THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD

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INTRODUCTION

Dynamism is inherent in Dostoyevsky, both in his writings and in the man himself. He generates a mass of ideas and almost a whirlwind of passions which, as they develop, inevitably clash. The man himself is in a continuous state of flux. His moods and his views and aims are always changing as he seeks for what he believes is the truth. Truth seeking is not a rarity in literature—particularly in Russian literature—what is exceptional in Dostoyevsky's case is the very great extent to which his personal experience affected his writing.

One of Dostoyevsky's most obvious characteristics is his dualism. He could never throughout his life sort out in his own mind what he really thought or felt about so very many problems, e.g. religion, social status, Europe, Russia's future. Possibly an early guilt complex arising from an unhappy relationship with his father (whom he felt he ought to love but could not) exacerbated his inability to reconcile the reactions of heart and brain.

His youth was' not a happy one. His mother died of consumption when he was sixteen. His father, a Muscovite doctor, organized his family on patriarchal lines and all his children feared him. In 1839, having retired to his estate, he was murdered by his peasants, who had been maddened by his brutality and licentiousness.

As a child Dostoyevsky read widely; at ten years old he was already an admirer of Schiller. His world was a world of literature and the death of Pushkin shocked him more than that of his own mother. The church, too, made an impression on him; he felt the impact of religious architecture, of choral music, of the hordes of worshippers, and he witnessed the curing of hysterical women.

In 1838 Dostoyevsky entered the Institute of Engineering in St Petersburg. Forced to 'cram' mathematics, which he loathed, he continued to be greatly interested in literature, in the theatre, and in the ideas of the romantics. In 1842, on becoming a subaltern, he was allowed to live in private lodgings and he led a gay and carefree life. By 1843 he had passed all the necessary examinations but he was uninterested in his career. 'It's as dull as potatoes,' he wrote to his brother Michael. In 1844 he resigned his commission in order to devote himself to literature. To start with, he wanted to write a tragedy, but after translating Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* he decided to write, in the form of an exchange of correspondence, a novel about an unhappy love-affair. This novel, *Poor Folk*, immediately made a name for Dostoyevsky. The author not only made his début as the defender of the 'humiliated and insulted' but attacked Gogol and his famous short story, *The Overcoat*. Gogol at this moment dominated Russian literature. *The Overcoat* is a grotesque satire—the story of the unhappy fate of a minor civil servant and his struggle to obtain a new greatcoat. In *Poor Folk* psychology replaces the grotesque. The civil servant altruistically and touchingly looks after Varenka. The satire is replaced by a tragedy with sentimental overtones and the author's views are cleverly stressed when his hero on reading *The Overcoat* indignantly reproaches Gogol for his satire which humiliates human dignity.

Dostoyevsky had entered literary St Petersburg. His letters show that he was quite 'giddy at his success.' The poet Nekrasov had published his first novel in the *Petersburg Miscellany* and he had become a friend of the famous radical critic Belinsky. But for Dostoyevsky success was short-lived because he had not yet discovered his own *genre* and style. All his work at this period is, as it were, 'under the sign of Gogol.' *A Novel in Nine Letters* reflects Gogol's *Gamblers* and *The Lawsuit. The Double*, published in 1846, elicited remarks such as: 'Dostoevsky uses Gogol's phrases,' 'One keeps on meeting old acquaintances from Gogol's books in Dostoyevsky's novels.' Yet if Dostoyevsky was unable to free himself from Gogol's influence both in form and in subject matter, he was trying to replace Gogol's satire, e.g. in *The Nose* and in *Notes of a Madman*, by showing that in his characters psychology was the motivating force for their actions. Dostoyevsky's disdain of social problems led to a break with Belinsky and with Nekrasov and his journal *The Contemporary*, since they considered that literature must embody a message.

