

CHAPTER XV.

I began to examine the matter from a third and wholly personal point of view. Among the phenomena which particularly impressed me, during the period of my charitable activity, there was yet another, and a very strange one, for which I could for a long time find no explanation. It was this: every time that I chanced, either on the street or in the house, to give some small coin to a poor man, without saying any thing to him, I saw, or thought that I saw, contentment and gratitude on the countenance of the poor man, and I myself experienced in this form of benevolence an agreeable sensation. I saw that I had done what the man wished and expected from me. But if I stopped the poor man, and sympathetically questioned him about his former and his present life, I felt that it was no longer possible to give three or twenty kopeks, and I began to fumble in my purse for money, in doubt as to how much I ought to give, and I always gave more; and I always noticed that the poor man left me dissatisfied. But if I entered into still closer intercourse with the poor man, then my doubts as to how much to give increased also; and, no matter how much I gave, the poor man grew ever more sullen and discontented. As a general rule, it always turned out thus, that if I gave, after conversation with a poor man, three rubles or even more, I almost always beheld gloom, displeasure, and even ill-will, on the countenance of the poor man; and I have even known it to happen, that, having received ten rubles, he went off without so much as saying "Thank you," exactly as though I had insulted him.

And thereupon I felt awkward and ashamed, and almost guilty. But if I followed up a poor man for weeks and months and years, and assisted him, and explained my views to him, and associated with him, our relations became a torment, and I perceived that the man despised me. And I felt that he was in the right.

If I go out into the street, and he, standing in that street, begs of me among the number of the other passers-by, people who walk and ride past him, and I give him money, I then am to him a passer-by, and a good, kind passer-by, who bestows on him that thread from which a shirt is made for the naked man; he expects nothing more than the thread, and if I give it he thanks me sincerely. But if I stop him, and talk with him as man with man, I thereby show him that I desire to be something more than a mere passer-by. If, as often happens, he weeps while relating to me his woes, then he sees in me no longer a passer-by, but that which I desire that he should see: a good man. But if I am a good man, my goodness cannot pause at a twenty-kopek piece, nor at ten rubles, nor at ten thousand; it is impossible to be a little bit of a good man. Let us suppose that I have given him a great deal, that I have fitted him out, dressed him, set him on his feet so that he can live without outside assistance; but for some reason or other, though misfortune or his own weakness or vices, he is again without that coat, that linen, and that money which I have given him; he is again cold and hungry, and he has come again to me,--how can I refuse him? [For if the cause of my action consisted in the attainment of a definite, material end, on giving him so many rubles or such and

such a coat I might be at ease after having bestowed them. But the cause of my action is not this: the cause is, that I want to be a good man, that is to say, I want to see myself in every other man. Every man understands goodness thus, and in no other manner.] {111} And therefore, if he should drink away every thing that you had given him twenty times, and if he should again be cold and hungry, you cannot do otherwise than give him more, if you are a good man; you can never cease giving to him, if you have more than he has. And if you draw back, you will thereby show that every thing that you have done, you have done not because you are a good man, but because you wished to appear a good man in his sight, and in the sight of men.

And thus in the case with the men from whom I chanced to recede, to whom I ceased to give, and, by this action, denied good, I experienced a torturing sense of shame.

What sort of shame was this? This shame I had experienced in the Lyapinsky house, and both before and after that in the country, when I happened to give money or any thing else to the poor, and in my expeditions among the city poor.

A mortifying incident that occurred to me not long ago vividly reminded me of that shame, and led me to an explanation of that shame which I had felt when bestowing money on the poor.

[This happened in the country. I wanted twenty kopeks to give to a poor

pilgrim; I sent my son to borrow them from some one; he brought the pilgrim a twenty-kopek piece, and told me that he had borrowed it from the cook. A few days afterwards some more pilgrims arrived, and again I was in want of a twenty-kopek piece. I had a ruble; I recollected that I was in debt to the cook, and I went to the kitchen, hoping to get some more small change from the cook. I said: "I borrowed a twenty-kopek piece from you, so here is a ruble." I had not finished speaking, when the cook called in his wife from another room: "Take it, Parasha," said he. I, supposing that she understood what I wanted, handed her the ruble. I must state that the cook had only lived with me a week, and, though I had seen his wife, I had never spoken to her. I was just on the point of saying to her that she was to give me some small coins, when she bent swiftly down to my hand, and tried to kiss it, evidently imagining that I had given her the ruble. I muttered something, and quitted the kitchen. I was ashamed, ashamed to the verge of torture, as I had not been for a long time. I shrank together; I was conscious that I was making grimaces, and I groaned with shame as I fled from the kitchen. This utterly unexpected, and, as it seemed to me, utterly undeserved shame, made a special impression on me, because it was a long time since I had been mortified, and because I, as an old man, had so lived, it seemed to me, that I had not merited this shame. I was forcibly struck by this. I told the members of my household about it, I told my acquaintances, and they all agreed that they should have felt the same. And I began to reflect: why had this caused me such shame? To this, something which had happened to me in Moscow furnished me with an answer.

I meditated on that incident, and the shame which I had experienced in the presence of the cook's wife was explained to me, and all those sensations of mortification which I had undergone during the course of my Moscow benevolence, and which I now feel incessantly when I have occasion to give any one any thing except that petty alms to the poor and to pilgrims, which I have become accustomed to bestow, and which I consider a deed not of charity but of courtesy. If a man asks you for a light, you must strike a match for him, if you have one. If a man asks for three or for twenty kopeks, or even for several rubles, you must give them if you have them. This is an act of courtesy and not of charity.]

