

EXILED TO SIBERIA

BY WM. MURRAY GRAYDON.

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(Continued.)

The overseer came forward and looked at it with evident satisfaction. "That is good work," he said, briefly. "Today you may have 30 minutes' rest."

Some of the convicts cheered and threw their caps into the air. Even this insignificant privilege was something to be thankful for. Picks and barrows were tossed aside, and sitting down on masses and clouds of earth the hungry men began to devour greedily the black bread and tea that were served out to them.

The Cossacks stacked their arms, with the exception of two or three muskets, and gathered about the fires, rubbing their hands and stamping their feet.

Ten or fifteen yards from the spot where the convicts were grouped the snow of a rocky hill sloped to the river. It was barren and rugged, strewn with boulders and a half dozen stunted birches. A few feet below the crest a spring of icy water poured out, and falling in numerous cascades down the slope emptied into the Kara river.

At this spring the prisoners were often allowed to drink, for the waters of the Kara were slightly brackish and, moreover, were usually muddy and tainted from the mining operations.

To-day but few of the men were thirsty. One or two climbed painfully up the slope, and filling their tin cups came back to their places. Maurice was sitting on an upturned wheelbarrow slowly eating his bread and looking wistfully at Phil and Platoff, who were some yards away, near the bank of the river. He turned his eyes toward the spring. The snow was falling thickly over the rocky crest of the hill, and suddenly against the gloomy whiteness of the sky he saw an arm thrust from the rocks. Thinking it only a delusion, he rubbed his eyes and looked again. No; he was not mistaken. It was a human arm, and it was beckoning him to approach. He watched it closely for a moment or two. Twice it vanished and then appeared again, and still it continued to motion him forward. A sudden thrill of hope made his heart beat wildly, but with great self-command he checked all show of emotion and assumed a careless attitude.

Presently he ventured to look about him. No one else apparently had seen the signal. The convicts were engrossed in their bread and tea, the overseers were sitting by the fire with their backs toward the hill, and the soldiers off duty for the time were chatting loudly among themselves.

Maurice hastily gulped down the remainder of his tea, and taking the tin cup in one hand and his hunk of bread in the other he rose slowly to his feet and commenced to ascend the hill with careful, hesitating steps. He trembled constantly with excitement, fearing each second to be called back, but no such summons came, and at last he gained the spring and sat down on a flat stone beside the outpouring water.

Close over his head was the nook among the rocks where he had seen that wavering arm. Not daring to look behind him, he glanced down into the hollow. Some of his fellow-prisoners were looking at him in a careless manner, but neither the overseers nor the soldiers were paying any attention. He dipped his cup into the spring, and as he raised it to his lips a soft voice whispered, with a strangely familiar accent:—"You saw my signal. You have come. Be on your guard. Don't move. Don't speak a word."

The cup almost dropped from Maurice's trembling hand, but with a great effort he recovered himself and drank as though nothing had happened.

"I am Lora Melnikoff," continued the speaker after a pause. "I have not forgotten your brave deed. I am going to do what I can for you in return. You speak my language, do you not?"

Maurice inclined his head without speaking.

"Your noble act has put you in great peril," resumed Lora; "more so than you think. My father is grateful, it is true, but he is stern—ah, you do not know how stern and severe—and he declares that you must be punished as an example to the other men. I have implored him in vain, and last night I listened when he was talking to some officers. They will either shoot you or send you to the Province of Yakutsk. One is as bad as the other. I have not time to tell you of Yakutsk, but it is a terrible place. In a week an officer is expected from St. Petersburg on a tour of inspection, and then your fate will be decided. You must try to escape. Do you know anything of the country? Could you find the Pacific Ocean, do you think? There are vessels at Vladivostok from every part of the world."

Maurice tremblingly held his bread to his lips, as though he were eating, and said in a low whisper:—"I have two friends. One of them is a Russian, a man who knows the country. He has spoken of Vladivostok and knows the way down the valley of the Amur."

Then he added, with sudden alarm:—"There are guards down the other slope. They can see you surely."

