

EXILED

SIBERIA

BY W. MURRAY GRAYDON.

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(Continued.)

"Yes, so far as concerns the soldiers in garrison at the mines," answered Platoff. "Of course our escape, with full descriptions, has been telegraphed all over Siberia, and at every village and posting station they will be on the lookout for us, but we will keep away from all such dangerous places; trust me for that."

The change in Platoff during the last few days had been marvellous. He actually seemed to have grown taller, and the weary, hopeless expression had departed from his face, leaving it bright and sparkling with animation. His taciturn, moody disposition was gone, and he beguiled the weary hours spent in the cavern with tales and incidents that were absorbingly interesting to the boys. Thus the time went swiftly by, and they woke on the sixth morning to find the air mild and damp, and a drizzling rain coming down steadily. "This puts an end to all pursuit that may still be going on," said Platoff. "It is impossible for horsemen to travel through the slushy snow. Today we will spend in packing up and preparing for the start."

"But how can we travel better than horses in such weather?" asked Maurice.

"Wait till to-morrow," said Platoff, knowingly. "There may be a change."

The Russian's prediction was still unfulfilled when evening came, but some time during the night Maurice woke and sat up shivering. Outside he heard the wind roaring, and a cold air was drifting down the cavern's mouth. Wrapping some of the abandoned clothes about him, he fell asleep again. Then he began to dream. He was riding on horseback over a snowy plain that stretched far in the distance. By his side, mounted on a black horse, was Lora Melkoff, her dark hair streaming in the wind, her cheeks aglow with excitement. A steady tramp, tramp was ringing in his ears—the din of the pursuing Cossacks—and ever and anon rides cracked sharply and the whistling bullets hissed overhead. But suddenly the plain vanished, and a great black gulf was before them. Faster and faster sped the horses, still closer came the awful chasm, and now they were treading on the brink. Crash, crash! They toppled over the edge. Then came a ringing voice in his ear and a hand on his shoulder.

"Come, get up. The morning has come and the rain is over."

Maurice sat erect, rubbing his eyes with his fists. "Lora—where is Lora?" he asked.

"Ah, you have been dreaming," said Platoff, with a merry laugh. "Come out to the ledge. Did I not predict a change in the weather? Well, it is already here, and to-night we may bid farewell to our cavern."

He led the boys to the opening, and the first touch of the cold, piercing air made them shiver. A cry of astonishment burst from their lips. The sky was intensely blue and clear, and in the sunlight, as far as the eye could reach, hills, valley, and plain sparkled like myriads of diamonds.

"The cold is intense," remarked Platoff, "but it has done us good service. An icy crust has formed on the snow overnight that will bear us. At the same time it is not strong enough for horsemen. Our opportunity for escape could not be better. At sundown we will be off—off for Vladivostok and freedom."

The brave Russian's voice shook with emotion, and a tear trickled slowly down his cheek. Brief as that day really was, it seemed an eternity to the impatient fugitives. The provisions—of which a considerable supply remained—were divided into packages, one for each man.

Platoff took one of the revolvers and the belt of rubles, giving the other revolver to Maurice and the knife to Phil.

The Cossack uniform and the prison clothes, which might have done good service in case of cold or wet, they were compelled to leave in the cavern. To take them along would have imperilled their safety and afforded a sure means of identification. All day long Platoff lay at the cavern's mouth watching the valley.

Not a creature came that way, and when the setting sun was succeeded by a misty twilight he gave the word to start.

Slowly and deliberately they climbed from the ledge to the top of the hill, and standing in the shadow of the seven pine trees glanced back at the darkening valley with its dread associations.

"Forward!" cried Platoff, and turning to the south-east they crossed the ridge and went with cautious steps down the slope beyond.

Alternately sliding and crawling they gained the valley and travelled for an hour or more over the frozen crust. Then a hill loomed darkly before them, and an hour later they reached its crest, weary and footsore.

"There!" exclaimed Platoff, with a wave of the hand. "Behold the valley of the Amur!" And glancing down the long frozen slopes the boys saw vaguely and dimly the great water highway that flows to the far Pacific, low chafing and fretting under its icy fetters.

For some minutes they stood thus strangely fascinated by the splendour of the night.

Then the impressive silence was disturbed by a sharp cry from Platoff—a cry that echoed swiftly down the valley from peak to peak, as though giants were signalling each other.

"It was a foolish thing to shout so loudly," he said. "I forgot the echo. It was done before I had time to think. But see, I have made a fortunate discovery."

Hurrying to the spot, the boys were surprised to find half a dozen wheelbarrows deeply imbedded in the snow.

"A year ago or more mining operations were begun beyond this ridge," said Platoff, "so one of the convicts informed me. These wheelbarrows were either forgotten or purposely abandoned, and now they will do us a good turn."

"In what way?" asked Maurice.

"For answer Platoff pointed to the long slope of frozen snow.

