

CHAPTER XI.

This visit dealt the final blow to my self-delusion. It now appeared indisputable to me, that what I had undertaken was not only foolish but loathsome.

But, in spite of the fact that I was aware of this, it seemed to me that I could not abandon the whole thing on the spot. It seemed to me that I was bound to carry out this enterprise, in the first place, because by my article, by my visits and promises, I had aroused the expectations of the poor; in the second, because by my article also, and by my talk, I had aroused the sympathies of benevolent persons, many of whom had promised me their co-operation both in personal labor and in money. And I expected that both sets of people would turn to me for an answer to this.

What happened to me, so far as the appeal of the needy to me is concerned, was as follows: By letter and personal application I received more than a hundred; these applications were all from the wealthy-poor, if I may so express myself. I went to see some of them, and some of them received no answer. Nowhere did I succeed in doing any thing. All applications to me were from persons who had once occupied privileged positions (I thus designate those in which people receive more from others than they give), who had lost them, and who wished to occupy them again. To one, two hundred rubles were indispensable, in order that he might prop up a failing business, and complete the education of his

children which had been begun; another wanted a photographic outfit; a third wanted his debts paid, and respectable clothing purchased for him; a fourth needed a piano, in order to perfect himself and support his family by giving lessons. But the majority did not stipulate for any given sum of money, and simply asked for assistance; and when I came to examine into what was required, it turned out that their demands grew in proportion to the aid, and that there was not and could not be any way of satisfying them. I repeat, that it is very possible that this arose from the fact that I did not understand how; but I did not help any one, although I sometimes endeavored to do so.

A very strange and unexpected thing happened to me as regards the co-operation of the benevolently disposed. Out of all the persons who had promised me financial aid, and who had even stated the number of rubles, not a single one handed to me for distribution among the poor one solitary ruble. But according to the pledges which had been given me, I could reckon on about three thousand rubles; and out of all these people, not one remembered our former discussions, or gave me a single kopek. Only the students gave the money which had been assigned to them for their work on the census, twelve rubles, I think. So my whole scheme, which was to have been expressed by tens of thousands of rubles contributed by the wealthy, for hundreds and thousands of poor people who were to be rescued from poverty and vice, dwindled down to this, that I gave away, haphazard, a few scores of rubles to those people who asked me for them, and that there remained in my hands twelve rubies contributed by the students, and twenty-five sent to me by the City Council for my

labor as a superintendent, and I absolutely did not know to whom to give them.

The whole matter came to an end. And then, before my departure for the country, on the Sunday before carnival, I went to the Rzhanoff house in the morning, in order to get rid of those thirty-seven rubles before I should leave Moscow, and to distribute them to the poor. I made the round of the quarters with which I was familiar, and in them found only one sick man, to whom I gave five rubles. There was no one else there to give any to. Of course many began to beg of me. But as I had not known them at first, so I did not know them now, and I made up my mind to take counsel with Ivan Fedotitch, the landlord of the tavern, as to the persons upon whom it would be proper to bestow the remaining thirty-two rubies.

It was the first day of the carnival. Everybody was dressed up, and everybody was full-fed, and many were already intoxicated. In the courtyard, close to the house, stood an old man, a rag-picker, in a tattered smock and bast shoes, sorting over the booty in his basket, tossing out leather, iron, and other stuff in piles, and breaking into a merry song, with a fine, powerful voice. I entered into conversation with him. He was seventy years old, he was alone in the world, and supported himself by his calling of a rag-picker; and not only did he utter no complaints, but he said that he had plenty to eat and drink. I inquired of him as to especially needy persons. He flew into a rage, and said plainly that there were no needy people, except drunkards and lazy men; but, on

learning my object, he asked me for a five-kopek piece to buy a drink, and ran off to the tavern. I too entered the tavern to see Ivan Fedotitch, and commission him to distribute the money which I had left. The tavern was full; gayly-dressed, intoxicated girls were flitting in and out; all the tables were occupied; there were already a great many drunken people, and in the small room the harmonium was being played, and two persons were dancing. Out of respect to me, Ivan Fedotitch ordered that the dance should be stopped, and seated himself with me at a vacant table. I said to him, that, as he knew his tenants, would not he point out to me the most needy among them; that I had been entrusted with the distribution of a little money, and, therefore, would he indicate the proper persons? Good-natured Ivan Fedotitch (he died a year later), although he was pressed with business, broke away from it for a time, in order to serve me. He meditated, and was evidently undecided. An elderly waiter heard us, and joined the conference.

They began to discuss the claims of persons, some of whom I knew, but still they could not come to any agreement. "The Paramonovna," suggested the waiter. "Yes, that would do. Sometimes she has nothing to eat. Yes, but then she tipples."--"Well, what of that? That makes no difference."--"Well, Sidoron Ivanovitch has children. He would do." But Ivan Fedotitch had his doubts about Sidoron Ivanovitch also. "Akulina shall have some. There, now, give something to the blind." To this I responded. I saw him at once. He was a blind old man of eighty years, without kith or kin. It seemed as though no condition could be more painful, and I went immediately to see him. He was lying on a feather-

bed, on a high bedstead, drunk; and, as he did not see me, he was scolding his comparatively youthful female companion in a frightful bass voice, and in the very worst kind of language. They also summoned an armless boy and his mother. I saw that Ivan Fedotitch was in great straits, on account of his conscientiousness, for he knew that whatever was given would immediately pass to his tavern. But I had to get rid of my thirty-two rubles, so I insisted; and in one way and another, and half wrongfully to boot, we assigned and distributed them. Those who received them were mostly well dressed, and we had not far to go to find them, as they were there in the tavern. The armless boy appeared in wrinkled boots, and a red shirt and vest. With this my charitable career came to an end, and I went off to the country; irritated at others, as is always the case, because I myself had done a stupid and a bad thing. My benevolence had ended in nothing, and it ceased altogether, but the current of thoughts and feelings which it had called up with me not only did not come to an end, but the inward work went on with redoubled force.