

CHAPTER XII.

What was its nature?

I had lived in the country, and there I was connected with the rustic poor. Not out of humility, which is worse than pride, but for the sake of telling the truth, which is indispensable for the understanding of the whole course of my thoughts and sentiments, I will say that in the country I did very little for the poor, but the demands which were made upon me were so modest that even this little was of use to the people, and formed around me an atmosphere of affection and union with the people, in which it was possible to soothe the gnawing sensation of remorse at the independence of my life. On going to the city, I had hoped to be able to live in the same manner. But here I encountered want of an entirely different sort. City want was both less real, and more exacting and cruel, than country poverty. But the principal point was, that there was so much of it in one spot, that it produced on me a frightful impression. The impression which I experienced in the Lyapinsky house had, at the very first, made me conscious of the deformity of my own life. This feeling was genuine and very powerful. But, notwithstanding its genuineness and power, I was, at that time, so weak that I feared the alteration in my life to which this feeling commended me, and I resorted to a compromise. I believed what

everybody told me, and everybody has said, ever since the world was made,--that there is nothing evil in wealth and luxury, that they are given by God, that one may continue to live as a rich man, and yet help the needy. I believed this, and I tried to do it. I wrote an essay, in which I summoned all rich people to my assistance. The rich people all acknowledged themselves morally bound to agree with me, but evidently they either did not wish to do any thing, or they could not do any thing or give any thing to the poor. I began to visit the poor, and I beheld what I had not in the least expected. On the one hand, I beheld in those dens, as I called them, people whom it was not conceivable that I should help, because they were working people, accustomed to labor and privation, and therefore standing much higher and having a much firmer foothold in life than myself; on the other hand, I saw unfortunate people whom I could not aid because they were exactly like myself. The majority of the unfortunates whom I saw were unhappy only because they had lost the capacity, desire, and habit of earning their own bread; that is to say, their unhappiness consisted in the fact that they were precisely such persons as myself.

I found no unfortunates who were sick, hungry, or cold, to whom I could render immediate assistance, with the solitary exception of hungry Agafya. And I became convinced, that, on account of my remoteness from the lives of those people whom I desired to help, it would be almost impossible to find any such unfortunates, because all actual wants had already been supplied by the very people among whom

these unfortunates live; and, most of all, I was convinced that money cannot effect any change in the life led by these unhappy people.

I was convinced of all this, but out of false shame at abandoning what I had once undertaken, because of my self-delusion as a benefactor, I went on with this matter for a tolerably long time,-- and would have gone on with it until it came to nothing of itself,-- so that it was with the greatest difficulty that, with the help of Ivan Fedotitch, I got rid, after a fashion, as well as I could, in the tavern of the Rzhanoff house, of the thirty-seven rubles which I did not regard as belonging to me.

Of course I might have gone on with this business, and have made out of it a semblance of benevolence; by urging the people who had promised me money, I might have collected more, I might have distributed this money, and consoled myself with my charity; but I perceived, on the one hand, that we rich people neither wish nor are able to share a portion of our a superfluity with the poor (we have so many wants of our own), and that money should not be given to any one, if the object really be to do good and not to give money itself at haphazard, as I had done in the Rzhanoff tavern. And I gave up the whole thing, and went off to the country with despair in my heart.

In the country I tried to write an essay about all this that I had experienced, and to tell why my undertaking had not succeeded. I

wanted to justify myself against the reproaches which had been made to me on the score of my article on the census; I wanted to convict society of its indifference, and to state the causes in which this city poverty has its birth, and the necessity of combating it, and the means of doing so which I saw.

I began this essay at once, and it seemed to me that in it I was saying a very great deal that was important. But toil as I would over it, and in spite of the abundance of materials, in spite of the superfluity of them even, I could not get through that essay; and so I did not finish it until the present year, because of the irritation under the influence of which I wrote, because I had not gone through all that was requisite in order to bear myself properly in relation to this essay, because I did not simply and clearly acknowledge the cause of all this,--a very simple cause, which had its root in myself.

In the domain of morals, one very remarkable and too little noted phenomenon presents itself.

If I tell a man who knows nothing about it, what I know about geology, astronomy, history, physics, and mathematics, that man receives entirely new information, and he never says to me: "Well, what is there new in that? Everybody knows that, and I have known it this long while." But tell that same man the most lofty truth, expressed in the clearest, most concise manner, as it has never

before been expressed, and every ordinary individual, especially one who takes no particular interest in moral questions, or, even more, one to whom the moral truth stated by you is displeasing, will infallibly say to you: "Well, who does not know that? That was known and said long ago." It really seems to him that this has been said long ago and in just this way. Only those to whom moral truths are dear and important know how important and precious they are, and with what prolonged labor the elucidation, the simplification, of moral truths, their transit from the state of a misty, indefinitely recognized supposition, and desire, from indistinct, incoherent expressions, to a firm and definite expression, unavoidably demanding corresponding concessions, are attained.

We have all become accustomed to think that moral instruction is a most absurd and tiresome thing, in which there can be nothing new or interesting; and yet all human life, together with all the varied and complicated activities, apparently independent, of morality, both governmental and scientific, and artistic and commercial, has no other aim than the greater and greater elucidation, confirmation, simplification, and accessibility of moral truth.

I remember that I was once walking along the street in Moscow, and in front of me I saw a man come out and gaze attentively at the stones of the sidewalk, after which he selected one stone, seated himself on it, and began to plane (as it seemed to me) or to rub it with the greatest diligence and force. "What is he doing to the sidewalk?" I

said to myself. On going close to him, I saw what the man was doing. He was a young fellow from a meat-shop; he was whetting his knife on the stone of the pavement. He was not thinking at all of the stones when he scrutinized them, still less was he thinking of them when he was accomplishing his task: he was whetting his knife. He was obliged to whet his knife so that he could cut the meat; but to me it seemed as though he were doing something to the stones of the sidewalk. Just so it appears as though humanity were occupied with commerce, conventions, wars, sciences, arts; but only one business is of importance to it, and with only one business is it occupied: it is elucidating to itself those moral laws by which it lives. The moral laws are already in existence; humanity is only elucidating them, and this elucidation seems unimportant and imperceptible for any one who has no need of moral laws, who does not wish to live by them. But this elucidation of the moral law is not only weighty, but the only real business of all humanity. This elucidation is imperceptible just as the difference between the dull and the sharp knife is imperceptible. The knife is a knife all the same, and for a person who is not obliged to cut any thing with this knife, the difference between the dull and the sharp one is imperceptible. For the man who has come to an understanding that his whole life depends on the greater or less degree of sharpness in the knife,--for such a man, every whetting of it is weighty, and that man knows that the knife is a knife only when it is sharp, when it cuts that which needs cutting.

This is what happened to me, when I began to write my essay. It seemed to me that I knew all about it, that I understood every thing connected with those questions which had produced on me the impressions of the Lyapinsky house, and the census; but when I attempted to take account of them and to demonstrate them, it turned out that the knife would not cut, and that it must be whetted. And it is only now, after the lapse of three years, that I have felt that my knife is sufficiently sharp, so that I can cut what I choose. I have learned very little that is new. My thoughts are all exactly the same, but they were duller then, and they all scattered and would not unite on any thing; there was no edge to them; they would not concentrate on one point, on the simplest and clearest decision, as they have now concentrated themselves.