

Poor People

Leo Tolstoy

In a small fisherman's cabin, near the edge of the sea, Zhanna, a fisherman's wife, sat by the fire mending an old sail. It was dark and cold outside. The wind was howling. There was a storm over the sea. But in the cabin it was warm and cozy. The earthen floor had been swept clean and a comforting fire was spluttering and hissing softly in the fireplace. Five young children were asleep on a wide bed in the corner.

Zhanna's husband had put out to sea early that morning and had not yet returned. She kept listening to the drone of the waves and the fury of the wind. She was worried.

The old wooden clock struck ten—then eleven, and still he did not return. Zhanna thought of her fisherman husband—how he didn't spare himself and would stay out fishing in cold weather and in storms. She, too, worked from morning till night. But they never had enough to eat. The children didn't have shoes and went about barefoot both in winter and in

summer. Zhanna was grateful though that they were strong and healthy. Then she thought of her husband again and she said to herself, "Where is he now? May the Lord watch over him!"

It was too early to go to bed. She put down her sewing, wrapped herself in a heavy shawl, lit a lantern, and went outside to see if the sea was calming down, whether the beacon was still burning in the lighthouse, and if she could see her husband's boat coming in. But she saw nothing in the black darkness.

Zhanna remembered that she had intended to visit her neighbor, the widow, who was very poor and ill and had two small children to care for. Life had been very hard for this woman. "I'll go and stay with her for a while," Zhanna thought.

She approached her neighbor's hut and knocked. There was no answer. Zhanna pushed the door open and entered. It was damp, cold, and dark inside. She raised the lantern to see where the sick woman was. She saw her lying on

a small bed that stood right across from the door. The woman was lying very quietly, her head was tilted way back. She did not move at all. Her face was as white as the pillow, and her arm hung limply from the side of the bed.

And on the same bed, near the dead mother, two little children were sleeping. They were curly haired and chubby. They had been covered carefully with the mother's threadbare shawl and with her dress. Evidently the dying woman had tried to care for her young ones to the very last moment of her ebbing life. The children were breathing easily and sleeping peacefully.

Zhanna wrapped the children in her shawl and took them home with her. She put the sleeping orphans near her own children and drew the curtain across the bed.

She was pale and shaken. "What will her husband say? After all, they had five children of their own and a lot of care they were. Why did she bring the others!" Zhanna sat there, at the bed, for a long time, worrying.

It finally stopped raining and it was getting light outside, but the wind continued to howl. Suddenly the door to the cabin was opened, a stream of cold sea air blew into

the room and a tall dark-skinned man entered.

"It's me, Zhanna," her husband said.

"Oh, it's you! Thank God!" Zhanna said but she didn't dare look him in the face.

"The weather was awful," he continued. "I hardly caught anything and the nets got torn. I was lucky to get back alive. And what did you do while I was away?"

"I? ..." she began, and grew paler. "I sat here sewing. It was scary. I worried about you."

They were silent for a while.

"Our neighbor the widow, died! Death was not easy for her. How her heart must have ached for her two little ones ..."

Zhanna said no more. Her husband frowned. Then his face grew thoughtful and he looked troubled. After a while he said:

"We'll have to take them in. We'll manage to survive—somehow. Hurry and get them."

But Zhanna did not move.

"Why don't you go? Don't you want to take them in? What's wrong with you, Zhanna?"

"Here they are. I've already brought them," Zhanna said, parting the bed curtain.