

Famine or Not Famine

Leo Tolstoy

1898

This winter I received a letter from Mrs. Sokolof with an account of the needs of the peasants in the Voronezh Government, and I transmitted this letter, together with a memorandum of my own, to the Russkiya Vyedomosti¹ and since then several persons have sent me their contributions to aid the starving peasants. These small contributions I have forwarded partly to a good acquaintance of mine in the Zemlyansky District, two hundred rubles ; the monthly contribution of Smolensk physicians and certain other small offerings I dispatched to the Chernsky District in the government of Tula, to my son and his wife, for the distribution of help in their locality. But in April I received new and quite important contributions : Mrs. Mevius sent four hundred rubles ; three hundred came in small sums ; S. T. Morozof gave one thousand rubles ; so that about two thousand were collected, and considering that I had no right to refuse to serve as medium between the contributor and the needy, I decided to go to the locality so as to distribute this aid in the very best way. As in 1891 I came to the conclusion that the very best form of helping was by eating-rooms² because only by the organization of eating-rooms could be assured good everyday food for old men, old women, the sick, and the children of the poor, and this, I consider, met the desires of the contributors.

In distributing provisions by hand this end was not attained, because every good manager on receiving meal, always first of all gave some to his horse with which he had to plow, and in doing so, he does what is perfectly reasonable, because he must plow so as to support his family, not only this year, but the next; the feeble members of his family will not have enough to eat this year any more than before the distribution, so that the object of the contributors will not be attained.

Moreover, only in the form of eating-rooms for the feeble members of families is there any limit on which to take a stand. By distribution by hand, the aid goes to the farm,³ and in order to satisfy the demands of a ruined peasant farm, it is impossible to decide what is most necessary and what is not. Most necessary is a horse, is a cow, is the redemption of a pawned shuba, and payment of taxes, and seed, and repairs. Thus in the distribution of help one has to give it arbitrarily at haphazard, or else to all equally without distinction. Therefore I decided to distribute the help, as I had done in 1891, 1892, in the form of rations.

¹ 1 The memorandum addressed to the editor of the Russian Gazette was as follows :

² The word stolovaya, plural stolovuiya, from stol, a table, uniformly used in the original, is here translated eating-room, free eating-room, free tables. TR.

³ Khozyaistvo, housekeeping, farming, anything connected with domestic economy.

In order to determine the neediest families and the number of persons in each of them deserving to be admitted to the public tables, I was guided as before by the following considerations :

1. The amount of cattle ;
2. The number of parcels of land ;
3. The number of members of each family capable of working for wages ;
4. The number of consumers ; and
5. Exceptionally unfortunate circumstances reducing any family, a fire, illness of members, the death of a horse, and the like.

The first village to which I came was Spasskoye, well known to me as having once belonged to Ivan Sergey evitch Turgenief. Having inquired of the starosta and the other old men of the village as to the condition of the peasants in that vicinity, I became convinced that it was far from being as bad as had been the condition of the peasants among whom we had organized public tables in 1891. At all the farms there were horses, cows, sheep, potatoes, and there were no ruined houses. So that, judging by the condition of the Spasskoye peasants, I thought that probably the reports of the year's poverty were exaggerated.

But my visit to Malaya Gubarevka and other villages to which I was directed as being very poor, convinced me that Spasskoye was in exceptionally fortunate circumstances, both on account of having good land and on account of having enjoyed a good harvest the year before. Thus in the first village which I went to from Spasskoye, Malaya Gubarevka, on ten farms there were four cows and two horses, two families were begging, and the poverty of all the inhabitants was terrible. Such also was the condition of many villages,⁴ though some were rather better off than others. In all these fourteen or fifteen villages, though there was no adulteration of the bread as was the case in 1891, still the bread, while pure, was not to be had as desired. Broths of millet, cabbage, potatoes were entirely lacking to the majority. The food consisted of herb shchi made of grass, colored with milk where there was a cow, but not where there was no cow, and nothing but bread. In all these villages the majority of the inhabitants had sold or hypothecated everything that could be sold or hypothecated. So that there was so much of extreme poverty in the places around us in a radius of seven or eight versts that, after we had established fourteen public tables, we received each day petitions for help from new villages in the same situation. Where the eating-rooms were established they went very well and cost about one ruble fifty kopecks a month for each person and apparently met the requirements which we set for ourselves, keeping up the life and health of the feeble members of the poorest families.

