

EXILED TO SIBERIA.

BY W. MURRAY GRAYDON.

(CONTINUED.)

...screaming, swearing and shouting, the panic-stricken wretches surged up the hatchway and flung themselves against the grating until it trembled and cracked. The guards ran up and down the deck, the officers shouted fiercely, and through the open hatchway the angry flames were already visible. "We'll be burned alive," cried Maurice, and he tore desperately at the grating. The hatchway was now one mass of flames, volumes of smoke were pouring out, and the deck planks were getting hot.

Suddenly a shrill whistle was heard from the steamer, and then the barge seemed to lie motionless on the water. The guards, apparently stupefied at this appalling calamity, ran helplessly about the deck, while the officers seemed to have disappeared.

Maurice and Phil joined with the rest in their desperate rush against the grating, but as the stout iron refused to yield, and the smoke and heat became almost unendurable, they lost all hope of escaping the flames.

At this moment of despair a hand clutched Maurice's arm, and a voice whispered in his ear:—"Follow me. Come this way."

Grodno—for it was he—had already vanished, but the boys turned in the direction he had taken and fought their way through the frenzied crowd. The opposite side of the pen, strangely enough, was almost deserted, and here they found Grodno and Hamid flinching at the grating.

"All right," the Russian whispered, triumphantly, and to their amazement the boys saw that he had opened one of the little sliding doors.

He darted quickly through, followed by Hamid, Maurice, horror-stricken at the thought of abandoning all these poor wretches to a shocking death, was about to attract general attention to the open doorway when, with a terrific crash, the entire grating on the opposite side of the pen gave way before the desperate efforts of the mob and toppled over on the astounded guards.

"Come quick," shouted the Russian, and without further delay the boys tumbled out on the open deck. Not a soldier was in sight. They were all on the other side.

Grodno had laid his plans well. On the edge of the barge lay a rude boat, belonging to a peddler who had come on board with provisions a few days before.

Grodno and Hamid seized this by the bow and stern and dropped it with a light splash into the water. It landed fairly on its keel, and, turning to the boys, Grodno shouted:—"Jump in now quick. Don't delay."

CHAPTER VI.

A MURDEROUS AMBUSH.

With a hasty glance at the sluggish black water, Maurice and Phil jumped together, landing fairly in the boat. Hamid followed instantly, but Grodno, in the very act of leaping, was confronted by a soldier, who presented his rifle at the convict's head and pulled the trigger. The weapon missed fire, and before the guard could recover from his surprise Grodno sprang furiously upon him and bore him to the deck.

From the boat the boys witnessed the whole affair. It was a very brief struggle, for the desperate convict, endowed with more than ordinary strength, choked his antagonist into a state of helplessness, and hastily plunging him of his sword and revolver, sprang to his feet. He tossed these weapons down to Hamid, following them with the soldier's gun, and then made a desperate leap for the boat, just as half a dozen guards rounded the corner of the nearest deckhouse.

Had the fire made sufficient progress to throw any light on the scene, escape would have been impossible, but the water was shrouded in darkness, and by a skilful use of a paddle which

was lying in the boat, Grodno drove it some distance out in the river before the soldiers reached the spot.

"Stoop down," he whispered, and as all obeyed, half a dozen rifles cracked from the deck of the barge, and a storm of bullets pattered around the boat. A straggling fire was kept up for two or three minutes, but the guards were shooting wildly, and none of the bullets struck the boat.

Grodno continued paddling with all his might, and just as the shore loomed up darkly ahead, a burst of flame shot aloft from the barge, illuminating the water for many yards around. The tumult was now terrific. The steamer's shrill whistle mingled with the cries of the frightened convicts and the hoarse command of the soldiers. The flames were long since beyond all control, and the barge was doomed. The steamer had dropped alongside and appeared to be taking the prisoners from the burning vessel.

Deeply interested in the thrilling sight, the fugitives in the boat almost forgot their own peril. They waited until the barge was a mass of flames from bow to stern, and then Grodno drove the boat on shore. As soon as Hamid and the boys were out he turned it bottom up and sent it adrift with the current.

"Captain Stanisla thinks we're drowned," he explained to Maurice. "Maybe he won't look for us. Hurry now; we must get away. They'll soon miss us."

With a last look at the steamer lying motionless on the water, and the blazing hull of the barge, they turned up the steep bank and plunged into a thick forest.

Grodno assumed the leadership, and he hurried the party along at a rapid rate of speed, picking his way with wonderful skill among the trees. Hour



Grodno sprang furiously upon him.

after hour they pressed on untiringly, pausing once for a brief rest, and when at last the gray light of dawn shone through the forest the river was miles to the rear.

Hungry and exhausted, the fugitives threw themselves on a mossy glade. A dense forest of poplars and silver birches was all around them, and close by was a babbling brook flowing over a bed of pebbles. Here they quenched their thirst and then, reckless of the consequences, they slept for an hour or more until the sun was well up and shining brightly through the trees.

Maurice knew that St. Petersburg was many miles away, but he was hardly prepared for the Russian's statement that the actual distance was about 2,500 miles.

"St. Petersburg lies to the west," explained Grodno, "but to the Russian frontier it is not more than 1,000 miles. That is the point we must strike for, and we stand a good chance of reaching it, for the country to our west is

much of it wild, and we are hundreds of miles north of the great Siberian roads where capture would be certain."

"And what will we do for food?" asked Maurice, in dismay. "How are we going to live through such a journey as that?"

"There are villages scattered through the country," replied Grodno, "and the people are always willing to aid escaped prisoners. Our first necessity is a change of clothes. We must rid ourselves of these convict garments."

