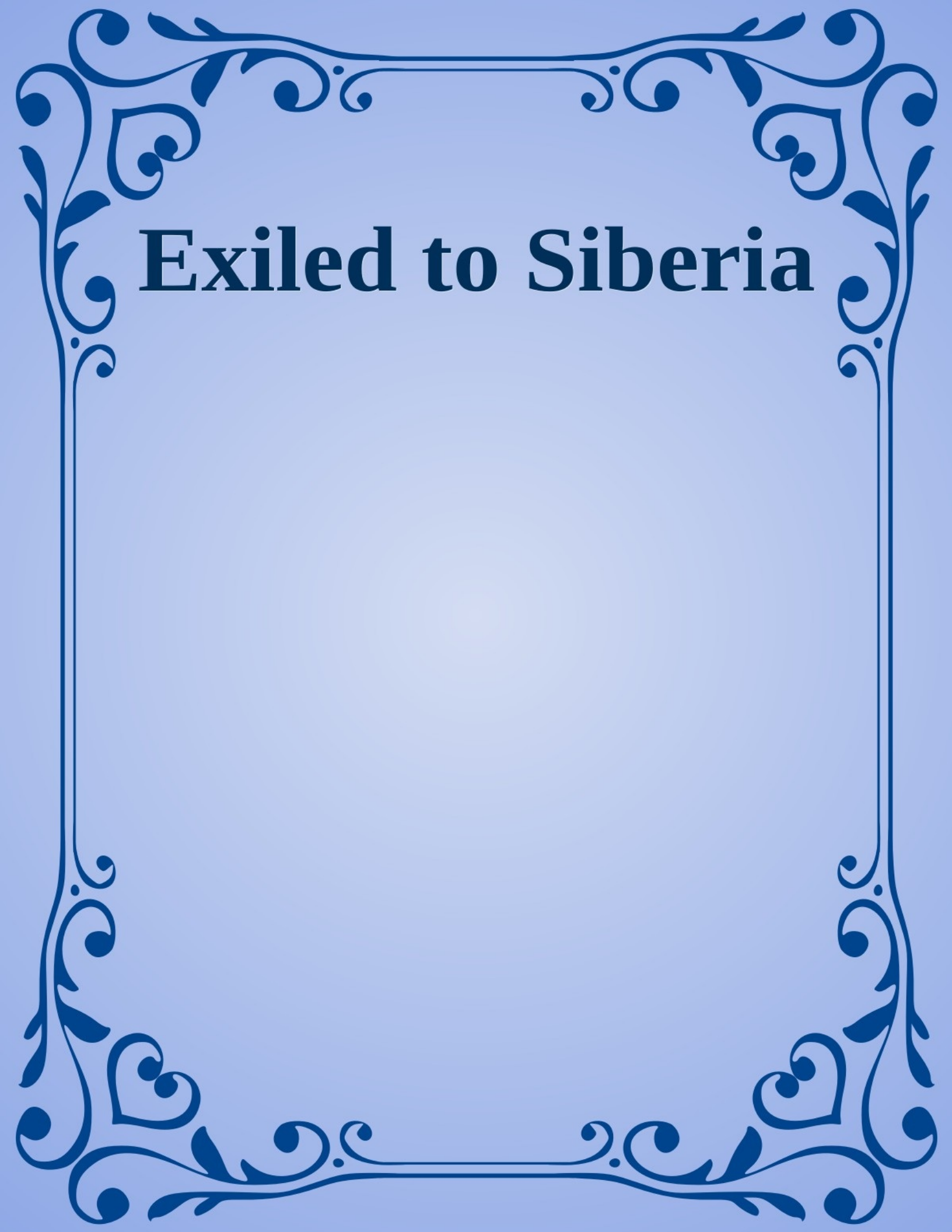


A decorative border in a dark blue color, featuring intricate floral and scrollwork patterns that frame the central text. The border is composed of repeating motifs of leaves, scrolls, and small circular accents, creating a classic, ornate look.

Exiled to Siberia

Exiled to Siberia

or, Valdimir Saradoff's Crime

by William Murray Graydon

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CHAPTER I

It was November in Paris.

The proverbial gloominess, however, was entirely lacking in the estimation of Colonel Hercules Hoffman, as he looked down on the gay and crowded boulevard from his apartment in the Hotel Bristol.

Colonel Hoffman was a New Yorker, a man of wealth, position, and prominence, and in spite of the seductive attractions of the French capital, he was congratulating himself on the completion of the business that had taken him abroad and the prospect of a speedy return home.

In Paris Colonel Hoffman was an atom, a mite; in New York he was—somebody.

He turned from the window and strolled softly across the room.

A faint smile hovered on his features as a huge mirror brought him face to face with his own reflection.

What he saw was a tall, finely-formed man, with a pleasing face, becomingly adorned with a light moustache and English side-whiskers.

As the colonel turned again to the window, a sharp rat-tat-tat echoed on the panels of the door, and a servant entered with a card on a silver salver.

“A gentleman for monsieur; he waits below.”

Colonel Hoffman raised the card with his thumb and forefinger, and carelessly read the inscription.

“VLADIMIR SARADOFF

Nevskoi Prospekt,

St. Petersburg.”

A dusky pallor passed swiftly over his ruddy features, and the card trembled in his fingers.

“Show the gentleman up,” he said briefly, and then muttered under his breath. “Vladimir Saradoff, of all men. What ill wind brings him here to-day?”

Warned by approaching footsteps, he hastily composed his features.

A moment later the door was thrown open, and Vladimir Saradoff appeared in person.

The Russian was a typical representative of his race.

Huge of stature, yet graceful in every movement, his patrician bearing and aristocratic features awoke Colonel Hoffman’s deepest admiration. His hair was coal-black, and his moustache and beard were trimmed and pointed in French fashion.

A huge cloak, richly trimmed with fur, was thrown loosely over his shoulders, and he held a cap of the same material in his hand. He glanced sharply at the colonel under his gold eyeglass.

“Colonel Hoffman, of New York, I believe,” he said, in perfect English, and then the two gentlemen shook hands.

The Russian tossed aside his coat and cap, and took the chair that his host handed him.

Colonel Hoffman seated himself opposite, and then ensued a brief, embarrassing silence.

An attentive observer would have promptly concluded that the interview about to take place would be no friendly one.

The Russian’s features were stern, and his eyes were fixed on the American with an intensity of gaze that made Colonel Hoffman ill at ease.

He shuffled to and fro in his chair, glanced from one part of the room to the other, and at last in desperation drew out a cigar, and lighting it began to smoke furiously.

A faint smile flitted across Vladimir Saradoff’s features.

“Pardon my intrusion,” he said, abruptly; “by mere chance I became aware of your presence in Paris, and have thus spared myself the fatigues of a voyage across the Atlantic. I presume I am not mistaken. You are the guardian of my—my nephew, Maurice Hammond, the son of my dead sister?”

Colonel Hoffman inclined his head.

“Yes, I am.”

“Where is the boy now?” asked the Russian.

“Travelling in the western states of America with a college mate.

“When does he come of age?”

“In a little more than two years. He will be nineteen in December.”

Vladimir Saradoff leaned forward in his chair.

“By my sister’s will,” he said, slowly, “all her property was left to her husband, in trust for their only child Maurice. In case the boy died unmarried, the whole of the property reverted to me. Am I right?”

“Yes; precisely right.”

“Now,” continued the Russian, in soft tones, “on the death of Frederick Hammond ten years ago, you were appointed guardian of the boy. May I ask what is the extent of the property entrusted to your care?”

