

AN EXECUTION IN THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL
PRISONS.¹

BY LEONIDE SEMENOF.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY COUNT LEO TOLSTOY.

THE account which follows shows, it seems to me, remarkable literary workmanship. It is full of feeling and artistic imagination. It should be given the widest publicity. This wish of mine recalls a conversation which I once had with Ostrovsky, the dramatist. I had just written a play, "The Contaminated Family," which I read to him, remarking that I should like to see it published as soon as possible. He thereupon replied: "Why, are you afraid people are going to become more intelligent?" These words were quite to the point in this matter of my poor play. But in this other matter, the situation is quite different. To-day nobody can help hoping that men may become more intelligent and that the horrors described below cease, though there is little reason to believe that such will be the case. Hence it is that I esteem most useful every word raised against what is now going on in Russia.

LEO TOLSTOY.

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There was nothing extraordinary about it. It was the same as always,—the same walls, the same barred windows. The day was clear and cold just like a thousand other days here below.

¹The translation of this article has been communicated by Mr. Theodore Stanton.

In the barracks the soldiers were lolling about, smoking, telling their long crude stories and laughing. The guards sometimes whispered together and then paced up and down the long somber corridors of the prison, their keys jingling, while they were lazily thinking ever the same thing,—their prison duties and their home comforts.

The political prisoners were in a nervous state. Now they would go pacing forward and back in their narrow cells; then, on a sudden, they would tremble, would listen to what was going on, and then begin once more their endless aimless tramp. And all around them was hideous,—the dirty walls of the prison and the awful stench.

The engineer sighed and threw himself down on the boards which served as a bed. He was a tall thin man with high cheek bones and weary sad eyes. His nerves were unstrung and his whole body worn out. One thought never left his head, where it clung most pertinaciously.

During the past few days he had tried with all his strength to put away from him all feeling. He had become quite indifferent to death,—“a slight necessary operation,” he would often say to himself while smoking a cigarette. “And afterwards, what? Nothing.” The whole thing seemed so simple and clear to him that it was not worth a moment’s reflection. The only thing necessary was, in some way or another, to keep occupied and stifle his conscience during the few days that remained to him. Every thing to prevent the inevitable had been done.

So the engineer would read and smoke. Then he would pace his cell to begin reading again. Fortunately he had some books. In spite of the severity of the solitary confinement system, he had been able to get books from the political prisoners confined in another part of the building.

In one of these books he had read a thought that would give him no peace of mind. It pursued him all day, and when he went to bed it was transformed into a nightmare, and this nightmare seemed to become a reality.

All humanity, he thought, is a unique, immense, monstrous organism. It appeared before him growing, spreading, devouring some of its cells for the benefit of other cells, and devouring him also!

And why was all this? And when the engineer would ask this question, then the thought would crumble to pieces. It seemed to lack a link. But nevertheless it would again get possession

of his head, infiltrating into his own veins as does sap into the veins of plants.

Then he would walk and smoke again. Sometimes he would listen to what the other prisoners were doing. In what state of mind were they awaiting the coming of death? Perhaps they had lost courage. But as this appeared bad and was disagreeable to him, he would banish such thoughts. Perhaps the others were more nervous than he was.

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It was a clear winter's day. The director of the prison came and went in the court-yard and gave orders. It was cold and the frost bit one's ears. He turned up the collar of his great-coat. From his apartments came the odor of roasting turkey and this odor irritated him. He wanted to eat.

"Winding-sheets cost two rubles and fifty kopeks each," the prison bookkeeper informed him, a shrewd blond peasant with an obsequious manner.

The director glanced at him for a moment and said impatiently:

"Then that won't go, especially as the municipality has voted us no funds. The price is too high. We need money as it is. Explain the matter to them."

"I have already done so, Sir."

"But you idiot; tell them so again," he growled.

This clerk had long been a source of vexation to him. His thickheadedness, his blue eyes with their innocent look and his fawning ways,—the fellow seemed to be making fun of him. "He thinks me an assassin," the director would say to himself; "that all I am good for is to kill people and nothing else,—this stupid fool!" Then turning once more to his subordinate:

"Well, go and tell them so again or we shall have to get on without winding-sheets."

