

CHAPTER IV.

The crowd stood talking in front of the house of the bailiff, and as Nekhludoff approached, the conversation ceased and the peasants, like those of Kusminskoie, removed their caps. It was a coarser crowd than the peasants of Kusminskoie, and almost all the peasants wore bast shoes and homespun shirts and caftans. Some of them were bare-footed and only in their shirts.

With some effort Nekhludoff began his speech by declaring that he intended to surrender the land to them. The peasants were silent, and there was no change in the expression of their faces.

"Because I consider," said Nekhludoff, blushing, "that every man ought to have the right to use the land."

"Why, certainly." "That is quite right," voices of peasants were heard.

Nekhludoff continued, saying that the income from the land should be distributed among all, and he therefore proposed that they take the land and pay into the common treasury such rent as they may decide upon, such money to be used for their own benefit. Exclamations of consent and approbation continued to be heard, but the faces of the peasants became more and more grave, and the eyes that at first were

fixed on the master were lowered, as if desiring not to shame him with the fact that his cunning was understood by all, and that he could not fool anybody.

Nekhludoff spoke very clearly, and the peasants were sensible folks; but he was not understood, and could not be understood by them for the same reason which prevented the clerk from understanding him for a long time. They were convinced that it was natural for every man to look out for his own interest. And as to the land owners, the experience of several generations had taught them long ago that these were always serving their own interests.

"Well, what rate do you intend to assess," asked Nekhludoff.

"Why assess? We cannot do that? The land is yours; it is for you to say," some in the crowd said.

"But understand that you are to use the money for the common wants."

"We cannot do it. The community is one thing, and this is another thing."

"You must understand," said the smiling clerk, wishing to explain the offer, "that the Prince is giving you the land for money which is to go into the community's treasury."

"We understand it very well," said a toothless old man without raising his eyes. "Something like a bank, only we must pay in time. We cannot do it; it is hard enough as it is. That will ruin us entirely."

"That is to no purpose. We would rather continue as before," said several dissatisfied and even rough voices.

The resistance was particularly hot when Nekhludoff mentioned that he would draw a contract which he himself and they would have to sign.

"What is the good of a contract? We will keep on working as we did before. We don't care for it. We are ignorant people."

"We cannot consent, because that is an uncustomary thing. Let it be as it was before. If you would only do away with the seed," several voices were heard.

"Doing away with the seed" meant that under the present regime the sowing-seed was chargeable to the peasants, and they asked that it be furnished by the master.

"So you refuse to take the land?" asked Nekhludoff, turning to a middle-aged, bare-footed peasant in tattered caftan and with a radiant face who held his cap straight in front of him, like a soldier hearing "Hats off!"

"Yes, sir," said this peasant.

"Then you have enough land?" asked Nekhludoff.

"No, sir," said the ex-soldier, with artificial cheerfulness, holding his torn cap before him, as though offering it to anyone deserving to take it.

"Think it over at your leisure," said the surprised Nekhludoff, again repeating his offer.

"There is nothing to think over; as we said, so it will be," the toothless, gloomy old man said angrily.

"I will stay here all day to-morrow. If you alter your decision, let me know."

The peasants made no answer.

On their return to the office the clerk explained to Nekhludoff that it was not a want of good sense that prevented their acceptance of the offer; that when gathered in assembly they always acted in that stubborn manner.

Nekhludoff then asked him to summon for the following day several of the most intelligent peasants to whom he would explain his project at

greater length.

Immediately after the departure of the smiling clerk, Nekhludoff heard angry women's voices interrupted by the voice of the clerk. He listened.

"I have no more strength. You want the cross on my breast," said an exasperated voice.

"She only ran in," said another voice. "Give her up, I say. Why do you torture the beast, and keep the milk from the children?"

Nekhludoff walked around the house where he saw two disheveled women, one of whom was evidently pregnant, standing near the staircase. On the stairs, with his hands in the pockets of his crash overcoat, stood the clerk. Seeing their master, the women became silent and began to arrange their kerchiefs, which had fallen from their heads, while the clerk took his hands out of his pockets and began to smile.

The clerk explained that the peasants purposely permitted their calves, and even cows, to roam over the master's meadows. That two cows belonging to these women had been caught on the meadow and driven into an inclosure. The clerk demanded from the women thirty copecks per cow, or two days' work.

"Time and again I told them," said the smiling clerk, looking around

at Nekhludoff, as if calling him to witness, "to look out for cows when driving them to feed."

"I just went to see to the child, and they walked away."

"Don't leave them when you undertake to look after them."

"And who would feed my child?"

"If they had only grazed, at least, they would have no pains in their stomachs. But they only walked in."

"All the meadows are spoiled," the clerk turned to Nekhludoff. "If they are not made to pay there will be no hay left."

"Don't be sinning," cried the pregnant woman. "My cow was never caught."

"But now that she was caught, pay for her, or work."

"Well, then, I will work. But return me the cow; don't torture her," she cried angrily. "It is bad enough as it is; I get no rest, either day or night. Mother-in-law is sick; my husband is drunk. Single-handed I have to do all the work, and I have no strength. May you choke yourself!" she shouted and began to weep.

Nekhludoff asked the clerk to release the cows and returned to the house, wondering why people do not see what is so plain.