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THE
HOUSE
OF THE DEAD

*Translated from
the Russian by*

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

IN the remote parts of Siberia in the midst of steppes, mountains, or impassable forests, there are scattered here and there wretched little wooden towns of one, or at the most two, thousand inhabitants, with two churches, one in the town and one in the cemetery—more like fair-sized villages in the neighbourhood of Moscow than towns. They are usually well provided with police officers, superintendents and minor officials of all sorts. A post in Siberia is usually a snug berth in spite of the cold. The inhabitants are simple folk and not of liberal views; everything goes on according to the old-fashioned, solid, time-honoured traditions. The officials, who may fairly be said to be the aristocracy of Siberia, are either born and bred in Siberia, or men who have come from Russia, usually from Petersburg or Moscow, attracted by the extra pay, the double travelling expenses and alluring hopes for the future. Those of them who are clever at solving the problem of existence almost always remain in Siberia, and eagerly take root there. Later on they bring forth sweet and abundant fruit. But others of more levity and no capacity for solving the problems of existence soon weary of Siberia, and wonder regretfully why they came. They wait with impatience for the end of their three years' term of office, and instantly, on the expiration of it, petition to be transferred and return home abusing Siberia and sneering at it. They are wrong: not only from the official standpoint but from many others, one may find a blissful existence in Siberia. The climate is excellent; there are many extremely wealthy and hospitable merchants; many exceedingly well-to-do natives. Young ladies bloom like roses, and are moral to the last extreme. The wild game-birds fly about the streets and positively thrust themselves upon the sportsman. The amount of champagne consumed is supernatural. The caviare is marvellous. In some parts the crops often yield fifteenfold. In fact it is a blessed land. One need only know how to reap the benefits of it. In Siberia people do know.

In one of these lively, self-satisfied little towns with most charming inhabitants, the memory of whom is imprinted for ever

on my heart, I met Alexandr Petrovitch Goryanchikov, a man who had been a gentleman and landowner born in Russia, had afterwards become a convict in the second division for the murder of his wife, and on the expiration of his ten years' sentence was spending the rest of his life humbly and quietly as a settler in the town. Although he was officially described as an inhabitant of a neighbouring village, he did actually live in the town as he was able to earn some sort of a living there by giving lessons to children. In Siberian towns one often meets teachers who have been convicts; they are not looked down upon. They are principally employed in teaching French, of which in the remote parts of Siberia the inhabitants could have no notion but for them, though the language is so indispensable for success in life. The first time I met Alexandr Petrovitch was in the house of Ivan Ivanitch Gvozdkov, an old-fashioned and hospitable official who had gained honours in the service and had five very promising daughters of various ages. Alexandr Petrovitch gave them lessons four times a week for thirty kopecks a lesson. His appearance interested me. He was an exceedingly pale, thin man, small and frail-looking, who could hardly be called old—about five-and-thirty. He was always very neatly dressed in European style. If one talked to him he looked at one very fixedly and intently, listened with strict courtesy to every word one uttered, as though reflecting upon it, as though one had asked him a riddle or were trying to worm out a secret, and in the end answered clearly and briefly, but so weighing every word that it made one feel ill at ease, and one was relieved at last when the conversation dropped. I questioned Ivan Ivanitch about him at the time and learnt that Goryanchikov was a man of irreproachably moral life, and that otherwise Ivan Ivanitch would not have engaged him for his daughters; but that he was dreadfully unsociable and avoided everyone, that he was extremely learned, read a great deal but spoke very little, and in fact it was rather difficult to talk to him; that some people declared that he was positively mad, though they considered that this was not a failing of much importance; that many of the most respected persons in the town were ready to be kind to Alexandr Petrovitch in all sorts of ways; that he might be of use, indeed, writing petitions and so forth. It was supposed that he must have decent relations in Russia, possibly people of good position, but it was known that from the time of his conviction he had resolutely cut off all communication with them—in fact he was his own enemy. Moreover, everyone in the town knew his story, knew that he had killed his wife in the first

year of his marriage, had killed her from jealousy, and had surrendered himself to justice (which had done much to mitigate his sentence). 'Such crimes are always looked upon as misfortunes, and pitied accordingly. But in spite of all this the queer fellow persisted in holding himself aloof from everyone, and only came among people to give his lessons.