In the afternoon of June 6, I reached the village of Gushchino, which consists of forty-nine homes, twenty-four of which lacked horses. It was dinner-time : outdoors under two well-cleaned sheds at five tables sat eighty pensioners ; the old men mixed with the old women on stools at large tables, at small tables the children on deal boards laid across blocks. They had just finished the first course, potatoes with kvas; and the second, cabbage soup, was coming on. The peasant women were pouring the smoking, well-prepared shchi into wooden bowls ; a waiter with a loaf of bread and a knife went around the table, and holding the loaf against his chest, cut off slices of nice-looking, fresh, savory bread to any one who had eaten his.⁵ The grown-up

⁴ Bolshaya Gubarevka, Matsnevo, Protosovo, Chapkino, Kukuyevka, Gushchino, Khmyelinok, Shelamkovo, Lopashino, Siderovo, Mikhailovo Brod, Bobriko, and the two Ramenkos.

⁵ We succeeded in securing on the South Eastern R. R., two carloads of flour at seventy-six kopecks when its price was ninety, and this flour proved to be so unusually good that both the women who made the loaves and those who

people were served by the matron⁶ and a woman from among the pensioners, the children by a young girl, the matron's daughter. Everything went off in an orderly, dignified manner, exactly as if this condition of things had existed for centuries.

The pensioners were for the most part wrinkled old women and emaciated, feeble old men with thin beards, gray hair, or bald heads, and wearing tattered clothing. On all their faces there was an expression of tranquility and satisfaction. All these people evidently found themselves in that peaceful and joyous and even somewhat enthusiastic frame of mind induced by the supply of sufficient food after long deprivation of it. You could hear the sounds of eating, of subdued conversation, and occasionally a laugh at the children's tables. Two tramps were present, and the manager apologized for admitting them to the dinner.

From Gushchino I proceeded to the hamlet of Gnyevuishevo, from which two days before some peasants had come asking for aid.

This hamlet, like Gubarevka, consists of ten homes, and for these ten homes there were four horses and four cows and almost no sheep. All the houses were so old and wretched that they barely stood. All the people were poor and begged us for help.

"Though the very little children have gone to sleep," said a peasant woman, "yet they begged for papki (bread), and as there was none to give them, they went to bed without any supper."

I know that here there is a bit of exaggeration, but what a muzhik in a caftan with the shoulder torn said was surely no exaggeration, but the sober truth :

"There might be enough bread for two or three children," said he, "but here I carried to the city my last outside garment my shuba has been there for a long time and brought back only three pudiks for eight persons. How long would that last ? And now I don't know what next I can pawn ! "

I asked for change for three rubles. In the whole hamlet there was not a ruble of money.

Evidently it was necessary to establish a free table there. And it was equally necessary to do the same in other hamlets from which came petitions.-

Moreover, we were informed that in the southern part of the Chernsky District, on the borders of the Yefremovsky, the need was very great, and that so far no help had been afforded. It would seem evident that we must go and widen our operations, and this was rendered possible by the receipt of quite considerable donations : five hundred rubles from the Princess Kudashef, a thousand rubles from Mrs. Mansurof, two thousand rubles from theatrical managers.

But it proved that it was almost impossible to continue the work, much less to widen its scope. It was impossible to continue it for the following reasons : The governor of Orlof would not permit the free eating-rooms to be opened, first, without the consent of the local wardenship ; secondly, without the decision of the question as to the establishment of every eating-room by the zemsky nachalnik ; and thirdly, without sometime previously notifying the governor as to the number of eating-rooms which would have to be opened in .any given place.

In the government of Tula the stanovof had already appeared with an order prohibiting the establishment of eating-rooms without the governor's consent; without the cooperation of helpers specially occupied in the rather complicated and laborious business of the free tables their establishment is impossible.

were at the tables were enthusiastic over it, declaring that the bread made from it was like gingerbread. AUTHOR'S NOTE.

⁶ Khozyalka.

Thus, notwithstanding the unquestionable need of the people, notwithstanding the means contributed by the philanthropic for the relief of this need, our work not only could not be enlarged, but was in danger of being entirely stopped. As a result of this the money recently received by me, and especially the thirty-five hundred rubles above mentioned, and certain other small contributions remained unexpended, and will have to be returned to the donors, unless they wish to make some other disposition of them.

On the third day of June the account of receipts and disbursements was as follows :

Receipts.

