

CHAPTER VIII.

The second class of unfortunates whom I also expected to assist later on, were the dissolute women; there were a very great many of them, of all sorts, in the Rzhanoﬀ house--from those who were young and who resembled women, to old ones, who were frightful and horrible, and who had lost every semblance of humanity. The hope of being of assistance to these women, which I had not at first entertained, occurred to me later. This was in the middle of our rounds. We had already worked out several mechanical tricks of procedure.

When we entered a new establishment, we immediately questioned the landlady of the apartment; one of us sat down, clearing some sort of a place for himself where he could write, and another penetrated the corners, and questioned each man in all the nooks of the apartment separately, and reported the facts to the one who did the writing.

On entering a set of rooms in the basement, a student went to hunt up the landlady, while I began to interrogate all who remained in the place. The apartment was thus arranged: in the centre was a room six arshins square, {7} and a small oven. From the oven radiated four partitions, forming four tiny compartments. In the first, the entrance slip, which had four bunks, there were two persons--an old man and a woman. Immediately adjoining this, was a rather long slip

of a room; in it was the landlord, a young fellow, dressed in a sleeveless gray woollen jacket, a good-looking, very pale citizen.

{8} On the left of the first corner, was a third tiny chamber; there was one person asleep there, probably a drunken peasant, and a woman in a pink blouse which was loose in front and close-fitting behind.

The fourth chamber was behind the partition; the entrance to it was from the landlord's compartment.

The student went into the landlord's room, and I remained in the entrance compartment, and questioned the old man and woman. The old man had been a master-printer, but now had no means of livelihood.

The woman was the wife of a cook. I went to the third compartment, and questioned the woman in the blouse about the sleeping man. She said that he was a visitor. I asked the woman who she was. She replied that she was a Moscow peasant. "What is your business?" She burst into a laugh, and did not answer me. "What do you live on?" I repeated, thinking that she had not understood my question. "I sit in the taverns," she said. I did not comprehend, and again I inquired: "What is your means of livelihood?" She made no reply and laughed. Women's voices in the fourth compartment which we had not yet entered, joined in the laugh. The landlord emerged from his cabin and stepped up to us. He had evidently heard my questions and the woman's replies. He cast a stern glance at the woman and turned to me: "She is a prostitute," said he, apparently pleased that he knew the word in use in the language of the authorities, and that he could pronounce it correctly. And having said this, with a

respectful and barely perceptible smile of satisfaction addressed to me, he turned to the woman. And no sooner had he turned to her, than his whole face altered. He said, in a peculiar, scornful, hasty tone, such as is employed towards dogs: "What do you jabber in that careless way for? 'I sit in the taverns.' You do sit in the taverns, and that means, to talk business, that you are a prostitute," and again he uttered the word. "She does not know the name for herself." This tone offended me. "It is not our place to abuse her," said I. "If all of us lived according to the laws of God, there would be none of these women."

"That's the very point," said the landlord, with an awkward smile.

"Therefore, we should not reproach but pity them. Are they to blame?"

I do not recollect just what I said, but I do remember that I was vexed by the scornful tone of the landlord of these quarters which were filled with women, whom he called prostitutes, and that I felt compassion for this woman, and that I gave expression to both feelings. No sooner had I spoken thus, than the boards of the bed in the next compartment, whence the laugh had proceeded, began to creak, and above the partition, which did not reach to the ceiling, there appeared a woman's curly and dishevelled head, with small, swollen eyes, and a shining, red face, followed by a second, and then by a third. They were evidently standing on their beds, and all three

were craning their necks, and holding their breath with strained attention, and gazing silently at us.

A troubled pause ensued. The student, who had been smiling up to this time, became serious; the landlord grew confused and dropped his eyes. All the women held their breath, stared at me, and waited. I was more embarrassed than any of them. I had not, in the least, anticipated that a chance remark would produce such an effect. Like Ezekiel's field of death, strewn with dead men's bones, there was a quiver at the touch of the spirit, and the dead bones stirred. I had uttered an unpremeditated word of love and sympathy, and this word had acted on all as though they had only been waiting for this very remark, in order that they might cease to be corpses and might live. They all stared at me, and waited for what would come next. They waited for me to utter those words, and to perform those actions by reason of which these bones might draw together, clothe themselves with flesh, and spring into life. But I felt that I had no such words, no such actions, by means of which I could continue what I had begun; I was conscious, in the depths of my soul, that I had lied [that I was just like them], {9} and there was nothing further for me to say; and I began to inscribe on the cards the names and callings of all the persons in this set of apartments.

This incident led me into a fresh dilemma, to the thought of how these unfortunates also might be helped. In my self-delusion, I fancied that this would be very easy. I said to myself: "Here, we

will make a note of all these women also, and LATER ON when we [I did not specify to myself who "we" were] write every thing out, we will attend to these persons too." I imagined that we, the very ones who have brought and have been bringing these women to this condition for several generations, would take thought some fine day and reform all this. But, in the mean time, if I had only recalled my conversation with the disreputable woman who had been rocking the baby of the fever-stricken patient, I might have comprehended the full extent of the folly of such a supposition.

