

Prison Work on Theosophical Lines **by Barbara Poushkine (Princess Galitzine)**

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THE Theosophical tenets are rather at variance with the current scientific views on criminality. Science regards it as an abnormal deviation from the highway of civilisation. It considers the criminal as a sort of unnatural excrescence on the bodies of civilised nations, that must be done away with by surgical or any other violent means. The “whence and whither” of these excrescences, their meaning and intrinsic value, are obscure problems for the learned criminologist. He is like a looker-on, gazing at a weird and incomprehensible drama played on the stage by strange actors, altogether alien and repulsive to him. Such was the position of science till some two decades ago.

Lombroso was the first who tried to peep behind the scenes and to get a glimpse of the inner workings of the whole performance. Heredity is what he saw there, and, ever since, heredity is the word of rally of the criminologists; it is quite a rational and right one.

The only flaw in it is that science treats the question of heredity rather too superficially. It deals solely with defects of physical structure, with insufficient development of the brain, with definite tendencies and physical taints inherited from alcohol-drinking and vicious parents. Theosophy goes further behind the scenes; it probes the deepest springs of human actions and declares that criminality is in no wise an abnormal phenomenon, but is a natural consequence of two powerful factors of life, involution and heredity — but heredity taken in a wider and deeper sense.

Let us consider first the bearing of the theory of involution and subsequent evolution on the problem of criminality. Involution is differentiation, the separation of the whole into many parts; the more man differentiates, the more he hedges himself in with a thorny belt of selfish passions, selfish desires, personal griefs and personal joys. Living only for his own self, and considering himself as the only centre round which circles his life, he naturally becomes greedy, grasping; violent, vindictive, quick to resent an offence and quick to return it. He strives to satisfy his cravings at any price, whatever it may cost his fellow-men. This leads him to crime, and we may safely venture to say that criminality is involution and individualisation brought to their ultimate expression.

I am far from presuming that hardened criminality is a stage through which all souls must necessarily pass. At this point intervenes a new regulating factor, already mentioned: heredity. But in the light of Theosophy it acquires a meaning infinitely more extensive than the handing down of mere physical propensities and particularities from parent to child. It has behind it an endless vista of centuries, includes heredity on all planes, and leads us right up to the primary source of human heredity — the mode of individualisation from the animal.

As we all know, there are two gates leading into the human realm: the gate of love and devotion and that of hate and fear. We may presume, without going very far astray, that men, individualised by hatred and fear, necessarily follow during the earlier part of their human career the impulse that has projected them out of the animal kingdom into the human, and this impulse must wear itself out before man can turn, so to say, round the corner of evolution. The ego accumulates bad karma on his way, and under the pressure of karmic law he takes birth from parents, and in surroundings, that may condition the degeneration of his lower vehicles and may drag him ever lower and lower, unless the man, by determined efforts of will, pulls himself out of these conditions. We have used a familiar word: karma. Heredity spells simply karma in its all-embracing and all-exhausting meaning.

Thus Theosophical tenets, instead of putting the criminal outside the pale of normally developing humanity, allow him to step into his natural place in one of the lower stages of evolution, out of which it is our duty to help him as quickly as possible; the more so that we ourselves have established conditions of life and have set up vibrations that largely contribute to the sinking of the weaker individuals below the surface of civilised and law-abiding existence.

It follows from the aforesaid that the men and women entrusted with the physical and moral care of criminals ought to know and accept the doctrine of evolution, if they want to deal successfully with them. Western civilisation has made a sore tangle of the whole concern. But Theosophy is the lever that turns the current of life into new channels; it sets up new ideals. The knowledge of Theosophy makes it incumbent upon us to descend with its torch into life's deepest strata, and to throw a light on problems insoluble for the purely materialistic mind.