From the physicians of Smolensk

" Mr. Mevius .

" Prince T. .

A. Z. .

" Baumann

" M. K. .

C.

Through " R. V." . From "A woman" through D.

" Kasatkin Through R. V." From Baumann

" " A woman "

" gymnasium pupils By the sale of a medal from C. N. Shil From Olimpiada Kolalevskaya

" S. T. M. .

" E. F. Younge

Disbursements.

Rubles.

Kopecks. 323 27 400

TOO

200 25 40 25 112 16 4 8 25 200 .. 20 .. 250 18 99 .. 4 .. 1000 15 3012 75

Flour (2584 puds) Millet (150 puds) Pease (75 puds) . Potatoes (131 chetverts) Cabbage (56 puds, 35 lb.) Transport of millet, butter, s

alt

Rubles. 2061 140 60 171 27 56 27 2

Kopecks.

18 24 5 10 75 80 40

Butter (5 puds)

2549 97

Such has been my personal work. Now I will try to answer those general questions to which my activity has led me questions which, if one judges by the newspapers, have occupied society also of late. These questions are as follows :

Is there famine this year or is there not famine?

Why is there so often such widespread need among the people ?

And what is to be done to prevent this need from recurring, and would not especial measures be demanded for overcoming it ?

To the first question the answer is this :

There are statistical reports to prove that the Russian nation in general are not eating within thirty per cent of what a man needs for his normal support. Moreover, there is information to the effect that the young men of the black earth zone during the last twenty years have been

growing less and less able to fulfill the requirements of a good physique for military service ; the general census has shown that the increase of the population, twenty years ago the largest in the agricultural region, has been constantly diminishing, and of late has come to zero in these governments.

But even without studying statistical data, it requires only to compare the average peasant farmer of the central regions skeleton-like in his emaciation and with his unhealthy complexion with the same peasant who has secured a situation as a dvornik or a coachman where he has a good table, and to compare the motions of this dvornik or coachman, and the work which he can do, with the motions and work of the peasant, living at home, to see how much the peasant has become enfeebled.

When, as used to be the case with extravagant managers and is still the case, cattle are kept for manure, feeding them somewhere in the cold yard simply that they may not perish, it results that from all this cattle, only those which are in full strength endure without loss to their organism, while the old and the feeble, the young ones that have not yet attained strength, either perish, or if they survive, it is at a loss of their increase and their strength, and in the case of the young at a loss of size and development and in exactly the same condition are the Russian peasantry of the black earth center.

So that if by the word " golod " hunger is meant that insufficiency of food in consequence of which men are subject to disease and death, as was the case recently in India according to reports, then such a famine did not exist in Russia in 1891 nor does it to-day.

But if by the word " golod " is meant insufficiency of food, not the kind that people actually die of, but the kind where people live, but live miserably, dying prematurely, growing disfigured, not begetting children, and degenerating, then, indeed such a famine has existed for the past twenty years for the largest part of the black earth center, and is this year particularly violent.

Such is my answer to the first question. To the second question, What is the cause of this ? my answer is that it is mental and not material.

Military men know the meaning of the term " the spirit of the army," know that this intangible element is the first and foremost condition of success, that if this element is absent, all others are unavailing. Let soldiers be handsomely dressed, well fed and armed, let them have the most advantageous position, the battle will be lost if this intangible element called " the army spirit " is lacking.

It is the same thing in the battle with nature. As soon as a people lack vigor, faith, hope in an ever increasing amelioration of their circumstances, but on the contrary become conscious of the idleness of their endeavors, of dejection, that people will not conquer nature, but will be conquered by it. And such in our day has come to be the condition of our peasantry, and especially that of the agricultural center. They feel that their position as agriculturists is miserable, almost inextricable, and having become wonted to this inextricable situation, they no longer struggle with it, but merely exist and accomplish only as much as the instinct of self-preservation leads them to do. Moreover, the wretchedness of the condition into which they have fallen still further enhances the depression of their spirits.

The lower the economical prosperity of the population sinks, like a weight on a lever, the harder it is for them to rise, and the peasants, conscious of this, give up all effort.

The symptoms of this depression of spirit are very many. The one first and foremost is their complete indifference to all spiritual interests. The religious question is absolutely lacking in the agricultural center, and not in the least because the peasant holds firmly to orthodoxy, on the

contrary, all the reports and advices of the priests confirm the fact that the people are growing more and more indifferent to the Church, but because he feels no interest in spiritual questions.

