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(Continued.)

The minutes passed on without interruption, and he had about made up his mind to return to his companions when a sudden crash echoed through the forest, and he sprang to his feet in wild excitement, just in time to see the frightened deer go past him like a streak.

Something had scared the animal badly. The possibility that a tiger was lurking in the vicinity made Maurice's blood run cold, but on second thought he was inclined to believe that his companions were awake and searching for him.

Under this impression he was about to leave his hiding place and start up the valley when a slight mist hid his eyes that caused him to crouch deeper in the bushes with a shudder.

Through the forest, less than forty yards distant, came a burly Cossack, resident in his green uniform.

In one hand he held a rifle, and with the other he led his horse.

Close behind him was a second soldier, also on foot and leading his steed by the bridle.

They advanced into the open glade, bending over the ground and apparently conversing. Like a flash the truth entered Maurice's mind. They had discovered his footprints in the patches of snow and were following up his trail.

For a moment he gave himself up for lost. The Cossacks were between him and his companions, so that retreat up the valley was cut off. The footmarks showed the direction he had taken, and he was in danger of discovery at any moment.

He had presence of mind enough to remember the steep and rocky hillside behind him. If he could gain that and climb up the face, he might escape after all.



The sight caused him to crouch deeper in the bushes.

The Cossacks certainly could not follow him on horseback, and on foot the chances were even.

Thrusting the revolver into his belt, he dropped on hands and knees and crawled off into the forest until the enemy were out of sight. Then, rising to his feet, he dashed off across the valley at full speed.

A short run brought him to rising ground, and he pressed on up the slope faster than ever, and soon reached a level stretch at the base of a hill. The first glance brought despair to his heart. Overhead were steep and barren rocks, rising many feet in the air, and here and there a stunted pine tree.

To ascend this place was impossible, for the rocky ledges jutted out from the face of the cliff.

He turned and ran at full speed, searching vainly for some nook to hide in or a break in the rugged precipice that would allow him to ascend. He tore through thorn bushes and bruised his feet on sharp stones, but these mishaps were unheeded, for he imagined constantly that the Cossacks were on his track.

The path now became blocked with loose bowlders, and in his haste among these he tripped and came heavily to the ground.

He rose painfully to his feet—rose to find himself face to face with a monstrous tiger—a huge, tawny beast that lay supine on the ground.

The disturbed brute lifted his head sleepily and surveyed the intruder with glittering eyes. His long, spotted tail twitched, and from his throat issued a deep growl.

The tiger made no attempt to rise. He looked at Maurice, and Maurice looked at him, and in this position they remained for a full minute. Maurice slid his hand cautiously toward his belt, and the revolver was already in his grasp when he suddenly remembered that even should he succeed in shooting the tiger, which was improbable, the shot would at once draw the Cossacks to the spot, and he would be in a worse plight than ever.

The tiger solved the difficulty by slowly rising, and that broke the spell. Wheeling around, Maurice darted at the top of his speed back along the cliff. A hoarse growl warned him that the tiger was coming in pursuit, and in desperation he cast his eyes about for a refuge.

Such a place met his sight instantly, a deep crack in the very edge of the hill, running parallel with the ground. It was possibly wide enough for him to crawl in, and without stopping to weigh the chances he threw himself flat and ran his head and shoulders into the crevice. It was a tight squeeze, but with a prodigious effort he managed to drag his whole body inside and crawl back a few feet from the opening. This he had barely

accomplished when the pursuing tiger pounced angrily upon the spot, and thrust his great jaws into the hole, growling horribly all the while. Maurice, seizing a loose fragment of stone, dealt the brute a violent blow on the nose.

He drew back instantly, screaming with rage, and Maurice took advantage of this interval to squeeze still deeper into the crack. The floor was of soft, sticky clay. The roof, which pressed down on his head and body, was covered with stalactites, and from these fell water with a constant drip. His situation was decidedly uncomfortable. He could scarcely move his legs, and he had the restricted use of one arm only, while the icy water chilled him to the bone.

