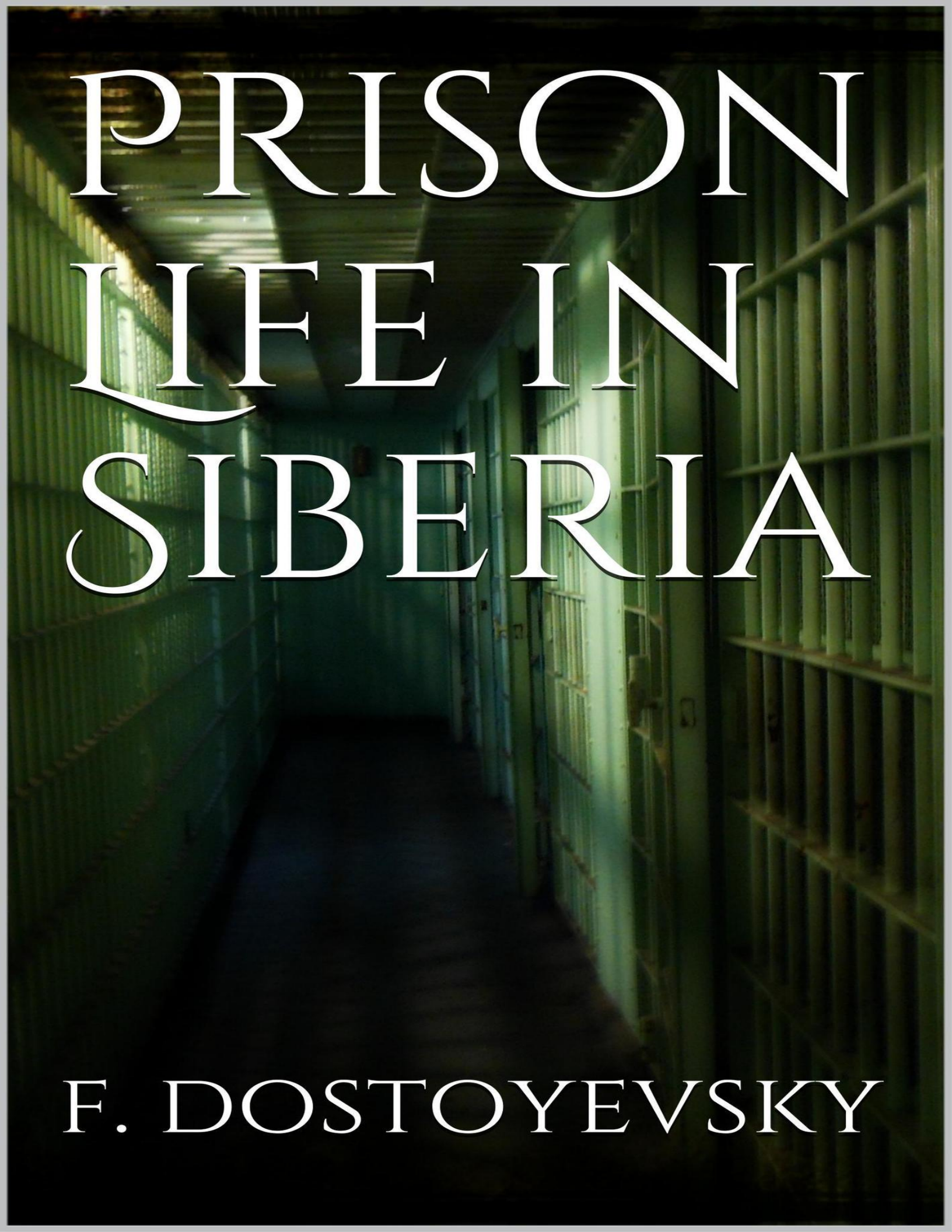
PRISON
LIFE IN
SIBERIA
F. DOSTOYEVSKY

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky

INTRODUCTION

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

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

general.
To this very disassociation he attributed, without quite understanding the rest of us, our not understanding the Russian people, and our taxing them with "a lack of personality." We failed to perceive their rare synthetic power—that faculty of the Russian mind to read the aspirations of the whole of human kind. Among his own folk, he avowed, we would find none of the imperviousness, the intolerance, of the average European. The Russian adapts himself with ease to the play of contemporary thought and has no difficulty in assimilating any new idea. He sees where it will help his fellow-creatures and where it fails to be of value. He divines the process by which ideas, even the most divergent, the most hostile to one another, may meet and blend.
Possibly, recognising this, M. Dostoïeffsky was the more concerned not to be too far depolarised, or say de-Russified, in his own works of fiction. But in truth he had no need to fear any weakening of his natural fibre and racial proclivities, or of the authentic utterance wrung out of him by the hard and cruel thongs of experience. We see the rigorous sincerity of his record again in the sheer autobiography contained in the present work, *The House of the Dead* . It was in the fatal winter of 1849 when he was with many others, mostly very young men like himself, sentenced to death for his liberal political propaganda; a sentence which was at the last moment commuted to imprisonment in the Siberian prisons. Out of that terror, which turned youth grey, was distilled the terrible reality of *The House of the Dead* . If one would truly fathom how deep that reality is, and what its phenomenon in literature amounts to, one should turn again to that favourite idyllic book of youth, by my countrywoman Mme. Cottin, *Elizabeth, or the Exiles of Siberia* , and compare, for example, the typical scene of Elizabeth's sleep in the wooden chapel in the snow, where she ought to have been

frozen to death but fared very comfortably, with the Siberian actuality of Dostoïeffsky.

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

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

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

JULIUS BRAMONT.

PART I.

CHAPTER I. TEN YEARS A CONVICT

In the midst of the steppes, of the mountains, of the impenetrable forests of the desert regions of Siberia, one meets from time to time with little towns of a thousand or two inhabitants, built entirely of wood, very ugly, with two churches—one in the centre of the town, the other in the cemetery—in a word, towns which bear much more resemblance to a good-sized village in the suburbs of Moscow than to a town properly so called. In most cases they are abundantly provided with police-master, assessors, and other inferior officials. If it is cold in Siberia, the great advantages of the Government service compensate for it. The inhabitants are simple people, without liberal ideas. Their manners are antique, solid, and unchanged by time. The officials who form, and with reason, the nobility in Siberia, either belong to the country, deeply-rooted Siberians, or they have arrived there from Russia. The latter come straight from the capitals, tempted by the high pay, the extra allowance for travelling expenses, and by hopes not less seductive for the future. Those who know how to resolve the problem of life remain almost always in Siberia; the abundant and richly-flavoured fruit which they gather there recompenses them amply for what they lose.

