

From Bremer's Excursions in the Interior of Russia,

### THE EXILES OF SIBERIA.

The laws of the empire requiring that all those condemned to exile, in whatever part of the country they may have received sentence, must pass through Moscow on their way to Siberia, the traveller has here the best opportunity that can be afforded in any part of European Russia, of learning something of the treatment and prospects of those unhappy men.

On reaching this city, they are allowed a brief rest in the convict prison; their daily journeys being so calculated that the separate bands all arrive here, from the opposite corners of the empire, each Saturday night. After resting throughout the ensuing week, during which they are relieved from their chains, they are despatched in one common band on the second Monday after their arrival; on which occasion government allows some member or members of the committee of prisons to be present, to controul the harshness of the jailors or the guards, and to see that none suffer any unnecessary degree of restraint. They are even empowered to hear any statement which the prisoners may make, and, in most cases, to grant immediate redress; or if the application be not of a nature to be granted on the spot, to pledge themselves that it shall be duly attended to after their departure.

The person most frequently present on those occasions is the excellent Hazy, physician to the prisons, one of the warmest philanthropists we have ever known. His exertions in behalf of the unhappy convicts are most incessant. His labours are evidently those of love, and that makes him deem no sacrifice of time or comfort too great.

Instead of a frowning prison we were surprised to see merely a collection of log huts, united, however, and surrounded by a wooden wall, strong and high. Indeed we soon saw that the place, though of seemingly frail materials, is made fully as secure as stone and lime could be—numerous sentinels being posted round it, as well as at every gate. On being admitted, which was done with great caution, and after a strict scrutiny, we found the first court occupied by a file of prisoners already chained for the dreary journey. Poor wretches! with those heavy fetters on their ankles, they were to walk every step of a journey which lasts only a few days less than six months! They were all, men and women, in the convicts' dress, a long loose kind of greatcoat made of coarse lightish grey cloth. The men have one side of their head shaved; but to distinguish soldiers more readily from the others, they have the whole fore part of the head shaved, in place of the side. All are permitted to retain the enormous beard, in which they take much delight. Each is allowed a low felt cap; but they always remain uncovered when any visitor comes near: in fact, the whole time we remained in the prison, the manner of all we saw was not only respectful, but becoming. There was something of composed resignation amongst them, which touched us more than clamorous grief would have done. Of what is still more shocking in such places—levity—there was also none—not a single instance of the swearing and attempted tricks generally seen in such places at home.

Leaving the court, we entered a large prison-room, most frightfully crowded with men, women, and children, who were to depart that morning. Dr. Hazy and another member of the committee were seated near the door, and by them stood the principal keeper, who had the long list of names in his hand, to each of which was added a brief notice of the crime and history of the individual. Always, as a new name was called, the person came forward from the crowd, and, before passing out to have his chains put on in the yard, was asked whether he had any application to make. Many of them had nothing to ask; others had petitions about wife or child, or relations, which were almost invariably granted. If the request be of a kind which cannot be fulfilled without a short delay, the visitors' powers go so far as to entitle them to defer a prisoner's departure for a week.

The readiness and clearness too, with which they seemed to state their cases, surprised us; a few words sufficed; while the firm yet respectful way in which the plea was urged, showed that they felt themselves in friendly company. Their joy and gratitude, when any wish was complied with, knew no bounds. The anxiety shown to gratify them astonished us, and proved that the system is not in all respects so cruel as we had imagined.

The applications were of course of very different kinds. One man, for instance, a Jew, came forward and begged that he might be granted eight days' delay, as his brother, also a convict, would arrive the following week, and it would be some consolation to them, even in disgrace, to travel together. It was instantly complied with; and the poor man—he had been condemned for a species of forgery—drew back overjoyed into the throng.

A female who had volunteered to accompany her husband, and had an infant in her arms, wished that they might be allowed to remain a little, to give her time for receiving an answer to an application which they had made to see whether the parish would allow their other child to accompany them. This was also conceded: In explanation of this case it may be stated, that by the law, if a prisoner wish to have his wife with him, and she is willing to go (she cannot be compelled, banishment to Siberia cancelling the bonds of marriage,) government pays all her expenses on the journey, but she must assume the convict uniform and go

along with the chain—not tied, nor in it, but behind it—in one of the carts for infants and baggage. With children the case is different—they belong to the parish, not to the parents. Each parish and each proprietor having an interest in keeping their population as high as possible, parents are not allowed to claim any above five years of age when boys, nor above seven when girls. Boys, in particular, parishes are very unwilling to part with; as may be expected in a country where the numbers to be drawn for the army in each parish depends not on the amount of population at the moment of drawing, but on the amount a short time before; so that the conscription falls more heavily on those who remain, if they part too readily with youngsters. Sometimes however, great indulgence is shown, both by proprietors and communities.