Meanwhile the tiger, squatted outside on the ground, was working himself into a terrible rage. Presently he sprang to the mouth of the crevice, and rolling half over on his side, made a vicious dig at Maurice with his fore paw, catching the lad's arm and ripping open the heavy sleeve from the elbow down. The sharp claws tore the flesh, and the smell of blood rendered the beast furious. With eyes that shone like fire, and snarling ferociously, he tried again and again to reach his victim, jamming his head against the stalactites and stretching his great claws like India rubber.

Maurice drew himself as far back as possible, expecting each moment that the great paws would seize him and drag him out.

He made no further attempt to strike the brute with the stone he still held in his hand, fearing it would only incite him to greater efforts.

All this time the loaded pistol was still in his belt, but he dared not fire. He could easily reach it, and no doubt he could kill the tiger without difficulty, but the report would surely bring the Cossacks to the spot. If his life was in actual danger, not before. He little thought how soon the alternative would be presented.

For five minutes or more the tiger thrust his claws repeatedly into the crevice. Then he drew off a yard or so and sat on his haunches, licking his bloody nose and whining angrily. Hope sprang up again in Maurice's breast, and he began to think that the brute would leave him in peace. But suddenly, with a hoarse growl, the tiger bounded forward again, and with its powerful forepaws began to dig furiously at the soft, miry clay about the mouth of the hole. The loose chunks of dirt flew in every direction, and the cavity grew larger every second.

In a very short time the tiger would be able to enter. Maurice realized that if anything was to be done it must be done at once.

Either he must slay the animal at the risk of being recaptured by the Cossacks or he must be torn to pieces and devoured. He chose the first alternative. At that moment, face to face with the brute's bloodshot eyes and lolling tongue, even the mines of Kara seemed preferable to such a death.

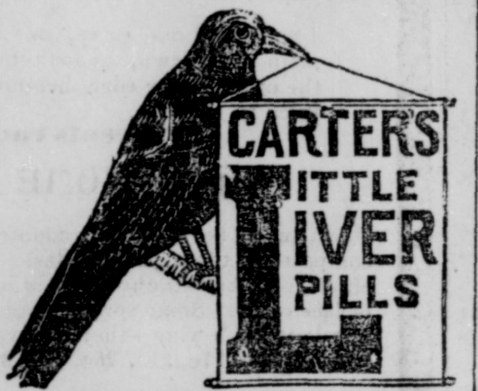
With some difficulty he drew the revolver from his belt and succeeded in cocking it.

The tiger was still pawing away with undiminished energy, and even now the cavity thus made seemed to Maurice's eyes fully large enough to admit the brute's head and shoulders.

Still, although in the very jaws of death, as it were, he hesitated to fire. Then he remembered that, with one single spring, the tiger could reach him, and in sudden terror he pointed the revolver full at the savage eyes. His finger was already pressing the trigger when an inspiration flashed into his mind that changed the whole course of events.

"The pepper!" he exclaimed aloud. "I'll try it." And, lowering the weapon, he thrust his hand into his coat pocket.

It so happened that among the provisions provided by the starosta had been a small bottle of red pepper.



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for fiery dishes, made frequent use of this on nearly everything he ate, and that very morning, having forgotten it when they left their camping place, Maurice had picked it up and put it in his own pocket. Now he suddenly remembered it. He gave a sigh of relief when his fingers closed on the bottle, and, drawing it out, he pulled the cork with his teeth.

The tiger suddenly suspended operations, and blew the dirt off his whiskers. Now was the critical moment. Reaching out his arm, Maurice dashed half the contents of the bottle into the brute's very eyes.

The effect exceeded his highest anticipations. Sneezing and snarling in one breath, the tiger sprang away from the crevice, and rolled in agony on the ground, completely overcome by the pungent dust.

Maurice held the bottle in readiness for a second onslaught.

Overjoyed at his success, he was watching the brute's strange antics when suddenly over the edge of the hill appeared the astrachan cap of a Cossack, speedily followed by the head and shoulders.

Before he could see whether more were behind a rifle cracked sharply from some spot up among the rocks apparently—and the Cossack toppled over backward with a cry of agony.

CHAPTER XXV.

A STRANGE MEETING.

