

CHAPTER XXVII.

Princess Sophia Vasilievna had finished her meal of choice and nourishing dishes, which she always took alone, that no one might see her performing that unpoetical function. A cup of coffee stood on a small table near her couch, and she was smoking a cigarette. Princess Sophia Vasilievna was a lean and tall brunette, with long teeth and large black eyes, who desired to pass for a young woman.

People were making unpleasant remarks about her relations with the doctor. Formerly Nekhludoff had paid no attention to them. But to-day, the sight of the doctor, with his oily, sleek head, which was parted in the middle, sitting near her couch, was repulsive to him.

Beside the Princess sat Kolosoff, stirring the coffee. A glass of liquor was on the table.

Missy entered, together with Nekhludoff, but she did not remain in the room.

"When mamma gets tired of you and drives you away, come to my room," she said, turning to Nekhludoff, as if nothing had happened, and, smiling cheerfully, she walked out of the room, her steps deadened by the heavy carpet.

"Well, how do you do, my friend? Sit down and tell us the news," said Sophia Vasilievna, with an artful, feigned, resembling a perfectly natural, smile, which displayed her beautiful, long, skillfully made, almost natural-looking teeth. "I am told that you returned from the court in very gloomy spirits. It must be very painful to people with a heart," she said in French.

"Yes, that is true," said Nekhludoff. "One often feels his--feels that he has no right to judge others."

"Comme c'est vrai!" she exclaimed, as if struck by the truth of the remark, and, as usual, artfully flattering her friend.

"And what about your picture? It interests me very much," she added.

"Were it not for my indisposition, I should have visited you long ago."

"I have given up painting entirely," he answered dryly. Her unjust flattery was as apparent to him to-day as was her age, which she attempted to conceal. Try as he would, he could not force himself to be pleasant.

"It is too bad! You know, Riepin himself told me that Nekhludoff possesses undoubted talent," she said, turning to Kolosoff.

"What a shameless liar!" Nekhludoff thought, frowning.

Seeing that Nekhludoff was in ill humor, and could not be drawn into pleasant and clear conversation, Sophia Vasilievna turned to Kolossoff for his opinion of the new drama, with an air as if Kolossoff's opinion would dispel all doubt and every word of his was destined to become immortalized. Kolossoff condemned the drama and took occasion to state his views on art. The correctness of his views seemed to impress her; she attempted to defend the author of the drama, but immediately yielded, or found a middle ground. Nekhludoff looked and listened and yet saw and heard but little.

Listening now to Sophia Vasilievna, now to Kolossoff, Nekhludoff saw, first, that neither of them cared either for the drama or for each other, and that they were talking merely to satisfy a physiological craving to exercise, after dinner, the muscles of the tongue and throat. Secondly, he saw that Kolossoff, who had drunk brandy, wine and liquors, was somewhat tipsy--not as drunk as a drinking peasant, but like a man to whom wine-drinking has become a habit. He did not reel, nor did he talk nonsense, but was in an abnormal, excited and contented condition. Thirdly, Nekhludoff saw that Princess Sophia Vasilievna, during the conversation, now and again anxiously glanced at the window, through which a slanting ray of the sun was creeping toward her, threatening to throw too much light on her aged face.

"How true it is," she said of some remark of Kolossoff, and pressed a button on the wall near the couch.

At this moment the doctor rose with as little ceremony as one of the family, and walked out of the room. Sophia Vasilievna followed him with her eyes.

"Please, Phillip, let down that curtain," she said to the fine-looking servant who responded to the bell, her eyes pointing to the window.

"Say what you will, but there is something mystical about him, and without mysticism there is no poetry," she said, with one black eye angrily following the movements of the servant who was lowering the curtain.

"Mysticism without poetry is superstition, and poetry without mysticism is prose," she continued, smiling sadly, still keeping her eye on the servant, who was smoothing down the curtain.

"Not that curtain, Phillip--the one at the large window," she said in a sad voice, evidently pitying herself for the efforts she was compelled to make to say these words, and to calm herself, with her ring-bedecked hand, she lifted to her lips the fragrant, smoking cigarette.

