

CHAPTER XLIV.

At the usual hour the jailers' whistles were heard in the corridors of the prison; with a rattling of irons the doors of the corridors and cells opened, and the patter of bare feet and the clatter of prison shoes resounded through the corridors; the men and women prisoners washed and dressed, and after going through the morning inspection, proceeded to brew their tea.

During the tea-drinking animated conversations were going on among the prisoners in the cells and corridors. Two prisoners were to be flogged that day. One of these was a fairly intelligent young clerk who, in a fit of jealousy, had killed his mistress. He was loved by his fellow-prisoners for his cheerfulness, liberality and firmness in dealing with the authorities. He knew the laws and demanded compliance with them. Three weeks ago the warden struck one of the chambermen for spilling some soup on his new uniform. The clerk, Vasilieff, took the chamberman's part, saying that there was no law permitting an official to beat prisoners. "I will show you the law," said the warden, reviling Vasilieff. The latter answered in kind. The warden was about to strike him, but Vasilieff caught hold of his hands and held him fast for about three minutes and then pushed him out of the door. The warden complained and the inspector ordered Vasilieff placed in solitary confinement.

These cells for solitary confinement were dark closets iron-bolted from the outside. In these cold, damp cells, devoid of bed, table or chair, the prisoners were obliged to sit or lie on the dirty floor. The rats, of which there was a large number, crawled all over them, and were so bold that they devoured the prisoner's bread and often attacked the prisoners themselves when they remained motionless. Vasilieff resisted, and with the aid of two other prisoners, tore himself loose from the jailers, but they were finally overcome and all three were thrust into cells. It was reported to the Governor that something like a mutiny occurred, and in answer came a document ordering that the two chief culprits, Vasilieff and the tramp Don'tremember (an application given to some tramps and jail birds who, to conceal the identity, with characteristic ingenuity and stupidity make that answer to all questions relating to their names), be given thirty lashes each.

The flogging was to take place in the women's reception-room.

This was known to all the inmates of the prison since the previous evening, and every one was talking of the coming flogging.

Korableva, Miss Dandy, Theodosia and Maslova, flushed and animated, for they had already partaken of vodka which Maslova now had in abundance, were sitting in their corner, talking of the same thing.

"Why, he has not misbehaved," Korableva said of Vasilieff, biting off

a piece of sugar with her strong teeth. "He only sided with a comrade. Fighting, you know, is not allowed nowadays."

"They say he is a fine fellow," added Theodosia, who was sitting on a log on which stood a tea-pot.

"If you were to tell him, Michaelovna," the watch-woman said to Maslova, meaning Nekhludoff.

"I will. He will do anything for me," Maslova answered, smiling and shaking her head.

"It will be too late; they are going to fetch him now," said Theodosia. "It is awful," she added, sighing.

"I have seen once a peasant flogged in the town hall. My father-in-law had sent me to the Mayor of the borough, and when I came there I was surprised to see him----" The watch-woman began a long story.

Her story was interrupted by voices and steps on the upper corridor.

The women became silent, listening.

"They are bringing him, the fiends," said Miss Dandy. "Won't he get it now! The jailers are very angry, for he gave them no rest."

It became quiet in the upper corridor, and the watch-woman finished her story, how she was frightened when she saw the peasant flogged, and how it turned her stomach. Miss Dandy told how Schezloff was flogged with a lash while he never uttered a word. Theodosia then removed the pots and bowls; Korableva and the watch-woman took to their sewing, while Maslova, hugging her knees, became sad from ennui. She was about to lay down to sleep when the matron called her into the office, where a visitor was waiting for her.

"Don't fail to tell him about us," said the old Menshova, while Maslova was arranging her headgear before a looking-glass half void of mercury. "It was not me who set the fire, but he, the villain, himself did it, and the laborer saw it. He would not kill a man. Tell him to call Dmitry. Dmitry will explain to him everything. They locked us up here for nothing, while the villain is living with another man's wife and sits around in dram-shops."

"That's wrong!" affirmed Korableva.

"I will tell him--yes, I will," answered Maslova. "Suppose we have a drink, for courage?" she added, winking one eye.

Korableva poured out half a cup for her. Maslova drank it and wiped her mouth. Her spirits rose, and repeating the words "for courage," shaking her head and smiling, she followed the matron.