"I do not fear them," said Lora, calmly. "There is but one, and him I have bribed to allow me to reach this spot. You say you have two friends. It will be more difficult for three to escape, I fear, and yet I may be wrong. Three can do more than one. But I have much to say, and little time in which to tell it. Listen closely now to every word, and be careful. If you once fail to betray you, that you will not betray you, I have placed a small package under the stone on which you are sitting. It contains tools which may help you to escape from the prison at night. You must conceal it in some way about your clothes. I have written on a scrap of paper your best plan for getting free of the prison. Read it carefully and be sure to destroy the writing. It will be difficult and dangerous, and success is very doubtful, but if you once gain the outside of the prison stockade, you can place yourself in security for a few days at least. After that you must do the best you can, and I shall pray constantly that you may reach Vladivostok and get safely away from Siberia. Now, here is what you must do when you are outside the prison: Go directly to the Kara river, and follow its channel up to this very spot, so that it will be impossible to track your footsteps. Two miles along this ridge is a cave among the rocks. It lies in among seven pine trees, and is difficult to find. No one but myself knows it, and I discovered it by accident two years ago, when my father first came here from Moscow. In this cave I have ready hidden clothes and a money bag. To-day or to-morrow I shall find a way to convey food there, and to-morrow night you must attempt to escape. If you can reach the cave, you are safe for a while. Remain there for a week or two, and then, when the pursuit has abated, or is being conducted far from here, it will be time to start for the distant Pacific. If your friend is a clever man, he may guide you there in safety. You will find clothes for three in the cave. Now you had better go. Don't attempt to get the package at present. Wait until you start back to the prison at night."

"But you"—cried Maurice, quite forgetting himself—"you have placed yourself in peril for my sake. How can I ever thank you? How can I ever hope to repay such a debt of gratitude?"

"Hush," said Lora; "not so loud. You will betray yourself." Her voice had a touch of haughtiness, of offended pride, that showed Maurice instantly the gulf between himself, a degraded convict, wearing the prison stripes, and this aristocratic young Russian, the daughter of famous Col. Melnikoff.

"Forgive me," he said, humbly. "I forgot—I was so grateful—that was all. I did not think—"

"It is a debt," she interrupted, coldly; "a sacred obligation on me, an obligation that is doubly binding since my father refuses to acknowledge it. But do not think that I regard you as the men yonder, those thieves, assassins, robbers. I have heard something of your history. You are Englishmen, you and your friend. You are very young, and I prefer to believe that you have fallen into bad company and sinned through ignorance. Don't think that I sympathize with your views, for those who plot against our Czar are wicked men. If through any aid of mine you can reach your own country again, please try to think better of Russia."

"I shall never forget you," said Maurice, "but your opinion of me is wrong, I assure you. I am neither a revolutionist nor a Nihilist, and I have never plotted against Russia. I am an American, Miss Melnikoff, and my story, could you but hear it, would give you some different ideas of your own land. My mother was—"

"Hush!" said Lora, suddenly. "The guards are coming. I must slip away at once. I will never see you again, but I shall pray for your escape. Goodby."

"Goodby," exclaimed Maurice, fervently, and as he rose to his feet the harsh voice of the overseer summoned the men to work, and he went slowly and sadly down the slope.

Through the long hours of that afternoon he worked as though in a dream, and more than one sharp reprimand was hurled at him by the angry overseer. Little did he care for that. A wild hope of freedom was seething through his brain, a vision of a better America and friends he had never expected to see again, yet there was bitterness mingled with his joy.

This Russian girl believed him guilty of the crimes with which he was charged. She believed that he had plotted against her native land, against the Czar, whom she honored and revered.

Carried away by his feelings, Maurice even began to find some excuse for the tyrannical and despotic means that had placed him in his terrible situation. If only he could have a chance to tell her his story, he thought, she would be convinced and believe him. And now he would never see her again, never have a chance to explain, and she would always be ignorant of the truth.

The agitated expression of his face was noticed by his companions. They regarded him curiously, wondering evidently what bit of joy could be



He drew the flat, heavy parcel from under a stone.

mingled with his wretched existence. But the watchful eye of the overseer, trained on the work that was being done, failed to note these signs.

When the coppery sun went down, the labour ceased.

Now came the most difficult part of all, but Maurice was equal to the task. Before the convicts formed in line for the homeward march he carelessly climbed the hill with his cup, and stooping, under pretence of getting a drink, he dexterously drew the flat, heavy parcel from under a stone and hid it in the folds of his shirt beneath the heavy overcoat. There it rested snugly all through the long tramp back to the prison, and when the evening verification was over and the convicts were eating their supper on the platforms his heart was beating fast at the thought of what lay next to it—the precious means that might be destined to lead to safety and freedom.

CHAPTER XV. AGAINST GREAT ODDS.

It must be remembered that some alterations had been recently made in the disposition of the prisoners. Phil and Platoff had been removed from the central apartment of the prison to a camera, or separate cell, which they shared with four other convicts, coarse, villainous-looking fellows, of a low and vicious grade. They were locked up securely in this cell every evening, and their supper was served to them here on the sleeping platforms. It was a dreary, ill-smelling apartment, with a decayed plank floor, and one small window crusted with dirt, that opened on the prison courtyard.

On this particular evening Maurice ate his supper in silence, replying only in monosyllables to the queries of Phil and Platoff concerning his strange behaviour that afternoon.

The other inmates of the camera hurried through their meals and retired to their own corner of the platform. Maurice waited until the sound of heavy breathing assured him that they were asleep, and then, drawing the package from his bosom, he proceeded to open it before the astonished eyes of his two companions, briefly explaining as he did so how it came into his possession.