"But won't we be pursued?" asked Maurice. "How can we hope to escape the soldiers?"

"We must take the chances," replied Grodno, coolly. "Our escape was discovered long ago, of course. It is possible that when the empty boat is found they will believe that we are at the bottom of the river, but it is more than likely that the Cossacks will scour the country. We must stay in hiding for a few days."

Grodno turned aside to converse with Hamid, and Maurice explained to Phil what the Russian had told him. In spite of the discouraging outlook the boys were now hopeful.

"Everything depends on reaching St. Petersburg without being retaken," said Maurice, "and once there, Phil, I shall try to see this Colonel Jaroslav. If we succeed in that, we shall be saved, and Vladimir Saradoff shall pay dearly for this outrage."

To Maurice, comparatively ignorant of the tremendous obstacles in the way, the chances of reaching St. Petersburg seemed very good, and his cheering words brightened Phil considerably.

...case with Hamid, that same quick glance showed him the crouching form of Hamid in the act of pulling his revolver on the officer seated in the wagon.

With Maurice to think was to act, and like a flash he sprang on the Turk's back at the very second that the man fired.

Phil's aim was spoiled, however, and the ball from the weapon whizzed over the officer's head.

In an instant all was confusion. Hamid, with a cry, fell back into the cove, struggling to tear loose from the brave boy's hold, while Phil, quick to grasp the situation, threw himself on Grodno, and they rolled together into the road, almost to the wheels of the wagon.

Grodno's shot had killed the one horse, and his mate in frantic alarm broke from his fastenings and darted like a streak over the plain, leaving the wagon and its two occupants to their fate.

The cowardly driver, frightened out of his wits by the shooting and by the sight of the gray convict garbs, left the wagon at a leap and ran in a zig-zag course toward the distant village, uttering a howl of fright at every step. The officer was a man of quite different calibre. Without the least appearance of fright he leaned forward, and opening a black box in the bottom of the wagon drew out a pair of revolvers.

The sight of the two convicts puzzling him considerably, for he looked on without attempting to make any use of his weapons.

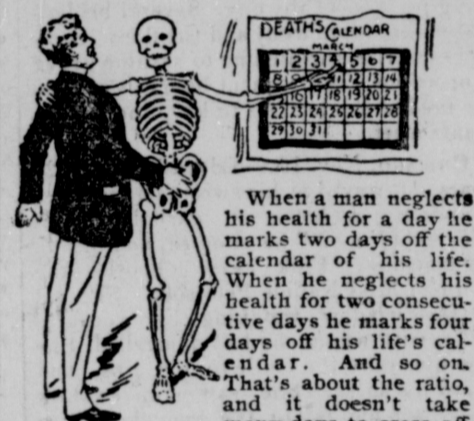
Phil was no match for Grodno. The burly convict twisted him over and over, and finally dashed his head against a projecting stone, with stunning force. Phil's grasp loosened, and Grodno was free. Seeing that the game was up, he made a sudden dash for the woods, but the officer, concluding that the time had come for him to act, raised one of his revolvers and fired.

A sharp cry of pain followed the report, and Grodno, lunging heavily forward, vanished in the undergrowth.

Meanwhile, under cover of the bushes, Maurice and Hamid were struggling desperately. The enraged Turk fought like a demon, trying in vain to make use of the revolver which he still clutched in his hands, but Maurice held him in a firm embrace, and they rolled over and over through the grass, neither gaining the ascendancy. At length Maurice got his antagonist just where he wanted him—underneath—and, clutching his throat with one hand, was about to wrest the revolver from him with the other, when the bushes parted almost beside him, and he glanced up to see Grodno's evil countenance glaring at him. The convict's left arm hung motionless at his side, stained with blood. Maurice released his hold on the Turk instantly and darted into the woods, intending to circle round and see what had become of Phil and the officer. He made a short detour which brought him to the edge of the road, some twenty or thirty yards above the wagon.

(To be Continued.)

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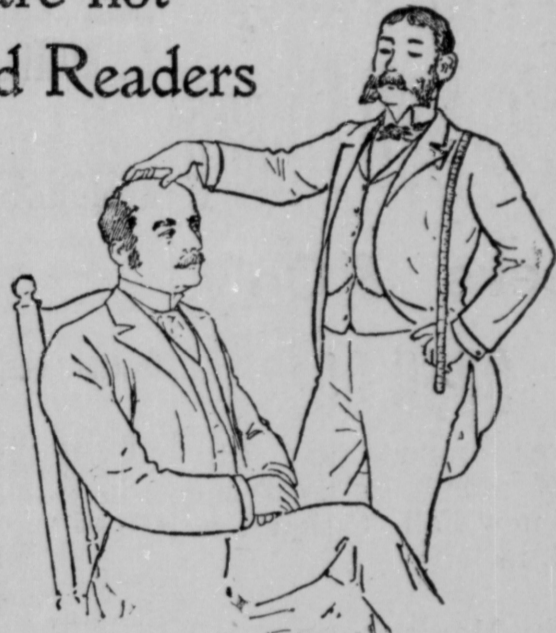
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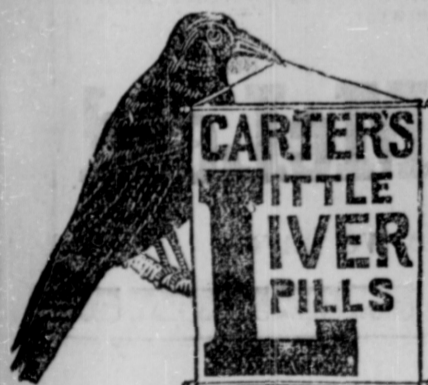
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