"I will obey orders."

The director interrupted him:

"Oh, enough of that obeying orders business. There is something else besides. We must have a wig and a beard. The official circular prescribes this. Go to Axenstein's and get them."

"I will obey orders."

So the clerk hastened away and the snow creaked under his feet. The director watched him disappear, then thoughts of his own cursed duties took possession of him once more.

"When will all this stop? It nearly drives me mad. Every day, new death sentences, fresh executions. I wish those fellows were in my place!"

And the old dominant hatred of the authorities which had been accumulating in his heart suddenly began to show itself and quickly reached the boiling point.

"And all this comes from those at the head. Well, let them go on with this. But if things take a bad turn, we are not going to be the ones who will suffer. We simply obey orders."

And this thought that it would be the chiefs who would suffer seemed to console the director and he went off to give further orders.

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The President of the military tribunal at a dinner given in his honor by the officers of the regiment of the Imperial Fusileers, was exceedingly contented and freely indulged in laughter. He was a fat general, with red cheeks and long mustaches. He had once studied for a time in a theological seminary and he sometimes spoke like a clergyman. He really believed himself thoroughly upright and good, and he wanted to have everybody else think so too, even to the lawyer who had defended the prisoners, who, during a sitting of the tribunal had referred to him in most flattering terms as "that light of science." This pleased him very much, particularly because it was said in the presence of the Judge Advocate who was of a higher grade than himself and who had once written some sort of a book of which he was very proud. He it was who had said at one of the sittings of the tribunal: "No educated jurist can have a moment's doubt about the guilt of the prisoner now before us."

"And yet we had our doubts," the general said to his hosts at the table, "and we acquitted a most evident terrorist. Ha, ha, ha, 'no educated jurist,' he said. We let him see who runs things at the tribunal. We acquit when we like and we hang if the fancy takes us. There was something very pleasing about that Klemenkine," he continued, addressing these last words across the table to the lawyer.

"Whom are you speaking of, General?" asked the colonel of the regiment who did not understand to whom he was referring.

"We are going to hang the fellow over there," exclaimed the general; and then he continued, turning to the lawyer: "Nobody can bring this up against us, for all the blame was laid on two dead men. You doubtless noticed this?" And then more completely to satisfy the lawyer, he added with an air of importance and in an

undertone: "The Governor General called for seven. We had to find five more. May God receive their souls!"

Thereupon the general cast his eyes around the banqueting hall as though he were looking for some holy image, made the sign of the cross over his high stomach, which was beginning to perspire under his unbuttoned uniform, and raised his glass with these words:

"To your health, my legal friend. Don't feel so solemn over the affair. Perhaps we can do better next time."

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One of the officers who was on the tribunal nearly burst into tears during the sitting, so deeply moved was he by the lawyer's speech in defense of a young college boy of eighteen, who, he was convinced, was innocent but who was, nevertheless, condemned to death. Now, at the banquet, this same officer was drinking like a fish, while, through his befogged eyes he saw all around him the good and charming faces of his brother officers, and was surprised, even himself, to find them so sympathetic. And now he was asking himself how he could have been so foolish during the sitting as to think for a moment of resigning from the army for such a thing. If he had done so what would he be now? Why should he have done so? If this boy had been let off another would have been hung in his place. The President had made it very clear to all the judges that it was necessary to hang five. So what difference did it make who the five were? In fact, he got so much comfort out of these reflections that he went on drinking harder than ever.

The lawyer had long been convinced that before a military tribunal neither eloquence, nor erudition, nor even sentiment, counted for anything. The essential thing was to be on good terms with the judges and to habituate them to his person, so that they should not fear him nor look upon him as a terrorist. So now he began to drink too, forcing himself to smile to the right and to the left with the officers in order to show them that he was quite one of them. But at the bottom of his heart, through the mists of the wine, the feeling was ever present, that this is the center where was prepared Port Arthur and Isoushima. And he thought how some day he would write all this in his memoirs.

