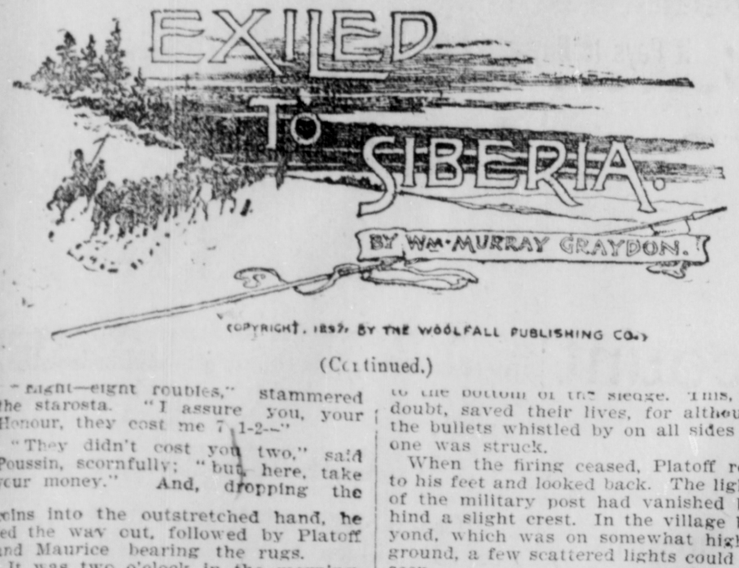


(Continued.)

"Eight—eight roubles," stammered the starosta. "I assure you, your Honour, they cost me 7 1-2—"

"They didn't cost you two," said Poussin, scornfully; "but here, take your money." And, dropping the coins into the outstretched hand, he led the way out, followed by Platoff and Maurice bearing the rugs.

It was two o'clock in the morning. The postyard, lit by the glaring torches of the soldiery, was weird and unnatural. A splendid troika—three powerful black horses—was attached to the sledge, and the restless animals were stamping impatiently. Platoff and Maurice took the back seat and drew the furs around them. A slight movement of the rugs in front showed that Phil was still safe in his retreat. He doubtless was curious to know what was going on.

Poussin deliberately made an inspection of the food he had bought to see that everything was there, and, finally climbing to his seat, he roughly ordered the station attendants out of the road, and chirruped to the horses.

They trotted through the yard, and, turning the angle at the gate, under the very eyes of a dozen Cossacks, dashed off down the frozen, deserted street. The low houses, dim and gloomy, shot past like streaks, and, skimming over a slight ridge, the darkness was relieved by a bar of light shining from the military outpost—a small wooden structure by the roadside.

"I forgot all about that," muttered Poussin, as he pulled up his horses in obedience to the stern command to halt.

Two or three soldiers were lounging inside, and the officer who came forward with a lantern was the same man that examined their passports that morning. He held up the light and scrutinized their faces.

"Ah, yes," he said, "I remember you. You just came last evening."

"Yes," replied Poussin. "We have been turned out of our beds." And he related in good humoured tones how the expected arrival of the Government inspector had deprived them of their room, and started them off a few hours ahead of their usual time.

"Then you are not connected with his Excellency's party?" asked the officer.

"Why, no," said Poussin, thrown off his guard by the question.

"But your companions are," said the officer, and, pulling a document from his pocket, he hastily unfolded it.

"I find both your names here," he said, looking at Platoff, "Louis Miroff and Serge Lyapin. This is a list of the inspector's party brought to me an hour ago by the captain of his Excellency's advance guard in order that I might copy it for my monthly report. Seeing your names upon it, I supposed you had preceded the inspector. May I ask why you are leaving again before his arrival?"

Platoff's courage rose to meet this trying emergency. "We belong to his Excellency's party," he answered, in a firm voice, "my companion and I. We are travelling incognito for reasons that must remain secret."

Then, seeing that the officer hesitated, he added:—"You saw the passports properly made out in our names. Surely that is sufficient."

Perhaps there was an ill-suppressed touch of eagerness in Platoff's voice. The officer's suspicions were plainly aroused.

Without replying he held his lantern to Platoff's face, and then turned it on Poussin, who sat white and miserable on the front seat. That woebegone countenance confirmed the officer's doubts.

