

CHAPTER VI.

An officer entered the cell and announced that the time for departing had arrived. He counted every prisoner, pointing at every one with his finger. When he reached Nekhludoff he said, familiarly:

"It is too late to remain now, Prince; it is time to go."

Nekhludoff, knowing what that meant, approached him and thrust three rubles into his hand.

"Nothing can be done with you--stay here a while longer."

Simonson, who was all the while silently sitting on his bunk, his hands clasped behind his head, firmly arose, and carefully making his way through those sitting around the bunk, went over to Nekhludoff.

"Can you hear me now?" asked Simonson.

"Certainly," said Nekhludoff, also rising to follow him.

Maslova saw Nekhludoff rising, and their eyes meeting, she turned red in the face and doubtfully, as it seemed, shook her head.

"My business with you is the following," began Simonson, when they

reached the corridor. "Knowing your relations toward Catherine Michaelovna," and he looked straight into Nekhludoff's face, "I consider it my duty----" But at the very door two voices were shouting at the same time.

"I tell you, heathen, they are not mine," shouted one voice.

"Choke yourself, you devil!" the other said, hoarsely.

At that moment Maria Pablovna entered the corridor.

"You cannot talk here," she said. "Walk in here; only Verotchka is there." And she opened the door of a tiny cell, evidently intended for solitary confinement, and now at the disposal of the political prisoners. On one of the bunks lay Vera Efremovna, with her head covered.

"She is ill and asleep; she cannot hear you, and I will go," said Maria Pablovna.

"On the contrary, stay here," said Simonson. "I keep nothing secret, especially from you."

"Very well," said Maria Pablovna, and childishly moving her whole body from side to side, and thus getting into a snug corner of the bunks, she prepared to listen, at the same time looking somewhere in the

distance with her beautiful, sheepish eyes.

"Well, then, knowing your relations toward Catherine Michaelovna, I consider it my duty to let you know my relations to her."

"Well, go on," said Nekhludoff, involuntarily admiring Simonson's simplicity and straightforwardness.

"I wished to tell you that I would like to marry Catherine Michaelovna----"

"Remarkable!" exclaimed Maria Pablovna, fixing her gaze on Simonson.

"And I have decided to ask her to be my wife," continued Simonson.

"What, then, can I do? It depends on her," said Nekhludoff.

"Yes; but she would not decide the matter without you."

"Why?"

"Because, while the question of your relations remains undecided, she cannot choose."

"On my part the question is definitely decided. I only wished to do that which I considered it my duty to do, and also to relieve her

condition, but in no case did I intend to influence her choice."

"Yes; but she does not wish your sacrifice."

"There is no sacrifice."

"And I also know that her decision is irrevocable."

"Why, then, talk to me?" said Nekhludoff.

"It is necessary for her that you should also approve of it."

"I can only say that I am not free, but she is free to do what she wishes."

Simonson began to ponder.

"Very well, I will tell her so. Do not think that I am in love with her," he continued. "I admire her as a good, rare person who has suffered much. I wish nothing from her, but I would very much like to help her, to relieve her----"

Simonson's trembling voice surprised Nekhludoff.

"To relieve her condition," continued Simonson. "If she does not wish to accept your help, let her accept mine. If she consented, I would

ask permission to join her in prison. Four years is not an eternity. I would live near her, and perhaps lighten her fate----" His emotion again compelled him to stop.

"What can I say?" said Nekhludoff. "I am glad that she has found such a protector."

"That is just what I wanted to know," continued Simonson. "I wished to know whether you, loving her and seeking her good, could approve of her marrying me?"

"Oh, yes," Nekhludoff answered, decisively.

"It is all for her; all I wish is that that woman, who had suffered so much, should have some rest," said Simonson, with a childlike gentleness that no one would expect from a man of such gloomy aspect.

Simonson rose, took Nekhludoff's hand, smiled bashfully and embraced him.

"Well, I will so tell her," he said, and left the room.