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The city was full of excitement. A meeting of voters at the Douma and a newly elected deputy were signing a protest against capital punishment. A telegram was sent to St. Petersburg. A large lady with deep-set eyes, but who did not weep, the mother of

one of those condemned to death, a college boy, was hurrying about, first to deputies, then to the Governor General, then to the lawyers and finally to the Judge Advocate. On all of them she produced an impression of terror.

The Governor General had declined to receive her. The others tried to remove her fears, stammered out vague assurances, made promises and hastened to get rid of her. She was accompanied by her daughter, a young lady who was not handsome, who watched over her mother with anguish and anxiety. She put her carefully in the carriage and said to her:

"Mama, mama, be calm. I am sure nothing will happen. Valia is innocent and will be pardoned."

The deputy also called twice on the Governor General, but the second time he was not received. This deputy was a physician, a kindly old man with gray hair and eyebrows, and watery eyes. He was very well known in town and was highly esteemed. The first time he went to the palace of the Governor General, a strange thought came into his head. Before him people were hurrying with a quick step. The snow shone. The cab-drivers were swinging their arms to keep their hands warm. The pale mother of the college lad came back to him, and then suddenly everything seemed a lie, a useless lie. Also a lie was his visit to the Governor General to intercede for the condemned. He spoke to himself, and this was the strange thought which haunted him:

"The Government is always the Government. The very noise being made about this boy's case will hurt our cause. The Government will not yield!"

But it would seem that the meetings, the protests, the general emotion which had spread everywhere, would arouse the country like a victorious wave and sweep everything before it. He was a witness of this historic movement, so grand and so important; so he went up the stairway of the Governor's Palace with a firm step and with the dignity of one of the people's representatives, resolved boldly to state the case.

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The Governor General was a tall soldier, his torso tightly fitted into his uniform, his cheeks rosy, who carried superbly his seventy-seven years. He was thoroughly convinced that his broad face, his grand mustaches, his bushy eyebrows always severely contracted, produced the very impression which should be associated with a great dignitary such as he believed himself to be: and his every

thought and effort were devoted to augment this impression. To him, everything "was as plain as the nose on your face," he would say. It was the Liberals who pushed "them" to the point where they revolted. That was all there was of it. So of course he received the deputy coldly and told him that everything permitted by the law would be done.

The little deputy felt himself almost nothing when he stood before the towering Governor General, whose breast was covered with decorations, and met the steady gaze of those piercing eyes. For a moment, he quite forgot what he had come to say. But finally he tried to touch delicately on the humanitarian side of the affair. He spoke of the grief of the lad's mother. But the reply was always the same.

"All that the law permits will be done," and the Governor General extended mechanically his big hand on whose little finger shone a ring. But when the deputy was gone and the Governor General was back in his own study again, he burst out laughing and exclaimed:

"Why, he himself is a candidate for prison!"

The Governor General prided himself on being able to look men through and through, and he was especially proud of his ability to detect a revolutionist.

So he laid his cigar down on the corner of the table and in a firm hand signed the lad's death warrant. The only thing that troubled him was possible interference from St. Petersburg.

"I am responsible before the Czar and the nation for calm throughout the Empire. St. Petersburg mixes in everything but only makes blunders."

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The night of this same day, when the condemned men were waked up for execution, all the officials who were to take part in the lugubrious affair were seized with a feeling of terror and anguish. The Sub-Director of the prison, a young officer on duty that night, with a very handsome and somewhat effeminate face, while hastening through the prison's somber passage ways, lighted by little petroleum lamps, felt much as he used to feel as a child when alone in the woods, trembling at every sound, at every tree, as though they boded danger. He imagined now that a thousand invisible and terrible eyes were staring at him from every side, surprising him in the act of committing a base and terrible crime. He had just been appointed sub-director, and this was the first time he was to take part in an execution.

There were some eight hundred prisoners in the building, and in spite of themselves the officials had come to look upon them as so many numbers and papers, and the *sang froid* with which the approaching execution was looked upon had communicated itself involuntarily to everybody.

