



***ARTHUR  
GRIFFITHS***

***RUSSIAN  
PRISONS***

**Arthur Griffiths**

# **Russian Prisons**

**St. Peter and St. Paul; the Schlüsselburg; the Ostrog  
at Omsk; the story of Siberian exile; Tiumen, Tomsk,  
Saghalien**

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# INTRODUCTION

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The huge empire founded by the Czars of Russia in the latter half of the sixteenth century was based upon absolute autocracy. The Czar by virtue of his divine origin exercised absolute authority over the many diverse elements consolidated under his sovereign will. From the earliest times no idea of personal liberty was tolerated; the slightest expression of independence in thought and action was peremptorily forbidden. The attitude of the government has ever been uncompromisingly severe toward all malcontents, and Russian history for the last two centuries is one long record of conspiracy constantly afoot, and constantly repressed by savagely cruel coercion. Imprisonment, the absolute loss of physical freedom, has taken a wider meaning in Russia than in other countries, for it is the lot in one form or another of two classes of offenders: the ordinary criminal under a civil code, from which capital punishment is now excluded, and the political dissidents deemed criminal by the arbitrary government of the land and deserving of exemplary and vindictive punishment. Russian prisons are in some respects the worst and most horrible the world has seen, and they are more especially reprehensible in these latter days when humane considerations are allowed weight in the administration of penal institutions.

In giving a description of Russian prisons as they have been and to some extent still remain, it is fair to state that the facts are authenticated by unimpeachable evidence. We

have the statements of eye-witnesses speaking from their own knowledge, and these unsparing critics have not always been foreigners and outsiders; Russians themselves have also raised their indignant voices in energetic protest, and official reports can be quoted to substantiate many of the charges. On the other hand, Russian methods have found champions and apologists among travellers, who were, perhaps, superficial observers, easily misled, and their accounts cannot in the least upset the conclusions arrived at by more thoroughgoing and disinterested investigators. Such men as George Kennan, indefatigable, honest, courageous and of the highest veracity, have framed an indictment from which there is no appeal. The facts have been vouched for, moreover, by the trustworthy narratives of those who have themselves been personal victims of the worst horrors inflicted, and buttressed by confidential reports from great Russian functionaries sent direct to the Czar. Secret despatches which have fallen into hands for which they were not intended, and have been made public by the searchers for truth, frankly admit the justice of the sentence passed upon at least one frightful portion of Russian penal institutions,—the system of exile to Eastern Siberia. Governor-General Anuchin twice addressed the Czar Alexander III, in 1880 and 1882, after long tours of personal inspection, in such condemnatory terms that the mighty ruler upon whom the terrible burden of responsibility rested, was moved to endorse the report in his own handwriting with the words, “It is inexcusable, even criminal, to allow such a state of affairs in Siberia to continue.” The frightful system which allowed an irresponsible bureaucracy to

sentence untried persons to exile by so-called “administrative process” is fully explained and described in the present volume.







# CHAPTER I

## GENERAL SURVEY

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Commencement of judicial reform in Russia—Abandonment of knout and branding iron—The plet—Two classes of prisons, the “lock-up” and the “central” or convict prisons—Experiences of a woman exiled from Russia—Testimony of Carl Joubert—The state of the central prisons—The “model” prison in St. Petersburg—Punishments inflicted—The food in different prisons—Attempted escapes—Myshkin—His early history and daring exploits—Failure of his plan to rescue Chernyshevski from Siberia—His escape, recapture, and sentence of death—The prisoner Medvediev.

A definite movement toward judicial reform began in Russia in the early sixties. The old law courts with their archaic procedure and evil repute as sinks of bribery and corruption were abolished. Trial by jury was revived, and justices of the peace were established to dispose of the smaller criminal offences. Shortly afterward, two of the most disgraceful features in the Russian penal code, the knout and the branding iron, disappeared. The punishment of splitting the nostrils to mark ineffaceably the prisoners exiled to the salt mines of Okhotsk also ceased, and the simple Chinese no longer were surprised with the sight of a hitherto unknown race of men with peculiar features of their own. The knout, however, had long served its devilish purpose. It was inflicted even upon women in the time of

Peter the Great, and was still remembered as an instrument which would surely kill at the thirtieth stroke, although in the hands of a skilful performer a single blow might prove fatal.

