HAVING been accused of plotting against the Russian Government, I was confined for four years in various prisons of my native land. It was a cold and lonesome time. The longest part of my buried life I spent in the famous Dom Predvaritelnovo Zakutchenia—the House of Preliminary Confinement, in St. Petersburg. It was the place to which prisoners were brought immediately after arrest and in which they remained until either convicted and exiled to Siberia or released.

My cell, number four hundred and ten, was on the fourth floor, and like most cells it was dark, narrow and cold. I shuddered when I crossed the threshold and the door clanged behind me; for I felt that I had left the world and all its loveliness forever behind, and that I was locked in a tomb. The naked interior of my dreadful home was of reddish iron and mournful dark stone. There was an inquisitional cruelty in the iron furniture, the stone floor and the gray walls. A feeling of being buried alive was my first impression.

To be forever alone, to hear never a word from the world without, never a syllable from human lips other than the grudging replies of the guards—this was almost death. My life was to become a long monotony, and I began to prepare to be imprisoned forever.

Every day, it is true, I was allowed to walk for fifteen minutes in the prison yard—but even there I was alone, and all I could see of the universal sky was a narrow strip of blue or a gray patch of cloud.

Once a month, however, it was my privilege to attend services in the prison chapel; for it must be admitted that the Russian Government is piously solicitous for the welfare of the souls of those whose bodies it starves and kills. But even in the church I was in a cell, and could see no one save the officiating priest.

Though I was deprived of human companionship, yet I was not wholly forsaken; for during my imprisonment I was consoled by the love of a dove and a mouse. We were indeed great friends and shared both joys and sorrows. We had a common language, the intuitive speech of the heart and affection. Not the mouth, but the eyes and gestures express this wordless language. We had much to talk about and we understood each other very well.

A few weeks after my imprisonment, while walking in the yard, a white dove flew to my feet. The next day, in anticipation of such an event, I secretly provided myself with a few bread crumbs. The dove again appeared and it was not long before I succeeded in coaxing her to feed out of my hand. Not only would she fly to me in the yard, eat from my hand and look at me with her comforting eyes, but she
would also perch on my shoulder, where I had put some bread crumbs, and murmur her monotonous "Hu, hu, hu."

HAVING seen from the window, circling above the roof, the same white dove which I had fed in the courtyard, I determined to coax her to my cell. This I did by placing some crumbs of food on the window-sill. Her attention having been attracted to this particular spot, I felt that she would be likely to visit it again. The result was that the little dove and I soon became devoted friends. She always came in the early morning and at twilight; and when the window was closed she would tap on the pane with her beak until it was opened.

Sometimes her gentle little eyes were sad, as if she, too, suffered; often they were glad, as if with happiness.

"Hu, hu, hu," she would say, and when I stroked her feathers she seemed truly grateful. After a while, when I had gained her entire confidence, she would fly into the cell and perch upon the bed or the table.

One day it occurred to me that she might be a carrier pigeon and that I could use her as a messenger. So I tied around her neck a little piece of paper, on which I had written these words:

"From a prisoner in Dom Predvaritelnavo Zakluchtenia. Please answer by the dove, who visits me every day. Send me a pencil and some thin paper. Prisoner Four Hundred and Ten."

The dove flew away with my letter and I eagerly awaited her return at twilight. However, she did not come back that evening as usual, and I began to fear that some misfortune had overtaken her, occasioned perhaps by my message. I did not sleep much that night. The next morning I heard the usual tap, tap, and hurriedly opening the window admitted my little messenger. Around her neck was another letter. Feverishly untying the string with which it was bound, I opened it and found a little bag and a blue silk ribbon, on which was written this reply:

"The dove brought me your letter. She and her little ones have a nest in our house. She is also my dearest friend and I am not jealous of her friendship for you. I enclose pencil and paper; for I know you are deprived of these things. God help you. Your friend, Miss Liberty."

This was a great event in my monotonous life, and the dove became my greatest benefactor. Nearly every week she brought me a note from my unknown friend. Days, months and years passed like a dream. I almost forgot that there was another life besides the prison life; or other beings than the dove, the mouse and the myste-
rious Miss Liberty. Had it not been for my daily walk in the prison yard when I caught glimpses of the sky, the clouds and sometimes of the birds, the world I had lost would have been no more than a memory. It was hard to realize that I once had lived in that free world, that I had actually had birds and trees for my daily associates, that I could go where my will directed.

