

CHAPTER XIV.

I reached the same conclusion from a totally different point. On recalling all my relations with the city poor during that time, I saw that one of the reasons why I could not help the city poor was, that the poor were disingenuous and untruthful with me. They all looked upon me, not as a man, but as means. I could not get near them, and I thought that perhaps I did not understand how to do it; but without uprightness, no help was possible. How can one help a man who does not disclose his whole condition? At first I blamed them for this (it is so natural to blame some one else); but a remark from an observing man named Siutaeff, who was visiting me at the time, explained this matter to me, and showed me where the cause of my want of success lay. I remember that Siutaeff's remark struck me very forcibly at the time; but I only understood its full significance later on. It was at the height of my self-delusion. I was sitting with my sister, and Siutaeff was there also at her house; and my sister was questioning me about my undertaking. I told her about it, and, as always happens when you have no faith in your course, I talked to her with great enthusiasm and warmth, and at great length, of what I had done, and of what might possibly come of it. I told her every thing,--how we were going to keep track of pauperism in Moscow, how we were going to keep an eye on the orphans and old people, how we were going to send away all country people who had

grown poor here, how we were going to smooth the pathway to reform for the depraved; how, if only the matter could be managed, there would not be a man left in Moscow, who could not obtain assistance. My sister sympathized with me, and we discussed it. In the middle of our conversation, I glanced at Siutaeff. As I was acquainted with his Christian life, and with the significance which he attached to charity, I expected his sympathy, and spoke so that he understood this; I talked to my sister, but directed my remarks more at him. He sat immovable in his dark tanned sheepskin jacket,--which he wore, like all peasants, both out of doors and in the house,--and as though he did not hear us, but were thinking of his own affairs. His small eyes did not twinkle, and seemed to be turned inwards. Having finished what I had to say, I turned to him with a query as to what he thought of it.

"It's all a foolish business," said he.

"Why?"

"Your whole society is foolish, and nothing good can come out of it," he repeated with conviction.

"Why not? Why is it a stupid business to help thousands, at any rate hundreds, of unfortunate beings? Is it a bad thing, according to the Gospel, to clothe the naked, and feed the hungry?"

"I know, I know, but that is not what you are doing. Is it necessary to render assistance in that way? You are walking along, and a man asks you for twenty kopeks. You give them to him. Is that alms? Do you give spiritual alms,--teach him. But what is it that you have given? It was only for the sake of getting rid of him."

"No; and, besides, that is not what we are talking about. We want to know about this need, and then to help by both money and deeds; and to find work."

"You can do nothing with those people in that way."

"So they are to be allowed to die of hunger and cold?"

"Why should they die? Are there many of them there?"

"What, many of them?" said I, thinking that he looked at the matter so lightly because he was not aware how vast was the number of these people.

"Why, do you know," said I, "I believe that there are twenty thousand of these cold and hungry people in Moscow. And how about Petersburg and the other cities?"

He smiled.

"Twenty thousand! And how many households are there in Russia alone, do you think? Are there a million?"

"Well, what then?"

"What then?" and his eyes flashed, and he grew animated. "Come, let us divide them among ourselves. I am not rich, I will take two persons on the spot. There is the lad whom you took into your kitchen; I invited him to come to my house, and he did not come. Were there ten times as many, let us divide them among us. Do you take some, and I will take some. We will work together. He will see how I work, and he will learn. He will see how I live, and we will sit down at the same table together, and he will hear my words and yours. This charity society of yours is nonsense."

These simple words impressed me. I could not but admit their justice; but it seemed to me at that time, that, in spite of their truth, still that which I had planned might possibly prove of service. But the further I carried this business, the more I associated with the poor, the more frequently did this remark recur to my mind, and the greater was the significance which it acquired for me.

I arrive in a costly fur coat, or with my horses; or the man who lacks shoes sees my two-thousand-ruble apartments. He sees how, a little while ago, I gave five rubles without begrudging them, merely

because I took a whim to do so. He surely knows that if I give away rubles in that manner, it is only because I have hoarded up so many of them, that I have a great many superfluous ones, which I not only have not given away, but which I have easily taken from other people. [What else could he see in me but one of those persons who have got possession of what belongs to him? And what other feeling can he cherish towards me, than a desire to obtain from me as many of those rubles, which have been stolen from him and from others, as possible? I wish to get close to him, and I complain that he is not frank; and here I am, afraid to sit down on his bed for fear of getting lice, or catching something infectious; and I am afraid to admit him to my room, and he, coming to me naked, waits, generally in the vestibule, or, if very fortunate, in the ante-chamber. And yet I declare that he is to blame because I cannot enter into intimate relations with him, and because me is not frank.

Let the sternest man try the experiment of eating a dinner of five courses in the midst of people who have had very little or nothing but black bread to eat. Not a man will have the spirit to eat, and to watch how the hungry lick their chops around him. Hence, then, in order to eat daintily amid the famishing, the first indispensable requisite is to hide from them, in order that they may not see it. This is the very thing, and the first thing, that we do.

And I took a simpler view of our life, and perceived that an approach to the poor is not difficult to us through accidental causes, but

that we deliberately arrange our lives in such a fashion so that this approach may be rendered difficult.