But now that he was going in the middle of the night to announce death to men whose faces even were unknown to him,—this filled the young officer with fear, and he began to ask himself whether he should not blame the Director for having thus assigned to him a duty which was as disagreeable as it was delicate and difficult to perform. Or, on the contrary, should he feel flattered at the confidence thus shown him? This last way of looking at the matter was finally the accepted one. So, downing every fear, he affected in the sight of everybody a free and easy manner which he did not feel and kept nervously twisting his budding mustaches..

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The awakened prisoners rose from their bunks pale and tired and looked dazedly around them. They were ordered to make haste; everybody wanted the terrible business over as rapidly as possible. At the same time, strangely enough, a sort of angry feeling against them suddenly took possession of officers and soldiers alike, at the sight of these faces half asleep and half frozen. This ill-feeling seemed to spring from the fact that it was these poor creatures who had forced them to rout out in the middle of the night and perform an awful duty that filled them all with horror.

“Make haste, you,” yelled a soldier into one cell, forgetting the presence of his superior officer; “there is no use in wasting time now.”

And the poor victims silently obeyed, all understanding what the brutal soldier meant.

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The engineer had just fallen asleep when they came to get him. He had had much trouble that night in quieting his throbbing temples. He had smoked so much during the day that his nerves were over-excited. His enfeebled head was peopled with thoughts and images which became nightmares, and again he saw humanity take on the form of some monster embracing the whole earth and carrying on its mysterious work of rejecting dead cells, which had become useless, and creating new ones to take their places.

When called, the engineer started up half asleep, ran his fingers

through his hair, and stretched himself out as though he would enjoy his uncomfortable bed for the last time and thus prolong the final moments remaining to him. Then suddenly everything disappeared, everything vanished into nothingness,—the revolution, its actors, the tribunal, all. All things seemed to him so useless, so indifferent, and he said to himself:

“Only death remains and then all is ended;” and he again repeated: “A little operation, that is all.”

But this time no smile accompanied the thought. It only ran through his brain, simply, tranquilly, for an extraordinary calmness had suddenly spread through his whole being. Now everything seemed so mean, so small in the presence of that immense nothingness which was about to open to him and into which he was sure to disappear within the next few minutes. He would have liked to tarry for a few moments longer in the spell of this feeling which he had never experienced before. But the officer was in haste.

“There is no time to waste, none to waste. Get ready. Hurry.”

There was something cowardly in this order. The officer appeared to be trying to give himself courage and to stir up his own brutality. Such was the thought that flashed on the engineer’s mind as he started up. For a moment he felt offended at this indecent haste at such a time. But this feeling quickly faded away, for he could see that the officer was deathly pale and that his eyes were weak and haggard. He could not look the prisoner in the face.

“He is some libertine,” thought the engineer mechanically. But now all this seemed to him so small and insignificant, mere dust in the presence of the immense future nothingness, that he simply smiled and got up. He had to obey.

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In the corridor, the victims were crowded against one another; all was disorder, one pushing the other, while the chains clinked and the heavy footfalls echoed. The soldiers were watchful. They appeared to fear that even now some of their prisoners might escape. Now and then they urged them forward. There was a slight delay as they all crowded through a door-way, when a loud voice exclaimed:

“Comrades, we are being led to the judgment seat of heaven.”

This was said by the son of a deacon, with pale cheeks and poor teeth. He did not seem to know just what he was saying, and his jaws were clattering together as though he had a fever.

“That’s all right; that’s the very road you ought to follow,”

replied angrily the soldier at his side, the same who had a few minutes before hustled him out of his cell.

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At the prison registry office the minutes seemed an eternity. But this eternity advanced without pity, advanced and disappeared.

While they had been hastening through the corridors, the whole life of each prisoner appeared to rise up before him and pass through his mind as images which were extraordinarily wonderful. This terrible work of the imagination absorbed all of their attention, turned their minds away from everything else. They quite forgot to ask themselves if even yet something might not be done to save them. They walked like somnambulists. But this momentary and unexpected stop at the prison office broke the spell and made vanish all these more tender feelings.

The Registrar and the Director were busy finding the names in the prison books, and when found the names were called out. It looked as though they were scratched out. But all this passed before the prisoners' eyes as in a dream, like pale lifeless visions,—the books, the lamps, the bald head of the Director, the bayonets of the soldiers.