"Time is precious," he said, "and to make our way down that slippery incline would be a difficult task. By taking these wheelbarrows apart we can go to the bottom of the valley in two or three minutes. The risk will be slight, for no trees or rocks can be seen."

With some difficulty the clumsy barrows were torn loose from the frozen snow, and the shallow wooden beds detached from the wheels.

Platoff chose a good position on the brow of the hill and fixed himself as comfortable as possible in the strange sled.

"Don't start until I am one hundred yards down," he said to the boys. "If there is danger ahead, I will shout, and you can alter your course." He pushed himself gently off and went skimming down the hill at prodigious speed.

"Now, there, off we go!" said Maurice. "Hold tight, Phil, and don't be scared." He slipped over the crest and plumed downward. For a moment the clumsy box grated over the icy crust; then it went off with a rush that took Maurice's breath away, and his remembrance of what followed was always of the dimmest nature. Frightened by the terrific speed and the stinging force of the wind, he clung to the sides with all his might. Hissing like a buzz-saw, the sled whizzed down the first couple of slopes; then, with a succession of heavy bumps, it shot over a ridge and entered upon a longer and steeper incline.

With a rush like a skyrocket it covered this half-mile stretch, and then leaped into the air. Maurice cried aloud as he felt himself falling, and clutched the sled all the tighter. A crash—a crack—a blinding shower of snow—and then he knew that the ride had ended.

Overhead he saw the stars shining, and struggling through the masses of light, powdery snow that enveloped him he gained the edge of the crust, and climbed into the open air none the worse for his adventure, save a slight sensation of dizziness. A dark figure was visible some distance away, and an instant later he was clasping hands with Platoff.

"Phil—where is Phil?" he demanded, anxiously.

Platoff made no reply, and together they ran over the crust. A black hole yawned before them, and, leaning over the brink, Platoff inserted his arm and helped out the missing boy. Phil opened his eyes and then his mouth.

"Well, that beats all the toboggan slides ever I saw!" he said, looking up at the hills behind him with such a comical expression that his companions laughed.

"Thank heaven we are safe!" said Platoff. "That was a perilous trip." And he pointed to the sharp cliff twenty feet above them over which the sleds had plunged.

"All's well that ends well," replied Maurice. "I wonder if we lost anything on the way." Nothing was missing, however, and, after a brief rest, all were ready for the start. A succession of slight hills and ravines now separated the party from the river.

"Somewhere below us lies the post road," said Platoff. "It will not be safe to approach any nearer. We

valley. Our ride down hill has given us a big start. We can gain a safe hiding place before daylight. The journey was resumed in single file, Platoff assuming the lead, and for hours they travelled over slippery ridges and through dark, thickly wooded hollows. The cold was intense, but they moved at too rapid a pace to suffer from it. At the first appearance of dawn Platoff cast his eyes about for a hiding place, and finally chose a deep, secluded valley with a forest of spruce and fir on all sides. They slept at intervals during the day, and in spite of the risk a fire was kept up and fed with branches from the trees. One of the party remained constantly on guard. At night the journey was resumed over the hard crust.

For nearly two weeks the weather remained pretty much the same, and the fugitives made satisfactory progress. They kept far back from the river, and although they frequently saw wolves at a distance and heard them howling among the hills the brutes made no attempt to molest them. No signs of pursuit were encountered, and with each night's journey they felt more hopeful of ultimate escape.

It was now early in the month of March—a whole year since the boys had first crossed the Russian frontier. Their main sufferings had been from cold, but they were cheered by the hope of warmer weather. In a month or more, Platoff said, spring would come, and their discomforts would then be over. By great economy the supply of provisions had been made to last, but now, in the beginning of the third week of their flight, barely enough food was left to last them two days, and the future outlook was dark.

The day had been spent in hiding at the foot of a rocky hill. Water was close by—a mountain spring that was too cold and rapid to freeze. At sunset Platoff shared with the boys a scant supper of bread and dried meat.

"To-morrow," he said, "we must obtain food in some way. If we do not succeed in shooting any deer, extreme measures will be necessary. I shall endeavour to find a village and buy provisions."

"Are there people living near here?" asked Maurice.

"Oh, yes," replied Platoff; "Siberian towns are scattered all along the resting route, at distant intervals, of course. We have seen nothing of them because we have kept far back in the forest. It may not be necessary, though, to take any such risks. Who knows what a day may bring with it?"

Platoff spoke thus hopefully to encourage the boys. In his own heart the prospect was gloomy enough, and therefore, what happened in the course of the next few hours was all the greater a surprise.

They travelled rapidly that night, covering mile after mile of forest land and hearing constantly the howling of wolves in different directions. The accounts of the ferocity of Siberian wolves, however, are greatly exaggerated. It is seldom that they attack men, and the Government sizers that traverse the post road have never been molested.