In this respect the prisons offer an extensive field of work. The doctrines alone of reincarnation and karma would shatter to pieces the building of preconceived ideas erected during centuries by the keepers of the criminals and the prisoners themselves, and would revolutionise their respective attitudes. The officers would cease to consider the prisoner, and especially the old-timer, as an abnormal subject incapable of betterment, save in a few quite exceptional cases, and would look on him as on an entity moving from light to light through a desolate period of darkness and sin.

On the other hand the acceptance of the laws of reincarnation and karma by the criminals would explain away the problems of their incomprehensible life; instead of the sombre circle in which they deem themselves forever enclosed; they would see stretching before them a broad avenue leading to an honourable life in the near future and to light and glory later on. Whoever has had to do with criminals knows that the "why and wherefore" of their criminal state is tormenting them keenly. I have the testimony for it of an old-timer, a man over thirty, who has been acquainted with prisons from his thirteenth year upward. He writes: "If I only knew that *forces* me to commit crimes and to lower myself to the level of the meanest brute." It is the cry of a soul hungering for an explanation of his miserable existence, and a logical explanation of the cruelty of life would perhaps save him from further degradation.

Another fact, powerful in its influence on the criminal, is that of the existence of the higher ego in man. The prisoner, and especially the old-timer, considers himself a degraded creature, utterly unfit for anything good. He has lost all confidence in himself, and the idea that, in spite of his crimes and evil ways, God still dwells in him and patiently awaits the time of His resurrection, is quite a revelation to him. All his notions about himself are revolutionised and he gains hope — that best of supports.

I have read an inspiring book, which I earnestly ask every Theosophist to peruse: *After Prison—What?* by Mrs Booth. She is the niece of the founder of the Salvation Army and was a leader of this movement in America, but she left the Salvation Army later on to consecrate herself entirely to prison work.

Here is what she writes:

I believe that in every human heart, however hardened or hopeless the exterior, there is some tender spot, if one know rightly how to touch it; some chord of sweetness that can be made to vibrate to the very harmony of heaven amid all the jangling discords of life; some little spark that by the breath of inspiration may be fanned into a flame and kindle the purifying fire.

Mrs Booth is no Theosophist, but her intuition has guided her to the discovery of the higher ego in every man. She brings this message into the prisons, and her words "I trust you; I trust the Good that is in you;" have the effect of an electric shock on their inmates, and lift them out of the position of sullen and dogged despair.

She called for volunteers, willing to turn over a new leaf, and to strive towards good living and discipline, and she formed a League with simple rules laid down for observance. The members receive a badge: a white button with a blue star on it, and the motto: "Look up and hope." The League once started, Mrs Booth remained in constant touch with its members, visiting them personally, corresponding with them, taking care of their families.

In the fifteen years of the League's existence, over fifty thousand men have enrolled themselves in it. The results are, without controversy, brilliant. They are testified to by the staff of prison officers as well. The warders had not originally much faith in Mrs Booth's enterprise and predicted her complete failure; but they had to change their mind after all, for, as one of them says: "The change it has made in the prison is amazing, and it has wrought miracles in many of the men.

A most necessary corollary of Mrs Booth's work is the care she takes of her volunteers after their release. The hardest part of a man's punishment begins *after* he has left his prison. He is free, yes; but he drags chained to him a corpse — his dead past. The outer world meets the ex-convict sternly and coldly.

During his incarceration the old-timer has lost his friends, he is absolutely alone, weakened by prison life, bewildered by the rush of the street traffic — grown unfamiliar to him after many years of seclusion — with just money enough to carry him through the first two or three days, with no home to go to, no friendly face to welcome him back to freedom. It is the critical moment, when crime and vice lie in wait for their victim at every step, ready to seize him in their grip the minute his forlorn heart gives way to despair. Mrs Booth has taken into account this psychological moment, and has sought to tide over her "boys," as she calls the members of her League. She has bought three farms in different parts of America, and has turned them into homes for released prisoners. "No discrimination as to the crimes is made in the welcoming of the guests; that is a matter of the past. The number of terms served, the nationality or the colour of the man makes no more difference than their creed."