A second symptom is their inertia, their unwillingness to change their habits and their position. For all these years at a time when in the other governments of Russia European plows, iron harrows, new methods of sowing seeds, improved horticulture, and even mineral manures were coming into use, in the center everything remained the same the wooden sokha, and all the habits and customs of Rurik's time. Even the emigration is less from the black earth district.

A third symptom is their aversion to rustic industry, not through laziness, but the languid, dejected, unproductive labor; labor, the emblem of which might be represented by the well from which the bucket is drawn, not by a sweep, nor by a wheel, as used to be done, but by the rope alone and by the hands, and with a leaky bucket, so that a third of the water is lost before it reaches the top. Such is almost all the labor of the black earth muzhik, who labors sixteen hours in plowing a field with a horse scarcely able to drag one leg after another, while with a good horse, well fed, and a good iron plow he might accomplish it in half a day. Together with this is the natural desire to forget his troubles, and then wine and tobacco are more and more extensively used, so that lately even young boys drink and smoke.

A fourth symptom of dejection of spirits is the undutifulness of sons to their parents, of younger brothers to their elders, the retention of money earned away from home, and the endeavor of the younger generation to avoid the heavy, hopeless rustic life, and to get situations in the city. A striking symptom of this degeneracy during the last seven years was the fact that in many hamlets mature and, it would seem, well-to-do peasants would come begging to the free eating-rooms, and enter them if they were permitted.

This was not so in 1891. Here, for example, is an incident which shows the whole degree of the poverty and distrust of their own resources to which the peasants have come.

In the village of Shushmino, Chernsky District, a lady owning an estate sold the peasants some land through the bank. She asked of them a money payment at the rate of ten rubles a desyatin, and even then gave them two terms of payment at the rate of five rubles each, letting them have the land with the seed in at the rate of two chetverts of oats on the spring yield. And in spite of these remarkably advantageous conditions, the peasants hesitated and would not undertake it.

So that my answer to the second question is that the cause of the situation to which the peasants are reduced is that they have lost their energy and confidence in their own forces, and hope for the amelioration of their circumstances; they have lost spirit.

The answer to the third question, how to help the peasants in their wretched condition? is an outcome of this second answer. In order to help the peasantry one thing is necessary to raise their spirits, to overcome what is crushing them.

The spirits of the peasantry are crushed by the lack of recognition on the part of those that govern them of their human dignity, considering the peasant, not a man like others, but a coarse, unreasonable creature which ought to be guarded and directed in every action, and consequently utter constraint and extinction of his personality. Thus in religion, the most important of all things, every peasant feels that he is not a free member of his Church, having freely chosen, or, at least, having freely acknowledged the faith that has been preached to him, but a slave to that Church, obliged absolutely to fulfill the duties laid upon him by his religious superiors, who are sent to him and appointed independently of his will or choice. That this is an important cause for the dejected condition of the people is proved by the fact that always, everywhere, as soon as peasants are emancipated from ecclesiastical tyranny, falling away, as happens, into a sect,

immediately the spirits of this population rise and immediately, without exception, their economical prosperity is established.⁷ Ruinous for the people is this anxiety about them, displayed in the special laws for the peasantry, leading in reality to the absence of all laws, and to the full discretion of functionaries placed in control of the peasants.

For the peasants there exist nominally certain special laws both for the control of the land and their allotments and for their obligations they have no rights; and in reality there is an inconceivable mass of decrees, explanations, of common law, of cassation decisions, and the like, in consequence of which the peasants, with perfect justification, feel that they are absolutely dependent on the whim of their numberless chiefs.

The peasant recognizes as his chief, not only the sotsky, the starosta, the starshina, the secretary, the uryadnik, the stanovo'f, the ispravnik, the insurance agent, the surveyor, the arbitrator of disputes, the veterinary and his assistant, the doctor, the priest, the judge, the magistrate, and every functionary and even landowner, but also every gentleman, because he knows by experience that every such gentleman can do with him what he pleases.

More than by anything else is the peasant's spirit crushed although this is not visible by the shameful torture of flogging, which, like the sword of Damocles, hangs over every peasant.