"Hereafter," said Platoff, "I think we will sleep at night and travel in the daytime. The risk will be little greater, and we can make much better speed."

"That will be splendid," said Maurice. "It always makes me weary to hear the wolves howling."

"They are more than usually noisy to-night," replied Platoff, "and they will become more dangerous as we near the Pacific. In daylight they lose their courage and are cowards."

They travelled on in silence for a time. Suddenly Platoff halted and raised his hand. Far off in the forest



Platoff slung him a yard or two away.

a great tumult was heard. It swelled in volume each moment, until the boys could distinguish the howling of wolves and the scurrying of feet over the snow. At intervals a branch cracked sharply above the din.

"They are coming this way," said Phil. "What shall we do? Where shall we go?"

"Hush. Don't be alarmed," exclaimed Platoff. "Stay just where you are."

Motioning the boys back, he crept forward to the brink of the ravine, which they had been about to cross. Down this hollow the wolves were evidently coming, and their furious outcries had a significance for Platoff which the inexperienced boys failed to understand. He drew out his revolver and examined it carefully. Then turning to Maurice he called out guardedly, "Get your weapon ready—be on the safe side, you know."

The wolves were close at hand, and as Platoff crept a yard or two farther down the ravine a deer broke into view through the spruce thicket and dashed swiftly past him. The poor animal was nearly exhausted and ran with difficulty. Taking a quick aim at the shadows figure Platoff pulled the trigger. As the report echoed through the ravine the deer was seen to fall, but it rose again quickly and sped on in flight. That brief delay was fatal. With wild howls half a dozen wolves burst from the forest, and overhauling the fugitive in half a dozen leaps bore it still struggling to the ground not twenty yards from where Platoff stood.

are boys, hearing the outcry and not knowing what was taking place, were inclined to run, but Platoff turned around, his face aglow with triumph, and shouted:—

"Follow me now. We can easily drive off this handful of wolves."

Then he vanished down the ravine, pistol in hand. Maurice cocked his revolver and followed, shouting to Phil, who was armed only with a knife, to keep in the rear. He reached the bottom of the gully almost at Platoff's side, and his hasty glimpse of the struggle made plain the Russian's eagerness for the conflict.

The first glimmer of dawn shed a dim light on the scene, and the gray forms of the wolves outlined against the snowy whiteness of the ground afforded a fine opportunity for aim. The struggles of the wounded deer were over, and his assailants were swarming over its body, tearing the flesh with such ferocious haste that the approach of Platoff and Maurice was unheeded.

"We must have that meat," whispered Platoff. "It will keep us for weeks." And raising his revolver, he aimed at the nearest wolf, a huge, gaunt brute who toppled over simultaneously with the report. At the same instant Maurice fired, but unfortunately made a miss, and the remaining wolves, angered at this interruption to their feast, sprang in a body at the daring intruders.

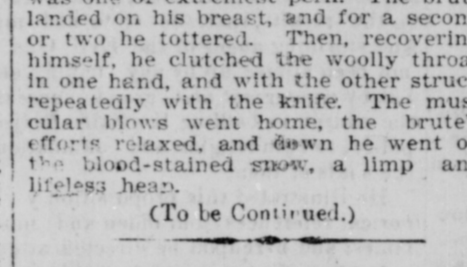
Crack, crack, went Platoff's revolver, and down went the foremost animal, staining the snow a dark crimson. His second shot crippled another, who retreated with a mournful howl.

Maurice, who remained admirably cool under this trying ordeal, killed a third by careful shooting, and the remaining uninjured brutes, two in number, very wisely retreated up the slope. The wounded wolf had crawled away under cover.

"Hurrah! We've done it," cried Maurice, with pardonable glee, and as he spoke a loud outcry was heard from Phil, who had remained on top of the slope. Platoff was off like a streak, with Maurice at his heels, and, gaining the ridge, they were horrified to see the lad struggling with one of the fugitive wolves. The crust had broken, and both were floundering about in the soft snow beneath.

Platoff reached the spot in a couple of leaps, and, actually seizing the brute by the throat, lifted him up and flung him a yard or two away. He reached for his revolver, but it was missing, and, snatching the knife from Phil, who was now rising unsteadily to his feet, he turned just in time to meet the rabid animal's attack. The wolf was not a large one, but what he lacked in size he made up in ferocity, and for a moment Platoff's position was one of extreme peril. The brute landed on his breast, and for a second or two he tottered. Then, recovering himself, he clutched the woolly throat in one hand, and with the other struck repeatedly with the knife. The muscular blows went home, the brute's efforts relaxed, and down he went on the blood-stained snow, a limp and lifeless heap.

(To be Continued.)



A Letter for Grandpa.

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CHAPTER XIX.
A DISPUTE WITH WOLVES.
Platoff's outcry gave the boys a severe fright. When they turned around, the Russian was striding toward a dark object a few yards away.