I paid no particular attention to him at first but, I can't tell why, he gradually began to interest me. There was something enigmatic about him. It was utterly impossible to talk freely with him. He always answered my questions, of course, and with an air, indeed, of considering it a sacred obligation to do so; but after his answers I somehow felt it awkward to ask him anything more; and there was a look of suffering and exhaustion on his face afterwards. I remember one fine summer evening, as I was walking home with him from Ivan Ivanitch's, it occurred to me suddenly to invite him in for a minute to smoke a cigarette. I can't describe the look of horror that came into his face; he was utterly disconcerted, began muttering incoherent words, and, suddenly looking angrily at me, rushed away in the opposite direction. I was positively astounded. From that time he looked at me with a sort of alarm whenever we met. But I did not give in: something attracted me to him, and a month later for no particular reason I went to Goryanchikov's myself. No doubt I acted stupidly and tactlessly. He lodged in the very outskirts of the town in the house of an old woman of the working class, who had a daughter in consumption, and this daughter had an illegitimate child, a pretty, merry little girl of ten. Alexandr Petrovitch was sitting beside this child teaching her to read at the moment when I came in. Seeing me, he was as confused as though he had been caught in a crime. He was utterly disconcerted, jumped up from his chair and gazed open-eyed at me. At last we sat down; he watched every look in my face intently, as though he suspected in each one of them some peculiar mysterious significance. I guessed that he was suspicious to the point of insanity. He looked at me with hatred, almost as though asking me: how soon are you going? I began talking about our town and the news of the day; it appeared that he did not know the most ordinary news of the town known to everyone, and what is more, did not care to. Then I began talking of the country and its needs; he heard me in silence and looked me in the face so strangely that at last I felt ashamed of what I was saying. I almost succeeded in tempting him, however, with new books and reviews; they had just come by post, they were in my hands and

I offered to lend them, uncut. He glanced eagerly at them but at once changed his mind and declined my offer, alleging that he had no time for reading. At last I took leave of him, and as I went out I felt as though an insufferable weight were taken off my heart. I felt ashamed, and it seemed horribly stupid to pester a man who made it his great aim to shrink as far as possible out of sight of everyone. But the thing was done. I remember that I noticed scarcely a single book in his room, and so it was not true that he read a great deal as people said. Yet passing by his windows once or twice, very late at night, I noticed a light in them. What was he doing, sitting up till daybreak? Could he have been writing? And if so, what?

Owing to circumstances I left the town for three months. Returning home in the winter, I learnt that Alexandr Petrovitch had died in the autumn, in solitude, without even sending for the doctor. He was already almost forgotten in the town. His lodgings were empty. I immediately made the acquaintance of his landlady, intending to find out from her what had occupied her lodger, and whether he had written anything. For twenty kopecks she brought me quite a hamper of manuscript left by her late lodger. The old woman confessed that she had already torn up two exercise books. She was a grim and taciturn old woman from whom it was difficult to extract anything much. She could tell me nothing very new of her lodger. According to her, he scarcely ever did anything, and for months together did not open a book or take up a pen; but he would walk up and down the room all night, brooding, and would sometimes talk to himself; that he was very fond of her little grandchild, Katya, and was very kind to her, especially since he had heard that her name was Katya, and that on St. Katherine's day he always had a requiem service sung for someone. He could not endure visitors; he never went out except to give his lessons; he looked askance even at an old woman like her when she went in once a week to tidy up his room a bit, and scarcely ever said a word to her all those three years. I asked Katya whether she remembered her teacher. She looked at me without speaking, turned to the wall and began to cry. So this man was able to make someone, at least, love him.

