

THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD BY FEDOR DOSTOÏEFFSKY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY JULIUS BRAMONT

[Pg ii]

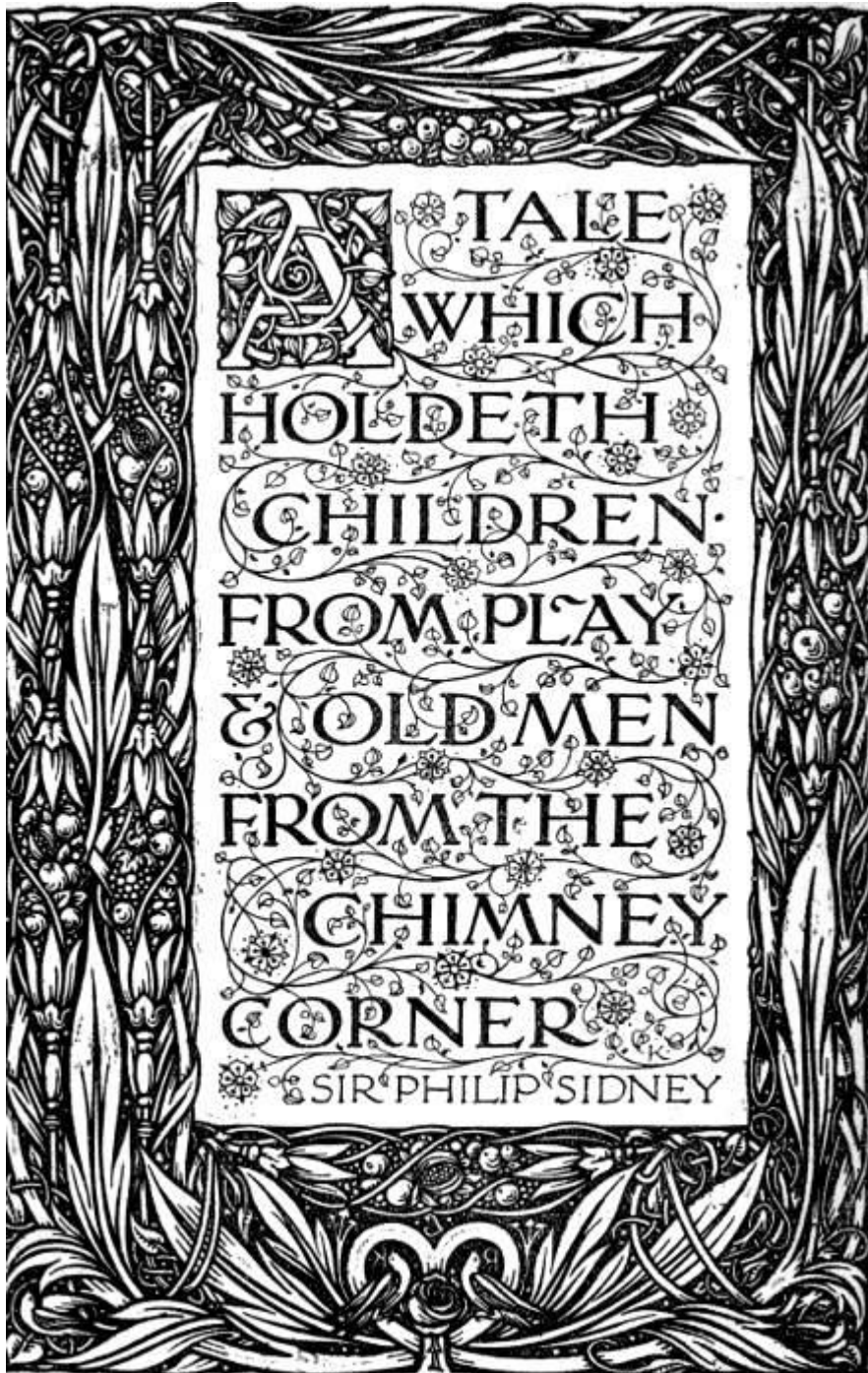
THE PUBLISHERS OF *EVERYMAN'S*
LIBRARY WILL BE PLEASED TO SEND
FREELY TO ALL APPLICANTS A LIST
OF THE PUBLISHED AND PROJECTED
VOLUMES TO BE COMPRISED UNDER
THE FOLLOWING THIRTEEN HEADINGS:

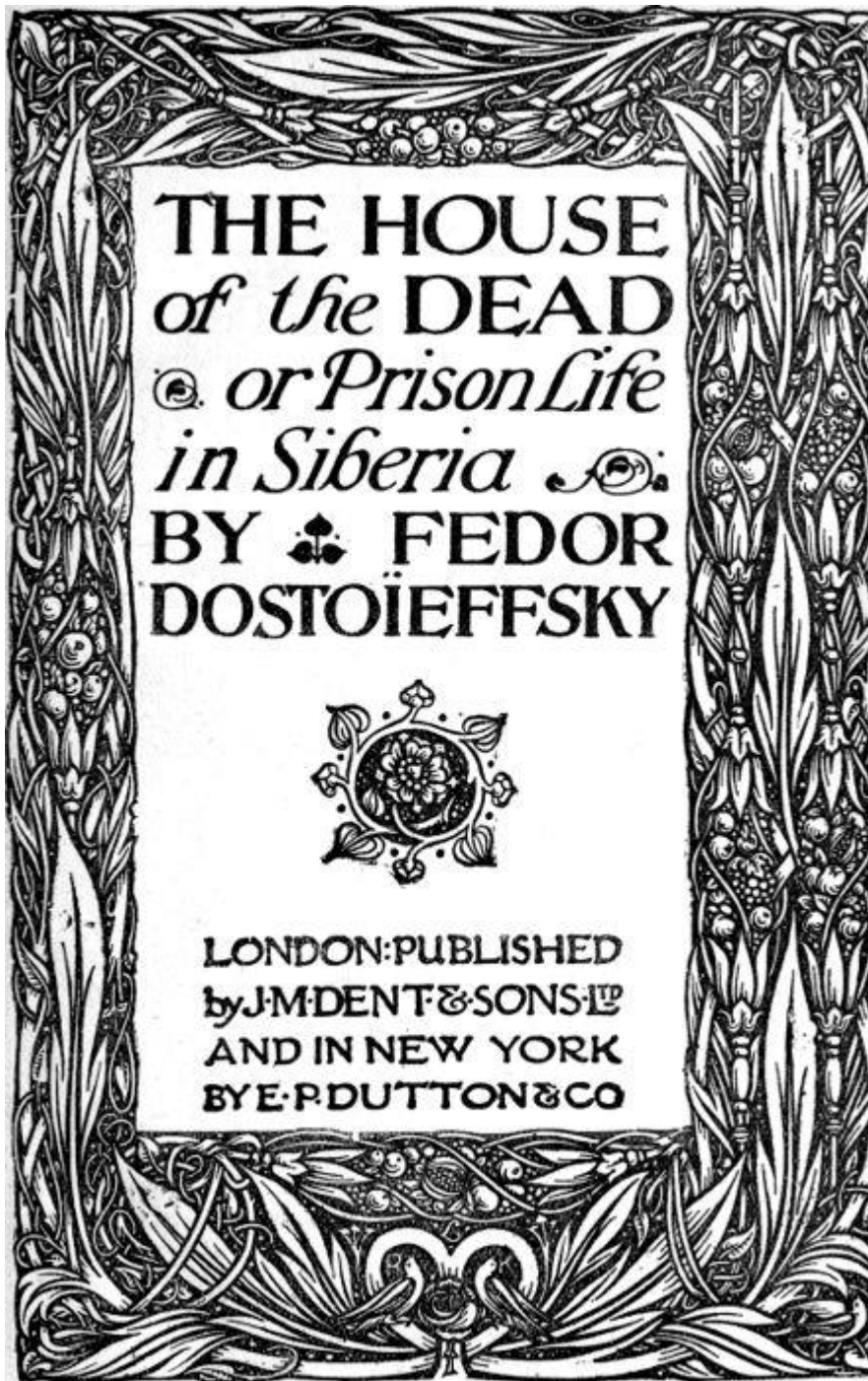
TRAVEL ❖ SCIENCE ❖ FICTION
THEOLOGY & PHILOSOPHY
HISTORY ❖ CLASSICAL
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
ESSAYS ❖ ORATORY
POETRY & DRAMA
BIOGRAPHY
REFERENCE
ROMANCE



IN FOUR STYLES OF BINDING: CLOTH,
FLAT BACK, COLOURED TOP; LEATHER,
ROUND CORNERS, GILT TOP; LIBRARY
BINDING IN CLOTH, & QUARTER PIGSKIN

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS, LTD.
NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO.





[Pg vi]

First Issue of this Edition 1911

Reprinted 1914

INTRODUCTION

“The Russian nation is a new and wonderful phenomenon in the history of mankind. The character of the people differs to such a degree from that of the other Europeans that their neighbours find it impossible to diagnose them.” This affirmation by Dostoïeffsky, the prophetic journalist, offers a key to the treatment in his novels of the troubles and aspirations of his race. He wrote with a sacramental fervour whether he was writing as a personal agent or an impersonal, novelist or journalist. Hence his rage with the calmer men, more gracious interpreters of the modern Slav, who like Ivan Tourguenieff were able to see Russia on a line with the western nations, or to consider her maternal throes from the disengaged, safe retreat of an arm-chair exile in Paris. Not so was *l’âme Russe* to be given her new literature in the eyes of M. Dostoïeffsky, strained with watching, often red with tears and anger.

Those other nations, he said—proudly looking for the symptoms of the world-intelligence in his own—those other nations of Europe may maintain that they have at heart a common aim and a common ideal. In fact they are divided among themselves by a thousand interests, territorial or other. Each pulls his own way with ever-growing determination. It would seem that every individual nation aspires to the discovery of the universal ideal for humanity, and is bent on attaining that ideal by force of its own unaided strength. Hence, he argued, each European nation is an enemy to its own welfare and that of the world in general.

To this very disassociation he attributed, without quite understanding the rest of us, our not understanding the Russian people, and our taxing them with “a lack of personality.” We failed to perceive their rare synthetic power—that faculty of the Russian mind to read the aspirations of the whole of human kind. Among his own folk, he avowed, we would find none of the imperviousness, the [Pg viii] intolerance, of the average European. The Russian adapts himself with ease to the play of contemporary thought and has no difficulty in assimilating any new idea. He sees where it will help his fellow-creatures and where it fails to be of value. He divines the process by which ideas, even the most divergent, the most hostile to one another, may meet and blend.

Possibly, recognising this, M. Dostoïeffsky was the more concerned not to be too far depolarised, or say de-Russified, in his own works of fiction. But in truth he had no need to fear any weakening of his natural fibre and racial proclivities, or of the authentic utterance wrung out of him by the hard and cruel thongs of experience. We

see the rigorous sincerity of his record again in the sheer autobiography contained in the present work, *The House of the Dead*. It was in the fatal winter of 1849 when he was with many others, mostly very young men like himself, sentenced to death for his liberal political propaganda; a sentence which was at the last moment commuted to imprisonment in the Siberian prisons. Out of that terror, which turned youth grey, was distilled the terrible reality of *The House of the Dead*. If one would truly fathom how deep that reality is, and what its phenomenon in literature amounts to, one should turn again to that favourite idyllic book of youth, by my countrywoman Mme.

Cottin, *Elizabeth, or the Exiles of Siberia*, and compare, for example, the typical scene of Elizabeth's sleep in the wooden chapel in the snow, where she ought to have been frozen to death but fared very comfortably, with the Siberian actuality of Dostoïeffsky.

But he was no idyllist, though he could be tender as Mme. Cottin herself. What he felt about these things you can tell from his stories. If a more explicit statement in the theoretic side be asked of him, take this plain avowal from his confession books of 1870-77:—

“There is no denying that the people are morally ill, with a grave, although not a mortal, malady, one to which it is difficult to assign a name. May we call it ‘An unsatisfied thirst for truth’? The people are seeking eagerly and untiringly for truth and for the ways that lead to it, but hitherto they have failed in their search. After the liberation of the serfs, this great longing for truth appeared among the [Pg ix] people—for truth perfect and entire, and with it the resurrection of civic life. There was a clamouring for a ‘new Gospel’; new ideas and feelings became manifest; and a great hope rose up among the people believing that these great changes were precursors of a state of things which never came to pass.”

There is the accent of his hope and his despair. Let it prove to you the conviction with which he wrote these tragic pages, one that is affecting at this moment the destiny of Russia and the spirit of us who watch her as profoundly moved spectators.

JULIUS BRAMONT.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(*Dostoïeffsky's works, so far as they have appeared in English.*)

Translations of Dostoïeffsky's novels have appeared as follows:—Buried Alive; or, Ten Years of Penal Servitude in Siberia, translated by Marie v. Thilo, 1881. In Vizetelly's One Volume Novels: Crime and Punishment, vol. 13; Injury and Insult, translated by F. Whishaw, vol. 17; The Friend of the Family and the Gambler, etc., vol. 22. In Vizetelly's Russian Novels: The Idiot, by F. Whishaw, 1887; Uncle's Dream; and, The Permanent

Husband, etc., 1888. Prison Life in Siberia, translated by H. S. Edwards, 1888; Poor Folk, translated by L. Milman, 1894.

See D. S. Merezhkovsky, Tolstoi as Man and Artist, with Essay on Dostoïeffsky, translated from the Russian, 1902; M. Baring, Landmarks in Russian Literature (chapter on Dostoïeffsky), 1910.

[Pg xi]

CONTENTS

PART I

CHAP.	PAGE
I. Ten Years a Convict	1
II. The Dead-House	7
III. First Impressions	24
IV. First Impressions (<i>continued</i>)	43
V. First Impressions (<i>continued</i>)	61
VI. The First Month	80
VII. The First Month (<i>continued</i>)	95
VIII. New Acquaintances—Petroff	110
IX. Men of Determination—Luka	125
X. Isaiah Fomitch—The Bath—Baklouchin	133
XI. The Christmas Holidays	152
XII. The Performance	171

PART II

I.	The Hospital	194
II.	The Hospital (<i>continued</i>)	209
III.	The Hospital (<i>continued</i>)	225
IV.	The Husband of Akoulka	248
V.	The Summer Season	264
VI.	The Animals at the Convict Establishment	286
VII.	Grievances	302
VIII.	My Companions	325
IX.	The Escape	344
X.	Freedom!	363

[Pg 1]

PRISON LIFE IN SIBERIA.

PART I.

CHAPTER I. TEN YEARS A CONVICT

In the midst of the steppes, of the mountains, of the impenetrable forests of the desert regions of Siberia, one meets from time to time with little towns of a thousand or two inhabitants, built entirely of wood, very ugly, with two churches—one in the centre of the town, the other in the cemetery—in a word, towns which bear much more resemblance to a good-sized village in the suburbs of Moscow than to a town properly so called. In most cases they are abundantly provided with police-master,

assessors, and other inferior officials. If it is cold in Siberia, the great advantages of the Government service compensate for it. The inhabitants are simple people, without liberal ideas. Their manners are antique, solid, and unchanged by time. The officials who form, and with reason, the nobility in Siberia, either belong to the country, deeply-rooted Siberians, or they have arrived there from Russia. The latter come straight from the capitals, tempted by the high pay, the extra allowance for travelling expenses, and by hopes not less seductive for the future. Those who know how to resolve the problem of life remain almost always in Siberia; the abundant and richly-flavoured fruit which they gather there recompenses them amply for what they lose.

[Pg 2]

As for the others, light-minded persons who are unable to deal with the problem, they are soon bored in Siberia, and ask themselves with regret why they committed the folly of coming. They impatiently kill the three years which they are obliged by rule to remain, and as soon as their time is up, they beg to be sent back, and return to their original quarters, running down Siberia, and ridiculing it. They are wrong, for it is a happy country, not only as regards the Government service, but also from many other points of view.

The climate is excellent, the merchants are rich and hospitable, the Europeans in easy circumstances are numerous; as for the young girls, they are like roses and their morality is irreproachable. Game is to be found in the streets, and throws itself upon the sportsman's gun. People drink champagne in prodigious quantities. The caviare is astonishingly good and most abundant. In a word, it is a blessed land, out of which it is only necessary to be able to make profit; and much profit is really made.

It is in one of these little towns—gay and perfectly satisfied with themselves, the population of which has left upon me the most agreeable impression—that I met an exile, Alexander Petrovitch Goriantchikoff, formerly a landed proprietor in Russia. He had been condemned to hard labour of the second class for assassinating his wife. After undergoing his punishment—ten years of hard labour—he lived quietly and unnoticed as a colonist in the little town of K——. To tell the truth, he was inscribed in one of the surrounding districts; but he resided at K——, where he managed to get a living by giving lessons to children. In the towns of Siberia one often meets with exiles who are occupied with instruction. They are not looked down upon, for they teach the French language, so necessary in life, and of which without them one would not, in the distant parts of Siberia, have the least idea.

I saw Alexander Petrovitch the first time at the house of an official, Ivan Ivanitch Gvosdikof, a venerable old man, very hospitable, and the father of five daughters,[Pg

3] of whom the greatest hopes were entertained. Four times a week Alexander Petrovitch gave them lessons, at the rate of thirty kopecks silver a lesson. His external appearance interested me. He was excessively pale and thin, still young—about thirty-five years of age—short and weak, always very neatly dressed in the European style. When you spoke to him he looked at you in a very attentive manner, listening to your words with strict politeness, and with a reflective air, as though you had placed before him a problem or wished to extract from him a secret. He replied clearly and shortly; but in doing so, weighed each word, so that one felt ill at ease without knowing why, and was glad when the conversation came to an end. I put some questions to Ivan Gvosdikof in regard to him. He told me that Goriantchikoff was of irreproachable morals, otherwise Gvosdikof would not have entrusted him with the education of his children; but that he was a terrible misanthrope, who kept apart from all society; that he was very learned, a great reader, and that he spoke but little, and never entered freely into a conversation. Certain persons told him that he was mad; but that was not looked upon as a very serious defect. Accordingly, the most important persons in the town were ready to treat Alexander Petrovitch with respect, for he could be useful to them in writing petitions. It was believed that he was well connected in Russia. Perhaps, among his relations, there were some who were highly placed; but it was known that since his exile he had broken off all relations with them. In a word—he injured himself. Every one knew his story, and was aware that he had killed his wife, through jealousy, less than a year after his marriage; and that he had given himself up to justice; which had made his punishment much less severe. Such crimes are always looked upon as misfortunes, which must be treated with pity. Nevertheless, this original kept himself obstinately apart, and never showed himself except to give lessons. In the first instance I paid no attention to him; then, without knowing why, I found myself interested by him. He was rather enigmatic; [Pg 4] to talk with him was quite impossible. Certainly he replied to all my questions; he seemed to make it a duty to do so; but when once he had answered, I was afraid to interrogate him any longer.

After such conversations one could observe on his countenance signs of suffering and exhaustion. I remember that, one fine summer evening, I went out with him from the house of Ivan Gvosdikof. It suddenly occurred to me to invite him to come in with me and smoke a cigarette. I can scarcely describe the fright which showed itself in his countenance. He became confused, muttered incoherent words, and suddenly, after looking at me with an angry air, took to flight in an opposite direction. I was very much astonished afterwards, when he met me. He seemed to experience, on seeing me, a sort of terror; but I did not lose courage. There was something in him which attracted me.

A month afterwards I went to see Petrovitch without any pretext. It is evident that, in doing so, I behaved foolishly, and without the least delicacy. He lived at one of the extreme points of the town with an old woman whose daughter was in a consumption. The latter had a little child about ten years old, very pretty and very lively.

When I went in Alexander Petrovitch was seated by her side, and was teaching her to read. When he saw me he became confused, as if I had detected him in a crime. Losing all self-command, he suddenly stood up and looked at me with awe and astonishment. Then we both of us sat down. He followed attentively all my looks, as if I had suspected him of some mysterious intention. I understood he was horribly mistrustful. He looked at me as a sort of spy, and he seemed to be on the point of saying, "Are you not soon going away?"

I spoke to him of our little town, of the news of the day, but he was silent, or smiled with an air of displeasure. I could see that he was absolutely ignorant of all that was taking place in the town, and that he was in no way curious to know. I spoke to him afterwards of the country generally, and of its men. He listened to me [Pg 5] still in silence, fixing his eyes upon me in such a strange way that I became ashamed of what I was doing. I was very nearly offending him by offering him some books and newspapers which I had just received by post. He cast a greedy look upon them; he then seemed to alter his mind, and declined my offer, giving his want of leisure as a pretext.

At last I wished him good-bye, and I felt a weight fall from my shoulders as I left the house. I regretted to have harassed a man whose tastes kept him apart from the rest of the world. But the fault had been committed. I had remarked that he possessed very few books. It was not true, then, that he read so much. Nevertheless, on two occasions when I drove past, I saw a light in his lodging. What could make him sit up so late? Was he writing, and if that were so, what was he writing?

I was absent from our town for about three months. When I returned home in the winter, I learned that Petrovitch was dead, and that he had not even sent for a doctor. He was even now already forgotten, and his lodging was unoccupied. I at once made the acquaintance of his landlady, in the hope of learning from her what her lodger had been writing. For twenty kopecks she brought me a basket full of papers left by the defunct, and confessed to me that she had already employed four sheets in lighting her fire. She was a morose and taciturn old woman. I could not get from her anything that was interesting. She could tell me nothing about her lodger. She gave me to understand all the same that he scarcely ever worked, and that he remained for months together without opening a book or touching a pen. On the other hand, he

walked all night up and down his room, given up to his reflections. Sometimes, indeed, he spoke aloud. He was very fond of her little grandchild, Katia, above all when he knew her name; on her name's-day—the day of St. Catherine—he always had a requiem said in the church for some one's soul. He detested receiving visits, and never went out except to give lessons. Even his landlady he looked upon with an unfriendly eye when, once a week, she came into his room to put it in order.

[Pg 6]

During the three years he had passed with her, he had scarcely ever spoken to her. I asked Katia if she remembered him. She looked at me in silence, and turned weeping to the wall. This man, then, was loved by some one! I took away the papers, and passed the day in examining them. They were for the most part of no importance, merely children's exercises. At last I came to a rather thick packet, the sheets of which were covered with delicate handwriting, which abruptly ceased. It had perhaps been forgotten by the writer. It was the narrative—incoherent and fragmentary—of the ten years Alexander Petrovitch had passed in hard labour. This narrative was interrupted, here and there, either by anecdotes, or by strange, terrible recollections thrown in convulsively as if torn from the writer. I read some of these fragments again and again, and I began to doubt whether they had not been written in moments of madness; but these memories of the convict prison—"Recollections of the Dead-House," as he himself called them somewhere in his manuscript—seemed to me not without interest. They revealed quite a new world unknown till then; and in the strangeness of his facts, together with his singular remarks on this fallen people, there was enough to tempt me to go on. I may perhaps be wrong, but I will publish some chapters from this narrative, and the public shall judge for itself.

[Pg 7]

CHAPTER II. THE DEAD-HOUSE

Our prison was at the end of the citadel behind the ramparts. Looking through the crevices between the palisade in the hope of seeing something, one sees nothing but a little corner of the sky, and a high earthwork, covered with the long grass of the steppe. Night and day sentries walk to and fro upon it. Then one perceives from the first, that whole years will pass during which one will see by the same crevices between the palisades, upon the same earthwork, always the same sentinels and the same little corner of the sky, not just above the prison, but far and far away. Represent to yourself a court-yard, two hundred feet long, and one hundred and fifty feet broad,

enclosed by an irregular hexagonal palisade, formed of stakes thrust deep into the earth. So much for the external surroundings of the prison. On one side of the palisade is a great gate, solid, and always shut; watched perpetually by the sentinels, and never opened, except when the convicts go out to work. Beyond this, there are light and liberty, the life of free people! Beyond the palisade, one thought of the marvellous world, fantastic as a fairy tale. It was not the same on our side. Here, there was no resemblance to anything. Habits, customs, laws, were all precisely fixed. It was the house of living death. It is this corner that I undertake to describe.

[Pg 8]

On penetrating into the enclosure one sees a few buildings. On each side of a vast court are stretched forth two wooden constructions, made of trunks of trees, and only one storey high. These are convicts' barracks. Here the prisoners are confined, divided into several classes. At the end of the enclosure may be seen a house, which serves as a kitchen, divided into two compartments. Behind it is another building, which serves at once as cellar, loft, and barn. The centre of the enclosure, completely barren, is a large open space. Here the prisoners are drawn up in ranks, three times a day. They are identified, and must answer to their names, morning, noon, and evening, besides several times in the course of the day if the soldiers on guard are suspicious and clever at counting. All around, between the palisades and the buildings there remains a sufficiently large space, where some of the prisoners who are misanthropes, or of a sombre turn of mind, like to walk about when they are not at work. There they go turning over their favourite thoughts, shielded from all observation.

When I met them during those walks of theirs, I took pleasure in observing their sad, deeply-marked countenances, and in guessing their thoughts. The favourite occupation of one of the convicts, during the moments of liberty left to him from his hard labour, was to count the palisades. There were fifteen hundred of them. He had counted them all, and knew them nearly by heart. Every one of them represented to him a day of confinement; but, counting them daily in this manner, he knew exactly the number of days that he had still to pass in the prison. He was sincerely happy when he had finished one side of the hexagon; yet he had to wait for his liberation many long years. But one learns patience in a prison.

One day I saw a prisoner, who had undergone his punishment, take leave of his comrades. He had had twenty years' hard labour. More than one convict remembered seeing him arrive, quite young, careless, thinking neither of his crime nor of his punishment. He was now an old man with gray hairs, with a sad and morose

[Pg 9]

countenance. He walked in silence through our six barracks. When he entered each of them he prayed before the holy image, made a deep bow to his former companions, and begged them not to keep a bad recollection of him.

I also remember one evening, a prisoner, who had been formerly a well-to-do Siberian peasant, so called. Six years before he had had news of his wife's remarriage, which had caused him great pain. That very evening she had come to the prison, and had asked for him in order to make him a present! They talked together for two minutes, wept together, and then separated never to meet again. I saw the expression of this prisoner's countenance when he re-entered the barracks. There, indeed, one learns to support everything.

When darkness set in we had to re-enter the barrack, where we were shut up for all the night. It was always painful for me to leave the court-yard for the barrack. Think of a long, low, stifling room, scarcely lighted by tallow candles, and full of heavy and disgusting odours. I cannot now understand how I lived there for ten entire years. My camp bedstead was made of three boards. This was the only place in the room that belonged to me. In one single room we herded together, more than thirty men. It was, above all, no wonder that we were shut up early. Four hours at least passed before every one was asleep, and, until then, there was a tumult and uproar of laughter, oaths, rattling of chains, a poisonous vapour of thick smoke; a confusion of shaved heads, stigmatised foreheads, and ragged clothes disgustingly filthy.

Yes, man is a pliable animal—he must be so defined—a being who gets accustomed to everything! That would be, perhaps, the best definition that could be given of him. There were altogether two hundred and fifty of us in the same prison. This number was almost invariably the same. Whenever some of them had undergone their punishment, other criminals arrived, and a few of them died. Among them there were all sorts of people. I believe that each region of Russia had furnished its[Pg 10] representatives. There were foreigners there, and even mountaineers from the Caucasus.

All these people were divided into different classes, according to the importance of the crime; and consequently the duration of the punishment for the crime, whatever it might be, was there represented. The population of the prison was composed for the most part of men condemned to hard labour of the civil class—"strongly condemned," as the prisoners used to say. They were criminals deprived of all civil rights, men rejected by society, vomited forth by it, and whose faces were marked by the iron to testify eternally to their disgrace. They were incarcerated for different periods of time,

varying from eight to ten years. At the expiration of their punishment they were sent to the Siberian districts in the character of colonists.

As to the criminals of the military section, they were not deprived of their civil rights—as is generally the case in Russian disciplinary companies—but were punished for a relatively short period. As soon as they had undergone their punishment they had to return to the place whence they had come, and became soldiers in the battalions of the Siberian Line.^[1]

Many of them came back to us afterwards, for serious crimes, this time not for a small number of years, but for twenty at least. They then formed part of the section called “for perpetuity.” Nevertheless, the perpetuals were not deprived of their right. There was another section sufficiently numerous, composed of the worst malefactors, nearly all veterans in crime, and which was called the special section. There were sent convicts from all the Russias. They looked upon one another with reason as imprisoned for ever, for the term of their confinement had not been indicated. The law required them to receive double and treble tasks. They remained in prison until work of the most painful character had to be undertaken in Siberia.

“You are only here for a fixed time,” they said to the [Pg 11] other convicts; “we, on the contrary, are here for all our life.”

I have heard that this section has since been abolished. At the same time, civil convicts are kept apart, in order that the military convicts may be organised by themselves into a homogeneous “disciplinary company.” The administration, too, has naturally been changed; consequently what I describe are the customs and practices of another time, and of things which have since been abolished. Yes, it was a long time ago; it seems to me that it is all a dream. I remember entering the convict prison one December evening, as night was falling. The convicts were returning from work. The roll-call was about to be made. An under officer with large moustaches opened to me the gate of this strange house, where I was to remain so many years, to endure so many emotions, and of which I could not form even an approximate idea, if I had not gone through them. Thus, for example, could I ever have imagined the poignant and terrible suffering of never being alone even for one minute during ten years? Working under escort in the barracks together with two hundred “companions;” never alone, never!

However, I was obliged to get accustomed to it. Among them there were murderers by imprudence, and murderers by profession, simple thieves, masters in the art of finding money in the pockets of the passers-by, or of wiping off no matter what from the table. It would have been difficult, however, to say why and how certain prisoners

found themselves among the convicts. Each of them had his history, confused and heavy, painful as the morning after a debauch.

The convicts, as a rule, spoke very little of their past life, which they did not like to think of. They endeavoured, even, to dismiss it from their memory.

