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Pëtr Kropotkin
Christmas in Prison
1874

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Peter Kropotkin's birthday on the modern calendar falls on the Winter Solstice, December 21, 1842 (Wikipedia, as with many things, does not acknowledge that December 9th is Kropotkin's birthday on the old Russian calendar). Every year around this time I like to post something by Kropotkin, sometimes with a Christmas theme. So this year I am presenting two excerpts. This one is from Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, where he describes reading Charles Dickens' Christmas stories while imprisoned in Russia in 1874. - Robert Graham

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Christmas in Prison

Pëtr Kropotkin

1874

When he learned about my arrest, [my brother] Alexander immediately left everything, — the work of his life, the life itself of freedom which was as necessary for him as free air is necessary for a bird, — and returned to St. Petersburg, which he disliked, only to help me through my imprisonment.

We were both very much affected at this interview. My brother was extremely excited. He hated the very sight of the blue uniforms of the gendarmes, those executioners of all independent thought in Russia, and expressed his feeling frankly in their presence. As for me, the sight of him at St. Petersburg filled me with the most dismal apprehensions. I was happy to see his honest face, his eyes full of love, and to hear that I should see them once a month; and yet I wished him hundreds of miles away from that place to which he came free that day, but to which he would inevitably be brought some night under an escort of gendarmes. "Why did you come into the lion's den? Go back at once!" my whole inner self cried; and yet I knew that he would remain as long as I was in prison.

He understood better than any one else that inactivity would kill me, and had already made application to obtain for me permission to resume work. The Geographical Society

wanted me to finish my book on the glacial period, and my brother turned the whole scientific world in St. Petersburg upside down to move it to support his application. The Academy of Sciences was interested in the matter; and finally, two or three months after my imprisonment, the governor entered my cell and announced to me that I was permitted by the Emperor to complete my report to the Geographical Society, and that I should be allowed pen and ink for that purpose. "Till sunset only," he added. Sunset, at St. Petersburg, is at three in the afternoon, in winter time; but that could not be helped. "Till sunset" were the words used by Alexander II when he granted the permission.

So I could work!

I could hardly express now the immensity of relief I then felt at being enabled to resume writing. I would have consented to live on nothing but bread and water, in the dampest of cellars, if only permitted to work.

I was, however, the only prisoner to whom writing materials were allowed. Several of my comrades spent three years and more in confinement before the famous trial of "the hundred and ninety-three" took place, and all they had was a slate. Of course, even the slate was welcome in that dreary loneliness, and they used it to write exercises in the languages they were learning, or to work out mathematical problems; but what was jotted down on the slate could last only a few hours.

My prison life now took on a more regular character. There was something immediate to live for. At nine in the morning I had already made the first three hundred paces across my cell, and was waiting for my pencils and pens to be delivered to me. The work which I had prepared for the Geographical Society contained, beside a report of my explorations in Finland, a discussion of the bases upon which the glacial hypothesis ought to rest. Now, knowing that I had plenty of time before me, I decided to rewrite and enlarge that part of my work. The Academy of Sciences put its admirable library at my service,

and a corner of my cell soon filled up with books and maps, including the whole of the Swedish Geological Survey publications, a nearly complete collection of reports of all arctic travels, and whole sets of the *Quarterly Journal* of the London Geological Society. My book grew in the fortress to the size of two large volumes. The first of them was printed by my brother and Polakóff (in the Geographical Society's *Memoirs*); while the second, not quite finished, remained in the hands of the Third Section when I ran away. The manuscript was found only in 1895, and given to the Russian Geographical Society, by whom it was forwarded to me in London.

At five in the afternoon, — at three in the winter, — as soon as the tiny lamp was brought in, my pencils and pens were taken away, and I had to stop work. Then I used to read, mostly books of history. Quite a library had been formed in the fortress by the generations of political prisoners who had been confined there. I was allowed to add to the library a number of staple works on Russian history, and with the books which were brought to me by my relatives I was enabled to read almost every work and collection of acts and documents bearing on the Moscow period of the history of Russia. I relished, in reading, not only the Russian annals, especially the admirable annals of the democratic mediæval republic of Pskov, — the best, perhaps, in Europe for the history of that type of mediæval cities, — but all sorts of dry documents, and even the *Lives of the Saints*, which occasionally contain facts of the real life of the masses which cannot be found elsewhere. I also read during this time a great number of novels, and even arranged for myself a treat on Christmas Eve. My relatives managed to send me then the Christmas stories of Dickens, and I spent the festival laughing and crying over those beautiful creations of the great novelist.