Behind the curling cigar-smoke Colonel Hoffman paled visibly.

The Russian was watching him closely.

“In rough figures,” he said, with assumed carelessness, “the estate would possibly amount to two hundred thousand dollars.”

“Very good,” replied Vladimir Saradoff. “Your memory is not bad. I have here,” he continued, pulling a small note-book from his inner pocket, “a copy of the inventory which you filed as guardian; the estate consists of negotiable bonds and stocks to the amount of two hundred and ten thousand dollars; in Russian

money, four hundred thousand rubles.

“Now, Monsieur Hoffman,” he added, with a sudden change of voice, “what did you do with the malachite box of jewels?”

Had a bombshell exploded in the apartment that instant it could not have produced a more startling effect upon Colonel Hoffman.

Trembling in every limb, he sank back in his chair.

The Russian looked on calmly.

“Sit still,” he added, sharply, as the colonel made a feeble effort to rise, “and don’t attempt to deny your guilt. It is useless. I am in possession of all the facts. I knew of the existence of those jewels and of my sister’s intention to leave them to her son. I procured a copy of your inventory on the death of Frederick Hammond. The jewels were not included. The rest was simple. Ten years ago you were a man of moderate circumstances. To-day, enriched by those stolen jewels, you are a man of wealth and renown. Relying on the fact that the boy knew nothing of them, you hoped to escape detection.”

Colonel Hoffman rose and staggered to the table.

“Spare me,” he whispered—“spare me! I will make restitution—I will—”

“Sit down,” commanded the Russian. “I know all, even where the stones were disposed of, and what became of the malachite box. They were old family jewels, and they netted you the sum of nearly two hundred thousand rubles. I possess all the proofs of your guilt.”

Colonel Hoffman threw himself in his chair, and buried his face in his hands.

“Yes,” continued the Russian, in the same cutting tones, “I hold in my hands your reputation, which I am told stands high in your American city. I can consign you to a felon’s cell.

He paused impressively, and then added: “But I have concluded to take no action. Your secret is safe with me.”

Colonel Hoffman rose to his feet in surprise.

“Do you mean it?” he cried, “can it be possible?”

“Be seated,” added the Russian, and the colonel obeyed.

For a moment or two, Vladimir Saradoff surveyed his victim with an inscrutable expression.

When he spoke again, his voice was unnaturally harsh.

“I will spare you,” he said—” on one condition. In what light does young Hammond regard me—his uncle?”

“Unfavourably, I am sorry to say,” stammered the colonel, with an effort. “You must be aware— —”

Yes,” interrupted the Russian, “of course, he believes that I treated his mother cruelty. His father taught him that. There was a time when I would gladly have given a hundred thousand rubles to lay my hands on Frederick Hammond. From the day that Anna Saradoff left Russia with that vile, scheming American, she ceased to be a sister of mine.”

With eyes flashing he waved his hand, studded with diamonds, before the colonel’s countenance. Then his anger suddenly passed off, and his face assumed a crafty expression.

“Monsieur Hammond,” he said abruptly, “do you know I have taken a fancy to that young nephew of mine. I did not forgive my sister, it is true, but I still think of her tenderly, and perhaps this boy resembles her. At all events, I should like to see him. I would have him visit me. Now, this is what you must do . Give him to understand that I am not the savage he has been taught to believe me. Tell him that you have seen me, that I spoke tenderly of his mother, of his father, that I am lonely amid the grandeur of my Russian home, and that I want him for his mother’s sake to come to St. Petersburg.

Vladimir Saradoff leaned forward in his chair, and stared coolly in the face of the American.

Colonel Hoffman breathed hard and fast.

“Yes,” said he, “I *understand*, and the double meaning of his reply was obvious

to the Russian. Their eyes met, each conscious that the innermost secret of his soul stood revealed to the gaze of the other.

“Suppose I refuse?” remarked the colonel, finally.

“Do so at your peril,” said the other; “I will pursue you to the very limits of the law. I will hunt you to a felon’s cell.”

A period of silence followed.

Colonel Hoffman rose and walked to the window. The Russian drew a cigarette-case from his pocket and began to smoke, confident of his victory.

Fearful indeed must have been the colonel’s emotions as he stood looking vacantly down on the crowded boulevard. His crime had found him out.

Two alternatives confronted him, each equally terrible at first contemplation.

On the one side was long imprisonment, with loss of fortune, position, reputation, everything.

On the other was absolute immunity from punishment, a continued enjoyment of his ill-gotten wealth, without fear of detection; but, to secure these benefits, he must consent to be the passive actor in a crime so dreadful that he dared not frame it in words, for Vladimir Saradoff’s demand admitted no misconstruction.

Ten minutes passed in silence; and then Colonel Hoffman moved back to his chair.

Every spark of colour had fled from his face, and in its stead was only an ashen pallor.

“I am at your mercy,” he groaned. “I must consent to your infamous proposition. You still refuse to allow me to make restitution?”

“Absolutely,” replied Vladimir Saradoff; “you know my terms. You know also what you are expected to do. You will have no difficulty. Suggest to the lad that he take a Continental tour before settling down. Let him start early in the spring, and see that he comes to St. Petersburg. You have my address. Keep me posted by cablegram. *I will attend to the rest.*”

“I intended sailing for America next week, but I saw your name in *Galignani*, and thus spared myself the trouble. And now, Monsieur Hoffman, I shall bid you *au revoir*. It pleases me to have made your acquaintance. We shall meet again, and should you ever come to St. Petersburg, you may be sure of a hearty welcome.”

Smiling pleasantly, the Russian flung his coat over his arm and picked up his cap.

Slightly touching the colonel’s cold, irresponsive hand, he bowed low in the doorway, and was gone.

Ten days later the New York papers announced that Colonel Hercules Hoffman, the well-known broker and financier, had returned from a short trip abroad.

CHAPTER II

On a certain March morning of the year following the events related in the preceding chapter two young Americans left the office of the Russian Consul-General at Berlin, and an hour later were speeding as fast as steam could carry them towards the distant frontier of the Russian Empire.

Maurice Hammond and Philip Danvers were the names registered on their passports, and while they are hastening towards St. Petersburg, enthusiastic and delighted at the prospect of soon seeing this frozen capital of the North, we will take the opportunity of briefly acquainting the reader with the circumstances necessary to an understanding of the strange and startling drama upon which the curtain is even now rising.

Twenty years before, Frederick Hammond, a young American, an *attaché* of the United States Legation at St. Petersburg, met and fell in love with Anna Saradoff, a young Russian girl of wealth and position.

Such marriages are uncommon, but when Frederick Hammond returned to New York he took with him a Russian bride.

Anna Saradoff's only relative was her brother Vladimir, who, having other views for his sister, conceived a most intense hatred of this scheming American, as he chose to call him.

He never forgave his sister, and professed from that time to regard her as one dead.

Mrs. Hammond, in turn, well content with her husband's love, cut off all connection with her native land. Her Russian property was converted into American securities, and, without a shadow of regret for the brilliance and magnificence she had voluntarily abandoned, she entered upon the quieter occupations of her new life.

Five years later she died, leaving the one child, Maurice, at that time four years of age.

Six years later Frederick Hammond followed his wife, but in the meantime,

embittered by her loss, he taught his son to detest his Russian uncle, whose cruel treatment had probably hastened his sister's death.

Frederick Hammond had few intimate friends. To one of these, Colonel Hercules Hoffman, he entrusted the care of his son and his son's fortune.