Dostoyevsky's further literary efforts were unsuccessful. *Mr Prokharchin* has much in common with Pushkin's *The Covetous Knight,* although Dostoyevsky's central figure is only a civil servant. *The Landlady* (1847) reminds one of Gogol's *Nevsky Prospect* and was sharply criticized by Belinsky; it combined inharmoniously melodrama and mystification. In 1848, in a series of seven sketches and short stories, Dostoyevsky tried rather unsuccessfully to return to the type of psychological analysis of *Poor Folk.* Of these perhaps the best are *White Nights* and *Netochka Nezvanova.* As a whole, however, all Dostoyevsky's work of this period (including *The Little Hero,* written in 1849) gives the impression of literary experimentation as he searched for an individual manner of expression. It would appear that, although he had ideas that were basically interesting, he was unable to develop these ideas in a readable form. Later many of these ideas recur in his 'great' novels, where he was able to use them competently.

In April 1849 Dostoyevsky was arrested and charged with being a member of a revolutionary group. In fact, he and his friends had only discussed socialism and he had read aloud Belinsky's letter to Gogol, which, although it had been banned by the censor, was available in manuscript form. Dostoyevsky was considered to be one of the ringleaders and together with his friends was sentenced to be shot. A brutal farce was then enacted, the emotional trauma of which left a scar on Dostoyevsky throughout his life. When the firing squad was already drawn up, the Emperor Nicholas I reprieved the convicted men and commuted their sentence to hard labour. The whole scene had been prearranged.

Dostoyevsky's life changed completely from this moment. He was to spend nine years in Siberia: four years' hard labour at a penal settlement in Omsk were followed by service as a private soldier in a line battalion at Semipalatinsk. In the autumn of 1855 (after the accession of the new Tsar, Alexander II) he was promoted to non-commissioned rank, and in October 1856 he became an officer. After an agonizing love-affair with M. D. Isayeva he married her in 1857, but the marriage was not a happy one. He suffered from epilepsy and his attacks became more frequent. In January 1858 he requested permission to retire and this was granted the following year. At first he was not allowed to reside in either Moscow or St Petersburg, and for a while he lived in Tver' (Kalinin), but finally, in December 1859, he was given permission to move to St Petersburg.

Since leaving prison Dostoyevsky, fired with the desire to write, had been feverishly seeking for a non-provocative theme. In March 1859 he wrote *Uncle's Dream,* a farce, as he later defined it, in which he debunked the romantic philosopher. *The Village of Stepanchikovo* appeared the same year, and in it Dostoyevsky attacked hypocrites and spitefully parodied Gogol.

In 1860 *The House of the Dead* began to appear in the newspaper the *Russian World,* and in 1861-2, chapter by chapter, in the Dostoyevsky brothers' journal, *Time.* It immediately attracted widespread attention. *The House of the Dead* is exceptional among Dostoyevsky's writings in that it has no central plot and there is no dramatization of any of the characters or of the situation. Dostoyevsky could not have written his reminiscences of his own prison life without coming into conflict with the authorities, but the voice of the story-teller whom he presents to his readers as a member of the gentry and a convicted criminal is undoubtedly Dostoyevsky's own. Despite this autobiographical disguise[1] Dostoyevsky was circumspect in his descriptions. He wrote to his brother on 22nd February 1854, i.e. a week after the termination of his prison sentence, giving him a much clearer picture of prison life than he gives in *The House of the Dead.* He was particularly struck by the attitude of the other convicts to him and his companions. ' They hate the upper classes to a fantastic extent, they were most hostile and they rejoiced at our sorrow. They would have killed us had they been given the chance, they never stopped persecuting us, it gave them pleasure, it distracted them—it was an occupation. ...

'We lived in a heap all together in one barrack. . . . All the flooring was rotten and an inch deep in filth so that one slipped and fell. When wood was put on the stove there was no resulting heat only a horrible smell and thus it went on throughout the winter.' The convicts did their washing there. The stench and lack of hygiene were frightful, the food was so bad that Dostoyevsky became ill. He tried, despite their hostility, to discover what they were really like: ' How much joy it gave me to find gold under a thick outer crust. Some of them one could not help admiring and some were just wonderful. How many stories of tramps and workmen and human suffering [I heard]. Enough for many books.' And he summed up his experiences: ' The time has not been wasted as far as I am concerned, even if I have not got to know Russia I have got to know the Russian people well.'