These soldiers still clung close to their prisoners. Their caps and often their bodies rubbed up against the bodies of their victims. Still they feared escape, and looked at them with an expression which seemed to say:

“We are not to blame for this, but we will be held responsible for anything that goes wrong.”

A nervous young soldier with a slight black mustache just beginning to show itself was clearly much moved and strove not to look at the prisoners. The strange thought that he was there living and well, while these other men, that tall prisoner, unshaven, his gray eyes so sunken like the eyes of all of them, would in a few minutes more be no longer among the living,—this sent a shudder through him, made his heart beat faster and caused him to grow deadly pale.

Among the prisoners was Klemenkine, a man of southern type, sturdy, with a fine face and thick hair. It was difficult for him to keep still. He sat down on a bench, took his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. He stamped his feet and exclaimed:

“Comrades, the best they can do is to finish up this business promptly,” and he looked about on the unhappy group as he buried

his cold hands in his prison cap. Then wild thoughts of escape came into his head, and then he spoke again :

"Comrades, what does all this mean, anyway? I am innocent. I swear it. I was condemned without being heard. What does all this mean then?"

But the most terrified member of the unfortunate group was the young college boy. This tender lad, with his plump body and downy cheeks, contracted his eyebrows, bit his lips, and was plainly making every effort in his power not to break down, and yet sobbing in spite of it all. Suddenly, he hastily made the sign of the cross ; his face grew so red that the veins of his temples stood out ; his chin trembled, and, for a moment, his lips moved without uttering a sound. It was plain that he wished to say something, but his emotion was such that he could not do so.

At this moment, the engineer happened to be looking at him. He feared that the rush of blood to the throat might smother the boy. "This, added to his other suffering, would be too much," the engineer said to himself. But finally the lad got better control of his organs of speech and said in a whisper :

"I—I—I want a priest."

Then he looked frightened at the sound of his own voice, and, terrified, gazed wildly about. But nobody had heard him except the soldier who was near the engineer, and who, pale as ever, was still striving not to look at the prisoners. Trembling with emotion, he hastened to his superior officer in order to tell him of the boy's wish. But the officer's head was buried in the books.

"I want a priest," the youth now repeated in a louder voice, which, this time, was heard by everybody.

Thereupon, the son of the deacon exclaimed with an oath :

"And I, I want a cigarette."

The officer looked up from his registers and shouted at the frightened boy :

"You shall have one. But what are you blubbering about?"

But when he saw that young face so red and so terribly drawn, the eyes inflamed with emotion, he felt embarrassed and added in a more kindly tone :

"You will have one ; you will have all that the law permits."

The boy, confused, looked about him again and replied :

"Oh it's nothing ; I simply wanted to say something."

And the old thought suddenly came back to the engineer. All this seemed so little, so mean, in the presence of that eternal calm where all were soon to be annihilated, that he felt like trying to ex-

plain to the lad, in order that he should not break down and could smile with him, that all this was useless and that, even at such a moment one could be happy.

But at the same moment, a feeling of pity for the Director came into the engineer's heart,—this Director who, at such a time, was placed in such a terrible position; and when he saw in his face an expression of tenderness for the suffering of the lad, he felt that he too was a man. So he now thought of going, not to the lad, but to the Director and saying to him:

“Would it not be best to hang the boy first? I am ready to wait. It will be easier for the child.”

It seemed to the engineer that this could be brought about, “for,” he said to himself, “all here are men,—himself, the Director and the soldiers. These officers are not criminals. Each will understand this humane and natural sentiment in so important and general an act as death.”

But while mechanically he was asking himself how he was going to set to work to do this, for he saw that he could not say these things aloud, that the matter had to be explained with tact and prudence, for it to be understood,—in the midst of these plans the terrible business at the registry office was finished, and all was commotion again.

The deacon's son had noticed by the clock that they had been there only five minutes. “But it seemed like an age,” he said as they moved on.

It was now seven minutes to three a. m. All went crowding through the doors into the courtyard. The prisoners passed between two rows of soldiers. At their head marched the same young officer, while behind walked the group of witnesses required by the law to be present at the execution.