"I must put you to the inconvenience of a brief delay," he said. "No doubt all will be explained, but I dare not assume any risks. I will despatch a man at once to bring the captain of the Cossack guard. He will know you, of course."

The officer moved quietly forward and caught the horses' lines, while three soldiers with rifles in their hands came out of the station and stood near the sledge.

"Yes," said Platoff. "He will know us. Oh, yes, the captain will know us." His lips trembled, and he caught Maurice's wrist in a convulsive grasp.

Poussin never turned his head. He was trembling like a leaf. Ten seconds—twenty—half a minute.

No one moved or spoke.

Suddenly Platoff straightened up. With one quick, marvellous leap he sprang behind Poussin and snatched the lines and the whip from the nerveless fingers. He shouted fiercely, and brought down the lash with stinging severity on the spirited horses. They reared in the air, tore madly from the officer's detaining grasp, and before the amazed soldiers could realize what had taken place the sledge was dashing like a meteor into the gloom.

"Down!" Platoff shouted to Maurice. And, sweeping Poussin into the bottom of the sledge with one arm, he tightened his grip on the lines, and dropped low himself.

Crack! crack! crack!—for two or three minutes the rifles popped continuously on the frosty air, and the bullets tore through the leather hood and splintered the woodwork on all sides. Then the last shot echoed and died away, and the flashes of red fire vanished, leaving the night darker than before by contrast.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PURSUIT AND ESCAPE.

Platoff's brave deed would probably have resulted disastrously had it not been for the presence of mind which prompted him to drag his companions to the bottom of the sledge. This, no doubt, saved their lives, for although the bullets whistled by on all sides no one was struck.

When the firing ceased, Platoff rose to his feet and looked back. The lights of the military post had vanished behind a slight crest. In the village beyond, which was on somewhat higher ground, a few scattered lights could be seen.

"Are they coming?" asked Poussin, as he rose and climbed on the seat.

"No," said Platoff; "I can't hear any sounds of pursuit. They have no horses, you know."

"All seems quiet behind us," said Maurice, who was leaning over the back seat.

"What's the matter? Who was shooting?" demanded a smothered voice, and Phil poked his head and shoulders from under the rugs.

Platoff briefly explained what had just taken place, and then turned his attention to the horses, which had stuck to the road in spite of the lack of guidance, and were dashing forward at a tremendous pace.

"Hand me the lines," said Poussin. "I will drive now." And with a touch of the whip he spurred the horses to still greater efforts.

"Stop!" said Platoff. "For your own safety you must put us off by the road. Your peril is too great already. It will be increased if you are caught in our company. Put us off right here, and we can easily escape to the hills."

"No," replied Poussin; "I will do nothing of the kind. At present there is no danger. The military outpost is nearly half a mile from the post station in the village. To give the alarm it is necessary for one of the soldiers to go there on foot. Of course the Cossacks will at once start in pursuit, but their horses are pretty well worn out, while ours are fresh. The next station is fifty miles distant. I can keep in advance of our pursuers at least that far. When daylight comes, I will let you out, and you can seek safety in the hills. Your absence will not be discovered until I reach the station, where, of course, I shall be arrested at once."

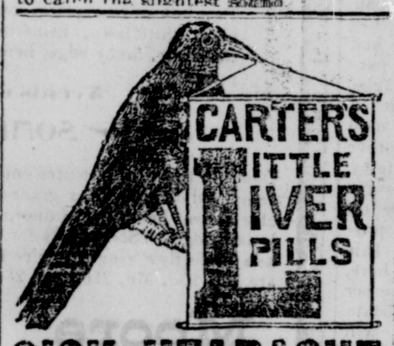
"Ah, my friend, escape with us," implored Platoff. "Together we will reach the coast and sail on some friendly vessel to a better country than this. Don't trust yourself to the mercies of these tyrants. They will inflict some terrible punishment—"

"I do not fear," interrupted Poussin. "I can make an explanation which I think will save me. I have not time to explain now. What I have done for you was only a debt. You saved my life. I hope I have saved yours. Remember, your identity is unknown to me. It is even possible that the authorities will not discover for some time who my strange passengers were. Your disguise is effective, and the fact that a third man was concealed in the sledge will never be known."

In spite of Platoff's continued entreaties, Poussin remained firm.

