exposed to what may be met here."

"I tell you what," said Miss Haldin, after a moment of reflection. "I believe that you hate revolution; you fancy it's not quite honest. You belong to a people which has made a bargain with fate and wouldn't like to be rude to it. But we have made no bargain. It was never offered to us--so much liberty for so much hard cash. You shrink from the idea of revolutionary action for those you think well of as if it were something--how shall I say it--not quite decent."

I bowed my head.

"You are quite right," I said. "I think very highly of you"

"Don't suppose I do not know it," she began hurriedly. "Your friendship has been very valuable."

"I have done little else but look on."

She was a little flushed under the eyes.

"There is a way of looking on which is valuable I have felt less lonely because of it. It's difficult to explain."

"Really? Well, I too have felt less lonely. That's easy to explain, though. But it won't go on much longer. The last thing I want to tell you is this: in a real revolution--not a simple dynastic change or a mere reform of institutions--in a real revolution the best characters do not come to the front. A violent revolution falls into the hands of narrow-minded fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all the pretentious intellectual failures of the time. Such are the chiefs and the leaders. You will notice that I have left out the mere rogues. The scrupulous and the just, the noble, humane, and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement--but it passes away from them. They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims: the victims of disgust, of disenchantment--often of remorse. Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured--that is the definition of revolutionary success. There have been in every revolution hearts broken by such successes. But enough of that. My meaning is that I don't want you to be a victim."

"If I could believe all you have said I still wouldn't think of myself," protested Miss Haldin. "I would take liberty from any hand as a hungry man would snatch at a piece of bread. The true progress must begin after. And for that the right men

shall be found. They are already amongst us. One comes upon them in their obscurity, unknown, preparing themselves...."

She spread out the letter she had kept in her hand all the time, and looking down at it--

"Yes! One comes upon such men!" she repeated, and then read out the words, "Unstained, lofty, and solitary existences."

Folding up the letter, while I looked at her interrogatively, she explained--

"These are the words which my brother applies to a young man he came to know in St. Petersburg. An intimate friend, I suppose. It must be. His is the only name my brother mentions in all his correspondence with me. Absolutely the only one, and--would you believe it?--the man is here. He arrived recently in Geneva."

"Have you seen him?" I inquired. "But, of course; you must have seen him."

"No! No! I haven't! I didn't know he was here. It's Peter Ivanovitch himself who told me. You have heard him yourself mentioning a new arrival from Petersburg.... Well, that is the man of 'unstained, lofty, and solitary existence.' My brother's friend!"

"Compromised politically, I suppose," I remarked.

"I don't know. Yes. It must be so. Who knows! Perhaps it was this very friendship with my brother which.... But no! It is scarcely possible. Really, I know nothing except what Peter Ivanovitch told me of him. He has brought a letter of introduction from Father Zosim--you know, the priest-democrat; you have heard of Father Zosim?"

"Oh yes. The famous Father Zosim was staying here in Geneva for some two months about a year ago," I said. "When he left here he seems to have disappeared from the world."

"It appears that he is at work in Russia again. Somewhere in the centre," Miss Haldin said, with animation. "But please don't mention that to any one--don't let it slip from you, because if it got into the papers it would be dangerous for him."

"You are anxious, of course, to meet that friend of your brother?" I asked.

Miss Haldin put the letter into her pocket. Her eyes looked beyond my shoulder at the door of her mother's room.

"Not here," she murmured. "Not for the first time, at least."

After a moment of silence I said good-bye, but Miss Haldin followed me into the ante-room, closing the door behind us carefully.

"I suppose you guess where I mean to go tomorrow?"

"You have made up your mind to call on Madame de S--."

"Yes. I am going to the Chateau Borel. I must."

"What do you expect to hear there?" I asked, in a low voice.

I wondered if she were not deluding herself with some impossible hope. It was not that, however.

"Only think--such a friend. The only man mentioned in his letters. He would have something to give me, if nothing more than a few poor words. It may be something said and thought in those last days. Would you want me to turn my back on what is left of my poor brother--a friend?"

"Certainly not," I said. "I quite understand your pious curiosity."

"--Unstained, lofty, and solitary existences," she murmured to herself. "There are! There are! Well, let me question one of them about the loved dead."

"How do you know, though, that you will meet him there? Is he staying in the Chateau as a guest--do you suppose?"

"I can't really tell," she confessed. "He brought a written introduction from Father Zosim--who, it seems, is a friend of Madame de S-- too. She can't be such a worthless woman after all."

