

CHAPTER X.

This feeling of compassion for people, and of disgust with myself, which I had experienced in the Lyapinsky house, I experienced no longer. I was completely absorbed in the desire to carry out the scheme which I had concocted,--to do good to those people whom I should meet here. And, strange to say, it would appear, that, to do good--to give money to the needy--is a very good deed, and one that should dispose me to love for the people, but it turned out the reverse: this act produced in me ill-will and an inclination to condemn people. But during our first evening tour, a scene occurred exactly like that in the Lyapinsky house, and it called forth a wholly different sentiment.

It began by my finding in one set of apartments an unfortunate individual, of precisely the sort who require immediate aid. I found a hungry woman who had had nothing to eat for two days.

It came about thus: in one very large and almost empty night-lodging, I asked an old woman whether there were many poor people who had nothing to eat? The old woman reflected, and then told me of two; and then, as though she had just recollected, "Why, here is one of them," said she, glancing at one of the occupied bunks. "I think that woman has had no food."

"Really? Who is she?"

"She was a dissolute woman: no one wants any thing to do with her now, so she has no way of getting any thing. The landlady has had compassion on her, but now she means to turn her out . . . Agafya, hey there, Agafya!" cried the woman.

We approached, and something rose up in the bunk. It was a woman haggard and dishevelled, whose hair was half gray, and who was as thin as a skeleton, dressed in a ragged and dirty chemise, and with particularly brilliant and staring eyes. She looked past us with her staring eyes, clutched at her jacket with one thin hand, in order to cover her bony breast which was disclosed by her tattered chemise, and oppressed, she cried, "What is it? what is it?" I asked her about her means of livelihood. For a long time she did not understand, and said, "I don't know myself; they persecute me." I asked her,--it puts me to shame, my hand refuses to write it,--I asked her whether it was true that she had nothing to eat? She answered in the same hurried, feverish tone, staring at me the while,--"No, I had nothing yesterday, and I have had nothing today."

The sight of this woman touched me, but not at all as had been the case in the Lyapinsky house; there, my pity for these people made me instantly feel ashamed of myself: but here, I rejoiced because I had at last found what I had been seeking,--a hungry person.

I gave her a ruble, and I recollect being very glad that others saw it.

The old woman, on seeing this, immediately begged money of me also. It afforded me such pleasure to give, that, without finding out whether it was necessary to give or not, I gave something to the old woman too. The old woman accompanied me to the door, and the people standing in the corridor heard her blessing me. Probably the questions which I had put with regard to poverty, had aroused expectation, and several persons followed us. In the corridor also, they began to ask me for money. Among those who begged were some drunken men, who aroused an unpleasant feeling in me; but, having once given to the old woman, I had no might to refuse these people, and I began to give. As long as I continued to give, people kept coming up; and excitement ran through all the lodgings. People made their appearance on the stairs and galleries, and followed me. As I emerged into the court-yard, a little boy ran swiftly down one of the staircases thrusting the people aside. He did not see me, and exclaimed hastily: "He gave Agashka a ruble!" When he reached the ground, the boy joined the crowd which was following me. I went out into the street: various descriptions of people followed me, and asked for money. I distributed all my small change, and entered an open shop with the request that the shopkeeper would change a ten-ruble bill for me. And then the same thing happened as at the Lyapinsky house. A terrible confusion ensued. Old women, noblemen, peasants, and children crowded into the shop with outstretched hands; I gave, and interrogated some of them as to their lives, and took notes. The shopkeeper, turning up the furred points of the collar of his coat, sat like a stuffed creature, glancing at the crowd occasionally, and then fixing his eyes beyond them again. He evidently, like every one else, felt that this was foolish,

but he could not say so.

The poverty and beggary in the Lyapinsky house had horrified me, and I felt myself guilty of it; I felt the desire and the possibility of improvement. But now, precisely the same scene produced on me an entirely different effect; I experienced, in the first place, a malevolent feeling towards many of those who were besieging me; and in the second place, uneasiness as to what the shopkeepers and porters would think of me.

On my return home that day, I was troubled in my soul. I felt that what I had done was foolish and immoral. But, as is always the result of inward confusion, I talked a great deal about the plan which I had undertaken, as though I entertained not the slightest doubt of my success.

On the following day, I went to such of the people whom I had inscribed on my list, as seemed to me the most wretched of all, and those who, as it seemed to me, would be the easiest to help. As I have already said, I did not help any of these people. It proved to be more difficult to help them than I had thought. And either because I did not know how, or because it was impossible, I merely imitated these people, and did not help any one. I visited the Rzhanoff house several times before the final tour, and on every occasion the very same thing occurred: I was beset by a throng of beggars in whose mass I was completely lost. I felt the impossibility of doing any thing, because there were too many of

them, and because I felt ill-disposed towards them because there were so many of them; and in addition to this, each one separately did not incline me in his favor. I was conscious that every one of them was telling me an untruth, or less than the whole truth, and that he saw in me merely a purse from which money might be drawn. And it very frequently seemed to me, that the very money which they squeezed out of me, rendered their condition worse instead of improving it. The oftener I went to that house, the more I entered into intercourse with the people there, the more apparent became to me the impossibility of doing any thing; but still I did not give up any scheme until the last night tour.

