

EXILED

SIBERIA.

BY W. MURRAY GRAYDON.

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(Continued.)

Refusing to hear another word, he hastened from the room, and the guard in the corridor banged the heavy door. Up to this moment neither of the boys had even suspected the truth. It remained for Maurice to make that startling discovery, and as the realization of his uncle's treachery forced itself upon him—dimly at first, but speedily strengthened by added proofs—he saw what stared him in the face. With a cry of despair he threw himself on the bed, and when, at Phil's entreaties, he sat up, his face was puffed in its hopelessness.

"We are lost, Phil," he said. "We shall never see America again. What fools we were ever to venture on Russian soil! I see it all—the perfidy of the man who calls himself my uncle. He never came to Moscow at all. That was Vladimir Saradoff I saw in St. Petersburg. Ivan was his accomplice, and together they formed this conspiracy."

"Ivan stole our cards, our passports, every means of identification we had, and substituted false passports and the other things which were found in our bags. We are lost."

"But how can such a thing be?" exclaimed Phil, in bewilderment. "Our innocence must be discovered. You can prove your relationship to Vladimir Saradoff."

"You know little about Russia," replied Maurice. "We are absolutely helpless, Phil. No one will listen to us or believe us. We shall not be permitted to write letters, and on the strength of that evidence we shall be condemned without a shadow of a trial. Vladimir Saradoff will cover up his tracks too well. For myself it matters little, but you, Phil—your father and mother, your sisters—Here Maurice broke down completely."

Phil bravely tried to comfort him, and presently he became more composed.

"They discussed their situation from every conceivable point of view, but not a ray of light could be discovered. It was really so hopeless that Maurice, who possessed a fair knowledge of the Russian police system, dared not hold out any encouragement to his companion."

The most puzzling thing to him was his uncle's motive for such a crime. He was ignorant of the terms of his mother's will, or his quick wits would have divined the truth.

On reflection, however, he remembered that a fierce hatred Vladimir Saradoff had always borne his father, and allowing for the transfer of this enmity from father to son the solution of the mystery became more clear.

"What do you suppose they will do with us?" asked Phil.

The answer was already trembling on Maurice's lips, but he checked himself. "He will, know the truth soon enough," he thought, so he replied evasively. "I don't know, Phil—perhaps a long confinement in some Russian fortress."

The hours of that night seemed interminable. Sleep was out of the question, and the first gray glimmer of dawn that crept into the dreary cell through a narrow aperture, high upon the wall, found the two boys wearily pacing the floor.

A fairly good breakfast was presently brought, which they barely tasted, and then appeared a gendarme officer and four men, who led the boys away.

Maurice begged for a brief interview with the commanding officer, hoping to convince him of the truth, but the guards refused to listen and hurried them into the street, where a closed carriage was waiting, hemmed about by mounted Cossacks.

Through the gray mist they had a hazy vision of countless domes and spires of marvellous colours and fantastic shapes.

Then the heavy curtains cut off the view, and the carriage rolled away. It

stopped before a huge brick building, and the boys passed quickly through the gloomy portals. The gendarme officer, preceded them with a stamped document in his hand, which he delivered to a big, black bearded man in blue uniform, who came forward to receive them.

A few words passed between them, and then the boys were led away to a small, whitewashed cell, furnished with a single bed and a chair. A grated door opened on a large corridor, which was constantly patrolled by armed sentries.

They were now in the great forwarding prison of Moscow, and the commandant, Captain Sasha, had just received the official documents that sealed their fate. Russian justice knows no delay.

During their two days' confinement here the boys attempted in vain to open communications with the commandant.

Not the slightest attention was paid to their entreaties, and no one came near the cell except the guards.

On the third day their clothes were stripped off, and they were given, in place of them, coarse linen shirts and trousers, long gray overcoats with yellow, diamond-shaped patches sewed between the shoulders, and visorless caps of the same material.

Attired in these coarse garments they were conveyed in the dusk of the evening to the railway station, in com-



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pany with a dozen other poor wretches, and placed in a huge, dreary car, with narrow, grated windows and rough board seats.

As the train rattled off into the night Maurice turned to the burly Cossack at his side.

"Where are we going?" he asked, imploringly. "Won't you tell us?"