Thus to my three questions propounded at the beginning is there famine or is there not famine? what is the cause of the people's poverty? and what must be done to help this poverty? my answers are as follows:

There is no famine, but in the whole population there is chronic lack of food, and this has lasted already twenty years, and is all the time increasing, and is especially felt this year owing to the poor harvest of a year ago, and will be still worse the year to come because the rye harvest this year is poorer than it was a year ago. There is no famine, but the situation is far worse. It is just the same as would be the case of a physician who was asked if a patient had typhus, and replied no, not typhus, but galloping consumption.

To the second question my answer is, that the cause of the poverty of the people is not material, but is spiritual, that the chief cause is the loss of their spirits, that until the people shall recover their spirits there will be no help by external means coming from the ministry of agriculture,⁸ or exhibitions, or agricultural colleges, or changes of tariff, or deliverance from redemption payments (which should have been done long ago, since the peasants long ago paid up their obligations if the rate per cent now employed is taken into consideration), or the withdrawal of duties from iron and machinery⁹ nothing will help the people if their mental state remains the same. I do not say that these measures are not all advantageous, but that they will be advantageous only when the people are cheered in spirit and consciously and freely desire to take advantage of them.

The answer to my third question what to do that this poverty may not be repeated is that it is necessary, I will not say to esteem the people, but to cease to scorn and insult them by treating them as if they were animals; it is necessary to subject them to general, not to exclusive laws; it is necessary to give them freedom of education,¹⁰ freedom of religion,¹¹ freedom of movement,

⁷ This passage is not found in the Moscow edition. ED.

⁸ "And all his fictions." Geneva edition.

⁹ The Geneva edition adds: "And the establishments for the undoubted healing of all diseases, and parochial schools, not too much loved by them now."

¹⁰ Not in Geneva edition.

¹¹ Not in Moscow edition.

and above all to remove the brand of ignominy which lies on the past and present reigns, the practice¹² of barbarous torture the castigation of grown men simply because they happen to be in the class of peasants.

If it is said to me : " Here you wish the people well choose one of two things: to give the whole ruined population three horses, two cows, and three well manured desyatins, and a stone house for each family, or only freedom of worship, of instruction, of migration, and the abrogation of all special laws for the peasants," then I should without hesitation choose the second, because I am persuaded that with whatever material blessings the peasant is loaded, if they remain with the same clergy, the same parochial schools, the same crown liquor saloons, the same army of functionaries pretending to be working for their advantage, then within twenty years they would have spent everything, and would be left the same poor wretches which they were.¹³

If the peasants should be freed from all these dealings and humiliations by which they are bound, then within twenty years they would acquire all the riches with which we should wish to reward them, and far more besides.

I think this will be so in the first place, because I have always found more reason and actual knowledge, such as is needful to people, among the peasants than among the functionaries, and because I think that the peasants themselves devise better and more quickly what is needful for them ; in the second place because it is more reasonable to suppose that the peasants the very persons whose welfare is in question know better in what it consists than the functionaries, who are engaged chiefly in getting their salaries ; and in the third place, because the experience of life constantly and unmistakably shows that the more the peasants are subjected to the influence of the chinovniks, as is the case in the centers, the poorer they grow, and on the other hand,¹⁴ the farther peasants live from the functionaries, as for example, in the governments of Samara, Orenburg, Viatka, Vologda, Olenezh, and Siberia, the more prosperous they are, without exception.

Here are the thoughts and feelings which were aroused in me by a new and close observation of the peasants' poverty, and I consider it my duty to express them, so that true men, actually desirous of compensating the people for all that we have received and are receiving from them, might not spend our energies in vain in a second-rate and often false activity, and that all our energies might be expended on that without which no help is efficacious the destruction of all that depresses the spirit of the people, and the restoration of all that may raise it.

June 7, 1898.

Before dispatching this article I resolved to go once more to the Yefremovsky District, the wretched condition of a part of which I had learned from persons worthy of the fullest confidence. On my way to this locality it was my fortune to traverse the Chernsky District from one end to the other. The rye in that region where I lived, that is, in the northern part of the Chernsky and Mtsensky districts, this year was thoroughly bad, worse than in the past, but what I saw on the way to the Yefremovsky District was perfectly unexpected.¹⁵

The region which I traversed about thirty-five versts in a straight line, from the village of Gremyachevo to the boundary of the Yefremovsky and Bogoroditsky districts, and, as I was told, twenty versts in width was looking forward to awful poverty for the year before them. The rye

¹² The twelve words preceding are not in the Moscow edition.

¹³ This paragraph is not found in the Moscow edition. ED.

¹⁴ The fifty words preceding are not in the Moscow edition.

