

CHAPTER LV.

On the following day Nekhludoff drove to the lawyer and told him of the Menshoffs' case, asking him to take up their defense. The lawyer listened to him attentively, and said that if the facts were really as told to Nekhludoff, he would undertake their defense without compensation. Nekhludoff also told him of the hundred and thirty men kept in prison through some misunderstanding, and asked him whose fault he thought it was. The lawyer was silent for a short while, evidently desiring to give an accurate answer.

"Whose fault it is? No one's," he said decisively. "If you ask the prosecutor, he will tell you that it is Maslenikoff's fault, and if you ask Maslenikoff, he will tell you that it is the prosecutor's fault. It is no one's fault."

"I will go to Maslenikoff and tell him."

"That is useless," the lawyer retorted, smiling. "He is--he is not your friend or relative, is he? He is such a blockhead, and, saving your presence, at the same time such a sly beast!"

Nekhludoff recalled what Maslenikoff had said about the lawyer, made no answer, and, taking leave, directed his steps toward Maslenikoff's residence.

Two things Nekhludoff wanted of Maslenikoff. First, to obtain Maslova's transfer to the hospital, and to help, if possible, the hundred and thirty unfortunates. Although it was hard for him to be dealing with this man, and especially to ask favors of him, yet it was the only way of gaining his end, and he had to go through it.

As Nekhludoff approached Maslenikoff's house, he saw a number of carriages, cabs and traps standing in front of it, and he recalled that this was the reception day to which he had been invited. While Nekhludoff was approaching the house a carriage was standing near the curb, opposite the door, and a lackey in a cockaded silk hat and cape, was seating a lady, who, raising the long train of her skirt, displayed the sharp joints of her toes through the thin slippers. Among the carriages he recognized the covered landau of the Korchagins. The gray-haired, rosy-cheeked driver deferentially raised his hat. Nekhludoff had scarcely asked the porter where Michael Ivanovich (Maslenikoff) was, when the latter appeared on the carpeted stairway, escorting a very important guest, such as he usually escorted not to the upper landing, but to the vestibule. This very important military guest, while descending the stairs, was conversing in French about a lottery for the benefit of orphan asylums, giving his opinion that it was a good occupation for ladies. "They enjoy themselves while they are raising money."

"Qu'elles s'amusement et que le bon Dieu les bénisse. Ah, Nekhludoff,

how do you do? You haven't shown yourself for a long time," he greeted Nekhludoff. "Allez présenter vos devoirs à madame. The Korchagins are here, too. Toutes les jolies femmes de la ville," he said, holding out and somewhat raising his military shoulders for his overcoat, which was being placed on him by his own magnificent lackey in gold-braided uniform. "Au revoir, mon cher." Then he shook Maslenikoff's hand.

"Well, now let us go upstairs. How glad I am," Maslenikoff began excitedly, seizing Nekhludoff by the arm, and, notwithstanding his corpulence, nimbly leading him up the stairs. Maslenikoff was in a particularly happy mood, which Nekhludoff could not help ascribing to the attention shown him by the important person. Every attention shown him by an important person put him into such an ecstasy as may be observed in a fawning little dog when its master pats it, strokes it, and scratches under its ears. It wags its tail, shrinks, wriggles, and, straightening its ears, madly runs in a circle. Maslenikoff was ready to do the same thing. He did not notice the grave expression on Nekhludoff's face, nor hear what he was saying, but irresistibly dragged him into the reception-room. Nekhludoff involuntarily followed.

"Business afterward. I will do anything you wish," said Maslenikoff, leading him through the parlor. "Announce Prince Nekhludoff to Her Excellency," he said on the way to a lackey. The lackey, in an ambling gait, ran ahead of them. "Vous n'avez qu'à ordonner. But you must see my wife without fail. She would not forgive my failure to present you

last time you were here."

The lackey had already announced him when they entered, and Anna Ignatievna, the vice-governess--Mrs. General, as she called herself--sat on a couch surrounded by ladies. As Nekhludoff approached she was already leaning forward with a radiant smile on her face. At the other end of the reception-room women sat around a table, while men in military uniforms and civil attire stood over them. An incessant cackle came from that direction.

"Enfin! Why do you estrange yourself? Have we offended you in any way?"

With these words, presupposing an intimacy between her and Nekhludoff, which never existed, Anna Ignatievna greeted him.

"Are you acquainted? Madam Beliavskaia--Michael Ivanovich Chernoff. Take a seat here."

"Missy, venez donc à notre table. On vous apportera votre thé. And you," she turned to the officer who was conversing with Missy, evidently forgetting his name, "come here, please. Will you have some tea, Prince?"

"No, no; I will never agree with you. She simply did not love him," said a woman's voice.

"But she loved pie."

"Eternally those stupid jests," laughingly interferred another lady in a high hat and dazzling with gold and diamonds.

"C'est excellent, these waffles, and so light! Let us have some more."

"Well, how soon are you going to leave us?"

"Yes, this is the last day. That is why we came here."

"Such a beautiful spring! How pleasant it is in the country!"

Missy in her hat and some dark, striped dress which clasped her waist without a wrinkle, was very pretty. She blushed when she saw Nekhludoff.

"I thought you had left the city," she said to him.

"Almost. Business keeps me here. I come here also for business."

"Call on mamma. She is very anxious to see you," she said, and, feeling that she was lying, and that he understood it, her face turned a still deeper purple.

"I shall hardly have the time," gloomily answered Nekhludoff, pretending not to see that she was blushing.

Missy frowned angrily, shrugged her shoulders, and turned to an elegant officer, who took from her hands the empty teacup and valiantly carried it to another table, his sword striking every object it encountered.

"You must also contribute toward the asylum."

"I am not refusing, only I wish to keep my contribution for the lottery. There I will show all my liberality."

"Don't forget, now," a plainly dissimulating laugh was heard.

The reception day was brilliant, and Anna Ignatievna was delighted.

"Mika told me that you busy yourself in the prisons. I understand it very well," she said to Nekhludoff. "Mika"--she meant her stout husband, Maslenikoff--"may have his faults, but you know that he is kind. All these unfortunate prisoners are his children. He does not look on them in any other light. Il est d'une bonté----"

She stopped, not finding words to express bonté of a husband, and immediately, smiling, turned to an old, wrinkled woman in lilac-colored bows who had just entered.

Having talked as much and as meaninglessly as it was necessary to preserve the decorum, Nekhludoff arose and went over to Maslenikoff.

"Will you please hear me now?"

"Ah! yes. Well, what is it?"

"Come in here."

They entered a small Japanese cabinet and seated themselves near the window.