The remembrance of that last tour is particularly mortifying to me. On other occasions I had gone thither alone, but twenty of us went there on this occasion. At seven o'clock, all who wished to take part in this final night round, began to assemble at my house. Nearly all of them were strangers to me,--students, one officer, and two of my society acquaintances, who, uttering the usual, "C'est tres interessant!" had asked me to include them in the number of the census-takers.

My worldly acquaintances had dressed up especially for this, in some sort of hunting-jacket, and tall, travelling boots, in a costume in which they rode and went hunting, and which, in their opinion, was appropriate for an excursion to a night-lodging-house. They took with them special notebooks and remarkable pencils. They were in that peculiarly excited state of mind in which men set off on a hunt, to a duel, or to the wars. The most apparent thing about them was their folly and the falseness of our

position, but all the rest of us were in the same false position. Before we set out, we held a consultation, after the fashion of a council of war, as to how we should begin, how divide our party, and so on.

This consultation was exactly such as takes place in councils, assemblages, committees; that is to say, each person spoke, not because he had any thing to say or to ask, but because each one cudgelled his brain for something that he could say, so that he might not fall short of the rest. But, among all these discussions, no one alluded to that beneficence of which I had so often spoken to them all. Mortifying as this was to me, I felt that it was indispensable that I should once more remind them of benevolence, that is, of the point, that we were to observe and take notes of all those in destitute circumstances whom we should encounter in the course of our rounds. I had always felt ashamed to speak of this; but now, in the midst of all our excited preparations for our expedition, I could hardly utter the words. All listened to me, as it seemed to me, with sorrow, and, at the same time, all agreed in words; but it was evident that they all knew that it was folly, and that nothing would come of it, and all immediately began again to talk about something else. This went on until the time arrived for us to set out, and we started.

We reached the tavern, roused the waiters, and began to sort our papers. When we were informed that the people had heard about this round, and were leaving their quarters, we asked the landlord to lock the gates; and we went ourselves into the yard to reason with the fleeing people,

assuring them that no one would demand their tickets. I remember the strange and painful impression produced on me by these alarmed night-lodgers: ragged, half-dressed, they all seemed tall to me by the light of the lantern and the gloom of the court-yard. Frightened and terrifying in their alarm, they stood in a group around the foul-smelling out-house, and listened to our assurances, but they did not believe us, and were evidently prepared for any thing, like hunted wild beasts, provided only that they could escape from us. Gentlemen in divers shapes--as policemen, both city and rural, and as examining judges, and judges--hunt them all their lives, in town and country, on the highway and in the streets, and in the taverns, and in night-lodging houses; and now, all of a sudden, these gentlemen had come and locked the gates, merely in order to count them: it was as difficult for them to believe this, as for hares to believe that dogs have come, not to chase but to count them. But the gates were locked, and the startled lodgers returned: and we, breaking up into groups, entered also. With me were the two society men and two students. In front of us, in the dark, went Vanya, in his coat and white trousers, with a lantern, and we followed. We went to quarters with which I was familiar. I knew all the establishments, and some of the people; but the majority of the people were new, and the spectacle was new, and more dreadful than the one which I had witnessed in the Lyapinsky house. All the lodgings were full, all the bunks were occupied, not by one person only, but often by two. The sight was terrible in that narrow space into which the people were huddled, and men and women were mixed together. All the women who were not dead drunk slept with men; and women with two children did the same.

The sight was terrible, on account of the poverty, dirt, rags, and terror of the people. And it was chiefly dreadful on account of the vast numbers of people who were in this situation. One lodging, and then a second like it, and a third, and a tenth, and a twentieth, and still there was no end to them. And everywhere there was the same foul odor, the same close atmosphere, the same crowding, the same mingling of the sexes, the same men and women intoxicated to stupidity, and the same terror, submission and guilt on all faces; and again I was overwhelmed with shame and pain, as in the Lyapinsky house, and I understood that what I had undertaken was abominable and foolish and therefore impracticable. And I no longer took notes of anybody, and I asked no questions, knowing that nothing would come of this.

I was deeply pained. In the Lyapinsky house I had been like a man who has seen a fearful wound, by chance, on the body of another man. He is sorry for the other man, he is ashamed that he has not pitied the man before, and he can still rise to the succor of the sufferer. But now I was like a physician, who has come with his medicine to the sick man, has uncovered his sore, and examined it, and who must confess to himself that every thing that he has done has been in vain, and that his remedy is good for nothing.