Colonel Hoffman was at that time a man of honesty and integrity—honest, because as yet he had not been tempted. That temptation came later, in the form of the malachite box of jewels; and how Colonel Hoffman resisted a base temptation we have already seen.

Maurice Hammond can be described in a few words.

He had inherited the ardent temperament of his mother, his father's intellect and good looks.

At nineteen he was tall, athletic, blond-haired, and ruddy-cheeked. His life had been passed at preparatory schools and colleges, while in the vacations he usually travelled—for Colonel Hoffman was unmarried; and, moreover, a coolness, fostered probably by instinct existed between guardian and ward.

When Colonel Hoffman returned from that trip abroad Maurice was travelling in the West with his intimate friend and college chum. Philip Danvers.

For several months Colonel Hoffman was the most wretched man in New York.

That diplomatic interview at the Hotel Bristol, which has been described word for word, possessed a sinister meaning that he could not fail to interpret.

He never dared admit to himself that his suspicions were correct, but constantly before his mental vision hung that clause in the forgiving Anna Hammond's will: "In case my son Maurice die unmarried, the estate shall revert to my brother, Vladimir Saradoff, of St. Petersburg."

The first sin oftentimes paves a smooth pathway for the second.

What was the welfare of his ward compared to his own interests—his fortune, his position, his reputation?

In January Maurice Hammond came East with his friend, and himself proposed a

six months' Continental tour.

The two boys having finished college, what was more natural than that they should wish to see the world?

Colonel Hoffman gladly acquiesced. With infinite finesse, he pictured Uncle Vladimir as sorrowful, repentant, anxious to see his nephew for his sister's sake.

He cabled to St. Petersburg.

Three weeks later a letter came to Maurice Hammond—a warm invitation to visit the Russian capital before the approach of summer made it unpleasant.

The tempting prospects that the letter held out proved irresistible.

The two boys sailed from New York late in February, and contenting themselves with a brief stay in London and Paris, travelled by easy stages across the Continent.

Vladimir Saradoff, at the time this story opens, had reached the age of forty-five years.

The last member of an old and renowned Russian family, his brilliant birth, his political influence, and above all the favour of the Czar, gave him a prestige at Court and in St. Petersburg society that was surpassed by few. His education, acquired partly at home, partly in German universities, was lacking in nothing, and he possessed a fluent knowledge of English language and customs, the result of a diplomatic term of service at the Russian Legation in London. In disposition he was crafty and revengeful.

His sister's marriage had been a severe shock to his pride.

He was absent in the Caucasus at the time it occurred; when he returned she had already left Russia, and the vengeance which he meditated on the daring American was beyond his reach. The events of the past twenty years—the death of his sister and her husband, and the fortune left to their child—had only added fuel to the flame of his wrath.

To-day he hated Maurice Hammond as implacably as he had hated Frederick Hammond twenty years before.

Let us add one more fact.

Vladimir Saradoff had been all his life addicted to that especially Russian vice—gambling.

He was supposed to be wealthy.

He owned a palace on the Nevskoi Prospekt, a country seat in the North.

His expenses were enormous but his income was reported to be fabulous. The truth was not even suspected. Slowly but surely Vladimir Saradoff's wealth had been slipping away over the gaming tables. A crisis was at hand. He realised that he must acquire a large sum of money, or lose all that he held most dear—his prestige at Court, his position in society, and his ancestral heritage. He concentrated his thoughts on two objects—the attainment of a long-deferred vengeance, and the acquisition of the badly-needed wealth.

At the vast frontier station of Wirballen, which they reached at midnight, cold and hungry, the boys obtained their first view of Russian life. Passports and baggage were overhauled, and then they were turned into the dreary waiting-room with many other passengers.

There was little time for scrutiny or observation.

The Russian train rattled into the station, and almost before they knew it, their passports, properly stamped, had been pressed into their hands, the train was rattling noisily on into the night.

They were speeding over Russian soil now. Before them stretched the dominions of the Czar, an empire that reached thousands and thousands of miles across Siberian wastes and deserts to the far-away Pacific coast.

Hour after hour the train rushed through the gloomy snow-clad country, stopping at intervals at huge barn-like stations; and at last, late on the following evening, they knew that the end of the journey was near.

“I wonder what sort of a reception this aristocratic uncle of yours will give *me*, Maurice?” said Phil Danvers, as he pulled a cap over his curly black hair, and unfolded his big fur-trimmed coat, preparatory to putting it on. “Don't you think it was rather a cheeky performance to invite a guest on your own

responsibility?”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Phil,” replied his companion. “He will be only too glad to receive a friend of mine. He had plenty of notice. I wrote to him from London, and then, you know, we cabled him from Berlin yesterday morning.”

“Petersburg!” shouts the smartly-uniformed conductor, and in an instant all is bustle and commotion as the train rolls into the vast station.

Maurice draws a long breath as he hurries from the car.

This is his mother’s native city—the lovely, delicate woman whom he remembered so faintly.

A tall man, in a heavy cloak and astrakhan cap, suddenly confronts him.

“Monsieur Hammond?” he says, inquiringly, in plain English

Maurice nods his head, not knowing whether to hold out his hand or not.

The next word reassures him.

“The carriage waits,” says the man, with a servile bow, and taking the boys’ luggage, he motions them to follow him through the crowd.

A huge sleigh is waiting. The boys and their strange guide occupy the spacious seat, and pull the rugs closely around them.

The driver perched in front seizes the lines, and presently they are gliding through the streets of St. Petersburg.

A light fall of snow is coming down, and in the lamp-light the houses, the people, and the vehicles are seen as through a yellow fog.

It seems a cheerless reception to the two young travellers.

Not a word is spoken during the half-hour’s ride. The grim-visaged man with the astrakhan-cap sits between them.

At length the sleigh halts before a huge palatial building. Their guide leads them up a broad flight of steps. Massive doors are flung open, revealing a soft light

within, and they are ushered into a spacious apartment. Maurice has barely time to observe the furniture, the tapestries, the paintings, and the rugs, when a tall, fine-looking gentleman in evening dress comes quickly forward.

“My dear nephew!” he exclaims, as he takes him by the hand “Yes, your mother’s face—her very features. But how did you endure the long journey? You must be terribly fatigued.”

He extends a warm welcome to Phil, and presently Maurice concludes that he was utterly mistaken in his previous estimate of Vladimir Saradoff.

They dined informally in a large apartment that was a marvel of luxury with its gilded decorations, and then Vladimir Saradoff led the way back to the library.

“My dear Maurice,” he began, abruptly, “an unfortunate thing has happened, urgent business demands my presence in Moscow. I am compelled to forego the pleasure of showing you our city in person. I shall start by an early train, and will be absent two or three days. What I would suggest to you is this: remain here to-morrow, and look around St. Petersburg under Ivan’s guidance. Ivan Tambor is my trusted servant who met you at the train to-night. He has always accompanied me, and speaks good English. Then on the following day he will escort you to Moscow, and there I shall devote myself to your pleasure. There is much to be seen at Moscow.”

The boys expressed themselves as delighted with this arrangement.

“Meanwhile,” continued their host, “you will find everything here arranged for your comfort. Ivan will see that nothing is neglected. And now I observe that you are weary and in need of rest. Pardon my thoughtlessness.”

He rang for a servant, and the boys were speedily ushered to another floor, where luxurious bedrooms, not unlike apartments they had seen at home, awaited them.

