[Pg 80]

CHAPTER VI. THE FIRST MONTH

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

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

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

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

After a time the affability and good-will shown to me by certain convicts gave me a little courage, and restored my spirits. Most friendly among them was Akim Akimitch. I soon noticed some kind, good-natured faces in the dark and hateful crowd. Bad people are to be found everywhere, but even among the worst there may be something good, I began to think, by way of consolation. Who knows? These persons are perhaps not worse than others who are free. While making these reflections I felt some doubts, and, nevertheless, how much I was in the right!

The convict Suchiloff, for example; a man whose acquaintance I did not make until long afterwards, although he was near me during nearly the whole period of my confinement. Whenever I speak of the convicts who are not worse than other men, my thoughts turn involuntarily to him. He acted as my servant, together with another prisoner named Osip, whom Akim Akimitch had recommended to me immediately after my arrival. For thirty kopecks a month this man agreed to cook me a separate

dinner, in case I should not be able to put up with the ordinary prison fare, and should be able to pay for my own food. Osip was one of the four cooks chosen by the prisoners in our two kitchens. I may observe that they were at liberty to refuse these duties, and give them up whenever they might think fit. The cooks were men from whom hard labour was not expected. They had to bake bread and prepare the cabbage soup. They were called “cook-maids,” not from contempt, for the men chosen were always the most intelligent, but merely in fun. The name given to them did not annoy them.

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

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

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

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

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

Suchiloff was a poor, meek fellow; all the courage seemed to have been beaten out of him, although he had in reality been born meek. For nothing in the world would he have raised his hand against any one in the prison. I always pitied him without knowing why. I could not look at him without feeling the deepest[Pg 84] compassion for him. If asked to explain this, I should find it impossible to do so. I could never get him to talk, and he never became animated, except when, to put an end to all attempts at conversation, I gave him something to do, or told him to go somewhere for me. I soon found that he loved to be ordered about. Neither tall nor short, neither ugly nor handsome, neither stupid nor intelligent, neither old nor young, it would be difficult to describe in any definite manner this man, except that his face was slightly pitted with the small-pox, and that he had fair hair. He belonged, as far as I could make out, to the same company as Sirotkin. The prisoners sometimes laughed at him because he had “exchanged.” During the march to Siberia he had exchanged for a red

shirt and a silver rouble. It was thought comical that he should have sold himself for such a small sum, to take the name of another prisoner in place of his own, and consequently to accept the other's sentence. Strange as it may appear it was nevertheless true. This custom, which had become traditional, and still existed at the time I was sent to Siberia, I, at first, refused to believe, but found afterwards that it really existed. This is how the exchange was effected:

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

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

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

Before the special section was abolished, many persons in the official world, even at St. Petersburg, were unaware even of its existence. It was in such a retired corner of one of the most distant regions of Siberia, that it was difficult to know anything about it. It was insignificant, moreover, from the number of persons belonging to it. In my time they numbered altogether only seventy. I have since met men who have served in Siberia, and know the country well, and yet have never heard of the "special section." In the rules and regulations there are only six lines about this institution. Attached to the convict prison of ---- is a special section reserved for the most dangerous criminals, while the severest labours are being prepared for them. The prisoners

themselves knew nothing of this special section. Did it exist temporarily or constantly? Neither Suchiloff nor any of the prisoners being sent out, not Mikhailoff himself could guess the significance of those two words. Mikhailoff, however, had his suspicion as to the true character of this section. He formed his opinion from the gravity of the crime for which he was made to march three or four thousand versts on foot. It was certain that he was not being sent to a place where he would be at his ease. Suchiloff was[Pg 86] to be a colonist. What could Mikhailoff desire better than that?

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

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

Suchiloff then finds that it is impossible to go back, that nothing can save him, and he accordingly agrees to all that is demanded of him. The bargain is then made known to all the convoy, and if denunciations are feared, the men looked upon as suspicious are entertained. What, moreover, does it matter to the others whether Mikhailoff or Suchiloff goes to the devil? They have had gratuitous drinks, they have been feasted for nothing, and the secret is kept by all.

[Pg 87]

At the next station the names are called. When Mikhailoff’s turn arrives, Suchiloff answers “present,” Mikhailoff replies “present” for Suchiloff, and the journey is continued. The matter is not now even talked about. At Tobolsk the prisoners are told

off. Mikhailoff will become a colonist, while Suchiloff is sent to the special section under a double escort. It would be useless now to cry out, to protest, for what proof could be given? How many years would it take to decide the affair, what benefit would the complainant derive? Where, moreover, are the witnesses? They would deny everything, even if they could be found.

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

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

[Pg 88]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arrived at St. Petersburg before he had finished his studies, after a quarrel with his parents, whom his life of debauchery had terrified, he had not shrunk for the sake of money from doing the work of an informer. He did not hesitate to sell the blood of ten men in order to satisfy his insatiable thirst for the grossest and most licentious pleasures. At last he became so completely perverted in the St. Petersburg taverns and houses of ill-fame, that he did not hesitate to take part in an affair which he knew to be conceived in madness—for he was not without intelligence. He was condemned to exile and ten years’ hard labour in Siberia. One might have thought that such a frightful blow would have shocked him, that it would have caused some reaction and brought about a crisis; but he accepted his new fate without the least confusion. It did not frighten him; all that he feared in it was the necessity of working, and of giving up for ever his habits of debauchery. The name of convict had no effect but to prepare

him for new acts of baseness, and more hideous villainies than any he had previously perpetrated.

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

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

During the first three days I did nothing but wander about the convict prison, when I did not remain stretched[Pg 91] out on my camp-bedstead. I entrusted to a prisoner of whom I was sure, the piece of linen which had been delivered to me by the administration, in order that he might make me some shirts. Always on the advice of Akim Akimitch, I got myself a folding mattress. It was in felt, covered with linen, as thin as a pancake, and very hard to any one who was not accustomed to it. Akim Akimitch promised to get me all the most essential things, and with his own hands made me a

blanket out of a piece of old cloth, cut and sewn together from all the old trousers and waistcoats which I had bought from various prisoners. The clothes delivered to them, when they have been worn the regulation time, become the property of the prisoners. They at once sell them, for however much worn an article of clothing may be, it always possesses a certain value. I was very much astonished by all this, above all at the outset, during my first relations with this world. I became as low as my companions, as much a convict as they. Their customs, their habits, their ideas influenced me thoroughly, and externally became my own, without affecting my inner self. I was astonished and confused as though I had never heard or suspected anything of the kind before, and yet I knew what to expect, or at least what had been told me. The thing itself, however, produced on me a different impression from the mere description of it. How could I suppose, for instance, that old rags possessed still some value? And, nevertheless, my blanket was made up entirely of tatters. It would be difficult to describe the cloth out of which the clothes of the convicts were made. It was like the thick, gray cloth manufactured for the soldiers, but as soon as it had been worn some little time it showed the threads and tore with abominable ease. The uniform ought to have lasted for a whole year, but it never went so long as that. The prisoner labours, carries heavy burdens, and the cloth naturally wears out, and gets into holes very quickly. Our sheepskins were intended to be worn for three years. During the whole of that time they served as outer[Pg 92] garments, blankets, and pillows, but they were very solid. Nevertheless, at the end of the third year, it was not rare to see them mended with ordinary linen. Although they were now very much worn, it was always possible to sell them at the rate of forty kopecks a piece, the best preserved ones even at the price of sixty kopecks, which was a great sum for the convict prison.