Amongst my companions of the chain I have known murderers who were so gay and so free from care, that one might have made a bet that their conscience never made them the least reproach. But there were also men of sombre countenance who remained almost always [Pg 12] silent. It was very rarely any one told his history. This sort of thing was not the fashion. Let us say at once that it was not received. Sometimes, however, from time to time, for the sake of change, a prisoner used to tell his life to another prisoner, who would listen coldly to the narrative. No one, to tell the truth, could have said anything to astonish his neighbour. "We are not ignoramuses," they would sometimes say with singular pride.

I remember one day a ruffian who had got drunk—it was sometimes possible for the convicts to get drunk—relating how he had killed and cut up a child of five. He had first tempted the child with a plaything, and then taking it to a loft, had cut it up to pieces. The entire barrack, which, generally speaking, laughed at his jokes, uttered one unanimous cry. The ruffian was obliged to be silent. But if the convicts had interrupted him, it was not by any means because his recital had caused their indignation, but because it was not allowed to speak of such things.

I must here observe that the convicts possessed a certain degree of instruction. Half of them, if not more, knew how to read and write. Where in Russia, in no matter what population, could two hundred and fifty men be found able to read and write? Later on I have heard people say, and conclude on the strength of these abuses, that education demoralises the people. This is a mistake. Education has nothing whatever to do with moral deterioration. It must be admitted, nevertheless, that it develops a resolute spirit among the people. But this is far from being a defect.

Each section had a different costume. The uniform of one was a cloth vest, half brown and half gray, and trousers with one leg brown, the other gray. One day while we were at work, a little girl who sold scones of white bread came towards the convicts. She looked at them for a time and then burst into a laugh. "Oh, how ugly they are!" she cried; "they have not even enough gray cloth or brown cloth to make their clothes." Every convict wore a vest made of gray cloth, except the sleeves, which were brown. Their heads, too, were shaved [Pg 13] in different styles. The crown was bared sometimes longitudinally, sometimes latitudinally, from the nape of the neck to the forehead, or from one ear to another.

This strange family had a general likeness so pronounced that it could be recognised at a glance.

Even the most striking personalities, those who dominated involuntarily the other convicts, could not help taking the general tone of the house.

Of the convicts—with the exception of a few who enjoyed childish gaiety, and who by that alone drew upon themselves general contempt—all the convicts were morose, envious, frightfully vain, presumptuous, susceptible, and excessively ceremonious. To be astonished at nothing was in their eyes the first and indispensable quality.

Accordingly, their first aim was to bear themselves with dignity. But often the most composed demeanour gave way with the rapidity of lightning. With the basest humility some, however, possessed genuine strength; these were naturally all sincere. But strangely enough, they were for the most part excessively and morbidly vain. Vanity was always their salient quality.

The majority of the prisoners were depraved and perverted, so that calumnies and scandal rained amongst them like hail. Our life was a constant hell, a perpetual damnation; but no one would have dared to raise a voice against the internal regulations of the prison, or against established usages. Accordingly, willingly or unwillingly, they had to be submitted to. Certain indomitable characters yielded with difficulty, but they yielded all the same. Prisoners who when at liberty had gone beyond all measure, who, urged by their over-excited vanity, had committed frightful crimes unconsciously, as if in a delirium, and had been the terror of entire towns, were put down in a very short time by the system of our prison. The “new man,” when he began to reconnoitre, soon found that he could astonish no one, and insensibly he submitted, took the general tone, and assumed a sort of personal dignity which almost every convict maintained, just as if the denomination of convict had been a title of honour. Not the least sign of shame or of [Pg 14] repentance, but a kind of external submission which seemed to have been reasoned out as the line of conduct to be pursued. “We are lost men,” they said to themselves. “We were unable to live in liberty; we must now go to Green Street.”[\[2\]](#)

“You would not obey your father and mother; you will now obey thongs of leather.”

“The man who would not sow must now break stones.”

These things were said, and repeated in the way of morality, as sentences and proverbs, but without any one taking them seriously. They were but words in the air. There was not one man among them who admitted his iniquity. Let a stranger not a convict endeavour to reproach him with his crime, and the insults directed against him would be endless. And how refined are convicts in the matter of insults! They

insult delicately, like artists; insult with the most delicate science. They endeavour not so much to offend by the expression as by the meaning, the spirit of an envenomed phrase. Their incessant quarrels developed greatly this special art.

As they only worked under the threat of an immense stick, they were idle and depraved. Those who were not already corrupt when they arrived at the convict establishment, became perverted very soon. Brought together in spite of themselves, they were perfect strangers to one another. "The devil has worn out three pairs of sandals before he got us together," they would say. Intrigues, calumnies, scandal of all kinds, envy, and hatred reigned above everything else. In this life of sloth, no ordinary spiteful tongue could make head against these murderers, with insults constantly in their mouths.

As I said before, there were found among them men of open character, resolute, intrepid, accustomed to self-command. These were held involuntarily in esteem. Although they were very jealous of their reputation,[Pg 15] they endeavoured to annoy no one, and never insulted one another without a motive. Their conduct was on all points full of dignity. They were rational, and almost always obedient, not by principle, or from any respect for duty, but as if in virtue of a mutual convention between themselves and the administration—a convention of which the advantages were plain enough.

The officials, moreover, behaved prudently towards them. I remember that one prisoner of the resolute and intrepid class, known to possess the instincts of a wild beast, was summoned one day to be whipped. It was during the summer, no work was being done. The Adjutant, the direct and immediate chief of the convict prison, was in the orderly-room, by the side of the principal entrance, ready to assist at the punishment. This Major was a fatal being for the prisoners, whom he had brought to such a state that they trembled before him. Severe to the point of insanity, "he threw himself upon them," to use their expression. But it was above all that his look, as penetrating as that of a lynx, was feared. It was impossible to conceal anything from him. He saw, so to say, without looking. On entering the prison, he knew at once what was being done. Accordingly, the convicts, one and all, called him the man with the eight eyes. His system was bad, for it had the effect of irritating men who were already irascible. But for the Commandant, a well-bred and reasonable man, who moderated the savage onslaughts of the Major, the latter would have caused sad misfortunes by his bad administration. I do not understand how he managed to retire from the service safe and sound. It is true that he left after being called before a court-martial.

The prisoner turned pale when he was called; generally speaking, he lay down courageously, and without uttering a word, to receive the terrible rods, after which he got up and shook himself. He bore the misfortune calmly, philosophically, it is true, though he was never punished carelessly, nor without all sorts of precautions. But this time he considered himself innocent. He turned pale, and as he walked quietly towards the [Pg 16] escort of soldiers he managed to conceal in his sleeve a shoemaker's awl. The prisoners were severely forbidden to carry sharp instruments about them. Examinations were frequently, minutely, and unexpectedly made, and all infractions of the rule were severely punished. But as it is difficult to take away from the criminal what he is determined to conceal, and as, moreover, sharp instruments are necessarily used in the prison, they were never destroyed. If the official succeeded in taking them away from the convicts, the latter procured new ones very soon.

On the occasion in question, all the convicts had now thrown themselves against the palisade, with palpitating hearts, to look through the crevices. It was known that this time Petroff would not allow himself to be flogged, that the end of the Major had come. But at the critical moment the latter got into his carriage, and went away, leaving the direction of the punishment to a subaltern. "God has saved him!" said the convicts. As for Petroff, he underwent his punishment quietly. Once the Major had gone, his anger fell. The prisoner is submissive and obedient to a certain point, but there is a limit which must not be crossed. Nothing is more curious than these strange outbursts of disobedience and rage. Often a man who has supported for many years the most cruel punishment, will revolt for a trifle, for nothing at all. He might pass for a madman; that, in fact, is what is said of him.

I have already said that during many years I never remarked the least sign of repentance, not even the slightest uneasiness with regard to the crime committed; and that most of the convicts considered neither honour nor conscience, holding that they had a right to act as they thought fit. Certainly vanity, evil examples, deceitfulness, and false shame were responsible for much. On the other hand, who can claim to have sounded the depths of these hearts, given over to perdition, and to have found them closed to all light? It would seem all the same that during so many years I ought to have been able to notice some indication, even the most fugitive, [Pg 17] of some regret, some moral suffering. I positively saw nothing of the kind. With ready-made opinions one cannot judge of crime. Its philosophy is a little more complicated than people think. It is acknowledged that neither convict prisons, nor the hulks, nor any system of hard labour ever cured a criminal. These forms of chastisement only punish him and reassure society against the offences he might commit. Confinement, regulation, and excessive work have no effect but to develop

with these men profound hatred, a thirst for forbidden enjoyment, and frightful recalcitrations. On the other hand I am convinced that the celebrated cellular system gives results which are specious and deceitful. It deprives a criminal of his force, of his energy, enervates his soul by weakening and frightening it, and at last exhibits a dried up mummy as a model of repentance and amendment.

The criminal who has revolted against society, hates it, and considers himself in the right; society was wrong, not he. Has he not, moreover, undergone his punishment? Accordingly he is absolved, acquitted in his own eyes. In spite of different opinions, every one will acknowledge that there are crimes which everywhere, always, under no matter what legislation, are beyond discussion crimes, and should be regarded as such as long as man is man. It is only at the convict prison that I have heard related, with a childish, unrestrained laugh, the strangest, most atrocious offences. I shall never forget a certain parricide, formerly a nobleman and a public functionary. He had given great grief to his father—a true prodigal son. The old man endeavoured in vain to restrain him by remonstrance on the fatal slope down which he was sliding. As he was loaded with debts, and his father was suspected of having, besides an estate, a sum of ready money, he killed him in order to enter more quickly into his inheritance. This crime was not discovered until a month afterwards. During all this time the murderer, who meanwhile had informed the police of his father's disappearance, continued his debauches. At last, during his absence, the police discovered the old man's corpse in a drain. The gray head[Pg 18] was severed from the trunk, but replaced in its original position. The body was entirely dressed. Beneath, as if by derision, the assassin had placed a cushion.

The young man confessed nothing. He was degraded, deprived of his nobiliary privileges, and condemned to twenty years' hard labour. As long as I knew him I always found him to be careless of his position. He was the most light-minded, inconsiderate man that I ever met, although he was far from being a fool. I never observed in him any great tendency to cruelty. The other convicts despised him, not on account of his crime, of which there was never any question, but because he was without dignity. He sometimes spoke of his father. One day for instance, boasting of the hereditary good health of his family, he said: "My father, for example, until his death was never ill."

Animal insensibility carried to such a point is most remarkable—it is, indeed, phenomenal. There must have been in this case an organic defect in the man, some physical and moral monstrosity unknown hitherto to science, and not simply crime. I naturally did not believe in so atrocious a crime; but people of the same town as himself, who knew all the details of his history, related it to me. The facts were so clear

that it would have been madness not to accept them. The prisoners once heard him cry out during his sleep: “Hold him! hold him! Cut his head off, his head, his head!”

Nearly all the convicts dreamed aloud, or were delirious in their sleep. Insults, words of slang, knives, hatchets, seemed constantly present in their dreams. “We are crushed!” they would say; “we are without entrails; that is why we shriek in the night.”

Hard labour in our fortress was not an occupation, but an obligation. The prisoners accomplished their task, they worked the number of hours fixed by the law, and then returned to the prison. They hated their liberty. If the convict did not do some work on his own account voluntarily, it would be impossible for him to support his confinement. How could these persons, all strongly constituted, who had lived sumptuously, and [Pg 19] desired so to live again, who had been brought together against their will, after society had cast them up—how could they live in a normal and natural manner? Man cannot exist without work, without legal, natural property. Depart from these conditions, and he becomes perverted and changed into a wild beast. Accordingly, every convict, through natural requirements and by the instinct of self-preservation, had a trade—an occupation of some kind.

The long days of summer were taken up almost entirely by our hard labour. The night was so short that we had only just time to sleep. It was not the same in winter.

According to the regulations, the prisoners had to be shut up in the barracks at nightfall. What was to be done during these long, sad evenings but work?

Consequently each barrack, though locked and bolted, assumed the appearance of a large workshop. The work was not, it is true, strictly forbidden, but it was forbidden to have tools, without which work is evidently impossible. But we laboured in secret, and the administration seemed to shut its eyes. Many prisoners arrived without knowing how to make use of their ten fingers; but they learnt a trade from some of their companions, and became excellent workmen.

We had among us cobblers, bootmakers, tailors, masons, locksmiths, and gilders. A Jew named Esau Boumstein was at the same time a jeweller and a usurer. Every one worked, and thus gained a few pence—for many orders came from the town. Money is a tangible resonant liberty, inestimable for a man entirely deprived of true liberty. If he feels some money in his pocket, he consoles himself a little, even though he cannot spend it—but one can always and everywhere spend money, the more so as forbidden fruit is doubly sweet. One can often buy spirits in the convict prison. Although pipes are severely forbidden, every one smokes. Money and tobacco save the convicts from the scurvy, as work saves them from crime—for without work they would mutually have destroyed one another like spiders shut up in a close bottle. Work and money

were all the same[Pg 20] forbidden. Often during the night severe examinations were made, during which everything that was not legally authorised was confiscated. However successfully the little hoards had been concealed, they were sometimes discovered. That was one of the reasons why they were not kept very long. They were exchanged as soon as possible for drink, which explains how it happened that spirits penetrated into the convict prison. The delinquent was not only deprived of his hoard, but was also cruelly flogged.

A short time after each examination the convicts procured again the objects which had been confiscated, and everything went on as before. The administration knew it; and although the condition of the convicts was a good deal like that of the inhabitants of Vesuvius, they never murmured at the punishment inflicted for these peccadilloes. Those who had no manual skill did business somehow or other. The modes of buying and selling were original enough. Things changed hands which no one expected a convict would ever have thought of selling or buying, or even of regarding as of any value whatever. The least rag had its value, and might be turned to account. In consequence, however, of the poverty of the convicts, money acquired in their eyes a superior value to that really belonging to it.

Long and painful tasks, sometimes of a very complicated kind, brought back a few kopecks. Several of the prisoners lent by the week, and did good business that way. The prisoner who was ruined and insolvent carried to the usurer the few things belonging to him and pledged them for some halfpence, which were lent to him at a fabulous rate of interest. If he did not redeem them at the fixed time the usurer sold them pitilessly by auction, and without the least delay.

Usury flourished so well in our convict prison that money was lent even on things belonging to the Government: linen, boots, etc.—things that were wanted at every moment. When the lender accepted such pledges the affair took an unexpected turn. The proprietor went,[Pg 21] immediately after he had received his money, and told the under officer—chief superintendent of the convict prison—that objects belonging to the State were being concealed, on which everything was taken away from the usurer without even the formality of a report to the superior administration. But never was there any quarrel—and that is very curious indeed—between the usurer and the owner. The first gave up in silence, with a morose air, the things demanded from him, as if he had been waiting for the request. Sometimes, perhaps, he confessed to himself that, in the place of the borrower, he would not have acted differently. Accordingly, if he was insulted after this restitution, it was less from hatred than simply as a matter of conscience.

The convicts robbed one another without shame. Each prisoner had his little box fitted with a padlock, in which he kept the things entrusted to him by the administration. Although these boxes were authorised, that did not prevent them from being broken into. The reader can easily imagine what clever thieves were found among us. A prisoner who was sincerely devoted to me—I say it without boasting—stole my Bible from me, the only book allowed in the convict prison. He told me of it the same day, not from repentance, but because he pitied me when he saw me looking for it everywhere. We had among our companions of the chain several convicts called “innkeepers,” who sold spirits, and became comparatively rich by doing so. I shall speak of this further on, for the liquor traffic deserves special study.

A great number of prisoners had been deported for smuggling, which explains how it was that drink was brought secretly into the convict prison, under so severe a surveillance as ours was. In passing it may be remarked that smuggling is an offence apart. Would it be believed that money, the solid profit from the affair, possesses often only secondary importance for the smuggler? It is all the same an authentic fact. He works by vocation. In his style he is a poet. He risks all he possesses, exposes himself to terrible dangers, intrigues,[Pg 22] invents, gets out of a scrape, and brings everything to a happy end by a sort of inspiration. This passion is as violent as that of play.

I knew a prisoner of colossal stature who was the mildest, the most peaceable, and most manageable man it was possible to see. We often asked one another how he had been deported. He had such a calm, sociable character, that during the whole time that he passed at the convict prison, he never quarrelled with any one. Born in Western Russia, where he lived on the frontier, he had been sent to hard labour for smuggling. Naturally, then, he could not resist his desire to smuggle spirits into the prison. How many times was he not punished for it, and heaven knows how much he feared the rods. This dangerous trade brought him in but slender profits. It was the speculator who got rich at his expense. Each time he was punished he wept like an old woman, and swore by all that was holy that he would never be caught at such things again. He kept his vow for an entire month, but he ended by yielding once more to his passion. Thanks to these amateurs of smuggling, spirits were always to be had in the convict prison.

Another source of income which, without enriching the prisoners, was constantly and beneficently turned to account, was alms-giving. The upper classes of our Russian society do not know to what an extent merchants, shopkeepers, and our people generally, commiserate the “unfortunate!”^[3] Alms were always forthcoming, and consisted generally of little white loaves, sometimes of money, but very rarely.

Without alms, the existence of the convicts, and above all that of the accused, who are badly fed, would be too painful. These alms are shared equally between all the prisoners. If the gifts are not sufficient, the little loaves are divided into halves, and sometimes into six pieces, so that each convict may have his share. I remember the first alms, a small piece of money, that I received. A short time after my arrival, one morning, as I was coming back from work with a soldier[Pg 23] escort, I met a mother and her daughter, a child of ten, as beautiful as an angel. I had already seen them once before.

The mother was the widow of a poor soldier, who, while still young, had been sentenced by a court-martial, and had died in the infirmary of the convict prison while I was there. They wept hot tears when they came to bid him good-bye. On seeing me the little girl blushed, and murmured a few words into her mother's ear, who stopped, and took from a basket a kopeck which she gave to the little girl. The little girl ran after me.

"Here, poor man," she said, "take this in the name of Christ." I took the money which she slipped into my hand. The little girl returned joyfully to her mother. I preserved that kopeck a considerable time.

FOOTNOTES:

[1]Goriantchikoff became himself a soldier in Siberia, when he had finished his term of imprisonment.

[2]An allusion to the two rows of soldiers, armed with green rods, between which convicts condemned to corporal punishment had and still have to pass. But this punishment now exists only for convicts deprived of all their civil rights. This subject will be returned to further on.

[3]Men condemned to hard labour, and exiles generally, are so called by the Russian peasantry.

[Pg 24]

CHAPTER III. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

During the first weeks, and naturally the early part of my imprisonment, made a deep impression on my imagination. The following years on the other hand are all mixed up together, and leave but a confused recollection. Certain epochs of this life are even effaced from my memory. I have kept one general impression of it, always the same;

painful, monotonous, stifling. What I saw in experience during the first days of my imprisonment seems to me as if it had all taken place yesterday. Such was sure to be the case. I remember perfectly that in the first place this life astonished me by the very fact that it offered nothing particular, nothing extraordinary, or to express myself better, nothing unexpected. It was not until later on, when I had lived some time in the convict prison, that I understood all that was exceptional and unforeseen in such a life. I was astonished at the discovery. I will avow that this astonishment remained with me throughout my term of punishment. I could not decidedly reconcile myself to this existence.

First of all, I experienced an invincible repugnance on arriving; but oddly enough the life seemed to me less painful than I had imagined on the journey.

Indeed, prisoners, though embarrassed by their irons went to and fro in the prison freely enough. They insulted one another, sang, worked, smoked pipes, and [Pg 25] drank spirits. There were not many drinkers all the same. There were also regular card parties during the night. The labour did not seem to me very trying; I fancied that it could not be the real "hard labour." I did not understand till long afterwards why this labour was really hard and excessive. It was less by reason of its difficulty, than because it was forced, imposed, obligatory; and it was only done through fear of the stick. The peasant works certainly harder than the convict, for, during the summer, he works night and day. But it is in his own interest that he fatigues himself. His aim is reasonable, so that he suffers less than the convict who performs hard labour from which he derives no profit. It once came into my head that if it were desired to reduce a man to nothing—to punish him atrociously, to crush him in such a manner that the most hardened murderer would tremble before such a punishment, and take fright beforehand—it would be necessary to give to his work a character of complete uselessness, even to absurdity.

Hard labour, as it is now carried on, presents no interest to the convict; but it has its utility. The convict makes bricks, digs the earth, builds; and all his occupations have a meaning and an end. Sometimes, even the prisoner takes an interest in what he is doing. He then wishes to work more skilfully, more advantageously. But let him be constrained to pour water from one vessel into another, or to transport a quantity of earth from one place to another, in order to perform the contrary operation immediately afterwards, then I am persuaded that at the end of a few days the prisoner would strangle himself or commit a thousand crimes, punishable with death, rather than live in such an abject condition and endure such torments. It is evident that such punishment would be rather a torture, an atrocious vengeance, than a correction. It would be absurd, for it would have no natural end.

I did not, however, arrive until the winter—in the month of December—and the labour was then unimportant in our fortress. I had no idea of the summer labour—five times as fatiguing. The prisoners, during[Pg 26] the winter season, broke up on the Irtych some old boats belonging to the Government, found occupation in the workshops, took away the snow blown by hurricanes against the buildings, or burned and pounded alabaster. As the day was very short, the work ceased at an early hour, and every one returned to the convict prison, where there was scarcely anything to do, except the supplementary work which the convicts did for themselves.

Scarcely a third of the convicts worked seriously, the others idled their time and wandered about without aim in the barracks, scheming and insulting one another. Those who had a little money got drunk on spirits, or lost what they had saved at gambling. And all this from idleness, weariness, and want of something to do.

I learned, moreover, to know one suffering which is perhaps the sharpest, the most painful that can be experienced in a house of detention apart from laws and liberty. I mean, “forced cohabitation.” Cohabitation is more or less forced everywhere and always; but nowhere is it so horrible as in a prison. There are men there with whom no one would consent to live. I am certain that every convict, unconsciously perhaps, has suffered from this.

The food of the prisoners seemed to me passable; some declared even that it was incomparably better than in any Russian prison. I cannot certify to this, for I was never in prison anywhere else. Many of us, besides, were allowed to procure whatever nourishment we wanted. As fresh meat cost only three kopecks a pound, those who always had money allowed themselves the luxury of eating it. The majority of the prisoners were contented with the regular ration.

When they praised the diet of the convict prison, they were thinking only of the bread, which was distributed at the rate of so much per room, and not individually or by weight. This last condition would have frightened the convicts, for a third of them at least would have constantly suffered from hunger; while, with the system in vogue, every one was satisfied. Our bread was [Pg 27]particularly nice, and was even renowned in the town. Its good quality was attributed to the excellent construction of the prison ovens. As for our cabbage-soup, it was cooked and thickened with flour. It had not an appetising appearance. On working days it was clear and thin; but what particularly disgusted me was the way it was served. The prisoners, however, paid no attention to that.

During the three days that followed my arrival, I did not go to work. Some respite was always given to prisoners just arrived, in order to allow them to recover from their

fatigue. The second day I had to go out of the convict prison in order to be ironed. My chain was not of the regulation pattern; it was composed of rings, which gave forth a clear sound, so I heard other convicts say. I had to wear them externally over my clothes, whereas my companions had chains formed, not of rings, but of four links, as thick as the finger, and fastened together by three links which were worn beneath the trousers. To the central ring was fastened a strip of leather, tied in its turn to a girdle fastened over the shirt.

I can see again the first morning that I passed in the convict prison. The drum sounded in the orderly room, near the principal entrance. Ten minutes afterwards the under officer opened the barracks. The convicts woke up one after another and rose trembling with cold from their plank bedsteads, by the dull light of a tallow candle. Nearly all of them were morose; they yawned and stretched themselves. Their foreheads, marked by the iron, were contracted. Some made the sign of the Cross; others began to talk nonsense. The cold air from outside rushed in as soon as the door was opened. Then the prisoners hurried round the pails full of water, one after another, and took water in their mouths, and, letting it out into their hands, washed their faces. Those pails had been brought in the night before by a prisoner specially appointed, according to the rules, to clean the barracks.

The convicts chose him themselves. He did not work[Pg 28] with the others, for it was his business to examine the camp bedsteads and the floors, to fetch and carry water. This water served in the morning for the prisoners' ablutions, and the rest during the day for ordinary drinking. That very morning there were disputes on the subject of one of the pitchers.

"What are you doing there with your marked forehead?" grumbled one of the prisoners, tall, dry, and sallow.

He attracted attention by the strange protuberances with which his skull was covered. He pushed against another convict round and small, with a lively rubicund countenance.

"Just wait."

"What are you crying out about? You know that a fine must be paid when the others are kept waiting. Off with you. What a monument, my brethren!"

"A little calf," he went on muttering. "See, the white bread of the prison has fattened him."

"For what do you take yourself? A fine bird, indeed."

“You are about right.”

“What bird do you mean?”

“You don’t require to be told.”

“How so?”

“Find out.”

They devoured one another with their eyes. The little man, waiting for a reply, with clenched fists, was apparently ready to fight. I thought that an encounter would take place. It was all quite new to me; accordingly I watched the scene with curiosity. Later on I learnt that such quarrels were very innocent, that they served for entertainment. Like an amusing comedy, it scarcely ever ended in blows. This characteristic plainly informed me of the manners of the prisoners.

The tall prisoner remained calm and majestic. He felt that some answer was expected from him, if he was not to be dishonoured, covered with ridicule. It was necessary for him to show that he was a wonderful bird, a personage. Accordingly, he cast a side look on his[Pg 29] adversary, endeavouring, with inexpressible contempt, to irritate him by looking at him over his shoulders, up and down, as he would have done with an insect. At last the little fat man was so irritated that he would have thrown himself upon his adversary had not his companions surrounded the combatants to prevent a serious quarrel from taking place.

“Fight with your fists, not with your tongues,” cried a spectator from a corner of the room.

“No, hold them,” answered another, “they are going to fight. We are fine fellows, one against seven is our style.”

Fine fighting men! One was here for having sneaked a pound of bread, the other is a pot-stealer; he was whipped by the executioner for stealing a pot of curdled milk from an old woman.

“Enough, keep quiet,” cried a retired soldier, whose business it was to keep order in the barrack, and who slept in a corner of the room on a bedstead of his own.

“Water, my children, water for Nevalid Petrovitch, water for our little brother, who has just woke up.”

“Your brother! Am I your brother? Did we ever drink a roublesworth of spirits together?” muttered the old soldier as he passed his arms through the sleeves of his great-coat.

The roll was about to be called, for it was already late. The prisoners were hurrying towards the kitchen. They had to put on their pelisses, and were to receive in their bi-coloured caps the bread which one of the cooks—one of the bakers, that is to say—was distributing among them. These cooks, like those who did the household work, were chosen by the prisoners themselves. There were two for the kitchen, making four in all for the convict prison. They had at their disposal the only kitchen-knife authorised in the prison, which was used for cutting up the bread and meat. The prisoners arranged themselves in groups around the tables as best they could in caps and pelisses, with leather girdles round their waists, all ready to begin work. Some of the convicts had kvas before them, in which they steeped pieces of bread. The noise[Pg 30] was insupportable. Many of the convicts, however, were talking together in corners with a steady, tranquil air.

“Good-morning and good appetite, Father Antonitch,” said a young prisoner, sitting down by the side of an old man, who had lost his teeth.

“If you are not joking, well, good-morning,” said the latter, without raising his eyes, and endeavouring to masticate a piece of bread with his toothless gums.

“I declare I fancied you were dead, Antonitch.”

“Die first, I will follow you.”

I sat down beside them. On my right two convicts were conversing with an attempt at dignity.

“I am not likely to be robbed,” said one of them. “I am more afraid of stealing myself.”

“It would not be a good idea to rob me. The devil! I should pay the man out.”

“But what would you do, you are only a convict? We have no other name. You will see that she will rob you, the wretch, without even saying, ‘Thank you.’ The money I gave her was wasted. Just fancy, she was here a few days ago! Where were we to go? Shall I ask permission to go into the house of Theodore, the executioner? He has still his house in the suburb, the one he bought from that Solomon, you know, that scurvy Jew who hung himself not long since.”

“Yes, I know him, the one who sold liquor here three years ago, and who was called Grichka—the secret-drinking shop.”

“I know.”

“All brag. You don’t know. In the first place it is another drinking shop.”

“What do you mean, another? You don’t know what you are talking about. I will bring you as many witnesses as you like.”

“Oh, you will bring them, will you? Who are you? Do you know to whom you are speaking?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“I have often thrashed you, though I don’t boast of it. Do not give yourself airs then.”

“You have thrashed me? The man who will thrash[Pg 31] me is not yet born; and the man who did thrash me is six feet beneath the ground.”

“Plague-stricken rascal of Bender?”

“May the Siberian leprosy devour you with ulcers!”

“May a chopper cleave your dog of a head.”

Insults were falling about like rain.

“Come, now, they are going to fight. When men have not been able to conduct themselves properly they should keep silent. They are too glad to come and eat the Government bread, the rascals!”

They were soon separated. Let them fight with the tongue as much as they wish. That is permitted. It is a diversion at the service of every one; but no blows. It is, indeed, only in extraordinary cases that blows were exchanged. If a fight took place, information was given to the Major, who ordered an inquiry or directed one himself; and then woe to the convicts. Accordingly they set their faces against anything like a serious quarrel; besides, they insulted one another chiefly to pass the time, as an oratorical exercise. They get excited; the quarrel takes a furious, ferocious character; they seem about to slaughter one another. Nothing of the kind takes place. As soon as their anger has reached a certain pitch they separate.

That astonished me much, and if I relate some of the conversations between the convicts, I do so with a purpose. Could I have imagined that people could have insulted one another for pleasure, that they could find enjoyment in it?

We must not forget the gratification of vanity. A dialectician, who knows how to insult artistically, is respected. A little more, and he would be applauded like an actor.

Already, the night before, I noticed some glances in my direction. On the other hand, several convicts hung around me as if they had suspected that I had brought money with me. They endeavoured to get into my good graces by teaching me how to carry my irons without being incommoded. They also gave me—of course in return for money—a box with a lock, in order to keep safe the things which[Pg 32] had been entrusted to me by the administration, and the few shirts that I had been allowed to bring with me to the convict prison. Not later than next morning these same prisoners stole my box, and drank the money which they had taken out of it.

