

# Horrors of Prison Life on Sakhalin Island

## The Russian Prison Colony and Its Terrible Tragedies.

DESCRIBED BY A RUSSIAN WRITER

**Terrible Cruelty of the Keepers and the Executioners—Methods of Punishment That Stagger Humanity—Dreaded "Knout" and How It Is Applied.**

The interest of the world in the Russian penal system is awakened by the capture of the island of Sakhalin by the Japanese. From time to time during the past quarter of a century the civilized world has been shocked beyond measure at the tales of cruelty to which the Russian convicts in this vast prison have been subjected, and the details of degradation to which these once human beings have been brought. But Russia has been careful that but little of the true picture of the island should reach the outside world, and newspaper and magazine writers from England, France and the United States have made repeated attempts to secure authentic descriptions of the conditions in this great prison land, and of the atrocious cruelties practiced there, but none have ever been fully successful. Much has been guessed at, and the world would scarcely credit these pictures of the imagination.

It has remained for a Russian to give us a practically authentic picture of Sakhalin, and though the picture is tempered by seeing things from the Russian standpoint, it is still a picture that is so horrible that it staggers humanity. This story of the horrors of Sakhalin has been published in book form, and it is only translated extracts from the book that we can give here:

**The First Impression.**  
First impressions are likely to be very vivid. I shall certainly never forget the moment when our steam launch came alongside the jetty at Korsakofsk. The landing was crowded with men. A few more steps and I was lost in that sea which I so yearned to fathom.

During the months I passed among the convicts at Sakhalin I could not free myself from two impressions which held me in thrall, tortured me and oppressed my soul like a heavy burden. They still are holding my soul under their ban and still are oppressing it. The first of these impressions concerns my trip to Sakhalin. Our steamer, which transported the convicts from Odessa, reminded me of a huge barge, like those used in our sea-coast towns for tow-

ing green, but a step and you sink in the deep, cold, sticky and viscous mire.

The remark about the neatness hardly escapes your lips when you hear around the corner the rattling of chains. Harnessed to a cart, convict after convict is dragged refuse to the sea.

What a depressing sight to see men doing the work of horses.

The road leads past the prison, and one can see the grimy window panes behind heavy iron bars. Right above us is the hospital and directly opposite the mortuary.

**The Chain Prison.**  
The chain prison of Sakhalin is intended for the criminals of the worst kind. Officially it is called the "prison for the testing of convicts," while the "prison for convicts showing signs of reforming," or the "free prison," is used for convicts who have passed the test of the "chain prison."

"Our chain prison is bad, very bad," remarked the inspector. "We are building a new one, but it will take years to get it ready."

"Attention!" calls out a guard. A rattling of chains, and the convicts rise from the benches. On Easter Sunday two of the convicts fled from the prison, in spite of the fact that the convicts in a body had given their "word of honor" not to attempt an escape. As a punishment, all of them were put in chains. It is moist and close. No attempt at ventilation. No effort to make the place habitable. No effort to make existence tolerable. Not even the usual convict chests are to be seen anywhere. Bare benches, filthy straw mattresses are bundled together at the head end of the benches. A mangle, lean cat plays among the benches and purrs ingratiatingly. The convicts are fond of animals, for they alone regard them as human.

In the center of the room is a table, or rather a tall bench. It is triangular in shape, wet and dirty, covered with bread crumbs and filthy tea cans.

We enter a cell, where we find two convicts chained to barrows. "Let's see your instrument!"

"Hullo, baby!" "Hullo, uncle!" "Don't you call me uncle, baby, for I am your godfather, or really your life mate's godfather," merrily exclaims Tolstych, the old executioner of Sakhalin.

"And how do you come to be his godfather?" I ask.

"Ha, ha, your honor, I knouted him."

"Have you knouted many people?" Tolstych smiles. "Well, just as many as you see hereabouts, your honor." Tolstych is about 60 years old. He does not look a day over 40. He is a good-looking man, with a fine mustache and carefully shaved chin. He is wealthy, according to Sakhalin ideas, and is somewhat of a dude. Tolstych wears a coat, top boots, and even a leather cap, which is the acme of Sakhalin fashions. He always jokes and is full of fun. "Why were you banished?" "Because of the old woman!" "He had killed his wife with a hatchet. 'Why did you do it?'" "She was no good." When he came to Sakhalin he did not lose courage. He soon found out what was wrong with him. Cruel by nature, strong and agile, he became an executioner. Man is born to be an artist. He makes an art of everything. Give him any instrument, and he will soon use it like a virtuoso. The inspector complained: "With a skilled executioner, it is hard to tell whether he knouts as terribly as it looks and sounds. Apparently he deals a terrible blow. Your heart stands still when he catches hold of the knout. And then, if he wants to, his knout will fall weakly and painlessly. Those rogues know how to do it, and there is no way to control them."