What such a home means to them may be judged by the pathetic words of one of them: "The nearest approach to home I ever had was my time in the kitchen of one of the State prisons, where the officer was very kind to me."

And how many of them have never had even this miserable parody of a home!

Out of the six to seven thousand men who have availed themselves of the home, seventy-five per cent have become honourable men, twenty per cent have been lost sight of, and five per cent have resumed the old life.

I must note as a very important feature that there is no sentimentality about the whole business; it is eminently practical, realistic work. The men must each and all themselves work out their own salvation. They are made to realise this very clearly. They see that they must fight their own battle, begin to rebuild their character; they are helped over rough places, but not carried over them.

I have roughly outlined the work done in America; now allow me to say a few words about my own experience in this direction in Russia, very small indeed as compared with that of Mrs Booth, but still eloquently testifying to the desperate need felt amid the convicts for moral help and support.

Last summer I happened to spend a few weeks in the neighbourhood of a prison for grave offenders in the south of Russia. Having never been inside one, I sought to gain admittance to it — not precisely out of curiosity, for I had been several years interested in questions of criminality, but still without any definite idea of helping its inmates. Admittance was vouchsafed, and on a bright summer day I was shown all over the building and looked into the sorrowful countenances of all the two hundred and fifty prisoners. And only then did I realise what a wicked thing I was doing, and how heartless it was just to stroll in, in a moment of leisure, and have a look at the most miserable and degraded creatures on earth, and to parade before them one's own happy and free life. I saw that I could be excused for intruding upon their sorrow and shame, only if I brought them some help. My old dream of prison work on the lines of Mrs Booth's Volunteer League revived, and I resolved to make an attempt in this direction. I laid my plan before the warder, and he fell in with it with the greatest readiness, and allowed me to address the prisoners.

I must confess that, when driving to the prison, I asked myself with some apprehension: "What words can I, a prosperous and fine lady, find that would touch the hearts of those miserable, hardened men, to whom I am an absolute stranger, and who see in me a being coming to them from the hateful world of rich and happy people, unacquainted with the brand of public shame?" The gulf seemed too great to be bridged over. But a few minutes after I saw how easy it was to get at their hearts.

Mrs Booth says that an audience in prison is much like the audiences we meet in the free world, "save that their hearts are sore and sensitive and that that great shadow of suffering, the awful loss of liberty, has brought anguish, despair and shame to quicken every feeling". I proved to the full the truth of this assertion. My audience responded to the lightest touch. I may add that, as a rule, it is easy to reach the soul of the Russian people. We are over and above everything else Mystics, and the lower the social

class to which a Russian belongs the more is found this strain of Mysticism unalloyed by civilisation. I may mention a striking fact in confirmation of my words. The numerous religious sects in Russia are, with scarcely any exception, founded by men of the people, by simple peasants. Many of them are surpassingly beautiful in their spirituality, and are composed almost exclusively of peasants.

Well, this national feature allowed me to find a ready response in the hearts of my hearers. I spoke to the men thrice, for about three-quarters of an hour each time, and offered to form a League closely resembling that of Mrs Booth.

I laid down four rules:

1. To pray morning and night; to those who did not care for religion I proposed to think morning and night a kind and good thought, its value being, to my mind, equal to that of a prayer.
2. To refrain from using bad language — a veritable scourge of prison life.
3. To observe faithfully the prison rules.
4. To give each other whatever help they can.

One hundred and seven men rose from their benches in response to my appeal. Some twenty more joined later. With some seventy men I had private interviews. It was extraordinary how they trusted me, an utter stranger, confided to me their intimate family concerns and opened their sore and criminal hearts! What the trust of those men means may be judged from the following sentences, written to me by an old-timer two months later:

It is our innermost conviction that only an outcast and a criminal, such as we are ourselves, can really pity us and suffer for us. If you can convince us of the reverse and make us trust you utterly, our League will expand and gain strength.

