[Pg i]

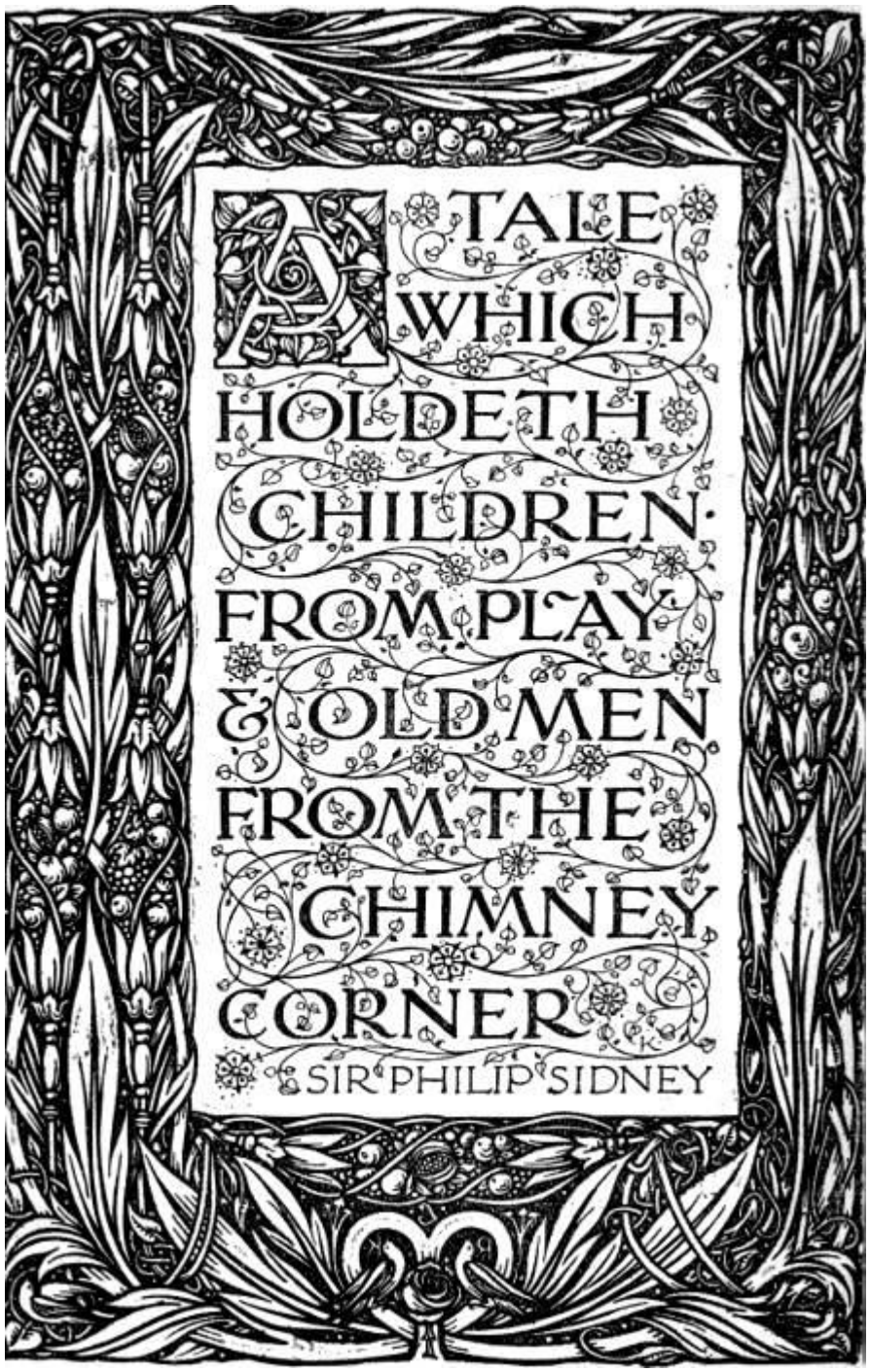
EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY
EDITED BY ERNEST RHYS