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

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

Nevertheless, I repeat that if the prisoners had been deprived of the opportunity of possessing something of their own, they would have lost their reason, or would have died like flies. They would have committed unheard-of crimes; some from wearisomeness or grief, the others, in order to get sooner punished, and, according to their expression, “have a change.” If the convict who has gained some kopecks by the sweat of his brow, who has embarked in perilous undertakings in order to conquer them, if he spends this money recklessly, with childish stupidity, that does not the

least in the world prove that he does not know its value, as might at first sight be thought. The convict is greedy for money, to the point of losing his reason, and, if he throws it away, he does so in order to procure what he places far above money—liberty, or at least a semblance of liberty.

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

[Pg 93]

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

Finally, they run some risk when they give themselves up to this boasting; in which again they find a semblance of life and liberty—the only thing they care for. Would not a millionaire with a rope round his neck give all his millions for one breath of air? A prisoner has lived quietly for several years in succession, his conduct has been so exemplary that he has been rewarded by special exemptions. Suddenly, to the great astonishment of his chiefs, this man becomes mutinous, plays the very devil, and does not recoil from a capital crime such as assassination, violation, etc. Every one is astounded at the cause of this unexpected explosion on the part of a man thought incapable of such a thing. It is the convulsive manifestation of his personality, an instinctive melancholia, an uncontrollable desire for self-assertion, all of which obscures his reason. It is a sort of epileptic attack, a spasm. A man buried alive who suddenly wakes up must strike in a similar manner against the lid of his coffin. He tries to rise up, to push it from him, although his reason must convince him of the uselessness of his efforts.

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

But how can this be managed?

[Pg 95]

CHAPTER VII. THE FIRST MONTH (*continued*)

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

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

In the town where we were then imprisoned lived a widow, Nastasia Ivanovna. Naturally, none of us were in direct relations with this woman. She had made it the object of her life to come to the assistance of all the exiles; but, above all, of us convicts. Had there been some misfortune in her family? Had some person dear to her undergone a punishment similar to ours? I do not know. In any case, she did for us whatever she could. It is true she could do very little, for she was very poor. But we felt when we were shut up in the convict prison that,[Pg 96] outside, we had a devoted friend. She often brought us news, which we were very glad to hear, for nothing of the kind reached us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was rather anxious during the first days to know what footing I should hold in the convict prison, and what rule of conduct I should follow with my companions. I felt and perfectly understood that the place being in every way new to me, I was walking in darkness, and it would be impossible for me to live for ten years in darkness. I decided to act frankly, according to the dictates of my conscience and my personal feeling. But I also knew that this decision might be very well in theory, and that I should, in

practice, be governed by unforeseen events. Accordingly, in addition to all the petty annoyances caused to me by my confinement in the convict prison, one terrible anguish laid hold of me and tormented me more and more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I remember the smallest particulars. We met, as we were walking along, a townsman with a long beard, who stopped and slipped his hand into his pocket. A prisoner left our party, took off his cap and received alms—to the extent of five kopecks—then came back hurriedly towards us. The townsman made the sign of the cross and went his way. The five kopecks were spent the same morning[Pg 100] in buying cakes of white bread which were shared equally among us. In my squad some were gloomy and taciturn, others indifferent and indolent. There were some who talked in an idle manner. One of these men was extremely gay, heaven knows why. He sang and

danced as we went along, shaking and ringing his chains at each step. This fat and corpulent convict was the very one who, on the very day of my arrival during the general washing, had a quarrel with one of his companions about the water, and had ventured to compare him to some sort of bird. His name was Scuratoff. He finished by shouting out a lively song of which I remember the burden:

They married me without my consent,

When I was at the mill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Pg 101]

“And what did you sell?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Scuratoff, had you a workshop?”

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

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

“And were you paid for them?”

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

The men around Scuratoff burst into a laugh.

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

“And was he satisfied?”

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

Akolina’s husband is in the court-yard.

There he waits.

Again he sang, and again he danced and leaped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Pg 105]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What can I do alone?”

“Set us tasks, Ivan Matveitch.”

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

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

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

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

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

what to say, to do, to advise. Just half-an-hour before the beating of the drum, the appointed task was executed, and the prisoners returned to the convict prison fatigued, but pleased to have gained half-an-hour from the working time fixed by the regulations.

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

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

“That is it,” added another.

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

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

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

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

It will now be understood that my first thought on[Pg 108] entering the convict prison was to ask myself how I should ever get on with such people. I foresaw that such incidents would often be repeated; but I resolved not to change my conduct in any way, whatever might be the result. I had decided to live simply and intelligently, without manifesting the least desire to approach my companions; but also without repelling them, if they themselves desired to approach me; in no way to fear their threats or their hatred; and to pretend as much as possible not to be affected by them. Such was my plan. I saw from the first that they would despise me, if I adopted any other course.

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

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

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

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

[Pg 110]

CHAPTER VIII. NEW ACQUAINTANCES—PETROFF

Time went on, and little by little I accustomed myself to my new life. The scenes I had daily before me no longer afflicted me so much. In a word, the convict prison, its inhabitants, and its manners, left me indifferent. To get reconciled to this life was impossible, but I had to accept it as an inevitable fact. I had driven entirely away from me all the anxiety by which I had at first been troubled. I no longer wandered through the convict prison like a lost soul, and no longer allowed myself to be subjugated by my anxiety. The wild curiosity of the convicts had had its edge taken off, and I was no longer looked upon with that affectation or insolence previously displayed. They had become indifferent to me, and I was very glad of it. I began to feel at home in the barracks. I knew where to go and sleep at night; gradually I became accustomed to things the very idea of which would formerly have been repugnant to me. I went every week regularly to have my head shaved. We were called every Saturday one after another to the guard-house. The regimental barbers lathered our skulls with cold water and soap, and scraped us afterwards with their saw-like razors.

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

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

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

From the first day of my imprisonment I began to dream of my liberation. My favourite occupation was to count thousands and thousands of times in a thousand different manners the number of days that I should have to pass in prison. I thought of that only, and every one deprived of his liberty for a fixed time does the same; of that I am certain. I cannot say that all the convicts had the same degree of hopefulness, but their sanguine character often astonished me. The hopefulness of a prisoner differs essentially from that of a free man. The[Pg 112] latter may desire an amelioration in his position, or a realisation of some enterprise which he has undertaken, but meanwhile he lives, he acts; he is swept away in the whirlwind of real life. Nothing of the kind takes place in the case of the convict for life. He lives also in a way, but not being condemned to a fixed number of years, he takes a vaguer view of his situation than the one who is imprisoned for a definite term. The man condemned for a comparatively short period feels that he is not at home; he looks upon himself, so to say, as on a visit; he regards the twenty years of his punishment as two years at most; he is sure that at fifty, when he has finished his sentence, he will be as young and as lively as at thirty-five. "We have time before us," he thinks, and he strives obstinately to dispel discouraging thoughts. Even a man sentenced for life thinks that some day an order

may arrive from St. Petersburg—"Transport such a one to the mines at Nertchinsk and fix a term for his detention." It would be famous, first because it takes six months to get to Nertchinsk, and the life on the road is a hundred times preferable to the convict prison. He would finish his time at Nertchinsk, and then—more than one gray-haired old man speculates in this way.

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

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

I saw one of my comrades, to my terror, melt away like a piece of wax; and yet, when he was with me in the convict prison, he was young, handsome, and vigorous; when he left his health was ruined, and his legs could no longer support him. His chest, too, was oppressed by asthma.

