

CHAPTER LVI.

"Well, je suis à vous. Will you smoke a cigarette? But wait; we must not soil the things here," and he brought an ash-holder. "Well?"

"I want two things of you."

"Is that so?"

Maslenikoff's face became gloomy and despondent. All traces of that animation of the little dog whom its master had scratched under the ears entirely disappeared. Voices came from the reception-room. One, a woman's voice, said: "Jamais, jamais je ne croirais;" another, a man's voice from the other corner, was telling something, constantly repeating: "La Comtesse Vorouzoff" and "Victor Apraksine." From the third side only a humming noise mingled with laughter was heard. Maslenikoff listened to the voices; so did Nekhludoff.

"I want to talk to you again about that woman."

"Yes; who was innocently condemned. I know, I know."

"I would like her to be transferred to the hospital. I was told that it can be done."

Maslenikoff pursed up his lips and began to meditate.

"It can hardly be done," he said. "However, I will consult about it, and will wire you to-morrow."

"I was told that there are many sick people in the hospital, and they need assistants."

"Well, yes. But I will let you know, as I said."

"Please do," said Nekhludoff.

There was a burst of general and even natural laughter in the reception-room.

"That is caused by Victor," said Maslenikoff, smiling. "He is remarkably witty when in high spirits."

"Another thing," said Nekhludoff. "There are a hundred and thirty men languishing in prison for the only reason that their passports were not renewed in time. They have been in prison now for a month."

And he related the causes that kept them there.

"How did you come to know it?" asked Nekhludoff, and his face showed disquietude and displeasure.

"I was visiting a prisoner, and these people surrounded me and asked----"

"What prisoner were you visiting?"

"The peasant who is innocently accused, and for whom I have obtained counsel. But that is not to the point. Is it possible that these innocent people are kept in prison only because they failed to renew their passports?"

"That is the prosecutor's business," interrupted Maslenikoff, somewhat vexed. "Now, you say that trials must be speedy and just. It is the duty of the assistant prosecutor to visit the prisons and see that no one is innocently kept there. But these assistants do nothing but play cards."

"So you can do nothing for them?" Nekhludoff asked gloomily, recalling the words of the lawyer, that the governor would shift the responsibility.

"I will see to it. I will make inquiries immediately."

"So much the worse for her. C'est un souffre-douleur," came from the reception-room, the voice of a woman apparently entirely indifferent to what she was saying.

"So much the better; I will take this," from the other side was heard a man's playful voice, and the merry laughter of a woman who refused him something.

"No, no, for no consideration," said a woman's voice.

"Well, then, I will do everything," repeated Maslenikoff, extinguishing the cigarette with his white hand, on which was a turquoise ring. "Now, let us go to the ladies."

"And yet another question," said Nekhludoff, without going into the reception-room, and stopping at the door. "I was told that some people in the prison were subjected to corporal punishment. Is it true?"

Maslenikoff's face flushed.

"Ah! you have reference to that affair? No, mon cher, you must positively not be admitted there--you want to know everything. Come, come; Annette is calling us," he said, seizing Nekhludoff's arm with the same excitement he evinced after the attention shown him by the important person, but this time alarming, and not joyful.

Nekhludoff tore himself loose, and, without bowing or saying anything, gloomily passed through the reception-room, the parlor and by the lackeys, who sprang to their feet in the ante-chamber, to the

street.

"What is the matter with him? What did you do to him?" Annette asked her husband.

"That is à la française," said some one.

"Rather à la zoulon."

"Oh, he has always been queer."

Some one arose, some one arrived, and the chirping continued.

The following morning Nekhludoff received from Maslenikoff a letter on heavy, glossy paper, bearing a coat-of-arms and seals, written in a fine, firm hand, in which he said that he had written to the prison physician asking that Maslova be transferred, and that he hoped his request would be acceded to. It was signed, "Your loving senior comrade," followed by a remarkably skillful flourish.

"Fool!" Nekhludoff could not help exclaiming, especially because he felt that by the word "comrade" Maslenikoff was condescending, i. e., although he considered himself a very important personage, he nevertheless was not too proud of his greatness, and called himself his comrade.