The population of the prison consisted at the time mostly of peasants, with a little sprinkling of more educated persons, and about a hundred Tartars. The latter were very much to be pitied. They were for the most part convicted of manslaughter, but they had committed murder in obedience to their own national law of bloody revenge, for the transgression of which they would themselves have been put to death by their elders. Thus they were the victims of two conflicting laws, and considered themselves innocent though punished.

They did not know a word of Russian and suffered terribly from the cold and the food — a sort of sour cabbage-soup — to which their organism could not adapt itself. Many of these die in prison of consumption.

I spoke to the men three times as aforesaid, and spent two days in private interviews. After that I had to return to Petrograd and did not come back any more to that part of Russia; but since my departure scarcely a day passes without my getting one, two, and sometimes four or five letters from my “boys,” and in these short months I have gathered many precious human documents. The wish to escape from the old life is intense. I could quote by the hundred words testifying to the longing for a clean, unsoiled life. “Help me, save me, do not let me perish,” is the habitual cry. Truly no weariness is so great as the

weariness of sin.

All these months my sufferings were so keen, that I was ready to take my life, but it did not happen, because of what you said to us. I am powerless to describe the influence your words exercised over me.

This comes from quite a young man — a rather striking case. He was sentenced to four years of imprisonment as a tramp, because he would not disclose his name. The law deals rather severely with such subjects, because they have, as a rule, some heavy crime on their conscience, not yet punished by justice. So it was with this young man. Murder was his crime, and he did not reveal his identity for fear of bringing shame on the heads of his old parents, who did not even know where he was and who thought him dead. On the day of the formation of the League, however, he decided to disclose his identity and his crime. He is being tried now and his trial is not yet over.

Your letter has had an extraordinary effect upon me. You, a stranger, have compassion on me and ask *me* — *me*, a professional thief — to become an honest man, and you promise even your moral support. All this is so new and so unexpected that I am at a loss what to answer. I have a plan that I was nursing and working out in my mind for the last five years. It is a criminal one, but now I give it up, *because you care*. Remember, at any rate, that whatever happens, I shall never lie to you.

The same man, a thief who has been many times in prison, has given away to poorer comrades all the money and the clothes that have been sent to him on the day of his release. Once he picked up a piece of gold that the warder had dropped without noticing it, and he gave it back to him with a joyful smile: "I would never have done this before," he said.

The following is from men already released:

"Only one thing I beg of you: trust me, believe that I will and shall tread the right path." "I have not forgotten and shall never forget my given word, but the struggle is well nigh too much for me, and I turn to you for help as a friend and a sister."

And the struggle is, in truth, desperate. The Russian prisoner, if he is a grave offender, on leaving the place of his incarceration, is the most handicapped creature in the world. According to old laws not yet amended, he is deprived of civic rights, *i.e.*, he cannot get a situation in the service of the State, cannot have a trade, cannot enter a guild; for four years he must live only in small country towns and villages, where life is dormant and it is difficult to earn a living; for the same number of years he remains under the supervision of the police and must put in an appearance every week at the police-station; and last, but not least, for four years he does not get his passport, that indispensable appendage of the Russian citizen, without which it is almost impossible to get a situation. The man is literally thrown out into the street, and needs no ordinary amount of courage and will-power to keep himself above water.

If you add to this, that the man comes out of prison in the bitter frost, often without a farthing and with scarcely any clothes on, it is a wonder that on the first night after his release he commits theft or even murder, in order to get a piece of bread or a coat?

Such are the outer difficulties of the released prisoners. The inner ones are graphically described by one of them in a letter.

I am between three fires: one of them is you. I have given you my word not to commit any more crimes; but how terribly difficult it is to keep it. The second fire is a woman, for whom I am ready to do anything, if only she were happy and contented; my old friends and comrades are the third fire. I was a model thief for many a year, but now they perceive a change in me and say: "You belong to us. Do not leave us. Have we not suffered with you and rejoiced with you? Have you not spent with us your best years? Have we not shared with you everything we had? Do not go away from us into this other world? *They* cannot understand you and will deem themselves your benefactors. And your pride will suffer.

