

## CHAPTER II.

With a feeling of timidity and shame Nekhludoff the following morning, walked out to meet the peasants who had gathered at a small square in front of the house. As he approached them the peasants removed their caps, and for a long time Nekhludoff could not say anything. Although he was going to do something for the peasants which they never dared even to think of, his conscience was troubled. The peasants stood in a fine, drizzling rain, waiting to hear what their master had to say, and Nekhludoff was so confused that he could not open his mouth. The calm, self-confident German came to his relief. This strong, overfed man, like Nekhludoff himself, made a striking contrast to the emaciated, wrinkled faces of the peasants, and the bare shoulder-bones sticking out from under their caftans.

"The Prince came to befriend you--to give you the land, but you are not worthy of it," said the German.

"Why not worthy, Vasily Karlych? Have we not labored for you? We are much satisfied with our late mistress--may she enjoy eternal life!--and we are grateful to the young Prince for thinking of us," began a red-haired peasant with a gift of gab.

"We are not complaining of our masters," said a broad-faced peasant with a long beard. "Only we are too crowded here."

"That is what I called you here for--to give you the land, if you wish it," said Nekhludoff.

The peasants were silent, as if misunderstanding him, or incredulous.

"In what sense do you mean to give us the land?" asked a middle-aged peasant in a caftan.

"To rent it to you, that you might use it at a low price."

"That is the loveliest thing," said an old man.

"If the payment is not above our means," said another.

"Of course we will take the land."

"It is our business--we get our sustenance from the land."

"So much the better for you. All you have to do is to take the money. And what sins you will spare yourself----"

"The sin is on you," said the German. "If you would only work and keep things in order----"

"We cannot, Vasily Karlych," said a lean old man with a pointed nose.

"You ask, Who let the horse feed in the field? But who did it? Day in and day out--and every day is as long as a year--I worked with the scythe, and as I fell asleep the horse went among the oats. And now you are fleecing me."

"You should keep order."

"It is easy for you to say keep order. But we have no strength," retorted a middle-aged peasant, all covered with hair.

"I told you to fence it in."

"You give us the timber," said an unsightly little peasant. "When I cut a joist last summer, intending to make a fence, you locked me up for three months in the castle to feed the insects. There was a fence for you!"

"Is that true?" asked Nekhludoff of the manager.

"Der erste dich im dorfe," said the manager in German. "He was caught every year in the woods. You must learn to respect other people's property."

"Do we not respect you?" said an old man. "We cannot help respecting you, because you have us in your hands, and you are twisting us into rope."

"If you would only abstain from doing wrong," said the manager. "It is pretty hard to wrong you."

"And who battered my face last summer? Of course, there is no use going to law with a rich man."

"You only keep within bounds of the law."

This was evidently a wordy tourney of which the participants hardly knew the purpose. Nekhludoff tried to get back to business.

"Well, what do you say? Do you wish the land, and what price do you set on it?"

"It is your goods; you name the price."

Nekhludoff set the price, and though much lower than the prevailing price, the peasants began to bargain, finding it high. He expected that his offer would be accepted with pleasure, but there was no sign of satisfaction. Only when the question was raised whether the whole community would take the land, or have individual arrangements did he know that it was profitable for them. For there resulted fierce quarrels between those who wished to exclude the weak ones and bad payers from participating in the land, and those whom it was sought to exclude. But the German finally arranged the price and time of

payment, and the peasants, noisily talking, returned to the village.

The price was about thirty per cent. lower than the one prevailing in the district, and Nekhludoff's income was reduced to almost one-half, but, with money realized from the sale of the timber and yet to be realized from the sale of the stock, it was amply sufficient for him. Everything seemed to be satisfactory, and yet Nekhludoff felt sad and lonesome, but, above all, his conscience troubled him. He saw that although the peasants spoke words of thanks, they were not satisfied and expected something more. The result was that while he deprived himself of much, he failed to do that which the peasants expected.

On the following day, after the contract was signed, Nekhludoff, with an unpleasant feeling of having left something undone, seated himself in the "dandy" three-horse team and took leave of the peasants, who were shaking their heads in doubt and dissatisfaction. Nekhludoff was dissatisfied with himself--he could not tell why, but he felt sad, and was ashamed of something.