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(Continued.)

Platoff coolly wiped the blood from his hands and examined the scratches on his arms and breast. "I'm not hurt," he said, in answer to the boys' eager enquiries. "The marks are only skin deep. I dropped my revolver somewhere, or I would have settled him without all this fuss. "You saved my life," exclaimed Phil. "In a moment more his teeth would have been in my throat. The brute sprang on me from that thicket there, and when we fell the crust broke. That is what kept me from being bitten. I don't believe I'm hurt at all, except for my clothes." And he pointed to the front of his coat, all ripped and hanging in tatters. Platoff disdained all praise, and strode off to look for his lost revolver. It was found half-way down the slope, where he had dropped it while running to Phil's assistance. It was now nearly daylight, and Platoff started at once to cut up the deer. It was a long and difficult task with but one knife, and a dull one at that, but an hour after sunrise the choice parts of the meat had been removed and packed for carriage. "Now," said Platoff, "we must leave here. It is just possible that our shots reached somebody's ears, and it will be a wise proceeding to put some miles between us and this spot."

CHAPTER XX.

As a more effective safeguard, Platoff led the boys deeper into the forest, and they plodded on for some miles before stopping even to eat. Refreshed by a hearty meal, they then traveled until nearly evening, and camped in a sheltered hollow. Of course a fire was necessary not only for warmth, but to keep off prowling wolves. The night was divided into watches, each taking his turn at guard duty and feeding the fire. For half a week more they journeyed on without incident, and then a spell of wet weather set in, which continued several days, and made travelling impossible. But it soon grew cold again, and a crust formed on what little snow remained. This good weather lasted for two weeks, and the fugitives took advantage of it to travel rapidly and steadily. They subsisted mainly on the tundra, but the bill of fare was varied occasionally by a rabbit or a pheasant which Platoff succeeded in knocking over. At times during their march the Amur was in sight, and the telegraph poles that follow the post road could be dimly made out. But for the most part they kept well back in the hills and had the rare good fortune to avoid meeting anyone, though signs of human beings were frequently encountered.

The boys endured their sufferings and hardships with a stoicism that excited Platoff's admiration, and their health remained good. As the first of April drew near they began to hope for milder weather, but as yet no change was visible. It remained cold, with occasional snowstorms of brief duration. One evening, after a weary march of 20 miles or more, they discovered a deserted cabin on the banks of a mountain stream. The wall was fitted with bunks, and in the closet was found a hard loaf of bread—a welcome discovery, for food had been very scarce during the past week. Soaked in water, this made a palatable meal, and the last crumb was devoured with a relish. "We can keep warm without a fire to-night," said Platoff. "I am afraid we are near habitations."

"How far have we come," asked Maurice, "and how far do you suppose it is to Vladivostok?" "That is a difficult question to answer," replied Platoff. "We have been travelling in such a zigzag course that the journey has been necessarily lengthened. I have tried to keep a mental record, though, and I can give a fair idea of what we have done. We have been on the road nearly seven weeks, and I think we have averaged nearly 100 miles a week. Taking off 100, which is a good allowance for our deviations, we have marched 600 miles down the Amur, and are only 400 miles from the ocean. Bear in mind, though, that our most dangerous journey is ahead, and that we may have to make still greater circuits."

"Then we are at least half way?" said Maurice. "Yes, half our journey is over," replied Platoff. "Heaven grant us equal prosperity during the remainder!" The boys were agreeably surprised to hear this. The whole distance covered seemed to them very large. They did not think of the long marches patiently endured through nearly every day of these seven weeks. "In the morning," resumed Platoff, "we will go down this stream toward the river. Our roubles must now be turned to some account. Food we must have. If we continue eating this half-raw flesh, we will be ill. That was a long to be remembered night. The cabin was snugly sheltered by the hills, and all enjoyed a restful, unbroken sleep until morning, dispensing entirely with guard duty. They were off at daybreak, after a hasty breakfast, and travelled rapidly down the stream through a thickly-wooded and rock-strewn ravine. It was at least four miles to the river, but a little more than an hour's march brought them in sight of its frozen surface. The hollow was thickly wooded with pine and spruce, and under its welcome cover the fugitives felt little fear. "Ah, there is the post road," said Platoff, and he pointed through a break in the trees to a couple of tall telegraph poles. They crept to its very edge, and the boys looked with curiosity at the smooth highway scarred with recent sled tracks. A solid bridge of logs was built across the stream, and was not 20 yards off when a slight

