

CHAPTER XL.

This room, like the one in the men's ward, was also divided in three, by two nets, but it was considerably smaller. There were also fewer visitors and fewer prisoners, but the noise was as great as in the men's room. Here, also, the authorities stood guard between the nets. The authorities were here represented by a matron in uniform with crown-laced sleeves and fringed with blue braid and a belt of the same color. Here, too, people pressed against the nets--in the passage--city folks in divers dresses; behind the nets, female prisoners, some in white, others in their own dresses. The whole net was lined with people. Some stood on tip-toe, speaking over the heads of others; others, again, sat on the floor and conversed.

The most remarkable of the women prisoners, both in her shouting and appearance, was a thin, ragged gipsy, with a 'kerchief which had slipped from her head, who stood almost in the middle of the room, near a post, behind the net, gesticulating and shouting to a short and tightly belted gipsy in a blue coat. A soldier sat beside him on the floor, talking to a prisoner. Beyond stood a young peasant with a light beard and in bast shoes, pressing his flushed face to the net, evidently with difficulty suppressing his tears. He was talking to a pretty, light-haired prisoner who gazed at him with her bright, blue eyes. This was Theodosia, with her husband. Beside them stood a tramp, who was talking to a disheveled, broad-faced woman. Further on there

were two women, a man, and again a woman, and opposite each was a prisoner. Maslova was not among them. But behind the prisoners stood another woman. Nekhludoff felt the beating of his heart increasing and his breath failing him. The decisive moment was approaching. He neared the net and recognized Katiousha. She stood behind the blue-eyed Theodosia, and, smiling, listened to her conversation. She did not wear the prison coat, but a white waist, tightly belted, and rising high above the breast. As in the court, her black hair hung in curls over her kerchiefed forehead.

"It will all be over in a moment," he thought. "Shall I address her, or shall I wait till she addresses me?"

But she did not address him. She was waiting for Clara, and never thought that that man came to see her.

"Whom do you wish to see?" the matron asked Nekhludoff, approaching him.

"Katherine Maslova," he stammered.

"Maslova, you are wanted," shouted the matron.

Maslova turned round, raised her head, and with the familiar expression of submissiveness, came to the net. She did not recognize Nekhludoff, and gazed at him in surprise. However, judging by his

dress that he was a rich man, she smiled.

"What are you?" she asked, pressing her smiling face with squinting eyes against the net.

"I wish to see--" He did not know whether to use the respectful "you" or the endearing "thou," and decided on the former. He spoke no louder than usual. "I wish to see you--I----"

"Don't give me any of your song and dance----" the tramp beside him shouted. "Did you take it, or did you not?"

"She is dying; she is very weak," some one shouted on the other side.

Maslova could not hear Nekhludoff, but the expression of his face, as she spoke, suddenly reminded her of that which she did not wish to think of. The smile disappeared from her face, and a wrinkle on her brow evidenced her suffering.

"I cannot hear what you are saying," she shouted, blinking and still more knitting her brows.

"I came----"

"Yes, I am doing my duty; I am repenting," thought Nekhludoff, and immediately tears filled his eyes, and he felt a choking sensation in

his throat. His fingers clutched at the net and he made efforts to keep from sobbing.

"I should not have gone if you were well," came from one side.

"I swear by God I know nothing about it!" cried a prisoner from the other side.

Maslova noticed his agitation, and it communicated itself to her. Her eyes sparkled, and her puffy, white cheeks became covered with red spots, but her face retained its severity, and her squinting eyes stared past him.

"You are like him, but I don't know you," she shouted.

"I came here to ask your forgiveness," he said in a loud voice, without intonation, as if repeating a lesson he had learned by heart.

As he said these words he felt ashamed and looked round. But the thought immediately came to his mind that it was well that he was ashamed, for he ought to bear the shame. And in a loud voice he continued:

"I acted meanly, infamously--forgive me."

She stood motionless, her squinting eyes fixed on him.

He could not continue and left the net, making efforts to stifle the sobbing which was convulsing his breast.

The inspector who directed Nekhludoff to the women's ward, evidently becoming interested in him, came into the room, and, seeing him in the middle of the passage, asked him why he was not speaking with the prisoner he had inquired about. Nekhludoff blew his nose, and, endeavoring to assume an air of calmness, said:

"I can't speak through the net; nothing can be heard."

The inspector mused awhile.

"Well, then, she can be brought out for awhile."

"Maria Karlovna!" he turned to the matron. "Lead Maslova out."