

## CHAPTER X.

The man in whose power it was to lighten the condition of the prisoners in St. Petersburg had earned a great number of medals, which, except for a white cross in his button-hole, he did not wear, however. The old general was of the German barons, and, as it was said of him, had become childish. He had served in the Caucasus, where he had received this cross; then in Poland and in some other place, and now he held the office which gave him good quarters, maintenance and honor. He always strictly carried out the orders of his superiors, and considered their execution of great importance and significance, so much so that while everything in the world could be changed, these orders, according to him, were above the possibility of any alteration.

As Nekhludoff was approaching the old general's house the tower clock struck two. The general was at the time sitting with a young artist in the darkened reception-room, at a table, the top of which was of inlaid work, both of them turning a saucer on a sheet of paper. Holding each others fingers over the saucer, placed face downward, they pulled in different directions over the paper on which were printed all the letters of the alphabet. The saucer was answering the general's question. How would souls recognize each other after death?

At the moment one of the servants entered with Nekhludoff's card, the

soul of Jeanne D'Arc was speaking through the saucer. The soul had already said, "They will recognize each other," which was duly entered on a sheet of paper. When the servant entered, the saucer, stopping first on the letter p, then on the letter o, reached the letter s and began to jerk one way and another. That was because, as the general thought, the next letter was to be l, that is to say, Jeanne D'Arc, according to his idea, intended to say that souls would recognize each other only after they had been purged of everything mundane, or something to that effect, and that therefore the next letter ought to be l (*\_posl*, i. e., after); the artist, on the other hand, thought that the next letter would be v; that the soul intended to say that souls would recognize each other by the light--*\_posv\_* (*\_ietu\_*) that would issue from the ethereal body of the souls. The general, gloomily knitting his brow, gazed fixedly on the hands, and imagining that the saucer moved itself, pulled it toward the letter l. The young, anaemic artist, with his oily hair brushed behind his ears, looked into the dark corner of the room, with his blue, dull eyes, and nervously twitching his lips, pulled toward the letter v. The general frowned at the interruption, and, after a moment's silence, took the card, put on his pince-nez and, groaning from pain in his loins, rose to his full height, rubbing his benumbed fingers.

"Show him into the cabinet."

"Permit me, Your Excellency, to finish it myself," said the artist, rising. "I feel a presence."

"Very well; finish it," said the general with austerity, and went, with firm, long strides, into the cabinet.

"Glad to see you," said the general in a rough voice to Nekhludoff, pointing to an arm-chair near the desk. "How long have you been in St. Petersburg?"

Nekhludoff said that he had but lately arrived.

"Is your mother, the Princess, well?"

"My mother is dead."

"Beg pardon; I was very sorry. My son told me that he had met you."

The general's son was making the same career as his father, and was very proud of the business with which he was entrusted.

"Why, I served with your father. We were friends, comrades. Are you in service?"

"No, I am not."

The general disapprovingly shook his head.

"I have a request to make of you, general," said Nekhludoff.

"Very glad. What can I do for you?"

"If my request be out of season, please forgive me. But I must state it."

"What is it?"

"There is a man, Gurkevitch, kept in prison under your jurisdiction. His mother asks to be permitted to visit him, or, at least to send him books."

The general expressed neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction at Nekhludoff's request, but, inclining his head to one side, seemed to reflect. As a matter of fact he was not reflecting; Nekhludoff's question did not even interest him, knowing very well that his answer would be as the law requires. He was simply resting mentally without thinking of anything.

"That is not in my discretion, you know," he said, having rested awhile. "There is a law relating to visits, and whatever that law permits, that is permitted. And as to books, there is a library, and they are given such books as are allowed."

"Yes, but he wants scientific books; he wishes to study."

"Don't believe that." The general paused. "It is not for study that they want them, but so, it is simply unrest."

"But their time must be occupied somehow?"

"They are always complaining," retorted the general. "We know them."

He spoke of them in general as of some peculiar race of people.

"They have such conveniences here as is seldom seen in a prison," he continued.

And as though justifying himself, he began to recount all the conveniences enjoyed by the prisoners in a manner to make one believe that the chief aim of the institution consisted in making it a pleasant place of abode.

"Formerly, it is true, the regulations were very harsh, but now their condition is excellent. They get three dishes, one of which is always of meat--chopped meat or cutlet. Sundays they get a fourth dish--dessert. May God grant that every Russian could feed so well."

The general, like all old men, evidently having committed to memory the oft-repeated words, proceeded to prove how exacting and ungrateful the prisoners were by repeating what he had told many times before.

"They are furnished books on spiritual topics, also old journals. We have a library of suitable books, but they seldom read them. At first they appear to be interested, and then it is found that the pages of all the new books are barely half cut, and of the old ones there is no evidence of any thumb-marks at all. We even tried," with a remote semblance of a smile the general continued, "to put a piece of paper between the pages, and it remained untouched. Writing, too, is allowed. A slate is given them, also a slate-pencil, so that they may write for diversion. They can wipe it out and write again. And yet they don't write. No, they become quiet very soon. At first they are uneasy, but afterward they even grow stout and become very quiet."

Nekhludoff listened to the hoarse, feeble voice; looked on that fleshless body, those faded eyes under the gray eyebrows, those sunken, shaved cheeks, supported by a military collar, that white cross, and understood that to argue and explain to him the meaning of those words were futile. But, making another effort, he asked him about the prisoner, Shustova, whose release, he had received information, had been ordered, through the efforts of Mariette.

"Shustova? Shustova--I don't remember them all by name. There are so many of them," he said, evidently reproving them for being so numerous. He rang the bell and called for the secretary.

While a servant was going after the secretary he admonished Nekhludoff

to go into service, saying that the country was in need of honest, noble men.

"I am old, and yet I am serving to the extent of my ability."

The secretary came and reported that there were no papers received relating to Shustova, who was still in prison.

"As soon as we receive an order we release them the very same day. We do not keep them; we do not particularly value their presence," said the general, again with a waggish smile, which had the effect only of making his face wry.

"Good-by, my dear," he continued. "Don't be offended for advising you, for I do so only because I love you. Have nothing to do with the prisoners. You will never find innocent people among them. They are the most immoral set. We know them," he said, in a tone of voice which did not permit the possibility of doubt. "You had better take an office. The Emperor and the country need honest people. What if I and such as you refused to serve? Who would be left? We are complaining of conditions, but refuse to aid the government."

Nekhludoff sighed deeply, made a low bow, pressed the bony hand condescendingly extended, and departed.

The general disapprovingly shook his head, and, rubbing his loins,

went to the reception-room, where the artist awaited him with the answer of Jeanne D'Arc. The general put on his pince-nez and read: "They will recognize each other by the light issuing from the ethereal bodies."

"Ah!" said the general, approvingly, closing his eyes. "But how will one recognize another when all have the same light?" he asked, and again crossing his fingers with those of the artist, seated himself at the table.

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Nekhludoff's driver drove up to the gate.

"It is very dull here, sir," he said, turning to Nekhludoff. "It was very tiresome, and I was about to drive away."

"Yes, tiresome," assented Nekhludoff with a deep sigh, resting his eyes on the clouds and the Neva, dotted with variegated boats and steamers.