One of them became afterwards a great friend of mine, though he robbed me whenever an opportunity offered itself. He was, all the same, vexed at what he had done. He committed these thefts almost unconsciously, as if in the way of a duty. Consequently I bore him no grudge.

These convicts let me know that one could have tea, and that I should do well to get myself a teapot. They found me one, which I hired for a certain time. They also recommended me a cook, who, for thirty kopecks a month, would arrange the dishes I might desire, if it was my intention to buy provisions and take my meals apart. Of course they borrowed money from me. The day of my arrival they asked me for some at three different times.

The noblemen degraded from their position, here incarcerated in the convict prison, were badly looked upon by their fellow prisoners; although they had lost all their rights like the other convicts, they were not looked upon as comrades.

In this instinctive repugnance there was a sort of reason. To them we were always gentlemen, although they often laughed at our fall.

“Ah! it’s all over now. Mossieu’s carriage formerly crushed the passers-by at Moscow. Now Mossieu picks hemp!”

They knew our sufferings, though we hid them as much as possible. It was, above all, when we were all working together that we had most to endure, for our strength was not so great as theirs, and we were really not of much assistance to them. Nothing is more difficult than to gain the confidence of the common people; above all, such people as these!

There were only a few of us who were of noble birth in the whole prison. First, there were five Poles—of[Pg 33] whom further on I shall speak in detail—they were detested by the convicts more, perhaps, than the Russian nobles. The Poles—I speak only of the political convicts—always behaved to them with a constrained and offensive politeness, scarcely ever speaking to them, and making no endeavour to conceal the

disgust which they experienced in such company. The convicts understood all this, and paid them back in their own coin.

Two years passed before I could gain the good-will of my companions; but the greater part of them were attached to me, and declared that I was a good fellow.

There were altogether—counting myself—five Russian nobles in the convict prison. I had heard of one of them even before my arrival as a vile and base creature, horribly corrupt, doing the work of spy and informer. Accordingly, from the very first day I refused to enter into relations with this man. The second was the parricide of whom I have spoken in these memoirs. The third was Akimitch. I have scarcely ever seen such an original; and I have still a lively recollection of him.

Tall, thin, weak-minded, and terribly ignorant, he was as argumentative and as particular about details as a German. The convicts laughed at him; but they feared him, on account of his susceptible, excitable, and quarrelsome disposition. As soon as he arrived, he was on a footing of perfect equality with them. He insulted them and beat them. Phenomenally just, it was sufficient for him that there was injustice, to interfere in an affair which did not concern him. He was, moreover, exceedingly simple. When he quarrelled with the convicts, he reproached them with being thieves, and exhorted them in all sincerity to steal no more. He had served as a sub-lieutenant in the Caucasus. I made friends with him the first day, and he related to me his “affair.” He had begun as a cadet in a Line regiment. After waiting some time to be appointed to his commission as sub-lieutenant, he at last received it, and was sent into the mountains to command a small fort. A small tributary prince in the neighbourhood set fire to the fort, and made a night attack, which had no success.

[Pg 34]

Akimitch was very cunning, and pretended not to know that he was the author of the attack, which he attributed to some insurgents wandering about the mountains. After a month he invited the prince, in a friendly way, to come and see him. The prince arrived on horseback, without suspecting anything. Akimitch drew up his garrison in line of battle, and exposed to the soldiers the treason and villainy of his visitor. He reproached him with his conduct; proved to him that to set fire to the fort was a shameful crime; explained to him minutely the duties of a tributary prince; and then, by way of peroration to his harangue, had him shot. He at once informed his superior officers of this execution, with all the details necessary. Thereupon Akimitch was brought to trial. He appeared before a court-martial, and was condemned to death; but his sentence was commuted, and he was sent to Siberia as a convict of the second class—condemned, that is to say, to twelve years’ hard labour and

imprisonment in a fortress. He admitted willingly that he had acted illegally, and that the prince ought to have been tried in a civil court, and not by a court-martial. Nevertheless, he could not understand that his action was a crime.

“He had burned my fort; what was I to do? Was I to thank him for it?” he answered to my objections.

Although the convicts laughed at Akimitch, and pretended that he was a little mad, they esteemed him all the same by reason of his cleverness and his precision.

He knew all possible trades, and could do whatever you wished. He was cobbler, bootmaker, painter, carver, gilder, and locksmith. He had acquired these talents at the convict prison, for it was sufficient for him to see an object, in order to imitate it. He sold in the town, or caused to be sold, baskets, lanterns, and toys. Thanks to his work, he had always some money, which he employed in buying shirts, pillows, and so on. He had himself made a mattress, and as he slept in the same room as myself he was very useful to me at the beginning of my imprisonment. Before leaving prison to go to work, the convicts were drawn up in two ranks before [Pg 35] the orderly-room, surrounded by an escort of soldiers with loaded muskets. An officer of Engineers then arrived, with the superintendent of the works and a few soldiers, who watched the operations. The superintendent counted the convicts, and sent them in bands to the places where they were to be occupied.

I went with some other prisoners to the workshop of the Engineers—a low brick house built in the midst of a large court-yard full of materials. There was a forge there, and carpenters’, locksmiths’, and painters’ workshops. Akimitch was assigned to the last. He boiled the oil for the varnish, mixed the colours, and painted tables and other pieces of furniture in imitation walnut.

While I was waiting to have additional irons put on, I communicated to him my first impressions.

“Yes,” he said, “they do not like nobles, above all those who have been condemned for political offences, and they take a pleasure in wounding their feelings. Is it not intelligible? We do not belong to them, we do not suit them. They have all been serfs or soldiers. Tell me what sympathy can they have for us. The life here is hard, but it is nothing in comparison with that of the disciplinary companies in Russia. There it is hell. The men who have been in them praise our convict prison. It is paradise compared to their purgatory. Not that the work is harder. It is said that with the convicts of the first class the administration—it is not exclusively military as it is here—acts quite differently from what it does towards us. They have their little houses

there I have been told, for I have not seen for myself. They wear no uniform, their heads are not shaved, though, in my opinion, uniforms and shaved heads are not bad things; it is neater, and also it is more agreeable to the eye, only these men do not like it. Oh, what a Babel this place is! Soldiers, Circassians, old believers, peasants who have left their wives and families, Jews, Gypsies, people come from Heaven knows where, and all this variety of men are to live quietly together side by side, eat from the same dish, and sleep on the same planks. Not a moment's liberty, no enjoyment except in secret; [Pg 36] they must hide their money in their boots; and then always the convict prison at every moment—perpetually convict prison! Involuntarily wild ideas come to one.”

As I already knew all this, I was above all anxious to question Akimitch in regard to our Major. He concealed nothing, and the impression which his story left upon me was far from being an agreeable one.

I had to live for two years under the authority of this officer. All that Akimitch had told me about him was strictly true. He was a spiteful, ill-regulated man, terrible above all things, because he possessed almost absolute power over two hundred human beings. He looked upon the prisoners as his personal enemies—first, and very serious fault. His rare capacities, and, perhaps, even his good qualities, were perverted by his intemperance and his spitefulness. He sometimes fell like a bombshell into the barracks in the middle of the night. If he noticed a prisoner asleep on his back or his left side, he awoke him and said to him: “You must sleep as I ordered!” The convicts detested him and feared him like the plague. His repulsive, crimson countenance made every one tremble. We all knew that the Major was entirely in the hands of his servant Fedka, and that he had nearly gone mad when his dog “Treasure” fell ill. He preferred this dog to every other living creature.

When Fedka told him that a convict, who had picked up some veterinary knowledge, made wonderful cures, he sent for him directly and said to him, “I entrust my dog to your care. If you cure ‘Treasure’ I will reward you royally.” The man, a very intelligent Siberian peasant, was indeed a good veterinary surgeon, but he was above all a cunning peasant. He used to tell his comrades long after the affair had taken place the story of his visit to the Major.

“I looked at ‘Treasure,’ he was lying down on a sofa with his head on a white cushion. I saw at once that he had inflammation, and that he wanted bleeding. I think I could have cured him, but I said to myself, ‘What will [Pg 37] happen if the dog dies? It will be my fault.’ ‘No, your noble highness,’ I said to him, ‘you have called me too late. If I had

seen your dog yesterday or the day before, he would now be restored to health; but at the present moment I can do nothing. He will die.' And 'Treasure' died."

I was told one day that a convict had tried to kill the Major. This prisoner had for several years been noticed for his submissive attitude and also his silence. He was regarded even as a madman. As he possessed some instruction he passed his nights reading the Bible. When everybody was asleep he rose, climbed up on to the stove, lit a church taper, opened his Gospel and began to read. He did this for an entire year.

One fine day he left the ranks and declared that he would not go to work. He was reported to the Major, who flew into a rage, and hurried to the barracks. The convict rushed forward and hurled at him a brick, which he had procured beforehand; but it missed him. The prisoner was seized, tried, and whipped—it was a matter of a few moments—carried to the hospital, and died there three days afterwards. He declared during his last moments that he hated no one; but that he had wished to suffer. He belonged to no sect of fanatics. Afterwards, when people spoke of him in the barracks, it was always with respect.

At last they put new irons on me. While they were being soldered a number of young women, selling little white loaves, came into the forge one after another. They were, for the most part, quite little girls who came to sell the loaves that their mothers had baked. As they got older they still continued to hang about us, but they no longer brought bread. There were always some of them about. There were also married women. Each roll cost two kopecks. Nearly all the prisoners used to have them. I noticed a prisoner who worked as a carpenter. He was already getting gray, but he had a ruddy, smiling complexion. He was joking with the vendors of rolls. Before they arrived he had tied a red handkerchief round his neck. A fat woman, much marked [Pg 38] with the small-pox, put down her basket on the carpenter's table. They began to talk.

"Why did you not come yesterday?" said the convict, with a self-satisfied smile.

"I did come; but you had gone," replied the woman boldly.

"Yes; they made us go away, otherwise we should have met. The day before yesterday they all came to see me."

"Who came?"

"Why, Mariashka, Khavroshka, Tchekunda, Dougrochva" (the woman of four kopecks).

"What," I said to Akimitch, "is it possible that——?"

“Yes; it happens sometimes,” he replied, lowering his eyes, for he was a very proper man.

Yes; it happened sometimes, but rarely, and with unheard of difficulties. The convicts preferred to spend their money in drink. It was very difficult to meet these women. It was necessary to come to an agreement about the place, and the time; to arrange a meeting, to find solitude, and, what was most difficult of all, to avoid the escorts—almost an impossibility—and to spend relatively prodigious sums. I have sometimes, however, witnessed love scenes. One day three of us were heating a brick-kiln on the banks of the Irtych. The soldiers of the escort were good-natured fellows. Two “blowers” (they were so-called) soon appeared.

“Where were you staying so long?” said a prisoner to them, who had evidently been expecting them. “Was it at the Zvierkoffs that you were detained?”

“At the Zvierkoffs? It will be fine weather, and the fowls will have teeth, when I go to see them,” replied one of the women.

She was the dirtiest woman imaginable. She was called Tchekunda, and had arrived in company with her friend, the “four kopecks,” who was beneath all description.

“It’s a long time since we have seen anything of you,” says the gallant to her of the four kopecks; “you seem to have grown thinner.”

[Pg 39]

“Perhaps; formerly I was good-looking and plump, whereas now one might fancy I had swallowed eels.”

“And you still run after the soldiers, is that so?”

“All calumny on the part of wicked people; and after all, if I was to be flogged to death for it, I like soldiers.”

“Never mind your soldiers, we’re the people to love; we have money.”

Imagine this gallant with his shaved crown, with fetters on his ankles, dressed in a coat of two colours, and watched by an escort.

As I was now returning to the prison, my irons had been put on. I wished Akimitch good-bye and went away, escorted by a soldier. Those who do task work return first, and, when I got back to the barracks, a good number of convicts were already there.

As the kitchen could not have held the whole barrack-full at once, we did not all dine together. Those who came in first were first served. I tasted the cabbage soup, but, not

being used to it, could not eat it, and I prepared myself some tea. I sat down at one end of the table, with a convict of noble birth like myself. The prisoners were going in and out. There was no want of room, for there were not many of them. Five of them sat down apart from the large table. The cook gave them each two ladles full of soup, and brought them a plate of fried fish. These men were having a holiday. They looked at us in a friendly manner. One of the Poles came in and took his seat by our side.

“I was not with you, but I know that you are having a feast,” exclaimed a tall convict who now came in.

He was a man of about fifty years, thin and muscular. His face indicated cunning, and, at the same time, liveliness. His lower lip, fleshy and pendant, gave him a soft expression.

“Well, have you slept well? Why don’t you say how do you do? Well, now my friends of Kursk,” he said, sitting down by the side of the feasters, “good appetite? Here’s a new guest for you.”

“We are not from the province of Kursk.”

“Then my friends from Tambof, let me say?”

[Pg 40]

“We are not from Tambof either. You have nothing to claim from us; if you want to enjoy yourself go to some rich peasant.”

“I have Maria Ikotishna [from “ikot,” hiccough] in my belly, otherwise I should die of hunger. But where is your peasant to be found?”

“Good heavens! we mean Gazin; go to him.”

“Gazin is on the drink to-day, he’s devouring his capital.”

“He has at least twenty roubles,” says another convict. “It is profitable to keep a drinking shop.”

“You won’t have me? Then I must eat the Government food.”

“Will you have some tea? If so, ask these noblemen for some.”

“Where do you see any noblemen? They’re noblemen no longer. They’re not a bit better than us,” said in a sombre voice a convict who was seated in the corner, who hitherto had not risked a word.

“I should like a cup of tea, but I am ashamed to ask for it. I have self-respect,” said the convict with the heavy lip, looking at me with a good-humoured air.

“I will give you some if you like,” I said. “Will you have some?”

“What do you mean—will I have some? Who would not have some?” he said, coming towards the table.

“Only think! When he was free he ate nothing but cabbage soup and black bread, but now he is in prison he must have tea like a perfect gentleman,” continued the convict with the sombre air.

“Does no one here drink tea?” I asked him; but he did not think me worthy of a reply.

“White rolls, white rolls; who’ll buy?”

A young prisoner was carrying in a net a load of calachi (scones), which he proposed to sell in the prison. For every ten that he sold, the baker gave him one for his trouble. It was precisely on this tenth scone that he counted for his dinner.

“White rolls, white rolls,” he cried, as he entered the kitchen, “white Moscow rolls, all hot. I would eat[Pg 41] the whole of them, but I want money, lots of money. Come, lads, there is only one left for any of you who has had a mother.”

This appeal to filial love made every one laugh, and several of his white rolls were purchased.

“Well,” he said, “Gazin has drunk in such a style, it is quite a sin. He has chosen a nice moment too. If the man with the eight eyes should arrive—we shall hide him.”

“Is he very drunk?”

“Yes, and ill-tempered too—unmanageable.”

“There will be some fighting, then?”

“Whom are they speaking of?” I said to the Pole, my neighbour.

“Of Gazin. He is a prisoner who sells spirits. When he has gained a little money by his trade, he drinks it to the last kopeck; a cruel, malicious animal when he has been drinking. When sober, he is quiet enough, but when he is in drink he shows himself in his true character. He attacks people with the knife until it is taken from him.”

“How do they manage that?”

“Ten men throw themselves upon him and beat him like a sack without mercy until he loses consciousness. When he is half dead with the beating, they lay him down on his plank bedstead, and cover him over with his pelisse.”

“But they might kill him.”

“Any one else would die of it, but not he. He is excessively robust; he is the strongest of all the convicts. His constitution is so solid, that the day after one of these punishments he gets up perfectly sound.”

“Tell me, please,” I continued, speaking to the Pole, “why these people keep their food to themselves, and at the same time seem to envy me my tea.”

“Your tea has nothing to do with it. They are envious of you. Are you not a gentleman? You in no way resemble them. They would be glad to pick a quarrel with you in order to humiliate you. You don’t know what annoyances you will have to undergo. It is [Pg 42] martyrdom for men like us to be here. Our life is doubly painful, and great strength of character can alone accustom one to it. You will be vexed and tormented in all sorts of ways on account of your food and your tea. Although the number of men who buy their own food and drink tea daily is large enough, they have a right to do so, you have not.”

He got up and left the table a few minutes later. His predictions were already being fulfilled.

[Pg 43]

CHAPTER IV. FIRST IMPRESSIONS (*continued*).

Hardly had M. —cki—the Pole to whom I had been speaking—gone out when Gazin, completely drunk, threw himself all in a heap into the kitchen.

To see a convict drunk in the middle of the day, when every one was about to be sent out to work—given the well-known severity of the Major, who at any moment might come to the barracks, the watchfulness of the under officer who never left the prison, the presence of the old soldiers and the sentinels—all this quite upset the ideas I had formed of our prison; and a long time passed before I was able to understand and explain to myself the effects, which in the first instance were enigmatic indeed.

I have already said that all the convicts had a private occupation, and that this occupation was for them a natural and imperious one. They are passionately fond of money, and think more of it than of anything else—almost as much as of liberty. The

convict is half-consolated if he can ring a few kopecks in his pocket. On the contrary, he is sad, restless, and despondent if he has no money. He is ready then to commit no matter what crime in order to get some. Nevertheless, in spite of the importance it possesses for the convicts, money does not remain long in their pockets. It is difficult to keep it.[Pg 44] Sometimes it is confiscated, sometimes stolen. When the Major, in a sudden perquisition, discovered a small sum amassed with great trouble, he confiscated it. It may be that he laid it out in improving the food of the prisoners, for all the money taken from them went into his hands. But generally speaking it was stolen. A means of preserving it was, however, discovered. An old man from Starodoub, one of the “old believers,” took upon himself to conceal the convicts’ savings.

I cannot resist my desire to say some words about this man, although it takes me away from my story. He was about sixty years old, thin, and getting very gray. He excited my curiosity the first time I saw him, for he was not like any of the others; his look was so tranquil and mild, and I always saw with pleasure his clear and limpid eyes, surrounded by a number of little wrinkles. I often talked with him, and rarely have I met with so kind, so benevolent a being. He had been consigned to hard labour for a serious crime. A certain number of the “old believers” at Starodoub had been converted to the orthodox religion. The Government had done everything to encourage them, and, at the same time, to convert the other dissenters. The old man and some other fanatics had resolved to “defend the faith.” When the orthodox church was being constructed in their town they set fire to the building. This offence had brought upon its author the sentence of deportation. This well-to-do shopkeeper—he was in trade—had left a wife and family whom he loved, and had gone off courageously into exile, believing in his blindness that he was “suffering for the faith.”

When one had lived some time by the side of this kind old man, one could not help asking the question, how could he have rebelled? I spoke to him several times about his faith. He gave up none of his convictions, but in his answers I never noticed the slightest hatred; and yet he had destroyed a church, and was far from denying it. In his view, the offence he had[Pg 45] committed and his martyrdom were things to be proud of.

There were other “old believers” among the convicts—Siberians for the most part—men of well-developed intelligence, and as cunning as all peasants. Dialecticians in their way, they followed blindly their law, and delighted in discussing it. But they had great faults; they were haughty, proud, and very intolerant. The old man in no way resembled them. With full more belief in religious exposition than others of the same faith, he avoided all controversy. As he was of a gay and expansive disposition he often laughed—not with the coarse cynical laugh of the other convicts, but with a laugh of

clearness and simplicity, in which there was something of the child, and which harmonised perfectly with his gray head. I may perhaps be in error, but it seems to me that a man may be known by his laugh alone. If the laugh of a man you are acquainted with inspires you with sympathy, be assured that he is an honest man.

The old man had acquired the respect of all the prisoners without exception; but he was not proud of it. The convicts called him grandfather, and he took no offence. I then understood what an influence he must have exercised on his co-religionists.

In spite of the firmness with which he supported his prison life, one felt that he was tormented by a profound, incurable melancholy. I slept in the same barrack with him. One night, towards three o'clock in the morning, I woke up; I heard a slow, stifling sob. The old man was sitting upon the stove—the same place where the convict who had wished to kill the Major was in the habit of praying—and was reading from his manuscript prayer-book. As he wept I heard him repeating: “Lord, do not forsake me. Master, strengthen me. My poor little children, my dear little children, we shall never see one another again.” I cannot say how much this moved me.

We used to give our money then to this old man.[Pg 46] Heaven knows how the idea got abroad in our barrack that he could not be robbed. It was well known that he hid somewhere the savings deposited with him, but no one had been able to discover his secret. He revealed it to us; to the Poles, and myself. One of the stakes of the palisade bore a branch which apparently belonged to it, but it could be taken away, and then replaced in the stake. When the branch was removed a hole could be seen. This was the hiding-place in question.

I now resume the thread of my narrative. Why does not the convict save up his money? Not only is it difficult for him to keep it, but the prison life, moreover, is so sad that the convict by his very nature thirsts for freedom of action. By his position in society he is so irregular a being that the idea of swallowing up his capital in orgies, of intoxicating himself with revelry, seems to him quite natural if only he can procure himself one moment's forgetfulness. It was strange to see certain individuals bent over their labour only with the object of spending in one day all their gains, even to the last kopeck. Then they would go to work again until a new debauch, looked forward to months beforehand. Certain convicts were fond of new clothes, more or less singular in style, such as fancy trousers and waistcoats; but it was above all for the coloured shirts that the convicts had a pronounced taste; also for belts with metal clasps.

On holidays the dandies of the prison put on their Sunday best. They were worth seeing as they strutted about their part of the barracks. The pleasure of feeling themselves well dressed amounted with them to childishness; indeed, in many things

convicts are only children. Their fine clothes disappeared very soon, often the evening of the very day on which they had been bought. Their owners pledged them or sold them again for a trifle.

The feasts were generally held at fixed times. They coincided with religious festivals, or with the name's day of the drunken convict. On getting up in the [Pg 47] morning he would place a wax taper before the holy image, then he said his prayer, dressed, and ordered his dinner. He had bought beforehand meat, fish, and little patties; then he gorged like an ox, almost always alone. It was very rare to see a convict invite another convict to share his repast. At dinner the vodka was produced. The convict would suck it up like the sole of a boot, and then walk through the barracks swaggering and tottering. It was his desire to show all his companions that he was drunk, that he was carrying on, and thus obtain their particular esteem.

The Russian people feel always a certain sympathy for a drunken man; among us it amounted really to esteem. In the convict prison intoxication was a sort of aristocratic distinction.

As soon as he felt himself in spirits the convict ordered a musician. We had among us a little fellow—a deserter from the army—very ugly, but who was the happy possessor of a violin on which he could play. As he had no trade he was always ready to follow the festive convict from barrack to barrack grinding him out dance tunes with all his strength. His countenance often expressed the fatigue and disgust which his music—always the same—caused him; but when the prisoner called out to him, “Go on playing, are you not paid for it?” he attacked his violin more violently than ever. These drunkards felt sure that they would be taken care of, and in case of the Major arriving would be concealed from his watchful eyes. This service we rendered in the most disinterested spirit. On their side the under officer, and the old soldiers who remained in the prison to keep order, were perfectly reassured. The drunkard would cause no disturbance. At the least scare of revolt or riot he would have been quieted and then bound. Accordingly the inferior officers closed their eyes; they knew that if vodka was forbidden all would go wrong. How was this vodka procured?

It was bought in the convict prison itself from the drink-sellers, as they were called, who followed this trade [Pg 48]—a very lucrative one—although the tipplers were not very numerous, for revelry was expensive, especially when it is considered how hardly money was earned. The drink business was begun, continued, and ended in rather an original manner. The prisoner who knew no trade, would not work, and who, nevertheless, desired to get speedily rich, made up his mind, when he possessed a little money, to buy and sell vodka. The enterprise was risky, it required great daring,

for the speculator hazarded his skin as well as liquor. But the drink-seller hesitated before no obstacles. At the outset he brought the vodka himself to the prison and got rid of it on the most advantageous terms. He repeated this operation a second and a third time. If he had not been discovered by the officials, he now possessed a sum which enabled him to extend his business. He became a capitalist with agents and assistants, he risked much less and gained much more. Then his assistants incurred risk in place of him.

Prisons are always abundantly inhabited by ruined men without the habit of work, but endowed with skill and daring; their only capital is their back. They often decide to put it into circulation, and propose to the drink-seller to introduce vodka into the barracks. There is always in the town a soldier, a shopkeeper, or some loose woman who, for a stipulated sum—rather a small one—buys vodka with the drink-seller's money, hides it in a place known to the convict-smuggler, near the workshop where he is employed. The person who supplies the vodka, tastes the precious liquid almost always as he is carrying it to the hiding-place, and replaces relentlessly what he has drunk by pure water. The purchaser may take it or leave it, but he cannot give himself airs. He thinks himself very lucky that his money has not been stolen from him, and that he has received some kind of vodka in exchange. The man who is to take it into the prison—to whom the drink-seller has indicated the hiding-place—goes to the supplier with bullock's intestines which after being washed, have been filled with water, [Pg 49] and which thus preserves their softness and suppleness. When the intestines have been filled with vodka, the smuggler rolls them round his body. Now, all the cunning, the adroitness of this daring convict is shown. The man's honour is at stake. It is necessary for him to take in the escort and the man on guard; and he will take them in. If the carrier is artful, the soldier of the escort—sometimes a recruit—does not notice anything particular; for the prisoner has studied him thoroughly, besides which he has artfully combined the hour and the place of meeting. If the convict—a bricklayer for example—climbs up on the wall that he is building, the escort will certainly not climb up after him to watch his movements. Who then, will see what he is about? On getting near the prison, he gets ready a piece of fifteen or twenty kopecks, and waits at the gate for the corporal on guard.

The corporal examines, feels, and searches each convict on his return to the barracks, and then opens the gate to him. The carrier of the vodka hopes that he will be ashamed to examine him too much in detail; but if the corporal is a cunning fellow, that is just what he will do; and in that case he finds the contraband vodka. The convict has now only one chance of salvation. He slips into the hand of the under officer the piece of money he holds in readiness, and often, thanks to this manœuvre,

the vodka arrives safely in the hands of the drink-seller. But sometimes the trick does not succeed, and it is then that the sole capital of the smuggler enters really into circulation. A report is made to the Major, who sentences the unhappy culprit to a thorough flogging. As for the vodka, it is confiscated. The smuggler undergoes his punishment without betraying the speculator, not because such a denunciation would disgrace him, but because it would bring him nothing. He would be flogged all the same, the only consolation he could have would be that the drink-seller would share his punishment; but as he needs him, he does not denounce him, although having allowed himself to be surprised, he will receive no payment from him.

[Pg 50]

Denunciation, however, flourishes in the convict prison. Far from hating spies or keeping apart from them, the prisoners often make friends of them. If any one had taken it into his head to prove to the convicts all the baseness of mutual denunciation, no one in the prison would have understood. The former nobleman of whom I have already spoken, that cowardly and violent creature with whom I had already broken off all relations immediately after my arrival in the fortress, was the friend of Fedka, the Major's body-servant. He used to tell him everything that took place in the convict prison, and this was naturally carried back to the servant's master. Every one knew it, but no one had the idea of showing any ill-will against the man, or of reproaching him with his conduct. When the vodka arrived without accident at the prison, the speculator paid the smuggler and made up his accounts. His merchandise had already cost him sufficiently dear; and that the profit might be greater, he diluted it by adding fifty per cent. of pure water. He was ready, and had only to wait for customers.

The first holiday, perhaps even on a week-day, a convict would turn up. He had been working like a negro for many months in order to save up, kopeck by kopeck, a small sum which he was resolved to spend all at once. These days of rejoicing had been looked forward to long beforehand. He had dreamt of them during the endless winter nights, during his hardest labour, and the perspective had supported him under his severest trials. The dawn of this day so impatiently awaited, has just appeared. He has some money in his pocket. It has been neither stolen from him nor confiscated. He is free to spend it. Accordingly he takes his savings to the drink-seller, who, to begin with, gives vodka which is almost pure—it has been only twice baptized—but gradually, as the bottle gets more and more empty, he fills it up with water. Accordingly the convict pays for his vodka five or six times as much as he would in a tavern.

[Pg 51]

It may be imagined how many glasses, and, above all, what sums of money are required before the convict is drunk. However, as he has lost the habit of drinking, the little alcohol which remains in the liquid intoxicates him rapidly enough; he goes on drinking until there is nothing left; he pledges or sells all his new clothes—for the drink-seller is at the same time a pawnbroker. As his personal garments are not very numerous he next pledges the clothes supplied to him by the Government. When the drink has made away with his last shirt, his last rag, he lies down and wakes up the next morning with a bad headache. In vain he begs the drink-seller to give him credit for a drop of vodka in order to remove his depression; he experiences a direct refusal. That very day he sets to work again. For several months together, he will weary himself out while looking forward to such a debauch as the one which has now disappeared in the past. Little by little he regains courage while waiting for such another day, still far off, but which ultimately will arrive. As for the drink-seller, if he has gained a large sum—some dozen of roubles—he procures some more vodka, but this time he does not baptize it, because he intends it for himself. Enough of trade! it is time for him to amuse himself. Accordingly he eats, drinks, pays for a little music—his means allow him to grease the palm of the inferior officers in the convict prison. This festival lasts sometimes for several days. When his stock of vodka is exhausted, he goes and drinks with the other drink-sellers who are waiting for him; he then drinks up his last kopeck.

However careful the convicts may be in watching over their companions in debauchery, it sometimes happens that the Major or the officer on guard notices what is going on. The drunkard is then dragged to the orderly-room, his money is confiscated if he has any left, and he is flogged. The convict shakes himself like a beaten dog, returns to barracks, and, after a few days, resumes his trade as drink-seller.