The outer covering was quickly removed, and the dim light of the tallow candle burning at their side revealed a strong-bladed knife, a flat steel wedge with a sharp edge, a small sealed bottle, and a scrap of paper covered with close writing. This latter Platoff seized and held close to the candle. As he read, his face flushed and his hands trembled with suppressed excitement.

"Ah, this is indeed fortunate!" he said, turning to Maurice. "Your bravery has obtained you a rich reward. She is truly a noble girl! Now, repeat carefully what she told you, in order that I may know how to form my plans."

"And you really think escape will be possible?" asked Maurice, eagerly, and in a whisper he related in detail all that had passed, explaining the location of the cave, and by what signs it could be discovered.

Platoff listened intently, keeping meanwhile a watchful eye upon the sleeping convicts.

"Did I not read Melnikoff's character rightly?" he said, when Maurice ended. "And so he proposes shooting you or sending you to Yakutsk. For my part I should prefer the shooting."

"Where is Yakutsk?" asked Maurice.

"It is a province 1,000 miles to the north of Kara," replied Platoff, grimly. "Inhabited by a barbarous, half-civilized race, who dress in skins and live six and seven in one small hut. The exile who goes there is domiciled with one of these families and suffers a fate worse than death. And yet," added Platoff, with bitter indignation, "I have known Russian women of refinement and education to suffer this most degrading of punishments. But keep up your courage, my boy. You shall not go to Yakutsk if I can prevent it. I must say that circumstances are strongly in our favour. In fact, we could hope for nothing better, for if once we get away from this prison the cave will afford us a secure hiding place until, as the girl says, the pursuit has spread far from here. Then for the valley of the Amur and Vladivostok, and I for one shall never be retaken alive."

A fearful expression that the boys had never seen there before appeared on Platoff's face.

"But now," he continued more calmly, "we must consider the most dangerous and important step. We are not yet out of the prison, and whether we shall ever get out depends on our

own cunning and daring. Without this paper it would be hopeless, but here, you see, is a description of the prison, which makes our task much easier.

"This is what the girl says:—
"The prison lies in a large courtyard, inclosed by a stockade on three sides. This courtyard is broad and constantly guarded by armed soldiers, but the western end of the prison is built close to the stockade, and the narrow passage between is visited only at intervals by a single sentry. With the bottle of chloroform stupefy the inmates of your cell. With the tools loosen a board in the floor and crawl under the prison, which is built on piles. Gain the western end, scale the stockade and go straight to the Kara river. Destroy this writing."
"That last injunction is important," said Maurice. "How shall we do it?"

For answer Platoff placed the scrap of paper in his mouth, and after chewing it for a moment swallowed it with a slight grimace.

"The chances of that question," he said, "and now we must find a hiding place for our treasures."
This was by no means an easy matter, but after much consideration the knife and the wedge were driven into the underside of the platform far back from the edge, and the bottle was placed in a crack in the wall and covered with a piece of dry plastering taken from another locality. Just at this point the candle exhausted its last drop of tallow and went out, and at the same time the tramp of the guard was heard in the corridor.

"No more talking now," whispered Platoff, "or we will be suspected. Tomorrow night we will make the attempt. Keep up your courage and spirits."

Morning came, a cold, dreary day, with the snow still falling at intervals, and the convicts started as usual for the mines. The boys found it a difficult matter to conceal their feelings under the watchful eyes of the overseers, but they managed to pass through the ordeal remarkably well, and nothing occurred to arouse the suspicions of their companions or of the guards. They assumed a dull, listless expression at work and devoured their lunch with an apparent greed which they were far from feeling.

As for Platoff, he kept purposely away from them all day, and joined the other gang on the return march at night. The evening verification was another dreadful ordeal, but it passed without incident, and five minutes later Maurice and his six companions were eating supper in their cell. The chosen time was at hand.

The dishes were taken away by one of the guards, and the door was bolted on the outside. Platoff waited until all were stretched on the platform, and then he blew out the candle, leaving the room in apparent darkness. It was not entirely so, however, for a dim glare shone through the window from the fires in the courtyard, which the guards had built to warm themselves, and when their eyes became accustomed to it the boys could see plainly every object in the room.

They remained quietly on their backs until it became evident that their fellow-prisoners were asleep. Platoff gave the signal for action by rising cautiously and moving on tiptoe to the end of the platform. Satisfied with the inspection, he came back and whispered to the boys, "Lie very still and don't make a sound."

Then crossing the room, he took the bottle from its hiding-place in the wall and approached the sleeping men. Maurice saw him tear a strip of cloth from his coat and apply it to the bottle two or three times, and immediately a peculiar odour was perceptible in the room.

(To be Continued.)



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