incline, was the Amur. For a narrow strip was in sight, only a barren stretch of ice and snow and wooded hills. Below the road faded into the dim distance, but up stream a sharp curve cut off the view. Platoff stood as though in deep thought, scanning the wintry landscape, and the boys hesitated to disturb his reverie. Suddenly from round the curve above was heard a sharp jingling of bells, faint at first, but rapidly growing louder. Platoff excitedly pushed the boys back into a dense spruce thicket that bordered the road. "Keep low and don't make a sound," he whispered. From their retreat it was possible to see the curve in the road, and on this all fixed their eyes expectantly. The jingle of the bells came nearer and nearer, ringing out as though the horses were running at full speed, and now above their clatter was heard a voice raised to its highest pitch. "Something is wrong," whispered Platoff, and as the words left his lips a huge sled burst round the curve at full speed. It was a clumsy vehicle, with a leather hood over the rear end, drawn by a troika, a team of three horses harnessed abreast. The one in the middle, a bearded man, muffled to his nose in furs, was tugging fiercely at the lines with an expression of terror on his face. These details the boys noticed at one sweeping glance. "The horses are running away," exclaimed Platoff, and that instant the frightened brutes, unable to round the bend at their terrific speed, plunged down the slope, dragging the heavy sledge behind them. The mouth of the stream, with its fringe of treacherous ice, was just at hand, but they dashed madly forward, and with a mighty crash horses, sledge, and driver went through into the dark waters. Platoff turned to his companions.

"Stay here," he said. "I must save that man." And bounding across the road he ran down the slope to the river. The true nobility of this deed did not occur at once to the boys. At any moment other sledges or troops of soldiers might pass along the road, and as for the man struggling in the water,

he was very likely a Russian official who would put pursuers on their track and drag them back to a living death at the mines. They realized the danger, of course, and felt momentarily angry at Platoff for imperilling at one move their dearly-purchased freedom. Then more generous impulses came to the front, and breaking out of their hiding-place they ran down the bank, catching up with Platoff at the very water's edge. He looked at them with an approving glance. "The horses are running away," exclaimed Platoff, and that instant the frightened brutes, unable to round the bend at their terrific speed, plunged down the slope, dragging the heavy sledge behind them. The mouth of the stream, with its fringe of treacherous ice, was just at hand, but they dashed madly forward, and with a mighty crash horses, sledge, and driver went through into the dark waters. Platoff turned to his companions.

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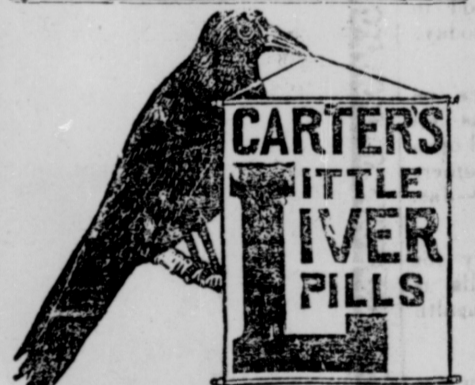
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ing since instead of the rescue they had expected.

"Be ready when I need you," he said, and plunging instantly into the water he swam toward the driver of the sledge, who was clinging to the fore end, uttering feeble appeals for help. The ice had broken for some yards around, and the swift current was dragging horses and sledge toward the lower rim, which was firm and solid. A few strokes brought Platoff to the half-unconscious man's side, and, tearing him loose, he took him by the collar and swam back toward the shore. The distance was slight, but both men were burdened with heavy clothes. Platoff's tremendous strength prevailed, however, and he gained the bank in safety with his burden.

"Rub his hands and face," he shouted to the boys. "Keep him moving." And darting off again he reached the lower edge of the ice just as the current swept the horses to the spot. Grasping the nearest one by the bridle, he turned his head toward shore, and by dint of shouting and hard pulling urged the whole team forward until they could touch bottom. The rest of the task was easy, and soon the sledge was standing on firm ground none the worse apparently for the accident.

The boys meanwhile were trotting the rescued man up and down. He was shivering so intensely from his cold bath that all attempts to speak were vain. When he saw the sledge safely on shore, he tottered up to it and drew from one corner a big flask of vodka. He took a hearty gulp and considerably passed it to Platoff, who was now shivering in his turn.

The fiery fluid put warmth into their bodies at once, and the stranger burst into a profuse declaration of thanks.

"Never mind," said Platoff, "it was nothing. I could not have done less. Build a fire, quick," he added to the boys, "a big, large one, some distance up the ravine."

It required but a few moments to execute this order, and the welcome blaze was soon sending out a grateful warmth. The stranger brought from his sledge a dozen fur robes, and, discarding their wet garments, he and Platoff wrapped themselves snugly in these. The horses were standing quietly by the roadside, looking very forlorn in their dripping condition.

"The brutes were scared a mile back at a cowardly wolf that crossed the road," said the stranger. "Had you not come to my rescue, I should now be at the bottom of the Amur. I fully appreciate your kindness, much more than you think possible." And he glanced keenly at the fugitives.

"I told you it was nothing," answered Platoff, coldly. "By chance we heard your cries and came to the rescue. We are fur hunters, and we live a few miles up this stream."