When we saw this woman with the baby, we thought that it was her child. To the question, "Who was she?" she had replied in a straightforward way that she was unmarried. She did not say--a prostitute. Only the master of the apartment made use of that frightful word. The supposition that she had a child suggested to me the idea of removing her from her position. I inquired:

"Is this your child?"

"No, it belongs to that woman yonder."

"Why are you taking care of it?"

"Because she asked me; she is dying."

Although my supposition proved to be erroneous, I continued my

conversation with her in the same spirit. I began to question her as to who she was, and how she had come to such a state. She related her history very readily and simply. She was a Moscow myeshchanka, the daughter of a factory hand. She had been left an orphan, and had been adopted by an aunt. From her aunt's she had begun to frequent the taverns. The aunt was now dead. When I asked her whether she did not wish to alter her mode of life, my question, evidently, did not even arouse her interest. How can one take an interest in the proposition of a man, in regard to something absolutely impossible? She laughed, and said: "And who would take me in with my yellow ticket?"

"Well, but if a place could be found somewhere as cook?" said I.

This thought occurred to me because she was a stout, ruddy woman, with a kindly, round, and rather stupid face. Cooks are often like that. My words evidently did not please her. She repeated:

"A cook--but I don't know how to make bread," said she, and she laughed. She said that she did not know how; but I saw from the expression of her countenance that she did not wish to become a cook, that she regarded the position and calling of a cook as low.

This woman, who in the simplest possible manner was sacrificing every thing that she had for the sick woman, like the widow in the Gospels, at the same time, like many of her companions, regarded the position

of a person who works as low and deserving of scorn. She had been brought up to live not by work, but by this life which was considered the natural one for her by those about her. In that lay her misfortune. And she fell in with this misfortune and clung to her position. This led her to frequent the taverns. Which of us--man or woman--will correct her false view of life? Where among us are the people to be found who are convinced that every laborious life is more worthy of respect than an idle life,--who are convinced of this, and who live in conformity with this belief, and who in conformity with this conviction value and respect people? If I had thought of this, I might have understood that neither I, nor any other person among my acquaintances, could heal this complaint.

I might have understood that these amazed and affected heads thrust over the partition indicated only surprise at the sympathy expressed for them, but not in the least a hope of reclamation from their dissolute life. They do not perceive the immorality of their life. They see that they are despised and cursed, but for what they are thus despised they cannot comprehend. Their life, from childhood, has been spent among just such women, who, as they very well know, always have existed, and are indispensable to society, and so indispensable that there are governmental officials to attend to their legal existence. Moreover, they know that they have power over men, and can bring them into subjection, and rule them often more than other women. They see that their position in society is recognized by women and men and the authorities, in spite of their

continual curses, and therefore, they cannot understand why they should reform.

In the course of one of the tours, one of the students told me that in a certain lodging, there was a woman who was bargaining for her thirteen-year-old daughter. Being desirous of rescuing this girl, I made a trip to that lodging expressly. Mother and daughter were living in the greatest poverty. The mother, a small, dark-complexioned, dissolute woman of forty, was not only homely, but repulsively homely. The daughter was equally disagreeable. To all my pointed questions about their life, the mother responded curtly, suspiciously, and in a hostile way, evidently feeling that I was an enemy, with evil intentions; the daughter made no reply, did not look at her mother, and evidently trusted the latter fully. They inspired me with no sincere pity, but rather with disgust. But I made up my mind that the daughter must be rescued, and that I would interest ladies who pitied the sad condition of these women, and send them hither. But if I had reflected on the mother's long life in the past, of how she had given birth to, nursed and reared this daughter in her situation, assuredly without the slightest assistance from outsiders, and with heavy sacrifices--if I had reflected on the view of life which this woman had formed, I should have understood that there was, decidedly, nothing bad or immoral in the mother's act: she had done and was doing for her daughter all that she could, that is to say, what she considered the best for herself. This daughter could be forcibly removed from her mother; but it would be impossible

to convince the mother that she was doing wrong, in selling her daughter. If any one was to be saved, then it must be this woman-- the mother ought to have been saved; [and that long before, from that view of life which is approved by every one, according to which a woman may live unmarried, that is, without bearing children and without work, and simply for the satisfaction of the passions. If I had thought of this, I should have understood that the majority of the ladies whom I intended to send thither for the salvation of that little girl, not only live without bearing children and without working, and serving only passion, but that they deliberately rear their daughters for the same life; one mother takes her daughter to the taverns, another takes hers to balls. But both mothers hold the same view of the world, namely, that a woman must satisfy man's passions, and that for this she must be fed, dressed, and cared for. Then how are our ladies to reform this woman and her daughter? {10}]