But except for *The House of the Dead* and for a few scenes in *Crime and Punishment,* Dostoyevsky did not make use of his prison experiences in his writing. In *The House of the Dead* he tries to be as objective as possible in his descriptions: the food is bearable, the prison authorities are humane and exceptions are rare, the work is not very hard, even in fetters convicts have ways of easing their lot (singing, smoking, making things for their own use and to earn pocket-money, card-playing, and even alcohol). The main tragedy is the lack of freedom. This is particularly clearly illustrated in the story of the wounded eagle which lived in the prison yard and which

the convicts freed. Later when people were shocked at the convicts easing the conditions under which they lived while the prison authorities turned a blind eye, Dostoyevsky wrote some additional pages which were never included in the book. In them he stresses that freedom is the most important thing: 'What's bread? People eat bread to live but life itself does not exist there.' And it is not surprising that when the story-teller is finally set free his release is compared with resurrection from the dead.

For Dostoyevsky these were the years in which he turned his back on romanticism and on his own illusions. ' There is little that all the wise men can teach the people,' he wrote.

He left prison with the feeling that the best of civilization must be brought to the people but there was equally something that could be learnt from the mass of the people: the manifestation of Christian humility. From this idea sprang Dostoyevsky's populist theories.

In *The House of the Dead* he expresses his feeling that the human heart and the quality of a man's soul are more important than endured humiliation. And it was after he had written this book, which, as it were, sums up his own experience, that the writer decided that the problems of happiness, sin, crime and punishment, suffering, and the rebirth of the soul were inseparable from and incomprehensible without religion. He began to doubt the wisdom of his belief in his former idols and flung himself into the search for ' a Russian Christ,' as he defined it. As he travelled this difficult path, his mood constantly changing, ranging from faith to disbelief, making impassioned attacks on his opponents, going from disappointment to enthusiasm for new illusions, Dostoyevsky was all the while creating his philosophical novels and in the tension of their plots he could express his ideas as passions ebbed and swirled and his characters' opinions clashed furiously. Thus it was that he wrote the remarkable *Memoirs from Underground* in 1864, *Crime and Punishment* in 1865, and *The Gambler,* which he dictated in one month, in 1866. His shorthand secretary, A. G. Snitkina, became his wife three months later. He struggled to create a 'positive perfect hero' in *The Idiot* (1868), but in the next book he wrote, *The Eternal Husband* (1870), a disappointed scepticism becomes evident. A grandiose plan for *The Life of a Great Sinner* resolves itself into a picture of evil in *The Possessed* (1870-1872). *The Adolescent* (1875) is an attempt to write a *roman à thèse* and expresses very much the same ideas as those of *The Diary of a Writer* (1873-81), which was a journalistic and political commentary. And, finally, Dostoyevsky produced *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), which expresses most clearly all the problems over which he worried so much.

Yet all these books, which brought their author worldwide fame and the reputation of a soothsayer, have their roots in *The House of the Dead,* since it was through the physical suffering recorded in the latter that Dostoyevsky was able intuitively to find a fresh path for his own spiritual and literary development. It was in prison that Dostoyevsky saw evildoers as they are in real life and turned his thoughts to the problem of coping with the contradictions and, duplicity of life and the contradictions and dualism of his own character. If, therefore, *The House of the Dead* appears outwardly static and slow-moving it reveals nevertheless the formative source for Dostoyevsky's philosophy and the determining influence in his search for a way of life.

Nikolay Andreyev. 1962.