Vladimir Saradoff, alone in his library, paced the floor with an ill-concealed expression of triumph on his features.

At last, seating himself at a large ebony desk, he seized paper and pen and began to write rapidly. The first letter completed, he sealed and stamped it with coloured wax, and addressed it as follows:

“TO COUNT PAUL BROSKY

“Minister of the Interior.”

He at once resumed his writing. and on finishing a second letter half an hour later, he sealed that in the same manner, and addressed it to.

“CAPTAIN SASHA

“Commandant of the Forwarding Prison,

“MOSCOW.”

He pulled a bell-cord, and Ivan Tambor speedily entered the room. Vladimir Saradoff handed him the letter.

“Deliver this one immediately,” he said, designating the letter first written; “let the other go by the early mail. You understand everything, Ivan?”

“Yes, your Excellency,” replied the Russian; “nothing shall be forgotten,” and saluting his master, he left the apartment.

Overhead, in the soft, luxurious bed, the two boys slept calmly little dreaming of their host’s perfidy, unconscious of the fatal import of those two letters that were even now speeding to their respective destinations.

In Russia deeds are possible that no other country on the globe would tolerate.

With his wealth, his standing at Court, his influence with high officials, what could not Vladimir Saradoff accomplish if he willed?

In the dark days of Ivan the Terrible no viler deed was ever conceived than this aristocratic Russian so coolly perpetrated that night.

CHAPTER III

One day Maurice Hammond and Philip Danvers spent amid the grandeur and magnificence of St. Petersburg—a day so vivid in contrast to the darkness and gloom that followed that it never remain undimmed in their memories.

In a huge Russian sleigh, drawn by three powerful horses, they drove the length of the vast Nevskoi Prospekt, a boulevard more than a hundred feet broad and three miles long. The buildings were huge, massive, and imposing, the frozen roadway was filled with sleighs of every description, from the peasant's humble box on runners to the magnificent turnouts of the nobility. The sidewalks were thronged with foot passengers, merchants, porters, civil servants, officers in long cloaks, ladies in Parisian toilettes, priests in flowing black gowns and brimless hats, while over the horizon rose gilded and painted domes and countless Greek crosses.

Presently the great street merged into the Court Quay, a marvellous highway of rose granite, bordered on the one side by the palaces of the nobility, on the other by the frozen waters of the Neva.

Ivan, sitting like a statute on the front seat, points out from time to time places of note—the Winter Palace, where the Czar lives in regal state, the adjoining Hermitage, and the palaces of the Grand Dukes.

Now he inclines his hand across the frozen Neva.

“The Fortress,” he says, briefly, and, with thrilling interest, the boys gaze on the bastions and towers of that noted citadel, where unhappy prisoners languish in their bombproof cells.

For hours they drove through the streets, crossing and recrossing the seven canals which appear in every direction.

Turning back late in the afternoon, they entered through a massive archway the Palace square.

A burst of music reached the boys' ears, and a scene of splendour opened before them.

From the centre of the square towered a shaft of red granite, the Alexander Column—and at its base the band of the Imperial Guard was playing airs from Offenbach. Mounted Cossacks were keeping back the impetuous crowd.

“There has been a review,” said Ivan, “the troops are returning.”

He signalled to the driver, and as the sleigh drew up before the imposing facade of the Admiralty, the head of the line, a squad of the Imperial Guard, reached the archway. Close behind, at a sharp trot, came the Asiatic troops.

Georgians, Persians, Circassians, and Mongols, armed with lances and steel maces, clad in long coats of mail.

Then followed compact bodies of infantry—Finland Chasseurs and the giants of the Paul Regiment with massive copper hats—marching sharply to avoid the hordes of cavalry who were crowding at their heels—Red Hussars, Grenadiers, Lancers, and swarms of Cossacks on their shaggy ponies.

They hastened on towards their quarters, and as the last Cossack ambled through the arch a battery of artillery charged into the square from the other extremity.

Maurice watched the approaching group with eager interest. They clattered past the Alexander Column, the fiery black chargers curvetting and prancing to the music of the band, and as they drew near the arch, an officer, superbly uniformed and mounted, galloped into the square almost beside the sleigh where the boys sat.

The horse slipped on the smooth-trodden snow, and plunged heavily to the ground, bearing his rider with him and pinning him firmly from the waist downward directly in the track of the rumbling cannons.

One loud cry burst from the startled spectators, and the artillery horses, scared at the uproar, bore madly down on the helpless officer, lost to all restraint.

Maurice took in the situation at a glance—the frightened people on the sidewalks, the mounted Cossacks before the sleigh, who seemed petrified with horror, and the rapidly advancing artillery.

He sprang to the ground, and in three leaps reached the luckless officer’s side. Grasping him under the arms, he pulled with all his might, once, twice, and as

the portly form yielded, he sprang back with his burden from under the very hoofs of the snorting horses and sank down on the trampled snow. The heavy cannon passed within an inch of his feet, and then with a sickening crunch the wheels rolled over the fallen steed.

He drew the man from under the horse's hoofs

Eager hands lifted them to their feet, and a shouting mob surged round on all sides.

The officer, who was apparently uninjured, tore loose from the Cossacks, who were brushing his uniform, and seizing Maurice in his arms, implanted a kiss fairly upon his lips, talking volubly all the while in Russian. He was a noble-looking man, with light, wavy beard and moustache.

"I can't speak Russian," Maurice finally stammered in despair.

"Ha!" cried the officer, joyously, "you are English. I speak your language, too. That was a noble deed. These base cowards here were too alarmed to move. To whom do I owe my life?" and he thrust a card into Maurice's hands.

At that moment a bare-headed man, wearing the garb of one of the palace servants, pushed forward and momentarily attracted the officer's attention.

In the same instant a pair of strong arms were thrown about Maurice, and he was forcibly dragged through the crowd and lifted into the sleigh.

Ivan Tambor—for it was he—shouted to the driver, and before Maurice could recover breath to speak, the sleigh had passed out the square, and the horses were galloping swiftly through the crowded street.

Maurice turned to the Russian.

"What did you do that for?" he exclaimed indignantly.

Ivan Tambor stared him full in the eye, with an expression in his face that made Maurice shiver.

"It was necessary," he said; "we should have been arrested. Private sleighs are not allowed in the square during a review."

“I don’t believe what he says, whispered Phil, when the Russian’s back was turned. “I mistrust that man, Maurice. You should have seen how savage he looked when you dragged that officer out of danger. I wonder who he was?”

“I have his card,” whispered Maurice, “but I don’t intend to risk taking it out here. Ivan doesn’t know I have it.”

Little did Maurice imagine when he acted on that resolve what an important bearing that deed was destined to have upon future events.

The short wintry day was nearly over when they reached Vladimir Saradoff’s mansion, and the dim, coppery sun was slanting on the gilded domes and crosses of the Imperial City.

Dinner was served in solitary state, a fitting accompaniment to the magnificence which the boys had just witnessed.

Waiters attired in European full dress supplied them with curious Russian dishes, and all the while Ivan Tambor stood motionless in one corner of the room.

“His Excellency, your uncle, wishes you to start for Moscow at four o’clock in the morning,” he said to Maurice, when the boys had returned to the library.

“Do you prefer to retire early, or shall I escort you to the Italian opera?”

“I don’t care anything about the opera, for my part,” said Maurice, “but I should like very much to see the city by night. What do you say, Phil?”

“Splendid,” rejoined his friend.

Ivan shrugged his shoulders, gave an order to a servant who answered the bell, and in ten minutes the sleigh was again at the door.