FICTION

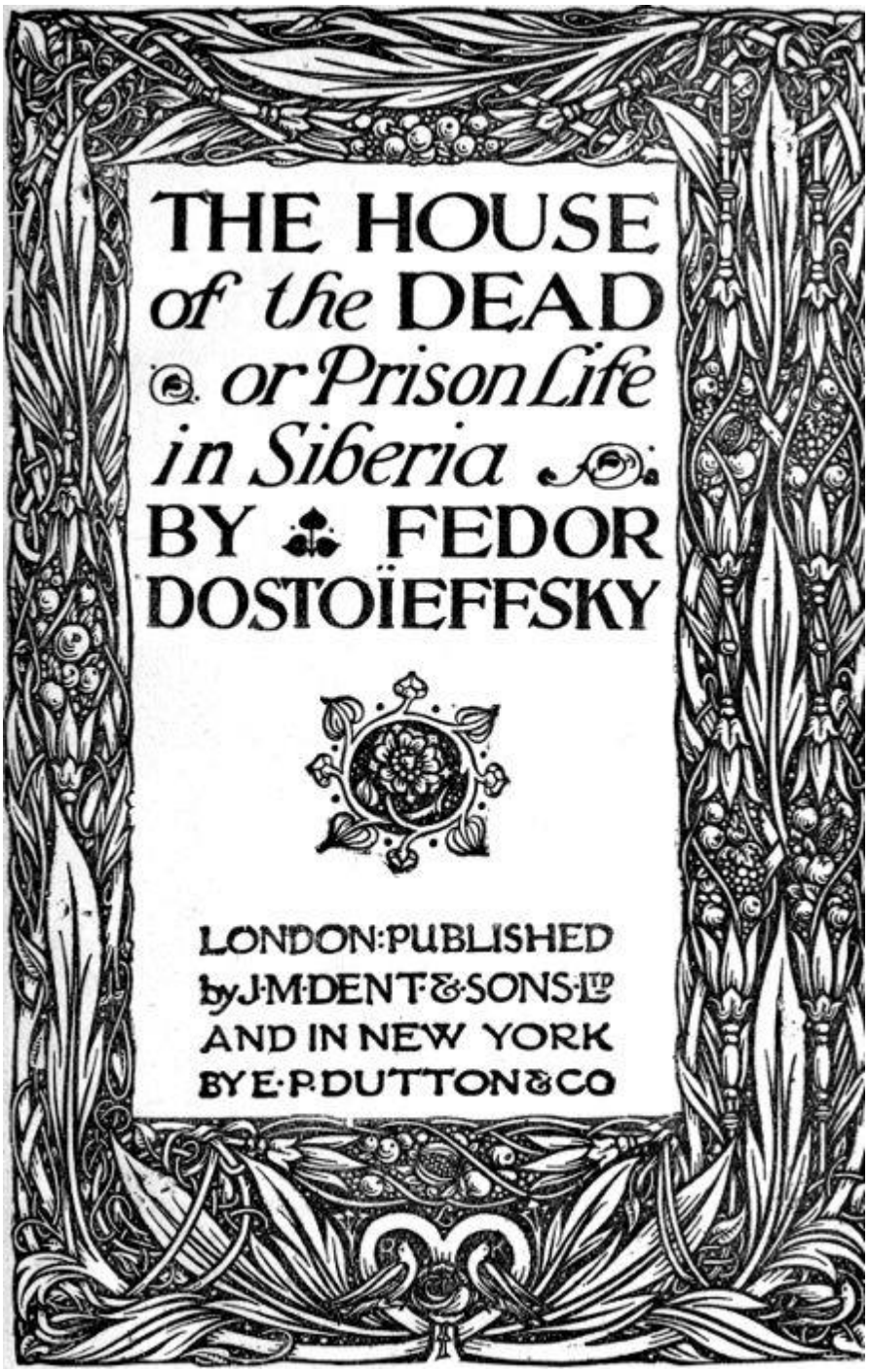
THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD BYFEDOR DOSTOÏEFFSKY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY JULIUS BRAMONT

[Pg ii]


A TALE
WHICH
HOLDETH
CHILDREN
FROM PLAY
& OLD MEN
FROM THE
CHIMNEY
CORNER
SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

[Pg v]



[Pg vi]

First Issue of this Edition 1911
Reprinted 1914

[Pg vii]

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 Sclav, 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

PART II

[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[Pg 9] morose

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 remarrying, 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 drink—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 Irtitch 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 Irtitch. 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-consoled 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 pleasantry was 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 necessaries 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.