

CHAPTER III.

That very evening, on my return from the Lyapinsky house, I related my impressions to a friend. The friend, an inhabitant of the city, began to tell me, not without satisfaction, that this was the most natural phenomenon of town life possible, that I only saw something extraordinary in it because of my provincialism, that it had always been so, and always would be so, and that such must be and is the inevitable condition of civilization. In London it is even worse. Of course there is nothing wrong about it, and it is impossible to be displeased with it. I began to reply to my friend, but with so much heat and ill-temper, that my wife ran in from the adjoining room to inquire what had happened. It appears that, without being conscious of it myself, I had been shouting, with tears in my voice, and flourishing my hands at my friend. I shouted: "It's impossible to live thus, impossible to live thus, impossible!" They made me feel ashamed of my unnecessary warmth; they told me that I could not talk quietly about any thing, that I got disagreeably excited; and they proved to me, especially, that the existence of such unfortunates could not possibly furnish any excuse for imbittering the lives of those about me.

I felt that this was perfectly just, and held my peace; but in the depths of my soul I was conscious that I was in the right, and I could not regain my composure.

And the life of the city, which had, even before this, been so strange and repellent to me, now disgusted me to such a degree, that all the pleasures of a life of luxury, which had hitherto appeared to me as pleasures, become tortures to me. And try as I would, to discover in my own soul any justification whatever for our life, I could not, without irritation, behold either my own or other people's drawing-rooms, nor our tables spread in the lordly style, nor our equipages and horses, nor shops, theatres, and assemblies. I could not behold alongside these the hungry, cold, and down-trodden inhabitants of the Lyapinsky house. And I could not rid myself of the thought that these two things were bound up together, that the one arose from the other. I remember, that, as this feeling of my own guilt presented itself to me at the first blush, so it persisted in me, but to this feeling a second was speedily added which overshadowed it.

When I mentioned my impressions of the Lyapinsky house to my nearest friends and acquaintances, they all gave me the same answer as the first friend at whom I had begun to shout; but, in addition to this, they expressed their approbation of my kindness of heart and my sensibility, and gave me to understand that this sight had so especially worked upon me because I, Lyof Nikolaevitch, was very kind and good. And I willingly believed this. And before I had time to look about me, instead of the feeling of self-reproach and regret, which I had at first experienced, there came a sense of satisfaction with my own kindness, and a desire to exhibit it to people.

"It really must be," I said to myself, "that I am not especially responsible for this by the luxury of my life, but that it is the indispensable conditions of existence that are to blame. In truth, a change in my mode of life cannot rectify the evil which I have seen: by altering my manner of life, I shall only make myself and those about me unhappy, and the other miseries will remain the same as ever. And therefore my problem lies not in a change of my own life, as it had first seemed to me, but in aiding, so far as in me lies, in the amelioration of the situation of those unfortunate beings who have called forth my compassion. The whole point lies here,--that I am a very kind, amiable man, and that I wish to do good to my neighbors." And I began to think out a plan of beneficent activity, in which I might exhibit my benevolence. I must confess, however, that while devising this plan of beneficent activity, I felt all the time, in the depths of my soul, that that was not the thing; but, as often happens, activity of judgment and imagination drowned that voice of conscience within me. At that juncture, the census came up. This struck me as a means for instituting that benevolence in which I proposed to exhibit my charitable disposition. I knew of many charitable institutions and societies which were in existence in Moscow, but all their activity seemed to me both wrongly directed and insignificant in comparison with what I intended to do. And I devised the following scheme: to arouse the sympathy of the wealthy for the poverty of the city, to collect money, to get people together who were desirous of assisting in this matter, and to visit all the refuges of poverty in company with the census, and, in addition to the work of the census, to enter into communion with the unfortunate, to

learn the particulars of their necessities, and to assist them with money, with work, by sending them away from Moscow, by placing their children in school, and the old people in hospitals and asylums. And not only that, I thought, but these people who undertake this can be formed into a permanent society, which, by dividing the quarters of Moscow among its members, will be able to see to it that this poverty and beggary shall not be bred; they will incessantly annihilate it at its very inception; then they will fulfil their duty, not so much by healing as by a course of hygiene for the wretchedness of the city. I fancied that there would be no more simply needy, not to mention abjectly poor persons, in the town, and that all of us wealthy individuals would thereafter be able to sit in our drawing-rooms, and eat our five-course dinners, and ride in our carriages to theatres and assemblies, and be no longer annoyed with such sights as I had seen at the Lyapinsky house.

Having concocted this plan, I wrote an article on the subject; and before sending it to the printer, I went to some acquaintances, from whom I hoped for sympathy. I said the same thing to every one whom I met that day (and I applied chiefly to the rich), and nearly the same that I afterwards printed in my memoir; proposed to take advantage of the census to inquire into the wretchedness of Moscow, and to succor it, both by deeds and money, and to do it in such a manner that there should be no poor people in Moscow, and so that we rich ones might be able, with a quiet conscience, to enjoy the blessings of life to which we were accustomed. All listened to me attentively and seriously, but nevertheless the same identical thing happened with every one of them

without exception. No sooner did my hearers comprehend the question, than they seemed to feel awkward and somewhat mortified. They seemed to be ashamed, and principally on my account, because I was talking nonsense, and nonsense which it was impossible to openly characterize as such. Some external cause appeared to compel my hearers to be forbearing with this nonsense of mine.