As for the others, light-minded persons who are unable to deal with the problem, they are soon bored in Siberia, and ask themselves with regret why they committed the folly of coming. They impatiently kill the three years which they

are obliged by rule to remain, and as soon as their time is up, they beg to be sent back, and return to their original quarters, running down Siberia, and ridiculing it. They are wrong, for it is a happy country, not only as regards the Government service, but also from many other points of view.

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

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

I saw Alexander Petrovitch the first time at the house of an official, Ivan Ivanitch Gvosdikof, a venerable old man, very hospitable, and the father of five daughters, of whom the greatest hopes were entertained. Four times a week Alexander Petrovitch gave them lessons, at the rate of

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

impossible. Certainly he replied to all my questions; he seemed to make it a duty to do so; but when once he had answered, I was afraid to interrogate him any longer.

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

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

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

I spoke to him of our little town, of the news of the day, but he was silent, or smiled with an air of displeasure. I could see that he was absolutely ignorant of all that was taking place in the town, and that he was in no way curious to know. I spoke to him afterwards of the country generally,

and of its men. He listened to me still in silence, fixing his eyes upon me in such a strange way that I became ashamed of what I was doing. I was very nearly offending him by offering him some books and newspapers which I had just received by post. He cast a greedy look upon them; he then seemed to alter his mind, and declined my offer, giving his want of leisure as a pretext.

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

I was absent from our town for about three months. When I returned home in the winter, I learned that Petrovitch was dead, and that he had not even sent for a doctor. He was even now already forgotten, and his lodging was unoccupied. I at once made the acquaintance of his landlady, in the hope of learning from her what her lodger had been writing. For twenty kopecks she brought me a basket full of papers left by the defunct, and confessed to me that she had already employed four sheets in lighting her fire. She was a morose and taciturn old woman. I could not get from her anything that was interesting. She could tell me nothing about her lodger. She gave me to understand all the same that he scarcely ever worked, and that he remained for months together without opening a book or touching a pen. On the other hand, he walked all night up and down his room, given up to his reflections. Sometimes, indeed, he spoke aloud. He was very fond of her little grandchild, Katia, above all when he knew her name; on her name's-day—the day of St. Catherine—he always had a requiem said in the church for some one's

soul. He detested receiving visits, and never went out except to give lessons. Even his landlady he looked upon with an unfriendly eye when, once a week, she came into his room to put it in order.