"There were all sorts of rumours afloat about Father Zosim himself," I observed.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Calumny is a weapon of our government too. It's well known. Oh yes! It is a fact that Father Zosim had the protection of the Governor-General of a certain province. We talked on the subject with my brother two years ago, I remember. But his work was good. And now he is proscribed. What better proof can one require. But no matter what that priest was or is. All that cannot affect my

brother's friend. If I don't meet him there I shall ask these people for his address. And, of course, mother must see him too, later on. There is no guessing what he may have to tell us. It would be a mercy if mamma could be soothed. You know what she imagines. Some explanation perhaps may be found, or--or even made up, perhaps. It would be no sin."

"Certainly," I said, "it would be no sin. It may be a mistake, though."

"I want her only to recover some of her old spirit. While she is like this I cannot think of anything calmly."

"Do you mean to invent some sort of pious fraud for your mother's sake?" I asked.

"Why fraud? Such a friend is sure to know something of my brother in these last days. He could tell us.... There is something in the facts which will not let me rest. I am certain he meant to join us abroad--that he had some plans--some great patriotic action in view; not only for himself, but for both of us. I trusted in that. I looked forward to the time! Oh! with such hope and impatience. I could have helped. And now suddenly this appearance of recklessness--as if he had not cared...."

She remained silent for a time, then obstinately she concluded--

"I want to know...."

Thinking it over, later on, while I walked slowly away from the Boulevard des Philosophes, I asked myself critically, what precisely was it that she wanted to know? What I had heard of her history was enough to give me a clue. In the educational establishment for girls where Miss Haldin finished her studies she was looked upon rather unfavourably. She was suspected of holding independent views on matters settled by official teaching. Afterwards, when the two ladies returned to their country place, both mother and daughter, by speaking their minds openly on public events, had earned for themselves a reputation of liberalism. The three-horse trap of the district police-captain began to be seen frequently in their village. "I must keep an eye on the peasants"--so he explained his visits up at the house. "Two lonely ladies must be looked after a little." He would inspect the walls as though he wanted to pierce them with his eyes, peer at the photographs, turn over the books in the drawing-room negligently, and after the usual refreshments, would depart. But the old priest of the village came one evening in the greatest distress and agitation, to confess that he--the priest--had been ordered to watch and ascertain in other ways too (such as using his spiritual power with the servants) all that was going on in the house, and especially in respect of the visitors these ladies received, who they were, the

length of their stay, whether any of them were strangers to that part of the country, and so on. The poor, simple old man was in an agony of humiliation and terror. "I came to warn you. Be cautious in your conduct, for the love of God. I am burning with shame, but there is no getting out from under the net. I shall have to tell them what I see, because if I did not there is my deacon. He would make the worst of things to curry favour. And then my son-in-law, the husband of my Parasha, who is a writer in the Government Domain office; they would soon kick him out--and maybe send him away somewhere." The old man lamented the necessities of the times--"when people do not agree somehow" and wiped his eyes. He did not wish to spend the evening of his days with a shaven head in the penitent's cell of some monastery--"and subjected to all the severities of ecclesiastical discipline; for they would show no mercy to an old man," he groaned. He became almost hysterical, and the two ladies, full of commiseration, soothed him the best they could before they let him go back to his cottage. But, as a matter of fact, they had very few visitors. The neighbours--some of them old friends--began to keep away; a few from timidity, others with marked disdain, being grand people that came only for the summer--Miss Haldin explained to me--aristocrats, reactionaries. It was a solitary existence for a young girl. Her relations with her mother were of the tenderest and most open kind; but Mrs. Haldin had seen the experiences of her own generation, its sufferings, its deceptions, its apostasies too. Her affection for her children was expressed by the suppression of all signs of anxiety. She maintained a heroic reserve. To Nathalie Haldin, her brother with his Petersburg existence, not enigmatical in the least (there could be no doubt of what he felt or thought) but conducted a little mysteriously, was the only visible representative of a proscribed liberty. All the significance of freedom, its indefinite promises, lived in their long discussions, which breathed the loftiest hope of action and faith in success. Then, suddenly, the action, the hopes, came to an end with the details ferreted out by the English journalist. The concrete fact, the fact of his death remained! but it remained obscure in its deeper causes. She felt herself abandoned without explanation. But she did not suspect him. What she wanted was to learn almost at any cost how she could remain faithful to his departed spirit.