CHAPTER III.

From Kusminskoie Nekhludoff went to Panovo, the estate left him by his aunts, and where he had first seen Katiousha. He intended to dispose of this land in the same manner as he disposed of the other, and also desired to learn all there was known about Katiousha, and to find out if it was true that their child had died.

As he sat at the window observing the familiar scenery of the now somewhat neglected estate, he not only recalled, but felt himself as he was fourteen years ago; fresh, pure and filled with the hope of endless possibilities. But as it happens in a dream, he knew that that was gone, and he became very sad.

Before breakfast he made his way to the hut of Matrena Kharina, Katiousha's aunt, who was selling liquor surreptitiously, for information about the child, but all he could learn from her was that the child had died on the way to a Moskow asylum; in proof of which the midwife had brought a certificate.

On his way back he entered the huts of some peasants, and inquired about their mode of living. The same complaints of the paucity of land, hunger and degradation he heard everywhere. He saw the same pinched faces, threadbare homespuns, bare feet and bent shoulders.

In front of a particularly dilapidated hut stood a number of women with children in their arms, and among them he noticed a lean, pale-faced woman, easily holding a bloodless child in a short garment made of pieces of stuff. This child was incessantly smiling. Nekhludoff knew that it was the smile of suffering. He asked who that woman was.

It transpired that the woman's husband had been in prison for the past six months--"feeding the insects"--as they termed it, for cutting down two lindens.

Nekhludoff turned to the woman, Anisia.

"How do you fare?" he asked. "What do you live on?"

"How do I live? I sometimes get some food," and she began to sob.

The grave face of the child, however, spread into a broad smile, and its thin legs began to wriggle.

Nekhludoff produced his pocketbook and gave the woman ten rubles. He had scarcely made ten steps when he was overtaken by another woman with a child; then an old woman, and again another woman. They all spoke of their poverty and implored his help. Nekhludoff distributed the sixty rubles that were in his pocketbook and returned home, i. e., to the wing inhabited by the clerk. The clerk, smiling, met Nekhludoff

with the information that the peasants would gather in the evening, as he had ordered. Nekhludoff thanked him and strolled about the garden, meditating on what he had seen. "The people are dying in large numbers, and are used to it; they have acquired modes of living natural to a people who are becoming extinct--the death of children, exhausting toil for women, insufficiency of food for all, especially for the aged--all comes and is received naturally. They were reduced to this condition gradually, so that they cannot see the horror of it, and bear it uncomplainingly. Afterward, we, too, come to consider this condition natural; that it ought to be so."

All this was so clear to him now that he could not cease wondering how it was that people could not see it; that he himself could not see that which is so patent. It was perfectly clear that children and old people were dying for want of milk, and they had no milk because they had not land enough to feed the cattle and also raise bread and hay. And he devised a scheme by which he was to give the land to the people, and they were to pay an annual rent which was to go to the community, to be used for common utilities and taxes. This was not the single-tax, but it was the nearest approach to it under present conditions. The important part consisted in that he renounced his right to own land.

When he returned to the house, the clerk, with a particularly happy smile on his face, offered him dinner, expressing his fear that it might spoil.

The table was covered with a gloomy cloth, an embroidered towel serving as a napkin, and on the table, in vieux-saxe, stood a soup-bowl with a broken handle, filled with potato soup and containing the same rooster that he had seen carried into the house on his arrival. After the soup came the same rooster, fried with feathers, and cakes made of cheese-curds, bountifully covered with butter and sugar. Although the taste of it all was poor, Nekhludoff kept on eating, being absorbed in the thoughts which relieved him of the sadness that oppressed him on his return from the village.

After dinner Nekhludoff with difficulty seated the superserviceable clerk, and in order to make sure of himself and at the same time to confide to some one the thoughts uppermost in his mind, told him of his project and asked his opinion. The clerk smiled, as though he had been thinking of the same thing, and was very glad to hear it, but in reality did not understand it, not because Nekhludoff did not express himself plainly enough, but because, according to this project, Nekhludoff deprived himself of advantages for the benefit of others, whereas the truth that every man strives to obtain advantages at the expense of others, was so firmly rooted in the clerk's mind, that he thought that he misunderstood Nekhludoff when the latter said that the entire income of the land was to go into the community's treasury.

"I understand. So you will draw the interest on the capital?" he said, becoming radiant.

"No, no. I transfer the land to them entirely."

"In that case you will get no income?" asked the clerk and he ceased to smile.

"I relinquish that."

The clerk sighed deeply, then began to smile again. Now he understood. He understood that Nekhludoff's mind was not entirely sound, and he immediately tried to find a way of profiting by Nekhludoff's project, and endeavored to so construe it that he might turn it to his own advantage.

When, however, he understood that there was no such opportunity, he ceased to take interest in the projects, and continued to smile only to please his master. Seeing that the clerk could not understand him, Nekhludoff dismissed him from his presence, seated himself at the ink-stained table and proceeded to commit his project to paper.

The sun was already descending behind the unfolding lindens, and the mosquitos filled the room, stinging him. While he was finishing his notes, Nekhludoff heard the lowing of cattle in the village, the creaking of the opening gates and the voices of the peasants who were coming to meet their master. Nekhludoff told the clerk not to call them before the office, that he would go and meet them at any place in

the village, and gulping down a glass of tea offered him by the clerk, he went to the village.