¹⁵ " Surpassed my gloomiest forebodings." Geneva edition.

over the whole space of this quadrilateral almost one hundred thousand desyatms¹⁶ had been an absolute failure. If you go one verst, two, ten, twenty versts, on either side of the road on land belonging to various estates, you will find instead of rye an abundance of the lebeda-weed ; on the peasants' land not even that ! So that in the year to come the situation of the peasants in this locality will be incomparably worse than it is now, and I was told that the rye had failed in many other places.

I speak of the situation of the peasants only, and not of the farmers in general, because only for the peasants, who are supported directly and immediately by their grain, and especially by their rye-fields, does the crop of rye have a decisive answer to the question of life and death.

When in a peasant's home the supply of grain is not sufficient for his household or a large part of it, and bread is high, as it is this year (about a ruble), then his situation becomes desperate, like the situation, let us say, of a functionary deprived of his place and his salary, and still continuing to support his family in the city. For the chinovnik to exist without his salary, he must either spend his earnings or sell his possessions, and each day of life brings him nearer to absolute ruin. Exactly so it is with the peasant who is obliged to buy costly bread, apart from the usual quantity secured by his definite earnings, with this difference, that, as he sinks lower and lower, the chinovnik, as long as he lives, is not deprived of the possibility of securing a place and getting his position back again ; while the peasant, deprived of his horse, his field, his seed, is definitely deprived of any possibility of recovering himself.

In this ruin-threatening situation are most of the peasants in this locality. Next year this situation will be not only threatening, but, for the majority, will bring actual ruin. And therefore assistance, both from the government and from private persons, will be even more essential than it is this year.

And meantime, now, at the present moment, in our government of Tula, as well as in the governments of Orlof, Riazan, and Voronezh, and others, the most energetic measures are taken to prevent application of private aid, in any of its forms, measures, it would seem, universal and constant.

Thus, in this Yefremovsky District where I went, persons from outside were absolutely prohibited from coming in to render assistance to the needy. A bakeshop, opened there by a person who came with contributions from the Free- Economical Society, was closed under my own eyes, and the person himself was expelled. And others who had come before me were also expelled. It was taken for granted that there was no need in this district, and that help was not required. So that, even if from private reasons I could not have fulfilled my intentions and driven through the Yefremovsky District, my visit there would have been useless, or would have brought about unnecessary complications.

In the Chernsky District during my absence, according to the reports of my son, who went there, the following took place. The police authorities, coming to a hamlet where a free eating-room had been opened, prevented the peasants from going to it for their dinners and suppers ; to prove their fidelity to duty, they broke up the tables where the food was served, and calmly rode away, not substituting for the crust of bread which they took away from these starving men anything except a recommendation to resigned obedience !

It is difficult to realize what comes into the minds and hearts of people compelled to submit to this arbitrary prohibition, or of those that know about it. It is still more difficult, for me at least,

¹⁶ This sentence not so definite in Moscow edition.

to realize what comes into the minds and hearts of others of those that consider it necessary to enact and carry out such measures ; that is to say, without knowing what they are doing, to take the bread of charity out of the mouths of starving old men and children.

I know the considerations which are urged in defense of such measures. In the first place, it is necessary to show that the condition of the population committed to our charge is not so bad as the men of the party opposed to us try to make it appear as if the matter did not concern the aid of the starving, but the outcome of a contest. In the second place, every establishment and free eating-rooms and bakeshops, in the opinion of the stanovoi' must be subjected to the control of the police authorities.¹⁷ In the third place, the direct and immediate relations of those that are assisting the population might arouse in them undesirable thoughts and feelings.

But all these considerations, even if they had any reason and they are all false are so petty and insignificant that they can have no weight in comparison with what is done by the free eating-rooms and bakeshops, in giving bread to the needy.

Why, the whole matter consists in the following : there are people, we will not say dying, but suffering from want; there are others living in abundance and out of the goodness of their hearts willing to share their superfluity with these sufferers ; there are still others who are willing to be the mediators between these two classes and to give their labor to this end.

Can such activities be subjected to the interdiction of the authorities ?¹⁸

I can understand why the soldier in the Borovitsky Gates, when I was going to give alms to a beggar, forbade me to do so, and paid no attention to my reference to the Gospels, but asked me if I had read the military code ; he was a watchman. But the government authorities cannot be ignorant of the Gospels and forbid the fulfillment of the most fundamental morality that is to say, that men should help one another.