[Pg 52]

It sometimes happens that among the convicts there are admirers of the fair sex. For a sufficiently large sum of money they succeed, accompanied by a soldier whom they have corrupted, in getting secretly out of the fortress into a suburb instead of going to work. There in an apparently quiet house a banquet is held at which large sums of money are spent. The convicts' money is not to be despised, accordingly the soldiers will sometimes arrange these temporary escapes beforehand, sure as they are of being generously recompensed. Generally speaking these soldiers are themselves candidates for the convict prison. The escapades are scarcely ever discovered. I must add that they are very rare, for they are very expensive, and the admirers of the fair sex are obliged to have recourse to other less costly means.

At the beginning of my stay, a young convict with very regular features excited my curiosity; his name was Sirotkin, he was in many respects an enigmatic being. His face had struck me, he was not more than twenty-three years of age, and he belonged to the special section; that is to say, he was condemned to hard labour in perpetuity. He accordingly was to be looked upon as one of the most dangerous of military criminals. Mild and tranquil, he spoke little and rarely laughed; his blue eyes, his clear complexion, his fair hair gave him a soft expression, which even his shaven crown did not destroy. Although he had no trade, he managed to get himself money from time to time. He was remarkably lazy, and always dressed like a sloven; but if any one was generous enough to present him with a red shirt, he was beside himself with joy at having a new garment, and he exhibited it everywhere. Sirotkin neither drank nor played, and he scarcely ever quarrelled with the other convicts. He walked about with his hands in his pockets peacefully, and with a pensive air. What he was thinking of I cannot say. When any one called to him, to ask him a question, he replied with deference, precisely, without chattering like the others. He had in his eyes the [Pg 53] expression of a child of ten; when he had money he bought nothing of what the others looked upon as indispensable. His vest might be torn, he did not get it mended, any more than he bought himself new boots. What particularly pleased him were the little white rolls and gingerbread, which he would eat with the satisfaction of a child of seven. When he was not at work he wandered about the barracks; when every one else was occupied, he remained with his arms by his sides; if any one joked with him, or laughed at him—which happened often enough—he turned on his heel without speaking and went elsewhere. If the pleasantries were too strong he blushed. I often asked myself for what crime he could have been condemned to hard labour. One day when I was ill, and lying in the hospital, Sirotkin was also there, stretched out on a bedstead not far from me. I entered into conversation with him; he became animated, and told me freely how he had been taken for a soldier, how his mother had followed him in tears, and what treatment he had endured in military service. He added that he had never been able to accustom himself to this life; every one was severe and angry with him about nothing, his officers were always against him.

“But why did they send you here?—and into the special section above all! Ah, Sirotkin!”

“Yes, Alexander Petrovitch, although I was only one year with the battalion, I was sent here for killing my captain, Gregory Petrovitch.”

“I heard about that, but I did not believe it; how was it that you killed him?”

“All that was told you was true; my life was insupportable.”

“But the other recruits supported it well enough. It is very hard at the beginning, but men get accustomed to it and end by becoming excellent soldiers. Your mother must have pampered you and spoiled you. I am sure that she fed you with gingerbread and with sweet milk until you were eighteen.”

“My mother, it is true, was very fond of me. When[Pg 54] I left her she took to her bed and remained there. How painful to me everything in my military life was; after that all went wrong. I was perpetually being punished, and why? I obeyed every one, I was exact, careful. I did not drink, I borrowed from no one—it’s all up with a man when he begins to borrow—and yet every one around me was harsh and cruel. I sometimes hid myself in a corner and did nothing but sob. One day, or rather one night, I was on guard. It was autumn: there was a strong wind, and it was so dark that you could not see a speck, and I was sad, so sad! I took the bayonet from the end of my musket and placed it by my side. Then I put the barrel to my breast and with my big toe—I had taken my boot off—pressed the trigger. It missed fire. I looked at my musket and loaded it with a charge of fresh powder. Then I broke off the corner of my flint, and once more I placed the muzzle against my breast. Again there was a misfire. What was I to do? I said to myself. I put my boot on, I fastened my bayonet to the barrel, and walked up and down with my musket on my shoulder. Let them do what they like, I said to myself; but I will not be a soldier any longer. Half-an-hour afterwards the captain arrived, making his rounds. He came straight upon me. ‘Is that the way you carry yourself when you are on guard?’ I seized my musket, and stuck the bayonet into his body. Then I had to walk forty-six versts. That is how I came to be in the special section.”

He was telling no falsehood, yet I did not understand how they could have sent him there; such crimes deserve a much less severe punishment. Sirotkin was the only one of the convicts who was really handsome. As for his companions of the special section—to the number of fifteen—they were frightful to behold with their hideous, disgusting physiognomies. Gray heads were plentiful among them. I shall speak of these men further on. Sirotkin was often on good terms with Gazin, the drink-seller, of whom I have already spoken at the beginning of this chapter.

[Pg 55]

This Gazin was a terrible being; the impression that he produced on every one was confusing or appalling. It seemed to me that a more ferocious, a more monstrous creature could not exist. Yet I have seen at Tobolsk, Kameneff, the brigand, celebrated for his crimes. Later, I saw Sokoloff, the escaped convict, formerly a deserter, who was a ferocious creature; but neither of them inspired me with so much disgust as

Gazin. I often fancied that I had before my eyes an enormous, gigantic spider of the size of a man. He was a Tartar, and there was no convict so strong as he was. It was less by his great height and his herculean construction, than by his enormous and deformed head, that he inspired terror. The strangest reports were current about him. Some said that he had been a soldier, others that he had escaped from Nertchinsk, and that he had been exiled several times to Siberia, but had always succeeded in getting away. Landing at last in our convict prison, he belonged there to the special section. It appeared that he had taken a pleasure in killing little children when he had attracted them to some deserted place; then he frightened them, tortured them, and after having fully enjoyed the terror and the convulsions of the poor little things, he killed them resolutely and with delight. These horrors had perhaps been imagined by reason of the painful impression that the monster produced upon us; but they seemed probable, and harmonised with his physiognomy. Nevertheless, when Gazin was not drunk, he conducted himself well enough.

He was always quiet, never quarrelled, avoided all disputes as if from contempt for his companions, just as though he had entertained a high opinion of himself. He spoke very little, all his movements were measured, calm, resolute. His look was not without intelligence, but its expression was cruel and derisive like his smile. Of all the convicts who sold vodka, he was the richest. Twice a year he got completely drunk, and it was then that all his brutal ferocity exhibited itself. Little by little he got excited, and began to tease the prisoners[Pg 56] with venomous satire prepared long beforehand. Finally when he was quite drunk, he had attacks of furious rage, and, seizing a knife, would rush upon his companions. The convicts who knew his herculean vigour, avoided him and protected themselves against him, for he would throw himself on the first person he met. A means of disarming him had been discovered. Some dozen prisoners would rush suddenly upon Gazin, and give him violent blows in the pit of the stomach, in the belly, and generally beneath the region of the heart, until he lost consciousness. Any one else would have died under such treatment, but Gazin soon got well. When he had been well beaten they would wrap him up in his pelisse, and throw him upon his plank bedstead, leaving him to digest his drink. The next day he woke up almost well, and went to his work silent and sombre. Every time that Gazin got drunk, all the prisoners knew how his day would finish. He knew also, but he drank all the same. Several years passed in this way. Then it was noticed that Gazin had lost his energy, and that he was beginning to get weak. He did nothing but groan, complaining of all kinds of illnesses. His visits to the hospital became more and more frequent. "He is giving in," said the prisoners.

At one time Gazin had gone into the kitchen followed by the little fellow who scraped the violin, and whom the convicts in their festivities used to hire to play to them. He stopped in the middle of the hall silently examining his companions one after another. No one breathed a word. When he saw me with my companions, he looked at us in his malicious, jeering style, and smiled horribly with the air of a man who was satisfied with a good joke that he had just thought of. He approached our table, tottering.

“Might I ask,” he said, “where you get the money which allows you to drink tea?”

I exchanged a look with my neighbour. I understood that the best thing for us was to be silent, and not [Pg 57] to answer. The least contradiction would have put Gazin in a passion.

“You must have money,” he continued, “you must have a good deal of money to drink tea; but, tell me, are you sent to hard labour to drink tea? I say, did you come here for that purpose? Please answer, I should like to know.”

Seeing that we were resolved on silence, and that we had determined not to pay any attention to him, he ran towards us, livid and trembling with rage. At two steps’ distance, he saw a heavy box, which served to hold the bread given for the dinner and supper of the convicts. Its contents were sufficient for the meal of half the prisoners. At this moment it was empty. He seized it with both hands and brandished it above our heads. Although murder, or attempted, was an inexhaustible source of trouble for the convicts—examinations, counter-examinations, and inquiries without end would be the natural consequence—and though quarrels were generally cut short, when they did not lead to such serious results, yet every one remained silent and waited.

Not one word in our favour, not one cry against Gazin. The hatred of all the prisoners for all who were of gentle birth was so great that every one of them was evidently pleased to see that we were in danger. But a fortunate incident terminated this scene, which must have become tragic. Gazin was about to let fly the enormous box, which he was turning and twisting above his head, when a convict ran in from the barracks, and cried out:

“Gazin, they have stolen your vodka!”

The horrible brigand let fall the box with a frightful oath, and ran out of the kitchen.

“Well, God has saved them,” said the prisoners among themselves, repeating the words several times.

I never knew whether his vodka had been stolen, or whether it was only a stratagem invented to save us.

That same evening, before the closing of the barracks,[Pg 58] when it was already dark, I walked to the side of the palisade. A heavy feeling of sadness weighed upon my soul. During all the time that I passed in the convict prison I never felt myself so miserable as on that evening, though the first day is always the hardest, whether at hard labour or in the prison. One thought in particular had left me no respite since my deportation—a question insoluble then and insoluble now. I reflected on the inequality of the punishments inflicted for the same crimes. Often, indeed, one crime cannot be compared even approximately to another. Two murderers kill a man under circumstances which in each case are minutely examined and weighed. They each receive the same punishment; and yet by what an abyss are their two actions separated! One has committed a murder for a trifle—for an onion. He has killed on the high-road a peasant who was passing, and found on him an onion, and nothing else.

“Well, I was sent to hard labour for a peasant who had nothing but an onion!”

“Fool that you are! an onion is worth a kopeck. If you had killed a hundred peasants you would have had a hundred kopecks, or one rouble.” The above is a prison joke.

Another criminal has killed a debauchee who was oppressing or dishonouring his wife, his sister, or his daughter.

A third, a vagabond, half dead with hunger, pursued by a whole band of police, was defending his liberty, his life. He is to be regarded as on an equality with the brigand who assassinates children for his amusement, for the pleasure of feeling their warm blood flow over his hands, of seeing them shudder in a last bird-like palpitation beneath the knife which tears their flesh!

They will all alike be sent to hard labour; though the sentence will perhaps not be for the same number of years. But the variations in the punishment are not very numerous, whereas different kinds of crimes may be[Pg 59] reckoned by thousands. As many characters, so many crimes.

Let us admit that it is impossible to get rid of this first inequality in punishment, that the problem is insoluble, and that in connection with penal matters it is the squaring of the circle. Let all that be admitted; but even if this inequality cannot be avoided, there is another thing to be thought of—the consequences of the punishment. Here is a man who is wasting away like a candle; there is another one, on the contrary, who had no idea before going into exile that there could be such a gay, such an idle life, where he would find a circle of such agreeable friends. Individuals of this latter class are to be found in the convict prison.

Now take a man of heart, of cultivated mind, and of delicate conscience. What he feels kills him more certainly than the material punishment. The judgment which he himself pronounces on his crime is more pitiless than that of the most severe tribunal, the most Draconian law. He lives by the side of another convict, who has not once reflected on the murder he is expiating, during the whole time of his sojourn in the convict prison. He, perhaps, even considers himself innocent. Are there not, also, poor devils who commit crimes in order to be sent to hard labour, and thus to escape the liberty which is much more painful than confinement? A man's life is miserable, he has never, perhaps, been able to satisfy his hunger. He is worked to death in order to enrich his master. In the convict prison his work will be less severe, less crushing. He will eat as much as he wants, better than he could ever have hoped to eat, had he remained free. On holidays he will have meat, and fine people will give him alms, and his evening's work will bring him in some money. And the society one meets with in the convict prison, is that to be counted for nothing? The convicts are clever, wide-awake people, who are up to everything. The new arrival can scarcely conceal the admiration he feels for his companions in labour. He has seen nothing like it [Pg 60] before, and he will consider himself in the best company possible.

Is it possible that men so differently situated can feel in an equal degree the punishment inflicted? But why think about questions that are insoluble? The drum beats, let us go back to barracks.

[Pg 61]

CHAPTER V. FIRST IMPRESSIONS (*continued*)

We were between walls once more. The doors of the barracks were locked, each with a particular padlock, and the prisoners remained shut up till the next morning.

The verification was made by a non-commissioned officer accompanied by two soldiers. When by chance an officer was present, the convicts were drawn up in the court-yard, but generally speaking they were identified in the buildings. As the soldiers often made mistakes, they went out and came back in order to count us again and again, until their reckoning was satisfactory, then the barracks were closed. Each one contained about thirty prisoners, and we were very closely packed in our camp bedsteads. As it was too soon to go to sleep, the convicts occupied themselves with work.

Besides the old soldier of whom I have spoken, who slept in our dormitory, and represented there the administration of the prison, there was in our barrack another

old soldier wearing a medal as rewarded for good conduct. It happened often enough, however, that the good-conduct men themselves committed offences for which they were sentenced to be whipped. They then lost their rank, and were immediately replaced by comrades whose conduct was considered satisfactory.

Our good-conduct man was no other than Akim[Pg 62] Akimitch. To my great astonishment, he was very rough with the prisoners, but they only replied by jokes. The other old soldier, more prudent, interfered with no one, and if he opened his mouth, it was only as a matter of form, as an affair of duty. For the most part he remained silent, seated on his little bedstead, occupied in mending his own boots.

That day I could not help making to myself an observation, the accuracy of which became afterwards apparent: that all those who are not convicts and who have to deal with them, whoever they may be—beginning with the soldiers of the escort and the sentinels—look upon the convicts in a false and exaggerated light, expecting that for a yes or a no, these men will throw themselves upon them knife in hand. The prisoners, perfectly conscious of the fear they inspire, show a certain arrogance. Accordingly, the best prison director is the one who experiences no emotion in their presence. In spite of the airs they give themselves, the convicts prefer that confidence should be placed in them. By such means, indeed, they may be conciliated. I have more than once had occasion to notice their astonishment at an official entering their prison without an escort, and certainly their astonishment was not unflattering. A visitor who is intrepid imposes respect. If anything unfortunate happens, it will not be in his presence. The terror inspired by the convicts is general, and yet I saw no foundation for it. Is it the appearance of the prisoner, his brigand-like look, that causes a certain repugnance? Is it not rather the feeling that invades you directly you enter the prison, that in spite of all efforts, all precautions, it is impossible to turn a living man into a corpse, to stifle his feelings, his thirst for vengeance and for life, his passions, and his imperious desire to satisfy them? However that may be, I declare that there is no reason for fearing the convicts. A man does not throw himself so quickly nor so easily upon his fellow-man, knife in hand. Few accidents happen; sometimes they are so rare that the danger may be looked upon as non-existent.

I speak, it must be understood, only of prisoners already[Pg 63] condemned, who are undergoing their punishment, and some of whom are almost happy to find themselves in the convict prison; so attractive under all circumstances is a new form of life. These latter live quiet and contented. As for the turbulent ones, the convicts themselves keep them in restraint, and their arrogance never goes too far. The prisoner, audacious and reckless as he may be, is afraid of every official connected with the prison. It is by no means the same with the accused whose fate has not been decided. Such a one is

quite capable of attacking, no matter whom, without any motive of hatred, and solely because he is to be whipped the next day. If, indeed, he commits a fresh crime his offence becomes complicated. Punishment is delayed, and he gains time. The act of aggression is explained; it has a cause, an object. The convict wishes at all hazards to change his fate, and that as soon as possible. In connection with this, I myself have witnessed a physiological fact of the strangest kind.

In the section of military convicts was an old soldier who had been condemned to two years' hard labour, a great boaster, and at the same time a coward. Generally speaking, the Russian soldier does not boast. He has no time for doing so, even had he the inclination. When such a one appears among a multitude of others, he is always a coward and a rogue. Dutoff—that was the name of the prisoner of whom I am speaking—underwent his punishment, and then went back to the same battalion in the Line; but, like all who are sent to the convict prison to be corrected, he had been thoroughly corrupted. A “return horse” re-appears in the convict prison after two or three weeks' liberty, not for a comparatively short time, but for fifteen or twenty years. So it happened in the case of Dutoff. Three weeks after he had been set at liberty, he robbed one of his comrades, and was, moreover, mutinous. He was taken before a court-martial and sentenced to a severe form of corporal punishment. Horribly frightened, like the coward that he was, at the prospect of punishment, he threw himself, knife in hand, on to the officer of the guard, as he entered his dungeon on the eve of the day that he was to [Pg 64] run the gauntlet through the men of his company. He quite understood that he was aggravating his offence, and that the duration of his punishment would be increased; but all he wanted was to postpone for some days, or at least for some hours, a terrible moment. He was such a coward that he did not even wound the officer whom he had attacked. He had, indeed, only committed this assault in order to add a new crime to the last already against him, and thus defer the sentence.

The moment preceding the punishment is terrible for the man condemned to the rods. I have seen many of them on the eve of the fatal day. I generally met with them in the hospital when I was ill, which happened often enough. In Russia the people who show most compassion for the convicts are certainly the doctors, who never make between the prisoners the distinctions observed by other persons brought into direct relations with them. In this respect the common people can alone be compared with the doctors, for they never reproach a criminal with the crime that he has committed, whatever it may be. They forgive him in consideration of the sentence passed upon him.

Is it not known that the common people throughout Russia call crime a “misfortune,” and the criminal an “unfortunate”? This definition is expressive, profound, and, moreover, unconscious, instinctive. To the doctor the convicts have naturally recourse, above all when they are to undergo corporal punishment. The prisoner who has been before a court-martial knows pretty well at what moment his sentence will be executed. To escape it he gets himself sent to the hospital, in order to postpone for some days the terrible moment. When he is declared restored to health, he knows that the day after he leaves the hospital this moment will arrive. Accordingly, on quitting the hospital the convict is always in a state of agitation. Some of them may endeavour from vanity to conceal their anxiety, but no one is taken in by that; every one understands the cruelty of such a moment, and is silent from humane motives.

I knew one young convict, an ex-soldier, sentenced [Pg 65] for murder, who was to receive the maximum of rods. The eve of the day on which he was to be flogged, he had resolved to drink a bottle of vodka in which he had infused a quantity of snuff.

The prisoner condemned to the rods always drinks, before the critical moment arrives, a certain amount of spirits which he has procured long beforehand, and often at a fabulous price. He would deprive himself of the necessities of life for six months rather than not be in a position to swallow half a pint of vodka before the flogging. The convicts are convinced that a drunken man suffers less from the sticks or whip than one who is in cold blood.

I will return to my narrative. The poor devil felt ill a few moments after he had swallowed his bottle of vodka. He vomited blood, and was carried in a state of unconsciousness to the hospital. His lungs were so much injured by this accident that phthisis declared itself, and carried off the soldier in a few months. The doctors who had attended him never knew the origin of his illness.

If examples of cowardice are not rare among the prisoners, it must be added that there are some whose intrepidity is quite astounding. I remember many instances of courage pushed to the extreme. The arrival in the hospital of a terrible bandit remains fixed in my memory.

One fine summer day the report was spread in the infirmary that the famous prisoner, Orloff, was to be flogged the same evening, and that he would be brought afterwards to the hospital. The prisoners who were already there said that the punishment would be a cruel one, and every one—including myself I must admit—was awaiting with curiosity the arrival of this brigand, about whom the most unheard-of things were told. He was a malefactor of a rare kind, capable of assassinating in cold blood old men and children. He possessed an indomitable force of will, and was fully conscious of

his power. As he had been guilty of several crimes, they had condemned him to be flogged through the ranks.

He was brought, or, rather carried, in towards evening.[Pg 66] The place was already dark. Candles were lighted. Orloff was excessively pale, almost unconscious, with his thick curly hair of dull black without the least brilliancy. His back was skinned and swollen, blue, and stained with blood. The prisoners nursed him throughout the night; they changed his poultices, placed him on his side, prepared for him the lotion ordered by the doctor; in a word, showed as much solicitude for him as for a relation or benefactor.

Next day he had fully recovered his faculties, and took one or two turns round the room. I was much astonished, for he was broken down and powerless when he was brought in. He had received half the number of blows ordered by the sentence. The doctor had stopped the punishment, convinced that if it were continued Orloff's death would inevitably ensue.

This criminal was of a feeble constitution, weakened by long imprisonment. Whoever has seen prisoners after having been flogged, will remember their thin, drawn-out features and their feverish looks. Orloff soon recovered his powerful energy, which enabled him to get over his physical weakness. He was no ordinary man. From curiosity I made his acquaintance, and was able to study him at leisure for an entire week. Never in my life did I meet a man whose will was more firm or inflexible.

I had seen at Tobolsk a celebrity of the same kind—a former chief of brigands. This man was a veritable wild beast; by being near him, without even knowing him, it was impossible not to recognise in him a dangerous creature. What above all frightened me was his stupidity. Matter, in this man, had taken such an ascendant over mind, that one could see at a glance that he cared for nothing in the world but the brutal satisfaction of his physical wants. I was certain, however, that Kareneff—that was his name—would have fainted on being condemned to such rigorous corporal punishment as Orloff had undergone; and that he would have murdered the first man near him without blinking.

Orloff, on the contrary, was a brilliant example of the[Pg 67] victory of spirit over matter. He had a perfect command over himself. He despised punishment, and feared nothing in the world. His dominant characteristic was boundless energy, a thirst for vengeance, and an immovable will when he had some object to attain.

I was not astonished at his haughty air. He looked down upon all around him from the height of his grandeur. Not that he took the trouble to pose; his pride was an innate

quality. I don't think that anything had the least influence over him. He looked upon everything with the calmest eye, as if nothing in the world could astonish him. He knew well that the other prisoners respected him; but he never took advantage of it to give himself airs.

Nevertheless, vanity and conceit are defects from which scarcely any convict is exempt. He was intelligent and strangely frank in talking too much about himself. He replied point-blank to all the questions I put to him, and confessed to me that he was waiting impatiently for his return to health in order to take the remainder of the punishment he was to undergo.

"Now," he said to me with a wink, "it is all over. I shall have the remainder, and shall be sent to Nertchinsk with a convoy of prisoners. I shall profit by it to escape. I shall get away beyond doubt. If only my back would heal a little quicker!"

For five days he was burning with impatience to be in a condition for leaving the hospital. At times he was gay and in the best of humours. I profited by these rare occasions to question him about his adventures.

Then he would contract his eyebrows a little; but he always answered my questions in a straightforward manner. When he understood that I was endeavouring to see through him, and to discover in him some trace of repentance, he looked at me with a haughty and contemptuous air, as if I were a foolish little boy, to whom he did too much honour by conversing with him.

I detected in his countenance a sort of compassion for me. After a moment's pause he laughed out loud, but without the least irony. I fancy he must, more than [Pg 68] once, have laughed in the same manner, when my words returned to his memory. At last he wrote down his name as cured, although his back was not yet entirely healed. As I also was almost well, we left the infirmary together and returned to the convict prison, while he was shut up in the guard-room, where he had been imprisoned before. When he left me he shook me by the hand, which in his eyes was a great mark of confidence. I fancy he did so, because at that moment he was in a good humour. But in reality he must have despised me, for I was a feeble being, contemptible in all respects, and guilty above all of resignation. The next day he underwent the second half of his punishment.

When the gates of the barracks had been closed, it assumed, in less than no time, quite another aspect—that of a private house, of quite a home. Then only did I see my convict comrades at their ease. During the day the under officers, or some of the other authorities, might suddenly arrive, so that the prisoners were then always on the look-

out. They were only half at their ease. As soon, however, as the bolts had been pushed and the gates padlocked, every one sat down in his place and began to work. The barrack was lighted up in an unexpected manner. Each convict had his candle and his wooden candlestick. Some of them stitched boots, others sewed different kinds of garments. The air, already mephitic, became more and more impure.

Some of the prisoners, huddled together in a corner, played at cards on a piece of carpet. In each barrack there was a prisoner who possessed a small piece of carpet, a candle, and a pack of horribly greasy cards. The owner of the cards received from the players fifteen kopecks [about sixpence] a night. They generally played at the “three leaves”—Gorka, that is to say: a game of chance. Each player placed before him a pile of copper money—all that he possessed—and did not get up until he had lost it or had broken the bank.

Playing was continued until late at night; sometimes the dawn found the gamblers still at their game. Often, indeed, it did not cease until a few minutes before the [Pg 69] opening of the gates. In our room—as in all the others—there were beggars ruined by drink and play, or rather beggars innate—I say innate, and maintain my expression. Indeed, in our country, and in all classes, there are, and always will be, strange easy-going people whose destiny it is to remain always beggars. They are poor devils all their lives; quite broken down, they remain under the domination or guardianship of some one, generally a prodigal, or a man who has suddenly made his fortune. All initiative is for them an insupportable burden. They only exist on condition of undertaking nothing for themselves, and by serving, always living under the will of another. They are destined to act by and through others. Under no circumstances, even of the most unexpected kind, can they get rich; they are always beggars. I have met these persons in all classes of society, in all coteries, in all associations, including the literary world.

As soon as a party was made up, one of these beggars, quite indispensable to the game, was summoned. He received five kopecks for a whole night’s employment; and what employment it was! His duty was to keep guard in the vestibule, with thirty degrees (Réaumur) of frost, in total darkness, for six or seven hours. The man on watch had to listen for the slightest noise, for the Major or one of the other officers of the guard would sometimes make a round rather late in the night. They arrived secretly, and sometimes discovered the players and the watchers in the act—thanks to the light of the candles, which could be seen from the court-yard.

When the key was heard grinding in the padlock which closed the gate, it was too late to put the lights out and lie down on the plank bedsteads. Such surprises were,

however, rare. Five kopecks was a ridiculous payment even in our convict prison, and the exigency and hardness of the gamblers astonished me in this as in many cases: "You are paid, you must do what you are told." This was the argument, and it admitted of no reply. To have paid a few kopecks to [Pg 70] any one gave the right to turn him to the best possible account, and even to claim his gratitude. More than once it happened to me to see the convicts spend their money extravagantly, throwing it away on all sides, and, at the same time, cheat the man employed to watch. I have seen this in several barracks on many occasions.

I have already said that, with the exception of the gamblers, every one worked. Five only of the convicts remained completely idle, and went to bed on the first opportunity. My sleeping place was near the door. Next to me was Akim Akimitch, and when we were lying down our heads touched. He used to work until ten or eleven at making, by pasting together pieces of paper, multicolour lanterns, which some one living in the town had ordered from him, and for which he used to be well paid. He excelled in this kind of work, and did it methodically and regularly. When he had finished he put away carefully his tools, unfolded his mattress, said his prayers, and went to sleep with the sleep of the just. He carried his love of order even to pedantry, and must have thought himself in his inner heart a man of brains, as is generally the case with narrow, mediocre persons. I did not like him the first day, although he gave me much to think of. I was astonished that such a man could be found in a convict prison. I shall speak of Akimitch further on in the course of this book.

But I must now continue to describe the persons with whom I was to live a number of years. Those who surrounded me were to be my companions every minute, and it will be understood that I looked upon them with anxious curiosity.

On my left slept a band of mountaineers from the Caucasus, nearly all exiled for brigandage, but condemned to different punishments. There were two Lesghians, a Circassian, and three Tartars from Daghestan. The Circassian was a morose and sombre person. He scarcely ever spoke, and looked at you sideways with a sly, sulky, wild-beast-like expression. One of the Lesghians, an old man with an aquiline nose, tall [Pg 71] and thin, seemed to be a true brigand; but the other Lesghian, Nourra by name, made a most favourable impression upon me. Of middle height, still young, built like a Hercules, with fair hair and violet eyes; he had a slightly turned up nose, while his features were somewhat of a Finnish cast. Like all horsemen, he walked with his toes in. His body was striped with scars, ploughed by bayonet wounds and bullets. Although he belonged to the conquered part of the Caucasus, he had joined the rebels, with whom he used to make continual incursions into our territory. Every one liked him in the prison by reason of his gaiety and affability. He worked without

murmuring, always calm and peaceful. Thieving, cheating, and drunkenness filled him with disgust, or put him in a rage—not that he wished to quarrel with any one; he simply turned away with indignation. During his confinement he committed no breach of the rules. Fervently pious, he said his prayers religiously every evening, observed all the Mohammedan fasts like a true fanatic, and passed whole nights in prayer. Every one liked him, and looked upon him as a thoroughly honest man. “Nourra is a lion,” said the convicts; and the name of “Lion” stuck to him. He was quite convinced that as soon as he had finished his sentence he would be sent to the Caucasus. Indeed, he only lived by this hope, and I believe he would have died had he been deprived of it. I noticed it the very day of my arrival. How was it possible not to distinguish this calm, honest face in the midst of so many sombre, sardonic, repulsive countenances!

Before I had been half-an-hour in the prison, he passed by my side and touched me gently on the shoulder, smiling at the same time with an innocent air. I did not at first understand what he meant, for he spoke Russian very badly; but soon afterwards he passed again, and, with a friendly smile, again touched me on the shoulder. For three days running he repeated this strange proceeding. As I soon found out, he wanted to show me that he pitied me, and that he felt how painful the first moment of imprisonment must be. He wanted to [Pg 72] testify his sympathy, to keep up my spirits, and to assure me of his good-will. Kind and innocent Nourra!

