

# EXILED TO SIBERIA

BY W. MURRAY GRAYDON.

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(Continued.)

Then before it grew dark he set some snares in the forest, though with little hope of trapping anything. But the morning brought with it a pleasing surprise. The despised snares contained one a rabbit, the other a bird. A fire was kindled, and the game was cooked and eagerly devoured. This afforded strength for another day's journey, and late in the afternoon they stopped on the banks of a narrow stream.

With some loose stones Platoff constructed a rude triangular dam across a shallow part of the channel, leaving a narrow aperture in the centre. At this place he held a rude net made from the lining of his coat, while Maurice and Phil, entering the stream some yards above, waded slowly down toward the dam, beating the water on each side with sticks. In this way a dozen nice fish were procured, sufficient for supper that night and breakfast the following morning. Poussin had given them some salt, and Maurice had fortunately held on to the bottle of red pepper; so, with the aid of these condiments, the fish were quite palatable.

They travelled that day with increased caution and halted when the sun was low in a deep valley.

All were visibly excited. One more march—less perhaps—would bring them to Vladivostock. They forgot for the moment what yet lay before them—perils to appal the stoutest heart.

Bidding his companions remain hidden in the bushes, Platoff climbed up the steep hill to the eastward, hoping



Maurice leveled his revolver straight at the man's head.

to gain a sight of the distant sea, but the horizon was dimmed by misty gray clouds and he returned disappointed.

"Vladivostock is not far away," said Captain Daroman. "I am sure of that, for I have been in this locality before. One thing in our favour is the wild nature of the country. Desolate and uninhabited hills slope clear down to the town and almost to the edge of the bay."

The fugitives devoured the only food they had—a couple of cold fish cooked at a fire the night before—and then stretched themselves on the ground in the thickest part of the forest. What little sleep they got was broken, and at midnight a cold, steady rain began to fall that put a summary end to all further rest. It dropped through

the foliage and crept in little rivulets along the ground.

The remainder of the night was passed sitting up.

At last morning dawned, cold, wet and cheerless, and Platoff, with a few words of encouragement, led his companions off in single file.

Realizing the increased dangers that now surrounded them, he observed every possible precaution, seeking out the deepest part of the forest and keeping in the shelter of trees and stones. It rained steadily all the morning, and with wet clothes and empty stomachs the fugitives felt miserably indeed. At noon, as they were ascending a steep, wooded ridge, the sky brightened visibly, and Platoff, who had reached the summit at that moment in advance of the rest, shouted with joy and waved his hands in the air.

His companions, with fast-beating hearts, hurried to the spot. Maurice was ahead, and as he gained the crest and stood beside Platoff, he saw spread before his eyes the scene that he had so often dreamed of—a scene that he could never, never forget. Six or seven miles to the eastward lay the Pacific, a gleaming blue sheet, lit up by a momentary bar of sunlight that had broken through a rift in the clouds. Still farther beyond sea and sky faded into the dusky, grey horizon. But closer at hand, along the base of sloping green hills, lay the graceful curving of the Bay of Amur, with here and there a ship riding at anchor, while slightly to the south, a sight never to be forgotten, lay Vladivostock, its roofs and spires and the shipping in the harbour bathed in a golden mist.

"A sign from heaven!" cried Platoff. "God is with us. He will aid us to escape." And reverently taking off his cap he fell on his knees.

All followed his example, overcome with gratitude and emotion. In silence they looked their fill at the glorious view, neither willing nor able to speak.

Captain Daroman was apparently as deeply impressed as his comrades. A strange light was in his eyes, a fierce and sudden joy upon his face.

Thus they knelt for some moments, and even as they looked the golden haze faded away, dark clouds hid the broken rift, the sea paled and vanished, and a great hazy stormcloud, massed in billowy folds, came sweeping landward, hiding in its advance the

harbour and the town and the green foothills.

"Come," said Platoff, rising to his feet, "come; it is time to go."

## CHAPTER XXVI. TREACHERY.

"Would it not be safer to hide in some place until night," asked Maurice, "and approach the shore in the dark?"

"Now is the best time," said Captain Daroman. "On such wet days the soldiers do not move about much, and the Cossacks along the coast, who are probably on the lookout for us, will relax their vigilance. We would have no better opportunity if we waited a week. We can easily reach the shore and conceal ourselves in the hills until night comes."

