

CHAPTER XXXI.

SIBERIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS.

The Za-Baikal a natural prison.—“Decembrists” of 1825.—Misapprehensions respecting political prisoners.—The story of Elizabeth.—Vindictive foreign writers.—Palpable misstatements.—Misleading information.—Dostoyeffsky’s “Buried Alive.”—Rosen’s “Russian Conspirators.”—Present condition of political prisoners.—Testimony of Poles.—Treatment of an attempted regicide.—The number of “politicals” exaggerated.—Calculations concerning them.—Their mode of transport.—Paucity of statistics accounted for.

THE Trans-Baikal province, east of the “Holy Sea,” was, until within the past 30 years, a *cul-de-sac*, to which the gravest of political offenders were commonly deported. It lay outside the two great routes of Siberian travel. The traveller to the Pacific, by way of the Lena, left the province on his right; the merchant going to Kiakhta passed it on his left. There was, indeed, a road running through the province, but it might be said to lead to nowhere. It was, moreover, a country from which a prisoner found it difficult to escape. If he went to the north he came to enormous forests, in which, though he might find berries in summer, he could not live in winter. Southwards he was hemmed in by the Mongolian desert. The road eastwards brought him to a river, down which, if he could float 2,000 miles and escape the jealous Chinese, he might reach the Pacific;

or, again, if he turned to the west, and rounded or crossed the Baikal lake, he was likely to be caught in the neighbourhood of Irkutsk ; and lastly, in whatever direction he went, there was a price on his head that could be claimed by any Buriat who chose to make him his prisoner, and bring him to the authorities either dead or alive.

There was also another reason, which, in the eyes of the Government, made the Za-Baikal a suitable place in which to confine the worst offenders ; for the province is rich in silver and gold, and gems are found in its mountains. It provided a place, therefore, where they could segregate disturbing elements of society, exact enforced labour from their convicts, and to some extent mitigate the cost of keeping them by the value of the minerals obtained. Consequently “the silver-mines of Nertchinsk” has long been an expression, at the mention of which the ears of Russians tingle ; and so it was with the prisons of Chita and Petrovski,—connected in their minds with political exiles, and especially with certain of them called “Decembrists,” who in December 1825 tried to raise revolt among the soldiers of Nicolas, and deprive him of his throne.

The mines of Nertchinsk and Kara will be treated of in subsequent chapters. I purpose to speak in this, not of political exiles with their families and descendants generally, but of the condition of *political prisoners*, past and present, and of certain buildings in which some of them have been confined. That there exists a great deal of exaggeration and misapprehension in England, on the Continent, and in America respecting the number, misery, and degradation of

Russian political prisoners I am persuaded ; nor is this hard to account for if regard be had to the character of the books which profess to give information upon the subject.

Let us begin, for instance, with the touching story of "Elizabeth ; or, the Exiles of Siberia," by Madame de Cottin, to whose work many English persons are indebted for nearly all they know of Siberia. The book so far resembles the truth that, in 1799, a young girl of 18, the only daughter of a Russian exiled officer, Proscovie Lopouloff, formed the project of asking forgiveness for her parents, for which purpose she left Ischim, near Tobolsk, with a few roubles in her pocket, walked in 18 months 2,000 miles to the capital, was presented, and obtained her petition, the real account of which is told by Xavier de Maistre in "La Jeune Sibérienne." But Madame de Cottin imported a love-match into the story, and produced one of the most popular books of her day, depicting, however, a narrative for which she had to rely largely upon her imagination for many details. She paints a picture of Siberian exile life very different from anything I ever heard, saw, or read of in the country itself. Her mistakes, however, were the mistakes such as any foreign author might easily commit in laying the scene of a story in a country then almost unknown.

Less excuse can be made for later writers (some of them escaped or released convicts), who, trading upon the credulity and ignorance of the public, have retailed and garnished accounts of horrible severities, which they neither profess to have witnessed, nor attempt to support by adequate testimony. In one of these

books, by Alexander Herzen, published in 1855, the author naïvely says in the preface that, having written in London a work, entitled "Prison and Exile," which met with success, he decided to write another volume. He accordingly did so, and had the audacity to call it "My Exile in Siberia"; whereas, on reading the book, we find that he was not exiled to Siberia at all, but simply banished for awhile to Perm, which is in Russia in Europe! Again we have, in De Lagny's "Knout and the Russians," published in 1854, a tirade against Russia all through, in which words bad enough can hardly be found to vilify its army, navy, nobility, and clergy; whilst in the following year was published "Recollections of Russia by a German Nobleman," in which he states that, for prisoners, water was drawn up green from the filthiest canal in Petersburg; and, as if that were too little, he adds that, after being knouted, the prisoners had to drink their own blood!