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

My love for work exposed me in the first place to the contempt and bitter laughter of my comrades; but I paid no attention to them, and went away with a light heart wherever I was sent. Sometimes, for instance, to break and pound alabaster. This work, the first that was given to me, is easy. The engineers did their utmost to lighten the task-work of all the gentlemen; this was not indulgence, but simple justice. Would it not have been strange to require the same work from a labourer as from a man whose strength was less by half, and who had never worked with his hands? But we

were not “spoilt” in this way for ever, and we were only spared in secret, for we were severely watched. As real severe work was by no means rare, it often happened that the task given to us was beyond the strength of the gentlemen, who thus suffered twice as much as their comrades.

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

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

The day following, when the alabaster was entirely calcined, we turned it out. Each one filled a box of alabaster, which he afterwards crushed. This work was not disagreeable. The fragile alabaster soon became a white, brilliant dust. We brandished our heavy hammers, and dealt such formidable blows, that we admired our own strength. When we were tired we felt lighter, our cheeks were red, the blood circulated more rapidly in our veins. Almazoff would then look at us in a condescending manner, as he would have looked at little children. He smoked his pipe with an indulgent air, unable, however, to prevent himself from grumbling.[Pg 115] When he opened his mouth he was never otherwise, and he was the same with every one. At bottom I believe he was a kind man.

They gave me another kind of labour, which consisted in working the turning wheel. This wheel was high and heavy, and great efforts were necessary to make it go round, above all when the workmen from the workshop of the engineers used to make the balustrade of a staircase or the foot of a large table, which required almost the whole

trunk. No one man could have done the work alone. To two convicts, B—— (formerly gentleman) and myself, this work was given nearly always for several years, whenever there was anything to turn. B—— was weak, even still young, and somewhat sympathetic. He had been sent to prison a year before me, with two companions who were also of noble birth. One of them, an old man, used to pray day and night. The prisoners respected him greatly for it. He died in prison. The other one was quite a young man, fresh-coloured, strong, and courageous. He had carried his companion B—— for several hundred versts, seeing that at the end of the first half-stage he had fallen down from fatigue. Their friendship for one another was something to see.

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

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

We were sent in large bands, sometimes the whole of the convicts together. Each of us received a shovel and[Pg 116] had an appointed task to do, which it sometimes seemed impossible to get through. But we all went to work with a good-will. The light dust-like snow had not yet congealed, and was frozen only on the surface. We removed it in enormous shovelfuls, which were dispersed around us. In the air the snow-dust was as brilliant as diamonds. The shovel sank easily into the white glittering mass. The convicts did this work almost always with gaiety, the cold winter air and the exercise animated them. Every one felt himself in better spirits, laughter and jokes were heard, snowballs were exchanged, which after a time excited the indignation of the serious-minded convicts, who liked neither laughter nor gaiety. Accordingly these scenes finished almost always in showers of insults.

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

Nevertheless, during the first period of my stay, Petroff thought it his duty to come towards me nearly every day, or at least to stop me when, after work, I went for a stroll

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

It seemed to me, I know not why, that this man did not live in the same prison with me, but in another house in the town, far away. It appeared as though he had come to the convict prison by chance in order to pick up news, to inquire for me, in short, to see how I was getting on. He was always in a hurry, as though he had left some one for a moment who was waiting for him, or as if he had given up for a time some matter of business. And yet he never hurried himself. His look was strongly fixed, with a slight air of levity and irony. He had a habit of looking into the distance above the objects near him, as though he were endeavouring to distinguish something behind the person to whom he was talking. He always seemed absent-minded. I sometimes asked myself where he went when he left me, where could Petroff be so anxiously expected? He would simply go with a light step to one of the barracks or to the kitchen, and sit down to hear the conversation. He listened attentively, and joined in with animation; after which he would suddenly become silent. But whether he spoke or kept silent, one could always see on his countenance that he had business somewhere else, and that some one was waiting for him in the town, not very far away. The most astonishing thing was that he[Pg 118] never had any business—apart, of course, from the hard labour assigned to him. He knew no trade, and had scarcely ever any money. But that did not seem to grieve him. Why did he speak to me? His conversation was as strange as he himself was singular. When he noticed that I was walking alone at the back of the barracks he made a stand, and turned towards me. He walked very fast, and when

I turned he was suddenly on his heel. He approached me walking, but so quickly that he seemed to be going at a run.

“Good-morning.”

“Good-morning.”

“I am not disturbing you?”

“No.”

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

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

“Of course he is.”

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

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

“How will that be?”

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

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

“Yes.”

“What are they like?”

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

“And where do they live?”

[Pg 119]

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

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

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

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

“It is an invention, no doubt.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I never noticed that he was vain, or given to bragging like so many other convicts. He hardly ever quarrelled, but he was on friendly relations with scarcely any one, except,

perhaps, Sirotkin, and then only when he had need of him. I saw him, however, one day seriously irritated. Some one had offended him by refusing him something he wanted. He was disputing on the point with a tall convict, as vigorous as an athlete, named Vassili Antonoff, known for his nagging, spiteful disposition. The man, however, who belonged to the class of civil convicts, was far from being a coward. They shouted at one another for some time, and I thought the quarrel would finish like so many others of the same kind, by simple interchange of abuse. The affair took an unexpected turn. Petroff only suddenly turned pale, his lips trembled, and turned blue, his respiration became difficult. He got up, and slowly, very slowly, and with imperceptible steps—he liked to walk about with his feet naked—approached Antonoff; at once the noise of shouting gave place to a death-like silence—a fly passing[Pg 121] through the air might have been heard—every one anxiously awaited the event. Antonoff pointed to his adversary. His face was no longer human. I was unable to endure the scene, and I left the prison. I was certain that before I got to the staircase I should hear the shrieks of a man who was being murdered; but nothing of the kind took place. Before Petroff had succeeded in getting up to Antonoff, the latter threw him the object which had caused the quarrel—a miserable rag, a worn-out piece of lining.

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

A quarter of an hour later he was strolling about the barracks quite unoccupied, looking for some group whose conversation might possibly gratify his curiosity. Everything seemed to interest him, and yet he remained apparently indifferent to all he heard. He might have been compared to a workman, a vigorous workman, whom the work fears; but who, for the moment, has nothing to do, and condescends meanwhile to put out his strength in playing with his children. I did not understand why he remained in prison, why he did not escape. He would not have hesitated to get away if he had really desired to do so. Reason has no power on people like Petroff unless they are spurred on by will. When they desire something there are no obstacles in their way. I am certain that he would have been clever enough to escape, that he would have deceived every one, that he would have remained for a time without eating, hid in a forest, or in the bulrushes of the river; but the idea had evidently not occurred to him. I never noticed in him much judgment or good sense. People like him are born with one idea, which, without being aware of it, pursues them all their life.