The stranger made no reply, but kept his keen eyes fixed on the party. He was a fine-looking, heavily-built, and light-bearded, while his manner of speech proved him to be intelligent. Platoff endured this scrutiny with secret uneasiness, glancing from time to time toward the road, and anxiously feeling his wet clothes, which were drying over the fire.

"I beg your pardon," he said, deliberately, "but the horses must be driven hard if you would avoid any ill-effects of their cold plunges. The ice is forming on them already. I would advise you to leave no time in starting for the next posting station."

"What will you do?" asked the stranger, quietly.

Platoff's face flushed, and in visible embarrassment he attempted to frame a reply. Maurice, who was watching him closely, saw his eyes flash, and anticipated trouble.

"Hold on," said the stranger. "Keep cool. I have something to say. My name is Nicolas Poussin, and I am a merchant of Vladivostok. I have been to Irkutsk on business, and am on my way home. Two friends accompanied me as far as Toular, a town fifty miles behind. In their haste they left their passports in my possession, and I have them now. Beyond Toular I met many Cossacks, and I was informed that three 'politicals' who escaped some time ago from Kara had been seen in the vicinity, and the soldiers were on their track." He paused, and looked his hearers full in the face.

Platoff, with a livid countenance, leaned over and drew Maurice's revolver from his belt. He cocked it and laid it on his knee. "Now, what next?" he said. "Go on with your story."

"Well," resumed Nicolas Poussin, without the least show of fear, "one good turn deserves another. My sledge is roomy, and my horses are strong. If you have any desire to journey toward the Pacific, I will take you with me for some distance. The extra passports that I have will serve for two of you. The third can be hidden in the bed of the sledge. I prefer that you should give me no information. I don't want to know who you are, you understand?"

"God bless you," exclaimed Platoff, embracing the worthy man's hand. "Forgive my suspicions. But you are assuming a risk—a terrible risk."

"Never mind about that," replied Poussin. "All I ask is caution. Of course, I dare not take you clear to Vladivostok. That is understood. But let us waste no more time. Our clothes are dry, and we can start."

The boys could barely realize at first the full measure of their good fortune. A moment before the tidings that the Cossacks were on their track had filled their hearts with despair. Now a merciful hand was stretched out to save them. Platoff's heroism had brought its own reward.

It was impossible to doubt Nicolas Poussin's sincerity. His frank, open face, his honest, gray eyes, were truth itself.

Quickly the dry clothes were donned, the fire was smothered with wet snow, and they dimly realize at first the full measure of their good fortune. A moment before the tidings that the Cossacks were on their track had filled their hearts with despair. Now a merciful hand was stretched out to save them. Platoff's heroism had brought its own reward.

the sledge scraped merrily over the frozen crust—toward the Pacific.

CHAPTER XXI.

A MIDNIGHT ALARM.

They travelled 40 miles that day, reaching sunset a wayside post station, a one-storey log building. Close by were a couple of houses and a telegraph office. The starosta, or station-master, provided a warm supper and a bed in one corner of the room. The sledge was hauled into the yard, and under half a dozen big furs Phil passed a fairly comfortable night. In the morning a Russian officer demanded the passports. They were returned without comment, and ten minutes later the sledge, drawn by a fresh troika, was speeding to the eastward.

Thus for a whole week they rode on across Siberia, each hour drawing nearer to safety. Nicolas Poussin spoke but little. He preserved a grave and silent demeanour, and drove his horses with an unsparring hand. Spring was not far off, and he was anxious to reach Vladivostok before the mild weather made a smiling impossibility. Smuggled up in furs, Platoff and Maurice sat far back under the leather hood, while Phil, cramped and uncomfortable, remained in his narrow place of concealment. They passed many travellers on the road—Tartars, merchants, peasants, and occasionally Cossack soldiers or Russian officers—but no unpleasant incidents occurred. Nicolas Poussin's passports carried them through all dangerous places.

Sometimes they slept in the same room at night with soldiers or dined with them at the same table. On such occasions Nicolas Poussin conversed for himself and his companions. Phil had the hardest time of all, sleeping at night in the station yards, and eating such food as his companions could smuggle out to him, but he bore all without complaint.

Day by day travelling became more difficult, and it was well that Nicolas Poussin was able to procure fresh troikas each morning, for when night came the horses were often completely worn out from dragging the heavy sledge over bare places in the road and through the slushy snow.

On the seventh evening, just as the sun was going down redly over the pine-crowned hills to the westward, they reached a small Siberian village, Yastak by name, and drove into the spacious yard of the station. Sleepy-looking peasants in gay costumes were standing about in the street, and a few soldiers were visible. The station-house was larger than many of its kind, and at Nicolas Poussin's request the starosta gave the travellers a small private room, and presently brought in dishes of bread, meat, and cheese, and a steaming samovar. In the middle of the repast a Russian officer entered, and with many apologies requested their passports.

He glanced them over briefly and bowed his way out. As the door closed Nicolas Poussin drew a small map from his pocket and spread it out on the table.

(To be Continued.)



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