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While the last formalities were being carried out at the office, the priest, in the greatest agitation, paced up and down the adjoining room, the private bureau of the Director. “All that seems unnecessary,” he thought to himself; it could surely be avoided in some way. The prisoners could be treated in a more Christian spirit and pardoned. But, was his conclusion, we are small fry, and the official world probably knows better than we as to what should be done. Several times the priest indulged in prayer. But the presence of other persons and the unusual surroundings disturbed him. He would brush back his long hair and fumble the cross. At this moment, the Director came to him and said:

"Father, one of the prisoners wants you."

All the others had declined the consolation of religion.

The priest hastened into the office, when it suddenly occurred to him to ask where the confession should take place. "Here or out in the court-yard?" It was decided that it should occur in the office.

"I shall now bring comfort to at least one of them, and I will pray for the others," said the priest, whose heart was throbbing.

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The Judge Advocate was nervous and was striving not to notice what was going on. He was thinking of his wife whom he had left in his warm and comfortable bed. She liked decadent poetry, and, in a general way, held advanced ideas. He too sympathized with the movement and understood the whole subject. He felt that it was time to abolish the old régime; but yet it was plain to him that so long as the law existed, it must be carried out. "When they get the power," he said to himself, "then they will make other laws and live according to their own ideas." He too was angry with these men because they were not jurists and could not grasp such simple truths, though from a humanitarian standpoint, he admitted they were to be pitied. And while he was indulging in these rather philosophical reflections, he would now and again fumble the sentence which was in his pocket and which he would soon have to read to the condemned. He was now mustering up all his strength for this terrible task.

The doctor was drunk, smoked, and was complaining to the Director of some imaginary affront, while the young officer in command kept looking at his watch.

* * *

Out in the court-yard, within sight of the scaffolds, the college lad was sobbing and then suddenly burst into a flood of tears. He could not speak. He could only weep. All his strength and determination to bear up like a man had disappeared during the confession. He did not believe in God, he did not understand the conception. But thoughts of his mother were ever present with him, and he felt that the presence of this priest during his last moments would console her. He had begged the priest to tell her that he had died bravely, believing in immortality, with love for her in his heart and trusting that she would not be too sad. He was ready to lie to accomplish this end.

But in the hurry of the confession, he had forgotten to speak to the priest of his sister, and he was deeply pained by the thought that he had never been just towards this puny scrofulous child, who now would always think that in his last moments he had forgotten her and did not love her. But it was now too late to repair this oversight, and he wept, and sobbed, and shook throughout his whole young body.

It was a terrible scene. Tears were in all eyes. All felt that it should be ended. So the hangman seized the lad the first, who then became suddenly silent and swooned.

While entering the court-yard, the engineer had urged that everything possible should be done for the boy, and when he saw that there were five scaffolds, he grew still calmer. Again the old feeling of the littleness of everything took still stronger hold upon him so that the sobs of the boy no longer touched him. He knew that they were all going to die, that in a moment all would be over, both tears and what produced them. Twice he looked up at the starry heavens, and the stars seemed to tell him the same thing. For the last time he drew into his lungs a long draught of the cold fresh air and then he himself kicked away the stool on which he was standing.

Klemenkine, enervated and deeply effected by this scene of the college boy, yelled at the top of his voice and shouted out that this act would never be pardoned these "villains and brutes."

At this imprecation, the Judge Advocate and all the others trembled. But they said nothing, knowing that the hour for discussion had ended.

The workman shook with cold, and the son of the deacon tried to say something, but his eyes were haggard and no words would come.

Twenty minutes later, twenty long minutes, during which the Judge Advocate and the others stamped about impatiently in the snow, turning away from the hanging men and freezing with cold. The young officer and the Director looked at their watches. The doctor, wrapped in his cloak, moved from one corpse to the other hastily feeling their legs, though scarcely touching them. Then he murmured:

"Yes, they are all dead, quite dead. We can go now, and I will sign the document to this effect."

Then we all left, and soon the court-yard resumed its customary appearance.