Flogging did not go entirely out of practice and might still be ordered by peasant courts, in the army and in the convict prisons. But another brutal whip survived; the plet is still used in the far-off penal settlements, although rarely, and only upon the most hardened offenders. It is composed of a thong of twisted hide about two feet in length, ending in a number of thin lashes, each a foot long, with small leaden balls attached, and forms a most severe and murderous weapon. The number of strokes inflicted may vary from twenty-three to fifty and at Saghalien in some cases reaches ninety-nine. If the victim has money or friends, the flogger is bribed to lay on heavily; for when the blow is so light as to fail to draw blood, the pain is greater. By beginning gently the flagellator can gradually increase the force of each blow until the whole back is covered with long swollen transverse welts which not uncommonly mortify, causing death.

At one time trial by court-martial could sentence a soldier to the frightful ordeal of the "rods," flogging administered by comrades standing in two ranks between which he moved at a deliberate pace while they "laid on" the strokes with sticks upon his bare back. This is exactly the same penalty as that of "running the gauntlet," or "gantlope," well known in old-time military practice, and sometimes called "Green Street" in Russia, for the rods used were not always stripped of their leaves. The infliction might be greatly prolonged and the number of strokes given sometimes

amounted to several thousand. Devilish ingenuity has now replaced the physical torture of knout and plet by a modern device for inflicting bodily discomfort, nothing less than riveting a wheelbarrow to a man's legs, which he must take with him everywhere, even to bed,—the apology for a bed on which he passed the night.

Russian prisons are of several classes. There are first the "lock-ups," or places of detention for the accused awaiting trial, scattered throughout the country, and quite unequal in the aggregate to the accommodation of the number of prisoners on hand. It has been estimated that to lodge all adequately, half as many more than the existing prisons would be required. Those of another class, the houses of correction, the hard labour or "central" prisons where compulsory labour is exacted, are very much like the "public works" convict prisons in the English system. Many of these are established in European Russia; more are to be found in Western Siberia, and, on somewhat different lines, in the penal settlements of Eastern Siberia.

In the provincial "lock-ups" or *ostrogs* the conditions have always been deplorable. They are horribly overcrowded with wretched, hopeless beings for whom trial is often greatly delayed, and who lie there in inconceivable discomfort at the mercy of brutal and extortionate gaolers, "packed like herrings in a cask, in rooms of inconceivable foulness, in an atmosphere that sickens even to insensibility any one entering from the open air," says one writer.

The same author gives the experiences of a lady who was expelled from Russia for opening a school for peasants' children, and who was transferred to the Prussian frontier

from prison to prison. "At Wilna," she says, "we were taken to the town prison, and detained for two hours late at night in an open yard under a drenching rain. At last we were pushed into a dark corridor and counted. Two soldiers laid hold of me and insulted me shamefully. After many oaths and much foul language, the fire was lighted and I found myself in a spacious room, in which it was impossible to take a step in any direction without treading on the women sleeping on the floor. Two women who occupied a bed took pity on me and invited me to share it with them.... The next night we were turned out from the prison and paraded in the yard for the start under a heavy rain. I do not know how I happened to escape the fists of the gaolers, as the prisoners did not understand the evolutions and performed them under a storm of blows and curses; those who protested were put in irons and sent so to the train, although the law prescribes that in the cellular wagons no prisoner shall be chained.

"Arrived at Kovno, we spent the whole day in going from one police station to another. In the evening we were taken to the prison for women where the superintendent was railing against the head gaoler and swearing that she would give him 'bloody teeth.' The prisoners told me that she often kept promises of this sort. Here I spent a week among murderesses and thieves and women arrested by mistake. Misfortune unites the unfortunate, and everybody tried to make life more tolerable for the rest; all were very kind to me and did their best to console me. On the previous day I had eaten nothing, for prisoners receive no food on the day they are brought to prison. I fainted from hunger, and the

prisoners brought me round by giving me some of their black bread; there was a female inspector, but she did nothing but shout out shameless oaths such as no drunken man would use.