The government, on the contrary, exists only so as to remove everything that prevents this help. So that the government has no grounds for its opposition to this activity. If the mendaciously guided organs of the government should demand subjection to such a prohibition, a private citizen would be under obligations not to submit to such a demand.¹⁹

When the policeman who came to us said that it was my duty to apply to the governor with a petition to be allowed to establish the eating-rooms, I replied to him that I could not do that, since I did not know any statute whereby the establishment of free tables was interdicted ; even if there had been any such I could not be subjected to it, because if I were subjected to such a law, the next day I might be reduced to the necessity of submitting to a prohibition against distributing flour, of giving any kind of alms without the permission of the government.

They may close the eating-rooms and bakeshops, they may send from one district to another those that come to help the population, but it is impossible to prevent those thus expelled from one district, from living in another among their friends or in some peasant izba, and serving the people in some other way, thus sharing with them their means and their labor. It is impossible to herd away one class of the people from another. Every attempt at such divisions induces the very consequences which this separation is intended to prevent. It is impossible to prevent com-

¹⁷ "And yet in 1891 and 1892 such subjection was not required." Omitted in Moscow edition.

¹⁸ " Can such activities be harmful to any one and can it be a part of the duties of the government to oppose them?" Geneva edition.

¹⁹ These two paragraphs are not in the Moscow edition : instead the following inoffensive sentences are substituted : " Moreover the government cannot do this. It is as impossible to prevent a man from eating when he is hungry as to prevent another man from giving this hungry one the superfluity of his bread, his property, or his labor."

munication among men ; one can only interfere with the regular course of this communication, and give it a dangerous tendency where otherwise it would be beneficent.

To help the present, as indeed every, human need, only a spiritual elevation of the people can avail I mean by the people, not only the peasantry, but the whole people, both the working-classes and the rich and this elevation of the people will be only in one direction in a greater and greater fraternal unity of men ; and therefore, to help the people it needs to encourage this unity and not to stand in its way. Only by such a brotherly unity greater than ever before will the actual poverty of this year and the prospective poverty of the year to come be relieved, and also the general prosperity of the ever declining peasantry be restored, and the possibility of a repetition of the misfortune of 1891 and 1892, and of the present year, be averted.

June 16, 1898.

Dear Sir, I opine that the publication of the enclosed private letter from a person who evidently knows the peasantry very intimately, and accurately describes their situation on the spot, may be useful. The situation of the peasants in the places described is not exceptional ; as I well know it is the same with the peasants in many places in the Kozlovsky, Yeletsky, Novosil'sky, Chernsky, Yefremovsky, Zemlyansky, Nizhnedevitsky districts, and many others in the zone of the " black earth" the chernozyom. The person who wrote the letter had no notion of its being published, and only consented to it at the solicitation of her friends.

It is true that the situation of the larger part of our peasantry is such that it is sometimes very difficult to draw the line between what may be called famine and their normal condition, and that the aid especially needed this year is of the same kind that was needed last year and every year, though in a less degree; it is true that charitable aid for the population is a very difficult question, since it often stimulates a desire to take advantage of it even in those that might exist without such aid ; it is true that what can be done by private persons is only a drop in the ocean of the peasants' need; it is true, also, that aid in the form of dining-rooms, selling grain at reduced prices or distributing it, furnishing fodder for cattle, and the like, is only a palliative and does not overcome the fundamental causes of the catastrophe. All this is true, but it is also true that aid extended temporarily may save the life of an old man, or a child, may convert a ruined man's despair or animosity into a feeling of trust in the goodness and brotherly love of his fellow-men. And what is more important than all, it is unquestionably true that if every man of our circle who, instead of thinking of his amusements, theaters, concerts, subscription dinners, races, exhibitions, and the like, would think of that extreme poverty (as compared with anything to be seen in the city) in which now, at this particular minute, many and many of our brethren are living, and if every such man would strive, even though ignorantly, by sacrificing the smallest part of his pleasure, to help this dire need, he would unquestionably help himself in the most important thing in the world in a reasonable understanding of the meaning of life, and by the fulfilling in it of his human destination.

Mrs. SokoloPs letter gives a vivid account of the pitiful destitution of the peasantry caused by the failure of their crops and their inability to earn anything to pay for rent, for saving their cattle, for seed, or even for food and clothing. ED.

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Leo Tolstoy
Famine or Not Famine
1898

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