

CHAPTER LIII.

The short-haired, lean, yellow-faced Vera Efremovna, with her large, kindly eyes, entered timidly through the rear door.

"Well, I thank you for coming here," she said, pressing Nekhludoff's hand. "You remember me? Let us sit down."

"I did not expect to find you here."

"Oh, I am doing excellently--so well, indeed, that I desire nothing better," said Vera Efremovna, looking frightened, as usual, with her kindly, round eyes at Nekhludoff, and turning her very thin, sinewy neck, which projected from under the crumpled, dirty collar of her waist.

Nekhludoff asked her how she came to be in prison. She related her case to him with great animation. Her discourse was interspersed with foreign scientific terms about propaganda, disorganization, groups, sections and sub-sections, which, she was perfectly certain, everybody knew, but of which Nekhludoff had never even heard.

She was evidently sure that it was both interesting and pleasant to him to know all that she was relating. Nekhludoff, however, looked at her pitiful neck, her thin, tangled hair, and wondered why she was

telling him all that. He pitied her, but not as he pitied the peasant Menshov with his hands and face white as potato sprouts, and innocently languishing in an ill-smelling prison. He pitied her on account of the evident confusion that reigned in her head. She seemed to consider herself a heroine, and showed off before him. And this made her particularly pitiful. This trait Nekhludoff noticed in other people then in the room. His arrival attracted their attention, and he felt that they changed their demeanor because of his presence. This trait was also present in the young man in the rubber jacket, in the woman in prison clothes, and even in the actions of the two lovers. The only people who did not possess this trait were the consumptive young man, the beautiful girl with sheep eyes, and the dark-featured man who was talking to the beardless man who resembled a Skopetz.

The affair of which Vera Efremovna wished to speak to Nekhludoff consisted of the following: A chum of hers, Shustova, who did not even belong to her sub-section, was arrested because in her dwelling were found books and papers which had been left with her for safe keeping. Vera Efremovna thought that it was partly her fault that Shustova was imprisoned, and implored Nekhludoff, who was well connected, to do everything in his power to effect her release.

Of herself, she related that, after having graduated as midwife, she joined some party. At first everything went on smoothly, but afterward one of the party was caught, the papers were seized, and then all were taken in a police drag-net.

"They also took me, and now I am going to be transported," she wound up her story. "But that is nothing. I feel excellently," and she smiled piteously.

Nekhludoff asked her about the girl with the sheep eyes, and Vera Efremovna told him that she was the daughter of a general, that she had assumed the guilt of another person, and was now going to serve at hard labor in Siberia.

"An altruistic, honest person," said Vera Efremovna.

The other case of which Vera Efremovna wished to speak concerned Maslova. As the history of every prisoner was known to everyone in prison, she knew Maslova's history, and advised him to procure her removal to the ward for politicals, or, at least, to the hospital, which was just now crowded, requiring a larger staff of nurses.

Nekhludoff said that he could hardly do anything, but promised to make an attempt when he reached St. Petersburg.