

VIII. THE SECOND CONFESSION

Suddenly the sound of the priest's footsteps roused me from this reverie.

"Good morning to you," he said as he smoothed his grey hair with his hand. "What can I do for you?"

I besought him to give me his blessing, and then kissed his small, wizened hand with great fervour. After I had explained to him my errand he said nothing, but moved away towards the ikons, and began to read the exhortation: whereupon I overcame my shame, and told him all that was in my heart. Finally he laid his hands upon my head, and pronounced in his even, resonant voice the words: "My son, may the blessing of Our Heavenly Father be upon thee, and may He always preserve thee in faithfulness, loving-kindness, and meekness. Amen."

I was entirely happy. Tears of joy coursed down my face as I kissed the hem of his cassock and then raised my head again. The face of the priest expressed perfect tranquillity. So keenly did I feel the joy of reconciliation that, fearing in any way to dispel it, I took hasty leave of him, and, without looking to one side of me or the other (in order that my attention might not be distracted), left the grounds and re-entered the rickety, battered drozhki. Yet the joltings of the vehicle and the variety of objects which flitted past my eyes soon dissipated that feeling, and I became filled with nothing but the idea

that the priest must have thought me the finest-spirited young man he had ever met, or ever would meet, in the whole of his life. Indeed, I reflected, there could not be many such as myself--of that I felt sure, and the conviction produced in me the kind of complacency which craves for self-communication to another. I had a great desire to unbosom myself to some one, and as there was no one else to speak to, I addressed myself to the cabman.

"Was I very long gone?" I asked him.

"No, not very long," he replied. He seemed to have grown more cheerful under the influence of the sunshine. "Yet now it is a good while past my horse's feeding-time. You see, I am a night cabman."

"Well, I only seemed to myself to be about a minute," I went on. "Do you know what I went there for?" I added, changing my seat to the well of the drozhki, so as to be nearer the driver.

"What business is it of mine? I drive a fare where he tells me to go," he replied.

"Yes, but, all the same, what do you think I went there for?" I persisted.

"I expect some one you know is going to be buried there, so you went to see about a plot for the grave."

"No, no, my friend. Still, DO you know what I went there for?"

"No, of course I cannot tell, barin," he repeated.

His voice seemed to me so kind that I decided to edify him by relating the cause of my expedition, and even telling him of the feeling which I had experienced.

"Shall I tell you?" I said. "Well, you see,"--and I told him all, as well as inflicted upon him a description of my fine sentiments. To this day I blush at the recollection.

"Well, well!" said the cabman non-committally, and for a long while afterwards he remained silent and motionless, except that at intervals he adjusted the skirt of his coat each time that it was jerked from beneath his leg by the joltings of his huge boot on the drozhki's step. I felt sure that he must be thinking of me even as the priest had done. That is to say, that he must be thinking that no such fine-spirited young man existed in the world as I. Suddenly he shot at me:

"I tell you what, barin. You ought to keep God's affairs to yourself."

"What?" I said.

"Those affairs of yours--they are God's business," he repeated, mumbling

the words with his toothless lips.

"No, he has not understood me," I thought to myself, and said no more to him till we reached home.

Although it was not my original sense of reconciliation and reverence, but only a sort of complacency at having experienced such a sense, that lasted in me during the drive home (and that, too, despite the distraction of the crowds of people who now thronged the sunlit streets in every direction), I had no sooner reached home than even my spurious complacency was shattered, for I found that I had not the forty copecks wherewith to pay the cabman! To the butler, Gabriel, I already owed a small debt, and he refused to lend me any more. Seeing me twice run across the courtyard in quest of the money, the cabman must have divined the reason, for, leaping from his drozhki, he--notwithstanding that he had seemed so kind--began to bawl aloud (with an evident desire to punch my head) that people who do not pay for their cab-rides are swindlers.

None of my family were yet out of bed, so that, except for the servants, there was no one from whom to borrow the forty copecks. At length, on my most sacred, sacred word of honour to repay (a word to which, as I could see from his face, he did not altogether trust), Basil so far yielded to his fondness for me and his remembrance of the many services I had done him as to pay the cabman. Thus all my beautiful feelings ended in smoke. When I went upstairs to dress for church and go to Communion with the rest I found that my new clothes had not yet come home, and so I could

not wear them. Then I sinned headlong. Donning my other suit, I went to Communion in a sad state of mental perturbation, and filled with complete distrust of all my finer impulses.