Of the three Tartars from Daghestan, all brothers, the two eldest were well-developed men, while the youngest, Ali, was not more than twenty-two, and looked younger. He slept by my side, and when I observed his frank, intelligent countenance, thoroughly natural, I was at once attracted to him, and thanked my fate that I had him for a neighbour in place of some other prisoner. His whole soul could be read in his beaming countenance. His confident smile had a certain childish simplicity; his large black eyes expressed such friendliness, such tender feeling, that I always took a pleasure in looking at him. It was a relief to me in moments of sadness and anguish. One day his eldest brother—he had five, of whom two were working in the mines of Siberia—had ordered him to take his yataghan, to get on horseback, and follow him. The respect of the mountaineers for their elders is so great that young Ali did not dare to ask the object of the expedition. He probably knew nothing about it, nor did his brothers consider it necessary to tell him. They were going to plunder the caravan of a rich Armenian merchant, and they succeeded in their enterprise. They assassinated the merchant and stole his goods. Unhappily for them, their act of brigandage was discovered. They were tried, flogged, and then sent to hard labour in Siberia. The Court admitted no extenuating circumstances, except in the case of Ali. He was condemned to the minimum punishment—four years’ confinement. These brothers

loved him, their affection being paternal rather than fraternal. He was the only consolation of their exile. Dull and sad as a rule, they had always a smile for him when they spoke to him, which they rarely did—for they looked upon him as a child to whom it would be useless to speak seriously—their forbidding countenances lightened up. I fancied they always spoke to him in a jocular tone, as to an infant. When he replied, the brothers exchanged glances, and smiled good-naturedly.

He would not have dared to speak to them first by [Pg 73] reason of his respect for them. How this young man preserved his tender heart, his native honesty, his frank cordiality without getting perverted and corrupted during his period of hard labour, is quite inexplicable. In spite of his gentleness, he had a strong stoical nature, as I afterwards saw. Chaste as a young girl, everything that was foul, cynical, shameful, or unjust filled his fine black eyes with indignation, and made them finer than ever. Without being a coward, he would allow himself to be insulted with impunity. He avoided quarrels and insults, and preserved all his dignity. With whom, indeed, was he to quarrel? Every one loved him, caressed him.

At first he was only polite to me; but little by little we got into the habit of talking together in the evening, and in a few months he had learnt to speak Russian perfectly, whereas his brothers never gained a correct knowledge of the language. He was intelligent, and at the same time modest and full of delicate feeling.

Ali was an exceptional being, and I always think of my meeting him as one of the lucky things in my life. There are some natures so spontaneously good and endowed by God with such great qualities that the idea of their getting perverted seems absurd. One is always at ease about them. Accordingly I had never any fears about Ali. Where is he now?

One day, a considerable time after my arrival at the convict prison, I was stretched out on my camp-bedstead agitated by painful thoughts. Ali, always industrious, was not working at this moment. His time for going to bed had not arrived. The brothers were celebrating some Mussulman festival, and were not working. Ali was lying down with his head between his hands in a state of reverie. Suddenly he said to me:

“Well, you are very sad!”

I looked at him with curiosity. Such a remark from Ali, always so delicate, so full of tact, seemed strange. But I looked at him more attentively, and saw so much grief, so much repressed suffering in his countenance—of suffering caused no doubt by sudden recollections—that I understood in what pain he must be, and [Pg 74] said so to him. He uttered a deep sigh, and smiled with a melancholy air. I always liked his

graceful, agreeable smile. When he laughed, he showed two rows of teeth which the first beauty in the world would have envied him.

“You were probably thinking, Ali, how this festival is celebrated in Daghestan. Ah, you were happy there!”

“Yes,” he replied with enthusiasm, and his eyes sparkled. “How did you know I was thinking of such things?”

“How was I not to know? You were much better off than you are here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“What beautiful flowers there are in your country! Is it not so? It is a true paradise.”

“Be silent, please.”

He was much agitated.

“Listen, Ali. Had you a sister?”

“Yes; why do you ask me?”

“She must have been very beautiful if she is like you?”

“Oh, there is no comparison to make between us. In all Daghestan no such beautiful girl is to be seen. My sister is, indeed, charming. I am sure that you have never seen any one like her. My mother also is very handsome.”

“And your mother was fond of you?”

“What are you saying? Certainly she was. I am sure that she has died of grief, she was so fond of me. I was her favourite child. Yes, she loved me more than my sister, more than all the others. This very night she has appeared to me in a dream, she shed tears for me.”

He was silent, and throughout the rest of the night did not open his mouth; but from this very moment he sought my company and my conversation; although very respectful, he never allowed himself to address me first. On the other hand he was happy when I entered into conversation with him. He spoke often of the Caucasus, and of his past life. His brothers did not forbid him to converse[Pg 75] with me; I think even that they encouraged him to do so. When they saw that I had formed an attachment to him, they became more affable towards me.

Ali often helped me in my work. In the barrack he did whatever he thought would be agreeable to me, and would save me trouble. In his attentions to me there was neither

servility nor the hope of any advantage, but only a warm, cordial feeling, which he did not try to hide. He had an extraordinary aptitude for the mechanical arts. He had learnt to sew very tolerably, and to mend boots; he even understood a little carpentering—everything in short that could be learnt at the convict prison. His brothers were proud of him.

“Listen, Ali,” I said to him one day, “why don’t you learn to read and write the Russian language, it might be very useful to you here in Siberia?”

“I should like to do so, but who would teach me?”

“There are plenty of people here who can read and write. I myself will teach you if you like.”

“Oh, do teach me, I beg of you,” said Ali, raising himself up in bed; he joined his hands and looked at me with a suppliant air.

We went to work the very next evening. I had with me a Russian translation of the New Testament, the only book that was not forbidden in the prison. With this book alone, without an alphabet, Ali learnt to read in a few weeks, and after a few months he could read perfectly. He brought to his studies extraordinary zeal and warmth.

One day we were reading together the Sermon on the Mount. I noticed that he read certain passages with much feeling; and I asked him if he was pleased with what he read. He glanced at me, and his face suddenly lighted up.

“Yes, yes, Jesus is a holy prophet. He speaks the language of God. How beautiful it is!”

“But tell me what it is that particularly pleases you.”

“The passage in which it is said, ‘Forgive those that hate you!’ Ah! how divinely He speaks!”

[Pg 76]

He turned towards his brothers, who were listening to our conversation, and said to them with warmth a few words. They talked together seriously for some time, giving their approval of what their young brother had said by a nodding of the head. Then with a grave, kindly smile, quite a Mussulman smile (I liked the gravity of this smile), they assured me that Isu [Jesus] was a great prophet. He had done great miracles. He had created a bird with a little clay on which he breathed the breath of life, and the bird had then flown away. That, they said, was written in their books. They were convinced that they would please me much by praising Jesus. As for Ali, he was happy to see that his brothers approved of our friendship, and that they were giving me, what he thought

would be, grateful words. The success I had with my pupil in teaching him to write, was really extraordinary. Ali had bought paper at his own expense, for he would not allow me to purchase any, also pens and ink; and in less than two months he had learnt to write. His brothers were astonished at such rapid progress. Their satisfaction and their pride were without bounds. They did not know how to show me enough gratitude. At the workshop, if we happened to be together, there were disputes as to which of them should help me. I do not speak of Ali, he felt for me more affection than even for his brothers. I shall never forget the day on which he was liberated. He went with me outside the barracks, threw himself on my neck and sobbed. He had never embraced me before, and had never before wept in my presence.

“You have done so much for me,” he said; “neither my father nor my mother have ever been kinder. You have made a man of me. God will bless you, I shall never forget you, never!”

Where is he now, where is my good, kind, dear Ali?

Besides the Circassians, we had a certain number of Poles, who formed a separate group. They had scarcely any relations with the other convicts. I have already said that, thanks to their hatred for the Russian prisoners, they were detested by every one. They were of a restless, [Pg 77] morbid disposition: there were six of them, some of them men of education, of whom I shall speak in detail further on. It was from them that during the last days of my imprisonment I obtained a few books. The first work I read made a deep impression upon me. I shall speak further on of these sensations, which I look upon as very curious, though it will be difficult to understand them. Of this I am certain, for there are certain things as to which one cannot judge without having experienced them oneself. It will be enough for me to say that intellectual privations are more difficult to support than the most frightful, physical tortures.

A common man sent to hard labour finds himself in kindred society, perhaps even in a more interesting society than he has been accustomed to. He loses his native place, his family; but his ordinary surroundings are much the same as before. A man of education, condemned by law to the same punishment as the common man, suffers incomparably more. He must stifle all his needs, all his habits, he must descend into a lower sphere, must breathe another air. He is like a fish thrown upon the sand. The punishment that he undergoes, equal for all criminals according to the law, is ten times more severe and more painful for him than for the common man. This is an incontestable truth, even if one thinks only of the material habits that have to be sacrificed.

I was saying that the Poles formed a group by themselves. They lived together, and of all the convicts in the prison, they cared only for a Jew, and for no other reason than because he amused them. Our Jew was generally liked, although every one laughed at him. We only had one, and even now I cannot think of him without laughing. Whenever I looked at him I thought of the Jew Jankel, whom Gogol describes in his *Tarass Boulba*, and who, when undressed and ready to go to bed with his Jewess in a sort of cupboard, resembled a fowl; but Isaiah Fomitch Bumstein and a plucked fowl were as like one another as two drops of water. He was already of a certain age—about fifty—small, feeble, cunning, and, at the same time, very stupid, bold, and boastful, though[Pg 78] a horrible coward. His face was covered with wrinkles, his forehead and cheeks were scarred from the burning he had received in the pillory. I never understood how he had been able to support the sixty strokes he received.

He had been sentenced for murder. He carried on his person a medical prescription which had been given to him by other Jews immediately after his exposure in the pillory. Thanks to the ointment prescribed, the scars were to disappear in less than a fortnight. He had been afraid to use it. He was waiting for the expiration of his twenty years (after which he would become a colonist) in order to utilise his famous remedy.

“Otherwise I shall not be able to get married,” he would say; “and I must absolutely marry.”

We were great friends: his good-humour was inexhaustible. The life of the convict prison did not seem to disagree with him. A goldsmith by trade, he received more orders than he could execute, for there was no jeweller’s shop in our town. He thus escaped his hard labour. As a matter of course, he lent money on pledges to the convicts, who paid him heavy interest. He arrived at the prison before I did. One of the Poles related to me his triumphal entry. It is quite a history, which I shall relate further on, for I shall often have to speak of Isaiah Fomitch Bumstein.

As for the other prisoners there were, first of all, four “old believers,” among whom was the old man from Starodoub, two or three Little Russians, very morose persons, and a young convict with delicate features and a finely-chiselled nose, about twenty-three years of age, who had already committed eight murders; besides a band of coiners, one of whom was the buffoon of our barracks; and, finally, some sombre, sour-tempered convicts, shorn and disfigured, always silent, and full of envy. They looked askance at all who came near them, and must have continued to do so during a long course of years. I saw all this superficially on the first night of my arrival, in the midst of thick smoke, in a mephitic atmosphere, amid obscene oaths, accompanied by the rattling of chains, by insults, and cynical laughter.[Pg 79] I stretched myself out on the

bare planks, my head resting on my coat, rolled up to do duty in lieu of a pillow, not yet supplied to me. Then I covered myself with my sheepskin, but, thanks to the painful impression of this evening, I was unable for some time to get to sleep. My new life was only just beginning. The future reserved for me many things which I had not foreseen, and of which I had never the least idea.

[Pg 80]

CHAPTER VI. THE FIRST MONTH

Three days after my arrival I was ordered to go to work. The impression left upon me to this day is still very clear, although there was nothing very striking in it, unless one considers that my position was in itself extraordinary. The first sensations count for a good deal, and I as yet looked upon everything with curiosity. My first three days were certainly the most painful of all my terms of imprisonment.

My wandering is at an end, I said to myself every moment. I am now in the convict prison, my resting-place for many years. Here is where I am to live. I come here full of grief, who knows that when I leave it I shall not do so with regret? I said this to myself as one touches a wound, the better to feel its pain. The idea that I might regret my stay was terrible to me. Already I felt to what an intolerable degree man is a creature of habit, but this was a matter of the future. The present, meanwhile, was terrible enough.

The wild curiosity with which my convict companions examined me, their harshness towards a former nobleman now entering into their corporation, a harshness which sometimes took the form of hatred—all this tormented me to such a degree that I felt obliged of my own accord to go to work in order to measure at one stroke the whole extent of my misfortune, that I might at[Pg 81] once begin to live like the others, and fall with them into the same abyss.

But convicts differ, and I had not yet disentangled from the general hostility the sympathy here and there manifested towards me.

After a time the affability and good-will shown to me by certain convicts gave me a little courage, and restored my spirits. Most friendly among them was Akim Akimitch. I soon noticed some kind, good-natured faces in the dark and hateful crowd. Bad people are to be found everywhere, but even among the worst there may be something good, I began to think, by way of consolation. Who knows? These persons

are perhaps not worse than others who are free. While making these reflections I felt some doubts, and, nevertheless, how much I was in the right!

The convict Suchiloff, for example; a man whose acquaintance I did not make until long afterwards, although he was near me during nearly the whole period of my confinement. Whenever I speak of the convicts who are not worse than other men, my thoughts turn involuntarily to him. He acted as my servant, together with another prisoner named Osip, whom Akim Akimitch had recommended to me immediately after my arrival. For thirty kopecks a month this man agreed to cook me a separate dinner, in case I should not be able to put up with the ordinary prison fare, and should be able to pay for my own food. Osip was one of the four cooks chosen by the prisoners in our two kitchens. I may observe that they were at liberty to refuse these duties, and give them up whenever they might think fit. The cooks were men from whom hard labour was not expected. They had to bake bread and prepare the cabbage soup. They were called “cook-maids,” not from contempt, for the men chosen were always the most intelligent, but merely in fun. The name given to them did not annoy them.

For many years past Osip had been constantly selected as “cook-maid.” He never refused the duty except when he was out of sorts, or when he saw an [Pg 82] opportunity of getting spirits into the barracks. Although he had been sent to the convict prison as a smuggler, he was remarkably honest and good-tempered (I have spoken of him before); at the same time he was a dreadful coward, and feared the rod above all things. Of a peaceful, patient disposition, affable with everybody, he never got into quarrels; but he could never resist the temptation of bringing spirits in, notwithstanding his cowardice, and simply from his love of smuggling. Like all the other cooks he dealt in spirits, but on a much less extensive scale than Gazin, because he was afraid of running the same risks. I always lived on good terms with Osip. To have a separate table it was not necessary to be very rich; it cost me only one rouble a month apart from the bread, which was given to us. Sometimes when I was very hungry I made up my mind to eat the cabbage soup, in spite of the disgust with which it generally filled me. After a time this disgust entirely disappeared. I generally bought one pound of meat a day, which cost me two kopecks—[5 kopecks = 2 pence.]

The old soldiers, who watched over the internal discipline of the barracks, were ready, good-naturedly, to go every day to the market to make purchases for the convicts. For this they received no pay, except from time to time a trifling present. They did it for the sake of their peace; their life in the convict prison would have been a perpetual torment had they refused. They used to bring in tobacco, tea, meat—everything, in short, that was desired, always excepting spirits.

For many years Osip prepared for me every day a piece of roast meat. How he managed to get it cooked was a secret. What was strangest in the matter was, that during all this time I scarcely exchanged two words with him. I tried many times to make him talk, but he was incapable of keeping up a conversation. He would only smile and answer my questions by "yes" or "no." He was a Hercules, but he had no more intelligence than a child of seven.

Suchiloff was also one of those who helped me. I had never asked him to do so, he attached himself to me[Pg 83] on his own account, and I scarcely remember when he began to do so. His principal duty consisted in washing my linen. For this purpose there was a basin in the middle of the court-yard, round which the convicts washed their clothes in prison buckets.

Suchiloff had found means for rendering me a number of little services. He boiled my tea-urn, ran right and left to perform various commissions for me, got me all kinds of things, mended my clothes, and greased my boots four times a month. He did all this in a zealous manner, with a business-like air, as if he felt all the weight of the duties he was performing. He seemed quite to have joined his fate to mine, and occupied himself with all my affairs. He never said: "You have so many shirts, or your waistcoat is torn;" but, "We have so many shirts, and our waistcoat is torn." I had somehow inspired him with admiration, and I really believe that I had become his sole care in life. As he knew no trade whatever his only source of income was from me, and it must be understood that I paid him very little; but he was always pleased, whatever he might receive. He would have been without means had he not been a servant of mine, and he gave me the preference because I was more affable than the others, and, above all, more equitable in money matters. He was one of those beings who never get rich, and never know how to manage their affairs; one of those in the prison who were hired by the gamblers to watch all night in the ante-chamber, listening for the least noise that might announce the arrival of the Major. If there was a night visit they received nothing, indeed their back paid for their want of attention. One thing which marks this kind of men is their entire absence of individuality, which they seem entirely to have lost.

Suchiloff was a poor, meek fellow; all the courage seemed to have been beaten out of him, although he had in reality been born meek. For nothing in the world would he have raised his hand against any one in the prison. I always pitied him without knowing why. I could not look at him without feeling the deepest[Pg 84] compassion for him. If asked to explain this, I should find it impossible to do so. I could never get him to talk, and he never became animated, except when, to put an end to all attempts at conversation, I gave him something to do, or told him to go somewhere for

me. I soon found that he loved to be ordered about. Neither tall nor short, neither ugly nor handsome, neither stupid nor intelligent, neither old nor young, it would be difficult to describe in any definite manner this man, except that his face was slightly pitted with the small-pox, and that he had fair hair. He belonged, as far as I could make out, to the same company as Sirotkin. The prisoners sometimes laughed at him because he had “exchanged.” During the march to Siberia he had exchanged for a red shirt and a silver rouble. It was thought comical that he should have sold himself for such a small sum, to take the name of another prisoner in place of his own, and consequently to accept the other’s sentence. Strange as it may appear it was nevertheless true. This custom, which had become traditional, and still existed at the time I was sent to Siberia, I, at first, refused to believe, but found afterwards that it really existed. This is how the exchange was effected:

A company of prisoners started for Siberia. Among them there are exiles of all kinds, some condemned to hard labour, others to labour in the mines, others to simple colonisation. On the way out, no matter at what stage of the journey, in the Government of Perm, for instance, a prisoner wishes to exchange with another man, who—we will say he is named Mikhailoff—has been condemned to hard labour for a capital offence, and does not like the prospect of passing long years without his liberty. He knows, in his cunning, what to do. He looks among his comrades for some simple, weak-minded fellow, whose punishment is less severe, who has been condemned to a few years in the mines, or to hard labour, or has perhaps been simply exiled. At last he finds such a man as Suchiloff, a former serf, sentenced only to become a [Pg 85] colonist. The man has made fifteen hundred versts [about one thousand miles] without a kopeck, for the good reason that a Suchiloff is always without money; fatigued, exhausted, he can get nothing to eat beyond the fixed rations, nothing to wear in addition to the convict uniform.

Mikhailoff gets into conversation with Suchiloff, they suit one another, and they strike up a friendship. At last at some station Mikhailoff makes his comrade drunk, then he will ask him if he will “exchange.”

“My name is Mikhailoff,” he says to him, “condemned to what is called hard labour, but which, in my own case, will be nothing of the kind, as I am to enter a particular special section. I am classed with the hard-labour men, but in my special division the labour is not so severe.”

Before the special section was abolished, many persons in the official world, even at St. Petersburg, were unaware even of its existence. It was in such a retired corner of one of the most distant regions of Siberia, that it was difficult to know anything about

it. It was insignificant, moreover, from the number of persons belonging to it. In my time they numbered altogether only seventy. I have since met men who have served in Siberia, and know the country well, and yet have never heard of the “special section.” In the rules and regulations there are only six lines about this institution. Attached to the convict prison of ---- is a special section reserved for the most dangerous criminals, while the severest labours are being prepared for them. The prisoners themselves knew nothing of this special section. Did it exist temporarily or constantly? Neither Suchiloff nor any of the prisoners being sent out, not Mikhailoff himself could guess the significance of those two words. Mikhailoff, however, had his suspicion as to the true character of this section. He formed his opinion from the gravity of the crime for which he was made to march three or four thousand versts on foot. It was certain that he was not being sent to a place where he would be at his ease. Suchiloff was [Pg 86] to be a colonist. What could Mikhailoff desire better than that?

“Won’t you change?” he asks. Suchiloff is a little drunk, he is a simple-minded man, full of gratitude to the comrade who entertains him, and dare not refuse; he has heard, moreover, from other prisoners, that these exchanges are made, and understands, therefore, that there is nothing extraordinary, unheard-of, in the proposition made to him. An agreement is come to, the cunning Mikhailoff, profiting by Suchiloff’s simplicity, buys his name for a red shirt, and a silver rouble, which are given before witnesses. The next day Suchiloff is sober; but more liquor is given to him. Then he drinks up his own rouble, and after a while the red shirt has the same fate.

“If you don’t like the bargain we made, give me back my money,” says Mikhailoff. But where is Suchiloff to get a rouble? If he does not give it back, the “artel” [*i.e.*, the association—in this case of convicts] will force him to keep his promise. The prisoners are very sensitive on such points: he must keep his promise. The “artel” requires it, and, in case of disobedience, woe to the offender! He will be killed, or at least seriously intimidated. If indeed the “artel” once showed mercy to the men who had broken their word, there would be an end to its existence. If the given word can be recalled, and the bargain put an end to after the stipulated sum has been paid, who would be bound by such an agreement? It is a question of life or death for the “artel.” Accordingly the prisoners are very severe on the point.

Suchiloff then finds that it is impossible to go back, that nothing can save him, and he accordingly agrees to all that is demanded of him. The bargain is then made known to all the convoy, and if denunciations are feared, the men looked upon as suspicious are entertained. What, moreover, does it matter to the others whether Mikhailoff or

Suchiloff goes to the devil? They have had gratuitous drinks, they have been feasted for nothing, and the secret is kept by all.

[Pg 87]

At the next station the names are called. When Mikhailoff's turn arrives, Suchiloff answers "present," Mikhailoff replies "present" for Suchiloff, and the journey is continued. The matter is not now even talked about. At Tobolsk the prisoners are told off. Mikhailoff will become a colonist, while Suchiloff is sent to the special section under a double escort. It would be useless now to cry out, to protest, for what proof could be given? How many years would it take to decide the affair, what benefit would the complainant derive? Where, moreover, are the witnesses? They would deny everything, even if they could be found.

That is how Suchiloff, for a silver rouble and a red shirt, came to be sent to the special section. The prisoners laughed at him, not because he had exchanged—though in general they despised those who had been foolish enough to exchange a work that was easy for a work that was hard—but simply because he had received nothing for the bargain except a red shirt and a rouble—certainly a ridiculous compensation.

Generally speaking, the exchanges are made for relatively large sums; several ten-rouble notes sometimes change hands. But Suchiloff was so characterless, so insignificant, so null, that he could scarcely even be laughed at. We lived a considerable time together, he and I; I had got accustomed to him, and he had formed an attachment for me. One day, however—I can never forgive myself for what I did—he had not executed my orders, and when he came to ask me for his money I had the cruelty to say to him, "You don't forget to ask for your money, but you don't do what you are told." Suchiloff remained silent and hastened to do as he was ordered, but he suddenly became very sad. Two days passed. I could not believe that what I had said to him could affect him so much. I knew that a person named Vassilieff was claiming from him in a morose manner payment of a small debt. Suchiloff was probably short of money, and did not dare to ask me for any.

[Pg 88]

"Suchiloff, you wish, I think, to ask me for some money to pay Vassilieff; take this."

I was seated on my camp-bedstead. Suchiloff remained standing up before me, much astonished that I myself should propose to give him money, and that I remembered his difficult position; the more so as latterly he had asked me several times for money in advance, and could scarcely hope that I should give him any more. He looked at the paper I held out to him, then looked at me, turned sharply on his heel and went out. I

was as astonished as I could be. I went out after him, and found him at the back of the barracks. He was standing up with his face against the palisade and his arms resting on the stakes.

“What is the matter, Suchiloff?” I asked him.

He made no reply, and to my stupefaction I saw that he was on the point of bursting into tears.

“You think, Alexander Petrovitch,” he said, in a trembling voice, in endeavouring not to look at me, “that I care only for your money, but I——”

He turned away from me, and struck the palisade with his forehead and began to sob. It was the first time in the convict prison that I had seen a man weep. I had much trouble in consoling him; and he afterwards served me, if possible, with more zeal than ever. He watched for my orders, but by almost imperceptible indications I could see that his heart would never forgive me for my reproach. Meanwhile other men laughed at him and teased him whenever the opportunity presented itself, and even insulted him without his losing his temper; on the contrary, he still remained on good terms with them. It is indeed difficult to know a man, even after having lived long years with him.

The convict prison had not at first for me the significance it was afterwards to assume. I was at first, in spite of my attention, unable to understand many facts which were staring me in the face. I was naturally first struck by the most salient points, but I saw them from a false point of view, and the only impression they made[Pg 89] upon me was one of unmitigated sadness. What contributed above all to this result was my meeting with A——f, the convict who had come to the prison before me, and who had astonished me in such a painful manner during the first few days. The effect of his baseness was to aggravate my moral suffering, already sufficiently cruel. He offered the most repulsive example of the kind of degradation and baseness to which a man may fall when all feeling of honour has perished within him. This young man of noble birth—I have spoken of him before—used to repeat to the Major all that was done in the barracks, and in doing so through the Major’s body-servant Fedka. Here is the man’s history.

Arrived at St. Petersburg before he had finished his studies, after a quarrel with his parents, whom his life of debauchery had terrified, he had not shrunk for the sake of money from doing the work of an informer. He did not hesitate to sell the blood of ten men in order to satisfy his insatiable thirst for the grossest and most licentious pleasures. At last he became so completely perverted in the St. Petersburg taverns

and houses of ill-fame, that he did not hesitate to take part in an affair which he knew to be conceived in madness—for he was not without intelligence. He was condemned to exile and ten years' hard labour in Siberia. One might have thought that such a frightful blow would have shocked him, that it would have caused some reaction and brought about a crisis; but he accepted his new fate without the least confusion. It did not frighten him; all that he feared in it was the necessity of working, and of giving up for ever his habits of debauchery. The name of convict had no effect but to prepare him for new acts of baseness, and more hideous villainies than any he had previously perpetrated.

“I am now a convict, and can crawl at ease, without shame.”

That was the light in which he looked upon his new position. I think of this disgusting creature as of some monstrous phenomenon. During the many years I have lived in the midst of murderers, debauchees, and proved[Pg 90] rascals, never in my life did I meet a case of such complete moral abasement, determined corruption, and shameless baseness. Among us there was a parricide of noble birth. I have already spoken of him; but I could see by several signs that he was much better and more humane than A——f. During the whole time of my punishment, he was never anything more in my eyes than a piece of flesh furnished with teeth and a stomach, greedy for the most offensive and ferocious animal enjoyments, for the satisfaction of which he was ready to assassinate anyone. I do not exaggerate in the least; I recognised in A——f one of the most perfect specimens of animality, restrained by no principles, no rule. How much I was disgusted by his eternal smile! He was a monster—a moral Quasimodo. He was at the same time intelligent, cunning, good-looking, had received some education, and possessed a certain capacity. Fire, plague, famine, no matter what scourge, is preferable to the presence of such a man in human society. I have already said that in the convict prison espionage and denunciation flourished as the natural product of degradation, without the convicts thinking much of it. On the contrary, they maintained friendly relations with A——f. They were more affable with him than with any one else. The kindly attitude towards him of our drunken friend, the Major, gave him a certain importance, and even a certain worth in the eyes of the convicts. Later on, this cowardly wretch ran away with another convict and the soldier in charge of them; but of this I shall speak in proper time and place. At first, he hung about me, thinking I did not know his history. I repeat that he poisoned the first days of my imprisonment so as to drive me nearly to despair. I was terrified by the mass of baseness and cowardice in the midst of which I had been thrown. I imagined that every one else was as foul and cowardly as he. But I made a mistake in supposing that every one resembled A——f.

During the first three days I did nothing but wander about the convict prison, when I did not remain stretched[Pg 91] out on my camp-bedstead. I entrusted to a prisoner of whom I was sure, the piece of linen which had been delivered to me by the administration, in order that he might make me some shirts. Always on the advice of Akim Akimitch, I got myself a folding mattress. It was in felt, covered with linen, as thin as a pancake, and very hard to any one who was not accustomed to it. Akim Akimitch promised to get me all the most essential things, and with his own hands made me a blanket out of a piece of old cloth, cut and sewn together from all the old trousers and waistcoats which I had bought from various prisoners. The clothes delivered to them, when they have been worn the regulation time, become the property of the prisoners. They at once sell them, for however much worn an article of clothing may be, it always possesses a certain value. I was very much astonished by all this, above all at the outset, during my first relations with this world. I became as low as my companions, as much a convict as they. Their customs, their habits, their ideas influenced me thoroughly, and externally became my own, without affecting my inner self. I was astonished and confused as though I had never heard or suspected anything of the kind before, and yet I knew what to expect, or at least what had been told me. The thing itself, however, produced on me a different impression from the mere description of it. How could I suppose, for instance, that old rags possessed still some value? And, nevertheless, my blanket was made up entirely of tatters. It would be difficult to describe the cloth out of which the clothes of the convicts were made. It was like the thick, gray cloth manufactured for the soldiers, but as soon as it had been worn some little time it showed the threads and tore with a abominable ease. The uniform ought to have lasted for a whole year, but it never went so long as that. The prisoner labours, carries heavy burdens, and the cloth naturally wears out, and gets into holes very quickly. Our sheepskins were intended to be worn for three years. During the whole of that time they served as outer[Pg 92] garments, blankets, and pillows, but they were very solid. Nevertheless, at the end of the third year, it was not rare to see them mended with ordinary linen. Although they were now very much worn, it was always possible to sell them at the rate of forty kopecks a piece, the best preserved ones even at the price of sixty kopecks, which was a great sum for the convict prison.

Money, as I have before said, has a sovereign value in such a place. It is certain that a prisoner who has some pecuniary resources suffers ten times less than the one who has nothing.

“When the Government supplies all the wants of the convict, what need can he have for money?” reasoned our chief.