The Russian understood the gestures, if not the words.

"Siberia," he replied, gruffly, and the sentence of their doom fell like a death-knell on the boys' ears.

CHAPTER V.

THE BURNING BARGE.

On the bank of the river Tura, in front of the gloomy palisades of the great forwarding prison of Tiumen, there were grouped one morning late in the month of May a band of Russian exiles 400 or 500 in number.

A cordon of soldiers hemmed them in on all sides, and close by, a railed platform zigzagged down the steep bank to the water's edge, where lay a large, low vessel with black hull and yellow deck work, a convict barge waiting to receive its cargo.

The wretched convicts represented all sorts of types and contrasts—ferocious mountaineers from Circassia and Daghestan, sunburned Tartars from the lower Volga, Turks from the Crimea, with their scarlet fezzes, and Jews from Podolia.

A little apart from the rest stood two youthful figures with haggard faces in whom we find it difficult to recognize Maurice Hammond and Philip Danvers.

Partly by rail, partly by water, they had journeyed, with many delays, along the vast exile route.

Passing through the great fair city of Nijni Novgorod, the populous towns of Kazan and Perm, they crossed the dreary range of the Ural mountains, passed the boundary line between Russia and Siberia, and now, broken by hardship and suffering, still ignorant of their destination, they had reached Tiumen, 1,700 miles from St. Petersburg.

The past seems almost a dream. Hope has fled long ago, and they have learned to suffer in silence, thankful at least that they have not been separated from each other.

In their character of political prisoners they have been treated with some slight consideration, to distinguish them from the coarser class of criminals, but all attempts to obtain audience with any officials, in hope of convincing them of the fearful mistake that has been made, have been fruitless.

Vladimir Saradoff's triumph is complete. The net is woven tightly about his victims, and there is no escape from the living death to which he has consigned them.

"Come on; they are going now," said Maurice, and as he spoke a commotion was visible among the exiles, and the commanding officer shouted:—"Forward, now! Get on board!"

In groups of twos and threes the

platform past the armed guards, who stood twenty feet apart, and crossed the floating wharf to the barge.

This vessel was about 100 feet long. At each extremity was built a deck-house painted yellow, and the space between these was roofed over with timber, and faced with heavy wire screens. In these pens the prisoners were placed.

Beneath the deck were dark, gloomy holes, with tiers of narrow bunks, where they were to sleep.

The boys sat down on the bare floor in one corner of the pen and watched for an hour or two the strange scene that was taking place before them.

The prisoners, crowding up against the screen, were carrying on a brisk business with the peddlars and peasant women who had come on board the barge with bread, cakes, salted cucumbers, strings of dried mushrooms and fish pies.

The children and buying kept up briskly until a little past noon.

Then a steamer backed up to the vessel, with a great blowing of whistles, and in a few moments the convict barge was speeding through the black current of the river on its long voyage to Tomsik.

It was evident that Captain Sasha, the commandant of the Moscow prison, had received special instructions concerning the two boys. They were guarded more closely, it is true, than the common prisoners, but as yet they had not suffered the indignity of being chained, and they were supplied with reasonably good food.

Moreover, although they did not know it themselves, they were being transported across Siberia with a rapidity that is seldom granted to Russian exile. Instead of marching hundreds of miles on foot, they had journeyed entirely by rail and by water.

With their fellow passengers they had little or nothing to do. They were all low-grade convicts—thieves, murderers, bandits—a fact which Maurice was not slow to recognize.

In the past two months the boys had picked up a slight smattering of the Russian language and were now able to understand the commands of the soldiers and officers.

Day after day the barge moved slowly on its course, first up the sluggish current of the river Tobol and then down the more impetuous waters of the Ob.

For hours at a time the boys gazed wearily on the ever-changing landscape, the forest-clad hills and mountains, the pretty villages with their golden spires, and the waving fields of grain, for such was Siberian scenery at this season of the year. This vast continent is not always the barren, snow-clad desert that many believe it to be perpetually.

Among their fellow-prisoners the boys had made one acquaintance, a middle-aged Russian, who appeared to be of a higher class than his associates, though he possessed a cast of features by no means prepossessing. He had scraped acquaintance with Maurice by addressing him in French, a language which the lad happened to have acquired at college, and in his delight at finding someone from whom he could obtain information Maurice gladly overlooked all other considerations.