JUST as the life in the world is full of incidents and change, so also in prison there were events of more or less importance. Sometimes a prisoner died or was released, and within a few hours the news was telegraphed from cell to cell by a certain code of the prisoners, who conversed by tapping on the walls. Then there were the new arrivals who brought the news of the world. But even more interesting than these were the stories of the lives of the prisoners with which we made lighter many a heavy hour, and my correspondence, through the dove, with Miss Liberty was almost always concerning these subjects.

One morning the dove brought me a beautiful flower, a lily, and to this was attached a card, on which was written:

"Today is your mother’s birthday. I send you this flower. Try to look beyond your present suffering. This discipline will make you strong. Goodbye."

"How strange," I thought, "that she knows so much about my life. I must find out who she is." I wrote her often asking her to give me her address and real name, or something to identify her personality. To such request she would reply:

"You know the dove, you touch her feathers and pet her; I do the same. We both love her and she loves us. Is not that sufficient? She is the medium between you and me. Her eyes bring me your greetings and the story of your emotions and I ask her to bring you mine. I love her."

It is a peculiarity of solitary confinement that one inevitably invests even the most material objects with personality. One ceases to meditate; animals and inanimate things are endowed with human attributes, so that one converses with them as if they were friends and comrades. The dove and mouse had become my sisters. They seemed like other selves, to be conscious of my sufferings, to know my thoughts and to sympathize with me.

How I loved them, and how in return they loved me, cannot be appreciated by anyone who has not had a similar experience. It was a simple and innocent love,—a thing almost incredible in this world of strife and bitterness, where the strong survive at the sacrifice of the weak.
While the eyes of the dove gave me the impression that she was a pessimist, those of the mouse suggested the optimist. In the beginning of our acquaintance the mouse was very timid and would not take the food I had placed on the floor until I was some distance away. In a few weeks, however, she was so tame that she would take the food from my fingers. In a month or two she lost all her fear and would play with me, dancing around me like a tiny dog. She was fond of being tickled and scratched on the back, and I would stroke her fur as one strokes a cat.

Early in the morning she would come from a small hole under the water pipe. After listening a moment, she would run up the leg of the table and, reaching the top, would dash at the crumbs or the pieces of fat which I had placed there. Having finished her breakfast, she would jump down upon the bed and crawl under the blankets. At first I resented this intrusion. It did not impress me as particularly pleasant; for, as with most people, the touch of a rodent had always made me feel rather creepy. But when I understood the intimate affection of the little animal, I could no longer repulse her. Sometimes when I awoke earlier than usual, I would even wait for her. I named her “Tsakki.”

“Tsakki, tell me how old you are.” I would say to her.

Then she would close her eyes and nod her little head, seeming to say:

“I don’t remember; for we don’t measure time as you do. We are not so stupid. It is enough that we live and are happy.” Then I would ask:

“Tsakki, are you married or single?”

Wagging her little tail, she would reply; for so I interpreted her look and attitude:

“I have my nest, my children and my beloved, but I’ve never heard of a marriage. We live, love and are happy. Isn’t that enough?”

Thus I would talk with her for hours. She understood only the speech of my eyes. The desire to speak becomes almost a mania with prisoners in solitary confinement. They have a desire to communicate with everything: with the clouds, the stars, the moon, the birds and also with their own hallucinations.

Once Tsakki’s eyes were sad, like those of a weeping child.

“Tsakki, what is the matter?” I asked. “Have you lost one of your little ones? Or has your beloved forsaken you?”

“Everything,” she seemed to reply, shaking her head, “but I shall learn to forget and soon shall be happy again.” And happiness was indeed her normal condition.
THE PRISONER’S FRIENDS

She was fond of music. Often I would hum some tune, or play on a string held taut between my fingers, and to this she would listen for hours. She seemed to appreciate only the music of very high notes, while to the lower tones she remained entirely indifferent. Tsakki was indeed a paragon of virtue in every way, except when she was jealous of my other friend, the dove. She did not like it when I stroked the dove and fed her from my hand, and often she bristled as if she would attack the dove with her sharp teeth. The dove was very generous and willingly left her food for the mouse.

One evening, after several days of absence, Tsakki came again very shyly. I was just eating my supper when I heard her tiny voice. She emerged from the hole beneath the water pipe and scampered forward and backward several times as if to attract my attention. Presently another and smaller head appeared, and I realized that the mouse had come with her little one, of which, to judge by her actions and her sparkling eyes, she was exceedingingly proud.

She was not able, however, to persuade the younger to venture in my direction. It was very shy and timid, and kept a safe distance. I gave the mother a small piece of fat, which she carried to her infant; and the prodigy, as if to show what it could do, at once began to eat it. Then there was heard the sound of feet passing through the corridor, and mother and child scampered fearfully away.

