

PRISONERS OF RUSSIA.*

[In the winter of 1862-3 the writer of this notice, then a Field Agent of the United States Sanitary Commission, with the Army of the Potomac in Virginia, was thrown by circumstances into camp and comradeship with a battery of regular artillery, the young surgeon of which was a Dr. Benjamin Howard. In the interval of suspense and recuperation between the battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, and on the later bloody and unfortunate field, a pleasant friendship sprang up between the two, which however lapsed after the war into the desultory intimacy of correspondence, and finally ceased altogether. In those days Dr. Howard was the perfect expression of physical health and strength, mental equipment and balance, and spiritual purity and serenity. He had a beaming face, a resonant and tender voice, the gentleness of a woman, and one remarkable gift, the like of which the writer has never seen in anyone else. This was the power to read character in handwriting. Dr. Howard's intuitive skill in this rare art was marvelous, and seemed in some cases almost supernatural. With astonishing fullness and accuracy he would delineate the minutest traits of a person whom he had never seen, with only a letter of that person before him, even to peculiarities of bodily habit and mental action known only to intimate acquaintances. Dr. Howard was a native of Chesham, Bucks, England, where he was born in 1836. He began life in the trade of painter and paper-hanger; came to America about 1853, armed with the purpose of securing an education and offering himself as a medical missionary; studied for a time at Williams College; graduated at the New York College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1858; served as noted above in the Union Army during the Civil War; settled down to what became a large and distinguished practice in New York City; traveled and studied abroad; and at last established his home in London. He was the author of an improved system for resuscitating from drowning; of the improved ambulance service now in use in France and England; and in 1888 began the extensive course of travel and investigation among the prisons of Continental Europe and the Asiatic peoples, culminating in the special and extraordinary experiences in Siberia and distant Sakhalin recorded in this posthumous volume. Dr. Howard was a self-made man, a born gentleman, an accomplished scholar, a skilled master of his profession, a devout Christian, a humanitarian of a large heart, and in several important particulars a benefactor of mankind. He deserves to be remembered with gratitude and honor, and an old friend and companion of army days, who had not heard of his death (in 1900) until this book came into his hand, writes these words of appreciation with a sense of personal loss and sorrow.]

NOT the sensational disclosures of Mr. George Kennan, nor the more quiet but none the less readable reports of Dr. Lansdell, exceed in vividness and weight this narrative by the late Dr. Benjamin Howard of his four prison tours in the Russias during the ten years from 1886 to 1896. He enjoyed special and unprecedented privileges. He was the first English speaking visitor to penetrate the penal island of Sakhalin. He was for a time an actual resident of Korsakoffsk. From the inside

and official standpoint he saw everything the government officials saw. He witnessed, and reports in detail, the painful incident of punishment by the knout, and served professionally on several occasions of public execution of the sentence of the law. He made friends with the convicts, and gained the confidence of the officials. Previous to his coming no foreigner had ever been known to pass a night in Korsakoffsk.

The book begins at Vladivostock and reaches Korsakoffsk in the island of Sakhalin in the third chapter. In Korsakoffsk most of its remaining twenty chapters are spent. This is a point of view for the whole of the inaccessible, inhospitable, desolate, dismal, dreary penal island of Sakhalin, from which the author makes his final exit by way of Yezo. Prison life in Sakhalin is thus brought under the microscope of an unusually well-trained, intelligent, acute, cool-headed, and fair-minded observer. One of his most remarkable chapters, perhaps the most remarkable, is that describing the punishment by the knout.

Dr. Howard approaches the Siberian penal system from the inside—that is from the Russian side. His presentation is explanatory, largely defensory, and on the whole exculpatory. At least this is to be said, that he shows the system as the Russian sees it, and demonstrates features and traits of it which have not been always in plain sight. But whether the reader will be convinced or not as to his conclusions no one can question the literary skill, the dramatic power, the intense realism of his narrative. As his objective point was an Ultima Thule, and as his facilities were unprecedented, so the picture he paints is as bold and lifelike and startling, as relentless and direct, as the canvas of a Verestchagin. From beginning to end the book is one of surpassing interest, often sad and sometimes painful, but fascinating in the intimacy it affords with an outlandish corner of the earth and an unfortunate and unhappy community of mankind.

The book is illustrated with a portrait of the author and a number of Sakhalin scenes and groups, and is introduced by Major-General O. O. Howard, U. S. A.

*Prisoners of Russia. By Benjamin Howard. Illustrated. D. Appleton & Co.