

CHAPTER VII.

The unfortunates whom I noted down, divided themselves, according to my ideas, into three sections, namely: people who had lost their former advantageous position, and who were awaiting a return to it (there were people of this sort from both the lower and the higher class); next, dissolute women, of whom there are a great many in these houses; and a third division, children. More than all the rest, I found and noted down people of the first division, who had forfeited their former advantageous position, and who hoped to regain it. Of such persons, especially from the governmental and official world, there are a very great number in these houses. In almost all the lodgings which we entered, with the landlord, Ivan Fedotitch, he said to us: "Here you need not write down the lodger's card yourself; there is a man here who can do it, if he only happens not to be intoxicated to-day."

And Ivan Fedotitch called by name and patronymic this man, who was always one of those persons who had fallen from a lofty position. At Ivan Fedotitch's call, there crawled forth from some dark corner, a former wealthy member of the noble or official class, generally intoxicated and always undressed. If he was not drunk, he always readily acceded to the task proposed to him, nodded significantly, frowned, set down his remarks in learned phraseology, held the card neatly printed on red paper in his dirty, trembling hands, and glanced round at his fellow-lodgers with pride and contempt, as though now triumphing in his education over those

who had so often humiliated him. He evidently enjoyed intercourse with that world in which cards are printed on red paper, and with that world of which he had once formed a part. Nearly always, in answer to my inquiries about his life, the man began, not only willingly, but eagerly, to relate the story of the misfortunes which he had undergone,--which he had learned by rote like a prayer,--and particularly of his former position, in which he ought still to be by right of his education.

A great many such people were scattered over all the corners of the Rzhanoff house. But one lodging was densely occupied by them alone--both men and women. After we had already entered, Ivan Fedotitch said to us: "Now, here are some of the nobility." The lodging was perfectly crammed; nearly all of the people, forty in number, were at home. More demoralized countenances, unhappy, aged, and swollen, young, pallid, and distracted, were not to be seen in the whole building. I conversed with several of them. The story was nearly identical in all cases, only in various stages of development. Every one of them had been rich, or his father, his brother or his uncle was still wealthy, or his father or he himself had had a very fine position. Then misfortune had overtaken him, the blame for which rested either on envious people, or on his own kind-heartedness, or some special chance, and so he had lost every thing, and had been forced to condescend to these surroundings to which he was not accustomed, and which were hateful to him--among lice, rags, among drunkards and corrupt persons, and to nourish himself on bread and liver, and to extend his hand in beggary. All the thoughts, desires, memories of these people were directed exclusively to the past. The present

appeared to them something unreal, repulsive, and not worthy of attention. Not one of them had any present. They had only memories of the past, and expectations from the future, which might be realized at any moment, and for the realization of which only a very little was required; but this little they did not possess, it was nowhere to be obtained, and this had been ruining their whole future life in vain, in the case of one man, for a year, of a second for five years, and of a third for thirty years. All one needed was merely to dress respectably, so that he could present himself to a certain personage, who was well-disposed towards him another only needed to be able to dress, pay off his debts, and get to Orel; a third required to redeem a small property which was mortgaged, for the continuation of a law-suit, which must be decided in his favor, and then all would be well once more. They all declare that they merely require something external, in order to stand once more in the position which they regard as natural and happy in their own case.

Had my mind not been obscured by my pride as a benefactor, a glance at their faces, both old and young, which were mostly weak and sensitive, but amiable, would have given me to understand that their misfortunes were irreparable by any external means, that they could not be happy in any position whatever, if their views of life were to remain unchanged, that they were in no wise remarkable people, in remarkably unfortunate circumstances, but that they were the same people who surround us on all sides, and just like ourselves. I remember that intercourse with this sort of unfortunates was peculiarly difficult for me. I now understand why this was so; in them I beheld myself, as in a mirror. If I had

reflected on my own life and on the life of the people in our circle, I should have seen that no real difference existed between them.

If those about me dwell in spacious quarters, and in their own houses on the Sivtzevy Vrazhok and on the Dimitrovka, and not in the Rzhanoff house, and still eat and drink dainties, and not liver and herrings with bread, that does not prevent them from being exactly as unhappy. They are just as dissatisfied with their own positions, they mourn over the past, and pine for better things, and the improved position for which they long is precisely the same as that which the inhabitants of the Rzhanoff house long for; that is to say, one in which they may do as little work as possible themselves, and derive the utmost advantage from the labors of others. The difference is merely one of degrees and time. If I had reflected at that time, I should have understood this; but I did not reflect, and I questioned these people, and wrote them down, supposing, that, having learned all the particulars of their various conditions and necessities, I could aid them later on. I did not understand that such a man can only be helped by changing his views of the world. But in order to change the views of another, one must needs have better views himself, and live in conformity with them; but mine were precisely the same as theirs, and I lived in accordance with those views, which must undergo a change, in order that these people might cease to be unhappy.

I did not see that these people were unhappy, not because they had not, so to speak, nourishing food, but because their stomachs had been

spoiled, and because their appetites demanded not nourishing but irritating viands; and I did not perceive that, in order to help them, it was not necessary to give them food, but that it was necessary to heal their disordered stomachs. Although I am anticipating by so doing, I will mention here, that, out of all these persons whom I noted down, I really did not help a single one, in spite of the fact that for some of them, that was done which they desired, and that which, apparently, might have raised them. Three of their number were particularly well known to me. All three, after repeated rises and falls, are now in precisely the same situation in which they were three years ago.