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After the expiration of his penal servitude he became a settler. He started a small store and knouted only occasionally.

"For a year they had no executioner in prison. Many judgments accumulated, and they called me to execute them. Well, I knouted 50 men for three rubles."

"Say, Tolstych, is it true that you knouted a convict to death for 15 rubles?"

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An under-sized, hairy little man makes his way cautiously under the windows of the prison office at Alexandroffsk. His very walk is peculiar, and reminds one of the attitude of a mongrel cur sneaking around the kitchen door and keeping an eye on the windows for fear of boiling water. It is Komleff, the oldest executioner of Sakhalin, but now retired. He heard that Tumanoff, a tramp, was to be hanged at Alexandroffsk for shooting at a guard. And now he came from his settlement to apply for the prospective job.

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Old Testament. He was sentenced to 20 years' hard labor for highway robbery in broad daylight, and for attempted murder. He died in 1882 from Sakhalin, but was caught at the narrowest point of the Tartar straits, having almost crossed over the continent. For this attempt he received 36 lashes with the knout, and his time was extended another 20 years. Executioners were very busy in those days, and Teraki, a famous Sakhalin executioner, needed a helper. The convicts drew lots, and Komleff was chosen for the post.

But Komleff still dreamed of freedom. In 1888 he again broke jail, was caught again, and received 15 years additional.

"Fifty-five years' hard labor," proudly exclaims Komleff. Besides, he was sentenced to 45 lashes with the knout. Teraki "waited" on his pup.

"Well, dear scholar, lay thee down, and I will show thee how to knout," said Teraki. And he "showed" him. Thirteen years later Komleff said to me, "I am still rotting." He bared his back. His body looked as if it had been seared and branded with hot irons. It was terrible to see. Thick white scars covered a portion of his back, and elsewhere instead of skin was seen a thin reddish membrane.

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"I was married to him against my will, and I loved my godfather. I thought they would send us away together. But they sent him to one place and me to another."

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"You must have learned to love your life mate?"

"Of course; would I have fought for him? I might have been killed. He's a good fellow; I hoped I could live with him to the end, and now there's a fine mess to be in."

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The prison for women is very small. It consists of one ward which holds ten persons. The women convicts of Sakhalin are punished for their crimes in a special manner. They are given away to settlers as so-called "life mates." Only those are in "prison whose cases have not been finally passed upon. Two women arise as we enter. One is an old Tcherkessian from the hills of Caucasus, who does not speak a word of Russian. The other is a young woman. She was banished for life because she had induced her godfather to kill her husband.

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"Why were you convicted?" "Suspected of murder." "And you?" "Suspected of theft." "And you?" "Suspected of murder." Nothing but "suspects!" "And you?" "Killed two men." The reply came frank, sharp and firm.

**The Female Prison.**  
The prison for women is very small. It consists of one ward which holds ten persons. The women convicts of Sakhalin are punished for their crimes in a special manner. They are given away to settlers as so-called "life mates." Only those are in "prison whose cases have not been finally passed upon. Two women arise as we enter. One is an old Tcherkessian from the hills of Caucasus, who does not speak a word of Russian. The other is a young woman. She was banished for life because she had induced her godfather to kill her husband.

"Why?"

"I was married to him against my will, and I loved my godfather. I thought they would send us away together. But they sent him to one place and me to another."

In Sakhalin she committed a crime rare in the annals of the island. She had defied her life mate with a gun. He got himself into a fight with the settlers. Nine men surrounded him, and were beating him. She rushed to her hut, grabbed a rifle, and shot into the group.

"You must have learned to love your life mate?"

"Of course; would I have fought for him? I might have been killed. He's a good fellow; I hoped I could live with him to the end, and now there's a fine mess to be in."

She dries her tears and sobs silently.

