



(Continued.)

...and rapidly and cleverly applied the chloroform to three of the sleeping men, and then turned to the fourth, a tall, repulsive ruffian of the name of...

The ruffian was within three inches of his nose, when he suddenly rose to an upright position, and, facing Platoff, said, in a loud whisper: "Not so fast, my friend! I thought something was up, and I have kept an eye on your movements. If you are going to leave, I intend to go with you. Oh, don't get angry! You can't help yourself, you see. Be reasonable or I shall call in the guard. How would you like that?"

The boys, trembling with fear at this unexpected interruption, awaited Platoff's answer. They were little prepared for what followed. For a brief moment Platoff faced the ruffian, who was smiling with the insolence of power, and then with a fierce leap he clutched him by the neck with one hand and with the other forced the wet rag against his nose.

For a few seconds the fellow struggled furiously with arms and legs; then, suddenly relaxing in Platoff's grasp, he dropped limply on the platform just as Maurice and Phil hurried to the spot to render assistance.

"It's all right," said Platoff, in a voice that showed how deeply he was moved. "The second can't do us any harm now. It would have ruined our plans to have had to take him along. I hope the noise of the scuffle was not heard in the corridor."

"Listen! What's that?" "It must be the guard," whispered Maurice. "We are lost!" "Yes, you are right," said Platoff. "The footsteps are coming this way. It is too late for concealment. He will smell the chloroform. Get behind the door there, quick! Such a chance of escape is worth great odds, and I'm going to take them."

He had no time to say more. As Maurice and Phil darted to one side the door creaked and opened. A bar of light shone in from a lamp in the corridor, and was followed by a sturdy Cossack, who entered in a stealthy manner. His suspicions were well founded, as he must have realized a moment later, for Platoff's muscular arms fastened on his throat, and he was pressed bodily to the floor, unable to utter a sound.

"The chloroform—quick!" whispered Platoff. Maurice seized the rag from the platform, and at his bidding held it to the soldier's face.

"There, that will do," said Platoff, and he laid his burden quietly down. He turned to Maurice, his face white and ghastly in the lamplight. "If they discover us now, we will be shot," he gasped. "Tear off your clothes, quick! Don't lose a second! There is but one chance left to us. We must try it."

"What do you mean?" demanded Maurice, in bewilderment. "This," whispered Platoff, fiercely, pointing to the unconscious soldier. "That man is about your size and weight. His uniform will fit you nicely. The captain of the guard will pass through yonder corridor in a few minutes. You must be there to receive him with this Cossack's uniform and gun. Do you understand now?"

CHAPTER XVI. A DARING EXPLOIT.

Maurice attempted to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. He was positively stunned by the daring of Platoff's plan. And yet what if it were possible to carry the ruse through? Its supreme audacity was really in its favour.

"Did you hear me?" hissed Platoff, grasping him roughly by the shoulders. "Nerve yourself, or all is lost! Our only salvation lies with you. These words roused Maurice from his stupor. He alone could receive the disaster that confronted them.

"Yes," he whispered, "I understand. I will do what you say." With a firm hand he tore off his prison garb, the ugly grey shirt and trousers. Platoff had already stripped the Cossack of his uniform, and with feverish haste he assisted Maurice to pull on the dark green blouse and trousers, the high boots and the low cap.

"Now," he whispered, "take the gun and go out in the corridor. Bolt the cell door and pace slowly up and down. Keep your face away from the lamplight when the officer of the guard comes past. He may say something to you. If he does, answer as best you can and in a gruff voice. Above all be cool and resolute. If the officer passes without suspicion, draw the bolt of the door and give a slight rap with your hand. Now go. Every second is precious."

He pushed him gently into the corridor and closed the door softly. A sudden shudder of fear passed over Maurice as he realized his situation, and then his presence of mind returned. He softly drew the bolt into its socket, and placing the rifle on his shoulder began to pace the corridor, which was probably 40 feet long by 10 in width. Six doors opened on it, three on each side, and at each extremity lay other corridors running at right angles.

A rude lamp hanging from the ceiling dimly lit up the scene, and at intervals from some of the neighbouring cells could be heard a cough, or a fragment of whispered conversation.

With feelings that can be better imagined than described, he continued his solitary vigil. From his own cell came no sounds at all, but he had no doubt that Platoff and Phil were hard at work.

Occasionally he heard the tramp of the sentries in the other corridors, and once from the main portion of the prison came a clink of glasses and a coarse laugh.