The books quoted thus far are mostly foreign productions, which have been translated into English; but within the past three years has been published in London a book called "The Russians of To-day," by the author of "The Member for Paris," and dedicated to the Duke of Sutherland, which gives the following account of a Russian prison (page 86):—

"A Russian gaol is not built on any wasteful plan of keeping prisoners warm and comfortable. A black, mouldy house, situate in one of the slums of the town, it is guarded by a dozen corp-headed soldiers, and has a painted escutcheon with the Imperial double-headed eagle over the gate. There is a whipping-post in the

front yard. Thieves, murderers, boys, lunatics, women, are all huddled together in a room of foul stench, warmed by a stove, and the only food served out to them is a pound of black bread in the morning, and a mess of rancid soup at mid-day. The sexes are separated at night."

Now as there will appear to be a great difference between this account and what has been stated in my chapters on Siberian prisons, I think it only right to say that I have visited Russian houses of detention from the White Sea in the north to the Black Sea and the Persian frontier in the south, and from Warsaw in the west to the Pacific in the east, but have never yet seen a Russian prison such as fairly answers to the description given above. My experience would place prisons in the suburbs rather than the "slums" of towns; and as for their atmosphere, I may safely say that the air I breathed in the worst Russian prison was incomparably better than that I had temporarily to endure in some of the peasants' houses, or which may be inhaled in many of the post-houses. The "one pound of black bread" should be multiplied by two and a half or three, and in some cases *four*; and as for "the whipping-post," I have seen such a thing in English and in American prisons, but not in Russia. The "*kobyła*," or "mare," used in flogging with the "*plète*" in *Siberia*, will be described further on; and I do not deny that in Russia there may be *some* instrument to which those to be birched are fastened, but I have never seen one, though I have usually made a point of asking concerning the mode of corporal punishment.

Again, the same author says (page 217):—

“The convicts are forwarded to Siberia in convoys, which start at the commencement of spring, just after the snows have melted and left the ground dry. They perform the *whole* journey on foot, escorted by *mounted* Cossacks, who are armed with pistols, *lances*, and long *whips*; and behind them jolt a long string of springless tumbrils, to carry those who fall lame or ill on the way. The start is *always* made in the night, and care is taken that the convoys shall only pass through the towns on their road *after dark*. Each man is dressed in a grey kaftan, having a *brass numbered plate* fastened to the *breast*, *knee* boots, and a *sheepskin* bonnet. He carries a *rug* strapped to his back, a mess-tin, and a wooden spoon at his girdle. The women have black cloaks with hoods, and march in gangs by *themselves*, with an escort of soldiers like the men, and two or three female *warders*, who travel in carts.

“In leaving large cities like Petersburg, *all* the prisoners are chained with their hands *behind their backs*; but their fetters are removed outside the city, except in the case of men who have been marked as dangerous. These have to wear leg-chains of 4 lbs. weight all the way; and some of the more desperate ones are yoked by threes to a *beam of wood*, which rests on their shoulders, and is fastened to their necks by iron collars.”

The author then goes on to say that “Nihilist conspirators, patriotic Poles, and young student girls, are all mixed up, and tramp together with the criminals.”

The words I have italicised (of which there are 23 in 26 lines) involve, in many cases, palpable misstatements. In others they are blunders, or are, at all events, open to serious question. As in the case of

Madame de Cottin (only with less innocence), a very free rein has been here given to the imagination. The avoiding of towns by day, the brass plate on the breast (instead of a piece of yellow *cloth* on the *back*), the accompanying female warders, and the chaining of men's hands behind their backs, are *blunders* utterly inexcusable; and as for the mounted Cossacks with whips, and the "beams of wood" on some of the exiles' necks—*if* the Cossacks were *mounted*, they would naturally have whips as part of their accoutrements, as they do even when riding behind the carriage of the Emperor, but the "beam of wood" is a pure invention. I never saw, heard, or read of such an instrument. Upon these last two points, however, to correct my own opinion if wrong, I spoke to an Englishman living in a town through which pass all the Siberian exiles. He has lived there many years, and has seen exiles from Perm to Kiakhta, and under all conditions. He tells me, however, that he *never* saw this wooden collar, and never saw soldiers with whips to conduct exiles; and he added, further, that he had never witnessed them using exiles improperly or unfairly. Thus it will be seen that some of the information offered to the public respecting Russian exiles is open to more than suspicion of grave misrepresentation.

But there is yet a third class of books which, in detailing past horrors, leads public opinion astray, not so much by saying what is absolutely untrue, as by omitting to point out that since the horrors they relate were enacted, the law has been altered, and that they are now a thing of the past. Englishmen would think themselves very unfairly dealt with if a foreigner, having seen an old pair of stocks in an English village, appealed

to this as proof that persons are still exposed therein; or if he hunted up stories of Tyburn, with accounts of gibbeted felons hung, drawn, and quartered, or pilloried criminals with slit noses and cropped ears, and then represented this as the existing state of things, or left his readers so to infer. This would be very similar to the treatment Russia receives at the hands of prejudiced and careless writers now-a-days, as will be seen more fully hereafter when we speak of the mines.