They drove for miles through the dimly-lighted streets, finally passing out on the frozen Neva, and speeding far down towards the Gulf of Finland on the smooth crust.

As they were returning through one of the spacious streets leading into the Nevskoi Prospekt, a man in fur coat and cap emerged from the portal of a brilliantly lighted mansion. The rays from a lamp-post close by showed Maurice

a strangely familiar face.

“Is not that my uncle?” he exclaimed—” that man with the heavy coat?”

Ivan Tambor turned quickly in the direction Maurice indicated, but the man had already vanished in the shadows.

“His Excellency is in Moscow!” he said. “There may have been a resemblance—nothing more.”

Maurice was readily satisfied with this explanation, but an hour later, as he tossed sleeplessly on his bed, he wondered vaguely whether that could have been Vladimir Saradoff or not.

The features were like those of his uncle, he felt sure.

Puzzling over this, and various other incidents of his brief visits he fell asleep.

The boys were wakened early, and after a hasty breakfast—eaten by the light of huge bronze lamps—Ivan announced that the sleigh was waiting to convey them to the station. At his request the boys handed him their passports.

He refused to accept any money for the railway tickets.

“His Excellency, your uncle, has given me instructions,” he said, quietly, “distress yourself about nothing.”

St. Petersburg was silent as the grave when they drove away from Vladimir Saradoff’s mansion.

As the more central parts of the city were reached, some activity was noticed, and at the railway station all was hurry and excitement.

“It is fourteen hours to Moscow,” said Ivan. “You will take sleeping apartments. Stay here while I get the tickets.”

In the brief period that he was gone, Maurice examined the card given him the day before by the Russian officer. He read it aloud:

“COLONEL ALEXIS JAROSLAV,

“St. Petersburg.”

“I’ll put that away safely,” he said to his companion. “I may meet the colonel some day after our return from Moscow.”

Little did Maurice think under what circumstances he and Jaroslav would next meet.

He had barely time to replace the card in the inner pocket of his vest when Ivan came hurrying back with the tickets, and in twenty minutes they were rattling over the frozen land towards the city of Moscow.

The sleeping apartments were quite as comfortable as those on American railways, and the boys slept undisturbed until long past noon. Then they took theirs places by the window, eager to see the country they were travelling through. The landscape was flat and monotonous, relieved at long intervals by straggling villages and occasional lonely dwellings. Thus the afternoon wore on, and the short day came to an end.

Shortly after dark Ivan gave the boys their passports, which they placed in their pockets without examining.

“I have had them properly stamped,” he exclaimed, “thus you will have no delay at Moscow.”

“How near are we to the city?” asked Maurice.

“Half an hour’s ride,” was the reply, and after piling the boys’ baggage on a seat in front of them, Ivan entered a rear car.

“It is difficult to believe that we are really approaching Moscow,” said Maurice. “I feel quite reconciled already to leaving St. Petersburg.”

“I’ve been thinking about Napoleon and the terrible retreat of his army all the afternoon,” said Phil. “I wonder if any traces still remain of the great fire?”

Suddenly the train slowed up, and then stopped abruptly with a little jerk.

Looking out of the window, the boys saw a stretch of trodden snow, and the feeble glow from a couple of lamp-posts shone on a little group of gendarme

officers with white caps ornamented with crimson cockades; and half a dozen mounted Cossacks in the background with their dull green uniforms.

“Why, this is not Moscow,” exclaimed Maurice; “there are no houses in sight. Why have we stopped, and what is going on?”

The other passengers in the car—half a dozen in number—flocked curiously to the window. At that instant the door was thrown open, and a grave, stern-faced man in heavy military cloak and cap strode in, followed by half a dozen gendarmes, who carried drawn swords.

The passengers—divining only too well the cause of this interruption—withdrew in fear to their seats.

The officer halted before the wondering boys.

“Passports,” he demanded, sternly; and as they were handed to him, he glanced them over briefly and thrust them into his pocket.

He nodded to the gendarmes behind him, who instantly seized the pile of baggage, and then he clapped Maurice and Phil on the shoulder in a manner that was unmistakable.

“What do you want?” cried Maurice, in bewilderment. “Is anything wrong with our passport? Where is Ivan? He can explain this blunder.”

But Ivan was nowhere to be seen. As the boys hesitated, the officer gave an emphatic command in Russian, and instantly the gendarmes closed in on them, and dragged them roughly from the car. Their baggage had already preceded them.

Reaching the ground, they had a brief view of a lonely, deserted street, two long rows of glimmering lamp-posts that dwindled to a point, and a gloomy, closed carriage with two gendarmes mounted in the box.

The door was flung open to admit them, and closed with a sharp click.

They had a glimpse of the train as it moved slowly forward again, with its curious passengers swarming at the windows, and the carriage rumbled noisily through the deserts outskirts of the city, surrounded by a cordon of mounted

Cossacks.

In far-away St. Petersburg, Vladimir Saradoff, with a smile on his lips, is whirling a fair partner over the waxen floors of the French Legation, to the bewitching strains of the Grenadiers' band.

Thousands of versts to the east, the heartbroken Russian exiles are sleeping their sad sleep on frozen Siberian wastes.

Russia is the land of extremes.

CHAPTER IV

A gendarme had accompanied them into the carriage, when Maurice attempted to speak, he harshly enjoined silence.

The boys felt but little alarm or uneasiness. They were familiar with the strict system of espionage that prevails in Russia, and naturally supposed that something was wrong with their passports.

That it was a very remarkable proceeding for the police to stop a train on the outskirts of Moscow never occurred to them.

Thus, in happy ignorance of their fate, worried only on Ivan's account, who, they feared, was ignorant of what had happened, they rode on into the city, turning in and out through dark, gloomy streets, until a sombre stone building was reached, feebly lighted by a bunch of gas jets over the portal.

They were hurried across the sidewalk, through a gloomy hall, and ushered into a small apartment, where two severe-looking men were writing at tables. A couple of windows, crossed by heavy iron bars, seemed to open on the street.

In the centre of the room was a square pen surrounded by a railing, and, as the boys entered this, two gendarmes followed them in, and began to search their clothing.

No part of their person was neglected. Their handkerchiefs, pockets-books, card-cases, and watches were removed and placed on a large table, where their travelling-bags were already lying.

The gendarmes retired to a bench on the other side of the room; the officials at the tables ceased writings and presently the officer who had boarded the train entered by a private door, and sat down at a large desk facing the boys.

He took their passports from his pocket, and glancing over them, spoke a few words in Russian to the two assistants, who at once began to write.

A gendarme stood by his side, handing him the various articles from time to time, which he subjected to a minute examination. The money and watches were

laid to one side, and then he opened the card-cases.

Maurice, who saw all that was going on, was amazed to see that they were empty cards, letters, and various memoranda that they had possessed were missing.

But a still greater surprise was in store for him.

The officer opened the travelling-bags, and turned the contents upon the desk.

He placed aside the various toilet implements—clothes, brushes, collars, and other articles of apparel—until there remained before him a collection of strange objects that neither Maurice nor Phil had ever seen before.

These comprised a bunch of what resembled handbills printed in strange characters, half a dozen letters sealed and addressed, and two or three books bound in yellow paper covers, the title of which Maurice was unable to read.

Forgetting all prudence, he sprang to his feet. “This is a mistake,” he exclaimed; “those are not our things. Send for my uncle, Vladimir Saradoff, he can explain this—”

Before he could say more, two gendarmes jerked him back on his chairs a forcible manner of enjoining silence which Maurice was not slow to understand.