For several weeks the little one accompanied its mother, who seemed very anxious that we should become friends. I exhausted all my arts and hours of patience to attract the timid creature; but it would not become my friend. It was entirely different from its mother. Finally it ceased to come and I did not see it any more.

I wondered often at Tsakki’s keen understanding of my psychology. I was not always disposed to caress or to pet her and she understood my mood immediately and did not bother me at all, but after getting her meal soon disappeared. She knew when I was in a talkative or in a quiet humor and accommodated herself to my feelings. When I was sad she looked at me with her beaming eyes, wagged her tail and went away. When I was merry she jumped around and expressed her good humor.

She was, however, a thief and lacked a sense of honor, as men recognize it. I could leave neither meat nor sugar on the table or on the shelves, for Tsakki would return at night while I was sleeping and would steal it all.

I used to tease her by filling the meat with salt. Not suspecting any wrong she would grasp it, but when she began to eat she became
THE PRISONER’S FRIENDS

very angry. When I offered it again she would refuse to take it, or would bite my finger furiously. Food was the sole concern of her life. She was a real materialist and had no other ideals than her daily bread and her nest.

We quarreled with each other, we understood each other and we loved each other. For two years Tsakki shared all my joys and sufferings. I loved her companionship, especially when in my loneliness I felt that I was forsaken by my friends and by all those who once had loved me. I loved her because she was so gentle, so sincere and simple, while men seemed to me to be almost artificial. When I thought of their hypocrisies I looked upon my little friend as a being far superior to man. When I felt lonely and when I could endure the everlasting silence no longer, I found consolation in my conversation with Tsakki, in playing with her or in looking silently into her smiling eyes. She had become like my own child to me.

ONCE, on a rainy autumn evening, when the wind howled and roared around the towers and the chimneys of the gloomy prison, I was lying mournfully on my hard bed and thinking. A prisoner next to my cell had just told me through the language of the walls the tragedy of his life, and another, above me, had informed me of the suicide of his neighbor who had hanged himself to the wall. Their talk had made me sorrowful and the world seemed like a desert where joy could never come.

Being thus in a mood of deep melancholy and of sad reflections I was surprised by a very unusual noise, as if someone were beating against the wall in the next cell. I jumped out of my bed and listened; but I could hear nothing but the steps of the walking sentinel in the corridor as he passed my door. After a while I heard again the same fluttering noise.

I looked out of my window and there against the window pane like the shadow of a ghost stood my friend, the dove. I was greatly surprised in finding her so late at night at my window and in such stormy weather; for this never had happened before. I hurriedly opened the window and she flitted inside. She was in an altogether unusual state, for she trembled as if she were in great fear. I looked at her feathers, her wings and feet but I could discover nothing wrong with her, except her great excitement. Caressing her tenderly for some minutes I asked with intimate sympathy:

“Tell me, golubichik—little dove, what is the matter with you? Has somebody hurt you or was your life in danger? How is Miss Liberty? Is she ill? Tell me.”

I looked into her dreamy eyes and they gazed mutely at me with
THE PRISONER’S FRIENDS

such sorrow that it almost made me cry. They were the eyes of a child who has suddenly lost its mother. They were full of pain. I comforted her, stroked her feathers and beak, and offered her some water. This she accepted and after she had drunk thirstily she perched on my hand. Convulsive shudders now and then indicated that she was still in a spell of great excitement. I questioned her about everything, and imagined various tragedies in her eyes. But I was not able to discover the cause of her sorrow.

For many hours I kept her by me while she looked with great fear out of the window as if some great trouble were there. Only near me did she seem satisfied and quiet. She sat calmly on my hand or on my shoulder and gazed at me with a gentle look.

“What can I do for you?” I asked her.

“Your love is all I ask,” she seemed to reply, for so I interpreted her look. “I am hungry for it. Let me be with you. It is so dreadful there in the dark. How cosy it is to be with a beloved companion.”

I could not send her away, although according to the prison rules I was not allowed to keep her in the cell. However, I intended to have her over night with me. I put her on the edge of my iron bed, but she was so frightened that she refused to be a moment alone. The keeper put out the fire and the room became pitch dark. He did not notice the dove in the cell when he looked through a hole in the door. I was glad and went to bed, keeping my hand on her wings, which made her calm and quiet. And then I fell asleep.