They wander[Pg 122] until they meet with some object which apparently excites their desire, and then they do not mind risking their head. I was sometimes astonished that a man who had assassinated his Colonel for having been struck, would lie down without opposition beneath the rods, for he was always flogged when he was detected introducing spirits into the prison. Like all those who had no settled occupation, he smuggled in spirits; then, if caught, he would allow himself to be whipped as though he consented to the punishment, and confessed himself in the wrong. Otherwise they would have killed him rather than make him lie down. More than once I was astonished to see that he was robbing me in spite of his affection for me; but he did so from time to time. Thus he stole my Bible, which I had asked him to carry to its place. He had only a few steps to go; but on his way he met with a purchaser, to whom he sold the book, at once spending the money he had received on vodka. Probably he felt that day a violent desire for drink, and when he desired something it was necessary that he should have it. A man like Petroff will assassinate any one for twenty-five kopecks, simply to get himself a pint of vodka. On any other occasion he will disdain hundreds and thousands of roubles. He told me the same evening of the theft he had committed, but without showing the least sign of repentance or confusion, in a perfectly indifferent tone, as though he were speaking of an ordinary incident. I endeavoured to reprove him as he deserved, for I regretted the loss of my Bible. He listened to me without hesitation very calmly. He agreed that the Bible was a very useful book, and sincerely regretted that I had it no longer; but he was not for one moment sorry, though he had stolen it. He looked at me with such assurance that I gave up scolding him. He bore my reproaches because he thought I could not do otherwise than I was doing. He knew that he ought to be punished for such an action, and consequently thought I ought to abuse him for my own satisfaction, and to console myself for my loss. But in his inner heart he[Pg 123] considered that it was all nonsense, to which a serious man ought to be ashamed to descend. I believe even that he looked upon me as a child, an infant, who does not yet understand the simplest things in the world. If I spoke to him of anything, except books and matters of knowledge, he would answer me, but only from politeness, and in laconic phrases. I wondered what made him question me so much on the subject of books. I looked at him carefully during our conversation to assure myself that he was not laughing at me; but no, he listened seriously, and with an attention which was genuine, though not always maintained. This latter circumstance irritated me sometimes. The questions he put to me were clear and precise, and he always seemed prepared for the answer. He had made up his mind once for all that it was no use speaking to me as to other matters, and that, apart from books, I understood nothing. I am certain that he was attached to me, and much that fact astonished me; but he looked upon me as a child,

or as an imperfect man. He felt for me that sort of compassion which every stronger being feels for a weaker; he took me for—I do not know what he took me for. Although this compassion did not prevent him from robbing me, I am sure that in doing so he pitied me.

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

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

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

[Pg 125]

CHAPTER IX. MEN OF DETERMINATION—LUKA

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

A type of murderers that one often meets with is the following: A man lives calmly and peacefully. His fate is a hard one, but he puts up with it. He is a peasant attached to

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How long ago?" asked Kobylin.

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

"'You are afraid of such an idiot?' I said to them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Pg 129]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I had thrown my life away.

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

I will here make a digression from my narrative. The expression, “I am the Tzar! I am God!” and other similar ones were once, unfortunately, too often employed in the

good old times by many commanders. I must admit that their number has seriously diminished, and perhaps even the last has already disappeared. Let me observe that those who spoke in this way were, above all, men promoted from the ranks. The grade of officer had turned their brain upside down. After having laboured long years beneath the knapsack, they suddenly found themselves officers, commanders, and nobles above all. Thanks to their not being accustomed to it, and to the first excitement caused by their promotion, they contracted an exaggerated idea of their power and importance[Pg 130] relatively to their subordinates. Before their superiors such men are revoltingly servile. The most fawning of them will even say to their superiors that they have been common soldiers, and that they do not forget their place. But towards their inferiors they are despots without mercy. Nothing irritates the convicts so much as such abuses. These overweening opinions of their own greatness; this exaggerated idea of their immunity, causes hatred in the hearts of the most submissive men, and drives the most patient to excesses. Fortunately, all this dates from a time that is almost forgotten, and even then the superior authorities used to deal very severely with abuses of power. I know more than one example of it. What exasperates the convicts above all is disdain or repugnance manifested by any one in dealing with them. Those who think that it is only necessary to feed and clothe the prisoner, and to act towards him in all things according to the law, are much mistaken. However much debased he may be, a man exacts instinctively respect for his character as a man. Every prisoner knows perfectly that he is a convict and a reprobate, and knows the distance which separates him from his superiors; but neither the branding irons nor chains will make him forget that he is a man. He must, therefore, be treated with humanity. Humane treatment may raise up one in whom the divine image has long been obscured. It is with the “unfortunate,” above all, that humane conduct is necessary. It is their salvation, their only joy. I have met with some chiefs of a kind and noble character, and I have seen what a beneficent influence they exercised over the poor, humiliated men entrusted to their care. A few affable words have a wonderful moral effect upon the prisoners. They render them as happy as children, and make them sincerely grateful towards their chiefs. One other remark—they do not like their chiefs to be familiar and too much hail-fellow-well-met with them. They wish to respect them, and familiarity would prevent this. The prisoners will feel proud, for instance, if their chief has a number of decorations; if he has good manners; if he is [Pg 131]well-considered by a powerful superior; if he is severe, but at the same time just, and possesses a consciousness of dignity. The convicts prefer such a man to all others. He knows what he is worth, and does not insult others. Everything then is for the best.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Pg 132]

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

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

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

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

[Pg 133]

CHAPTER X. ISAIAH FOMITCH—THE BATH—BAKLOUCHIN.

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

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

great gates. The officer on service took him to the civil prison, and pointed out the place where his plank bedstead was to be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Three kopecks interest—for a year?”

“No, not for a year, for a month.”

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

“Isaiah Fomitch.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Scurvy Jew.”

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

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

“I am already in Siberia.”

“They will send you farther on.”

“Is not the Lord God there?”

“Of course, he is everywhere.”

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

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

The Jew sees that he is being laughed at, but does not lose courage. He gives himself airs. The flattery addressed to him causes him much pleasure, and with a high, squealing falsetto, which is heard throughout the barracks, he begins to sing, “la, la, la, la,” to an idiotic and ridiculous tune; the only song he was heard to sing during his stay at the convict prison. When he made my acquaintance, he assured me solemnly that it was the song, and the very air, that was sung by 600,000 Jews, small and great, when they crossed the Red Sea, and that every Israelite was ordered to sing it after a victory gained over an enemy.

The eve of each Saturday the convicts came from the other barracks to ours, expressly to see Isaiah Fomitch celebrating his Sabbath. He was so vain, so innocently

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

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

One evening, in the midst of his prayers, the Major entered, followed by the officer of the guard and an escort of soldiers. All the prisoners got immediately[Pg 138] into line before their camp-bedsteads. Isaiah Fomitch alone continued to shriek and gesticulate. He knew that his worship was authorised, and that no one could interrupt him, so that in howling in the presence of the Major he ran no risk. It pleased him to throw himself about beneath the eyes of the chief.

The Major approached within a few steps. Isaiah Fomitch turned his back to the table, and just in front of the officer began to sing his hymn of triumph, gesticulating and drawling out certain syllables. When he came to the part where he had to assume an expression of extreme happiness, he did so by blinking with his eyes, at the same time laughing and nodding his head in the direction of the Major. The latter was at first

much astonished; then he burst into a laugh, called out, “Idiot!” and went away, while the Jew still continued to shriek. An hour later, when he had finished, I asked him what he would have done if the Major had been wicked enough and foolish enough to lose his temper.

“What Major?”

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

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

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

[Pg 139]

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

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

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

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

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

“Drag them up on to your calves,” he said to me, holding me by the arms at the same time, as if I were an old man. I was ashamed at his care, and assured him that I could walk well enough by myself, but he did not believe me. He paid me the same attention that one gives to an awkward child. Petroff was not a servant in any sense of the word. If I had offended him, he would have known how to deal with me. I had promised him nothing for his assistance, nor had he asked me for anything. What inspired him with so much solicitude for me?