The broad-chested, muscular Phillip bowed slightly, as if excusing himself, and submissively and silently stepped over to the next

window, and, carefully looking at the Princess, so arranged the curtain that no stray ray should fall on her. It was again unsatisfactory, and again the exhausted Princess was obliged to interrupt her conversation about mysticism and correct the unintelligent Phillip, who was pitilessly tormenting her. For a moment Phillip's eyes flashed fire.

"The devil knows what you want,' he is probably saying to himself," Nekhludoff thought, as he watched this play. But the handsome, strong Phillip concealed his impatience, and calmly carried out the instructions of the enervated, weak, artificial Princess Sophia Vasilievna.

"Of course there is considerable truth in Darwin's theory," said the returning Kolosoff, stretching himself on a low arm-chair and looking through sleepy eyes at the Princess, "but he goes too far."

"And do you believe in heredity?" she asked Nekhludoff, oppressed by his silence.

"In heredity?" repeated Nekhludoff. "No, I do not," he said, being entirely absorbed at the moment by those strange forms which, for some reason, appeared to his imagination. Alongside of the strong, handsome Phillip, whom he looked upon as a model, he imagined Kolosoff, naked, his abdomen like a water-melon, bald-headed, and his arms hanging like two cords. He also dimly imagined what the silk-covered shoulders

of Sophia Vasilievna would appear like in reality, but the picture was too terrible, and he drove it from his mind.

Sophia Vasilievna scanned him from head to foot.

"Missy is waiting for you," she said. "Go to her room; she wished to play for you a new composition by Schuman. It is very interesting."

"It isn't true. Why should she lie so!" Nekhludoff thought, rising and pressing her transparent, bony, ring-bedecked hand.

In the drawing-room he met Katherine Alexeievna, returning to her mother's apartments. As usual, she greeted him in French.

"I see that the duties of juryman act depressingly upon you," she said.

"Yes, pardon me. I am in low spirits to-day, and I have no right to bore people," answered Nekhludoff.

"Why are you in low spirits?"

"Permit me not to speak of it," he said, looking for his hat as they entered the Princess' cabinet.

"And do you remember telling us that one ought to tell the truth? And

what cruel truths you used to tell us! Why don't you tell us now? Do you remember, Missy?" the Princess turned to Missy, who had just entered.

"Because that was in play," answered Nekhludoff gravely. "In play it is permissible, but in reality we are so bad, that is, I am so bad, that I, at least, cannot tell the truth."

"Don't correct yourself, but rather say that we are so bad," said Katherine Alexeievna, playing with the words, and pretending not to see Nekhludoff's gravity.

"There is nothing worse than to confess being in low spirits," said Missy. "I never confess it to myself, and that is why I am always cheerful. Well, come to my room. We shall try to drive away your mauvais humeur."

Nekhludoff experienced the feeling which a horse must feel when brushed down before the bridle is put on and it is led to be harnessed to the wagon. But to-day he was not at all disposed to draw. He excused himself and began to take leave. Missy kept his hand longer than usual.

"Remember that what is important to you is important to your friends," she said. "Will you come to-morrow?"

"I don't think I will," said Nekhludoff. And feeling ashamed, without knowing himself whether for her or for himself, he blushed and hastily departed.

"What does it mean? Comme cela m'intrigue," said Katherine Alexeievna, when Nekhludoff had left. "I must find it out. Some affaire d'amour propre; il est très susceptible notre cher Mitia."

"Plutôt une affaire d'amour sale," Missy was going to say. Her face was now wan and pale. But she did not give expression to that passage, and only said: "We all have our bright days and gloomy days."

"Is it possible that he, too, should deceive me?" she thought. "After all that has happened, it would be very wrong of him."

If Missy had had to explain what she meant by the words, "After all that has happened," she could have told nothing definite, and yet she undoubtedly knew that not only had he given her cause to hope, but he had almost made his promise--not in so many words, but by his glances, his smiles, his innuendos, his silence. She considered him her own, and to lose him would be very painful to her.