“After a week’s halt at Kovno, I was sent on to the next town. After three days’ march we came to Mariampol. My feet were wounded and my stockings full of blood. The soldiers advised me to ask for a vehicle, but I preferred physical suffering to the continued cursing and foul language of the chiefs. I was taken before the commander, who remarked that as I had walked for three days I could very well manage a fourth. On arrival at Volkovisk, the last halt, we were lodged provisionally in the prison, but the female side was in ruins and we were taken to the men’s quarters, and had nowhere to sit but on the filthily dirty and foul-smelling floor. Here I spent two days and nights, passing the whole time at the window. In the night, the door was constantly thrown open for new arrivals; they also brought in a male lunatic who was perfectly naked. The miserable prisoners delighted in this, and tormented the maniac into a paroxysm of passion, until at last he fell on the floor in a fit and lay there foaming at the mouth. On the third day a soldier of the depot, a Jew, took me into his room, a tiny cell, where I stayed with his wife.

“The prisoners told me that many of them were detained by mistake for seven or eight months, awaiting their papers before being sent across the frontier. It is easy to imagine their condition after a seven months’ stay in this sewer without a change of linen.... I had been six weeks on the road and was still delayed, but I got leave to send a

registered letter to St. Petersburg, where I had influential friends, and a telegram came to send me on to Prussia immediately. My papers were soon found, and I was sent to Eydtkuhnen, where I was set at liberty.”

It is asserted by our author that this horrible picture was not one whit overcharged. “To Russians every word rings true and every scene looks normal. Oaths, filth, brutality, bribery, blows, hunger, are the essentials of every *ostrog* and of every depot from Kovno to Kamtchatka, from Archangel to Erzerum.” It is summed up by Kropotkin as follows: “The incredible duration of preliminary detention, the disgusting circumstances of daily life; the congregation of hundreds of prisoners into small dirty chambers; the flagrant immorality of a corps of jailers who are practically omnipotent, whose whole function is to terrorise and oppress; the want of labour and the total absence of all that contributes to the moral welfare of man; the cynical contempt for human dignity and the physical degradation of prisoners—these are the elements of prison life in Russia.”

Another writer of more recent date, Carl Joubert, whose works on Russia have been widely read, says, “I am aware that in no part of the world is the lot of a prisoner a happy one. It is not intended that it should be; but in civilised countries they are, at least, given the opportunity of keeping themselves clean and decent. They are treated as human beings and their health is considered; but in Russia it is different. The prisoners in Russia, whether before or after the trial—and a great many of the political prisoners have no trial—the Russian prisoners are considered beasts, and treated accordingly. The warders know what is expected of

them; and if a warder shows any glimmering of humanity in his treatment of the prisoners committed to his charge, his services are dispensed with and a stronger-hearted warder takes his place.

“I said that Russian prisoners have no sex; but I must qualify that statement. In so far as the normal treatment of the women is concerned, they are separated from the men, but no other distinction is made. If they are young and attractive, however, their sex can procure for them, and worse still, for those who are dear to them, a certain amount of consideration from those in authority over them on the road to Siberia.”

The penalties inflicted by the Russian code may be classed under four heads. The first is hard labour with the loss of civil rights, so that the convict's property passes to his heirs; he is dead in law, and his wife may marry another; he endures his term either after deportation to Siberia, or in one of the “central prisons” which have been built on purpose in European Russia, and where he spends a third or fourth of his entire sentence, until he goes finally to Siberia or Saghalien as a penal colonist. These central prisons were created to substitute a more regular and more severe treatment than was possible at a distance from home, and the aim was achieved. According to the best authorities, the central prisons are practically “hells upon earth.” “The horrors of hard labour in Siberia,” says Peter Kropotkin, “have paled before them, and all those who have had experience of them are unanimous in declaring that the day a prisoner starts for Siberia is the happiest in his life.”

A few specific details may be quoted about one or two of these prisons. In that of Kharkov, in Little Russia, at one time two hundred of the five hundred inmates died of scurvy in the course of four months. In the Byelogorod prison, nearly half of a total of three hundred and thirty prisoners died within a year, and forty-five more in the following six months. At Kiev the scourge of typhus was endemic. In one month in the year 1881 the deaths were counted by hundreds and the places of those who died were promptly filled by others similarly doomed. All the rooms occupied were very damp, the walls sweating with moisture, the floor rotten in many places, the cesspools overflowing and the neighbouring ground saturated. The epidemics were officially explained and the causes acknowledged by the chief board of prisons. It was urged that although the prison was dreadfully overcrowded, there was plenty of room elsewhere.