Holding the horses with a skilled hand, he urged them on unsparingly, and the sledge skimmed over the frozen ground at a speed which made the landscape on each side one dizzy blend. Hour after hour passed on. The dark sky paled gradually, and a gray light stole over the frozen plain until the distant hills were dimly seen. Morning was close at hand, and yet no trace of the pursuit was visible. Eastward the rugged hill tops were flecked with pale crimson—a rosy mist beneath which the morning sun was creeping upward. The atmosphere was clear and radiant, revealing every tree and rock for miles around. Still the horses sped on untiringly, their nostrils white with foam, their glossy flanks damp and steaming.

Platoff and Poussin were on the front seat, Maurice and Phil behind. All were grave and silent, scanning the landscape intently, straining their ears to catch the slightest sound.



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It was Maurice who sounded the alarm. His sharp cry echoed on the frosty air. His arm pointed straight to the northward, and, turning quickly, all saw on the rolling crest of a distant hill a single black streak moving in a serpentine course down the slope.

"Cossacks!" ejaculated Platoff. "A whole company at least. They are coming at full speed."

"Be calm," said Poussin. "They are fully two miles distant. The time has come to part."

He touched up the horses, and they dashed at a furious gallop over the level ground. His companions, turning in their seats, watched the approaching soldiers until they gained the plain and vanished behind the gentle undulations of the road. A moment later the sledge swept over a ridge, and Poussin drew up the panting horses in the hollow of a wooded ravine. A bubbling mountain stream poured down from the hills and emptied into the Ussum, some yards distant.

"There is no time to lose," said Poussin, as the fugitives sprang to the ground. "Take these provisions, take a rug apiece, strike back into the heart of the hills and wade up the bed of the stream until the road is out of sight. Make a wide detour to reach Vladivostock. God be with you and help you to escape! There will be plenty of vessels in the harbour at this time of year. Vladivostock is now but 170 miles away by the road. Do you need anything else?"

"No," exclaimed Platoff. "We have everything. Heaven grant that no harm comes to you! I have known many brave men in my time, but none that would have dared to do what you have done—"

"Go!" said Poussin, huskily. "Don't delay. Remember I must lead your pursuers far off the track that you may have time to escape."

One at a time they clasped the brave merchant's hand fervently, and with tears in their eyes.

"Good-bye, good-bye!" they called out, chokingly.

"Farewell!" said Poussin. "God be with you!" And, bringing down the whip on his restless horses, he swept up the ravine and vanished from sight over the pine-crowned ridge.

The halt had been of less than two minutes' duration. The Cossacks were still two miles in the rear, and the chances of escape were good.

The fugitives had climbed out of the sledge on some loose stones that bordered the stream.

Platoff led the way carefully down to the water's edge, and, stepping fearlessly in, they waded briskly up the shallow channel, thus leaving no trace behind to show that the sledge had been relieved of its load at that point.

For fully a mile they remained in the water, penetrating deeper and deeper into the forest.

The weather was slightly milder, but the snow was still covered with a firm crust, and their feet made no impression on it as they turned aside from the stream and ascended the hill.

The country was wild and rugged, more so than it had been at any time. The forest was gloomy and dim, and the hills were gaunt and rocky, full of precipices and dark chasms.

"We are very near the Chinese border," said Platoff. "That is why the scenery is so wild and lonely. The country is uninhabited."

Fortified by their long rest, the fugitives travelled all that day at a rapid pace, covering at least twenty-five miles, and when twilight came on they halted among a heap of loose stones and made themselves comfortable with the rugs that Poussin had given them, and which they had carried on their backs all that day. Not daring to light a fire, they ate their supper cold, and then, not being able to sleep, talked for an hour or more over the situation.

Platoff was much distressed about Poussin.

"I fear that he will be punished severely," he said. "The Government will never overlook such a thing as this, and yet he spoke as though he would be able to make a satisfactory explanation."

"Yes, he did," said Maurice. "Perhaps he has some influence at Vladivostock."

"Either that," replied Platoff, "or he is a man of wealth and can bribe the officials to overlook his indiscretion. Money is a powerful agent in this part of Siberia, 6,000 miles from St. Petersburg."

"How about the pursuit?" asked Maurice.

"Well," said Platoff, "of course they will make an effort to scour the country, but we can readily avoid the soldiers. The coast will be closely watched, though, and that is where we will encounter the most difficulty. At present we have little to fear. You must remember that our identity may not even be suspected yet, although the discovery must be made sooner or later. Don't worry over the situation, but keep up your courage." And with this admonition Platoff wrapped himself tighter in his rug and went calmly to sleep.

