

CHAPTER L.

"May I look in?" asked Nekhludoff.

"If you please," the assistant said with a pleasant smile, and began to make inquiries of the warden. Nekhludoff looked through one of the openings. A tall young man with a small black beard, clad only in his linen, walked rapidly up and down the floor of his cell. Hearing a rustle at the door, he looked up, frowned, and continued to walk.

Nekhludoff looked into the second opening. His eye met another large, frightened eye. He hastily moved away. Looking into the third, he saw a small-sized man sleeping curled up on a cot, his head covered with his prison coat. In the fourth cell a broad-faced, pale-looking man sat with lowered head, his elbows resting on his knees. Hearing steps, this man raised his head and looked up. In his face and eyes was an expression of hopeless anguish. He was apparently unconcerned about who it was that looked into his cell. Whoever it might be, he evidently hoped for no good from any one. Nekhludoff was seized with fear, and he hastened to Number 21--Menshov's cell. The warden unlocked and opened the door. A young, muscular man with a long neck, kindly, round eyes and small beard, stood beside his cot, hastily donning his prison coat and, with frightened face, looking at the two men who had entered. Nekhludoff was particularly struck by the kindly, round eyes whose wondering and startled look ran from him to the

warden and back.

"This gentleman wishes to ask you about your case."

"Thank you."

"Yes, I was told about your case," said Nekhludoff, going into the depth of the cell and stopping at the barred, dirty window, "and would like to hear it from yourself."

Menshov also drew near the window and immediately began to relate the particulars of his case--at first timidly, from time to time glancing at the warden, then growing bolder and bolder. And when the warden had left the cell to give some orders, his timidity left him entirely. Judging by his speech and manner, his was a story of a simple, honest peasant, and it seemed very strange to Nekhludoff to hear it from the lips of a prisoner in the garb of disgrace and in prison. While listening to him, Nekhludoff examined the low cot, with its straw mattress, the window, with its thick iron bars, the damp, plastered walls, the pitiful face and the figure of the unfortunate, mutilated peasant in bast shoes and prison coat, and he became sad; he would not believe that what this kind-hearted man told him was true. And it was still harder to think that this truthful story should be false, and that kindly face should deceive him. His story, in short, was that soon after his wedding a tapster enticed away his wife. He had recourse to the law everywhere, and the tapster was everywhere

acquitted. Once he took her away by force, but she ran away the following day. He went to the seducer, demanding his wife. The tapster told him that she was not there, although he saw her when coming in, and ordered him to depart. He would not go. Then the tapster and another workman beat him until he bled, and the following day the tapster's house took fire. He and his mother were charged with incendiarism, although at the time the fire broke out he was visiting a friend.

"And you really did not set the fire?"

"I never even thought of such a thing, master. The villain must have done it himself. They say that he had just insured his house. And he said that I and my mother came and threatened him. It is true, I abused him at that time--couldn't help it--but I did not set the fire, and was not even in the neighborhood when the fire started. He set the fire purposely on the day I was there with my mother. He did it for the insurance money, and threw it on us."

"Is it possible?"

"As true as there is a living God, master. Do help us!" He was about to bow to the ground, but Nekhludoff forcibly prevented him. "Release me. I am suffering here innocently," he continued. His face suddenly began to twitch; tears welled up in his eyes, and, rolling up the sleeve of his coat, he began to wipe his eyes with the dirty sleeve

of his shirt.

"Have you finished?" asked the warden.

"Yes. Cheer up; I will do what I can for you," Nekhludoff said, and walked out. Menshov stood in the door, so that when the warden closed it he pushed him in. While the warden was locking the door, Menshov looked through the hole.