Nevertheless, I repeat that if the prisoners had been deprived of the opportunity of possessing something of their own, they would have lost their reason, or would have died like flies. They would have committed unheard-of crimes; some from wearisomeness or grief, the others, in order to get sooner punished, and, according to their expression, “have a change.” If the convict who has gained some kopecks by the sweat of his brow, who has embarked in perilous undertakings in order to conquer them, if he spends this money recklessly, with childish stupidity, that does not the least in the world prove that he does not know its value, as might at first sight be thought. The convict is greedy for money, to the point of losing his reason, and, if he throws it away, he does so in order to procure what he places far above money—liberty, or at least a semblance of liberty.

Convicts are great dreamers; I will speak of that further on with more detail. At present I will confine myself to saying that I have heard men, who had been condemned to twenty years’ hard labour, say, with a quiet air, “when I have finished my time, if God wishes, then——” The very words hard labour, or forced labour, indicate that the man has lost his freedom; and when this man spends his money he is carrying out his own will.

[Pg 93]

In spite of the branding and the chains, in spite of the palisade which hides from his eyes the free world, and encloses him in a cage like a wild beast, he can get himself spirits and other delights; sometimes even (not always), corrupt his immediate superintendents, the old soldiers and non-commissioned officers, and get them to close their eyes to his infractions of discipline within the prison. He can, moreover—what he adores—swagger; that is to say, impress his companions and persuade himself for a time, that he enjoys more liberty than he really possesses. The poor devil wishes, in a word, to convince himself of what he knows to be impossible. This is why the prisoners take such pleasure in boasting and exaggerating in burlesque fashion their own unhappy personality.

Finally, they run some risk when they give themselves up to this boasting; in which again they find a semblance of life and liberty—the only thing they care for. Would not a millionaire with a rope round his neck give all his millions for one breath of air? A prisoner has lived quietly for several years in succession, his conduct has been so exemplary that he has been rewarded by special exemptions. Suddenly, to the great astonishment of his chiefs, this man becomes mutinous, plays the very devil, and does not recoil from a capital crime such as assassination, violation, etc. Every one is astounded at the cause of this unexpected explosion on the part of a man thought

incapable of such a thing. It is the convulsive manifestation of his personality, an instinctive melancholia, an uncontrollable desire for self-assertion, all of which obscures his reason. It is a sort of epileptic attack, a spasm. A man buried alive who suddenly wakes up must strike in a similar manner against the lid of his coffin. He tries to rise up, to push it from him, although his reason must convince him of the uselessness of his efforts.

Reason, however, has nothing to do with this convulsion. It must not be forgotten that almost every voluntary manifestation on the part of a convict is looked upon as a crime. Accordingly, it is a perfect matter of [Pg 94] indifference to them whether this manifestation be important or insignificant, debauch for debauch, danger for danger. It is just as well to go to the end, even as far as a murder. The only difficulty is the first step. Little by little the man becomes excited, intoxicated, and can no longer contain himself. For that reason it would be better not to drive him to extremities. Everybody would be much better for it.

But how can this be managed?

[Pg 95]

CHAPTER VII. THE FIRST MONTH (*continued*)

When I entered the convict prison I possessed a small sum of money; but I carried very little of it about with me, lest it should be confiscated. I had gummed some banknotes into the binding of my New Testament—the only book authorised in the convict prison. This New Testament had been given to me at Tobolsk, by a person who had been exiled some dozens of years, and who had got accustomed to see in other “unfortunates” a brother.

There are in Siberia people who pass their lives in giving brotherly assistance to the “unfortunates.” They feel the same sympathy for them that they would have for their own children. Their compassion is something sacred and quite disinterested. I cannot help here relating in some words a meeting which I had at this time.

In the town where we were then imprisoned lived a widow, Nastasia Ivanovna. Naturally, none of us were in direct relations with this woman. She had made it the object of her life to come to the assistance of all the exiles; but, above all, of us convicts. Had there been some misfortune in her family? Had some person dear to her undergone a punishment similar to ours? I do not know. In any case, she did for us whatever she could. It is true she could do very little, for she was very poor. But we felt

when we were shut up in the convict prison that, [Pg 96] outside, we had a devoted friend. She often brought us news, which we were very glad to hear, for nothing of the kind reached us.

When I left the prison to be taken to another town, I had the opportunity of calling upon her and making her acquaintance. She lived in one of the suburbs, at the house of a near relation.

Nastasia Ivanovna was neither old nor young, neither pretty nor ugly. It was difficult, impossible even, to know whether she was intelligent and well-bred. But in her actions could be seen infinite compassion, an irresistible desire to please, to solace, to be in some way agreeable. All this could be read in the sweetness of her smile.

I passed an entire evening at her house, with other companions of my imprisonment. She looked us straight in the face, laughed when we laughed, did everything we asked her, in conversation was always of our opinion, and did her best in every way to entertain us. She gave us tea and various little delicacies. If she had been rich we felt sure she would have been pleased, if only to be able to entertain us better and offer for us some solid consolation.

When we wished her “good-bye,” she gave us each a present of a cardboard cigar-case as a souvenir. She had made them herself—Heaven knows how—with coloured paper, the paper with which school-boys’ copy-books are covered. All round this cardboard cigar-case she had gummed, by way of ornamentation, a thin edge of gilt paper.

“As you smoke, these cigar-cases will perhaps be of use to you,” she said, as if excusing herself for making such a present.

There are people who say, as I have read and heard, that a great love for one’s neighbour is only a form of selfishness. What selfishness could there be in this? That I could never understand.

Although I had not much money when I entered the convict prison, I could not nevertheless feel seriously annoyed with convicts who, immediately on my arrival, after [Pg 97] having deceived me once, came to borrow of me a second, a third time, and even oftener. But I admitted frankly that what did annoy me was the thought that all these people, with their smiling knavery, must take me for a fool, and laugh at me just because I lent the money for the fifth time. It must have seemed to them that I was the dupe of their tricks and their deceit. If, on the contrary, I had refused them and sent them away, I am certain that they would have had much more respect for me. Still, though it vexed me very much, I could not refuse them.

I was rather anxious during the first days to know what footing I should hold in the convict prison, and what rule of conduct I should follow with my companions. I felt and perfectly understood that the place being in every way new to me, I was walking in darkness, and it would be impossible for me to live for ten years in darkness. I decided to act frankly, according to the dictates of my conscience and my personal feeling. But I also knew that this decision might be very well in theory, and that I should, in practice, be governed by unforeseen events. Accordingly, in addition to all the petty annoyances caused to me by my confinement in the convict prison, one terrible anguish laid hold of me and tormented me more and more.

“The dead-house!” I said to myself when night fell, and I looked from the threshold of our barracks at the prisoners just returned from their labours and walking about in the court-yard, from the kitchen to the barracks, and *vice versa*. As I examined their movements and their physiognomies I endeavoured to guess what sort of men they were, and what their disposition might be.

They lounged about in front of me, some with lowered brows, others full of gaiety—one of these expressions was seen on every convict’s face—exchanged insults or talked on indifferent matters. Sometimes, too, they wandered about in solitude, occupied apparently with their own reflections; some of them with a worn-out, pathetic look, others with a conceited air of superiority. Yes, here, even here!—their cap balanced on the side of their head,[Pg 98] their sheepskin coat picturesquely over the shoulder, insolence in their eyes and mockery on their lips.

“Here is the world to which I am condemned, in which, in spite of myself, I must somehow live,” I said to myself.

I endeavoured to question Akim Akimitch, with whom I liked to take my tea, in order not to be alone, for I wanted to know something about the different convicts. In parenthesis I must say that the tea, at the beginning of my imprisonment, was almost my only food. Akim Akimitch never refused to take tea with me, and he himself heated our tin tea-urns, made in the convict prison and let out to me by M——.

Akim Akimitch generally drank a glass of tea (he had glasses of his own) calmly and silently, then thanked me when he had finished, and at once went to work on my blanket; but he had not been able to tell me what I wanted to know, and did not even understand my desire to know the dispositions of the people surrounding me. He listened to me with a cunning smile which I have still before my eyes. No, I thought, I must find out for myself; it is useless to interrogate others.

The fourth day, the convicts were drawn up in two ranks, early in the morning, in the court-yard before the guard-house, close to the prison gates. Before and behind them were soldiers with loaded muskets and fixed bayonets.

The soldier has the right to fire on the convict if he tries to escape. But, on the other hand, he is answerable for his shot, if there was no absolute necessity for him to fire. The same thing applies to revolts. But who would think of openly taking to flight?

The Engineer officer arrived accompanied by the so-called “conductor” and by some non-commissioned officers of the Line, together with sappers and soldiers told off to superintend the labours of the convicts.

The roll was called. Then the convicts who were going to the tailors’ workshop started first. These men worked inside the prison, and made clothes for all the inmates. The other exiles went into the outer workshops,[Pg 99] until at last arrived the turn of the prisoners destined for field labour. I was of this number—there were altogether twenty of us. Behind the fortress on the frozen river were two barges belonging to the Government, which were not worth anything, but which had to be taken to pieces in order that the wood might not be lost. The wood was in itself all but valueless, for firewood can be bought in the town at a nominal price. The whole country is covered with forests.

This work was given to us in order that we might not remain with our arms crossed. This was understood on both sides. Accordingly, we went to it apathetically; though just the contrary happened when work had to be done, which would be profitable, or when a fixed task was assigned to us. In this latter case, although prisoners were to derive no profit from their work, they tried to get it over as soon as possible, and took a pride in doing it quickly. When such work as I am speaking of had to be done as a matter of form, rather than because it was necessary, task work could not be asked for. We had to go on until the beating of the drum at eleven o’clock called back the convicts.

The day was warm and foggy, the snow was on the point of melting. Our entire band walked towards the bank behind the fortress, shaking lightly their chains hid beneath their garments: the sound came forth clear and ringing. Two or three convicts went to get their tools from the dépôt.

I walked on with the others. I had become a little animated, for I wanted to see and know in what this field labour consisted, to what sort of work I was condemned, and how I should do it for the first time in my life.

I remember the smallest particulars. We met, as we were walking along, a townsman with a long beard, who stopped and slipped his hand into his pocket. A prisoner left our party, took off his cap and received alms—to the extent of five kopecks—then came back hurriedly towards us. The townsman made the sign of the cross and went his way. The five kopecks were spent the same morning[Pg 100] in buying cakes of white bread which were shared equally among us. In my squad some were gloomy and taciturn, others indifferent and indolent. There were some who talked in an idle manner. One of these men was extremely gay, heaven knows why. He sang and danced as we went along, shaking and ringing his chains at each step. This fat and corpulent convict was the very one who, on the very day of my arrival during the general washing, had a quarrel with one of his companions about the water, and had ventured to compare him to some sort of bird. His name was Scuratoff. He finished by shouting out a lively song of which I remember the burden:

They married me without my consent,

When I was at the mill.

Nothing was wanting but a balalaika [the Russian banjo].

His extraordinary good-humour was justly reprov'd by several of the prisoners, who were offended by it.

“Listen to his hallooing,” said one of the convicts, “though it doesn’t become him.”

“The wolf has but one song; this Tuliak [inhabitant of Tula] is stealing it from him,” said another, who could be recognised by his accent as a Little Russian.

“Of course I am from Tula,” replied Scuratoff; “but we don’t stuff ourselves to bursting as you do in your Pultava.”

“Liar! what did you eat yourself? Bark shoes and cabbage soup?”

“You talk as if the devil fed you on sweet almonds,” broke in a third.

“I admit, my friend, that I am an effeminate man,” said Scuratoff with a gentle sigh, as though he were really reproaching himself for his effeminacy. “From my most tender infancy I was brought up in luxury, fed on plums and delicate cakes. My brothers even now have a large business at Moscow. They are wholesale dealers in the wind that blows; immensely rich men, as you may imagine.”

[Pg 101]

“And what did you sell?”

“I was very successful, and when I received my first two hundred——”

“Roubles? impossible!” interrupted one of the prisoners, struck with amazement at hearing of so large a sum.

“No, my good fellow, not two hundred roubles, two hundred blows of the stick. Luka; I say Luka!”

“Some have the right to call me Luka, but for you I am Luka Kouzmitch,” replied rather ill-temperedly a small, feeble convict with a pointed nose.

“The devil take you, you are really not worth speaking to; yet I wanted to be civil to you. But to continue my story; this is how it happened that I did not remain any longer at Moscow. I received my fifteen last strokes and was then sent off, and was at——”

“But what were you sent for?” asked a convict who had been listening attentively.

“Don’t ask stupid questions. I was explaining to you how it was I did not make my fortune at Moscow; and yet how anxious I was to be rich, you could scarcely imagine how much.”

Many of the prisoners began to laugh. Scuratoff was one of those lively persons, full of animal spirits, who take a pleasure in amusing their graver companions, and who, as a matter of course, received no reward except insults. He belonged to a type of men, to whose characteristics I shall, perhaps, have to return.

“And what a fellow he is now!” observed Luka Kouzmitch. “His clothes alone must be worth a hundred roubles.”

Scuratoff had the oldest and greasiest sheepskin that could be seen. It was mended in many different places with pieces that scarcely hung together. He looked at Luka attentively from head to foot.

“It is my head, friend,” he said, “my head that is worth money. When I took farewell of Moscow, I was half consoled, because my head was to make the journey on my shoulders. Farewell, Moscow,[Pg 102] I shall never forget your free air, nor the tremendous flogging I got. As for my sheepskin, you are not obliged to look at it.”

“You would like me, perhaps, to look at your head?”

“If it was really his own natural property, but it was given him in charity,” cried Luka Kouzmitch. “It was a gift made to him at Tumen, when the convoy was passing through the town.”

“Scuratoff, had you a workshop?”

“What workshop could he have? He was only a cobbler,” said one of the convicts.

“It is true,” said Scuratoff, without noticing the caustic tone of the speaker. “I tried to mend boots, but I never got beyond a single pair.”

“And were you paid for them?”

“Well, I found a fellow who certainly neither feared God nor honoured either his father or his mother, and as a punishment, Providence made him buy the work of my hands.”

The men around Scuratoff burst into a laugh.

“I also worked once at the convict prison,” continued Scuratoff, with imperturbable coolness. “I did up the boots of Stepan Fedoritch, the lieutenant.”

“And was he satisfied?”

“No, my dear fellows, indeed he was not; he blackguarded me enough to last me for the rest of my life. He also pushed me from behind with his knee. What a rage he was in! Ah! my life has deceived me. I see no fun in the convict prison whatever.” He began to sing again.

Akolina’s husband is in the court-yard.

There he waits.

Again he sang, and again he danced and leaped.

“Most unbecoming!” murmured the Little Russian, who was walking by my side.

“Frivolous man!” said another in a serious, decided tone.

I could not make out why they insulted Scuratoff,[Pg 103] nor why they despised those convicts who were light-hearted, as they seemed to do. I attributed the anger of the Little Russian and the others to a feeling of personal hostility, but in this I was wrong. They were vexed that Scuratoff had not that puffed-up air of false dignity with which the whole of the convict prison was impregnated.

They did not, however, get annoyed with all the jokers, nor treat them all like Scuratoff. Some of them were men who would stand no nonsense, and forgive no one voluntarily or involuntarily. It was necessary to treat them with respect. There was in our band a convict of this very kind, a good-natured, lively fellow, whom I did not see in his true light until later on. He was a tall young fellow, with pleasant manners, and not without good looks. There was at the same time a very comic expression on his face.

He was called the Sapper, because he had served in the Engineers. He belonged to the special section.

But all the serious-minded convicts were not so particular as the Little Russian, who could not bear to see people gay.

We had in our prison several men who aimed at a certain pre-eminence, either in virtue of skill at their work, of their general ingenuity, of their character, or their wit. Many of them were intelligent and energetic, and reached the point they were aiming at—pre-eminence, that is to say, and moral influence over their companions. They often hated one another, and they excited general envy. They looked upon other convicts with a dignified air, that was full of condescension; and they never quarrelled without a cause. Favourably looked upon by the administration, they in some measure directed the work, and none of them would have lowered himself so far as to quarrel with a man about his songs. All these men were very polite to me during the whole time of my imprisonment, but not at all communicative.

At last we reached the bank; a little lower down was the old hulk, which we were to break up, stuck fast in[Pg 104] the ice. On the other side of the water was the blue steppe and the sad horizon. I expected to see every one go to work at once. Nothing of the kind. Some of the convicts sat down negligently on wooden beams that were lying near the shore, and nearly all took from their pockets pouches containing native tobacco—which was sold in leaf at the market at the rate of three kopecks a pound—and short wooden pipes. They lighted them while the soldiers formed a circle around them, and began to watch us with a tired look.

“Who the devil had the idea of sinking this barque?” asked one of the convicts in a loud voice, without speaking to any one in particular.

“Were they very anxious, then, to have it broken up?”

“The people were not afraid to give us work,” said another.

“Where are all those peasants going to work?” said the first, after a short silence.

He had not even heard his companion’s answer. He pointed with his finger to the distance, where a troop of peasants were marching in file across the virgin snow.

All the convicts turned negligently towards this side, and began from mere idleness to laugh at the peasants as they approached them. One of them, the last of the line, walked very comically with his arms apart, and his head on one side. He wore a tall pointed cap. His shadow threw itself in clear lines on the white snow.

“Look how our brother Petrovitch is dressed,” said one of my companions, imitating the pronunciation of the peasants of the locality. One amusing thing—the convicts looked down on peasants, although they were for the most part peasants by origin.

“The last one, too, above all, looks as if he were planting radishes.”

“He is an important personage, he has lots of money,” said a third.

They all began to laugh without, however, seeming genuinely amused.

[Pg 105]

During this time a woman selling cakes came up. She was a brisk, lively person, and it was with her that the five kopecks given by the townsman were spent.

The young fellow who sold white bread in the convict prison took two dozen of her cakes, and had a long discussion with the woman in order to get a reduction in price. She would not, however, agree to his terms.

At last the non-commissioned officer appointed to superintend the work came up with a cane in his hand.

“What are you sitting down for? Begin at once.”

“Give us our tasks, Ivan Matveitch,” said one of the “foremen” among us, as he slowly got up.

“What more do you want? Take out the barque, that is your task.”

Then ultimately the convicts got up and went to the river, but very slowly. Different “directors” appeared, “directors,” at least, in words. The barque was not to be broken up anyhow. The latitudinal and longitudinal beams were to be preserved, and this was not an easy thing to manage.

“Draw this beam out, that is the first thing to do,” cried a convict who was neither a director nor a foreman, but a simple workman. This man, very quiet and a little stupid, had not previously spoken. He now bent down, took hold of a heavy beam with both hands, and waited for some one to help him. No one, however, seemed inclined to do so.

“Not you, indeed, you will never manage it; not even your grandfather, the bear, could do it,” muttered some one between his teeth.

“Well, my friend, are we to begin? As for me, I can do nothing alone,” said, with a morose air, the man who had put himself forward, and who now, quitting the beam, held himself upright.

“Unless you are going to do all the work by yourself, what are you in such a hurry about?”

“I was only speaking,” said the poor fellow, excusing himself for his forwardness.

“Must you have blankets to keep yourselves warm,[Pg 106] or are you to be heated for the winter?” cried a non-commissioned officer to the twenty men who seemed to loathe to begin work. “Go on at once.”

“It is never any use being in a hurry, Ivan Matveitch.”

“But you are doing nothing at all, Savelieff. What are you casting your eyes about for? Are they for sale, by chance? Come, go on.”

“What can I do alone?”

“Set us tasks, Ivan Matveitch.”

“I told you before that I had no task to give you. Attack the barque, and when you have finished we will go back to the house. Come, begin.”

The prisoners began work, but with no good-will, and very indolently. The irritation of the chief at seeing these vigorous men remain so idle was intelligible enough. While the first rivet was being removed it suddenly snapped.

“It broke to pieces,” said the convict in self-justification. It was impossible, then, they suggested, to work in such a manner. What was to be done? A long discussion took place between the prisoners, and little by little they came to insults; nor did this seem likely to be the end of it. The under officer cried out again as he agitated his stick, but the second rivet snapped like the first. It was then agreed that hatchets were of no use, and that other tools must be procured. Accordingly, two prisoners were sent under escort to the fortress to get the proper instruments. Waiting their return, the other convicts sat down on the bank as calmly as possible, pulled out their pipes and began again to smoke. Finally, the under officer spat with contempt.

“Well,” he exclaimed, “the work you are doing will not kill you. Oh, what people, what people!” he grumbled, with an ill-natured air. He then made a gesture, and went away to the fortress, brandishing his cane.

After an hour the “conductor” arrived. He listened quietly to what the convicts had to say, declared that the task he gave them was to get off four rivets[Pg 107] unbroken, and to demolish a good part of the barque. As soon as this was done the prisoners could go back to the house. The task was a considerable one, but, good heavens! how the convicts now went to work! Where now was their idleness, their want of skill? The hatchets soon began to dance, and soon the rivets were sprung. Those who had no hatchets made use of thick sticks to push beneath the rivets, and thus in due time and in artistic fashion, they got them out. The convicts seemed suddenly to have become intelligent in their conversation. No more insults were heard. Every one knew perfectly what to say, to do, to advise. Just half-an-hour before the beating of the drum, the appointed task was executed, and the prisoners returned to the convict prison fatigued, but pleased to have gained half-an-hour from the working time fixed by the regulations.

As regards myself, I have only one thing to say. Wherever I stood to help the workers I was never in my place; they always drove me away, and generally insulted me. Any one of the ragged lot, any miserable workman who would not have dared to say a syllable to the other convicts, all more intelligent and skilful than he, assumed the right of swearing at me if I went near him, under pretext that I interfered with him in his work. At last one of the best of them said to me frankly, but coarsely:

“What do you want here? Be off with you! Why do you come when no one calls you?”

“That is it,” added another.

“You would do better to take a pitcher,” said a third, “and carry water to the house that is being built, or go to the tobacco factory. You are no good here.”

I was obliged to keep apart. To remain idle while others were working seemed a shame; but when I went to the other end of the barque I was insulted anew.

“What men we have to work!” was the cry. “What can be done with fellows of this kind?”

All this was said spitefully. They were pleased to have the opportunity of laughing at a gentleman.

It will now be understood that my first thought on[Pg 108] entering the convict prison was to ask myself how I should ever get on with such people. I foresaw that such incidents would often be repeated; but I resolved not to change my conduct in any way, whatever might be the result. I had decided to live simply and intelligently, without manifesting the least desire to approach my companions; but also without

repelling them, if they themselves desired to approach me; in no way to fear their threats or their hatred; and to pretend as much as possible not to be affected by them. Such was my plan. I saw from the first that they would despise me, if I adopted any other course.

When I returned in the evening to the convict prison, having finished my afternoon's work, fatigued and harassed, a deep sadness took possession of me. "How many thousands of days have I to pass like this one?" Always the same thought. I walked about alone and meditated as night fell, when, suddenly, near the palisade behind the barracks, I saw my friend, Bull, who ran towards me.

Bull was the dog of the prison; for the prison has its dog as companies of infantry, batteries of artillery, and squadrons of cavalry have theirs. He had been there for a long time, belonged to no one, looked upon every one as his master, and lived on the remains from the kitchen. He was a good-sized black dog, spotted with white, not very old, with intelligent eyes, and a bushy tail. No one caressed him or paid the least attention to him. As soon as I arrived I made friends with him by giving him a piece of bread. When I patted him on the back he remained motionless, looked at me with a pleased expression, and gently wagged his tail.

That evening, not having seen me the whole day—me, the first person who in so many years had thought of caressing him—he ran towards me, leaping and barking. It had such an effect on me that I could not help embracing him. I placed his head against my body. He placed his paws on my shoulders and looked me in the face.

"Here is a friend sent to me by destiny," I said to myself, and during the first weeks, so full of pain, every[Pg 109] time that I came back from work I hastened, before doing anything else, to go to the back of the barracks with Bull, who leaped with joy before me. I took his head in my hands and kissed it. At the same time a troubled, bitter feeling pressed my heart. I well remember thinking—and taking pleasure in the thought—that this was my one, my only friend in the world—my faithful dog, Bull.

[Pg 110]

CHAPTER VIII. NEW ACQUAINTANCES—PETROFF

Time went on, and little by little I accustomed myself to my new life. The scenes I had daily before me no longer afflicted me so much. In a word, the convict prison, its inhabitants, and its manners, left me indifferent. To get reconciled to this life was impossible, but I had to accept it as an inevitable fact. I had driven entirely away from

me all the anxiety by which I had at first been troubled. I no longer wandered through the convict prison like a lost soul, and no longer allowed myself to be subjugated by my anxiety. The wild curiosity of the convicts had had its edge taken off, and I was no longer looked upon with that affectation or insolence previously displayed. They had become indifferent to me, and I was very glad of it. I began to feel at home in the barracks. I knew where to go and sleep at night; gradually I became accustomed to things the very idea of which would formerly have been repugnant to me. I went every week regularly to have my head shaved. We were called every Saturday one after another to the guard-house. The regimental barbers lathered our skulls with cold water and soap, and scraped us afterwards with their saw-like razors.

Merely the thought of this torture gives me a [Pg 111] shudder. I soon found a remedy for it—Akim Akimitch pointed it out to me—a prisoner in the military section who for one kopeck shaved those who paid for it with his own razor. This was his trade. Many of the prisoners were his customers merely to avoid the military barbers, yet these were not men of weak nerves. Our barber was called the “major,” why, I cannot say. As far as I know he possessed no points of resemblance with any major. As I write these lines I see clearly before me the “major” and his thin face. He was a tall fellow, silent, rather stupid, absorbed entirely by his business; he was never to be seen without a strop in his hand, on which day and night he sharpened a razor, which was always in admirable condition. He had certainly made this work the supreme object of his life; he was really happy when his razor was quite sharp and his services were in request; his soap was always warm, and he had a very light hand—a hand of velvet. He was proud of his skill, and used to take with a careless air the kopeck he received; one might have thought that he worked from love of his art, and not in order to gain money.

A——f was soundly corrected by our real Major one day, because he had the misfortune to say the “major” when he was speaking of the barber who shaved him. The real Major was in a violent rage.

“Blackguard,” he cried, “do you know what a major is?” and according to his habit he shook A——f violently. “The idea of calling a scoundrel of a convict a ‘major’ in my presence.”

From the first day of my imprisonment I began to dream of my liberation. My favourite occupation was to count thousands and thousands of times in a thousand different manners the number of days that I should have to pass in prison. I thought of that only, and every one deprived of his liberty for a fixed time does the same; of that I am certain. I cannot say that all the convicts had the same degree of hopefulness, but their sanguine character often astonished me. The hopefulness of a prisoner differs

essentially from that of a free man. The [Pg 112] latter may desire an amelioration in his position, or a realisation of some enterprise which he has undertaken, but meanwhile he lives, he acts; he is swept away in the whirlwind of real life. Nothing of the kind takes place in the case of the convict for life. He lives also in a way, but not being condemned to a fixed number of years, he takes a vaguer view of his situation than the one who is imprisoned for a definite term. The man condemned for a comparatively short period feels that he is not at home; he looks upon himself, so to say, as on a visit; he regards the twenty years of his punishment as two years at most; he is sure that at fifty, when he has finished his sentence, he will be as young and as lively as at thirty-five. "We have time before us," he thinks, and he strives obstinately to dispel discouraging thoughts. Even a man sentenced for life thinks that some day an order may arrive from St. Petersburg—"Transport such a one to the mines at Nertchinsk and fix a term for his detention." It would be famous, first because it takes six months to get to Nertchinsk, and the life on the road is a hundred times preferable to the convict prison. He would finish his time at Nertchinsk, and then—more than one gray-haired old man speculates in this way.

At Tobolsk I have seen men fastened to the wall by a chain about two yards long; by their side they have their bed. They are thus chained for some terrible crime committed after their transportation to Siberia; they are kept chained up for five, ten years. They are nearly all brigands, and I only saw one of them who looked like a man of good breeding; he had been in some branch of the Civil Service, and spoke in a soft, lisping way; his smile was sweet but sickly; he showed us his chain, and pointed out to us the most convenient way of lying down. He must have been a nice person! All these poor wretches are perfectly well-behaved; they all seem satisfied, and yet their desire to finish their period of chains devours them. Why? it will be asked. Because then they will leave their low, damp, stifling cells for the court-yard of the convict prison, that is all. These last [Pg 113] places of confinement they will never leave; they know that those who have once been chained up will never be liberated, and they will die in irons. They know all this, and yet they are very anxious to be no longer chained up. Without this hope could they remain five or six years fastened to a wall, and not die or go mad?

I soon understood that work alone could save me, by fortifying my health and my body, whereas incessant restlessness of mind, nervous irritation, and the close air of the barracks would ruin them completely. I should go out vigorous and full of elasticity. I did not deceive myself, work and movement were very useful to me.

I saw one of my comrades, to my terror, melt away like a piece of wax; and yet, when he was with me in the convict prison, he was young, handsome, and vigorous; when

he left his health was ruined, and his legs could no longer support him. His chest, too, was oppressed by asthma.

“No,” I said to myself, as I gazed upon him; “I wish to live, and I will live.”

My love for work exposed me in the first place to the contempt and bitter laughter of my comrades; but I paid no attention to them, and went away with a light heart wherever I was sent. Sometimes, for instance, to break and pound alabaster. This work, the first that was given to me, is easy. The engineers did their utmost to lighten the task-work of all the gentlemen; this was not indulgence, but simple justice. Would it not have been strange to require the same work from a labourer as from a man whose strength was less by half, and who had never worked with his hands? But we were not “spoilt” in this way for ever, and we were only spared in secret, for we were severely watched. As real severe work was by no means rare, it often happened that the task given to us was beyond the strength of the gentlemen, who thus suffered twice as much as their comrades.

Generally three or four men were sent to pound the[^[Pg 114]] alabaster, and nearly always old men or feeble ones were chosen. We were of the latter class. A man skilled in this particular kind of work was sent with us. For several years it was always the same man, Almazoff by name. He was severe, already in years, sunburnt, and very thin, by no means communicative, moreover, and difficult to get on with. He despised us profoundly; but he was of such a reserved disposition that he never broke it sufficient to call us names. The shed in which we calcined the alabaster was built on a sloping and deserted bank of the river. In winter, on a foggy day, the view was sad, both on the river and on the opposite shore, even to a great distance. There was something heartrending in this dull, naked landscape, but it was still sadder when a brilliant sun shone above the boundless white plain. How one would have liked to fly away beyond this steppe, which began on the opposite shore and stretched out for fifteen hundred versts to the south like an immense table-cloth.