Represent to yourself a room of twelve feet long by as many broad, in which a hundred men are all crowded together, or at least eighty, for we were in all two hundred divided into two sections. The steam blinded us; the sweat, the dirt, the want of space, were such that we did not know where to put a foot down. I was frightened and wished to go out. Petroff hastened to reassure me. With great trouble we succeeded in raising ourselves on to the benches, by passing over the[Pg 141] heads of the convicts, whom

we begged to bend down, in order to let us pass; but all the benches were already occupied. Petroff informed me that I must buy a place, and at once entered into negotiations with the convict who was near the window. For a kopeck this man consented to cede me his place. After receiving the money, which Petroff held tight in his hand, and which he had prudently provided himself with beforehand, the man crept just beneath me into a dark and dirty corner. There was there, at least, half an inch of filth; even the places above the benches were occupied, the convicts swarmed everywhere. As for the floor there was not a place as big as the palm of the hand which was not occupied by the convicts. They sent the water in spouts out of their pails. Those who were standing up washed themselves pail in hand, and the dirty water ran all down their body to fall on the shaved heads of those who were sitting down. On the upper bench, and the steps which led to it, were heaped together other convicts who washed themselves more thoroughly, but these were in small number. The populace does not care to wash with soap and water, it prefers stewing in a horrible manner, and then inundating itself with cold water. That is how the common people take their bath. On the floor could be seen fifty bundles of rods rising and falling at the same time, the holders were whipping themselves into a state of intoxication. The steam became thicker and thicker every minute, so that what one now felt was not a warm but a burning sensation, as from boiling pitch. The convicts shouted and howled to the accompaniment of the hundred chains shaking on the floor. Those who wished to pass from one place to another got their chains mixed up with those of their neighbours, and knocked against the heads of the men who were lower down than they. Then there were volleys of oaths as those who fell dragged down the ones whose chains had become entangled in theirs. They were all in a state of intoxication of wild exultation. Cries and shrieks were heard on all sides. There was much crowding and crushing at the window of the [Pg 142]dressing-room through which the hot water was delivered, and much of it got spilt over the heads of those who were seated on the floor before it arrived at its destination. We seemed to be fully at liberty; and yet from time to time, behind the window of the dressing-room, or through the open door, could be seen the moustached face of a soldier, with his musket at his feet, watching that no serious disorder took place.

The shaved heads of the convicts, and their red bodies, which the steam made the colour of blood, seemed more monstrous than ever. On their backs, made scarlet by the steam, stood out in striking relief the scars left by the whips and the rods, made long before, but so thoroughly that the flesh seemed to have been quite recently torn. Strange scars. A shudder passed through me at the mere sight of them. Again the volume of steam increased, and the bath-room was now covered with a thick, burning

cloud, covering agitation and cries. From this cloud stood out torn backs, shaved heads; and, to complete the picture, Isaiah Fomitch howling with joy on the highest of the benches. He was saturating himself with steam. Any other man would have fainted away, but no temperature is too high for him; he engages the services of a rubber for a kopeck, but after a few moments the latter is unable to continue, throws away his bunch of twigs, and runs to inundate himself with cold water. Isaiah Fomitch does not lose courage, he runs to hire a second rubber, then a third; on these occasions he thinks nothing of expense, and changes his rubber four or five times. "He stews well, the gallant Isaiah Fomitch," cry the convicts from below. The Jew feels that he goes beyond all the others, he has beaten them; he triumphs with his hoarse falsetto voice, and sings out his favourite air which rises above the general hubbub. It seemed to me that if ever we met in hell we should be reminded of the place where we then were. I could not resist a wish to communicate this idea to Petroff. He looked all round him, but made no answer.

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

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

When we got back to the barracks I offered him a glass of tea, which he did not refuse. He drank it and thanked me. I wished to go to the expense of a glass of vodka in his honour, and I succeeded in getting it on the spot. Petroff was exceedingly pleased. He swallowed his vodka with a murmur of satisfaction, declared that I had restored him to life, and then suddenly rushed to the kitchen, as if the people who were talking there could not decide anything important without him.

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

I never knew a man of a more agreeable disposition than Baklouchin. It must be admitted that he never forgave a wrong, and that he often got into quarrels. He could not, above all, endure people interfering with his affairs. He knew, in a word, how to

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

[Pg 145]

"From there they sent me on here," added Baklouchin.

"And why?" I asked him.

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

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

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

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

“An amusing story indeed, Alexander Petrovitch.”

“So much the better. Tell me.”

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

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

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

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

to me, ‘that it is a question of my happiness; for he is rich, and would you prevent my happiness?’ I looked her in the face, she wept, embraced me, clasped me in her arms.

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

“‘And what sort of a man is he? Is he good-looking?’

“‘No, he is old, and he has such a long nose.’

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

“I slipped a pistol into my pocket to be ready for everything; a little pistol which was not worth a curse, with an old-fashioned lock—a thing I had used when I was a boy, and which was really fit for nothing. I loaded it, however, because I thought they would try to kick me out, and that the German would insult me, in which case I would pull out my pistol to frighten them all. I arrived. There was no one on the staircase; they were

all in the work-room. No servant. The one girl who waited upon them was absent. I crossed the shop and saw that the door was closed—an old door fastened from the inside. My heart beat; I stopped and listened. They were speaking German. I broke open[Pg 148] the door with a kick. I looked round. The table was laid; there was a large coffee-pot on it, with a spirit lamp underneath, and a plate of biscuits. On a tray there was a small decanter of brandy, herrings, sausages, and a bottle of some wine. Luisa and her aunt, both in their Sunday best, were seated on a sofa. Opposite them, the German was exhibiting himself on a chair, got up like a bridegroom, and in his coat with the high collar, and with his hair carefully combed. On the other side, there was another German, old, fat, and gray. He was taking no part in the conversation. When I entered, Luisa turned very pale. The aunt sprang up with a bound and sat down again. The German became angry. What a rage he was in! He got up, and walking towards me, said:

"'What do you want?'

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

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

"The German reflected a moment, and then said, 'Sit down.'

"I sat down.

"'Here is some vodka. Help yourself, I beg.'

"'And let it be good,' I cried, getting more and more into a rage.

"'It is good.'

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

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

"'I cannot be your friend,' he replied. 'You are a private soldier.'

"Then I lost all self-command.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“‘And why should I not dare?’

“‘Because you would be severely punished.’

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

“‘So you think I dare not?’

“‘No.’

“‘I dare not, you think?’

“‘You would not dare!’

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

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

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

“‘Call Luisa!’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This brought a new charge against me. I was tried a second time, and for the two things was [Pg 151]condemned to four thousand strokes, and to the special section. When I was taken out to receive my punishment in the *Green Street*, the captain was at the same time sent away. He had been degraded from his rank, and was

despatched to the Caucasus as a private soldier. Good-bye, Alexander Petrovitch. Don't fail to come to our performance."

[Pg 152]

CHAPTER XI. THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS

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

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

and oaths. He was condemned as though he had been wanting in respect to the festival itself.

