

CHAPTER IX.

Nekhludoff had four cases in hand: Maslova's appeal, the petition of Theodosia Birukova, the case of Shustova's release, by request of Vera Bogodukhovskaia, and the obtaining of permission for a mother to visit her son kept in a fortress, also by Bogodukhovskaia's request.

Since his visit to Maslenikoff, especially since his trip to the country, Nekhludoff felt an aversion for that sphere in which he had been living heretofore, and in which the sufferings borne by millions of people in order to secure the comforts and pleasures of a few, were so carefully concealed that the people of that sphere did not and could not see these sufferings, and consequently the cruelty and criminality of their own lives.

Nekhludoff could no longer keep up relations with these people without reproving himself. And yet the habits of his past life, the ties of friendship and kinship, and especially his one great aim of helping Maslova and the other unfortunates, drew him into that sphere against his will; and he was compelled to ask the aid and services of people whom he had not only ceased to respect but who called forth his indignation and contempt.

Arriving at St. Petersburg, and stopping at his aunt's, the wife of an ex-Minister of State, he found himself in the very heart of the

aristocratic circle. It was unpleasant to him, but he could do no different. Not to stop at his aunt's was to offend her. Besides, through her connections she could be of great service to him in those affairs for the sake of which he came to St. Petersburg.

"What wonders I hear about you!" said Countess Catherine Ivanovna Charskaia, while Nekhludoff was drinking the coffee brought him immediately after his arrival. "Vous posez pour un Howard. You are helping the convicts; making the rounds of the prisons; reforming them."

"You are mistaken; I never had such intentions."

"Why, that is not bad. Only, I understand, there is some love affair--come, tell me."

Nekhludoff related the story of Maslova, exactly as it happened.

"Yes, yes, I remember. Poor Hellen told me at the time you lived at the old maids' house that, I believe, they wished you to marry their ward." Countess Catherine Ivanovna always hated Nekhludoff's aunts on his father's side. "So, that is she? Elle est encore jolie?"

Aunt Catherine Ivanovna was a sixty-year-old, healthy, jolly, energetic, talkative woman. She was tall, very stout, with a black, downy mustache on her upper lip. Nekhludoff loved her, and since

childhood had been accustomed to get infected with her energy and cheerfulness.

"No, ma tante, all that belongs to the past. I only wish to help her, because she is innocent, and it is my fault that she was condemned, her whole wrecked life is upon my conscience. I feel it to be my duty to do for her what I can."

"But how is it? I was told that you wish to marry her."

"I do wish it, it is true; but she doesn't."

Catherine Ivanovna raised her eyebrows and silently looked at Nekhludoff in surprise. Suddenly her face changed and assumed a pleased expression.

"Well, she is wiser than you are. Ah! what a fool you are! And you would marry her?"

"Certainly."

"After what she has been?"

"The more so--is it not all my fault?"

"Well, you are simply a crank," said the aunt, suppressing a smile.

"You are an awful crank, but I love you for the very reason that you are such an awful crank," she repeated, the word evidently well describing, according to her view, the mental and moral condition of her nephew. "And how opportune. You know, Aline has organized a wonderful asylum for Magdalens. I visited it once. How disgusting they are! I afterward washed myself from head to foot. But Aline is corps et ame in this affair. So we will send her, your Magdalen, to her. If any one will reform her, it is Aline."

"But she was sentenced to penal servitude. I came here for the express purpose of obtaining a reversal of her sentence. That is my first business to you."

"Is that so? Where is the case now?"

"In the Senate."

"In the Senate? Why, my dear cousin Levoushka is in the Senate. However, he is in the Heraldry Department. Let me see. No, of the real ones I do not know any. Heaven knows what a mixture they are: either Germans, such as Ge, Fe, De--tout l'alphabet--or all sorts of Ivanvas, Semenovs, Nikitins, or Ivaneukos, Semeneukos, Nikitenkas pour varier. Des gens de l'autre monde. However, I will tell my husband. He knows all sorts of people. I will tell him. You explain it to him, for he never understands me. No matter what I may say, he always says that he cannot understand me. C'est un parti pris. Everybody understands, only

he does not understand."