"I agree with you," said Platoff, with more warmth than he had yet shown. "This is our chance. On such a day escaped convicts are supposed to hide in some dry place instead of travelling in the rain. Captain Daroman, you keep about ten yards behind me, the boys half that distance in your rear. Thus the danger of discovery will be lessened." Platoff's advice was promptly heeded, and in that order they moved cautiously down the hill. Before they reached the bottom the stormcloud they had seen burst upon them in all its fury. The rain came down in torrents, and the wind blew with great force.

This storm was undoubtedly a blessing in disguise. Whatever Cossacks were posted in the hill passes were driven to shelter, and at one point Platoff and his companions actually crawled on hands and knees between two blazing campfires, not fifty feet apart. A cordon of troops was evidently stretched along the coast several miles north and south of Vladivostock.

The fugitives were moving cautiously over the lower slope of the foothills through a pretty heavy forest when Platoff halted and signalled his companions to join him. He pointed through a break in the trees to a small house built very tastily of stone, with fancy trimmings. A verandah surrounded the first floor, and all the shutters were tightly closed. The whole building was inclosed by a hedge of prickly thorn bushes.

Captain Daroman scrutinized the place closely. "This is a summer cottage belonging to some Vladivostock merchant," he said, "some wealthy fellow who goes to St. Petersburg for the winter and spends the summer here. The house is empty now, and the owner will probably not return until May or June. It is a fortunate thing for us. We can take refuge here until an opportunity offers to board some vessel."

"But will it be safe?" asked Platoff. "Yes," replied the captain. "No one will think of looking for us here. Suppose you make a detour of the house, and if you find no cause for alarm we will effect an entrance at once."

Platoff acted on the suggestion, and returned with the report that all was quiet in front.

It was an easy matter to slip through the hedge, and with almost equal facility Captain Daroman entered the cellar by forcing one of the skylights, and presently he opened the back door triumphantly for his companions.

A hasty examination showed that the building had been stripped of its furniture, the owner, no doubt, being afraid to leave anything valuable in it during the winter. Even the cellar was completely empty.

But the house was dry, and what was of more importance, probably safe. It had two stories, with a small square tower on top. Platoff found a small ladder, plainly made for the purpose.



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Two circular glass windows faced east and south, and from this point of view he could see the harbour and part of the town, the latter more than a mile away.

There are three or four ships in the harbour," he announced to his companions, "but I cannot make out their flags. They are half a mile off the shore. The waves are rolling high, and a heavy surf is breaking on the beach. It was evident that nothing could be done for the present, so they all returned to the cellar, which Platoff regarded as the safest place, and from where a watch could be kept on the outside of the house through the grated skylights.

All were suffering now for want of food. Nothing had passed their lips since the previous evening, and the chances of procuring anything to eat were slim indeed.

Captain Daroman made no attempt to conceal his feelings. He complained bitterly, speaking in despondent tones of the situation, and finally lapsed into

a low-spirited, apathetic condition. This made Platoff suspicious and uneasy. As soon as it grew dark he cautioned Maurice to keep an eye on the captain, and then pulling a heavy coat around him, he made his way out into the storm.

He was absent for nearly three hours, causing the boys great uneasiness, and when he returned the tone in which he greeted his companions showed that he had no favourable report to make.

"I was up the coast a mile or more," he said, "Campfires are visible every few rods, and sentries are posted at intervals. There are no boats in any place, and even if there were they could do us no good, for the wind is terrific and the surf is thundering on the beach. I can see the lights of half a dozen vessels in the harbour."

"Were you near the town?" demanded Captain Daroman, impatiently.

"Yes," replied Platoff, "I was within a quarter of a mile of Vladivostock. It is cordoned so completely by Cossacks that to pass through the lines is utterly hopeless. They are evidently expecting our arrival. It is impossible to obtain food, and the pangs of hunger must be borne. But we have good cause for hope rather than despair. In this place I feel confident that we are safe. By the close of another day I think that the storm will be over. We must endure our hunger until to-morrow night. Then if the sea be calmer we will tear boards from the floor, make our way to the beach in the darkness, and try to reach one of the vessels in the harbour. I am confident we can do it. Until then be brave and courageous."

"Alas," exclaimed Captain Daroman, despairingly, "I am unable to swim! I shall be left behind at the mercy of the soldiers, and you—you will procure your freedom."

"Not so," answered Platoff. "Don't despair. We shall find a way to take you with us. It will be unnecessary to swim if you are on a plank."

Platoff's cheering words, however, had but little effect on the captain.

He remained sullen and despondent, pacing the earthen floor in moody silence.

All slept some that night in spite of the torments of hunger, and, what was of chief importance, they retained their strength.