The rifle shot scared the tiger. Roaring with pain, he dashed up the edge of the valley and disappeared.

For a moment all was silent, and Maurice in his hiding place forgot his fear in astonishment at what had happened. Several minutes passed, and he was thinking of creeping out and making a dash for the forest when two or three fragments of stone rattled down to the ground not a dozen yards away.

A moment later a man dropped nimbly from an overhanging rock—a tall, slim fellow, in a torn and faded Cossack uniform, with a rifle in his hand.

Knowing that this stranger must be aware of his presence, Maurice hastily crawled out of his hole and stood upright. As he did so the stranger turned, revealing the haggard features of Captain Daroman.

Maurice levelled the revolver straight at the man's head.

"Don't attempt to use your rifle or I'll put a bullet through you," he said, quickly.

The Russian's face expressed the utmost surprise as he saw who it was that confronted him.

Then, advancing a step, he said:—"Put up your weapon. I mean you no harm. We are now companions in misfortune. And so it was you the tiger was after? I would have driven the brute off long ago, but knowing that the Cossacks were in the neighbourhood, I dared not fire."

Something in the Russian's face convinced Maurice that he meant no harm. He lowered his weapon and restored it to his belt.

"Quick! Let us get away from this," exclaimed the captain. "There may be other soldiers in the neighbourhood. There is no time to lose if we would escape."

He started off rapidly along the base of the cliff, and Maurice followed close behind, wondering at the strange fate that had brought about this meeting with his old enemy.

Suddenly he remembered that he was travelling directly away from his friends, and his heart sickened at the thought that they were probably even now in custody of the soldiers.

"Stop!" he cried to Daroman. "I must go back. My companions are up the valley a mile from here."

"You are not alone, then?" the Russian asked. "You are not alone, then?" "No," replied Maurice, and he briefly explained who was with him. "But what became of those two Cossacks?" he added, anxiously. "You hit one, did you not?"

"Yes," said Daroman, coolly. "I shot the foremost fellow in the head. He fell back, and his comrade carried him off down the hill. They did not look for such a warm reception. They have been lurking in the neighbourhood for several days. They discovered my tracks in the snow, and hoped to capture me. They are only stragglers, but larger bodies of troops are not far away. That is why we must leave the locality at once. Of course you are trying to reach the sea-
port?"

"Yes," said Maurice, reluctantly; "that is our object."

"Well," said Daroman, "I shall be glad to accompany you. I have had quite enough of Russia, and will endeavour to reach some other country. I know something of the Pacific coast, and of Vladivostok, and that experience is at your benefit if you will accept it."

"Wait until we see Platoff," Maurice answered, evasively.

The Russian might be sincere enough, but his past conduct was against him. He turned down into the valley, Maurice leading the way. Daroman's assurance that only those two soldiers were in the neighbourhood had quieted his fears. One of them was probably dead, and his companion could do nothing single-handed.

It was nearly sundown when the spring was reached, and to Maurice's consternation the spot was deserted.

"They have gone away," he exclaimed. "I must find them before night comes."

"What's that?" said Daroman. "Listen!"

A low, clear whistle was distinctly heard, and as Maurice whistled in reply Phil and Platoff broke from the bushes and came gladly forward.

They regarded Captain Daroman with evident aversion, and Platoff listened with a passive, unchanging countenance as Maurice explained his absence and related his adventure with the tiger and the meeting with the Russian.

Then Daroman briefly explained his object and wishes, speaking with apparent frankness and sincerity. His thin, careworn face and shrunken limbs excited the boys' pity, but Platoff allowed no sentimental considerations to influence him.

"You can accompany us," he said after a short deliberation, "but bear this in mind: at the first sign of treachery I will shoot you as I would a dog. I have little love for those who wear the Czar's uniform."

Daroman's face flushed. "You forget," he replied, "that escape from Siberia means as much to me as it does to you."

That was the only reference he ever made to the past. By tacit consent the subject was avoided.

"You are sure, then, that only these two Cossacks were in the neighbourhood?" resumed Platoff.

"Yes," said Daroman, "that is all. They were searching for me, and did not know of your presence."

