

CHAPTER XIII.

I remember that during the entire period of my unsuccessful efforts at helping the inhabitants of the city, I presented to myself the aspect of a man who should attempt to drag another man out of a swamp while he himself was standing on the same unstable ground. Every attempt of mine had made me conscious of the untrustworthy character of the soil on which I stood. I felt that I was in the swamp myself, but this consciousness did not cause me to look more narrowly at my own feet, in order to learn upon what I was standing; I kept on seeking some external means, outside myself, of helping the existing evil.

I then felt that my life was bad, and that it was impossible to live in that manner. But from the fact that my life was bad, and that it was impossible to live in that manner, I did not draw the very simple and clear deduction that it was necessary to amend my life and to live better, but I knew the terrible deduction that in order to live well myself, I must needs reform the lives of others; and so I began to reform the lives of others. I lived in the city, and I wished to reform the lives of those who lived in the city; but I soon became convinced that this I could not by any possibility accomplish, and I began to meditate on the inherent characteristics of city life and city poverty.

"What are city life and city poverty? Why, when I am living in the city, cannot I help the city poor?"

I asked myself. I answered myself that I could not do any thing for them, in the first place, because there were too many of them here in one spot; in the second place, because all the poor people here were entirely different from the country poor. Why were there so many of them here? and in what did their peculiarity, as opposed to the country poor, consist? There was one and the same answer to both questions. There were a great many of them here, because here all those people who have no means of subsistence in the country collect around the rich; and their peculiarity lies in this, that they are not people who have come from the country to support themselves in the city (if there are any city paupers, those who have been born here, and whose fathers and grandfathers were born here, then those fathers and grandfathers came hither for the purpose of earning their livelihood). What is the meaning of this: to earn one's livelihood in the city? In the words "to earn one's livelihood in the city," there is something strange, resembling a jest, when you reflect on their significance. How is it that people go from the country,--that is to say, from the places where there are forests, meadows, grain, and cattle, where all the wealth of the earth lies,--to earn their livelihood in a place where there are neither trees, nor grass, nor even land, and only stones and dust? What is the significance of the words "to earn a livelihood in the city," which are in such constant use, both by those who earn the livelihood, and by those who furnish it, as though it were something perfectly clear and comprehensible?

I recall the hundreds and thousands of city people, both those who live well and the needy, with whom I have conversed on the reason why they came hither: and all without exception said, that they had come from the country to earn their living; that in Moscow, where people neither sow nor reap,--that in Moscow there is plenty of every thing, and that, therefore, it is only in Moscow that they can earn the money which they require in the country for bread and a cottage and a horse, and articles of prime necessity. But assuredly, in the country lies the source of all riches; there only is real wealth,--bread, and forests, and horses, and every thing. And why, above all, take away from the country that which dwellers in the country need,--flour, oats, horses, and cattle?

Hundreds of times did I discuss this matter with peasants living in town; and from my discussions with them, and from my observations, it has been made apparent to me, that the congregation of country people in the city is partly indispensable because they cannot otherwise support themselves, partly voluntary, and that they are attracted to the city by the temptations of the city.

It is true, that the position of the peasant is such that, for the satisfaction of his demands made on him in the country, he cannot extricate himself otherwise than by selling the grain and the cattle which he knows will be indispensable to him; and he is forced, whether he will or no, to go to the city in order there to win back his bread. But it is also true, that the luxury of city life, and the comparative ease with which money is there to be earned, attract him thither; and under

the pretext of gaining his living in the town, he betakes himself thither in order that he may have lighter work, better food, and drink tea three times a day, and dress well, and even lead a drunken and dissolute life. The cause of both is identical,--the transfer of the riches of the producers into the hands of non-producers, and the accumulation of wealth in the cities. And, in point of fact, when autumn has come, all wealth is collected in the country. And instantly there arise demands for taxes, recruits, the temptations of vodka, weddings, festivals; petty pedlers make their rounds through the villages, and all sorts of other temptations crop up; and by this road, or, if not, by some other, wealth of the most varied description--vegetables, calves, cows, horses, pigs, chickens, eggs, butter, hemp, flax, rye, oats, buckwheat, pease, hempseed, and flaxseed--all passes into the hands of strangers, is carried off to the towns, and thence to the capitals. The countryman is obliged to surrender all this to satisfy the demands that are made upon him, and temptations; and, having parted with his wealth, he is left with an insufficiency, and he is forced to go whither his wealth has been carried and there he tries, in part, to obtain the money which he requires for his first needs in the country, and in part, being himself led away by the blandishments of the city, he enjoys, in company with others, the wealth that has there accumulated. Everywhere, throughout the whole of Russia,--yes, and not in Russia alone, I think, but throughout the whole world,--the same thing goes on. The wealth of the rustic producers passes into the hands of traders, landed proprietors, officials, and factory-owners; and the people who receive this wealth wish to enjoy it. But it is only in the city that they can derive full