The officer inspected these strange objects with a grave countenance. He continued dictating to the assistants, who wrote as rapidly as their hands could travel over the paper.

It was evident that the situation had now assumed serious phase. The boys still believed that an error had been made somewhere. Not a glimmer of the truth entered their minds. Unable to speak a word of Russian, they were in a bad plight. How could they acquaint Vladimir Saradoff with their predicament? Maurice had fairly resolved to make another effort to speak, when the officer signalled to the gendarmes, and the boys were led into another apartment furnished with a rude bed, two chairs, and a small table. The heavy door was locked and they were alone.

“This is dreadful,” exclaimed Phil, throwing himself on the bed. “I wish we had never seen Russia.”

“Keep up your spirits,” replied Maurice, “all will come right. My uncle will discover where we are before the night is over.”

Unable to sleep, the boys discussed their strange situation for an hour or more, expecting every moment to learn that Vladimir Saradoff had arrived.

This was their belief, when at last the prison door was opened to admit the officer who had conducted the examination. But no such glad tidings awaited them.

The Russian seated himself on a chair, and sharply surveyed his prisoners before he spoken

Then he drew a card from his pocket, which Maurice recognised as the one given to him by the man he had saved from death.

“I speak your language,” he said, in badly-accented English. “I may be able to mitigate your lot if you are sensible. This card was found in your possession. We have reason to believe that a conspiracy exists against his Highness, Colonel Jaroslav. Your own case is hopeless. Any information you may give will help yourselves, and will be used in secret

The officer looked inquiringly at the boys, who were quite at a loss to know what to make of this strange speech.

“I don’t understand you,” said Maurice; “I only know that a great mistake has been made, and with your permission I will try to explain.”

The officer nodded, and straightway Maurice related everything that had had happened to them from the moment they left Berlin, dwelling especially on his relationship to Vladimir Saradoff.

As he proceeded in his narration, the Russian freely expressed a strange mixture of incredulity and anger. It was evident he did not believe one word that Maurice was saving.

“Stop,” he exclaimed, impatiently. “I have listened to enough lies. You refuse my offer. You will repent it when too late. You deny, then, that you are the Englishmen, Cummings and Burton, named in the passports, that you are the agents of the Revolutionists in London, that you were bound for Moscow with

Nihilistic placards and books, and letters addressed to dangerous and suspected persons. Our government is always alert. The Minister of the Interior had accurate knowledge of your movements, and by his instructions you were arrested on the train. I should have told you nothing, but I wished to offer you this chance of benefiting yourselves.”

“Send for Vladimir Saradoff,” cried Maurice, excitedly, “this is all a terrible mistake, I assure you. My uncle can help us.”

The officer laughed disdainfully.

“His Excellency Vladimir Saradoff is in St. Petersburg; and as for this Ivan you speak of, no such person reached Moscow station this evening. You reject my offer. I wash my hands of you.”

Refusing to hear another word, he hastened from the room, and the guard in the corridor banged the heavy door.

Up to this moment neither of the boys had even suspected the truth. It remained for Maurice to make that startling discovery; and as the realisation of his uncle’s treachery forced itself upon him—dimly at first, but speedily strengthened by added proofs—he saw what stared him in the face. With a cry of despair he threw himself on the bed, and when, at Phil’s entreaties he sat up, his face was pitiful in its hopelessness.

“We are lost, Phil,” he said; “we shall never see America again. What fools we were ever to venture on Russian soil! I see it all—the perfidy of that man who calls himself my uncle. He never came to Moscow at all. That was Vladimir Saradoff we saw in St. Petersburg. Ivan was his accomplice, and together they formed this conspiracy.

“Ivan stole our cards, our passports, every means of identification we had, and substituted false passports and those other things which were found in our bags. We are lost.”

“But how can such a thing be?” exclaimed Phil, in bewilderment. “Our innocence must be discovered. You can prove your relationship to Vladimir Saradoff.”

You know little about Russia,” replied Maurice; “we are absolutely helpless,

Phil. No one will listen to us, or believe us; we shall not be permitted to write letters; and on the strength of that evidence we shall be condemned without a shadow of a trial. Vladimir Saradoff will cover up his tracks too well. For myself it matters little, but you, Phil—your father and mother, your sisters—here Maurice broke down completely.

Phil bravely tried to comfort him, and presently he became more composed.

They discussed the situation from every conceivable point of view, but not a ray of light could be discovered.

It was really so hopeless that Maurice, who possessed a fair knowledge of the Russian police system, dared not hold out any encouragement to his companion.

The most puzzling thing to him was his uncle's motive for such a crime.

He was ignorant of the terms of his mother's will, or his quick wits would have divined the truth.

On reflection, however, he remembered what a fierce hatred Vladimir Saradoff had always borne his father, and allowing for the transfer of this enmity from father to son, the solution of the mystery became more clear.

"What do you suppose they will do with us?" asked Phil.

The answer was already trembling on Maurice's lips, but he checked himself. "We will know the truth soon enough," he thought, so he replied, evasively: "I don't know, Phil; perhaps a long confinement in some Russian fortress."

The hours of that night seemed interminable. Sleep was out of the question, and the first grey glimmer of dawn that crept into the dreary cell through a narrow aperture, high upon the wall, found the two boys wearily pacing the floor.

A fairly good breakfast was presently brought, which they barely tasted, and then appeared a gendarme officer and four men, who led the boys away.

Maurice begged for a brief interview with the commanding officer—hoping to convince him of the truth—but the guards refused to listen, and hurried them into the street, where a close carriage was waiting hemmed about by mounted Cossacks.

Through the grey mist they had a hasty vision of countless domes and spires of marvellous colours and fantastic shapes.

Then the heavy curtains cut off the view, and the carnage rolled away. It stopped before a huge brick building, and the boys passed quickly through the gloomy portals. The gendarme officer preceded them with a stamped document in his hand, which he delivered to a big, black-bearded man in blue uniform, who came forward to receive him.

A few words passed between them, and then the boys were led away to a small, whitewashed cell, furnished with a single bed and a chair. A grated door opened on a large corridor, which was constantly patrolled by armed sentries.

They were now in the great forwarding prison of Moscow, and the commandant, Captain Sasha, had just received the official documents that sealed their fate. Russian justice knows no delay.

During their two days confinement here, the boys attempted in vain to open communication with the commandant.

Not the slightest attention was paid to their entreaties, and no one came near the cell except the guards.

On the third day their clothes were stripped off, and they were given in place of them, coarse linen shirts and trousers, long grey overcoats with yellow, diamond-shaped patches sewn between the shoulders, and visorless caps of the same material.

Attired in these coarse garments, they were conveyed in the dusk of the evening to the railway-station in company with a dozen other poor wretches, and placed in a huge, dreary car with narrow-grated windows and rough board seats.

As the train rattled off into the night, Maurice turned to the burly Cossack at his side.

“Where are we going?” he asked, imploringly; “won’t you tell us?”

The Russian understood the gestures, if not the words.

“*Siberia*,” he replied gruffly, and the sentence of their doom fell like a death-

knell on the boys' ears.

CHAPTER V

On the banks of the River Tura, in front of the gloomy palisades of the great forwarding prison of Tiumen, there were grouped one morning, late in the month of May a band of Russian exiles, four or five hundred in number.