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

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

This lesson had not been lost upon him, although it was written that he was never to understand his fault. He had yet become impressed with this salutary moral principle: never to reason in any matter because his mind was not equal to the task of judging. Blindly devoted to ceremonies, he looked with respect at the sucking-pig which he had stuffed with millet-seed, and which he had roasted himself (for he had some culinary skill), just as if it had not been an ordinary sucking-pig which could have been bought and roasted at any time, but a particular kind of animal born specially for Christmas Day. Perhaps he had been accustomed from his tender infancy to see that day a sucking-pig on the table, and he may have concluded that a sucking-pig was indispensable for the proper celebration of the festival. I am certain that if by ill-luck he had not eaten this particular kind of meat on that day, he would have been troubled with remorse all his life for not[Pg 155] having done his duty. Until Christmas morning he wore his old vest and his old trousers, which had long been threadbare. I then learned that he kept carefully in his box his new clothes which had been given to him four months before, and that he had not put them on once, in order that he might wear

them for the first time on Christmas Day. He did so. The evening before he took his new clothes out of his trunk, unfolded, examined them, cleaned them, blew on them to remove the dust, and when he was convinced that they were perfect, probably tried them on. The dress became him perfectly; all the different garments suited one another. The waistcoat buttoned up to the neck, the collar, straight and stiff like cardboard, kept his chin in its proper place. There was a military cut about the dress; and Akim Akimitch, as he wore it, smiled with satisfaction, turning himself round and round, not without swagger, before a little mirror adorned with a gilt border.

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

As soon as Akim Akimitch had finished his work he said his prayers, stretched himself on his bed, and went to sleep, with the sleep of a child, in order to wake up as early as possible the next day. The other convicts did the same. It must be added that all of them went to bed, but sooner than usual. They gave up their ordinary evening work that day. As for playing cards, no one would have dared even to speak of such a thing; every one was anxiously expecting the next morning.

At last this morning arrived. At an early hour, even before it was light, the drum was sounded, and the under officer, whose duty it was to count the convicts, wished them a happy Christmas. The prisoners answered him in an affable and amiable tone by expressing a like wish. Akim Akimitch, and many others, who had their geese and their sucking-pigs, went to the kitchen, after saying their prayers, in a hurried manner to see where their victuals were and how they were being cooked.

Through the little windows of our barracks, half hidden by the snow and the ice, could be seen, flaring in the darkness, the bright fire of the two kitchens where six stoves

had been lighted. In the court-yard, where it was still dark, the convicts, each with a half pelisse round his shoulders, or perhaps fully dressed, were hurrying towards the kitchen. Some of them, meanwhile—a very small number—had already visited the drink-sellers. They were the impatient ones, but they behaved becomingly, possibly much better than on ordinary days; neither quarrels nor insults were heard, every one understood that it was a great day, a great festival. The convicts went even to visit the other barracks in order to wish the inmates a happy Christmas; that day a sort of friendship seemed to exist between them all. I will remark in passing that the convicts have scarcely ever any intimate friendships. It was very rare to see a man on confidential terms with any other man, as, in the outer[Pg 157] world. We were generally harsh and abrupt in our mutual relations. With some rare exceptions this was the general tone adopted and maintained.

I went out of the barracks like the others. It was beginning to get late. The stars were paling, a light, icy mist was rising from the earth, and spirals of smoke were ascending in curls from the chimneys. Several convicts whom I met wished me, with affability, a happy Christmas. I thanked them and returned their wishes. Some of them had never spoken to me before.

Near the kitchen, a convict from the military barracks, with his sheepskin on his shoulder, came up to me. Recognising me, he called out from the middle of the court-yard, “Alexander Petrovitch.” He ran towards me. I waited for him. He was a young fellow, with a round face and soft eyes, and not at all communicative as a rule. He had not spoken to me since my arrival, and seemed never to have noticed me. I did not know on my side what his name was. When he came up, he remained planted before me, smiling with a vacuous smile, but with a happy expression of countenance.

“What do you want?” I asked, not without astonishment.

He remained standing before me, still smiling and staring, but without replying to my question.

“Why, it is Christmas Day,” he muttered.

He understood that he had nothing more to say, and now hastened into the kitchen.

I must add that, after this we scarcely ever met, and that we never spoke to one another again.

Round the flaming stoves of the kitchen the convicts were rubbing and pushing against one another. Every one was watching his own property. The cooks were preparing the dinner, which was to take place a little earlier than usual. No one began

to eat before the time, though a good many wished to do so; but it was necessary to be well-behaved before the others. We were waiting for the priest, and the fast preceding Christmas would not be at an end until his arrival.

[Pg 158]

It was not yet perfectly light, when the corporal was already heard shouting out from behind the principal gate of the prison:

“The kitchen; the kitchen.”

These calls were repeated without interruption for about two hours. The cooks were wanted in order to receive gifts brought from all parts of the town in enormous numbers; loaves of white bread, scones, rusks, pancakes, and pastry of various kinds. I do not think there was a shop-keeper in the whole town who did not send something to the “unfortunates.” Amongst these gifts there were some magnificent ones, including a good many cakes of the finest flour. There were also some very poor ones, such as rolls worth two kopecks a piece, and a couple of brown rolls, covered lightly over with sour cream. These were the offerings of the poor to the poor, on which a last kopeck had often been spent.

All these gifts were accepted with equal gratitude, without reference to the value or the giver. The convicts, on receiving the offerings, took off their caps and thanked the donors with low bows, wishing them a happy Christmas, and then carried the things to the kitchen.

When a number of loaves and cakes had been collected, the elders of each barrack were called, and it was for them to divide the whole in equal portions among all the sections. The division excited neither protest nor annoyance. It was made honestly, equitably. Akim Akimitch, helped by another prisoner, divided between the convicts of our barracks the share assigned to us, and gave to each of us what came to him. Every one was satisfied. No objection was made by any one. There was not the least manifestation of envy, and it occurred to no one to deceive another.

When Akim Akimitch had finished at the kitchen, he proceeded religiously to dress himself, and did so with a solemn air. He buttoned up his waistcoat button by button, in the most punctilious manner. Then, when he[Pg 159] had got his new clothes on, he went to pray, which occupied him a considerable time. Numbers of convicts fulfilled their religious duties, but these were for the most part old men. The young men scarcely ever prayed. The most they did was to make the sign of the cross when they rose from table, and that happened only on festival days.

Akim Akimitch came up to me as soon as he had finished his prayer, to express to me the usual good wishes. I invited him to have some tea, and he returned my politeness by offering me some of his sucking-pig. After some time Petroff came up to address to me the usual compliments. I think he had been already drinking, and although he seemed to have much to say, he scarcely spoke. He stood up before me for some seconds, and then went back to the kitchen. The priest was now expected in the military section of the barracks. This section was not constructed like the others. The camp-bedsteads were arranged all along the wall, and not in the middle of the room as in all the others, so that it was the only one in which the middle was not obstructed. It had been probably arranged in this manner so that in case of necessity it might be easier to assemble the convicts. A small table had been prepared in the middle of the room, and a holy image placed upon it, before which burned a little lamp.

At last the priest arrived, with the cross and holy water. He prayed and chanted before the image, and then turned towards the convicts, who one after the other came and kissed the cross. The priest then walked through all the barracks, sprinkling them with holy water. When he got to the kitchen he praised the bread of the convict prison, which had quite a reputation in town. The convicts at once expressed a desire to send him two loaves of new bread, still hot, which an old soldier was ordered to take to his house forthwith. The convicts walked back after the cross with the same respect as they had received it. Almost immediately afterwards, the Major and the Commandant arrived.[Pg 160] The Commandant was liked, and even respected. He made the tour of the barracks in company with the Major, wished the convicts a happy Christmas, went into the kitchen, and tasted the cabbage soup. It was excellent that day. Each convict was entitled to nearly a pound of meat, besides which there was millet-seed in it, and certainly the butter had not been spared. The Major saw the Commandant to the door, and then ordered the convicts to begin dinner. Each endeavoured not to be under the Major's eyes. They did not like his spiteful, inquisitorial look from behind his spectacles as he wandered from right to left, seeking apparently some disorder to repress, some crime to punish.