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

CHAPTER II. THE DEAD-HOUSE

Our prison was at the end of the citadel behind the ramparts. Looking through the crevices between the palisade in the hope of seeing something, one sees nothing but a little corner of the sky, and a high earthwork, covered with the long grass of the steppe. Night and day sentries walk to and fro upon it. Then one perceives from the first, that whole years will pass during which one will see by the same crevices between the palisades, upon the same earthwork, always the same sentinels and the same little corner of the sky, not just above the prison, but far and far away. Represent to yourself a court-yard, two hundred feet long, and one hundred and fifty feet broad, enclosed by an irregular hexagonal palisade, formed of stakes thrust deep into the earth. So much for the external surroundings of the prison. On one side of the palisade is a great gate, solid, and always shut; watched perpetually by the sentinels, and never opened, except when the convicts go out to work. Beyond this, there are light and liberty, the life of free people! Beyond the palisade, one thought of the marvellous world, fantastic as a fairy tale. It was not the same on our side. Here, there was no resemblance to anything. Habits, customs, laws, were all precisely fixed. It was the house of living death. It is this corner that I undertake to describe.

On penetrating into the enclosure one sees a few buildings. On each side of a vast court are stretched forth two wooden constructions, made of trunks of trees, and only one storey

high. These are convicts' barracks. Here the prisoners are confined, divided into several classes. At the end of the enclosure may be seen a house, which serves as a kitchen, divided into two compartments. Behind it is another building, which serves at once as cellar, loft, and barn. The centre of the enclosure, completely barren, is a large open space. Here the prisoners are drawn up in ranks, three times a day. They are identified, and must answer to their names, morning, noon, and evening, besides several times in the course of the day if the soldiers on guard are suspicious and clever at counting. All around, between the palisades and the buildings there remains a sufficiently large space, where some of the prisoners who are misanthropes, or of a sombre turn of mind, like to walk about when they are not at work. There they go turning over their favourite thoughts, shielded from all observation. When I met them during those walks of theirs, I took pleasure in observing their sad, deeply-marked countenances, and in guessing their thoughts. The favourite occupation of one of the convicts, during the moments of liberty left to him from his hard labour, was to count the palisades. There were fifteen hundred of them. He had counted them all, and knew them nearly by heart. Every one of them represented to him a day of confinement; but, counting them daily in this manner, he knew exactly the number of days that he had still to pass in the prison. He was sincerely happy when he had finished one side of the hexagon; yet he had to wait for his liberation many long years. But one learns patience in a prison.

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

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

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

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

Yes, man is a pliable animal—he must be so defined—a being who gets accustomed to everything! That would be, perhaps, the best definition that could be given of him. There were altogether two hundred and fifty of us in the same prison. This number was almost invariably the same. Whenever some of them had undergone their punishment, other criminals arrived, and a few of them died. Among

them there were all sorts of people. I believe that each region of Russia had furnished its representatives. There were foreigners there, and even mountaineers from the Caucasus.

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

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

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

of the most painful character had to be undertaken in Siberia.

"You are only here for a fixed time," they said to the other convicts; "we, on the contrary, are here for all our life."

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

However, I was obliged to get accustomed to it. Among them there were murderers by imprudence, and murderers by profession, simple thieves, masters in the art of finding money in the pockets of the passers-by, or of wiping off no matter what from the table. It would have been difficult, however, to say why and how certain prisoners found themselves among the convicts. Each of them had his history, confused and heavy, painful as the morning after a debauch.

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

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

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

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

Each section had a different costume. The uniform of one was a cloth vest, half brown and half gray, and trousers with one leg brown, the other gray. One day while we were

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

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

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

Of the convicts—with the exception of a few who enjoyed childish gaiety, and who by that alone drew upon themselves general contempt—all the convicts were morose, envious, frightfully vain, presumptuous, susceptible, and excessively ceremonious. To be astonished at nothing was in their eyes the first and indispensable quality. Accordingly, their first aim was to bear themselves with dignity. But often the most composed demeanour gave way with the rapidity of lightning. With the basest humility some, however, possessed genuine strength; these were naturally all sincere. But strangely enough, they were for the most part excessively and morbidly vain. Vanity was always their salient quality.

The majority of the prisoners were depraved and perverted, so that calumnies and scandal rained amongst them like hail. Our life was a constant hell, a perpetual damnation; but no one would have dared to raise a voice against the internal regulations of the prison, or against established usages. Accordingly, willingly or unwillingly, they had to be submitted to. Certain indomitable characters yielded with difficulty, but they yielded all the same. Prisoners who

when at liberty had gone beyond all measure, who, urged by their over-excited vanity, had committed frightful crimes unconsciously, as if in a delirium, and had been the terror of entire towns, were put down in a very short time by the system of our prison. The "new man," when he began to reconnoitre, soon found that he could astonish no one, and insensibly he submitted, took the general tone, and assumed a sort of personal dignity which almost every convict maintained, just as if the denomination of convict had been a title of honour. Not the least sign of shame or of repentance, but a kind of external submission which seemed to have been reasoned out as the line of conduct to be pursued. "We are lost men," they said to themselves. "We were unable to live in liberty; we must now go to Green Street." [2]

"You would not obey your father and mother; you will now obey thongs of leather." "The man who would not sow must now break stones."