In the morning it was still raining, and the wind in violent gusts seemed to shake the house to its foundations. At noon the storm was still raging.

Platoff went up stairs to visit the watch tower and returned with a grave face.

"Soldiers are visible on the beach," he said. "The sea is very turbulent, and the vessels have sought the safer shelter of the town harbour. I fear nothing can be done to-night. We must try to get food in some way. Our strength must be kept up or we will be unable to escape."

Most of that afternoon Platoff spent in the tower, and when twilight came he announced his intention of going out to seek food.

"The night will be stormy," he said, "and I can easily break through the lines. I will try to find some habitation and purchase provisions to last for a few days. By that time the storm will surely be over."

Captain Daroman's views were not consulted. He was lying in a corner, apparently fast asleep, with one of Poussin's big rugs drawn over his faded uniform.

As soon as it was fully dark Platoff went up to the tower again to mark the location of the campfires. He took Maurice with him. Phil remained behind, sitting at the bottom of the cellar stairway. From the south window of the tower a faint halo of light was visible hanging over Vladivostock, and from the east window could be seen the straggling campfires on the beach.

They remained for some time, listening to the patter of the rain overhead and the crash of the distant surf.

"We must return," said Platoff. "I don't like to be away from Daroman long. That man may turn traitor at the last moment. He has been in bad spirits for two days past."

They reached the cellar, to find Phil sound asleep on the bottom step.

"Poor boy, he is worn out," said Platoff, and, turning aside, he bent over the motionless figure in the corner.

With a cry that brought Maurice instantly to his side he lifted the rug. Captain Daroman was gone!

"The vile traitor!" exclaimed Platoff. "We are lost! He has betrayed us! What shall we do? The Cossacks may be here in an instant."

Maurice staggered back against the wall, pale and trembling. Phil, roused by the commotion, rubbed his eyes and sat up.

"We must leave at once," cried Platoff. "There is but one chance—we must break through the lines into the town and try to reach the landing wharf. Perhaps we may find a vessel there. Come, don't lose a second. Where are our things? My revolver is gone! I placed it here on the steps. Ah, I see. That traitorous wretch has carried it off."

"Mine, too, is gone," cried Maurice. "We are defenceless."

Platoff ground his teeth with rage. "As sure as there is a heaven above," he hissed, "that black-hearted scoundrel shall atone for this with his life!"

Crash! Crash! The heavy doors

overhead burst inward, and thundered to the floor. A clash of arms was

heard and a confused tramp of feet. Then the door at the head of the cellar stairs was torn open, and a blazing torch shone on fierce bearded faces, green uniforms, slashed with gold braid, and gleaming bayonets and sabres.



"In the name of the czar, surrender!" shouted the officer.

Platoff dashed to the skylight, only to be confronted by a dozen rifle barrels from without.

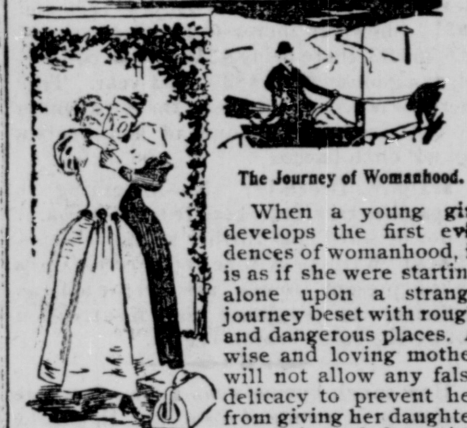
"Turning, with a hoarse cry that echoed from cellar to roof, he tore the knife from Phil's belt, which the traitor had failed to remove, and hurled himself with fury on the foremost of the Cossacks as they swept impetuously down the narrow flight of stairs.

The steel flashed in its descent and sank deep into an outstretched arm, but before the brave Russian could withdraw the blade for another stroke a blow from a rifle butt stretched him senseless on the floor, and the troops swarmed unresisted into the cellar.

The boys were too dazed to think of defence. Overcome by the crushing weight of this terrible misfortune, they witnessed Platoff's heroic charge, saw him fall, stunned and bleeding, and then submitted without a word to the rough usage of their captors.

Bound hand and foot, they were taken up stairs and placed on the floor. The doors and windows were opened, and a huge fire kindled in an triumphant faces of the Cossacks open grate. The blaze shone on the within, and cast gray gleams on the guards pacing outside in the rain. No need now for the long cordon of troops whose campfires were blazing along six miles of coast. At one stroke the campaign had ended.

(To be Continued.)



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