We dined. Akim Akimitch's sucking-pig was admirably roasted. I could never understand how, five minutes after the Major left, there was a mass of drunken prisoners, whereas as long as he remained every one was perfectly calm. Red, radiant faces were now numerous, and the balalaiki [Russian banjoes] soon appeared. Then came the little Pole, playing his violin, a convivial prisoner having engaged him for the whole day to play lively dance-tunes. The conversation became more animated and more noisy, but the dinner ended without great disorders. Every one had had enough. Some of the old men, serious-minded convicts, went immediately to bed. So did Akim

Akimitch, who probably thought it was a duty to go to sleep after dinner on festival days.

The “old believer” from Starodoub, after having slumbered a little, climbed up on to the top of the stove, opened his book, and prayed the entire day until late in the evening without interruption. The spectacle of so shameless an orgie was painful to him, he said. All the Circassians left the table. They looked with curiosity, but with a touch of disgust, at this drunken society. I met Nourra.

“Aman, aman,” he said, with a burst of honest indignation, and shaking his head. “What an offence to Allah!” Isaiah Fomitch lighted, with an arrogant and obstinate[Pg 161] air, a candle in his favourite corner, and went to work in order to show that in his eyes this was no holiday. Here and there card parties were arranged. The convicts did not fear the old soldiers, but men were placed on the look-out in case the under officer should suddenly come in. He made a point, however, of seeing nothing. The officer of the guard made altogether three rounds. The prisoners, if they were drunk, hid themselves at once. The cards disappeared in the twinkling of an eye. I fancy that he had made up his mind not to notice any contraventions of an unimportant kind. Drunkenness was not an offence that day. Little by little every one became more or less gay. Then there were some quarrels. The greater number of the prisoners, however, remained calm, amusing themselves with the spectacle of those who were intoxicated. Some of these drank without limit.

Gazin was triumphant. He walked about with a self-satisfied air, by the side of his camp bedstead, beneath which he had concealed his spirits, previously buried beneath the snow behind the barracks, in a secret place. He smiled knowingly when he saw customers arrive in crowds. He was perfectly calm. He had drunk nothing at all; for it was his intention to regale himself the last day of the holidays, after he had emptied the pockets of the other prisoners. Throughout the barracks the drunkenness was becoming infernal. Singing was heard, and the songs were giving way to tears. Some of the prisoners walked about in bands, sheepskin on shoulder, striking with a haughty air the strings of their balalaiki. A chorus of from eight to ten men had been formed in the special section. The singing here was excellent, with its accompaniments of balalaiki and guitars.

Songs of a truly popular kind were rare. I remember one which was admirably sung:

Yesterday, I, a young girl,

Went to the feast.

[Pg 162]

A variation was introduced previously unknown to me. At the end of the song these lines were added:

At my house, the house of a young girl,

Everything is in order.

I have washed the spoons,

I have turned out the cabbage-soup,

I have wiped down the panels of the door,

I have cooked the patties.

What they chiefly sang were prison songs; one of them, called “As it happened,” was very humorous. It related how a man amused himself, and lived like a prince until he was sent to the convict prison, where he fared very differently. Another song, only too popular, set forth how the hero of it had formerly possessed capital, but had now nothing but captivity. Here is a true convict’s song:

The day breaks in the heavens,

We are waked up by the drum.

The old man opens the door,

The warder comes and calls us.

No one sees us behind the prison walls,

Nor how we live in this place.

But God, the Heavenly Creator, is with us

He will not let us perish.

Another still more melancholy, but with a superb melody, was sung to tame and incorrect words. I can remember a few of the verses:

My eyes no more will see the land,

Where I was born;

To suffer torments undeserved,

Will be my punishment.

The owl will shriek upon the roof,

And raise the echoes of the forest.

My heart is broken down with grief.

No, never more shall I return.

This song is often sung; not as a chorus, but always as a solo. When the work is over, a prisoner goes out of the barracks, sits down on the threshold, meditates with his[Pg 163] chin resting on his hand, and then drawls out his song in a high falsetto. One listens to him, and the effect is heart-breaking. Some of our convicts had beautiful voices.

Meanwhile it was getting dusk. Wearisomeness and general depression were making themselves felt through the drunkenness and the debauchery. The prisoner, who an hour beforehand was holding his sides with laughter, now sobbed in a corner, exceedingly drunk; others were fighting, or wandering in a tottering manner through the barracks, pale, very pale, and seeking whom to quarrel with. These poor people had wished to pass the great festival in the most joyous manner, but, gracious heaven, how painful the day was for all of them! They had passed it in the vague hope of a happiness that was not to be realised. Petroff came up to me twice. As he had drunk very little he was calm; but until the last moment he expected something which he made sure would happen, something extraordinary, and highly diverting. Although he said nothing about it, this could be seen from his looks. He ran from barrack to barrack without fatigue. Nothing, however, happened; nothing except general intoxication, idiotic insults from drunkards, and general giddiness of heated heads.

Sirotkin wandered about also, dressed in a brand-new red shirt, going from barrack to barrack, and good-looking as usual. He also was on the watch for something to happen. The spectacle became insupportably repulsive, indeed nauseating. There were some laughable things, but I was too sad to be amused by them. I felt a deep pity for all these men, and felt strangled, stifled, in the midst of them. Here two convicts were disputing as to which should treat the other. The dispute lasts a long time; they have almost come to blows. One of them has, for a long time past, had a grudge against the other. He complains, stammering as he does so, and tries to prove to his companion that he acted unjustly when, a year before, he sold a pelisse and concealed the money. There was more than this too. The complainant is a tall young fellow,[Pg 164] with good muscular development, quiet, by no means stupid, but who, when he is drunk, wishes to make friends with every one, and to pour out his grief into their bosom. He insults his adversary with the intention of becoming reconciled to him later on. The other man, a big, massive person, with a round face, as cunning as a fox, had perhaps drunk more than his companion, but appeared only slightly intoxicated.

This convict has character, and passes for a rich man; he has probably no interest in irritating his companion, and he accordingly leads him to one of the drink-sellers. The expansive friend declares that his companion owes him money, and that he is bound to stand him a drink "if he has any pretensions to be considered an honest man."

The drink-seller, not without some respect for his customer, and with a touch of contempt for the expansive friend (for he was drinking at the expense of another man), took a glass and filled it with vodka.

"No, Stepka, you must pay, because you owe me money."

"I won't tire my tongue talking to you any longer," replied Stepka.

"No, Stepka, you lie," continues his friend, taking up a glass offered to him by the drink-seller. "You owe me money, and you must be without conscience. You have not a thing about you that you have not borrowed, and I don't believe your very eyes are your own. In a word, Stepka, you are a blackguard."

"What are you whining about? Look, you are spilling your vodka."

"If you are being treated, why don't you drink?" cries the drink-seller, to the expansive friend. "I cannot wait here until to-morrow."

"I will drink, don't be frightened. What are you crying out about? My best wishes for the day. My best wishes for the day, Stepan Doroveitch," replies the latter politely, as he bows, glass in hand, towards Stepka, whom the moment before he had called a blackguard. "Good health to you, and may you live a hundred years[Pg 165] in addition to what you have lived already." He drinks, gives a grunt of satisfaction, and wipes his mouth. "What quantities of brandy I have drunk," he says, gravely speaking to every one, without addressing any one in particular, "but I have finished now. Thank me, Stepka Doroveitch."

"There is nothing to thank you for."

"Ah! you won't thank me. Then I will tell every one how you have treated me, and, moreover, that you are a blackguard."