I carried off his papers and spent a whole day looking through them. Three-fourths of these papers were trifling, insignificant scraps, or exercises written by his pupils. But among them was one rather thick volume of finely written manuscript, unfinished, perhaps thrown aside and forgotten by the writer. It was a dis-

connected description of the ten years spent by Alexandr Petrovitch in penal servitude. In parts this account broke off and was interspersed by passages from another story, some strange and terrible reminiscences, jotted down irregularly, spasmodically, as though by some overpowering impulse. I read these fragments over several times, and was almost convinced that they were written in a state of insanity. But his reminiscences of penal servitude—"Scenes from the House of the Dead" as he calls them himself somewhere in his manuscript—seemed to me not devoid of interest. I was carried away by this absolutely new, till then unknown, world, by the strangeness of some facts, and by some special observations on these lost creatures, and I read some of it with curiosity. I may, of course, be mistaken. To begin with I am picking out two or three chapters as an experiment—the public may judge of them.

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD

OUR prison stood at the edge of the fortress grounds, close to the fortress wall. One would sometimes, through a chink in the fence, take a peep into God's world to try and see something; but one could see only a strip of the sky and the high earthen wall overgrown with coarse weeds, and on the wall sentries pacing up and down day and night. And then one would think that there are long years before one, and that one will go on coming to peep through the chink in the same way, and will see the same wall, the same sentries and the same little strip of sky, not the sky that stood over the prison, but a free, far-away sky. Imagine a large courtyard, two hundred paces long and a hundred and fifty wide, in the form of an irregular hexagon, all shut in by a paling, that is, a fence of high posts stuck deeply into the earth, touching one another, strengthened by cross-way planks and pointed at the top; this was the outer fence of the prison. On one side of the fence there is a strong gate, always closed, always, day and night, guarded by sentries; it is opened on occasion to let us out to work. Outside the gate is the world of light and freedom, where men live like the rest of mankind. But those living on this side of the fence picture that world as some unattainable fairyland. Here there is a world apart, unlike everything else, with laws of its own, its own dress, its own manners and customs, and here is the house of the living dead—life as nowhere else and a people apart. It is this corner apart that I am going to describe.

When you come into the enclosure you see several buildings within it. On both sides of the large inner court run two long log-houses of one storey. These are the prison barracks. Here the convicts live, distributed in divisions. Then at the farther end of the enclosure another similar log-house: this is the kitchen, divided in two for the use of two messes. Beyond it another building, where are the cellars, the storehouses and stables, all under one roof. The middle of the courtyard is empty and forms a fairly large level square. Here the convicts fall in, here they are mustered, and their names are called over in the morning,

at midday, and in the evening, and on occasion several times a day as well—if the sentries are suspicious and not very clever at counting. A fairly wide space is left all round between the buildings and the fence. Here behind the buildings prisoners of an unsociable and gloomy disposition like to walk in their spare time, to think their own thoughts, hidden from all eyes. Meeting them as they walked there, I used to like looking into their grim, branded faces, and guessing what they were thinking about. There was a prisoner whose favourite occupation in his spare time was counting the posts in the fence. There were fifteen hundred of them, and he had counted and noted them all. Every post stood for a day with him: he marked off one post every day, and in that way could see at a glance from the number of posts uncounted how many days he had left in prison before his term was out. He was genuinely glad every time one side of the hexagon was finished. He had many years yet to wait, but one had time in prison to learn patience. I once saw a convict who had been twenty years in prison and was being released take leave of his fellow prisoners. There were men who remembered his first coming into the prison, when he was young, careless, heedless of his crime and his punishment. He went out a grey-headed, elderly man, with a sad sullen face. He walked in silence through our six barrack-rooms. As he entered each room he prayed to the ikons, and then bowing low to his fellow prisoners he asked them not to remember evil against him. I remember too how a prisoner who had been a well-to-do peasant in Siberia was one evening summoned to the gate. Six months, before, he had heard that his former wife had married again, and he was terribly downcast about it. Now she herself had come to the prison, asked for him, and given him alms. They talked for a couple of minutes, both shed tears and parted for ever. I saw his face when he returned to the barracks. . . . Yes, in that place one might learn to be patient.

