

CHAPTER VII.

"What do you think of him?" said Maria Pablovna. "In love, and earnestly in love! I never thought that Vladimir Simonson could fall in love in such a very stupid, childish fashion. It is remarkable, and to tell the truth, sad," she concluded, sighing.

"But Katia? How do you think she will take it?" asked Nekhludoff.

"She?" Maria Pablovna stopped, evidently desiring to give a precise answer. "She? You see, notwithstanding her past, she is naturally of a most moral character. And her feelings are so refined. She loves you--very much so--and is happy to be able to do you the negative good of not binding you to herself. Marriage with you would be a dreadful fall to her, worse than all her past. For this reason she would never consent to it. At the same time, your presence perplexes her."

"Ought I then to disappear?" asked Nekhludoff.

Maria Pablovna smiled in her pleasant, childish way.

"Yes, partly."

"How can I partly disappear?"

"I take it back. But I will tell you that she probably sees the absurdity of that exalted love of his (he has not spoken to her about it), is flattered by it, and fears it. You know that I am not competent in these matters, but I think that his love is that of the ordinary man, although it is masked. He says that it rouses his energy and that it is a platonic love; but it has nothing but nastiness for its basis."

"But what am I to do?" asked Nekhludoff.

"I think it is best that you have a talk with her. It is always better to make everything clear. Shall I call her?" said Maria Pablovna.

"If you please," answered Nekhludoff, and Maria Pablovna went out.

Nekhludoff was seized with a strange feeling when, alone in the small cell, he listened to the quiet breathing of Vera Efremovna, interrupted by an occasional moan, and the constant din coming from the cells of the convicts.

That which Simonson had told him freed him from his self-imposed obligation, which, in a moment of weakness, seemed to him burdensome and dreadful; and yet it was not only unpleasant, but painful. The offer of Simonson destroyed the exclusiveness of his act, minimized in his own and other people's eyes the value of the sacrifice he was making. If such a good man as Simonson, who was under no obligation to

her, wished to join his fate to hers, then his own sacrifice was no longer so important. Maybe there was also the ordinary feeling of jealousy; he was so used to her love that he could not think that she was capable of loving any one else. Besides, his plans were now shattered, especially the plan of living near her while she served her sentence. If she married Simonson, his presence was no longer necessary, and that required a rearrangement of his projects. He could scarcely collect his thoughts, when Katiousha entered the cell.

With quick step she approached him.

"Maria Pablovna sent me," she said, stopping near him.

"Yes, I would like to talk with you. Take a seat. Vladimir Ivanovitch spoke to me."

She seated herself, crossed her hands on her knees, and seemed calm. But as soon as Nekhludoff pronounced Simonson's name, her face turned a purple color.

"What did he tell you?" she asked.

"He told me that he wishes to marry you."

Her face suddenly became wrinkled, evidencing suffering, but she remained silent, only looking at the floor.

"He asked my consent or advice. I told him that it all rests with you; that you must decide."

"Oh, what is it all for?" she said, and looked at Nekhludoff with that squinting glance that always peculiarly affected him. For a few seconds they looked silently at each other. That glance was significant to both.

"You must decide," repeated Nekhludoff.

"Decide what?" she said. "It has all been decided long ago. It is you who must decide whether you will accept the offer of Vladimir Ivanovitch," she continued, frowning.

"But if a pardon should come?" said Nekhludoff.

"Oh, leave me alone. It is useless to talk any more," she answered, and, rising, left the cell.

Gaining the street, Nekhludoff stopped, and, expanding his chest, drew in the frosty air.

The following morning a soldier brought him a note from Maria Pablovna, in which she said that Kryltzoff's condition was worse than they thought it to be.

"At one time we intended to remain here with him, but they would not allow it. So we are taking him with us, but we fear the worst. Try to so arrange in town that if he is left behind some one of us shall remain with him. If it is necessary for that purpose that I should marry him, then, of course, I am ready to do it."

Nekhludoff obtained horses and hastened to catch up with the party of prisoners. He stopped his team near the wagon carrying Kryltzoff on a bed of hay and pillows. Beside Kryltzoff sat Maria Pablovna.

Kryltzoff, in a fur coat and lambskin cap, seemed thinner and more pale than before. His beautiful eyes seemed particularly larger and sparkling. Weakly rolling from side to side from the jostling of the wagon, he steadily looked at Nekhludoff, and in answer to questions about his health, he only closed his eyes and angrily shook his head. It required all his energy to withstand the jostling of the wagon. Maria Pablovna exchanged glances with Nekhludoff, expressing apprehension concerning Kryltzoff's condition.

"The officer seems to have some shame in him," she shouted, so as to be heard above the rattling of the wheels. "He removed the handcuffs from Bouzovkin, who is now carrying his child. With him are Katia, Simonson and, in my place, Verotchka."

Kryltzoff, pointing at Maria Pablovna, said something which could not, however, be heard. Nekhludoff leaned over him in order to hear him.

Then Kryltzoff removed the handkerchief, which was tied around his mouth, and whispered:

"Now I am better. If I could only keep from catching cold."

Nekhludoff nodded affirmatively and glanced at Maria Pablovna.

"Have you received my note, and will you do it?" asked Maria Pablovna.

"Without fail," said Nekhludoff, and seeing the dissatisfied face of Kryltzoff, went over to his own team, climbed into the wagon, and holding fast to the sides of it, drove along the line of gray-coated and fettered prisoners which stretched for almost a mile.

Nekhludoff crossed the river to a town, and his driver took him to a hotel, where, notwithstanding the poor appointments, he found a measure of comfort entirely wanting in the inns of his stopping places. He took a bath, dressed himself in city clothes and drove to the governor of the district. He alighted at a large, handsome building, in front of which stood a sentry and a policeman.