To keep, however, for the present, to books about prisons, and to mention one more which has appeared in English dress during the present year—namely, Dostoyeffsky's "Buried Alive; or, Ten Years' Penal Servitude in Siberia," to which I naturally turned with interest as it was written by a Russian. I was struck at the outset with the significant fact that the reader is not properly informed as to places and dates. The introduction sets forth that a certain Alexander Petrovitch Goryantchikoff died, after whose death there was found among his papers a bundle of manuscripts, which the editor, Feodor Dostoyeffsky, thought would interest the public. But scarcely a word is dropped to inform the reader when the events referred to took place, and he is left to form the very natural conclusion that he is reading of things as they now exist. My suspicions being aroused, I put on my best critical spectacles to discover, if possible, *where* the events happened, and *when*. The writer mentions having been in Tobolsk, and says that his prison was near the banks of the Irtish. Now there was, and perhaps is, a prison on the banks of the Irtish at Tara, the same from which Rufin Pietrowski made his escape; and at first I was disposed to think this was the place

of Goryantchikoff's captivity, but two subsequent allusions gave me additional light: one, that in the prison was a Jew who went out in the town to a *synagogue*; and another, that on some prisoners running away the *Governor-General* was told of it. Now, assuming that the *Governor-General* was living in the town, then the only prison situate on the banks of the Irtysh, in a town with a *synagogue* and the residence of a *Governor-General*, would be Omsk, and here accordingly I adjudged my man as to his *place*. Then as for the *date*. The writer speaks of prisoners' chains made of "four iron rods, the size of the finger, connected by three rings and worn under the trousers." I saw none like these. All we saw had small *links*, and hence I assumed that the chains described must have been of an old-fashioned pattern of former days, and I have since learnt that chains such as the man describes were seen on a prisoner going to the Caucasus in 1842. Next he speaks a good deal of flogging, and mentions the running of a prisoner down "the green lane," that is, between two rows of soldiers, each of whom gave the culprit a stroke with a stick. But this method of punishment has long been abolished in Russia; and, finally, the writer, when speaking of his conversation with a fellow-prisoner, happens to use this sentence: "I explained to him Napoleon's position, adding that he might, perhaps, some day become Emperor of the French." Taking, therefore, these three *data*, that Napoleon became Emperor in 1851, that the flogging of the description mentioned was abolished not later than 1860, and the old pattern of the chains, I came to the conclusion that the story must represent events at

least 30 years old; and I have since heard that it was about as long ago the book appeared in Russia. Now, of course, the translation might not have sold so well had readers been informed that it treats of a state of things more than a quarter of a century old; yet, no doubt, so candid a statement would have prevented many from forming false opinions respecting the present state of Siberian prisons.*

But Goryantchikoff's, it should be remembered, is a picture of a convict prison for *criminals*, and not for *political* prisoners, who are treated as a class by themselves,—so much so that they are sent to Siberia, not usually walking, under the charge of Cossacks, but driving furiously under guard of gendarmes; and if

* Let me not fail to add, however, that the whole tone of Dostoyeffsky's book is far above that of the vindictive class of writers, some of whom have been alluded to. It gives an inner view of prison life, such as no inspector, or philanthropist, or person visiting prisons as I did, could furnish. Some of this writer's statements, indeed, would hardly tally with my own experience, as, for instance, that they had the bath *seldom*, whereas I found it the rule once a fortnight, and at Tiumen and Tomsk once a week; above all, the statement that prisoners were thrashed if found sleeping on their backs, or the left side instead of the right; also what he says of thrashing generally, to which I shall allude hereafter. But I have to thank Alexander Goryantchikoff for his life-like pictures, many of which illustrate scraps of information I received concerning the Siberian prison world—such, for instance, as the various occupations carried on in secret among the convicts, one being a pawn-broker, another a *vodka* seller, others smugglers of spirits into the prison, the card-playing at night, the exchanging of their names and punishments, and the horrible language and fighting and quarrelling of the prisoners. In these things I make no doubt that "Buried Alive" gives a fairly accurate picture of things as they were, and in some cases still are, perhaps, among such prisoners as those with whom the lot of Goryantchikoff (himself a murderer) was cast. Further light also is thrown upon the interior of prison life in Siberia by the papers of M. Andreoli in *La Revue Moderne* for 1868, in which he speaks of the tricks and vices of both prisoners and officials, and of the evil effects of the gang system. A great deal of this is inevitable where a number of the most desperate felons are herded together.