This struggle is not yet over. This man wanders restlessly all over Russia, in quest of peace, as he writes, and he cannot as yet say which of the three fires shall be the conqueror.

I cannot say much more about my work in prison. Karma has made me face it rather unexpectedly, and after the first steps it had to be carried on exclusively by correspondence. Moreover it is only nine months old, and many are the blunders that I have doubtless made; but nevertheless I have mustered courage to speak of it here, in the hope that some of my brothers and sisters, more equal to the task, may gain if only one grain of inspiration to start similar work in their countries, more wisely and successfully than I have done in mine.

Now, let us turn to ourselves, who are Theosophists, and consider what are the requirements we need in order to become useful workers in this field.

The chief quality, as far as I can see, is the feeling of unity, the intimate conviction that the Universe is an indissoluble whole, and that the fiercest criminal, standing on the lowest step of evolution, is just as lawful and necessary a part of it as the perfect man, who has accomplished the cycle of evolution. We must have the definite feeling that *his* sin and shame are *our* sin and shame, not because we have created a civilisation and surroundings against which a weak will cannot successfully struggle, but because we have *de facto* committed the sin and have *de facto* covered ourselves with shame in one part of our being. We are all *one* in the most practical and real sense of the word; all humanity undergoes the process of manifesting through and by itself the Heavenly Man; that is why we, each and all, take part in the performing of every act, be it a crime or a heroic deed. This Heavenly Man shall be manifested in all His perfection only when every part of Him shall be pure and luminous; and He cannot be perfect as long as a single part of Him, however minute, is soiled and dimmed. And so we can help the criminals only if, while looking into the eagerly listening faces, with sorrow and vice stamped on them, we feel every pang of pain as our own pain, every writhing of shame as our own shame, every criminal impulse as our own crime, not only in words, but in the innermost recesses of our being.

And Love also, gentle, wise and all-conquering; Love, fiery, burning out the dross and purifying the gold, must be the motive power in this work.

Three sentences should be inscribed on our banner:

1. Remember that the sin and shame of the world are your sin and shame.— *Light on the Path* , by M.C.

2. While correcting another's fault, imagine yourself as having committed it. — *The Way of Service*, by G.S. Arundale.
3. Let thy soul lend its ear to every cry of pain, like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer's eye. — *The Voice of the Silence*, by H.P. Blavatsky.

To conclude, let me plant the signposts of Theosophical prison work. The ideal would doubtless be for Theosophists to be entrusted with the management of prisons and reformatories, but we shall have to wait awhile till that becomes possible. Just now I am concerned only with immediate, practical work. It may be summed up in the three following points:

1. The spreading amid the staff and the prisoners of the theories of evolution, reincarnation and karma.
2. The forming of Volunteer Leagues for self-amendment, based on the idea of the higher ego, and, as a necessary corollary to this work, the founding of homes for released prisoners.
3. The organising by competent persons, of bands of invisible helpers for the giving of special help in prisons. The importance of this work is evident and needs no further explanation.

Let me hope that some of my brothers and sisters will shoulder this work. I have only just had a taste of it, but I can already testify that it needs the whole man; it drains the soul, and the heart may well be broken in the task. The anguish and struggle of those souls is a heavy burden to bear. Things cannot be done by halves. Only love freely lavished, confidence and trust ungrudgingly given, will call response from hearts that have never known the one or the other. "Look up and hope," is a motto valuable, not only for the criminals themselves, but also for those who would bring them moral help and support.

Robust physical and astral health is also needed in order to stand the terrible vibrations whirling through the prisons. Mr. Jinarajadasa, in one of his beautiful papers, engages us to work with equal readiness and enthusiasm wherever the Master wants us, be in it heaven or in hell. Well, work in prison is decidedly work in hell, and in the worst hell that our earth can produce; but if it be the Master's wish to send thither any one of us, what matters all the rest?