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THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD

Part I

Chapter I: Ten Years a Convict

Among the mountains and impenetrable forests of the Siberian desert one comes from time to time across little towns of a thousand or two inhabitants. They are built entirely of wood and are very ugly, with two churches—one in the centre of the town, the other in the cemetery. These places are, in fact, much more like good-sized villages on the outskirts of Moscow than towns properly so called, and are generally administered by an inspector of police, a body of assessors, and some minor officials. It is cold in Siberia, but the great advantages of Government service compensate for that. The inhabitants are simple folk without liberal ideas; their manners are old-fashioned, solid, and unchanged by time. The officials who, of course, form the nobility in Siberia, either belong to the country, deep-rooted Siberians, or have migrated from Russia. The latter come straight from the large cities, 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 adapt themselves to conditions in Siberia almost always remain there; the abundant and richly flavoured fruit which they gather 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 were so foolish as to come. They impatiently kill the three years for which they are obliged by their sentence to remain, and as soon as their time is up they ask to be sent back, and return to their original homes, decrying and ridiculing Siberia. 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 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 in fact made.

It was in one of these little towns—gay and perfectly self-satisfied, whose population 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 degree for assassinating his wife. After undergoing his punishment often years' hard labour, he lived quietly and unnoticed as a colonist in the little town of K—. To tell the truth, he was on the register of a neighbouring district; 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 exiles thus engaged: they are not looked down upon, for they teach the French language which is so necessary in life, and of which without them no one in the distant parts of Siberia would have the least idea.

I saw Alexander Petrovitch for the first time at the house of an official, Ivan Ivanitch Gvosdikof, a venerable old man, very hospitable, and the father of five daughters for whom the highest hopes were entertained. Four times a week Alexander Petrovitch gave them lessons, at the rate of thirty silver kopecks a lesson. His external appearance interested me. He was excessively pale and thin, still young—about thirty-five years of age—short and weak, and always very neatly dressed in the European style. When you spoke to him he looked at you most attentively, listening to your words with strict politeness and a reflective air, as though you had set him a problem or wished to extract a secret from him. 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 asked Ivan Gvosdikof about him. He told me that Goriantchikoff was of irreproachable morals, otherwise he would not have entrusted him with the education of his children; but that he was a terrible misanthrope, who avoided all society; that he was very learned, a great reader, and that he spoke but little, and never entered freely into a conversation. Some people said 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 contact with them. In a word, he was his own executioner. Everyone 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 extraordinary man 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 in him. He was rather enigmatic; to converse with him was quite impossible. Certainly he replied to all my questions, he seemed to regard it as a duty to do so; but when once he had answered I was afraid to question him further.

After such conversations one could observe on his countenance signs of suffering and exhaustion. I remember one fine summer's evening leaving Gvosdikof's house in his company. It suddenly occurred to me to invite him to come in and smoke a cigarette. I can scarcely describe the fright which showed itself in his countenance. He became confused, muttered incoherently, gave me an angry look, then suddenly fled in the opposite direction. I was 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 later I called on Petrovitch without pretext, and it is evident that, in doing so, I behaved foolishly and without the least delicacy. He lived in one of the farthest points of the town with an old woman whose daughter suffered from tuberculosis and had a little girl about ten years old, very pretty and very lively.

When I entered Alexander Petrovitch was seated beside the child, teaching her to read. When he saw me he became confused, as if I had detected him in a crime. Losing all self-control, he jumped 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 suspected him of some mysterious intention. I realized that he was horribly mistrustful. He looked at me as if I were some kind of spy, and seemed to be on the point of saying: 'Are you not going soon?'