After some hours, while we were asleep, Tsakki came to examine the table and the shelves to steal some food for her children. Seeing the dove slumbering on my bed she ran up to her angrily. I was awakened by the rustle of my excited friend flying frightened around in the darkness. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation I called to the dove, comforting her while I scolded Tsakki and ordered her to leave us alone, which she did only after a long scolding. After a time of quietness I again fell asleep and thus we remained until dawn.

The dove, now awakening, flew upon the table and picked up some bread crumbs for her breakfast. I got up also, wrote a letter to Miss Liberty about the curious excitement of our messenger, bound it around her neck and opened the window. She looked timidly back at me and at the flying clouds and disappeared.

Weeks passed and the dove did not come. I waited and waited. Heavy presentiments and sad thoughts began to depress me and I felt in agony, as one feels when he awaits his sweetheart and she never comes, for it seemed to me that I had at once lost my two best friends. “Yet, such is life!” I said to myself and I tried to forget.
THE PRISONER'S FRIENDS

But do what I could, it was impossible to shake off the memory of my lost companion. Always the dove was before my eyes and I almost saw visions of her.

One Sunday morning on a cold winter day, the dove again appeared at the window and gazed into the cell as if to find out if I, the old friend, were still there. It was as if I had refound my lost bride. I opened the window, put out my hand and cried:

"Come in. How do you do? Tell me what has been the matter."

She recognized me, came timidly in and looked at me curiously, with her usual melancholy expression. Her appearance was so impressive that I felt almost as if she were a lost child that was found. I took her in my hand, pressed her head to my face and caressed her with tender words. She seemed very happy and walked around the cell, perched upon the table, and pecked tenderly at my cheeks. After the first moments of greeting were over, I noticed a small bag around her neck which I untied immediately. It was a note from my mysterious friend. This is what she wrote:

"The interruption of our correspondence was apparently due to an accident to our messenger. Did you get that souvenir I sent through her five weeks ago? It was a stormy day and I felt also a tempest in my emotions. The dove today returned frightened and depressed after several weeks of absence. Where was she those many cold days and what did she do? She seems to tell me with her mournful "hu, hu, hu," but I am unable to understand. Please write me how you are and what you know about her absence. I hope she will find you safe and well. Your friend, Miss Liberty."

I read and reread the note and tried to get from its carrier some explanation. To all my questions she was dumb. Yet she was in her usual disposition and ate the breakfast I had prepared for her from my daily allowance. Now and then she shook her wings, glanced at me and at the blue sky through the trellised window and muttered her "hu, hu, hu." I then wrote Miss Liberty that I had never received her souvenir and that I did not know what had occasioned the absence of the dove. I asked my friend also what she meant by "the tempest in her emotions," but to this she never replied.

Thus the dove became again my benefactor and like a messenger of freedom brought healing from my sorrow and sufferings in that lonely world. I awaited her arrival with eagerness and I felt depressed when she failed to come. I was happy when she brought me news from that world without, which to me had become almost a dream.

A few days later I received a note from my unknown friend, in-
forming me that I would be free. I told some of my fellow prisoners, though they refused to believe it could be anything but a joke of the keepers. But all the same the dove proved a true prophet. At eleven o’clock the same night the keeper entered my cell and told me I was free.

And then I had to leave the cell where I had spent those terrible years. Words cannot describe my gladness, yet my joy was not unmixed with sorrow. It was with a keen pang that I caressed my little Tsakki for the last time and left my cell for the wide world.

As soon as I reached the street I found a carriage waiting for me and in the carriage a lady. It was Miss Liberty. She spoke only in monosyllables and would not reveal her identity, yet through the heavy veil that covered her face I could see that she was a young and very beautiful girl. She drove me to a church, then to the railway station, and there she gave me a ticket to my home. The train started, she waved her hand and I saw her no more.

She probably was an ardent sympathizer with the cause, one whose influential connections and wealth enabled her to accomplish what otherwise would have been impossible. Whether through some plea or through bribery she secured my release I cannot say. Yet she was an angel of deliverance, whom I can never forget. The dove was probably a carrier pigeon that she had trained to do her errands of mercy.

Years have passed since I left my cell and my little friends, the dove and the mouse. The realization that I should see them no more and that my talks with them would be soon only a memory—laid then a heaviness upon my heart. I hardly thought that this would be so; but when all, even the familiar silence, seemed to bid me an eternal farewell, I could hardly keep back my tears.

And now in my freedom I often think: "Oh, if I could meet once more my sympathetic prison companions."

The mouse and the dove—their friendship was true, so true that I rarely find such in this world of men, and I can never forget them.