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This was the case in question: I have already mentioned the two peasants with whom I was in the habit of sawing wood three years ago. One Saturday evening at dusk, I was returning to the city in their company. They were going to their employer to receive their wages. As we were crossing the Dragomilovsky bridge, we met an old man. He asked alms, and I gave him twenty kopeks. I gave, and reflected on the good effect which my charity would have on Semyon, with whom I had been conversing on religious topics. Semyon, the Vladimir peasant, who had a wife and two children in Moscow, halted also, pulled round the skirt of his kaftan, and got out his purse, and from this slender purse he extracted, after some fumbling, three kopeks, handed it to the old man, and asked for two kopeks in change. The old man exhibited in his hand two three-kopek pieces and one kopek. Semyon looked at them, was about to take the kopek, but thought better of it, pulled off his hat, crossed himself, and

walked on, leaving the old man the three-kopek piece.

I was fully acquainted with Semyon's financial condition. He had no property at home at all. The money which he had laid by on the day when he gave three kopeks amounted to six rubles and fifty kopeks.

Accordingly, six rubles and twenty kopeks was the sum of his savings. My reserve fund was in the neighborhood of six hundred thousand. I had a wife and children, Semyon had a wife and children. He was younger than I, and his children were fewer in number than mine; but his children were small, and two of mine were of an age to work, so that our position, with the exception of the savings, was on an equality; mine was somewhat the more favorable, if any thing. He gave three kopeks, I gave twenty. What did he really give, and what did I really give? What ought I to have given, in order to do what Semyon had done? he had six hundred kopeks; out of this he gave one, and afterwards two. I had six hundred thousand rubles. In order to give what Semyon had given, I should have been obliged to give three thousand rubles, and ask for two thousand in change, and then leave the two thousand with the old man, cross myself, and go my way, calmly conversing about life in the factories, and the cost of liver in the Smolensk market.

I thought of this at the time; but it was only long afterwards that I was in a condition to draw from this incident that deduction which inevitably results from it. This deduction is so uncommon and so singular, apparently, that, in spite of its mathematical infallibility, one requires time to grow used to it. It does seem as though there must be

some mistake, but mistake there is none. There is merely the fearful mist of error in which we live.

[This deduction, when I arrived at it, and when I recognized its undoubted truth, furnished me with an explanation of my shame in the presence of the cook's wife, and of all the poor people to whom I had given and to whom I still give money.

What, in point of fact, is that money which I give to the poor, and which the cook's wife thought I was giving to her? In the majority of cases, it is that portion of my substance which it is impossible even to express in figures to Semyon and the cook's wife,--it is generally one millionth part or about that. I give so little that the bestowal of any money is not and cannot be a deprivation to me; it is only a pleasure in which I amuse myself when the whim seizes me. And it was thus that the cook's wife understood it. If I give to a man who steps in from the street one ruble or twenty kopeks, why should not I give her a ruble also? In the opinion of the cook's wife, such a bestowal of money is precisely the same as the flinging of honey-cakes to the people by gentlemen; it furnishes the people who have a great deal of superfluous cash with amusement. I was mortified because the mistake made by the cook's wife demonstrated to me distinctly the view which she, and all people who are not rich, must take of me: "He is flinging away his folly, i.e., his unearned money."

As a matter of fact, what is my money, and whence did it come into my

possession? A portion of it I accumulated from the land which I received from my father. A peasant sold his last sheep or cow in order to give the money to me. Another portion of my money is the money which I have received for my writings, for my books. If my books are hurtful, I only lead astray those who purchase them, and the money which I receive for them is ill-earned money; but if my books are useful to people, then the issue is still more disastrous. I do not give them to people: I say, "Give me seventeen rubles, and I will give them to you." And as the peasant sells his last sheep, in this case the poor student or teacher, or any other poor man, deprives himself of necessaries in order to give me this money. And so I have accumulated a great deal of money in that way, and what do I do with it? I take that money to the city, and bestow it on the poor, only when they fulfil my caprices, and come hither to the city to clean my sidewalk, lamps, and shoes; to work for me in factories. And in return for this money, I force from them every thing that I can; that is to say, I try to give them as little as possible, and to receive as much as possible from them. And all at once I begin, quite unexpectedly, to bestow this money as a simple gift, on these same poor persons, not on all, but on those to whom I take a fancy. Why should not every poor person expect that it is quite possible that the luck may fall to him of being one of those with whom I shall amuse myself by distributing my superfluous money? And so all look upon me as the cook's wife did.

And I had gone so far astray that this taking of thousands from the poor with one hand, and this flinging of kopeks with the other, to those to

whom the whim moved me to give, I called good. No wonder that I felt ashamed.] {116}

Yes, before doing good it was needful for me to stand outside of evil, in such conditions that I might cease to do evil. But my whole life is evil. I may give away a hundred thousand rubles, and still I shall not be in a position to do good because I shall still have five hundred thousand left. Only when I have nothing shall I be in a position to do the least particle of good, even as much as the prostitute did which she nursed the sick women and her child for three days. And that seemed so little to me! And I dared to think of good myself! That which, on the first occasion, told me, at the sight of the cold and hungry in the Lyapinsky house, that I was to blame for this, and that to live as I live is impossible, and impossible, and impossible,--that alone was true.

What, then, was I to do?