At that moment a servant in knee-breeches entered with a letter on a silver tray.

"Ah, that is from Aline. Now you will have an opportunity to hear Kisiweather."

"Who is that Kisiweather?"

"Kisiweather? Come around to-day and you will find out who he is. He speaks so that the most hardened criminals fall on their knees and weep, and repent."

Countess Catherine Ivanovna, however strange it might be, and how so little it agreed with her character, was a follower of that teaching which held that essence of Christianity consisted in a belief in redemption. She visited the meetings where sermons were delivered on this teaching then in vogue, and invited the adherents to her own house. Although this teaching rejected all rites, images and even the sacraments, the Princess had images hanging in all her rooms, even over her bedstead, and she complied with all the ritual requirements of the church, seeing nothing contradictory in that.

"Your Magdalen ought to hear him; she would become converted," said the Countess. "Don't fail to come to-night. You will hear him then. He

is a remarkable man."

"It is not interesting to me, ma tante."

"I tell you it is interesting. You must come to-night. Now, what else do you want me to do? Videz votre sac."

"There is the man in the fortress."

"In the fortress? Well, I can give you a note to Baron Kriegmuth. C'est un très-brave homme. But you know him yourself. He was your father's comrade. Il donne dans le spiritisme. But that is nothing. He is a kind man. What do you want there?"

"It is necessary to obtain permission for a mother to visit her son who is incarcerated there. But I was told that Cherviansky and not Kriegmuth is the person to be applied to."

"I do not like Cherviansky, but he is Mariette's husband. I will ask her; she will do it for me. Elle est très gentille."

"There is another woman I wish you would speak to her about. She has been in prison for several months, and no one knows for what."

"Oh, no; she herself surely knows for what. They know very well. And it serves them right, those short-haired ones."

"I do not know whether it serves them right or not. But they are suffering. You are a Christian, and believe in the Gospel, and yet are so pitiless."

"That has nothing to do with it. The Gospel is one thing; what I dislike is another thing. It would be worse if I pretended to like the Nihilists, especially the female Nihilists, when as a matter of fact I hate them."

"Why do you hate them?"

"Why do they meddle in other people's affairs? It is not a woman's business."

"But you have nothing against Mariette occupying herself with business," said Nekhludoff.

"Mariette? Mariette is Mariette, but who is she? A conceited ignoramus who wants to teach everybody."

"They do not wish to teach; they only wish to help the people."

"We know without them who should and who should not be helped."

"But the people are impoverished. I have just been in the country. Is

it proper that peasants should overwork themselves without getting enough to eat, while we are living in such wasteful luxury?"

"What do you wish me to do? You would like to see me work and not eat anything?"

"No, I do not wish you not to eat," smiling involuntarily, answered Nekhludoff. "I only wish that we should all work, and all have enough to eat."

The aunt again raised her eyebrows and gazed at him with curiosity.

"Mon cher, vous finirez mal," she said.

At that moment a tall, broad-shouldered general entered the room. It was Countess Charskaia's husband, a retired Minister of State.

"Ah, Dmitri, how do you do?" he said, putting out his clean-shaven cheek. "When did you get here?"

He silently kissed his wife on the forehead.

"Non, il est impayable." Countess Catherine Ivanovna turned to her husband. "He wants me to do washing on the river and feast on potatoes. He is an awful fool, but, nevertheless, do for him what he asks. An awful crank," she corrected herself. "By the way, they say

that Kamenskaia is in a desperate condition; her life is despaired of," she turned to her husband. "You ought to visit her."

"Yes, it is awful," said the husband.

"Go, now, and have a talk together; I must write some letters."

Nekhludoff had just reached the room next to the reception-room when she shouted after him:

"Shall I write then to Mariette?"

"If you please, ma tante."

"I will learn that which you want to say about the short-haired en blanc, and she will have her husband attend to it. Don't think that I am angry. They are hateful, your proteges, but--je ne leur veux pas de mal. But God forgive them. Now, go, and don't forget to come in the evening; you will hear Kisiweather. We will also pray. And if you do not resist, ca vous fera beaucoup de bien. I know that Hellen and all of you are very backward in that respect. Now, au revoir."