The general was ill, and did not receive. Nekhludoff, nevertheless, asked the porter to take his card to the general, and the porter returned with a favorable answer:

"You are asked to step in."

The vestibule, the porter, the messenger, the shining floor of the hall--everything reminded him of St. Petersburg, only it was somewhat dirtier and more majestic. Nekhludoff was admitted to the cabinet.

The general, bloated, with a potato nose and prominent bumps on his forehead, hairless pate and bags under his eyes, a man of sanguine temperament, was reclining in a silk morning gown, and with a cigarette in his hand, was drinking tea from a silver saucer.

"How do you do, sir? Excuse my receiving you in a morning gown; it is better than not receiving at all," he said, covering his stout, wrinkled neck with the collar of his gown. "I am not quite well, and do not go out. What brought you into these wilds?"

"I was following a party of convicts, among whom is a person near to me," said Nekhludoff. "And now I come to see Your Excellency about that person, and also another affair."

The general inhaled the smoke of his cigarette, took a sip of tea, placed his cigarette in a malachite ash-holder, and steadily gazing with his watery, shining eyes at Nekhludoff, listened gravely. He only interrupted Nekhludoff to ask him if he wished to smoke.

Nekhludoff told the general that the person in whom he was interested was a woman, that she was unjustly convicted, and that His Majesty's

clemency had been appealed to.

"Yes. Well?" said the general.

"I was promised in St. Petersburg that the news of this woman's fate would be sent to this place not later than this month."

Looking steadily at Nekhludoff, the general asked:

"Anything else?"

"My second request would be concerning the political prisoner who is going to Siberia with this detachment."

"Is that so?" said the general.

"He is very sick--he is a dying man. And he will probably be left here in the hospital; for this reason one of the female prisoners would like to remain with him."

"Is she a relative of his?"

"No. But she wishes to marry him, if it will allow her to stay with him."

The general looked sharply at Nekhludoff from his shining eyes, and,

smoking continually, he kept silence, as if wishing to confound his companion.

When Nekhludoff had finished he took a book from the table, and frequently wetting the fingers with which he turned the leaves, he lighted on the chapter treating of marriage and perused it.

"What's her sentence?" he asked, lifting his eyes from the book.

"Hers? Hard labor."

"If this is the case, the sentence cannot be changed by marriage."

"But----"

"I beg your pardon! If a free man would marry her she would have to serve her sentence all the same. Whose sentence is harder, his or hers?"

"Both are sentenced to hard labor."

"So they are quits," the general said, laughing. "An equal share for both of them. He may be left here on account of his sickness," he continued, "and, of course, everything will be done to ameliorate his condition, but she, even if she should marry him, cannot remain here. Anyhow, I will think it over. What are their names? Write them down

here."

Nekhludoff did as he was asked.

"And this I cannot do either," said the general, concerning his request to see the patient. "Of course I don't suspect you, but you are interested in them and in others. You have money, and the people here are corrupt. How, then, is it possible for me to watch a person who is five thousand miles distant from me? There he is king, as I am here," and he began to laugh. "You have surely seen the political prisoners. You have surely given them money," he added, smiling. "Isn't it so?"

"Yes, it is true."

"I understand that you must act in this way. You want to see the political prisoner, and you all sorrow for him, and the soldier on guard will surely take money, because he has a family, and his salary amounts to something less than nothing; he cannot afford to refuse. I would do the same were I in yours or his place. But, being situated as I am now, I cannot permit myself to disobey one iota of the law, for the very reason that I, too, am no more than a man, and am liable to yield to pity. They confide in me under certain conditions, and I, by my actions, must prove that I am trustworthy. So this question is settled. Well, now tell me what is going on at the metropolis?"

Then the general put various questions, as if he would like to learn some news.

"Well, tell me now whom you are stopping with--at Duke's? It is unpleasant there. Come to us to dinner," he said, finally, dismissing Nekhludoff, "at five. Do you speak English?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that is good. You see, there is an English traveler here. He is studying the exile system, and the prisons in Siberia. So he will dine with us, and you come, too. We dine at five, and madam wants us to be punctual. I will let you know what will be done with that woman, and also with the patient. Maybe it will be possible to leave somebody with him."

Having taken leave of the general, Nekhludoff drove to the postoffice. Receiving his mail, he walked up to a wooden bench, on which a soldier was sitting, probably waiting for something; he sat down beside him, and started to look through the letters. Among them he found a registered letter in a beautiful, large envelope, with a large seal of red wax on it. He tore open the envelope, and, seeing a letter from Selenin with some official document, he felt the blood mounting to his cheeks, and his heart grow weak. This document was the decision concerning Katiousha's trial. What was it? Was it possible that it contained a refusal? Nekhludoff hastily ran over the letter,

written in small, hardly legible, broken handwriting, and breathed freely. The decision was a favorable one.

"Dear friend," wrote Selenin, "our last conversation made a strong impression upon me. You were right concerning Maslova. I have looked through the accusation. This could be corrected only through the Commission for Petitions, to which you sent your petition. They let me have a copy of the pardon, and here I send it to you, to the address which the Countess Catherine Ivanovna gave me. I press your hand in friendship."

The news was pleasant and important. All that Nekhludoff could wish for Katiousha and himself was realized. True, those changes in his life changed his relations to her. But now, he thought, all that was most important was to see her as quick as possible and bring her the good news of her freedom. He thought that the copy he had in his hand was sufficient for that. So he bade the cabman drive at once to the prison.

The superintendent of the prison told him that he could not admit him without a permit from the general. The copy of the petition from their majesty's bureau also did not prevail with the superintendent. He positively refused admittance. He also refused to admit him to see Kryltzoff.