The Russian's name was Grodno, and he very freely confessed to Maurice that his offence was smuggling contraband goods over the Russian border.

If he expected a like return of confidence, he was disappointed, for Maurice was clever enough to see that it would be unwise to make a confidant of such a man. Instead, he allowed himself to pose as a political prisoner. However, in regard to that matter of which he was most anxious, he could learn nothing.

Grodno, disappointed perhaps to find that his friend was neither a cut-throat nor a robber, disclaimed all knowledge of what was usually done with "politicals," as he rather scornfully termed them.

The Russian possessed another friend on board the barge, a most villainous looking Turk, with sunburned face and a stubby black beard. He wore a greasy red fez and was continually smoking a short clay pipe.

Grodno and Hamid, for that was the Turk's name, held long and whispered conversations in Russian day after day, always keeping apart in a corner by themselves and separating whenever any of the guards approached. These secret palavers Maurice observed with suspicion and distrust, for their actions on many occasions showed that the boys had something to do with the subject of their discussion.

Meanwhile the barge was drawing nearer its destination, and the dreary 2,000 mile ride would soon be over.

All day they had been drifting through a wild and picturesque bit of country, and now at sunset the air was sultry and oppressive.

Maurice and Phil, their heads resting on their coats, were lying close up against the grating. The hot atmosphere below deck was intolerable, and the indulgent guards had allowed a great many of the convicts to remain out instead of driving them all below, as was the usual rule.

It was remarkably quiet, so still indeed that the splash of the paddles was heard distinctly from the steamer some distance ahead.

The guards paced slowly up and down the deck, glancing watchfully at the prisoners from time to time. Off against the railing the commanding officer, Captain Stanisla, was smoking his evening cigar, and its fumes, drifting in through the grating, mingled with the villainous odour of Hamid's pipe.

Suddenly, when the guard's back was turned, Grodno slunk up to the boys and threw himself carelessly at their side. "Want to escape," he whispered, "want to leave vessel, hide in woods, go back to Russia?"

"What do you mean?" asked Maurice, sharply.

"Hush!" said the Russian. "Don't talk, don't say a word. Do you want to go?"

"Yes," replied Maurice, incautiously, "of course we want to go. But tell me, Grodno, what do you mean?"

"Hush; not now," replied Grodno, and slipping off in the gloom he disappeared, leaving the boys in a state of great excitement.

"I'd like to know what he means," said Maurice. "I don't see how escape can be possible from a place like this."

"It's a plot of some kind," replied Phil. "That's what Grodno and Hamid have been discussing for the last week. I don't like the looks of either of those fellows, Maurice, and in a matter of escape I am afraid

they will use us to serve their own ends."

"I believe all that," rejoined Maurice, "but a chance of escape is not to be neglected under any circumstances, Phil. If only we could find some influential person to listen to our story, he might be induced to investigate it and prove our innocence. If we escape and are recaptured, it will hardly make our position worse than it is now. But what became of Grodno? Did you see?"

"No; he and Hamid have disappeared," replied Phil.

"I saw them going toward the hatchway a moment ago."

The twilight had now merged into darkness, and the dim outline of the shores had vanished. A slight breeze sprang up, and the prisoners pressed close against the grating to enjoy its invigorating effect.

"Hamid can't be very far away," said Phil, suddenly. "I can smell that villainous pipe of his plainly. Don't you notice it?"

"I can smell something," said Maurice, "but I don't believe it's Hamid's pipe. It seems a very different kind of odour."

An armed soldier strolled slowly past the grating at that moment, and the conversation closed.

As soon as he was gone Maurice began to sniff the air uneasily.

"That's not tobacco smoke, Phil," he said finally. "I half believe something is burning. The odour is getting stronger every instant."

Before Phil could reply a sudden commotion was heard behind them, and turning quickly the boys saw a confused mass of convicts struggling up the hatchway, their dark forms outlined against a dull red glow.

Then the silence was broken by a sharp cry of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" and instantly an uproar arose that made the boys' hair fairly stand on end.

(To be Continued.)



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