Almazoff went to work silently, with a disagreeable air. We were ashamed not to be able to help him more effectually, but he managed to do his work without our assistance, and seemed to wish to make us understand that we were acting unjustly towards him, and that we ought to repent our uselessness. Our work consisted in heating the oven in order to calcine the alabaster that we had got together in a heap.

The day following, when the alabaster was entirely calcined, we turned it out. Each one filled a box of alabaster, which he afterwards crushed. This work was not disagreeable. The fragile alabaster soon became a white, brilliant dust. We brandished our heavy hammers, and dealt such formidable blows, that we admired

our own strength. When we were tired we felt lighter, our cheeks were red, the blood circulated more rapidly in our veins. Almazoff would then look at us in a condescending manner, as he would have looked at little children. He smoked his pipe with an indulgent air, unable, however, to prevent himself from grumbling. [Pg 115] When he opened his mouth he was never otherwise, and he was the same with every one. At bottom I believe he was a kind man.

They gave me another kind of labour, which consisted in working the turning wheel. This wheel was high and heavy, and great efforts were necessary to make it go round, above all when the workmen from the workshop of the engineers used to make the balustrade of a staircase or the foot of a large table, which required almost the whole trunk. No one man could have done the work alone. To two convicts, B—— (formerly gentleman) and myself, this work was given nearly always for several years, whenever there was anything to turn. B—— was weak, even still young, and somewhat sympathetic. He had been sent to prison a year before me, with two companions who were also of noble birth. One of them, an old man, used to pray day and night. The prisoners respected him greatly for it. He died in prison. The other one was quite a young man, fresh-coloured, strong, and courageous. He had carried his companion B—— for several hundred versts, seeing that at the end of the first half-stage he had fallen down from fatigue. Their friendship for one another was something to see.

B—— was a perfectly well-bred man, of noble and generous disposition, but spoiled and irritated by illness. We used to turn the wheel well together, and the work interested us. As for me, I found the exercise most salutary.

I was very—too—fond of shovelling away the snow, which we generally did after the hurricanes, so frequent in the winter. When the hurricane had been raging for an entire day, more than one house would be buried up to the windows, even if it was not covered over entirely. The hurricane ceased, the sun reappeared, and we were ordered to disengage the houses, barricaded as they were by heaps of snow.

We were sent in large bands, sometimes the whole of the convicts together. Each of us received a shovel and [Pg 116] had an appointed task to do, which it sometimes seemed impossible to get through. But we all went to work with a good-will. The light dust-like snow had not yet congealed, and was frozen only on the surface. We removed it in enormous shovelfuls, which were dispersed around us. In the air the snow-dust was as brilliant as diamonds. The shovel sank easily into the white glittering mass. The convicts did this work almost always with gaiety, the cold winter air and the exercise animated them. Every one felt himself in better spirits, laughter and jokes were heard, snowballs were exchanged, which after a time excited the

indignation of the serious-minded convicts, who liked neither laughter nor gaiety. Accordingly these scenes finished almost always in showers of insults.

Little by little the circle of my acquaintances increased, although I never thought of making new ones. I was always restless, morose, and mistrustful. Acquaintances, however, were made involuntarily. The first who came to visit me was the convict Petroff. I say visit, and I retain the word, for he lived in the special division which was at the farthest end of the barracks from mine. It seemed as if no relations could exist between him and me, for we had nothing in common.

Nevertheless, during the first period of my stay, Petroff thought it his duty to come towards me nearly every day, or at least to stop me when, after work, I went for a stroll at the back of the barracks as far as possible from observation. His persistence was disagreeable to me; but he managed so well that his visits became at last a pleasing diversion, although he was by no means of a communicative disposition. He was short, strongly built, agile, and skilful. He had rather an agreeable voice, and high cheek-bones, a bold look, and white, regular teeth. He had always a quid of tobacco in his mouth between the lower lip and the gums. Many of the convicts had the habit of chewing. He seemed to me younger than he really was, for he did not appear to be[Pg 117] more than thirty, and he was really forty. He spoke to me without any ceremony, and behaved to me on a footing of equality with civility and attention. If, for instance, he saw that I wished to be alone, he would talk to me for about two minutes and then go away. He thanked me, moreover, each time for my kindness in conversing with him, which he never did to any one else. I must add that his relations underwent no change not only during the first period of my story, but for several years, and that they never became more intimate, although he was really my friend. I never could say exactly what he looked for in my society, nor why he came every day to see me. He robbed me sometimes, but almost involuntarily. He never came to me to borrow money; so that what attracted him was not personal interest.

It seemed to me, I know not why, that this man did not live in the same prison with me, but in another house in the town, far away. It appeared as though he had come to the convict prison by chance in order to pick up news, to inquire for me, in short, to see how I was getting on. He was always in a hurry, as though he had left some one for a moment who was waiting for him, or as if he had given up for a time some matter of business. And yet he never hurried himself. His look was strongly fixed, with a slight air of levity and irony. He had a habit of looking into the distance above the objects near him, as though he were endeavouring to distinguish something behind the person to whom he was talking. He always seemed absent-minded. I sometimes asked myself where he went when he left me, where could Petroff be so anxiously expected? He

would simply go with a light step to one of the barracks or to the kitchen, and sit down to hear the conversation. He listened attentively, and joined in with animation; after which he would suddenly become silent. But whether he spoke or kept silent, one could always see on his countenance that he had business somewhere else, and that some one was waiting for him in the town, not very far away. The most astonishing thing was that he[Pg 118] never had any business—apart, of course, from the hard labour assigned to him. He knew no trade, and had scarcely ever any money. But that did not seem to grieve him. Why did he speak to me? His conversation was as strange as he himself was singular. When he noticed that I was walking alone at the back of the barracks he made a stand, and turned towards me. He walked very fast, and when I turned he was suddenly on his heel. He approached me walking, but so quickly that he seemed to be going at a run.

“Good-morning.”

“Good-morning.”

“I am not disturbing you?”

“No.”

“I wish to ask you something about Napoleon. I wanted to ask you if he is not a relation of the one who came to us in the year 1812.”

Petroff was a soldier’s son, and knew how to read and write.

“Of course he is.”

“People say he is President. What President—and of what?”

His questions were always rapid and abrupt, as though he wished to know as soon as possible what he asked. I explained to him of what Napoleon was President, and I added that perhaps he would become Emperor.

“How will that be?”

I explained it to him as well as I could; Petroff listened with attention. He understood perfectly all I told him, and added, as he leant his ear towards me:

“Hem! Ah, I wished to ask you, Alexander Petrovitch, if there are really monkeys who have hands instead of feet, and are as tall as a man?”

“Yes.”

“What are they like?”

I described them to him, and told him what I knew on the subject.

“And where do they live?”

[Pg 119]

“In warm climates. There are some to be found in the island of Sumatra.”

“Is that in America? I have heard that people there walk with their heads downwards.”

“No, no; you are thinking of the Antipodes.” I explained to him as well as I could what America was, and what the Antipodes. He listened to me as attentively as if the question of the Antipodes had alone caused him to approach me.

“Ah, ah! I read last year the story of the Countess de la Vallière. Arevief had bought this book from the Adjutant. Is it true or is it an invention? The work is by Dumas.”

“It is an invention, no doubt.”

“Ah, indeed. Good-bye. I am much obliged to you.”

And Petroff disappeared. The above may be taken as a specimen of our ordinary conversation.

I made inquiries about him. M—— thought he had better speak to me on the subject, when he learnt what an acquaintance I had made. He told me that many convicts had excited his horror on their arrival; but not one of them, not even Gazin, had produced upon him such a frightful impression as this Petroff.

“He is the most resolute, most to be feared of all the convicts,” said M——. “He is capable of anything, nothing stops him if he has a caprice. He will assassinate you, if the fancy takes him, without hesitation and without the least remorse. I often think he is not in his right senses.”

This declaration interested me extremely; but M—— was never able to tell me why he had such an opinion of Petroff. Strangely enough, for many years together I saw this man and talked with him nearly every day. He was always my sincere friend, though I could not at the time tell why, and during the whole time he lived very quietly, and did nothing extreme. I am moreover convinced that M—— was right, and that he was perhaps a most intrepid man and the most difficult to [Pg 120] restrain in the whole prison. And why so, I can scarcely explain.

This Petroff was that very convict who, when he was called up to receive his punishment, had wished to kill the Major. I have told you the latter was saved by a miracle—that he had gone away one minute before the punishment was inflicted.

Once when he was still a soldier—before his arrival at the convict prison—his Colonel had struck him on parade. Probably he had often been beaten before, but that day he was not in a humour to bear an insult, in open day, before the battalion drawn up in line. He killed his Colonel. I don't know all the details of the story, for he never told it to me himself. It must be understood that these explosions only took place when the nature within him spoke too loudly, and these occasions were rare; as a rule he was serious and even quiet. His strong, ardent passions were not burnt out, but smouldering, like burning coals beneath ashes.

I never noticed that he was vain, or given to bragging like so many other convicts. He hardly ever quarrelled, but he was on friendly relations with scarcely any one, except, perhaps, Sirotkin, and then only when he had need of him. I saw him, however, one day seriously irritated. Some one had offended him by refusing him something he wanted. He was disputing on the point with a tall convict, as vigorous as an athlete, named Vassili Antonoff, known for his nagging, spiteful disposition. The man, however, who belonged to the class of civil convicts, was far from being a coward. They shouted at one another for some time, and I thought the quarrel would finish like so many others of the same kind, by simple interchange of abuse. The affair took an unexpected turn. Petroff only suddenly turned pale, his lips trembled, and turned blue, his respiration became difficult. He got up, and slowly, very slowly, and with imperceptible steps—he liked to walk about with his feet naked—approached Antonoff; at once the noise of shouting gave place to a death-like silence—a fly passing[Pg 121] through the air might have been heard—every one anxiously awaited the event. Antonoff pointed to his adversary. His face was no longer human. I was unable to endure the scene, and I left the prison. I was certain that before I got to the staircase I should hear the shrieks of a man who was being murdered; but nothing of the kind took place. Before Petroff had succeeded in getting up to Antonoff, the latter threw him the object which had caused the quarrel—a miserable rag, a worn-out piece of lining.

Of course afterwards, Antonoff did not fail to call Petroff names, merely as a matter of conscience, and from a feeling of what was right, in order to show that he had not been too much afraid; but Petroff paid no attention to his insults, he did not even answer him. Everything had ended to his advantage, and the insults scarcely affected him; he was glad to have got his piece of rag.

A quarter of an hour later he was strolling about the barracks quite unoccupied, looking for some group whose conversation might possibly gratify his curiosity. Everything seemed to interest him, and yet he remained apparently indifferent to all he heard. He might have been compared to a workman, a vigorous workman, whom

the work fears; but who, for the moment, has nothing to do, and condescends meanwhile to put out his strength in playing with his children. I did not understand why he remained in prison, why he did not escape. He would not have hesitated to get away if he had really desired to do so. Reason has no power on people like Petroff unless they are spurred on by will. When they desire something there are no obstacles in their way. I am certain that he would have been clever enough to escape, that he would have deceived every one, that he would have remained for a time without eating, hid in a forest, or in the bulrushes of the river; but the idea had evidently not occurred to him. I never noticed in him much judgment or good sense. People like him are born with one idea, which, without being aware of it, pursues them all their life. They wander[Pg 122] until they meet with some object which apparently excites their desire, and then they do not mind risking their head. I was sometimes astonished that a man who had assassinated his Colonel for having been struck, would lie down without opposition beneath the rods, for he was always flogged when he was detected introducing spirits into the prison. Like all those who had no settled occupation, he smuggled in spirits; then, if caught, he would allow himself to be whipped as though he consented to the punishment, and confessed himself in the wrong. Otherwise they would have killed him rather than make him lie down. More than once I was astonished to see that he was robbing me in spite of his affection for me; but he did so from time to time. Thus he stole my Bible, which I had asked him to carry to its place. He had only a few steps to go; but on his way he met with a purchaser, to whom he sold the book, at once spending the money he had received on vodka. Probably he felt that day a violent desire for drink, and when he desired something it was necessary that he should have it. A man like Petroff will assassinate any one for twenty-five kopecks, simply to get himself a pint of vodka. On any other occasion he will disdain hundreds and thousands of roubles. He told me the same evening of the theft he had committed, but without showing the least sign of repentance or confusion, in a perfectly indifferent tone, as though he were speaking of an ordinary incident. I endeavoured to reprove him as he deserved, for I regretted the loss of my Bible. He listened to me without hesitation very calmly. He agreed that the Bible was a very useful book, and sincerely regretted that I had it no longer; but he was not for one moment sorry, though he had stolen it. He looked at me with such assurance that I gave up scolding him. He bore my reproaches because he thought I could not do otherwise than I was doing. He knew that he ought to be punished for such an action, and consequently thought I ought to abuse him for my own satisfaction, and to console myself for my loss. But in his inner heart he[Pg 123] considered that it was all nonsense, to which a serious man ought to be ashamed to descend. I believe even that he looked upon me as a child, an infant, who does not yet understand the

simplest things in the world. If I spoke to him of anything, except books and matters of knowledge, he would answer me, but only from politeness, and in laconic phrases. I wondered what made him question me so much on the subject of books. I looked at him carefully during our conversation to assure myself that he was not laughing at me; but no, he listened seriously, and with an attention which was genuine, though not always maintained. This latter circumstance irritated me sometimes. The questions he put to me were clear and precise, and he always seemed prepared for the answer. He had made up his mind once for all that it was no use speaking to me as to other matters, and that, apart from books, I understood nothing. I am certain that he was attached to me, and much that fact astonished me; but he looked upon me as a child, or as an imperfect man. He felt for me that sort of compassion which every stronger being feels for a weaker; he took me for—I do not know what he took me for. Although this compassion did not prevent him from robbing me, I am sure that in doing so he pitied me.

“What a strange person!” he must have said to himself, as he lay hands on my property; “he does not even know how to take care of what he possesses.” That, I think, is why he liked me. One day he said to me as if involuntarily:

“You are too good-natured, you are so simple, so simple that one cannot help pitying you. Do not be offended at what I was saying to you, Alexander Petrovitch,” he added a minute afterwards, “it is not ill-meant.”

People like Petroff will sometimes, in times of trouble and excitement, manifest themselves in a forcible manner; then they find the kind of activity which suits them; they are not men of words; they could not be instigators and chiefs of insurrections, but they are the men who[Pg 124] execute and act; they act simply without any fuss, and run just to throw themselves against an obstacle with bared breast, neither thinking nor fearing. Every one follows them to the foot of the wall, where they generally leave their life. I do not think Petroff can have ended well, he was marked for a violent end; and if he is not yet dead, that only means that the opportunity has not yet presented itself. Who knows, however? He will, perhaps, die of extreme old age, quite quietly, after having wandered through life, here and there, without an object; but I believe M—— was right, and that Petroff was the most determined man in the whole convict prison.

[Pg 125]

CHAPTER IX. MEN OF DETERMINATION—LUKA

It is difficult to speak of these men of determination. In the convict prison, as elsewhere, they are rare. They can be known by the fear they inspire; people beware of them. An irresistible feeling urged me first of all to turn away from them, but I afterwards changed my point of view, even in regard to the most frightful murderers. There are men who have never killed any one, and who, nevertheless, are more atrocious than those who have assassinated six persons. It is impossible to form an idea of certain crimes, of so strange a nature are they.

A type of murderers that one often meets with is the following: A man lives calmly and peacefully. His fate is a hard one, but he puts up with it. He is a peasant attached to the soil, a domestic serf, a shopkeeper, or a soldier. Suddenly he finds something give way within him; what he has hitherto suffered he can bear no longer, and he plunges his knife into the breast of his oppressor or his enemy. He then goes beyond all measure. He has killed his oppressor, his enemy. That can be understood—there was cause for that crime; but afterwards he does not assassinate his enemies alone, but the first person he happens to meet he kills for the pleasure of killing—for an abusive word, for a look, to make an equal number, or only because some one is [Pg 126] standing in his way. He behaves like a drunken man—a man in a delirium. When once he has passed the fatal line, he is himself astonished to find that nothing sacred exists for him. He breaks through all laws, defies all powers, and gives himself boundless license. He enjoys the agitation of his own heart and the terror that he inspires. He knows all the same that a frightful punishment awaits him. His sensations are probably like those of a man who, looking down from a high tower on to the abyss yawning at his feet, would be happy to throw himself head first into it in order to bring everything to an end. That is what happens with even the most quiet, the most commonplace individuals. There are some even who give themselves airs in this extremity. The more they were quiet, self-effacing before, the more they now swagger and seek to inspire fear. The desperate men enjoy the horror they cause; they take pleasure in the disgust they excite; they perform acts of madness from despair, and care nothing how it must all end, or seem impatient that it should end as soon as possible. The most curious thing is that their excitement, their exaltation, will last until the pillory. After that the thread is cut, the moment is fatal, and the man becomes suddenly calm, or, rather, he becomes extinct, a thing without feeling. In the pillory all his strength fails him, and he begs pardon of the people. Once at the convict prison, he is quite different. No one would ever imagine that this white-livered chicken had killed five or six men.

There are some men whom the convict prison does not easily subdue. They preserve a certain swagger, a spirit of bravado.

“I say, I am not what you take me for; I have sent six fellows out of the world,” you will hear them boast; but sooner or later they have all to submit. From time to time, the murderer will amuse himself by recalling his audacity, his lawlessness when he was in a state of despair. He likes at these moments to have some silly fellow before whom he can brag, and to whom he will relate his heroic deeds, by pretending not to have the[Pg 127] least wish to astonish him. “That is the sort of man I am,” he says.

And with what a refinement of prudent conceit he watches him while he is delivering his narrative! In his accent, in every word, this can be perceived. Where did he acquire this particular kind of artfulness?

During the long evening of one of the first days of my confinement, I was listening to one of these conversations. Thanks to my inexperience I took the narrator for the malefactor, a man with an iron character, a man to whom Petroff was nothing. The narrator, Luka Kouzmitch, had “knocked over” a Major, for no other reason but that it pleased him to do so. This Luka Kouzmitch was the smallest and thinnest man in all the barracks. He was from the South. He had been a serf, one of those not attached to the soil, but who serve their masters as domestics. There was something cutting and haughty in his demeanour. He was a little bird, but had a beak and nails. The convicts sum up a man instinctively. They thought nothing of this one, he was too susceptible and too full of conceit.

That evening he was stitching a shirt, seated on his camp-bedstead. Close to him was a narrow-minded, stupid, but good-natured and obliging fellow, a sort of Colossus, Kobylin by name. Luka often quarrelled with him in a neighbourly way, and treated him with a haughtiness which, thanks to his good-nature, Kobylin did not notice in the least. He was knitting a stocking, and listening to Luka with an indifferent air. Luka spoke in a loud voice and very distinctly. He wished every one to hear him, though he was apparently speaking only to Kobylin.

“I was sent away,” said Luka, sticking his needle in the shirt, “as a brigand.”

“How long ago?” asked Kobylin.

“When the peas are ripe it will be just a year. Well, we got to K——v, and I was put into the convict prison. Around me there were a dozen men from Little Russia, well-built, solid, robust fellows, like oxen, and how quiet![Pg 128] The food was bad, the Major of the prison did what he liked. One day passed, then another, and I soon saw that all these fellows were cowards.

““You are afraid of such an idiot?’ I said to them.

“Go and talk to him yourself,’ and they burst out laughing like brutes that they were. I held my tongue.

“There was one fellow so droll, so droll,” added the narrator, now leaving Kobylin to address all who chose to listen.

“This droll fellow was telling them how he had been tried, what he had said, and how he had wept with hot tears.

“There was a dog of a clerk there,’ he said, ‘who did nothing but write and take down every word I said. I told him I wished him at the devil, and he actually wrote that down. He troubled me so, that I quite lost my head.’”

“Give me some thread, Vasili; the house thread is bad, rotten.”

“There is some from the tailor’s shop,” replied Vasili, handing it over to him.

“Well, but about this Major?” said Kobylin, who had been quite forgotten.

Luka was only waiting for that. He did not go on at once with his story, as though Kobylin were not worth such a mark of attention. He threaded his needle quietly, bent his legs lazily beneath him, and at last continued as follows:

“I excited the fellows to such an extent that they all called out against the Major. That same morning I had borrowed the ‘rascal’ [prison slang for knife] from my neighbour, and had hid it, so as to be ready for anything. When the Major arrived, he was as furious as a madman. ‘Come now, you Little Russians,’ I whispered to them, ‘this is not the time for fear.’ But, dear me, all their courage had slipped down to the soles of their feet, they trembled! The Major came in, he was quite drunk.

[Pg 129]

“What is this, how do you dare? I am your Tzar, your God,’ he cried.

“When he said that he was the Tzar and God, I went up to him with my knife in my sleeve.

“No,’ I said to him, ‘your high nobility,’ and I got nearer and nearer to him, ‘that cannot be. Your “high nobility” cannot be our Tzar and our God.’

“Ah, you are the man, it is you,’ cried the Major; ‘you are the leader of them.’

“No,’ I answered, and I got still nearer to him; ‘no, your “high nobility,” as every one knows, and as you yourself know, the all-powerful God present everywhere is alone in heaven. And we have only one Tzar placed above every one else by God himself. He is

our monarch, your “high nobility.” And, your “high nobility,” you are as yet only Major, and you are our chief only by the grace of the Tzar, and by your merits.’

“How? how? how?’ stammered the Major. He could not speak, so astounded was he.

“This is how I answered, and I threw myself upon him and thrust my knife into his belly up to the hilt. It had been done very quickly; the Major tottered, turned, and fell.

“I had thrown my life away.

“Now, you fellows,’ I cried, ‘it is for you to pick him up.’”

I will here make a digression from my narrative. The expression, “I am the Tzar! I am God!” and other similar ones were once, unfortunately, too often employed in the good old times by many commanders. I must admit that their number has seriously diminished, and perhaps even the last has already disappeared. Let me observe that those who spoke in this way were, above all, men promoted from the ranks. The grade of officer had turned their brain upside down. After having laboured long years beneath the knapsack, they suddenly found themselves officers, commanders, and nobles above all. Thanks to their not being accustomed to it, and to the first excitement caused by their promotion, they contracted an exaggerated idea of their power and importance[Pg 130] relatively to their subordinates. Before their superiors such men are revoltingly servile. The most fawning of them will even say to their superiors that they have been common soldiers, and that they do not forget their place. But towards their inferiors they are despots without mercy. Nothing irritates the convicts so much as such abuses. These overweening opinions of their own greatness; this exaggerated idea of their immunity, causes hatred in the hearts of the most submissive men, and drives the most patient to excesses. Fortunately, all this dates from a time that is almost forgotten, and even then the superior authorities used to deal very severely with abuses of power. I know more than one example of it. What exasperates the convicts above all is disdain or repugnance manifested by any one in dealing with them. Those who think that it is only necessary to feed and clothe the prisoner, and to act towards him in all things according to the law, are much mistaken. However much debased he may be, a man exacts instinctively respect for his character as a man. Every prisoner knows perfectly that he is a convict and a reprobate, and knows the distance which separates him from his superiors; but neither the branding irons nor chains will make him forget that he is a man. He must, therefore, be treated with humanity. Humane treatment may raise up one in whom the divine image has long been obscured. It is with the “unfortunate,” above all, that humane conduct is necessary. It is their salvation, their only joy. I have met with some chiefs of a kind and noble character, and I have seen what a beneficent influence they

exercised over the poor, humiliated men entrusted to their care. A few affable words have a wonderful moral effect upon the prisoners. They render them as happy as children, and make them sincerely grateful towards their chiefs. One other remark—they do not like their chiefs to be familiar and too much hail-fellow-well-met with them. They wish to respect them, and familiarity would prevent this. The prisoners will feel proud, for instance, if their chief has a number of decorations; if he has good manners; if he is [Pg 131]well-considered by a powerful superior; if he is severe, but at the same time just, and possesses a consciousness of dignity. The convicts prefer such a man to all others. He knows what he is worth, and does not insult others. Everything then is for the best.

“You got well skinned for that, I suppose,” asked Kobylin.

“As for being skinned, indeed, there is no denying it. Ali, give me the scissors. But, what next; are we not going to play at cards to-night?”

“The cards we drank up long ago,” remarked Vassili. “If we had not sold them to get drink they would be here now.”

“If!—— Ifs fetch a hundred roubles a piece on the Moscow market.”

“Well, Luka, what did you get for sticking him?” asked Kobylin.

“It brought me five hundred strokes, my friend. It did indeed. They did all but kill me,” said Luka, once more addressing the assembly and without heeding his neighbour Kobylin. “When they gave me those five hundred strokes, I was treated with great ceremony. I had never before been flogged. What a mass of people came to see me! The whole town had assembled to see the brigand, the murderer, receive his punishment. How stupid the populace is!—I cannot tell you to what extent. Timoshka the executioner undressed me and laid me down and cried out, ‘Look out, I am going to grill you!’ I waited for the first stroke. I wanted to cry out, but could not. It was no use opening my mouth, my voice had gone. When he gave me the second stroke—you need not believe me unless you please—I did not hear when they counted two. I returned to myself and heard them count seventeen. Four times they took me down from the board to let me breathe for half-an-hour, and to souse me with cold water. I stared at them with my eyes starting from my head, and said to myself, ‘I shall die here.’”

“But you did not die,” remarked Kobylin innocently.

[Pg 132]

Luka looked at him with disdain, and every one burst out laughing.

“What an idiot! Is he wrong in the upper storey?” said Luka, as if he regretted that he had condescended to speak to such an idiot.

“He is a little mad,” said Vassili on his side.

Although Luka had killed six persons, no one was ever afraid of him in the prison. He wished, however, to be looked upon as a terrible person.

[Pg 133]

CHAPTER X. ISAIAH FOMITCH—THE BATH—BAKLOUCHIN.

But the Christmas holidays were approaching, and the convicts looked forward to them with solemnity. From their mere appearance it was easy to see that something extraordinary was about to arrive. Four days before the holidays they were to be taken to the bath; every one was pleased, and was making preparations. We were to go there after dinner. On this occasion there was no work in the afternoon, and of all the convicts the one who was most pleased, and showed the greatest activity, was a certain Isaiah Fomitch Bumstein, a Jew, of whom I spoke in my fifth chapter. He liked to remain stewing in the bath until he became unconscious. Whenever I think of the prisoner's bath, which is a thing not to be forgotten, the first thought that presents itself to my memory is of that very glorious and eternally to be remembered, Isaiah Fomitch Bumstein, my prison companion. Good Lord! what a strange man he was! I have already said a few words about his face. He was fifty years of age, his face wrinkled, with frightful scars on his cheeks and on his forehead, and the thin, weak body of a fowl. His face expressed perpetual confidence in himself, and, I may almost say, perfect happiness. I do not think he was at all sorry to be condemned to hard labour. He was a jeweller by trade, and as there was no other in the town, [Pg 134] he had always plenty of work to do, and was more or less well paid. He wanted nothing, and lived, so to say, sumptuously, without spending all that he gained, for he saved money and lent it out to the other convicts at interest. He possessed a tea-urn, a mattress, a tea-cup, and a blanket. The Jews of the town did not refuse him their patronage. Every Saturday he went under escort to the synagogue (which was authorised by the law); and he lived like a fighting cock. Nevertheless, he looked forward to the expiration of his term of imprisonment in order to get married. He was the most comic mixture of simplicity, stupidity, cunning, timidity, and bashfulness; but the strangest thing was that the convicts never laughed, or seriously mocked him—they only teased him for amusement. Isaiah Fomitch was a subject of distraction and amusement for every one.

“We have only one Isaiah Fomitch, we will take care of him,” the convicts seemed to say; and as if he understood this, he was proud of his own importance. From the account given to me it appeared he had entered the convict prison in the most laughable manner (it took place before my arrival). Suddenly one evening a report was spread in the convict prison that a Jew had been brought there, who at that moment was being shaved in the guard-house, and that he was immediately afterwards to be taken to the barracks. As there was not a single Jew in the prison, the convicts looked forward to his entry with impatience, and surrounded him as soon as he passed the great gates. The officer on service took him to the civil prison, and pointed out the place where his plank bedstead was to be.

Isaiah Fomitch held in his hand a bag containing the things given to him, and some other things of his own. He put down his bag, took his place at the plank bedstead, and sat down there with his legs crossed, without daring to raise his eyes. People were laughing all round him. The convicts ridiculed him by reason of his Jewish origin. Suddenly a young convict left the others, and came up to him, carrying in his hand an old pair of summer trousers, dirty, torn, and mended with old rags.[Pg 135] He sat down by the side of Isaiah Fomitch, and struck him on the shoulder.

“Well, my dear fellow,” said he, “I have been waiting for the last six years; look up and tell me how much you will give for this article,” holding up his rags before him.

Isaiah Fomitch was so dumbfounded that he did not dare to look at the mocking crowd, with mutilated and frightful countenances, now grouped around him, and did not speak a single word, so frightened was he. When he saw who was speaking to him he shuddered, and began to examine the rags carefully. Every one waited to hear his first words.

“Well, cannot you give me a silver rouble for it? It is certainly worth that,” said the would-be vendor smiling, and looking towards Isaiah Fomitch with a wink.

“A silver rouble! no; but I will give you seven kopecks.”

These were the first words pronounced by Isaiah Fomitch in the convict prison. A loud laugh was heard from all sides.

“Seven kopecks! Well, give them to me; you are lucky, you are indeed. Look! Take care of the pledge, you answer for it with your head.”

“With three kopecks for interest; that will make ten kopecks you will owe me,” said the Jew, at the same time slipping his hand into his pocket to get out the sum agreed upon.

“Three kopecks interest—for a year?”

“No, not for a year, for a month.”

“You are a terrible screw, what is your name?”