The ceremony just described was gone through with all, and by the time we returned to the principal court, fetters had been placed on nearly the whole band. It is a cruel operation. The fetters consist of a couple of heavy iron rings, one for each ankle, united by a chain generally two feet long, or rather more, and made of links each four or five inches in length. The chains are not placed on the naked skin, but over the short boot. Instead of being fastened by a padlock, however, so as to be easily removed at night,—the prisoner is never relieved of them till he reach his journey's end—the chains are rivetted by the executioner, who drives an iron bolt through the ankle-rings, and, by strong hammering, flattens it at both ends in such a way, that nothing can take it out—it must be cut through by main force. While the chaining is going on, the serjeant who is to take charge of the prisoners on their journey, stands by all the time, to see that all are secured to his satisfaction—that is, in such a way as he thinks will justify him in answering for their safe keeping with his own life.

The whole band being now fettered, they were again mustered in the yard, after which a new chaining commenced—they had still to be linked four and four together by the wrists. At the head of the line a little table was standing, covered with copper coin, from which every man was receiving, in advance, a certain part of his daily allowance, government giving each, for his maintenance, a fraction less than five-pence a day. To each woman who accompanies her husband, half that sum is allowed, and for each child something in proportion.

As the moment of starting approached—the moment when for them the world, our world, should cease to have any interest—for when once those gates are passed they are considered as dead, cut off from society—we were more than ever struck with the calm bearing of the troop. So far from being sad or repining, they looked almost cheerful, and willing to go. This feeling is inspired by the general leniency of their treatment. They are warmly clothed, provided with strong shoes for the journey, and plentifully fed. If sick, they are also cared for.

All being now ready, the final scene was gone through, by the doctor asking—it is the last chance they have of making their wants known—“whether they were satisfied or had any request still to make?” All replied, “we are contented; we have nothing to ask.”

The gates were thrown open, outside of which the exiles, of whom there must have been more than one hundred, were handed over to a strong guard on foot. Every man loaded his gun in the presence of the prisoners. There was a mounted escort with long spears; the commander of which instantly began to use the poor creatures very roughly, riding fiercely about amongst them, striking right and left with his strong whip, without the smallest reason for doing so, just as a brutal drover might do amongst cattle. A little confusion prevailed for a time, but soon all was in order, and they moved slowly away—the men in a band by themselves; after which followed the carts with their wives, their children, and their little bundles of clothes; and last came the female convicts, marching in a band by themselves, strongly guarded, but not chained.

When they had got to some distance, it was terrible to hear the slow, regular clank of their chains, as they crept across the turf among the small clumps of fir. This gave us a long look as we turned away.

The fate of those condemned to the highest degree of punishment is one of perhaps unmitigated misery—nothing can be more wretched than their condition. From the first hour after their arrival, they are engaged in the most laborious and unwholesome toils—in the freezing depths of the mine, or amid the suffocating vapours of the places where unhealthy chemical processes are carried on—shut up from the light of day, the breath of heaven, the sympathy of their kind. They not only lose goods and rank, but by a refinement in cruelty, they lose their very names—that which marked them to be Christians, and by which they were known among men, is taken away. Christian and family appellations are alike obliterated, and a number given in their stead, by which they are always called by the driver when he has occasion to address them.

Hard as all this may be, the government answers, and perhaps with some reason, that such a punishment is better than to take away their lives, which would have been their sentence in almost every other country.

It must also be stated that the number of those who suffer in

this way is very limited: the greater part of the Siberian exiles are by no means severely treated: they are more colonists than convicts, and have it fully in their power not only to live in comfort, but to secure the respect of those about them. Some prisoners who have made their escape, and got back to Russia, have said that, but for the unquenchable desire to see their native village, they would not have wished to change their condition.