"Nothing will happen to her," says the inspector. "She will be convicted and given to some settler in one of the distant settlements. Women in Sakhalin are not punished."

Perhaps some people may consider this impunity. But what greater penalty could there be for a woman who loved well enough to risk her life, and who was sentenced now to be "given away" to another man?

What a dreadful custom, reminding one of bygone ages! In the days of serfdom it was customary to give people "away," toying with their life and happiness. Of all the prisons in Rykoffsk this little prison impressed me most sadly.

**The Executioners.**  
"Hullo, baby!" "Hullo, uncle!" "Don't you call me uncle, baby, for I am your godfather, or really your life mate's godfather," merrily exclaims Tolstych, the old executioner of Sakhalin.

"And how do you come to be his godfather?" I ask.

"Ha, ha, your honor, I knouted him."

"Have you knouted many people?" Tolstych smiles. "Well, just as many as you see hereabouts, your honor." Tolstych is about 60 years old. He does not look a day over 40. He is a good-looking man, with a fine mustache and carefully shaved chin. He is wealthy, according to Sakhalin ideas, and is somewhat of a dude. Tolstych wears a coat, top boots, and even a leather cap, which is the acme of Sakhalin fashions. He always jokes and is full of fun. "Why were you banished?" "Because of the old woman!" "He had killed his wife with a hatchet. 'Why did you do it?'" "She was no good." When he came to Sakhalin he did not lose courage. He soon found out what was wrong with him. Cruel by nature, strong and agile, he became an executioner. Man is born to be an artist. He makes an art of everything. Give him any instrument, and he will soon use it like a virtuoso. The inspector complained: "With a skilled executioner, it is hard to tell whether he knouts as terribly as it looks and sounds. Apparently he deals a terrible blow. Your heart stands still when he catches hold of the knout. And then, if he wants to, his knout will fall weakly and painlessly. Those rogues know how to do it, and there is no way to control them."

Tolstych brought the art of knouting to perfection, but he bled the convicts. If he was well paid, the convict arose after a hundred blows with the knout without discomfort. Otherwise he was in store for him. He was smart enough to do his business without fear of detection. The authorities could not find proof against him, and the convicts feared him. But as they could at least bargain with him, they considered him a convenient man in the executioner's office.

After the expiration of his penal servitude he became a settler. He started a small store and knouted only occasionally.

"For a year they had no executioner in prison. Many judgments accumulated, and they called me to execute them. Well, I knouted 50 men for three rubles."

"Say, Tolstych, is it true that you knouted a convict to death for 15 rubles?"

"This is Sakhalin, your honor," grinned the torturer.

An under-sized, hairy little man makes his way cautiously under the windows of the prison office at Alexandroffsk. His very walk is peculiar, and reminds one of the attitude of a mongrel cur sneaking around the kitchen door and keeping an eye on the windows for fear of boiling water. It is Komleff, the oldest executioner of Sakhalin, but now retired. He heard that Tumanoff, a tramp, was to be hanged at Alexandroffsk for shooting at a guard. And now he came from his settlement to apply for the prospective job.

"Nobody can hang as well as I!" He had hanged 13 men in Sakhalin, and, being a specialist, hoped to earn the three rubles. In the meanwhile, pending the execution, he hired himself out to the wife of a settler to mind her children. Such are the customs of Sakhalin.

Komleff came from Kostroma, in central Russia, where he had studied for the ministry, and was fond of Scriptural texts, particularly from the

Old Testament. He was sentenced to 20 years' hard labor for highway robbery in broad daylight, and for attempted murder. He died in 1882 from Sakhalin, but was caught at the narrowest point of the Tartar straits, having almost crossed over the continent. For this attempt he received 36 lashes with the knout, and his time was extended another 20 years. Executioners were very busy in those days, and Teraki, a famous Sakhalin executioner, needed a helper. The convicts drew lots, and Komleff was chosen for the post.

But Komleff still dreamed of freedom. In 1888 he again broke jail, was caught again, and received 15 years additional.

"Fifty-five years' hard labor," proudly exclaims Komleff. Besides, he was sentenced to 45 lashes with the knout. Teraki "waited" on his pup.

"Well, dear scholar, lay thee down, and I will show thee how to knout," said Teraki. And he "showed" him. Thirteen years later Komleff said to me, "I am still rotting." He bared his back. His body looked as if it had been seared and branded with hot ir