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 went on in the town, and that he was in no way curious to know. I spoke to him next of the country generally, and of its men. He listened to me in silence, fixing his eyes upon me in such a strange way that I felt ashamed of what I was doing. I apparently offended him by offering him some books and newspapers which I had just received by post. He cast a greedy look upon them, but 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 felt a weight fall from my shoulders as I left the house. I regretted having harassed a man whose tastes kept him apart from the rest of the world, but the mistake had been made. I noticed 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 town for about three months, and on my return in the winter I learned that Petrovitch was dead. He had not even sent for a doctor. He was 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 deceased, and confessed that she had already used four sheets to light her fire. She was a morose and taciturn old woman and I could elicit nothing of interest. 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-day—the feast of St Catherine —he always had a requiem mass said in the parish church for somebody'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 lived under her roof, 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 someone! I took away the papers and spent the day 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 were covered with delicate handwriting which ended abruptly. 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. The story was interrupted here and there by anecdotes or strange, terrible recollections thrown in convulsively as if torn from the writer. I read some of these fragments again and again and began to suspect that they had been written in moments of madness. But his memories of the convict prison—*Recollections of the House of the Dead,* 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 shall publish some chapters from this narrative, and the public may judge for itself.

Chapter II: The House of the Dead

Our prison was at the far end of the citadel behind the ramparts. Peering through the crevices in the palisade in the hope of glimpsing 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 suddenly realizes that whole years will pass during which one will see, through those same crevices in the palisade, the same sentinels pacing the same earthwork, and the same little corner of the sky, not just above the prison, but far and far away. Imagine a courtyard two hundred feet long and one hundred and fifty feet broad, enclosed by an irregular hexagonal palisade formed of stakes thrust deep into the ground. So much for the external surroundings of the prison. On one side of the palisade is a great gate, solid and nearly always shut; watched perpetually by the sentries, 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 have undertaken to describe. Entering the enclosure, one sees a few buildings. On two sides of a vast courtyard are long wooden buildings made of logs, and only one storey high. These are convict 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 does duty 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 palisade and the buildings, there remains a fairly wide 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.

Meeting them on those walks, I took pleasure in observing their sad, deeply marked countenances, and in guessing their thoughts. The favourite occupation of one convict, during the moments allowed him from 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; and, numbering them daily in this manner, he knew exactly the number of days that he had still to pass in prison. He was sincerely happy when he had finished one side of the hexagon, although he had to wait many long years for his liberation. 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 done 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 grey hair, his countenance sad and morose. He walked in silence through our six barracks. As he entered each of them he prayed before the icon, made a deep bow to his former companions, and begged them to remember him kindly.

I also remember a prisoner who was supposed to have been a well-to-do Siberian peasant. Six years before he had had news of his" wife's remarrying, which had caused him great pain. One evening she came to the prison and asked for him in order to give him a present! They talked together for two minutes, wept together, and then separated never to meet again. I saw the expression on that man's face when he reentered the barracks. There, indeed, one learns to endure all.

When darkness set in we had to be indoors and were shut up for the night. I always found it painful to leave the courtyard for the barrack-room. Think of a long, low, stifling room, dimly lit by tallow candles, and full of heavy, disgusting odours. I cannot now understand how I lived there for ten whole years. My camp bedstead was made of three boards. It was the only place in the room that belonged to me. More than thirty of us were herded together in one room. It was, indeed, no wonder that we were shut up early. At least four hours passed before everyone was asleep, and until then there was a tumult of laughter and oaths; rattling of chains and a poisonous atmosphere of thick smoke; a confusion of shaved heads, branded foreheads, and clothes that were no more than filthy rags.

Yes, man is a pliable animal—he must be so defined: a being who grows 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, and that number remained almost invariably the same. Whenever some of us had done our time, other criminals arrived; and there were a few deaths. The population of that prison included all sorts of people: I believe that each region of Russia had furnished its representatives. There were foreigners, too, and even mountaineers from the Caucasus.

All these people were divided into different classes according to the gravity of their crimes; and consequently the length of their sentences was reflected in the class to which they were i assigned. The majority had been 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, whose brows were marked by the iron to testify for ever to their disgrace. They were incarcerated for periods of from eight to ten years, and at the expiration of their punishment they were sent as colonists to various parts of Siberia.

