

CHAPTER IV.

At my request, there had been assigned to me for the census, a portion of the Khamovnitshesky quarter, at the Smolensk market, along the Prototchny cross-street, between Beregovoy Passage and Nikolsky Alley. In this quarter are situated the houses generally called the Rzhanoff Houses, or the Rzhanoff fortress. These houses once belonged to a merchant named Rzhanoff, but now belong to the Zimins. I had long before heard of this place as a haunt of the most terrible poverty and vice, and I had accordingly requested the directors of the census to assign me to this quarter. My desire was granted.

On receiving the instructions of the City Council, I went alone, a few days previous to the beginning of the census, to reconnoitre my section. I found the Rzhanoff fortress at once, from the plan with which I had been furnished.

I approached from Nikolsky Alley. Nikolsky Alley ends on the left in a gloomy house, without any gates on that side; I divined from its appearance that this was the Rzhanoff fortress.

Passing down Nikolsky Street, I overtook some lads of from ten to fourteen years of age, clad in little caftans and great-coats, who were sliding down hill, some on their feet, and some on one skate,

along the icy slope beside this house. The boys were ragged, and, like all city lads, bold and impudent. I stopped to watch them. A ragged old woman, with yellow, pendent cheeks, came round the corner. She was going to town, to the Smolensk market, and she groaned terribly at every step, like a foundered horse. As she came alongside me, she halted and drew a hoarse sigh. In any other locality, this old woman would have asked money of me, but here she merely addressed me.

"Look there," said she, pointing at the boys who were sliding, "all they do is to play their pranks! They'll turn out just such Rzhanoff fellows as their fathers."

One of the boys clad in a great-coat and a visorless cap, heard her words and halted: "What are you scolding about?" he shouted to the old woman. "You're an old Rzhanoff nanny-goat yourself!"

I asked the boy:

"And do you live here?"

"Yes, and so does she. She stole boot-legs," shouted the boy; and raising his foot in front, he slid away.

The old woman burst forth into injurious words, interrupted by a cough. At that moment, an old man, all clad in rags, and as white as

snow, came down the hill in the middle of the street, flourishing his hands [in one of them he held a bundle with one little kalatch and baranki" {6}]. This old man bore the appearance of a person who had just strengthened himself with a dram. He had evidently heard the old woman's insulting words, and he took her part.

"I'll give it to you, you imps, that I will!" he screamed at the boys, seeming to direct his course towards them, and taking a circuit round me, he stepped on to the sidewalk. This old man creates surprise on the Arbata by his great age, his weakness, and his indigence. Here he was a cheery laboring-man returning from his daily toil.

I followed the old man. He turned the corner to the left, into Prototchny Alley, and passing by the whole length of the house and the gate, he disappeared through the door of the tavern.

Two gates and several doors open on Prototchny Alley: those belonging to a tavern, a dram-shop, and several eating and other shops. This is the Rzhanoft fortress itself. Every thing here is gray, dirty, and malodorous--both buildings and locality, and courtyards and people. The majority of the people whom I met here were ragged and half-clad. Some were passing through, others were running from door to door. Two were haggling over some rags. I made the circuit of the entire building from Prototchny Alley and Beregovoy Passage, and returning I halted at the gate of one of these houses.

I wished to enter, and see what was going on inside, but I felt that it would be awkward. What should I say when I was asked what I wanted there? I hesitated, but went in nevertheless. As soon as I entered the court-yard, I became conscious of a disgusting odor. The yard was frightfully dirty. I turned a corner, and at the same instant I heard to my left and overhead, on the wooden balcony, the tramp of footsteps of people running, at first along the planks of the balcony, and then on the steps of the staircase. There emerged, first a gaunt woman, with her sleeves rolled up, in a faded pink gown, and little boots on her stockingless feet. After her came a tattered man in a red shirt and very full trousers, like a petticoat, and with overshoes. The man caught the woman at the bottom of the steps.

"You shall not escape," he said laughing.

"See here, you cock-eyed devil," began the woman, evidently flattered by this pursuit; but catching sight of me, she shrieked viciously, "What do you want?"

As I wanted nothing, I became confused and beat a retreat. There was nothing remarkable about the place; but this incident, after what I had witnessed on the other side of the yard, the cursing old woman, the jolly old man, and the lads sliding, suddenly presented the business which I had concocted from a totally different point of view. I then comprehended for the first time, that all these

unfortunates to whom I was desirous of playing the part of benefactor, besides the time, when, suffering from cold and hunger, they awaited admission into the house, had still other time, which they employed to some other purpose, that there were four and twenty hours in every day, that there was a whole life of which I had never thought, up to that moment. Here, for the first time, I understood, that all those people, in addition to their desire to shelter themselves from the cold and to obtain a good meal, must still, in some way, live out those four and twenty hours each day, which they must pass as well as everybody else. I comprehended that these people must lose their tempers, and get bored, show courage, and grieve and be merry. Strange as this may seem, when put into words, I understood clearly for the first time, that the business which I had undertaken could not consist alone in feeding and clothing thousands of people, as one would feed and drive under cover a thousand sheep, but that it must consist in doing good to them.

And then I understood that each one of those thousand people was exactly such a man,--with precisely the same past, with the same passions, temptations, failings, with the same thoughts, the same perplexities,--exactly such a man as myself, and then the thing that I had undertaken suddenly presented itself to me as so difficult that I felt my powerlessness; but the thing had been begun, and I went on with it.