enjoyment from this wealth. In the country, in the first place, it is difficult to satisfy all the requirements of rich people, on account of the sparseness of the population; banks, shops, hotels, every sort of artisan, and all sorts of social diversions, do not exist there. In the second place, one of the chief pleasures procured by wealth--vanity, the desire to astonish and outshine other people--is difficult to satisfy in the country; and this, again, on account of the lack of inhabitants. In the country, there is no one to appreciate elegance, no one to be astonished. Whatever adornments in the way of pictures and bronzes the dweller in the country may procure for his house, whatever equipages and toilets he may provide, there is no one to see them and envy them, and the peasants cannot judge of them. [And, in the third place, luxury is even disagreeable and dangerous in the country for the man possessed of a conscience and fear. It is an awkward and delicate matter, in the country, to have baths of milk, or to feed your puppies on it, when directly beside you there are children who have no milk; it is an awkward and delicate matter to build pavilions and gardens in the midst of people who live in cots banked up with dung, which they have no means of warming. In the country there is no one to keep the stupid peasants in order, and in their lack of cultivation they might disarrange all this.]

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And accordingly rich people congregate, and join themselves to other rich people with similar requirements, in the city, where the gratification of every luxurious taste is carefully protected by a numerous police force. Well-rooted inhabitants of the city of this sort, are the governmental

officials; every description of artisan and professional man has sprung up around them, and with them the wealthy join their forces. All that a rich man has to do there is to take a fancy to a thing, and he can get it. It is also more agreeable for a rich man to live there, because there he can gratify his vanity; there is some one with whom he can vie in luxury; there is some one to astonish, and there is some one to outshine. But the principal reason why it is more comfortable in the city for a rich man is that formerly, in the country, his luxury made him awkward and uneasy; while now, on the contrary, it would be awkward for him not to live luxuriously, not to live like all his peers around him. That which seemed dreadful and awkward in the country, here appears to be just as it should be. [Rich people congregate in the city; and there, under the protection of the authorities, they calmly demand every thing that is brought thither from the country. And the countryman is, in some measure, compelled to go thither, where this uninterrupted festival of the wealthy which demands all that is taken from him is in progress, in order to feed upon the crumbs which fall from the tables of the rich; and partly, also, because, when he beholds the care-free, luxurious life, approved and protected by everybody, he himself becomes desirous of regulating his life in such a way as to work as little as possible, and to make as much use as possible of the labors of others.

And so he betakes himself to the city, and finds employment about the wealthy, endeavoring, by every means in his power, to entice from them that which he is in need of, and conforming to all those conditions which the wealthy impose upon him, he assists in the gratification of all their

whims; he serves the rich man in the bath and in the inn, and as cab-driver and prostitute, and he makes for him equipages, toys, and fashions; and he gradually learns from the rich man to live in the same manner as the latter, not by labor, but by divers tricks, getting away from others the wealth which they have heaped together; and he becomes corrupt, and goes to destruction. And this colony, demoralized by city wealth, constitutes that city pauperism which I desired to aid and could not.

All that is necessary, in fact, is for us to reflect on the condition of these inhabitants of the country, who have removed to the city in order to earn their bread or their taxes,--when they behold, everywhere around them, thousands squandered madly, and hundreds won by the easiest possible means; when they themselves are forced by heavy toil to earn kopeks,--and we shall be amazed that all these people should remain working people, and that they do not all of them take to an easier method of getting gain,--by trading, peddling, acting as middlemen, begging, vice, rascality, and even robbery. Why, we, the participants in that never-ceasing orgy which goes on in town, can become so accustomed to our life, that it seems to us perfectly natural to dwell alone in five huge apartments, heated by a quantity of beech logs sufficient to cook the food for and to warm twenty families; to drive half a verst with two trotters and two men-servants; to cover the polished wood floor with rugs; and to spend, I will not say, on a ball, five or ten thousand rubles, and twenty-five thousand on a Christmas-tree. But a man who is in need of ten rubles to buy bread for his family, or whose last sheep

has been seized for a tax-debt of seven rubles, and who cannot raise those rubles by hard labor, cannot grow accustomed to this. We think that all this appears natural to poor people there are even some ingenuous persons who say in all seriousness, that the poor are very grateful to us for supporting them by this luxury.] {96}