Most of the convicts are settled out on allotments, which they cultivate; and as it is the interest of government to colonize the country, and people it as fast as possible, a man with a family is always encouraged. Taking, therefore, the great mass of those sent thither, the true way of regarding Siberian exile would be to consider it as a new life to the prisoner. From the moment he leaves Moscow, all connexion between him and the community to which he hitherto belonged entirely ceases; he is cut off from every previous connection; habits, observances, duties—are changed;—the past becomes a blank; but the future may not be misery. If he can reconcile himself to it, his lot becomes supportable; even more, he may amass something, and leave a family who, taking warning by their father's sufferings, may, by perseverance in the paths of virtue, soon cause their origin to be forgotten.

It surprised us to find that, besides those banished by the sentence of the regular courts, a great many are sent to Siberia by the proprietors of land, noblemen, &c., whose sentence is fully as imperative as that of the judges. When one of his serfs offend him, a landlord has but to condemn him to exile, and he is rid of him for ever. Several of those we saw of this class. This punishment cannot be inflicted, taking the strict letter of the law, at the mere caprice of the individual; but in practice it is found difficult to control a nobleman; he is to all intents and purposes irresponsible for the exercise of this dangerous privilege.

### LAST NO. OF "NICHOLAS NICKLEBY"

BREAKING UP OF DOTHEBOY'S HALL.

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“The success of this first achievement prompted the malicious crowd, whose faces were clustered together in every variety of lank and half-starved ugliness, to further acts of outrage. The leader was insisting upon Mrs. Squeers repeating her dose, Master Squeers was undergoing another dip in the treacle, and a violent assault had been commenced on Miss Squeers, when John Browdie, bursting open the door with one vigorous kick, rushed to the rescue. The shouts, screams, groans, hoots, and clapping of hands, suddenly ceased, and a dead silence ensued.

“Ye be noice chaps,” said John, looking steadily round. “What's to do here, thou young dogs?”

“Squeers is in prison, and we are going to run away!” cried a score of shrill voices. “We won't stop, we won't stop!”

“Weel then, dinnot stop,” replied John, “who waants thee to stop? Run awa' loike men, but dinnot hurt the women.”

“Hurrah!” cried the shrill voices, more shrilly still.

“Hurrah!” repeated John. “Weel, hurrah loike men too. Noo then, look out. Hip—hip—hip—hurrah!”

“Hurrah!” cried the voices.

“Hurrah agean,” said John. “Looder still.”

The boys obeyed.

“Anoother!” said John. “Dinnot be afeard on it. Let's have a good 'un.”

“Hurrah!”

“Noo then,” said John, “let's have yan more to end wi,' and then coot off as quick as you loike. Tak' a good breadth noo—Squeers be in jail—the school's brokken oop—it's a' ower—past and gane—think o' that, and let it be a hearty 'un. Hurrah!”

“Such a cheer arose as the walls of Dotheboys Hall had never echoed before, and were destined never to respond to again. When the sound had died away the school was empty, and of the busy noisy crowd which had peopled it but five minutes before, not one remained.

“Very well, Mr. Browdie!” said Miss Squeers, hot and flushed from the recent encounter, but vixenish to the last; “you've been and excited our boys to run away. Now see if we don't pay you out for that, Sir! If my pa is unfortunate and trod down by, henemies, we're not going to be basely crowed and conquered over by you and Tilda.”

“Noa!” replied John bluntly, “thou bean't. Tak' thy oath o' that. Think better o' us, Fanny. I tell'ee both that I'm glad the auld man has been caught out at last—very glad—but ye'll sooffer eneaf wi'out any crowin' fra' me, and I be not the man to crow nor be Tilly the lass, so I tell'ee flat. More than that, I tell'ee noo, that if thou need'st friends to help the awa' from this place—dinnot turn up thy nose, Fanny, thou may'st—thou'lt foind Tilly and I wi' a thont o' old times about us, ready to lend thee a hand. And when I say that, dinnot think I be asheamed of waa't I've deane, for I say agean, Hurrah! and curse the schoolmeaster—there!”

“His parting words concluded, John Browdie strode heavily out, remounted his nag, put him once more into a smart canter, and, carolling lustily forth some fragments of an old song, to which the horse's hoofs rang a merry accompaniment, sped back to his pretty wife and to Nicholas.