"They won't be inclined for merry-making a few hours from now if all goes well," thought Maurice, with grim satisfaction. Then his thoughts turned to Lora, and in trying to imagine her joy on learning of his escape he forgot the ordeal in store for him. That unpleasant fact was brought to his memory with startling abruptness. In the neighbouring corridor a rifle butt was dropped heavily to the floor, voices were heard in conversation, and then a second or two later footsteps approached.

Fired with a sudden inspiration, Maurice decided to look danger in the face. Pulling the visor of his cap over his eyes, he wheeled round and paced down the corridor with a slow, regular step. Years ago, before entering college, he had spent two years at a military school, and the instructions there received he now put into use. The most rigid martinet could have found no fault with his bearing as he marched forward to meet the approaching peril.

The lamp was behind him, so that his face was in shadow, the effect he had aimed to produce. The footsteps were now close at hand, and suddenly an officer turned

through his infant's, and then hurried to the cell door. He drew the bolt noiselessly, and gave a slight rap on the panel. A moment later it opened from within, and Platoff's head appeared at the crack. He shook with excitement when Maurice related what had happened.

"We are saved," he exclaimed, "my noble lad. You have effected our salvation. I shall never forget it. The officer of the guard will not make another round for an hour and a half or two hours. In that interval we should reach the cave unless some unforeseen complication occurs. But come in and close the door. All is in readiness for the start."

Maurice entered, to receive a warm welcome from Phil, while Platoff, after waiting a moment in the doorway to assure himself that the coast was clear, joined his companions.

"I was only waiting for your signal," he said. "I have just renewed the chloroform on those fellows, and on the Cossack, too." And he pointed to the soldier's motionless figure stretched on the platform.

"I put your garments on him," he added. "When he wakes up, he'll know how it feels to wear convict clothes."

"And shall I keep the uniform on?" demanded Maurice with surprise. "Yes," said Platoff. "It may be of some aid to you; who knows? And now we must be off. Look! This is what I have done while you were on guard duty in the corridor."

He pointed to a hole in the floor close to the platform, from which two planks had been ripped up.

"Now," he continued, "I will go first, and you must follow at once."

He glanced again through the cell to assure himself that no precaution had been overlooked, and then, dipping to the floor, he slipped through the hole and disappeared. Phil went after him, and Maurice brought up the rear.

"Just a moment now," said Platoff. And drawing his head and shoulders back into the cell he lifted the two planks into position and let them drop behind him into their places.

"Not that it matters much," he observed, "for they will soon discover how we escaped, but it may give us more time."

The situation in which the boys now found themselves was anything but agreeable. The space between the ground and the flooring was not more than three feet, and from the unpleasant odour that saluted their nostrils it appeared to have been used as a receptacle for all sorts of refuse, no doubt dropped through holes in the floor.

"This is the critical time," said Platoff. "Don't make any noise, but stick close to me. The first thing is to crawl the west flank of the prison."

Crawling on hands and knees, the boys followed their guide through the intense darkness. A faint glimmer of light was presently seen, and a moment later Platoff halted.

"Where are we?" asked Maurice. "Wait a little," was the reply, "until I can pick a crack through these logs."

He worked industriously with his knife, making the dried mortar fly at every stroke, and then applied his eye to the orifice thus produced.

"Ah," he muttered, "this is the front of the prison. It is snowing fast outside, and the guards are standing around the fires. Everything is in our favour if only we are permitted to have time enough."

"I supposed this space opened on the courtyard," said Maurice. "Instead of that it seems to be hemmed in with logs."

"Don't let that annoy you," replied Platoff. "The building is old, and we will have no trouble to break through. I can loosen any one of the logs in five minutes. It is an easy matter now to get our bearings."

They started off again, guided by the wall of logs, and in a short time the angle was reached and turned. Platoff led on for a dozen yards or more before he came to a stop. "This is the place," he said. "Don't be impatient, but sit quietly down."

He drew his knife and commenced work on the logs. As soon as a crack had been excavated large enough to see through he stopped.

"This is the critical time," he observed, after taking a look. "The stockade is only six feet distant, and at a certain interval, no doubt, a sentry passes through this narrow avenue. Nothing can safely be done until he has gone his round of inspection. We may be delayed half an hour, and perhaps not five minutes."

Platoff became silent keeping his eyes glued to the crack, and the boys waited in an anxious state of suspense that was almost unendurable. They knew that in less than two hours at the very furthest their escape must be discovered, and unless they were clear of the prison at that time recapture was certain—and death by a rifle volley. The least noise overheard came to their ears with alarming distinctness, and with every passing footstep or clank of arms they imagined that all was discovered. A sharp "Hist!" from Platoff jerked their thoughts in another direction.