When it got dark we used all to be taken to the barracks, and to be locked up for the night. I always felt depressed at coming into our barrack-room from outside. It was a long, low-pitched, stuffy room, dimly lighted by tallow candles, full of a heavy stifling smell. I don't understand now how I lived through ten years in it. I had three planks on the wooden platform; that was all I had to myself. On this wooden platform thirty men slept side by side in our room alone. In the winter we were locked up early; it was fully four hours before everyone was asleep. And before that—noise, uproar, laughter, swearing, the clank of

chains, smoke and grime, shaven heads, branded faces, ragged clothes, everything defiled and degraded. What cannot man live through! Man is a creature that can get accustomed to anything, and I think that is the best definition of him.

There were two hundred and fifty of us in the prison, and the number scarcely varied. Some came, others completed their sentence and went away, others died. And there were some of all sorts. I imagine every province, every region of Russia had some representative there. There were some aliens, and there were some prisoners even from the mountains of Caucasus. They were all divided according to the degree of their criminality, and consequently according to the number of years they had to serve. I believe there was no sort of crime that had not sent some prisoner there. The bulk of the prison population were exiled convicts or *sylno-katorzhny* of the civilian division (the *silno-katorzhny*, or heavily punished convicts, as the prisoners naïvely mispronounced it).

These were criminals entirely deprived of all rights of property, fragments cut off from society, with branded faces to bear witness for ever that they were outcasts. They were sentenced to hard labour for terms varying from eight to twelve years, and afterwards they were sent to live as settlers in some Siberian village. There were prisoners of the military division, too, who were not deprived of rights, as is usual in Russian disciplinary battalions. They were sentenced for brief terms; at the expiration of their sentence they were sent back whence they had come, to serve in the Siberian line regiments. Many of them returned almost at once to the prison for some second serious offence, this time not for a short term, but for twenty years: this division was called the "lifers". But even these "lifers" were not deprived of all rights. Finally there was one more, fairly numerous, special division of the most terrible criminals, principally soldiers. It was called "the special section". Criminals were sent to it from all parts of Russia. They considered themselves in for life, and did not know the length of their sentence. According to law they had to perform double or treble tasks. They were kept in the prison until some works involving very severe hard labour were opened in Siberia. "You are in for a term, but we go onwards into servitude," they used to say to other prisoners. I have heard that this class has since been abolished. The civilian division, too, has been removed from our prison also, and a single disciplinary battalion of convicts has been formed. Of course, the officials in control of the prison were all changed at the same

time. So I am describing the past, things long bygone.

It was long ago; it all seems like a dream to me now. I remember how I entered the prison. It was in the evening, in January. It was already dark, the men were returning from their work, and they were getting ready for the roll-call. A non-commissioned officer with moustaches at last opened for me the door of this strange house in which I was to spend so many years, and to endure sensations of which I could never have formed the faintest idea if I had not experienced them. I could never have imagined, for instance, how terrible and agonising it would be never once for a single minute to be alone for the ten years of my imprisonment. At work to be always with a guard, at home with two hundred fellow prisoners; not once, not once alone! Yet this was not the worst I had to get used to!

There were here men who were murderers by mischance and men who were murderers by trade, brigands and brigand chiefs. There were simple thieves, and tramps who were pickpockets or burglars.

There were people about whom it was difficult to guess why they had come. Yet each had his own story, confused and oppressive as the heaviness that follows a day's drinking. As a rule they spoke little of their past, they did not like talking about it and evidently tried not to think of bygone days. I knew some among them, even murderers, so gay, so heedless of everything that one might bet with certainty that their consciences never reproached them. But there were gloomy faces, too, men who were almost always silent. As a rule it was rare for anyone to talk of his life, and curiosity was not the fashion; it was somehow not the custom and not correct. Only on rare occasions, from want of something better to do, some prisoner would grow talkative, and another would listen coldly and gloomily. No one could astonish anyone here. "We are men who can read," they would often say with strange satisfaction. I remember how a robber began once when he was drunk (it was sometimes possible to get drunk in prison) telling how he had murdered a boy of five, how he had enticed him at first with a toy, led him away to an empty shed, and there had murdered him. The whole roomful of men, who had till then been laughing at his jokes, cried out like one man, and the brigand was forced to be silent; it was not from indignation they cried out, but simply because there is no need to talk *about that*, because talking *about that* is not the correct thing. I may mention in parenthesis that that they were "men who could read", and not in the slang, but in the

literal sense. Probably more than half of them actually could read and write. In what other place in which Russian peasants are gathered together in numbers could you find two hundred and fifty men, half of whom can read and write? I have heard since that someone deduces from such facts that education is detrimental to the people. That is a mistake; there are quite other causes at work here, though it must be admitted that education develops self-reliance in the people. But this is far from being a defect.

