

CHAPTER XXIII.

When Nekhludoff reached the railroad station the prisoners were already seated in the cars, behind grated windows. There were a few people on the platform, come to see their departing relatives, but they were not allowed to come near the cars. The guards were greatly troubled this day. On the way from the prison to the station five men had died from sunstroke. Three of them had been taken to the nearest police station from the street, while two were stricken at the railroad station.[F] They were troubled not because five men had died while under their guard. That did not bother them; but they were chiefly concerned with doing all that the law required them to do under the circumstances--to make proper transfer of the dead, their papers and belongings, and to exclude them from the list of those that were to be transferred to Nijhni, which was very troublesome, especially on such a warm day.

This it was that occupied the convoy, and this was the reason why Nekhludoff and others were not permitted to approach the cars while the formalities were unfinished. However, upon bribing one of the sergeants, Nekhludoff was permitted to come near the cars, the sergeant asking him to do his errand so that the captain would not see him. There were eighteen cars, and all, except the one reserved for the authorities, were literally packed with prisoners. Passing by the windows, Nekhludoff listened to the sounds within. Everywhere he heard

the rattling of chains, bustle, and the hum of conversation, interspersed with stupid profanity; but nowhere did he hear, as he expected, any reference to the dead comrades. Their conversation related more to sacks, drinking-water, and the choice of seats. Looking into the window of one of the cars, Nekhludoff saw some guardsmen removing the handcuffs from the wrists of the prisoners. The prisoners stretched out their hands, while one of the guards with a key opened the locks of the handcuffs, which were collected by another. When Nekhludoff reached the second car occupied by the women he heard a woman's moan, "Oh, heavens! Oh, heavens!"

Nekhludoff passed by and approached one of the windows of the third car, pointed out to him by one of the guards. Overheated air, impregnated with a thick odor of perspiration, assailed his nostrils, and shrill women's voices were distinctly heard. All the benches were occupied by flushed, perspiring women in waists and coats, loudly conversing. His approach attracted their attention. Those sitting nearest to the grated window became silent. Maslova, in a waist and without headgear, was sitting near the opposite window. The smiling Theodosia, who was sitting near Maslova, seeing Nekhludoff, pushed her with her elbow and pointed to Nekhludoff. Maslova hurriedly rose, threw a kerchief over her black hair, and, with an animated, red, perspiring and smiling face, came near the window and placed her hands on the grating.

"But how warm it is!" she said, smiling joyously.

"Did you get the things?"

"I did, thank you."

"Do you need anything?" asked Nekhludoff, feeling the heat issuing from the window as from a steam bath.

"I do not need anything. Thank you."

"If we could only get some water," said Theodosia.

"Yes, some water," repeated Maslova.

"I will ask one of the guards," said Nekhludoff. "We will not meet now until we reach Nijhni."

"Why, are you going there?" she said, as if she did not know it, but joyously glancing at Nekhludoff.

"I am going on the next train."

Maslova was silent for a few moments; then sighed deeply.

"Is it true, master, that twelve people have died from the heat?" said a churlish old woman in a hoarse voice.

It was Korableva.

"I don't know that twelve have died. I have seen two," said Nekhludoff.

"They say twelve. They ought to be punished for it, the devils!"

"How is it with the women?" asked Nekhludoff.

"Women are stronger," said another prisoner, smiling. "Only there is one who has taken it into her head to give birth to a child. Listen to her wailing," she said, pointing to the adjacent car, from which the moaning proceeded.

"You asked if anything was needed," said Maslova, endeavoring to restrain a happy smile. "Could not that woman be taken off the train? She suffers so. Won't you tell the authorities?"

"Yes, I will."

"Another thing--could you not get her to see her husband, Tarass?" she added, pointing to the smiling Theodosia. "He is going with you, isn't he?"

At this point the voice of a sergeant was heard reminding Nekhludoff

that talking with the prisoners was prohibited. It was not the sergeant who passed Nekhludoff.

Nekhludoff walked off to find the captain, intending to see him about the sick woman and Tarass, but for a long time could not find him, the guards being too busy to answer his inquiries. Some were leading away one of the convicts; others were hurrying away to buy their provisions; still others were attending a lady who was traveling with the captain of the convoy.

Nekhludoff found the captain after the second bell. The captain, wiping his thick moustache with his short hand and raising his shoulders, was reprimanding one of the sergeants.

"What is it you want?" he asked Nekhludoff.

"There is a woman giving birth to a child, so I thought it would be well----"

"Well, let her. When the child is born we will see to it," said the captain, passing to his car.

The conductor came with a whistle in his hand. The third bell sounded, and a loud wailing rose among the female prisoners and their friends and relatives on the platform. Nekhludoff was standing beside Tarass, and watched the cars passing before him, with the grated

windows and the shaved heads seen through them. As the one in which Maslova was passed, he saw her standing with others at the window, looking at him and smiling piteously.

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote F: Early in the eighties five prisoners died from sunstroke while being transferred from the Boutyr prison to the Nijhni railroad station.--L. T.]