"They passed here not half an hour ago," said Platoff. "That is why we hid in the bushes. The one you shot was lying across the saddle, dead, I have no doubt, and his companion, also mounted, was leading the other horse. This offence only makes things worse. We must be many miles from here before morning."

Daroman assented to this, and urged an immediate start.

Platoff's suggestion to strike still deeper into the country toward Mongolia was discussed and approved. They ate a hearty meal, which Daroman diversified with ravenous greed, and just as twilight dimmed the forest the journey was begun.

It was uncertain travelling in the dark, for hills and ravines had to be crossed, but Platoff led the way with unerring sagacity, and when morning dawned they were many miles from the valley where Maurice had met with such a startling adventure.

All that day they pressed forward, and not until darkness came again would Platoff permit a halt. Then they stopped in a thick forest, and after a substantial meal prepared without fire they slept alternately, Platoff or one of the boys staying constantly on guard.

In the morning they were off again, and thus for three days they travelled steadily forward, meeting neither man nor beast, and stopping for rest at night. It is true that tigers and wolves were often heard in the forest, but they remained at a distance.

The tedium of the march was beguiled by Captain Daroman, who entertained his companions with the narration of his own wonderful escape and journey. If what he said was true, his sufferings had been frightful indeed, and the boys realized all the more how great was the cause for gratitude on their part.

The captain, no doubt, expected a like return of confidence, but if so he was disappointed, for Platoff was very reticent and guarded about what he said, and, moreover, cautioned the boys against giving any information that might react in the future against the kind friends who had aided them in their escape.

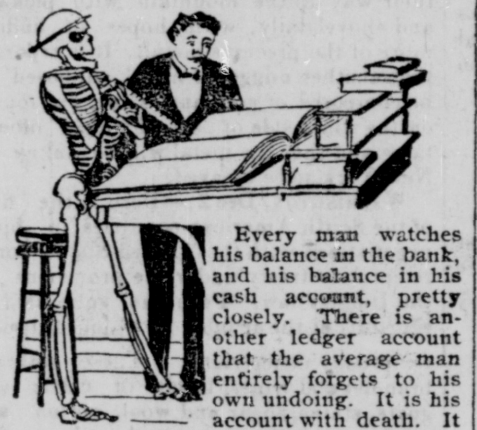
The weather remained good—very chilly at night, but pleasant during the day. A scarcity of food now threatened again. The provisions supplied by Poussia were about gone, and on the evening of the fourth day the last remaining scraps were devoured.

"In two days, or three at the most, we will reach Vladivostok," said Captain Daroman. "We must get along as best we can until then. We have weapons, it is true, but it would be unwise to make use of them."

"We have money also," said Platoff, fingering the belt of roubles, "but it might as well be so much dirt for all the good it can do us."

"It will come of use, though later on," he added. "A hundred roubles will be a strong temptation to some ship captain in the harbour of Vladivostok."

(To be Continued.)



Every man watches his balance in the bank, and his balance in his cash account, pretty closely. There is another ledger account that the average man entirely forgets to his own undoing. It is his account with death. It is more important than a "profit and loss" account, for its a "life and death" account. It is a man's duty to himself and family to look up this account once every day and see that the balance is on the right side.

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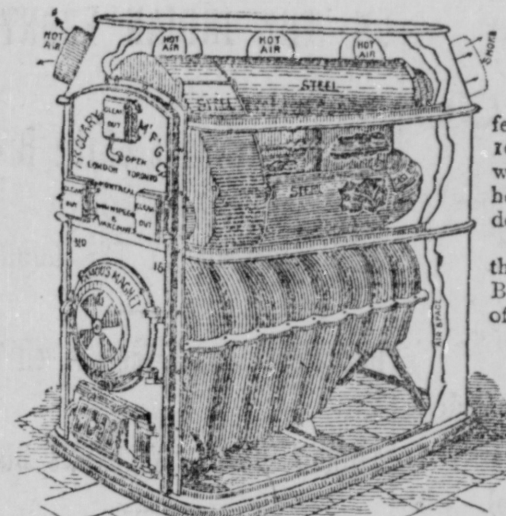
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