The divisions were distinguished from one another by their dress: some had half their jackets brown and half grey, and the same with their trousers—one leg dark brown and one grey. One day when we were at work a girl who was selling rolls looked at me intently for some time and then suddenly burst out laughing. "Ugh, how horrid," she cried, "they had not enough grey cloth and they had not enough black!" There were others whose jackets were all grey, and only the sleeves were blackish-brown. Our heads were shaved in different ways too; some had half the head shaved lengthways and others transversely.

At the first glance one could discover one conspicuous trait, common to all this strange family; even the most prominent and original personalities, who unconsciously dominated the others, tried to adopt the common tone of the prison. Speaking generally, I may say that, with the exception of a few indefatigably cheerful fellows who were consequently regarded with contempt by everyone, they were all sullen, envious, dreadfully vain, boastful people, prone to take offence and great sticklers for good form. Not to be surprised at anything was regarded as the greatest merit. They were all mad on keeping up to their standard of good form. But often the most aggressive conceit was followed in a flash by the most cringing feebleness. There were some genuinely strong characters; they were simple and unaffected. But strange to say, among these really strong people there were some who were vain to the most exaggerated degree, to a morbid point. As a rule vanity and regard for appearances were most conspicuous. The majority of them were corrupt and horribly depraved. Slander and backbiting went on incessantly; it was hell, outer darkness. But no one dared to rebel against the self-imposed rules and the accepted customs of the prison; all submitted to them. There were exceptional characters who found it hard and difficult to submit, but still they did submit. Some who came to the prison were men who had lost their heads, had become too reckless when at liberty, so that at last they com-

mitted their crimes as it were irresponsibly, as it were without an object, as it were in delirium, in intoxication, often from vanity excited to the highest pitch. But they were quickly suppressed, though some had been the terror of whole villages and towns before they came to prison. Looking about him, the newcomer soon realised that he had come to the wrong place, that there was no one he could impress here, and he gradually submitted and fell in with the general tone. This general tone was apparent externally in a certain peculiar personal dignity of which almost every inmate of the prison was acutely conscious. It was as though the status of a convict, of a condemned prisoner, was a sort of rank, and an honourable one too. There was no sign of shame or repentance! Yet there was an external, as it were official, resignation, a sort of philosophic calm. "We are a lost lot," they used to say; "since we didn't know how to get on in freedom now we must walk the Green Street,* and count the ranks." "Since we disobeyed our fathers and mothers, now we must obey the drum tap." "We wouldn't embroider with gold, so now we break stones on the road." Such things were often said by way of moral reflections and proverbial sayings, but never seriously. They were all words. I doubt whether one of the convicts ever inwardly admitted his lawlessness. If anyone, not a prisoner, were to try reproaching the criminal for his crime, upbraiding him (though it is not the Russian way to reproach a criminal), an endless stream of oaths would follow. And what masters of abuse they were! They swore elaborately, artistically. Abuse was carried to a science with them; they tried to score not so much by insulting words as by insulting meaning, spirit, ideas—and that is subtler and more malignant. This science was developed to a higher point by their incessant quarrels. All these people were kept at work by force, consequently they were idle, consequently they were demoralised; if they had not been depraved beforehand, they became so in prison. They had all been brought together here apart from their own will; they were all strangers to one another.