But poor people are not devoid of human understanding simply because they are poor, and they judge precisely as we do. As the first thought that occurs to us on hearing that such and such a man has gambled away or squandered ten or twenty thousand rubles, is: "What a foolish and worthless fellow he is to uselessly squander so much money! and what a good use I could have made of that money in a building which I have long been in need of, for the improvement of my estate, and so forth!"--just so do the poor judge when they behold the wealth which they need, not for caprices, but for the satisfaction of their actual necessities, of which they are frequently deprived, flung madly away before their eyes. We make a very great mistake when we think that the poor can judge thus, reason thus, and look on indifferently at the luxury which surrounds them.

They never have acknowledged, and they never will acknowledge, that it can be just for some people to live always in idleness, and for other people to fast and toil incessantly; but at first they are amazed and insulted by this; then they scrutinize it more attentively, and, seeing that these arrangements are recognized as legitimate, they endeavor to free themselves from toil, and to take part in the idleness. Some

succeed in this, and they become just such carousers themselves; others gradually prepare themselves for this state; others still fail, and do not attain their goal, and, having lost the habit of work, they fill up the disorderly houses and the night-lodging houses.

Two years ago, we took from the country a peasant boy to wait on table. For some reason, he did not get on well with the footman, and he was sent away: he entered the service of a merchant, won the favor of his master, and now he goes about with a vest and a watch-chain, and dandified boots. In his place, we took another peasant, a married man: he became a drunkard, and lost money. We took a third: he took to drink, and, having drank up every thing he had, he suffered for a long while from poverty in the night-lodging house. An old man, the cook, took to drink and fell sick. Last year a footman who had formerly been a hard drinker, but who had refrained from liquor for five years in the country, while living in Moscow without his wife who encouraged him, took to drink again, and ruined his whole life. A young lad from our village lives with my brother as a table-servant. His grandfather, a blind old man, came to me during my sojourn in the country, and asked me to remind this grandson that he was to send ten rubies for the taxes, otherwise it would be necessary for him to sell his cow. "He keeps saying, I must dress decently," said the old man: "well, he has had some shoes made, and that's all right; but what does he want to set up a watch for?" said the grandfather, expressing in these words the most senseless supposition that it was possible to originate. The supposition really was senseless, if we take into consideration that the old man throughout Lent had eaten

no butter, and that he had no split wood because he could not possibly pay one ruble and twenty kopeks for it; but it turned out that the old man's senseless jest was an actual fact. The young fellow came to see me in a fine black coat, and shoes for which he had paid eight rubles. He had recently borrowed ten rubles from my brother, and had spent them on these shoes. And my children, who have known the lad from childhood, told me that he really considers it indispensable to fit himself out with a watch. He is a very good boy, but he thinks that people will laugh at him so long as he has no watch; and a watch is necessary. During the present year, a chambermaid, a girl of eighteen, entered into a connection with the coachman in our house. She was discharged. An old woman, the nurse, with whom I spoke in regard to the unfortunate girl, reminded me of a girl whom I had forgotten. She too, ten years ago, during a brief stay of ours in Moscow, had become connected with a footman. She too had been discharged, and she had ended in a disorderly house, and had died in the hospital before reaching the age of twenty. It is only necessary to glance about one, to be struck with terror at the pest which we disseminate directly by our luxurious life among the people whom we afterwards wish to help, not to mention the factories and establishments which serve our luxurious tastes.

[And thus, having penetrated into the peculiar character of city poverty, which I was unable to remedy, I perceived that its prime cause is this,

that I take absolute necessaries from the dwellers in the country, and carry them all to the city. The second cause is this, that by making use

here, in the city, of what I have collected in the country, I tempt and lead astray, by my senseless luxury, those country people who come hither because of me, in order in some way to get back what they have been deprived of in the country.] {99}