Maurice and Phil did not remain long awake. The spot they had chosen was a sheltered nook between a dozen big rocks, into which no cool wind could penetrate, and all slept as only weary men can, waking strengthened and refreshed at early dawn.

Platoff slipped away on a reconnoissance, and returned in half an hour with the welcome news that no intruders were in the neighbourhood.

"I think we can risk a little fire this morning," he said, and gathered a few pine cones and dried tips of branches. He lit them, and held a tin flask of cold tea in the flames.

He smothered the fire with snow, and the warm beverage was a grateful addition to the breakfast.

On that day they first journeyed two or three miles to the westward, drawing still closer to the borders of Mongolia, and then headed slightly to the south-east, where Vladivostock lay. The same wild and barren country prevailed, and Platoff marched with great caution, keeping his revolver ready for immediate use, and bidding Maurice do the same. This was not from any fear of meeting the Cossacks, for danger from this source was slight, but because they were now in a neighbourhood frequented by large and ferocious tigers, and a casual encounter with one of these monarchs was not at all improbable.

Once huge footprints were seen in the snow, and the boys felt their hair beginning to rise on end.

On a closer examination it was seen that the marks had been made during the last thaw, perhaps a month before, and were frozen solidly in the crust.

In three whole days they met neither tigers nor other peril, but marched on steadily to the south, sleeping at night in crannies among the rocks. The fourth morning the air was warm, and a thin rain was falling. The long delayed spring had come at last.

"It's useless to travel," said Platoff, "in this slush. We could not make half a dozen miles. We will stay right here until the weather changes. Vladivostock is less than 100 miles distant. Let that be a consolation to you."

Fortunately the camping place they had chosen the previous night was eminently suitable for a protracted stay. It was a shallow cavern hollowed from the base of a high cliff and running back half a dozen feet, its face open, of course, and protected from wind and rain by a thick screen of young fir trees.

Thanks to Poussin's generosity, it was needless to worry about food. They had plenty and to spare. Still it was a dreary four days that they spent in that rocky nook, with nothing to do but eat, sleep, and talk. It rained hard day and night; the snow faded away, the ice melted, and the grass underneath began to spring up with amazing rapidity. In four short days winter yielded to spring, and frozen Siberia was blossoming a paradise.

"The ice is breaking on the rivers," said Platoff, "and in the harbour of Vladivostock. The ships will anchor now in the Golden Horn, and the flags of all nations will float in the breeze."

On the morning of the fifth day the march was resumed. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky, and birds were singing sweetly in the forest.

The fugitives pressed forward with elastic step, snuffing the crisp, cool atmosphere and bathing their faces in the warm sunlight that penetrated the foliage.

At noon they halted beside a spring of ice water. They ate a hearty meal, and then, slightly fatigued by the brisk morning walk, dropped lazily on the short grass for a brief siesta.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BESIEGED BY A TIGER.

When Maurice awoke, some time later, both of his companions were sleeping soundly. The sun was far to the west, and the air was chilly and piercing.

He threw on the rug and sat up. A rustling sound not far away attracted his attention, and, looking across the forest, he saw a deer—a big buck with branching horns—strolling past an open glade, thirty yards distant.

With sudden excitement he extended a trembling hand for his revolver, and rose to his feet. He was hungry for fresh venison, and here was too good a chance to be neglected. The canned food and musty cheese put up by the starosta was beginning to grow wearisome.

He delayed for a moment, uncertain whether to awake his companions or not.

"Better let them sleep," he thought. "I won't be gone long."

The deer by this time had crossed the glade and vanished in the forest beyond, so Maurice started off briskly, intending to make a wide detour and get ahead of his victim.

He ran up the valley for nearly a quarter of a mile, keeping close to the base of the hill, and then crept cautiously down into the hollow, peering ahead through the leafless branches of the trees.

In this sheltered retreat patches of snow still lay here and there on the ground, and through one such spot—an open glade—Maurice tramped heedlessly.

Still he saw no trace of the deer. He paused and listened intently, but the forest was very still. He drew back into a clump of bushes and sat down on a fallen log.

(To be Continued.)

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