A cordon of soldiers hemmed them in on all sides, and close by a railed platform zigzagged down the steep bank to the water's edge, where lay a long low vessel with black hull and yellow deckwork—a convict barge waiting to receive its cargo.

The wretched convicts represented all sorts of types and contrasts—fierce mountaineers from Circassia and Daghostan, sunburnt Tartars from the lower Volga, Turks from the Crimea with their scarlet fezes, and Jews from Podolia.

A little apart from the rest stood two youthful figures with haggard faces in whom we find it difficult to recognise Maurice Hammond and Philip Danvers.

Partly by rail, partly by water they had journeyed with many delays along the vast exile route.

Passing through the great Fair City, of Nijni Novgorod, the populous towns of Kazan and Perm, they crossed the dreary range of the Ural Mountains, passed the boundary line between Russia and Siberia; and now broken by hardship and suffering, still ignorant of their destination, they have reached Tiumen, seventeen hundred miles from St. Petersburg.

The past seems almost a dream. Hope has fled long ago, and they have learned to suffer in silence, thankful at least that they had not been separated from each other.

In their character of political prisoners they have been treated with some slight consideration to distinguish them from the coarser class of criminals, but all attempts to obtain audience with any official, in hope of convincing them of the fearful mistake that has been made, have been fruitless.

Vladimir Saradoff's triumph is complete. The net was woven tightly about his victims, and there is no escape from the living death to which he has consigned

them.

“Come on, they are going now,” said Maurice, and, as he spoke, commotion was visible among the exiles, and the commanding officer shouted.

“Forward now! Get on board!

In groups of twos and threes the wretched prisoners filed down the platform past the armed guards, who stood twenty feet apart, and crossed the floating wharf to the barge.

This vessel was about a hundred feet long. At each extremity was built a deckhouse painted yellow, and the space between these was roofed over with timber and faced with heavy iron screens. In these pens the prisoners were placed.

Beneath the deck were dark, gloom holes, with tiers of narrow bunks where they were to sleep.

The boys sat down on the bare floor in one corner of the pen, and watched for an hour or two the strange scene that was taking place before them.

The prisoners crowding up against the screen were carrying on a brisk business with the pedlars and peasant women who had come on board the barge with bread, cakes, salted cucumbers, strings of dried mushrooms, and fish pies.

The chaffing and buying kept up briskly until a little past noon.

Then a steamer backed up to the vessel with a great blowing of whistles, and in a few minutes the convict barge was speeding through the black current of the river on its long voyage to Tomsk.

It was evident that Captain Sasha, the commandant of the Moscow prison, had received special instructions concerning the two boys. They were guarded more closely it is true, than the common prisoners. but as yet they had not suffered the indignity of being chained, and they were supplied with reasonably good food.

Moreover—although they did not know it themselves—they were being transported across Siberia with a rapidity that is seldom granted to Russian exiles. Instead of marching hundreds of miles on foot, they had journeyed

entirely by rail and by water.

With their fellow-passengers they had little or nothing to do. They were all low-grade convicts—thieves, murderers, bandits—a fact which Maurice was not slow to recognise.

In the past two months the boys had picked up a slight smattering of the Russian language, and were now able to understand the commands of the soldiers and officers.

Day after day the barge moved slowly on its course, first up the sluggish current of the River Tobol, and then down the more impetuous waters of the Ob.

For hours at a time the boys gazed wearily on the ever-changing landscape, the forest clad hills and mountains; the pretty villages with their golden spires, and the waving fields of grain, for such was Siberian scenery at this season of the year. This vast continent is not always the barren, snow-clad desert that many believe it to be perpetually.

Among their fellow-prisoners the boys had made one acquaintance, a middle-aged Russian, who appeared to be of a higher class than his associates, though he possessed a cast of features by no means prepossessing. He had scraped acquaintance with Maurice by addressing him in French, a language which the lad happened to have acquired at college, and in his delight at finding someone from whom he could obtain information, Maurice gladly overlooked all other considerations

The Russian's name was Grodno, and he very freely confessed to Maurice that his offence was smuggling contraband goods over the Russian border.

If he expected a like return of confidence he was disappointed. Maurice was clever enough to see that it would be unwise to make a confidant of such a man. Instead, he allowed himself to pose as a political prisoner. However, in regard to that matter of which he was most anxious, he could learn nothing. Grodno, disappointed, perhaps, to find that his friend was neither a cutthroat nor a robber, disclaimed all knowledge of what was usually done with "politicals" as he rather scornfully termed them.

The Russian possessed another friend on board the barge, a most villainous-looking Turk, with sunburnt face and a stubby black beard. He wore a greasy red

fez, and was continually smoking a short clay-pipe.

Grodno, and Hamid—for that was the Turk's name—held long and whispered conversations in Russian, day after day, always keeping apart in a corner by themselves, and separating whenever any of the guards approached. These secret palavers Maurice observed with suspicion and distrust, for their actions on many occasions showed that the boys had something to do with the subject of their discussion.

Meanwhile the barge was drawing nearer its destination, and the dreary two-thousand-mile ride would soon be over.

All day they had been drifting through a wild and picturesque bit of country, and now at sunset the air was sultry and oppressive.

Maurice and Phil, their heads resting on their coats, were lying close up against the grating. The hot atmosphere below deck was intolerable, and the indulgent guards had allowed a great many of the convicts to remain out, instead of driving them all below, as was the usual rule.

It was remarkably quiet, so still indeed that the splash of the paddles was heard distinctly from the steamer, some distance ahead.

The guards paced slowly up and down the deck, glancing watchfully at the prisoners from time to time. Off against the railing, the commanding officer, Captain Stanisla, was smoking his evening cigar, and its fumes drifting in through the grating mingled with the villainous odour of Hamid's pipe.

Suddenly, when the guard's back was turned, Grodno slunk up to the boys, and threw himself carelessly at their side.

"Want to escape?" he whispered. "Want to leave the vessel; hide in woods, go back to Russia?"

"What do you mean?" asked Maurice, sharply.

"Hush!" said the Russian; "don't talk, don't say a word. Do you want to go?"

"Yes," replied Maurice, incautiously, "of course we want to go. But tell me, Grodno, what do you mean?"

“Hush, not now,” replied Grodno, and slipping off in the gloom he disappeared, leaving the boys in a state of great excitement.

“I’d like to know what he means,” said Maurice. “I don’t see how escape can be possible from a place like this.”

“It’s a plot of some kind,” replied Phil, “that’s what Grodno and Hamid have been discussing for the last week. I don’t like the looks of either of those fellows, Maurice, and in a matter of escape, I am afraid they would only use us to serve their own ends.”

“I believe all that,” rejoined Maurice, “but a chance of escape is not to be neglected under any circumstances, Phil. If only we could find some influential person to listen to our story he might be induced to investigate it, and prove our innocence. If we escape and are recaptured it will hardly make our position worse than it is now. But what became of Grodno? Did you see?”

“No, he and Hamid have disappeared,” replied Phil.

“I saw them going towards the hatchway a moment ago.”

The twilight had now merged into darkness, and the dim outline of the shores had vanished. A slight breeze sprang up, and the prisoners pressed close against the grating to enjoy its invigorating effect.

“Hamid can’t be very far away,” said Phil, suddenly. “I can smell that villainous pipe of his plainly; don’t you notice it?”

“I can smell something,” said Maurice, “but I don’t believe it’s Hamid’s pipe. It seems a very different kind of an odour.”

An armed soldier strolled slowly past the grating at that moment and the conversation ceased.

As soon as he was gone Maurice began to sniff the air uneasily.

