

CHAPTER LI.

It was dinner time when Nekhludoff retraced his steps through the wide corridor, and the cells were open. The prisoners, in light yellow coats, short, wide trousers and prison shoes, eyed him greedily. Nekhludoff experienced strange feelings and commiseration for the prisoners, and, for some reason, shame that he should so calmly view it.

In one of the corridors a man, clattering with his prison shoes, ran into one of the cells, and immediately a crowd of people came out, placed themselves in his way, and bowed.

"Your Excellency--I don't know what to call you--please order that our case be decided."

"I am not the commander. I do not know anything."

"No matter. Tell them, the authorities, or somebody," said an indignant voice, "to look into our case. We are guilty of no offense, and have been in prison the second month now."

"How so? Why?" asked Nekhludoff.

"We don't know ourselves why, but we have been here the second month."

"That is true," said the assistant inspector. "They were taken because they had no passports, and they were to be transported to their district, but the prison had burned down there, and the authorities asked us to keep them here. Those belonging to other districts were transported, but these we keep here."

"Is that the only reason?" asked Nekhludoff, stopping in the doorway.

The crowd, consisting of about forty men, all in prison garb, surrounded Nekhludoff and the assistant. Several voices began talking at once. The assistant stopped them.

"Let one of you speak."

A tall old man of good mien came forward. He told Nekhludoff that they were all imprisoned on the ground that they had no passports, but that, as a matter of fact, they had passports which had expired and were not renewed for about two weeks. It happened every year, but they were never even fined. And now they were imprisoned like criminals.

"We are all masons and belong to the same association. They say that the prison has burned down, but that isn't our fault. For God's sake, help us!"

Nekhludoff listened, but scarcely understood what the old man was

saying.

"How is that? Can it be possible that they are kept in prison for that sole reason?" said Nekhludoff, turning to the assistant.

"Yes, they ought to be sent to their homes," said the assistant.

At that moment a small-sized man, also in prison attire, pushed his way through the crowd and began to complain excitedly that they were being tortured without any cause.

"Worse than dogs----" he began.

"Tut, tut! do not talk too much, or else you know----"

"Know what?" said the little man desperately. "Are we guilty of anything?"

"Silence!" shouted the assistant, and the little man subsided.

"What a peculiar state of things!" Nekhludoff said to himself as he ran the gauntlet, as it were, of a hundred eyes that followed him through the corridor.

"Is it possible that innocent people are held in durance here?" Nekhludoff said, when they emerged from the corridor.

"What can we do? However, many of them are lying. If you ask them, they all claim to be innocent," said the assistant inspector; "although some are there really without any cause whatever."

"But these masons don't seem to be guilty of any offense."

"That is true so far as the masons are concerned. But those people are spoiled. Some measure of severity is necessary. They are not all as innocent as they look. Only yesterday we were obliged to punish two of them."

"Punish, how?" asked Nekhludoff.

"By flogging. It was ordered----"

"But corporal punishment has been abolished."

"Not for those that have been deprived of civil rights."

Nekhludoff recalled what he had seen the other day while waiting in the vestibule, and understood that the punishment had then been taking place, and with peculiar force came upon him that mingled feeling of curiosity, sadness, doubt, and moral, almost passing over into physical, nausea which he had felt before, but never with such force.

Without listening to the assistant or looking around him, he hastily passed through the corridor and ascended to the office. The inspector was in the corridor, and, busying himself with some affair, had forgot to send for Bogodukhovskaia. He only called it to mind when Nekhludoff entered the office.

"I will send for her immediately. Take a seat," he said.