The chief prison in St. Petersburg at one time was the Litovski Zamok, and it was credited with being kept clean, but the buildings, old-fashioned, dark and damp, were only fit to be levelled to the ground. A newer prison is the House of Preliminary Detention which is ambitiously designated as the "model," and which was built on the plan of modern prisons in Belgium and at an immense cost. Kropotkin characterises it as the only clean gaol for ordinary prisoners in Russia. Cleanliness in it amounts to a craze; the scrubbing brush is never idle; broom and pail are used with demoniacal activity. Particles of asphalt dust from the floor continually load the atmosphere and make breathing difficult. The three upper stories are infected by the



exhalations from the lower, and the ventilation is so abominably bad that at night when the doors are shut the interior of the cells is suffocating. Endeavours to remedy this have ended in a recommendation to rebuild the prison entirely as nothing less will serve. The cells are large enough, ten feet in length by five feet wide, and it is yet essential to keep the traps in the door constantly open to prevent asphyxiation.

Strict individual separation was the rule established in this St. Petersburg House of Detention, and it extended to both cells and exercising yards. The space allotted to the latter was circular in shape and was divided into segments by walls radiating from a common centre to the circumference. Each inmate walked to and fro singly in his own compartment, under the surveillance of an official standing on a raised platform in the centre. Nothing was visible from within the partition but the backs of the lofty prison buildings topped with a narrow strip of sky.

The rule of cellular isolation was defeated, however, by the ancient prison device of rapping on the walls according to a conventional alphabet based upon a fixed number of blows for each letter. The letters are arranged in certain groups as follows:—

a b c d e f  
g h i k l m  
n o p r s t  
u v w x y z

Words are composed by knocking so many times on the wall for each letter. First, the horizontal line on which the letter stands is counted and its place numbered on the vertical line. Thus to frame the word “you,” the first signal

for “y” would be four knocks, indicating the vertical line; then a pause and five taps to give the place on the horizontal line. Three taps followed after a short pause by two taps would form the letter “o,” and four short taps with one final tap after a pause would fix the letter “u.” These sounds are not only distinguishable in cells alongside each other but in those far distant if the wall is the same. Communications by this means passed continually, although the system was abhorrent to the authorities and severe punishments were imposed upon all caught in the act.

Punishments were the only break in the monotony of this dull solitary life, and they were varied and ingenious. A prisoner guilty of minor offences, such as smoking or the secreting of a match or a morsel of bread saved from a meal, might be condemned to kneel for a couple of hours on the bare flags of a freezingly cold thoroughfare, or be cast into a dark cell, originally intended for cases of ophthalmia, and kept there for months, frequently until he became blind or mad or both. Cruelty was of common occurrence in this House of Detention. It was here that General Trepov ordered a prisoner Bogolubov to be flogged for not removing his hat when he came into the great man’s presence, and punished others who protested by confining them in cells near the lavatory amidst all kinds of filth, and heated to a temperature of 110 degrees Fahrenheit.

The personal experiences of an officer who spent a long time in a prison near St. Petersburg were afterward published in a liberal journal. “In the evening,” he reports, “the governor went his rounds and usually began his favourite occupation—flogging. A very narrow bench was

brought out and soon the place resounded with shrieks, while the governor smoked a cigar and looked on, counting the lashes. The birch rods were of exceptional size, and when not in use were kept immersed in water to make them more pliant. After the tenth lash the shrieking ceased, and nothing was heard but groans. Flogging was usually applied on groups of five or ten men or more at one time, and when the execution was over a great pool of blood remained to mark the spot. People in the street without would cross themselves and pass to the other side. After every such scene we had two or three days of comparative peace; for the flogging had a soothing effect on the governor's nerves."

"On one occasion," says the same writer, "we were visited by an inspector of prisons. After casting a look down at us, he asked if our food was good or if there was anything else of which we could complain. Not only did the inmates declare that they were completely satisfied; they even enumerated articles of diet which we had never so much as smelled." The food here and elsewhere was neither plentiful nor palatable. "It consisted of a quarter of a pound of black bread for breakfast; and a soup made of bull's heart or liver, or of seven pounds of meat, twenty pounds of waste oats, twenty pounds of sour cabbage and plenty of water." The daily sum allowed to cover cost was one penny, three farthings, not a great deal when officials expected to embezzle a substantial part.