These things were said, and repeated in the way of morality, as sentences and proverbs, but without any one taking them seriously. They were but words in the air. There was not one man among them who admitted his iniquity. Let a stranger not a convict endeavour to reproach him with his crime, and the insults directed against him would be endless. And how refined are convicts in the matter of insults! They insult delicately, like artists; insult with the most delicate science. They endeavour not so much to offend by the expression as by the meaning, the spirit of an envenomed phrase. Their incessant quarrels developed greatly this special art.

As they only worked under the threat of an immense stick, they were idle and depraved. Those who were not already corrupt when they arrived at the convict establishment, became perverted very soon. Brought together in spite of themselves, they were perfect strangers to one another. "The devil has worn out three pairs of sandals before he got

us together," they would say. Intrigues, calumnies, scandal of all kinds, envy, and hatred reigned above everything else. In this life of sloth, no ordinary spiteful tongue could make head against these murderers, with insults constantly in their mouths.

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

The officials, moreover, behaved prudently towards them. I remember that one prisoner of the resolute and intrepid class, known to possess the instincts of a wild beast, was summoned one day to be whipped. It was during the summer, no work was being done. The Adjutant, the direct and immediate chief of the convict prison, was in the orderly-room, by the side of the principal entrance, ready to assist at the punishment. This Major was a fatal being for the prisoners, whom he had brought to such a state that they trembled before him. Severe to the point of insanity, "he threw himself upon them," to use their expression. But it was above all that his look, as penetrating as that of a lynx, was feared. It was impossible to conceal anything from him. He saw, so to say, without looking. On entering the prison, he knew at once what was being done. Accordingly, the convicts, one and all, called him the man with the eight eyes. His system was bad, for it had the effect of irritating men who were already irascible. But for the Commandant, a well-bred and reasonable man, who moderated the savage onslaughts of the Major, the latter

would have caused sad misfortunes by his bad administration. I do not understand how he managed to retire from the service safe and sound. It is true that he left after being called before a court-martial.

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

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

trifle, for nothing at all. He might pass for a madman; that, in fact, is what is said of him.

I have already said that during many years I never remarked the least sign of repentance, not even the slightest uneasiness with regard to the crime committed; and that most of the convicts considered neither honour nor conscience, holding that they had a right to act as they thought fit. Certainly vanity, evil examples, deceitfulness, and false shame were responsible for much. On the other hand, who can claim to have sounded the depths of these hearts, given over to perdition, and to have found them closed to all light? It would seem all the same that during so many years I ought to have been able to notice some indication, even the most fugitive, of some regret, some moral suffering. I positively saw nothing of the kind. With ready-made opinions one cannot judge of crime. Its philosophy is a little more complicated than people think. It is acknowledged that neither convict prisons, nor the hulks, nor any system of hard labour ever cured a criminal. These forms of chastisement only punish him and reassure society against the offences he might commit. Confinement, regulation, and excessive work have no effect but to develop with these men profound hatred, a thirst for forbidden enjoyment, and frightful recalcitrations. On the other hand I am convinced that the celebrated cellular system gives results which are specious and deceitful. It deprives a criminal of his force, of his energy, enervates his soul by weakening and frightening it, and at last exhibits a dried up mummy as a model of repentance and amendment.

The criminal who has revolted against society, hates it, and considers himself in the right; society was wrong, not he. Has he not, moreover, undergone his punishment? Accordingly he is absolved, acquitted in his own eyes. In spite of different opinions, every one will acknowledge that there are crimes which everywhere, always, under no

matter what legislation, are beyond discussion crimes, and should be regarded as such as long as man is man. It is only at the convict prison that I have heard related, with a childish, unrestrained laugh, the strangest, most atrocious offences. I shall never forget a certain parricide, formerly a nobleman and a public functionary. He had given great grief to his father—a true prodigal son. The old man endeavoured in vain to restrain him by remonstrance on the fatal slope down which he was sliding. As he was loaded with debts, and his father was suspected of having, besides an estate, a sum of ready money, he killed him in order to enter more quickly into his inheritance. This crime was not discovered until a month afterwards. During all this time the murderer, who meanwhile had informed the police of his father's disappearance, continued his debauches. At last, during his absence, the police discovered the old man's corpse in a drain. The gray head was severed from the trunk, but replaced in its original position. The body was entirely dressed. Beneath, as if by derision, the assassin had placed a cushion.