“Isaiah Fomitch.”

“Well, Isaiah Fomitch, you ought to get on. Good-bye.”

The Jew examined once more the rags on which he had lent seven kopecks, folded them up, and put them carefully away in his bag. The convicts continued to laugh at him.

In reality every one laughed at him, but, although every prisoner owed him money, no one insulted him;[Pg 136] and when he saw that every one was well disposed towards him, he gave himself haughty airs, but so comic that they were at once forgiven.

Luka, who had known many Jews when he was at liberty, often teased him, less from malice than for amusement, as one plays with a dog or a parrot. Isaiah Fomitch knew this and did not take offence.

“You will see, Jew, how I will flog you.”

“If you give me one blow I will return you ten,” replied Isaiah Fomitch valiantly.

“Scurvy Jew.”

“As scurvy as you like; I have in any case plenty of money.”

“Bravo! Isaiah Fomitch. We must take care of you. You are the only Jew we have; but they will send you to Siberia all the same.”

“I am already in Siberia.”

“They will send you farther on.”

“Is not the Lord God there?”

“Of course, he is everywhere.”

“Well, then! With the Lord God, and money, one has all that is necessary.”

“What a fellow he is!” cries every one around him.

The Jew sees that he is being laughed at, but does not lose courage. He gives himself airs. The flattery addressed to him causes him much pleasure, and with a high, squealing falsetto, which is heard throughout the barracks, he begins to sing, “la, la,

la, la,” to an idiotic and ridiculous tune; the only song he was heard to sing during his stay at the convict prison. When he made my acquaintance, he assured me solemnly that it was the song, and the very air, that was sung by 600,000 Jews, small and great, when they crossed the Red Sea, and that every Israelite was ordered to sing it after a victory gained over an enemy.

The eve of each Saturday the convicts came from the other barracks to ours, expressly to see Isaiah Fomitch celebrating his Sabbath. He was so vain, so innocently conceited, that this general curiosity flattered him immensely. He covered the table in his little corner[Pg 137] with a pedantic air of importance, opened a book, lighted two candles, muttered some mysterious words, and clothed himself in a kind of chasuble, striped, and with sleeves, which he preserved carefully at the bottom of his trunk. He fastened to his hands leather bracelets, and finally attached to his forehead, by means of a ribbon, a little box, which made it seem as if a horn were starting from his head. He then began to pray. He read in a drawling voice, cried out, spat, and threw himself about with wild and comic gestures. All this was prescribed by the ceremonies of his religion. There was nothing laughable or strange in it, except the airs which Isaiah Fomitch gave himself before us in performing his ceremonies. Then he suddenly covered his head with both hands, and began to read with many sobs. His tears increased, and in his grief he almost lay down upon the book his head with the ark upon it, howling as he did so; but suddenly in the midst of his despondent sobs he burst into a laugh, and recited with a nasal twang a hymn of triumph, as if he were overcome by an excess of happiness.

“Impossible to understand it,” the convicts would sometimes say to one another. One day I asked Isaiah Fomitch what these sobs signified, and why he passed so suddenly from despair to triumphant happiness. Isaiah Fomitch was very pleased when I asked him these questions. He explained to me directly that the sobs and tears were provoked by the loss of Jerusalem, and that the law ordered the pious Jew to groan and strike his breast; but at the moment of his most acute grief he was suddenly to remember that a prophecy had foretold the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, and he was then to manifest overflowing joy, to sing, to laugh, and to recite his prayers with an expression of happiness in his voice and on his countenance. This sudden passage from one phase of feeling to another delighted Isaiah Fomitch, and he explained to me this ingenious prescription of his faith with the greatest satisfaction.

One evening, in the midst of his prayers, the Major entered, followed by the officer of the guard and an escort of soldiers. All the prisoners got immediately[Pg 138] into line before their camp-bedsteads. Isaiah Fomitch alone continued to shriek and gesticulate. He knew that his worship was authorised, and that no one could interrupt

him, so that in howling in the presence of the Major he ran no risk. It pleased him to throw himself about beneath the eyes of the chief.

The Major approached within a few steps. Isaiah Fomitch turned his back to the table, and just in front of the officer began to sing his hymn of triumph, gesticulating and drawling out certain syllables. When he came to the part where he had to assume an expression of extreme happiness, he did so by blinking with his eyes, at the same time laughing and nodding his head in the direction of the Major. The latter was at first much astonished; then he burst into a laugh, called out, "Idiot!" and went away, while the Jew still continued to shriek. An hour later, when he had finished, I asked him what he would have done if the Major had been wicked enough and foolish enough to lose his temper.

"What Major?"

"What Major! Did you not see him? He was only two steps from you, and was looking at you all the time." But Isaiah Fomitch assured me as seriously as possible that he had not seen the Major, for while he was saying his prayers he was in such a state of ecstasy that he neither saw nor heard anything that was taking place around him.

I can see Isaiah Fomitch wandering about on Saturday throughout the prison, endeavouring to do nothing, as the law prescribes to every Jew. What improbable anecdotes he told me! Every time he returned from the synagogue he always brought me some news of St. Petersburg, and the most absurd rumours imaginable from his fellow Jews of the town, who themselves had received them at first hand. But I have already spoken too much of Isaiah Fomitch.

In the whole town there were only two public baths. The first, kept by a Jew, was divided into compartments, for which one paid fifty kopecks. It was frequented by the aristocracy of the town.

[Pg 139]

The other bath, old, dirty, and close, was destined for the people. It was there that the convicts were taken. The air was cold and clear. The prisoners were delighted to get out of the fortress and have a walk through the town. During the walk their laughter and jokes never ceased. A platoon of soldiers, with muskets loaded, accompanied us. It was quite a sight for the town's-people. When we had reached our destination, the bath was so small that it did not permit us all to enter at once. We were divided into two bands, one of which waited in the cold room while the other one bathed in the hot one. Even then, so narrow was the room that it was difficult for us to understand how half of the convicts could stand together in it.

Petroff kept close to me. He remained by my side without my having begged him to do so, and offered to rub me down. Baklouchin, a convict of the special section, offered me at the same time his services. I recollect this prisoner, who was called the "Sapper," as the gayest and most agreeable of all my companions. We had become intimate friends. Petroff helped me to undress, because I was generally a long time getting my things off, not being yet accustomed to the operation; and it was almost as cold in the dressing-room as outside the doors.

It is very difficult for a convict who is still a novice to get his things off, for he must know how to undo the leather straps which fasten on the chains. These leather straps are buckled over the shirt, just beneath the ring which encloses the leg. One pair of straps costs sixty kopecks, and each convict is obliged to get himself a pair, for it would be impossible to walk without their assistance. The ring does not enclose the leg too tightly. One can pass the finger between the iron and the flesh; but the ring rubs against the calf, so that in a single day the convict who walks without leather straps, gets his skin broken.

To take off the straps presents no difficulty. It is not the same with the clothes. To get the trousers off is in itself a prodigious operation, and the same may be [Pg 140] said of the shirt whenever it has to be changed. The first who gave us lessons in this art was Koreneff, a former chief of brigands, condemned to be chained up for five years. The convicts are very skilful at the work, and do it readily.

I gave a few kopecks to Petroff to buy soap and a bunch of the twigs with which one rubs oneself in the bath. Bits of soap were given to the convicts, but they were not larger than pieces of two kopecks. The soap was sold in the dressing-room, as well as mead, cakes of white flour, and boiling water; for each convict received but one pailful, according to the agreement made between the proprietor of the bath and the administration of the prison. The convicts who wished to make themselves thoroughly clean, could for two kopecks buy another pailful, which the proprietor handed to them through a window pierced in the wall for that purpose. As soon as I was undressed, Petroff took me by the arm and observed to me that I should find it difficult to walk with my chains.

"Drag them up on to your calves," he said to me, holding me by the arms at the same time, as if I were an old man. I was ashamed at his care, and assured him that I could walk well enough by myself, but he did not believe me. He paid me the same attention that one gives to an awkward child. Petroff was not a servant in any sense of the word. If I had offended him, he would have known how to deal with me. I had promised him

nothing for his assistance, nor had he asked me for anything. What inspired him with so much solicitude for me?

Represent to yourself a room of twelve feet long by as many broad, in which a hundred men are all crowded together, or at least eighty, for we were in all two hundred divided into two sections. The steam blinded us; the sweat, the dirt, the want of space, were such that we did not know where to put a foot down. I was frightened and wished to go out. Petroff hastened to reassure me. With great trouble we succeeded in raising ourselves on to the benches, by passing over the [Pg 141] heads of the convicts, whom we begged to bend down, in order to let us pass; but all the benches were already occupied. Petroff informed me that I must buy a place, and at once entered into negotiations with the convict who was near the window. For a kopeck this man consented to cede me his place. After receiving the money, which Petroff held tight in his hand, and which he had prudently provided himself with beforehand, the man crept just beneath me into a dark and dirty corner. There was there, at least, half an inch of filth; even the places above the benches were occupied, the convicts swarmed everywhere. As for the floor there was not a place as big as the palm of the hand which was not occupied by the convicts. They sent the water in spouts out of their pails. Those who were standing up washed themselves pail in hand, and the dirty water ran all down their body to fall on the shaved heads of those who were sitting down. On the upper bench, and the steps which led to it, were heaped together other convicts who washed themselves more thoroughly, but these were in small number. The populace does not care to wash with soap and water, it prefers stewing in a horrible manner, and then inundating itself with cold water. That is how the common people take their bath. On the floor could be seen fifty bundles of rods rising and falling at the same time, the holders were whipping themselves into a state of intoxication. The steam became thicker and thicker every minute, so that what one now felt was not a warm but a burning sensation, as from boiling pitch. The convicts shouted and howled to the accompaniment of the hundred chains shaking on the floor. Those who wished to pass from one place to another got their chains mixed up with those of their neighbours, and knocked against the heads of the men who were lower down than they. Then there were volleys of oaths as those who fell dragged down the ones whose chains had become entangled in theirs. They were all in a state of intoxication of wild exultation. Cries and shrieks were heard on all sides. There was much crowding and crushing at the window of the [Pg 142] dressing-room through which the hot water was delivered, and much of it got spilt over the heads of those who were seated on the floor before it arrived at its destination. We seemed to be fully at liberty; and yet from time to time, behind the window of the dressing-room, or

through the open door, could be seen the moustached face of a soldier, with his musket at his feet, watching that no serious disorder took place.

The shaved heads of the convicts, and their red bodies, which the steam made the colour of blood, seemed more monstrous than ever. On their backs, made scarlet by the steam, stood out in striking relief the scars left by the whips and the rods, made long before, but so thoroughly that the flesh seemed to have been quite recently torn. Strange scars. A shudder passed through me at the mere sight of them. Again the volume of steam increased, and the bath-room was now covered with a thick, burning cloud, covering agitation and cries. From this cloud stood out torn backs, shaved heads; and, to complete the picture, Isaiah Fomitch howling with joy on the highest of the benches. He was saturating himself with steam. Any other man would have fainted away, but no temperature is too high for him; he engages the services of a rubber for a kopeck, but after a few moments the latter is unable to continue, throws away his bunch of twigs, and runs to inundate himself with cold water. Isaiah Fomitch does not lose courage, he runs to hire a second rubber, then a third; on these occasions he thinks nothing of expense, and changes his rubber four or five times. "He stews well, the gallant Isaiah Fomitch," cry the convicts from below. The Jew feels that he goes beyond all the others, he has beaten them; he triumphs with his hoarse falsetto voice, and sings out his favourite air which rises above the general hubbub. It seemed to me that if ever we met in hell we should be reminded of the place where we then were. I could not resist a wish to communicate this idea to Petroff. He looked all round him, but made no answer.

I wished to buy a place for him on the bench by my[Pg 143] side; but he sat down at my feet and declared that he felt quite at his ease. Baklouchin meanwhile bought us some hot water which he would bring to us as soon as we wanted it. Petroff offered to clean me from head to foot, and he begged me to go through the preliminary stewing process. I could not make up my mind to it. At last he rubbed me all over with soap. I wished to make him understand that I could wash myself, but it was no use contradicting him and I gave myself up to him.

When he had done with me he took me back to the dressing-room, holding me up, and telling me at each step to take care, as if I had been made of porcelain. He helped me to put on my clothes, and when he had finished his kindly work he rushed back to the bath to have a thorough stewing.

When we got back to the barracks I offered him a glass of tea, which he did not refuse. He drank it and thanked me. I wished to go to the expense of a glass of vodka in his honour, and I succeeded in getting it on the spot. Petroff was exceedingly pleased. He

swallowed his vodka with a murmur of satisfaction, declared that I had restored him to life, and then suddenly rushed to the kitchen, as if the people who were talking there could not decide anything important without him.

Now another man came up for a talk. This was Baklouchin, of whom I have already spoken, and whom I had also invited to take tea.

I never knew a man of a more agreeable disposition than Baklouchin. It must be admitted that he never forgave a wrong, and that he often got into quarrels. He could not, above all, endure people interfering with his affairs. He knew, in a word, how to take care of himself; but his quarrels never lasted long, and I believe that all the convicts liked him. Wherever he went he was well received. Even in the town he was looked upon as the most amusing man in the world. He was a man of lofty stature, thirty years old, with a frank, determined countenance, and rather good-looking, with his tuft of hair on his chin. He possessed the art of changing his face in such a comic manner by imitating[Pg 144] the first person he happened to see, that the people around him were constantly in a roar. He was a professed joker, but he never allowed himself to be slighted by those who did not enjoy his fun. Accordingly, no one spoke disparagingly of him. He was full of life and fire. He made my acquaintance at the very beginning of my imprisonment, and related to me his military career, when he was a sapper in the Engineers, where he had been placed as a favour by people of influence. He put a number of questions to me about St. Petersburg; he even read books when he came to take tea with me. He amused the whole company by relating how roughly Lieutenant K—— had that morning handled the Major. He told me, moreover, with a satisfied air, as he took his seat by my side, that we should probably have a theatrical representation in the prison. The convicts proposed to get up a play during the Christmas holidays. The necessary actors were found, and, little by little, the scenery was prepared. Some persons in the town had promised to lend women's clothes for the performance. Some hopes were even entertained of obtaining, through the medium of an officer's servant, a uniform with epaulettes, provided only the Major did not take it into his head to forbid the performance, as he had done the previous year. He was at that time in ill-humour through having lost at cards, and he had been annoyed at something that had taken place in the prison. Accordingly, in a fit of ill-humour, he had forbidden the performance. It was possible, however, that this year he would not prevent it. Baklouchin was in a state of exultation. It could be seen that he would be one of the principal supporters of the meditated theatre. I made up my mind to be present at the performance. The ingenuous joy which Baklouchin manifested in speaking of the undertaking was quite touching. From whispering, we gradually got to talk of the matter quite openly. He told me, among other things, that he had not served

at St. Petersburg alone. He had been sent to R—— with the rank of non-commissioned officer in a garrison battalion.

[Pg 145]

“From there they sent me on here,” added Baklouchin.

“And why?” I asked him.

“Why? You would never guess, Alexander Petrovitch. Because I was in love.”

“Come now. A man is not exiled for that,” I said, with a laugh.

“I should have added,” continued Baklouchin, “that it made me kill a German with a pistol-shot. Was it worth while to send me to hard labour for killing a German? Only think.”

“How did it happen? Tell me the story. It must be a strange one.”

“An amusing story indeed, Alexander Petrovitch.”

“So much the better. Tell me.”

“You wish me to do so? Well, then, listen.”

And he told me the story of his murder. It was not “amusing,” but it was indeed strange.

“This is how it happened,” began Baklouchin; “I had been sent to Riga, a fine, handsome city, which has only one fault, there are too many Germans there. I was still a young man, and I had a good character with my officers. I wore my cap cocked on the side of my head, and passed my time in the most agreeable manner. I made love to the German girls. One of them, named Luisa, pleased me very much. She and her aunt were getters-up of fine linen. The old woman was a true caricature; but she had money. First of all I merely passed under the young girl’s windows; but I soon made her acquaintance. Luisa spoke Russian well enough, though with a slight accent. She was charming. I never saw any one like her. I was most pressing in my advances; but she only replied that she would preserve her innocence, that as a wife she might prove worthy of me. She was an affectionate, smiling girl, and wonderfully neat. In fact, I assure you, I never saw any one like her. She herself had suggested that I should marry her, and how was I not to marry her? Suddenly Luisa did not come to her appointment. This happened once, then twice, then a third time. I [Pg 146] sent her a letter, but she did not reply. ‘What is to be done?’ I said to myself. If she had been deceiving me she could easily have taken me in. She could have answered my letter and come all the

same to the appointment; but she was incapable of falsehood. She had simply broken off with me. 'This is a trick of the aunt,' I said to myself. I was afraid to go to her house.

"Even though she was aware of our engagement, we acted as if she were ignorant of it. I wrote a fine letter in which I said to Luisa, 'If you don't come, I will come to your aunt's for you.' She was afraid and came. Then she began to weep, and told me that a German named Schultz, a distant relation of theirs, a clockmaker by trade, and of a certain age, but rich, had shown a wish to marry her—in order to make her happy, as he said, and that he himself might not remain without a wife in his old age. He had loved her a long time, so she told me, and had been nourishing this idea for years, but he had kept it a secret, and had never ventured to speak out. 'You see, Sasha,' she said to me, 'that it is a question of my happiness; for he is rich, and would you prevent my happiness?' I looked her in the face, she wept, embraced me, clasped me in her arms.

"Well, she is quite right,' I said to myself, 'what good is there in marrying a soldier—even a non-commissioned officer? Come, farewell, Luisa. God protect you. I have no right to prevent your happiness.'

"And what sort of a man is he? Is he good-looking?"

"No, he is old, and he has such a long nose.'

"She here burst into a fit of laughter. I left her. 'It was my destiny,' I said to myself. The next day I passed by Schultz' shop (she had told me where he lived). I looked through the window and saw a German, who was arranging a watch, forty-five years of age, an aquiline nose, swollen eyes, a dress-coat with a very high collar. I spat with contempt as I looked at him. At that moment I was ready to break the shop windows, but 'What is the use of it?' I said to myself; 'there is nothing more to be done: it is over, all over.' I got back to the barracks as [Pg 147] the night was falling, and stretched myself out on my bed, and—will you believe it, Alexander Petrovitch?—began to sob—yes, to sob. One day passed, then a second, then a third. I saw Luisa no more. I had learned, however, from an old woman (she was also a washerwoman, and the girl I loved used sometimes to visit her), that this German knew of our relations, and that for that reason he had made up his mind to marry her as soon as possible, otherwise he would have waited two years longer. He had made Luisa swear that she would see me no more. It appeared that on account of me he had refused to loosen his purse-strings, and kept Luisa and her aunt very close. Perhaps he would yet change his idea, for he was not very resolute. The old woman told me that he had invited them to take coffee with him the next day, a Sunday, and that another relation, a former shopkeeper, now very poor, and an assistant in some liquor store, would also come. When I found that the business was to be settled on Sunday, I was so furious that I

could not recover my cold blood, and the following day I did nothing but reflect. I believe I could have devoured that German. On Sunday morning I had not come to any decision. As soon as the service was over I ran out, got into my great-coat, and went to the house of this German. I thought I should find them all there. Why I went to the German, and what I meant to say to him, I did not know myself.

“I slipped a pistol into my pocket to be ready for everything; a little pistol which was not worth a curse, with an old-fashioned lock—a thing I had used when I was a boy, and which was really fit for nothing. I loaded it, however, because I thought they would try to kick me out, and that the German would insult me, in which case I would pull out my pistol to frighten them all. I arrived. There was no one on the staircase; they were all in the work-room. No servant. The one girl who waited upon them was absent. I crossed the shop and saw that the door was closed—an old door fastened from the inside. My heart beat; I stopped and listened. They were speaking German. I broke open[Pg 148] the door with a kick. I looked round. The table was laid; there was a large coffee-pot on it, with a spirit lamp underneath, and a plate of biscuits. On a tray there was a small decanter of brandy, herrings, sausages, and a bottle of some wine. Luisa and her aunt, both in their Sunday best, were seated on a sofa. Opposite them, the German was exhibiting himself on a chair, got up like a bridegroom, and in his coat with the high collar, and with his hair carefully combed. On the other side, there was another German, old, fat, and gray. He was taking no part in the conversation. When I entered, Luisa turned very pale. The aunt sprang up with a bound and sat down again. The German became angry. What a rage he was in! He got up, and walking towards me, said:

“‘What do you want?’

“‘I should have lost my self-possession if anger had not supported me.

“‘What do I want? Is this the way to receive a guest? Why do you not offer him something to drink? I have come to pay you a visit.’

“The German reflected a moment, and then said, ‘Sit down.’

“‘I sat down.

“‘Here is some vodka. Help yourself, I beg.’

“‘And let it be good,’ I cried, getting more and more into a rage.

“‘It is good.’

“I was enraged to see him looking at me from top to toe. The most frightful part of it was, that Luisa was looking on. I took a drink and said to him:

“‘Look here, German, what business have you to speak rudely to me? Let us be better acquainted. I have come to see you as friends.’

“‘I cannot be your friend,’ he replied. ‘You are a private soldier.’

“Then I lost all self-command.

“‘Oh, you German! You sausage-seller! You know how much you are in my power. Look here; do you wish me to break your head with this pistol?’

“I drew out my pistol, got up, and struck him on the [Pg 149] forehead. The women were more dead than alive; they were afraid to breathe. The eldest of the two men, quite white, was trembling like a leaf.

“The German seemed much astonished. But he soon recovered himself.

“‘I am not afraid of you,’ he said, ‘and I beg of you, as a well-bred man, to put an end to this pleasantry. I am not afraid of you!’

“‘You are afraid! You dare not move while this pistol is presented at you.’

“‘You dare not do such a thing!’ he cried.

“‘And why should I not dare?’

“‘Because you would be severely punished.’

“May the devil take that idiot of a German! If he had not urged me on, he would have been alive now.

“‘So you think I dare not?’

“‘No.’

“‘I dare not, you think?’

“‘You would not dare!’

“‘Wouldn’t I, sausage-maker?’ I fired the pistol, and down he sank on his chair. The others uttered shrieks. I put back my pistol in my pocket, and when I returned to the fortress, threw it among some weeds near the principal entrance.

“Inside the barracks I laid on my bed, and said to myself, ‘I shall be taken away soon.’ One hour passed, then another, but I was not arrested.

“Towards evening I felt so sad, I went out at all hazards to see Luisa; I passed before the house of the clockmaker’s. There were a number of people there, including the police. I ran on to the old woman’s and said:

“‘Call Luisa!’

“I had only a moment to wait. She came immediately, and threw herself on my neck in tears.

“‘It is my fault,’ she said. ‘I should not have listened to my aunt.’

“She then told me that her aunt, immediately after the scene, had gone back home. She was in such a fright that she fell and did not speak a word; she had uttered[Pg 150] nothing. On the contrary, she ordered her niece to be as silent as herself.

“‘No one has seen her since,’ said Luisa.

“The clockmaker had previously sent his servant away, for he was afraid of her. She was jealous, and would have scratched his eyes out had she known that he wished to get married.

“There were no workmen in the house, he had sent them all away; he had himself prepared the coffee and collation. As for the relation, who had scarcely spoken a word all his life, he took his hat, and, without opening his mouth, went away.

“‘He is quite sure to be silent,’ added Luisa.

“So, indeed, he was. For two weeks no one arrested me nor suspected me the least in the world.

“You need not believe me unless you choose, Alexander Petrovitch.

“These two weeks were the happiest in my life. I saw Luisa every day. And how much she had become attached to me!

“She said to me through her tears: ‘If you are exiled, I will go with you. I will leave everything to follow you.’

“I thought of making away with myself, so much had she moved me; but after two weeks I was arrested. The old man and the aunt had agreed to denounce me.”

“But,” I interrupted, “Baklouchin, for that they would only have given you from ten to twelve years’ hard labour, and in the civil section; yet you are in the special section. How does that happen?”

“That is another affair,” said Baklouchin. “When I was taken before the Council of War, the captain appointed to conduct the case began by insulting me, and calling me names before the Tribunal. I could not stand it, and shouted out to him: ‘Why do you insult me? Don’t you see, you scoundrel! that you are only looking at yourself in the glass?’

“This brought a new charge against me. I was tried a second time, and for the two things was [Pg 151]condemned to four thousand strokes, and to the special section. When I was taken out to receive my punishment in the *Green Street*, the captain was at the same time sent away. He had been degraded from his rank, and was despatched to the Caucasus as a private soldier. Good-bye, Alexander Petrovitch. Don’t fail to come to our performance.”

[Pg 152]

CHAPTER XI. THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS

The holidays were approaching. On the eve of the great day the convicts scarcely ever went to work. Those who had been assigned to the sewing workshops, and a few others, went to work as usual; but they went back almost immediately to the convict prison, separately, or in parties. After dinner no one worked. From the early morning the greater part of the convicts were occupied with their own affairs, and not with those of the administration. Some were making arrangements for bringing in spirits, while others were seeking permission to see their friends, or to collect small accounts due to them for the work they had already executed. Baklouchin, and the convicts who were to take part in the performance, were endeavouring to persuade some of their acquaintances, nearly all officers’ servants, to procure for them the necessary costumes. Some of them came and went with a business-like air, solely because others were really occupied. They had no money to receive, and yet seemed to expect a payment. Every one, in short, seemed to be looking for a change of some kind. Towards evening the old soldiers, who [Pg 153] executed the convicts’ commissions, brought them all kinds of victuals—meat, sucking-pigs, and geese. Many prisoners, even the most simple and most economical, after saving up their kopecks throughout the year, thought they ought to spend some of them that day, so as to celebrate Christmas Eve in a worthy manner. The day afterwards was for the convicts a still greater festival, one to which they had a right, as it was recognised by law. The prisoners could not be sent to work that day. There were not three days like it in all the year.

And, moreover, what recollections must have been agitating the souls of those reprobates at the approach of such a solemn day! The common people from their childhood kept the great festival in their memory. They must have remembered with anguish and torments these days which, work being laid aside, are passed in the bosom of the family. The respect of the convicts for that day had something imposing about it. The drunkards were not at all numerous; nearly every one was serious, and, so to say, preoccupied, though they had for the most part nothing to do. Even those who feasted most preserved a serious air. Laughter seemed to be forbidden. A sort of intolerant susceptibility reigned throughout the prison; and if any one interfered with the general repose, even involuntarily, he was soon put in his proper place, with cries and oaths. He was condemned as though he had been wanting in respect to the festival itself.

This disposition of the convicts was remarkable, and even touching. Besides the innate veneration they have for this great day, they foresee that in observing the festival they are in communion with the rest of the world; that they are not altogether reprobates lost and cast off by society. The usual rejoicings took place in the convict prison as well as outside. They felt all that. I saw it, and understood it myself.

Akim Akimitch had made great preparations for the festival. He had no family recollections, being an[Pg 154] orphan, born in a strange house, and put into the army at the age of fifteen. He could never have experienced any great joys, having always lived regularly and uniformly in the fear of infringing the rules imposed upon him, nor was he very religious; for his acquired formality had stifled in him all human feeling, all passions and likings, good or bad. He accordingly prepared to keep Christmas without exciting himself about it. He was saddened by no painful, useless recollection. He did everything with the punctuality imposed upon him in the execution of his duties, and in order once for all to get through the ceremony in a becoming manner. Moreover, he did not care to reflect upon the importance of the day, had never troubled his brain about it, even while he was executing his prescribed duties with religious minuteness. If he had been ordered the day following to do contrary to what he had done the evening before he would have done it with equal submission. Once in life, once, and once only, he had wished to act by his own impulse—and he had been sent to hard labour for it.

This lesson had not been lost upon him, although it was written that he was never to understand his fault. He had yet become impressed with this salutary moral principle: never to reason in any matter because his mind was not equal to the task of judging. Blindly devoted to ceremonies, he looked with respect at the sucking-pig which he had stuffed with millet-seed, and which he had roasted himself (for he had some

culinary skill), just as if it had not been an ordinary sucking-pig which could have been bought and roasted at any time, but a particular kind of animal born specially for Christmas Day. Perhaps he had been accustomed from his tender infancy to see that day a sucking-pig on the table, and he may have concluded that a sucking-pig was indispensable for the proper celebration of the festival. I am certain that if by ill-luck he had not eaten this particular kind of meat on that day, he would have been troubled with remorse all his life for not[Pg 155] having done his duty. Until Christmas morning he wore his old vest and his old trousers, which had long been threadbare. I then learned that he kept carefully in his box his new clothes which had been given to him four months before, and that he had not put them on once, in order that he might wear them for the first time on Christmas Day. He did so. The evening before he took his new clothes out of his trunk, unfolded, examined them, cleaned them, blew on them to remove the dust, and when he was convinced that they were perfect, probably tried them on. The dress became him perfectly; all the different garments suited one another. The waistcoat buttoned up to the neck, the collar, straight and stiff like cardboard, kept his chin in its proper place. There was a military cut about the dress; and Akim Akimitch, as he wore it, smiled with satisfaction, turning himself round and round, not without swagger, before a little mirror adorned with a gilt border.

One of the waistcoat-buttons alone seemed out of place; Akim Akimitch remarked it, and at once set it right. He tried on the vest again and found it irreproachable. Then he folded up his things as before, and with a satisfied mind locked them up in his box until the next day. His skull was sufficiently shaved; but, after careful examination, Akim Akimitch came to the conclusion that it was not in good condition, his hair had imperceptibly sprung up. He accordingly went immediately to the "Major" to be properly shaved according to the rules. In reality no one would have dreamed of looking at him next day, but he was acting conscientiously in order to fulfil all his duties. This care lest the smallest button, the least thread of an epaulette, the slightest string of a tassel should go wrong, was engraved in his mind as an imperious duty, and in his heart as the image of the most perfect order that could possibly be attained. As one of the "old hands" in the barracks, he saw that hay was brought and strewed about on the floor; the same thing was done in the other[Pg 156] barracks. I do not know why, but hay was always strewed on the ground at Christmas time.