Leo Deutsch, an important political prisoner, says that his daily ration of black bread was two pounds, with a dinner at midday of two dishes, not bad, but insufficient and always

half cold, as the kitchen was far away. This was in the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul. At the “Butirki”—this was the popular name for the central prison of Moscow—the food, he says, “was beneath criticism; even the most robust at their hungriest could scarcely swallow a spoonful of the repulsive malodorous broth in wooden bowls brought to our cells at midday. This is explained by the fact that the sum originally provided by government for our maintenance was extremely small; and on its way through to us a great part of it found its way into the bottomless pockets of officials great and small, among whom there is an organised system of general peculation. The big cauldrons used for cooking the food of several thousand prisoners were filled up with the worst materials that were procurable.”

George Kennan in his “Siberia” tells us he tasted the soup in the kitchen of the Tiumen, or forwarding prison, and “found it nutritious and good.” The bread was rather sour and heavy, but not worse than that prepared and eaten by Russian peasants generally. The daily ration of the prisoners consisted of two and a half pounds of this black bread, about six ounces of boiled meat, and two or three ounces of coarsely ground barley or oats with a bowl of *kvas* morning and evening for drink.

Carl Joubert says, “I inspected the rations in the prison at Tomsk. The soup stank with the odour of a soap factory. I asked for a piece of bread from a warder, and when I had examined it I called for a bowl of warm water. I put the bread to soak in the water, and in a couple of minutes I handed the wooden bowl to Dr. Anatovich, and asked him to look at it. ‘Why should I examine it?’ he asked. But a

moment later I heard him exclaim: 'My God! My God!' The surface of the water was covered with worms." The soup at the infamous prison fortress of the Schlüsselburg often contained cockroaches floating on the surface, and the director thus explained their presence to a complainant: Whenever the copper lid is lifted, the steam rises to the ceiling and dislodges the cockroaches which fall into the soup.

Various attempts have been made to bring the Russian prisons into line with the more modern development of penal principles, but they have never been carried out consistently nor resulted in marked reforms. A good deal of money has been spent in constructing new buildings on the most approved plans, and the favourite theory in vogue, that of cellular confinement, has been adopted to a limited extent. Such enormous numbers have to be dealt with, and over such a wide area, that no comprehensive uniform system could possibly be introduced to meet even a fraction of the demand. But a certain number of cellular prisons were provided, seemingly with the idea of intensifying the pains and penalties of imprisonment.

The prison at Kharkov was one of the worst of its class; the cells were dark and damp, and the régime of solitary confinement was unduly prolonged. The most terrible sufferings were endured by the political prisoners who were chiefly lodged in them, until special prisons were appropriated for them, such as those of St. Peter and St. Paul and the Schlüsselburg. At Kharkov a "hunger strike" was organised, the fixed resolve to abstain altogether from food—a form of protest common enough in Russian prisons

until a remedy was applied to their grievances. Concessions were then made to the extent of permitting exercise in the open air, removing fetters from the limbs of the sick in hospital and giving daily employment, but not before disastrous results had shown themselves. Six of the political prisoners went out of their minds and several died.

During the time that the Kharkov prison was used for this class of offenders, it was the scene of some startling events. Several escapes and attempts at rescue occurred. The case of Hypolyte Myshkin, a determined and most courageous man, was remarkable and deserving of more success. Myshkin was lodged at Kharkov in a small cell on the lower story, which had once been occupied by Prince Tsitianov, a distinguished revolutionist. He concentrated all his energies upon contriving escape, and within the first year had manufactured a dummy figure to lie on the guard-bed in his place, and proceeded to excavate a tunnel beneath the prison wall. He had no implements except his hands and a small piece of board, but he dug deep and far, disposing of the earth by packing it into a space between the floor of his cell and the ground. He had also made a suit of clothes to substitute for the prison uniform when at large. The material used for this purpose was obtained from a number of old maps, given to the former occupant of the cell and which had been left lying on the stove. Myshkin soaked the paper off the muslin on which it was mounted, and made a shirt and a pair of trousers. He was actually on the point of departure, when, unfortunately, a gaoler visited his cell at an unusual hour. He was down in his tunnel, and the dummy betrayed him. The alarm was raised, the other end of the

tunnel was entered, and the fugitive was caught in a trap. He was transferred to another cell from which there was no prospect of escape.