"The sentry is coming," he whispered. "Don't utter a sound."

A faint tramp was audible from without, and then a shadow passed slowly by the chink in the logs. For nearly five minutes Platoff neither moved nor spoke. Then he attacked the log before him with tremendous energy, and the mortar flew in all directions, covering the boys with a coating of powdered lime.

"It's a good thing—this prison—was built by convict labour," he muttered at intervals as he pried his knife; "good for us—I mean." A moment later he tore the bayonet from the rifle which Maurice had brought with him, and after a few jabs with the farther-reaching weapon announced that the log was loose. He pried the bayonet in one end while Maurice used the wedge at the other extremity. Then working in concert the log was gradually drawn in, until Platoff was able to grasp and lower it to the ground. The hole thus made was a foot and a half high by six feet. Outside was revealed the thickly falling snow and the gray outlines of the palisade.

He nimbly crept through the aperture, and with the bayonet began to work at one of the big boards of the palisade.

It was evidently a harder task than he had anticipated. He inserted his bayonet first on one side, then on the other, but the board was firmly in place.

Then he put too much strength into the effort, and his weapon snapped sharply in two. At this critical moment death and disaster stared the fugitives in the face. Their best weapon broken, of what avail would be the knife or the wedge? Platoff flung the fragments on the ground and turned to the boys with a gesture of despair.

"I fear we are lost," he said, hoarsely. "The stockade is firmer than I supposed. It is impossible to loosen any of the planks without tools. And even now our time must be nearly up."

"Ah, I have a plan," whispered Maurice. "The stockade cannot be more than fifteen feet high. Take this log outside and stand it on end. I will mount the log, and you, Platoff, shall climb over my back to the top. You are strong enough to pull us both after you, are you not?"

CHAPTER XVII. FREE.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Platoff. "Was I blind not to think of it before? Pass me that log out as quickly as possible. But it is more dangerous," he added. "From the top of the stockade we may be seen by the men on guard in the sentry boxes outside, but it is our last chance. We must not think of the risk."

During this conversation Platoff was standing in the narrow avenue in plain view of any sentry who might chance that way, and just around the angles were 20 or 30 armed soldiers. Maurice and Phil lifted the heavy log and shoved one end at right angles through the opening. It stuck fast several times, but Platoff by main force dragged it clear, and lifting it in his arms placed it at a slight angle against the stockade.

"Now come on," he whispered, and assisting Maurice through the hole he lifted him to the top of the log. Bidding him cling firmly to the boards, he mounted behind him. A clever spring landed him on Maurice's shoulders, and a second later he was straddling the stockade.

"Is the coast clear?" whispered Maurice. Platoff made no reply. His face expressed sudden terror, but the darkness concealed this from his companions. The distance from Maurice's head to the top of the stockade was less than four feet. Bending down in silence, Platoff grasped the lad's outstretched hands and drew him quickly to the top. Phil instantly gained the vacant place on the log, and in less time than it takes to tell he, too, was safely on the summit of the stockade.

"Not a sound for your lives!" whispered Platoff, and with a trembling hand he pointed through the driving snow to a dark object twenty yards distant.

"The sentry!" he whispered. "His back is turned. We must drop together and run. Don't lose sight of me."

(To be Continued.)

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The Lieutenant took a long pull at the contents.

the angle, a young lieutenant with dangling sword and a pair of eye-glasses that gave him a fierce expression.

Maurice coolly saluted and dropped his rifle to the floor.

"Everything right, is it?" asked the officer, thickly, and Maurice noted with some uneasiness that he had been drinking.

"All's well," he responded, gruffly, though his voice trembled in spite of his effort to control it.

Under his glasses the lieutenant stared fixedly, and with a sinking heart Maurice returned the gaze, believing that his identity was suspected.

"Russo," said the officer, "have you got a drop of vodka about you?" Maurice felt himself trembling like a leaf, and then, hardly conscious of what he was doing, he plunked his hand into the pocket of his coat. Something hard slid into his grasp, and he drew out a small flask.

"Ah, you sly dog," exclaimed the lieutenant, and seizing the flask he took a long pull at the contents and handed it back. Maurice mechanically restored it to his pocket, and when he looked up the lieutenant was half-way up the corridor. A moment later and he vanished around the angle.

Overjoyed at his marvellous good fortune, and hardly able to believe it true, Maurice waited until the sentry in the next corridor had passed