"Then I shall have something to tell you, drunkard that you are," interrupts Stepka, who at last loses patience. "Listen and pay attention. Let us divide the world in two. You shall take one half, I the other. Then I shall have peace."

"Then you will not give me back my money?"

"What money do you want, drunkard?"

“My money. It is the sweat of my brow; the labour of my hands. You will be sorry for it in the other world. You will be roasted for those five kopecks.”

“Go to the devil.”

“What are you driving me for? Am I a horse?”

“Be off, be off.”

“Blackguard!”

“Convict!”

And the insults exchanged were worse than they had been before the visit to the drink-seller.

Two friends are seated separately on two camp-bedsteads. One is tall, vigorous, fleshy, with a red face—a regular butcher. He is on the point of weeping; for he has been much moved. The other is tall, thin, conceited, with an immense nose, which always seems to have a cold, and little blue eyes fixed upon the ground. He is a clever, well-bred man, and was formerly a secretary. He treats his friend with a little disdain, which the latter cannot stand. They have been drinking together all day.

“You have taken a liberty with me,” cries the stout one, as with his left hand he shakes the head of his [Pg 166]companion. To take a liberty signifies, in convict language, to strike. This convict, formerly a non-commissioned officer, envies in secret the elegance of his neighbour, and endeavours to make up for his material grossness by refined conversation.

“I tell you, you are wrong,” says the secretary, in a dogmatic tone, with his eyes obstinately fixed on the ground, and without looking at his companion.

“You struck me. Do you hear?” continues the other, still shaking his dear friend. “You are the only man in the world I care for; but you shall not take a liberty with me.”

“Confess, my dear fellow,” replies the secretary, “that all this is the result of too much drink.”

The corpulent friend falls back with a stagger, looks stupidly with his drunken eyes at the secretary, and suddenly, with all his might, sends his fist into the secretary’s thin face. Thus terminates the day’s friendship.

The dear friend disappears beneath the camp-bedstead unconscious.

One of my acquaintances enters the barracks. He is a convict of the special section, very good-natured, and gay, far from stupid, and jocular without malice. He is the man who, on my arrival at the convict prison, was looking out for a rich peasant, who spoke so much of his self-respect, and ended by drinking my tea. He was forty years old, had enormous lips, and a fat, fleshy, red nose. He held a balalaika, and struck negligently its strings. He was followed by a little convict, with a large head, whom I knew very little, and to whom no one paid any attention. Now that he was drunk he had attached himself to Vermaloff, and followed him like his shadow, at the same time gesticulating and striking with his fist the wall and the camp-bedsteads. He was almost in tears. Vermaloff did not notice him any more than if he had not existed. The most curious point was that these two men in no way resembled one another, neither by their occupations nor by their disposition. They[Pg 167] belonged to different sections, and lived in separate barracks. The little convict was named Bulkin.

Vermaloff smiled when he saw me seated by the stove. He stopped at some distance from me, reflected for a moment, tottered, and then came towards me with an affected swagger. Then he swept the strings of his instrument, and sung, or recited, tapping at the same time with his boot on the ground, the following chant:

My darling!

With her full, fair face,

Sings like a nightingale;

In her satin dress,

With its brilliant trimming,

She is very fair.

This song excited Bulkin in an extraordinary manner. He agitated his arms, and shrieked out to every one: “He lies, my friends; he lies like a quack doctor. There is not a shadow of truth in what he sings.”

“My respects to the venerable Alexander Petrovitch,” said Vermaloff, looking at me with a knowing smile. I fancied even he wished to embrace me. He was drunk. As for the expression, “My respects to the venerable so-and-so,” it is employed by the common people throughout Siberia, even when addressed to a young man of twenty. To call a man old is a sign of respect, and may amount even to flattery.

“Well, Vermaloff, how are you?” I replied.

“So, so. Nothing to boast of. Those who really enjoy the holiday have been drinking since early morning.”

Vermaloff did not speak very distinctly.

“He lies; he lies again,” said Bulkin, striking the camp-bedsteads with a sort of despair.

One might have sworn that Vermaloff had given his word of honour not to pay any attention to him. That was really the most comic thing about it; for Bulkin had not quitted him for one moment since the morning. Always with him, he quarrelled with Vermaloff about every word; wringing his hands, and striking with his[Pg 168] fists against the wall and the camp bedsteads till he made them bleed, he suffered visibly from his conviction that Vermaloff “lied like a quack doctor.” If Bulkin had had hair on his head, he would certainly have torn it in his grief, in his profound mortification. One might have thought that he had made himself responsible for Vermaloff’s actions, and that all Vermaloff’s faults troubled his conscience. The amusing part of it was that Vermaloff continued.

“He lies! He lies! He lies!” cried Bulkin.

“What can it matter to you?” replied the convicts, with a laugh.

“I must tell you, Alexander Petrovitch, that I was very good-looking when I was a young man, and the young girls were very fond of me,” said Vermaloff suddenly.

“He lies! He lies!” again interrupted Bulkin, with a groan. The convicts burst into a laugh.

“And well I got myself up to please them. I had a red shirt, and broad trousers of cotton velvet. I was happy in those days. I got up when I liked; did whatever I pleased. In fact——”

“He lies,” declared Bulkin.

“I inherited from my father a stone house, two storeys high. Within two years I made away with the two storeys; nothing remained to me but the street door. Well, what of that. Money comes and goes like a bird.”

“He lies!” declared Bulkin, more resolutely than before.

“Then when I had spent all, I sent a letter to my relations, that they might send me some money. They said that I had set their will at naught, that I was disrespectful. It is now seven years since I sent off my letter.”

“And any answer?” I asked, with a smile.

“No,” he replied, also laughing, and almost putting his nose in my face.

He then informed me that he had a sweetheart.

“You a sweetheart?”

[Pg 169]

“Onufriel said to me the other day: ‘My young woman is marked with small-pox, and as ugly as you like; but she has plenty of dresses, while yours, though she may be pretty, is a beggar.’”

“Is that true?”

“Certainly, she is a beggar,” he answered.

He burst into a laugh, and the others laughed with him. Every one indeed knew that he had a *liaison* with a beggar woman, to whom he gave ten kopecks every six months.

“Well, what do you want with me?” I said to him, wishing at last to get rid of him.

He remained silent, and then, looking at me in the most insinuating manner, said:

“Could not you let me have enough money to buy half-a-pint? I have drunk nothing but tea the whole day,” he added, as he took from me the money I offered him; “and tea affects me in such a manner that I am afraid of becoming asthmatic. It gives me the wind.”

When he took the money I offered him, the despair of Bulkin went beyond all bounds. He gesticulated like a man possessed.

“Good people all,” he cried, “the man lies. Everything he says—everything is a lie.”

“What can it matter to you?” cried the convicts, astonished at his goings on. “You are possessed.”

“I will not allow him to lie,” continued Bulkin, rolling his eyes, and striking his fist with energy on the boards. “He shall not lie.”

Every one laughed. Vermaloff bowed to me after receiving the money, and hastened, with many grimaces, to go to the drink-seller. Then only he noticed Bulkin.

“Come!” he said to him, as if the latter were indispensable for the execution of some design. “Idiot!” he added, with contempt, as Bulkin passed before him.

But enough about this tumultuous scene, which, at last, came to an end. The convicts went to sleep heavily on their camp-bedsteads. They spoke and raged during[Pg 170] their sleep more than on the other nights. Here and there they still continued to play at cards. The festival looked forward to with such impatience was now over, and to-morrow the daily work, the hard labour, will begin again.