"Ah, yes! of course. That would be very good," they said to me. "It is a self-understood thing that it is impossible not to sympathize with this. Yes, your idea is a capital one. I have thought of that myself, but . . . we are so indifferent, as a rule, that you can hardly count on much success . . . however, so far as I am concerned, I am, of course, ready to assist."

They all said something of this sort to me. They all agreed, but agreed, so it seemed to me, not in consequence of my convictions, and not in consequence of their own wish, but as the result of some outward cause, which did not permit them not to agree. I had already noticed this, and, since not one of them stated the sum which he was willing to contribute, I was obliged to fix it myself, and to ask: "So I may count on you for three hundred, or two hundred, or one hundred, or twenty-five rubles?" And not one of them gave me any money. I mention this because, when people give money for that which they themselves desire, they generally make haste to give it. For a box to see Sarah Bernhardt, they will instantly place the money in your hand, to clinch the bargain. Here, however, out of all those who agreed to contribute, and who expressed

their sympathy, not one of them proposed to give me the money on the spot, but they merely assented in silence to the sum which I suggested. In the last house which I visited on that day, in the evening, I accidentally came upon a large company. The mistress of the house had busied herself with charity for several years. Numerous carriages stood at the door, several lackeys in rich liveries were sitting in the ante-chamber. In the vast drawing-room, around two tables and lamps, sat ladies and young girls, in costly garments, dressing small dolls; and there were several young men there also, hovering about the ladies. The dolls prepared by these ladies were to be drawn in a lottery for the poor.

The sight of this drawing-room, and of the people assembled in it, struck me very unpleasantly. Not to mention the fact that the property of the persons there congregated amounted to many millions, not to mention the fact that the mere income from the capital here expended on dresses, laces, bronzes, brooches, carriages, horses, liveries, and lackeys, was a hundred-fold greater than all that these ladies could earn; not to mention the outlay, the trip hither of all these ladies and gentlemen; the gloves, linen, extra time, the candles, the tea, the sugar, and the cakes had cost the hostess a hundred times more than what they were engaged in making here. I saw all this, and therefore I could understand, that precisely here I should find no sympathy with my mission: but I had come in order to make my proposition, and, difficult as this was for me, I said what I intended. (I said very nearly the same thing that is contained in my printed article.)

Out of all the persons there present, one individual offered me money, saying that she did not feel equal to going among the poor herself on account of her sensibility, but that she would give money; how much money she would give, and when, she did not say. Another individual and a young man offered their services in going about among the poor, but I did not avail myself of their offer. The principal person to whom I appealed, told me that it would be impossible to do much because means were lacking. Means were lacking because all the rich people in Moscow were already on the lists, and all of them were asked for all that they could possibly give; because on all these benefactors rank, medals, and other dignities were bestowed; because in order to secure financial success, some new dignities must be secured from the authorities, and that this was the only practical means, but this was extremely difficult.

On my return home that night, I lay down to sleep not only with a presentment that my idea would come to nothing, but with shame and a consciousness that all day long I had been engaged in a very repulsive and disgraceful business. But I did not give up this undertaking. In the first place, the matter had been begun, and false shame would have prevented my abandoning it; in the second place, not only the success of this scheme, but the very fact that I was busying myself with it, afforded me the possibility of continuing to live in the conditions under which I was then living; failure entailed upon me the necessity of renouncing my present existence and of seeking new paths of life. And this I unconsciously dreaded, and I could not believe the inward voice,

and I went on with what I had begun.

Having sent my article to the printer, I read the proof of it to the City Council (Dum). I read it, stumbling, and blushing even to tears, I felt so awkward. And I saw that it was equally awkward for all my hearers. In answer to my question at the conclusion of my reading, as to whether the superintendents of the census would accept my proposition to retain their places with the object of becoming mediators between society and the needy, an awkward silence ensued. Then two orators made speeches. These speeches in some measure corrected the awkwardness of my proposal; sympathy for me was expressed, but the impracticability of my proposition, which all had approved, was demonstrated. Everybody breathed more freely. But when, still desirous of gaining my object, I afterwards asked the superintendents separately: Were they willing, while taking the census, to inquire into the needs of the poor, and to retain their posts, in order to serve as go-betweens between the poor and the rich? they all grew uneasy again. They seemed to say to me with their glances: "Why, we have just condoned your folly out of respect to you, and here you are beginning it again!" Such was the expression of their faces, but they assured me in words that they agreed; and two of them said in the very same words, as though they had entered into a compact together: "We consider ourselves morally bound to do this." The same impression was produced by my communication to the student-census-takers, when I said to them, that while taking our statistics, we should follow up, in addition to the objects of the census, the object of benevolence.

When we discussed this, I observed that they were ashamed to look the kind-hearted man, who was talking nonsense, in the eye. My article produced the same impression on the editor of the newspaper, when I handed it to him; on my son, on my wife, on the most widely different persons. All felt awkward, for some reason or other; but all regarded it as indispensable to applaud the idea itself, and all, immediately after this expression of approbation, began to express their doubts as to its success, and began for some reason (and all of them, too, without exception) to condemn the indifference and coldness of our society and of every one, apparently, except themselves.

In the depths of my own soul, I still continued to feel that all this was not at all what was needed, and that nothing would come of it; but the article was printed, and I prepared to take part in the census; I had contrived the matter, and now it was already carrying me a way with it.