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—and were punished for a relatively short period. As soon as they had undergone their punishment they had to return to their units, whence they were posted to battalions of the Siberian Line.[1]

Many of them came back to us later for serious crimes, this time not for a short spell, but for twenty years at least. They then formed part of the *in perpetuo* section. Nevertheless, the 'perpetuals' were not deprived of their civil rights. There was another and sufficiently numerous class, composed of the worst malefactors. These were nearly all veterans in crime, and were called the Special section. It included convicts from all the Russias. They looked upon one another with reason as imprisoned for ever, for the term of their confinement was indefinite: the law required them to receive double and treble tasks, and 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 used to tell the other convicts; 'we, on the contrary, are here for life.' I have heard that this section has since been abolished.

At the same time, civil convicts are still kept apart, in order that the military convicts may be organized by themselves into a homogeneous 'disciplinary company.' The administration, too, had of course been changed; consequently what I describe are the customs and practices of another time— things which have since been abolished. Yes, it was a long time ago; it all seems to me like a dream. I remember entering the prison one December evening as darkness fell. The convicts were returning from work, and the roll was about to be called. An under-officer with large moustaches opened to me the gate of this strange house where I was to remain so many years, to experience so many emotions, 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 men guilty of wilful murder and manslaughter, burglars, master pickpockets, cutpurses, petty thieves, and shoplifters.

It would have been difficult, however, to say why and how certain convias found themselves in prison. 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.

Among my companions in chains I have known murderers who were so gay and so carefree that one might have made a bet that their consciences never for a moment reproached them. But there were also men of sombre countenance, who remained almost always silent. It was very rarely anyone told his history: that sort of thing was not done. Indeed, it was not tolerated. Every now and again, however, by way of a change, one prisoner would tell another his life story, and the other would listen coldly to the narrative. No one, to tell the truth, could have said anything to astonish his neighbour. 'We're not fools,' they would sometimes say with singular pride.

I remember one day an intoxicated ruffian—it was sometimes possible for the convicts to obtain drink—relating how he had killed and cut up a child of five. He had first tempted the child with a toy, 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 blackguard was obliged to shut up. But if the convicts interrupted him, it was not by any means because his recital had aroused their indignation, but because it was forbidden to speak of such things.

I must here observe that the convicts as a community possessed a certain degree of education. Half of them, if not more, knew how to read and write. Where in Russia, in no matter what district, could two hundred and fifty men be found able to read and write? Since then I have heard people say, and conclude on the strength of

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

the literate criminal, that education demoralizes the people. This is a mistake. Education has nothing whatever to do with moral deterioration; and if one must admit that it develops a resolute spirit among the people, that is far from being a defect.

Each section was differently dressed. The uniform of one consisted of a cloth vest, half brown and half grey, and trousers with one leg brown, the other grey. 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 grey cloth or brown cloth to make their clothes.' Every convict wore a vest made of grey 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 recognized at a glance.

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

All, with the exception of a few who were childishly gay and by that alone drew upon themselves general contempt, were morose, envious, atrociously 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 vanished with Lightning rapidity. Together with grovelling humility, however, some 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 calumny and detraction 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 established usage. Accordingly, willingly or unwillingly, they had to be obeyed. Certain indomitable characters yielded with difficulty, but they yielded all the same. Men who had run amok and, urged by overweening pride, had committed the most terrible crimes as it were unconsciously and in delirium, men who had terrorized whole towns, were quickly subdued by our prison system. The 'new boy,' taking stock of his surroundings, soon found that he could astonish no one. Insensibly he submitted, took the general tone, and assumed a sort of personal dignity which almost all maintained, as if the denomination of convict were 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 best line of conduct to pursue. 'We are lost men,' they said to themselves. 'We were unable to live as free men, and we must now go to Green Street.'[1]

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

These things were said and repeated as moral aphorisms, sentences, and proverbs, but without anyone taking them seriously. They were but words in the air. There was not one man among us who admitted his iniquity. Let a stranger who was not a convict endeavour to reproach one with his crime, and he would meet with an endless storm of abuse. 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 this method into a fine art.