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

Animal insensibility carried to such a point is most remarkable—it is, indeed, phenomenal. There must have been in this case an organic defect in the man, some physical and moral monstrosity unknown hitherto to

science, and not simply crime. I naturally did not believe in so atrocious a crime; but people of the same town as himself, who knew all the details of his history, related it to me. The facts were so clear that it would have been madness not to accept them. The prisoners once heard him cry out during his sleep: "Hold him! hold him! Cut his head off, his head, his head!"

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

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

The long days of summer were taken up almost entirely by our hard labour. The night was so short that we had only just time to sleep. It was not the same in winter. According to the regulations, the prisoners had to be shut up in the barracks at nightfall. What was to be done during these long, sad evenings but work? Consequently each barrack, though locked and bolted, assumed the appearance of a large workshop. The work was not, it is true, strictly

forbidden, but it was forbidden to have tools, without which work is evidently impossible. But we laboured in secret, and the administration seemed to shut its eyes. Many prisoners arrived without knowing how to make use of their ten fingers; but they learnt a trade from some of their companions, and became excellent workmen.

We had among us cobblers, bootmakers, tailors, masons, locksmiths, and gilders. A Jew named Esau Boumstein was at the same time a jeweller and a usurer. Every one worked, and thus gained a few pence—for many orders came from the town. Money is a tangible resonant liberty, inestimable for a man entirely deprived of true liberty. If he feels some money in his pocket, he consoles himself a little, even though he cannot spend it—but one can always and everywhere spend money, the more so as forbidden fruit is doubly sweet. One can often buy spirits in the convict prison. Although pipes are severely forbidden, every one smokes. Money and tobacco save the convicts from the scurvy, as work saves them from crime—for without work they would mutually have destroyed one another like spiders shut up in a close bottle. Work and money were all the same forbidden. Often during the night severe examinations were made, during which everything that was not legally authorised was confiscated. However successfully the little hoards had been concealed, they were sometimes discovered. That was one of the reasons why they were not kept very long. They were exchanged as soon as possible for drink, which explains how it happened that spirits penetrated into the convict prison. The delinquent was not only deprived of his hoard, but was also cruelly flogged.

A short time after each examination the convicts procured again the objects which had been confiscated, and everything went on as before. The administration knew it; and although the condition of the convicts was a good deal like that of the inhabitants of Vesuvius, they never

murmured at the punishment inflicted for these peccadilloes. Those who had no manual skill did business somehow or other. The modes of buying and selling were original enough. Things changed hands which no one expected a convict would ever have thought of selling or buying, or even of regarding as of any value whatever. The least rag had its value, and might be turned to account. In consequence, however, of the poverty of the convicts, money acquired in their eyes a superior value to that really belonging to it.

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

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

if he was insulted after this restitution, it was less from hatred than simply as a matter of conscience.

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

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

I knew a prisoner of colossal stature who was the mildest, the most peaceable, and most manageable man it was possible to see. We often asked one another how he had been deported. He had such a calm, sociable character, that during the whole time that he passed at the convict prison, he never quarrelled with any one. Born in Western Russia, where he lived on the frontier, he had been sent to

hard labour for smuggling. Naturally, then, he could not resist his desire to smuggle spirits into the prison. How many times was he not punished for it, and heaven knows how much he feared the rods. This dangerous trade brought him in but slender profits. It was the speculator who got rich at his expense. Each time he was punished he wept like an old woman, and swore by all that was holy that he would never be caught at such things again. He kept his vow for an entire month, but he ended by yielding once more to his passion. Thanks to these amateurs of smuggling, spirits were always to be had in the convict prison.

Another source of income which, without enriching the prisoners, was constantly and beneficently turned to account, was alms-giving. The upper classes of our Russian society do not know to what an extent merchants, shopkeepers, and our people generally, commiserate the "unfortunate!" [3] Alms were always forthcoming, and consisted generally of little white loaves, sometimes of money, but very rarely. Without alms, the existence of the convicts, and above all that of the accused, who are badly fed, would be too painful. These alms are shared equally between all the prisoners. If the gifts are not sufficient, the little loaves are divided into halves, and sometimes into six pieces, so that each convict may have his share. I remember the first alms, a small piece of money, that I received. A short time after my arrival, one morning, as I was coming back from work with a soldier escort, I met a mother and her daughter, a child of ten, as beautiful as an angel. I had already seen them once before.

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