

CHAPTER XX.

In the evening Nekhludoff went to his sister. Ignatius Nikiforovitch was resting in another room, and Natalie Ivanovna alone met him. She wore a tight-fitting black silk dress, with a knot of red ribbon, and her hair was done up according to the latest fashion. She was evidently making herself look young for her husband. Seeing her brother, she quickly rose from the divan, and, rustling with her silk skirt, she went out to meet him. They kissed and, smiling, looked at each other. There was an exchange of those mysterious, significant glances in which everything was truth; then followed an exchange of words in which that truth was lacking. They had not met since the death of their mother.

"You have grown stout and young," he said.

Her lips contracted with pleasure.

"And you have grown thin."

"Well, how is Ignatius Nikiforovitch?" asked Nekhludoff.

"He is resting. He has not slept all night."

A great deal should have been said here, but their words said nothing,

and their glances said that that which interested them most was left unsaid.

"I have been at your lodging."

"Yes, I know it. I have moved from the house. I am so lonely and weary. I do not need any of those things, so you take them--the furniture--everything."

"Yes, Agrippina Petrovna told me. I have been there. I thank you very much. But----"

At that moment the servant brought in a silver tea service. Natalie Ivanovna busied herself with making the tea. Nekhludoff was silent.

"Well, Dimitri, I know everything," Natalie said, resolutely, glancing at him.

"I am very glad that you know."

"Do you think it possible to reform her after such a life?"

He was sitting erect on a small chair, attentively listening to her, prepared to answer satisfactorily her every question. He was still in that frame of mind which, after his last meeting with Maslova, filled his soul with tranquil happiness and love for all mankind.

"It is not her that I intend to reform, but myself," he answered.

Natalie Ivanovna sighed.

"There are other means besides marriage."

"And I think that that is the best. Besides, that will bring me into that world in which I can be useful."

"I do not think," said Natalie Ivanovna, "that you could be happy."

"It is not a question of my happiness."

"Of course; but if she possesses a heart, she cannot be happy--she cannot even desire it."

"She does not."

"I understand, but life--demands something different."

"Life only demands that we do what is right," said Nekhludoff, looking at her face, still beautiful, although covered with fine wrinkles around the eyes and mouth.

"Poor dear! How she has changed!" thought Nekhludoff, recalling

Natalie as she had been before her marriage, and a tender feeling, woven of countless recollections of their childhood, rose in his breast toward her.

At that moment Ignatius Nikiforovitch, as usual holding his head high and projecting his broad chest, entered the room, with shining eye-glasses, bald head and black beard.

"How do you do? How do you do?" he greeted Nekhludoff, unnaturally accentuating his words.

They pressed each other's hand, and Ignatius Nikiforovitch lowered himself into an arm-chair.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"No, I do not conceal anything I say or do from anybody."

As soon as Nekhludoff saw that face, those hairy hands and heard that patronizing tone, his gentle disposition immediately disappeared.

"Yes, we have been speaking about his intention," said Natalie Ivanovna. "Shall I pour out some tea for you?" she added, taking the tea-pot.

"Yes, if you please. What intention do you refer to?"

"My intention of going to Siberia with that party of convicts, among whom there is a woman I have wronged," said Nekhludoff.

"I heard that you intended more than that."

"Yes, and marry her, if she only desires it."

"I see! And may I ask you to explain your motives, if it is not unpleasant to you? I do not understand them."

"My motives are that that woman--that the first step on her downward career----" Nekhludoff became angry because he could not find the proper expression. "My motives are that I am guilty, while she is punished."

"If she is punished, then she is also, probably, guilty."

"She is perfectly innocent."

And, with unnecessary agitation, Nekhludoff related the whole case.

"Yes, that was an omission by the presiding justice. But in such cases there is the Senate."

"The Senate sustained the verdict."

"Ah, then there were no grounds of appeal," said Ignatius Nikiforovitch, evidently sharing the well-known opinion that truth is the product of court proceedings. "The Senate cannot go into the merits of a case. But if there is really a judicial error, a petition should be made to the Emperor."

"That was done, but there is no chance of success. Inquiries will be made at the Ministry, which will refer them to the Senate, and the Senate will repeat its decision, and, as usual, the innocent will be punished."

"In the first place, the Ministry will not refer to the Senate," and Ignatius Nikiforovitch smiled condescendingly, "but will call for all the documents in the case, and, if it finds an error, will so decide. In the second place, an innocent person is never, or, at least, very seldom punished. Only the guilty is punished."

"And I am convinced that the contrary is true," said Nekhludoff, with an unkind feeling toward his brother-in-law. "I am convinced that the majority of the people convicted by courts are innocent."

"How so?"

"They are innocent in the ordinary sense of the word, as that woman was innocent of poisoning; as that peasant is innocent of the murder which he has not committed; as that mother and son are innocent of the

arson which was committed by the owner himself, and for which they came near being convicted."

"Of course, there always have been and always will be judicial errors. Human institutions cannot be perfect."

"And, then, a large part of the innocent, because they have been brought up amid certain conditions, do not consider the acts committed by them criminal."

"Pardon me; that is unfair. Every thief knows that stealing is wrong; that theft is immoral," Ignatius Nikiforovitch said, with the calm, self-confident, and, at the same time, somewhat contemptuous, smile which particularly provoked Nekhludoff.

"No, he does not know. He is told not to steal, but he sees and knows that the employers steal his labor, keep back his pay, and that the officials are constantly robbing him."

"That is anarchism," Ignatius calmly defined the meaning of his brother-in-law's words.

"I do not know what it is, but I am speaking of facts," Nekhludoff continued. "He knows that the officials are robbing him. He knows that we, the landlords, own the land which ought to be common property, and when he gathers some twigs for his oven we send him to jail and try to

convince him that he is a thief."

"I do not understand, and if I do, I cannot agree with you. The land cannot be nobody's property. If you divide it," Ignatius Nikiforovitch began, being fully convinced that Nekhludoff was a socialist, and that the theory of socialism demands that all the land should be divided equally; that such division is foolish, and that he can easily refute it. "If you should divide the land to-day, giving each inhabitant an equal share, to-morrow it will again find its way into the hands of the more industrious and able among them----"

"Nobody even thinks of dividing the land into equal shares. There ought to be no property in land, and it ought not to be the subject of purchase and sale or renting."

"The right of property is a natural right. Without property right there would be no interest in cultivating the land. Destroy property right and we will return to the condition of the savage," authoritatively said Ignatius Nikiforovitch.

"On the contrary, only then will land not lie idle, as it is now."

"But, Dimitri Ivanovich, it is perfect madness! Is it possible in our time to destroy property in land? I know it is your old hobby. But permit me to tell you plainly----" Ignatius Nikiforovitch turned pale and his voice trembled. The question was evidently of particular

concern to him. "I would advise you to consider that question well before attempting its practical solution."

"You are speaking of my personal affairs?"

"Yes. I assume that we are all placed in a certain position, and must assume the duties that result from that position, must support those conditions of existence into which we were born, which we have inherited from our forefathers, and which we must hand over to our posterity."

"I consider it my duty----"

"Excuse me," continued Ignatius Nikiforovitch, who would not be interrupted. "I am not speaking of myself and my children. The fortune of my children is secure, and I earn enough to live in easy circumstances, and, therefore, my protest against your, permit me to say, ill-considered actions is not based on personal interest, but on principle. And I would advise you to give it a little more thought, to read----"

"You had better let me decide my own affairs. I think I know what to read and what not to read," said Nekhludoff, turning pale, and, feeling that he could not control himself, became silent and began to drink his tea.