As they worked only under threat of the big stick, they were idle and depraved. Those who were not already corrupt when they arrived were very soon perverted. Brought together in spite of themselves, they were perfect strangers to one another. 'The devil wore out three pairs of shoes before he rounded us up,[2] they would say. Intrigue, calumny, scandal of all kinds, envy, and hatred reigned above all else. In this slothful life no ordinary spiteful tongue could make headway against these murderers with insults constantly in their mouths.

As I said before, there were to be 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 on 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 -type, known to possess the instincts of a wild beast, was summoned one day to be whipped. It was during the summer, and no work was being done. The governor of the prison was in the orderly room near the

[2] An allusion to the two rows of soldiers, armed with green rods, between which convicts condemned to corporal punishment had to pass.

principal entrance, ready to assist at the punishment. This officer was dreaded by 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 his look, as penetrating as that of a lynx, that 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 going on. Accordingly the convicts one and all called him the man with eight eyes. His system was bad, for it had the effect of irritating men who were already irascible. But for the deputy governor, a well-bred and reasonable man who moderated the savage onslaughts of his superior, the latter would have caused sad misfortunes by his incompetent 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.

A prisoner, though he turned pale when summoned, generally lay down courageously and without uttering a word to receive the terrible rods; then he got up and shook himself. He bore the misfortune calmly, philosophically, it is true, though he was never punished at random, nor before careful inquiries had been made. But this time the victim considered himself innocent. Pale with fear, he walked quietly towards the escort of soldiers, but as he did so he managed to conceal in his sleeve a shoemaker's awl. Now the prisoners were strictly 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 deprive a criminal of what he is determined to conceal, and as, moreover, sharp instruments are necessarily used in the prison, they were never destroyed. If an official managed to confiscate them the convicts very soon procured new ones.

On the occasion in question all the convicts were pressed against the palisade, with palpitating hearts, peering through the crevices. It was known that this time Petroff would not allow himself to be flogged, that the governor's end had come. But at the critical moment the latter got into his carriage and departed, leaving the direction of the punishment to a subordinate. 'God has saved him!'said the convicts. As for Petroff, he underwent his punishment quietly. Once the governor had gone his anger abated. Prisoners are submissive and obedient up to a 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 for years endured the cruellest punishment will revolt for a trifle, for a mere nothing. He might pass for a madman; that, in fact, is what is said of him.

I have already stated that during many years I never remarked the least sign of repentance nor even the slightest uneasiness in a man with regard to his crime, and that most of the convicts considered neither honour nor conscience, holding that they had a right to art as they thought fit. Certainly vanity, bad example, deceitfulness, and false shame were responsible for much. On the other hand, who can claim to have sounded the depths of those hearts given over to perdition, and to have found them closed to all light? It would seem indeed that during all those years I should have been able to detect some indication, however fugitive, of some regret, of some moral suffering. I positively saw nothing of the kind. One cannot judge of crime with ready-made; opinions: 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 reformed 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 in these men profound hatred, a thirst for forbidden enjoyment, and frightful recalcitration. 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 initiative, 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, everyone will acknowledge that there are acts which everywhere and always, under no matter what legal system, are beyond doubt criminal, and should be regarded as such so long as man is man. It is only in prison that I have heard related with childish, unrestrained laughter the strangest, most atrocious offences. I shall never forget a certain parricide, formerly a nobleman and a public functionary. A true prodigal son, he had caused his father great grief. The old man had tried in vain to restrain him by remonstrance on the fatal slope down which he was sliding. But the son was heavily in debt, and as his father was suspected of having, besides an estate, a sum of ready money, he killed him in order to enter more quickly into the inheritance. This crime was not discovered until a month afterwards, during which 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 grey head was severed from the trunk, but replaced in its original position. The body was entirely dressed. Beneath, as if in derision, the assassin had placed a cushion.