"The devil must have worn out three pairs of shoes before he brought us all here," they used to say of themselves, and so backbiting, intrigues, womanish slander, envy, quarrelling, hatred were always conspicuous in this hellish life. No old women

*The torture of *palki*, or the sticks, described on page 174, is meant. It was a favourite form of punishment under Nicholas I, who was nicknamed Nicholas *Palka*, or the "stick." Why it was called the "Green Street" I have not been able to discover.—*Translator's Note.*

could be such old women as some of these cut-throats. I repeat, there were strong characters even among them, men who had been accustomed all their lives to go ahead and to dominate, hardy and fearless. These men were instinctively respected; yet though they for their part were often very jealous over their prestige, as a rule they tried not to oppress the others, did not pick quarrels over trifles, behaved with exceptional dignity, were reasonable and almost always obeyed the authorities—not from any principle of obedience, nor from a sense of duty, but as though it were a sort of contract with the authorities for the mutual advantage of both. On the other hand they were treated with consideration.

I remember how one of these convicts, a fearless and determined man, well known to the authorities for his brutal propensities, was once summoned to be punished for some offence. It was a summer day and not in working hours. The officer who was immediately responsible for the management of the prison came himself to the guard-house, which was close to our gate, to be present at the punishment. This major was, so to speak, a fateful being for the prisoners; he had reduced them to trembling before him. He was insanely severe, "flew at people," as the convicts said. What they feared most in him was his penetrating lynx-like eyes, from which nothing could be concealed. He seemed to see without looking. As soon as he came into the prison he knew what was being done at the farthest end of it. The prisoners used to call him "eight eyes". His system was a mistaken one. By his ferocious, spiteful actions he only exasperated people who were already exasperated, and if he had not been under the governor of the prison, a generous and sensible man who sometimes moderated his savage outbursts, his rule might have led to great trouble. I can't understand how it was he did not come to a bad end; he retired and is alive and well, though he was brought to trial for his misdeeds.

The convict turned pale when his name was called. As a rule he lay down to be flogged resolutely and without a word, endured his punishment in silence and got up again quite lively, looking calmly and philosophically at the mishap that had befallen him. He was always, however, handled with caution. But this time he thought himself for some reason in the right. He turned pale and managed, unseen by the guard, to slip into his sleeve a sharp English knife. Knives and all sharp instruments were sternly forbidden in prison. Searches were made frequently and unexpectedly; and they were no joking matter, for the

penalties were severe; but as it is difficult to find what a thief particularly means to hide, and as knives and instruments were always indispensable in the prison, in spite of searches they were always there. And if they were taken away, new ones were immediately obtained. All the convicts rushed to the fence and looked through the crevices with beating hearts. They all knew that this time Petrov did not mean to lie down to be flogged, and that it would be the end of the major. But at the critical moment our major got into his droshki and drove away, leaving the execution of the punishment to another officer. "God himself delivered him!" the convicts said afterwards. As for Petrov, he bore his punishment quite calmly. His wrath passed off with the departure of the major. The convict is obedient and submissive up to a certain point; but there is a limit which must not be overstepped. By the way, nothing can be more curious than these strange outbreaks of impatience and revolt. Often a man is patient for several years, is resigned, endures most cruel punishment, and suddenly breaks out over some little thing, some trifle, a mere nothing. From a certain point of view he might be called mad, and people do call him so in fact.

I have said already that in the course of several years I never saw one sign of repentance among these people, not a trace of despondent brooding over their crime, and that the majority of them inwardly considered themselves absolutely in the right. This is a fact. No doubt vanity, bad example, brag, false shame are responsible for a great deal of this. On the other side, who can say that he has sounded the depths of these lost hearts, and has read what is hidden from all the world in them? Yet surely it would have been possible during all those years to have noticed, to have detected something, to have caught some glimpse which would have borne witness to some inner anguish and suffering in those hearts. But it was not there, it certainly was not there. No, it seems crime cannot be interpreted from preconceived conventional points of view, and the philosophy of it is a little more difficult than is supposed. Of course, prisons and penal servitude do not reform the criminal; they only punish him and protect society from further attacks on its security. In the criminal, prison and the severest hard labour only develop hatred, lust for forbidden pleasures, and a fearful levity. But I am firmly convinced that the belauded system of solitary confinement attains only false, deceptive, external results. It drains the man's vital sap, enervates his soul, crows and enfeebles it, and then holds up the morally withered mummy, half imbecile, as a model