Myshkin, hopeless and reckless, now sought freedom in death. Resolving to commit an offence which would entail capital punishment, he obtained leave to attend divine service at the prison church, and managed to get close to the governor, whom he struck in the face when in the act of kissing the cross in the hands of the officiating priest. Under ordinary conditions, trial and condemnation to death would follow, but just at this time the distressing state of affairs at Kharkov had caused so much uneasiness that the Minister of the Interior had sent a sanitary expert to report upon the conditions which had produced so much lunacy and so many deaths. Professor Dobroslavin pronounced the place unfit for human habitation, and urged the immediate removal of all political convicts. It was no doubt supposed that Myshkin was of unsound mind when he struck the governor, and he was not even tried for the offence, but shortly afterward was despatched to the far-off silver mines of Kara.

Myshkin's antecedents and his ultimate fate are of interest. He was a young student at the Technological Institute of St. Petersburg in 1870, when, fired by the ardent spirit of the new revolutionists, he conceived a bold project to effect the escape of the well-known author and political writer, Chernyshevski, at that time in Siberian exile. After spending some time in the old Alexandrovski central prison near Irkutsk, the prisoner was presently interned under police surveillance in Villuisk, a small village in the subarctic

province of Yakutsk. Myshkin planned to travel across Asia disguised as a captain of gendarmerie, present a forged order to the head of the police at Villuisk, desiring him to hand over Chernyshevski to the sham captain, who was to escort him to another place on the Amur river. Myshkin got safely to Irkutsk, where he was employed in the office of the gendarmerie and became greatly trusted. He had the freedom of the office and cleverly abstracted the necessary blank forms, forged the signatures, affixed the seals, got his uniform, and, thus provided with all proper credentials, appeared before the *ispravnik*, or local chief of police, at Villuisk, who received him with all deference and respect. Myshkin was a man of fine presence, eloquent and well spoken, and when he produced his order he was within an ace of success.

But there was a weak point in the plot. It was quite unusual for officers of rank to travel without escort, and Myshkin had not had sufficient funds to take with him confederates disguised as soldiers or gendarmes. The *ispravnik* grew suspicious, the more so as the exile Chernyshevski was an important political offender, and he hesitated to surrender him without seeing his way more clearly. He told Myshkin that he must have the authority of the governor to set his exile free. Myshkin, unabashed, offered to go in person to seek the governor's consent, and he set off for Yakutsk, attended by a complimentary escort of Cossacks. The *ispravnik* astutely sent another Cossack to pass them on the road with a letter of advice for the governor. The messenger caught up with the first party and made no secret of his mission.



The game was up, and Myshkin, in despair, made a bolt for the woods. The Cossacks promptly gave chase, but Myshkin drew his revolver, beat off his pursuers and succeeded in getting away. He wandered through the forests for a week, and was at last captured, half dead from cold and privation. He was lodged first in the prison of Irkutsk and then brought to St. Petersburg, where he was thrown into the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul, and he lay there for three years in a solitary cell awaiting trial. He was kept in the Trubetzkoï Bastion, near a prisoner whom Mr. Kennan afterward met in Siberia and who described his neighbour's sufferings feelingly. "Myshkin," he said, "was often delirious from fever, excitement or the maddening effect of long solitary confinement, and I frequently heard his cries when he was put into a strait-jacket or strapped to his bed by the fortress guard."

Myshkin's trial caused a great sensation. The government had refused to allow the proceedings to be taken down in shorthand, and the prisoner declined to make any defence; he made a fiery speech, however, denouncing the secrecy of the trial and declaring that the public ought to hear the whole case through the press. He was ordered out of court, and being removed by force, his last words, half stifled, were: "This court is worse than a house of ill-fame; there they sell only bodies, but here you prostitute honour, justice and law." This insult aggravated the original offence, and the court increased his sentence to ten years' penal servitude with forfeiture of all civil rights.

Myshkin was a born orator, but by his own admission he lived to regret his eloquence. When on his long journey to