Not only this; but, on taking a survey of our life, of the life of the wealthy, I saw that every thing which is considered desirable in that life consists in, or is inseparably bound up with, the idea of getting as far away from the poor as possible. In fact, all the efforts of our well-endowed life, beginning with our food, dress, houses, our cleanliness, and even down to our education,--every thing has for its chief object, the separation of ourselves from the poor. In procuring this seclusion of ourselves by impassable barriers, we spend, to put it mildly, nine-tenths of our wealth. The first thing that a man who was grown wealthy does is to stop eating out of one bowl, and he sets up crockery, and fits himself out with a kitchen and servants. And he feeds his servants high, too, so that their mouths may not water over his dainty viands; and he eats alone; and as eating in solitude is wearisome, he plans how he may improve his food and deck his table; and the very manner of taking his food (dinner) becomes a matter for pride and vain glory with him, and his manner of taking his food becomes for him a means of sequestering himself from other men. A rich man cannot think of such a thing as inviting a poor man to his table. A man must know how to conduct ladies to table, how to bow, to sit down, to eat, to rinse out the mouth; and only rich people know all these things. The same thing occurs in the matter of clothing. If a rich man were to wear ordinary clothing, simply for the purpose of protecting his body from

the cold,--a short jacket, a coat, felt and leather boots, an under-jacket, trousers, shirt,--he would require but very little, and he would not be unable, when he had two coats, to give one of them to a man who had none. But the rich man begins by procuring for himself clothing which consists entirely of separate pieces, and which is fit only for separate occasions, and which is, therefore, unsuited to the poor man. He has frock-coats, vests, pea-jackets, lacquered boots, cloaks, shoes with French heels, garments that are chopped up into bits to conform with the fashion, hunting-coats, travelling-coats, and so on, which can only be used under conditions of existence far removed from poverty. And his clothing also furnishes him with a means of keeping at a distance from the poor. The same is the case, and even more clearly, with his dwelling. In order that one may live alone in ten rooms, it is indispensable that those who live ten in one room should not see it. The richer a man is, the more difficult is he of access; the more porters there are between him and people who are not rich, the more impossible is it to conduct a poor man over rugs, and seat him in a satin chair.

The case is the same with the means of locomotion. The peasant driving in a cart, or a sledge, must be a very ill-tempered man when he will not give a pedestrian a lift; and there is both room for this and a possibility of doing it. But the richer the equipage, the farther is a man from all possibility of giving a seat to any person whatsoever. It is even said plainly, that the most stylish equipages are those meant to hold only one person.

It is precisely the same thing with the manner of life which is expressed by the word cleanliness.

Cleanliness! Who is there that does not know people, especially women, who reckon this cleanliness in themselves as a great virtue? and who is not acquainted with the devices of this cleanliness, which know no bounds, when it can command the labor of others? Which of the people who have become rich has not experienced in his own case, with what difficulty he carefully trained himself to this cleanliness, which only confirms the proverb, "Little white hands love other people's work"?

To-day cleanliness consists in changing your shirt once a day; to-morrow, in changing it twice a day. To-day it means washing the face, and neck, and hands daily; to-morrow, the feet; and day after to-morrow, washing the whole body every day, and, in addition and in particular, a rubbing-down. To-day the table-cloth is to serve for two days, to-morrow there must be one each day, then two a day. To-day the footman's hands must be clean; to-morrow he must wear gloves, and in his clean gloves he must present a letter on a clean salver. And there are no limits to this cleanliness, which is useless to everybody, and objectless, except for the purpose of separating oneself from others, and of rendering impossible all intercourse with them, when this cleanliness is attained by the labors of others.

Moreover, when I studied the subject, I became convinced that even that which is commonly called education is the very same thing.

The tongue does not deceive; it calls by its real name that which men understand under this name. What the people call culture is fashionable clothing, political conversation, clean hands,--a certain sort of cleanliness. Of such a man, it is said, in contradistinction to others, that he is an educated man. In a little higher circle, what they call education means the same thing as with the people; only to the conditions of education are added playing on the pianoforte, a knowledge of French, the writing of Russian without orthographical errors, and a still greater degree of external cleanliness. In a still more elevated sphere, education means all this with the addition of the English language, and a diploma from the highest educational institution. But education is precisely the same thing in the first, the second, and the third case. Education consists of those forms and acquirements which are calculated to separate a man from his fellows. And its object is identical with that of cleanliness,--to seclude us from the herd of poor, in order that they, the poor, may not see how we feast. But it is impossible to hide ourselves, and they do see us.

And accordingly I have become convinced that the cause of the inability of us rich people to help the poor of the city lies in the impossibility of our establishing intercourse with them; and that this impossibility of intercourse is caused by ourselves, by the

whole course of our lives, by all the uses which we make of our wealth. I have become convinced that between us, the rich and the poor, there rises a wall, reared by ourselves out of that very cleanliness and education, and constructed of our wealth; and that in order to be in a condition to help the poor, we must needs, first of all, destroy this wall; and that in order to do this, confrontation after Siutaeff's method should be rendered possible, and the poor distributed among us. And from another starting-point also I came to the same conclusion to which the current of my discussions as to the causes of the poverty in towns had led me: the cause was our wealth.] {14}