“That’s not tobacco smoke, Phil,” he said, finally. “I half believe something is burning. The odour is getting stronger every instant.”

Before Phil could reply a sudden commotion was heard behind them, and

turning quickly, the boys saw a confused mass of convicts struggling up the hatchway, their dark forms outlined against a dull red glow.

Then the silence was broken by a sharp cry of “Fire! fire! fire!” and instantly an uproar arose that made the boys’ hair fairly stand on end.

Shrieking, swearing, and shouting the panic-stricken wretches surged up the hatchway, and flung themselves against the grating until it trembled and creaked, 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 burnt 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 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 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 fumbling 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 darted 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 pedlar 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 boy, Grodno shouted: “Jump in now quick! Don’t delay”

CHAPTER VI

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 plundering 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 on it, he turned it bottom up, and sent it adrift with the current.

“Captain Stanisla thinks we’re drowned,” he explained to Maurice. “Maybe 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 after hour they pressed on untiringly, pausing once for a brief rest, and when at last the grey 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 refreshed 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 twenty-five hundred miles.

“St Petersburg lies to the west,” explained Grodno; “but to the Russian frontier it is not more than a thousand 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 shall 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 shan’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 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 up Phil considerably.

The conversation was cut short by Grodno, who announced that it was time to start.

The Russian was armed with the gun and the sword, while Hamid was in possession of the revolver. They travelled on through the forest until long past noon, and then, worn out by long marching and by hunger, they halted by a small stream. It was impossible to proceed further without food. A close search revealed a few stunted raspberries, which were eagerly devoured. Birds were chattering overhead in the trees; but Grodno refused to use his weapon for fear the Cossacks should hear the report and be attracted to the spot. They succeeded in finding enough raspberries partly to satisfy their hunger, and with fresh hope they straggled on for three or four miles.

Towards sunset a glad sight met their eyes. In a small clearing amid the forest stood a roughly-built log-hut. Grodno advanced boldly to the door, and after two or three unanswered knocks flung it open and entered. He reappeared in a moment, beckoning to his companions, and then hurried eagerly forward.

“Some woodcutter’s hut,” said Grodno. “The owner has gone away; but he was considerate enough to leave this behind him, and he pointed to a couple of hard loaves of bread and a quantity of dried mushrooms. A careful search revealed nothing else that could be of use save a few matches, and leaving the hut, they

pressed on through the forest. With sunset came a chilly breeze, but this caused the fugitives little inconvenience with their heavy woollen clothing, and when it became too dark to travel, they camped by the side of a big rock, and pulled branches from the birch-trees to make a bed.

“It was a very encouraging sign,” Grodno said, “that no trace of pursuit had yet come near them.”

He conversed awhile with Hamid, and then both went calmly to sleep.

Maurice and Phil remained awake for some time listening to the rustling of the trees in the tree-tops, and thinking over their dreary situation. In spite of their weariness, they were unable to sleep.

I wish it were possible to make our way back to Russia without our companions,” said Maurice. “They are both hard characters, I am certain of that, and they may intend to commit other crimes. We may find ourselves in a worse plight than we were in before.”

“I agree with you there,” replied Phil. “and what is more, I have a dreadful suspicion that it was Grodno and Hamid who set the barge on fire.”

“By Jove!” exclaimed Maurice, suddenly, “why didn’t I think of that before? You are right, Phil— you are certainly right. These two scoundrels started that fire in order to escape, and ran the risk of burning all those poor wretches alive. What bloodthirsty fiends they must be. I declare I’m sorry we left the barge at all. Why Phil, if we’re caught now, they’ll probably shoot us. We are equally guilty with these two villains. Grodno says he can procure us other clothing, and as that is absolutely necessary, we shall be compelled to stay with them for a few days yet; but at the very first opportunity we will leave them and strike out for ourselves. It is a mighty slim chance, but anything is preferable to keeping company with such men.”

“Hush!” said Phil, “I believe they are awake.”

The boys had barely time to lie down and feign sleep, when Grodno sat up and looked around him.

He fell back in a moment; and after lying awake for nearly an hour longer, not daring to resume the conversation, the boys finally fell into a restless slumber

that lasted till daybreak.

Enough food still remained to make the fugitives a breakfast, and after hunting up a small stream, where the boys washed their faces and quenched their thirst, the march was resumed to the westward.

So great was the aversion which Maurice and Phil felt towards their companions since the mutual discovery made the previous nights that it was impossible to avoid showing it. Grodno perhaps realised something of this, for his repulsive face wore a sullen aspect, and he turned his whole attention to Hamid, carrying on an animated conversation, not a word of which the boys understood.

A few hours' march through the same monotonous country brought them to the edge of a vast open plain carpeted with waving grass and numerous wild-flowers.

Along the edge of the wood ran a well-defined road on which recent wheel-tracks were plainly visible, and less than two miles distant towered from the plain a couple of gilded crosses shining in the morning sun, and a cluster of low, grey houses.

As they stood gazing in consternation on the distant village and the open country, Grodno fiercely motioned them under cover.

Along the very side of the road lay dense timber with high grass and scattered rocks. Crouching down in this, the boys could see a vehicle of some sort approaching rapidly from the direction of the village. As it drew nearer, they saw that it was a small waggon covered with a leather hood, and drawn by a pair of black horses.

A peasant in a red shirt was driving, and behind with folded arms a military-looking man in a blue coat.

Grodno, who was under shelter of a big rock, slightly in advance of the boys, turned round and fiercely commanded them to lie low and make no noise.

He deliberately drew back the trigger of his rifle, and thrust the muzzle out through the branches, whispering as he did so to Hamid, who at once cocked his revolver and crept a foot closer to the path.

The waggon was now within twenty yards of the spot, rattling smoothly over the grassy road, and still the boys failed to realise the dreadful significance of Grodno's preparation. When the awful truth did flash into Maurice's mind, the next instant it was already too late. Taking careful aim, Grodno pulled the trigger, and a sharp report echoed over the plain, followed by a puff of white smoke.

CHAPTER VII

Through the wavering curls of smoke Maurice saw the nearer horse plunge heavily to the ground, dragging his mate with him, and that same quick glance showed him the crouching form of Hamid in the act of pulling his revolver on the officer seated in the waggon.

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.

His 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 copse, 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 waggon.

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 waggon and its two occupants to their fate.

The cowardly driver, frightened out of his wits by the shooting and by the sight of the grey convict garbs left the waggon at a leap, and ran in a zigzag course towards the distant village, uttering howls 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 waggon, drew out a pair of revolvers. The sight of the two convicts struggling in the roadway must have puzzled 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, falling 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 hand, 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 waggon.

Maurice wrestled the revolver from him.

Peeping cautiously from the fringe of bushes, he saw Phil lying motionless in the path, and the officer apparently bending over him. Then came a startling interruption. Grodno and Hamid burst from the forest with loud shouts, the former swinging the rifle around his head with one arm, and flung themselves on the officer, who staggered to his feet just in time to meet the attack. Shouts of anger were heard, but the combatants were so enveloped in a cloud of dust that Maurice could not tell how the battle was going.

"If I only had a weapon of some sort," he exclaimed, half aloud, and just then his eyes fell on a stout cudgel lying close at hand, a staff dropped probably by some peasant. Seizing this, he hurried quickly down the road, intent on rescuing the imperilled officer. As he drew near, a pistol cracked sharply above the din of voices and Hamid's short, chunky figure spun round for a brief second in the cloud of dust, and then dropped heavily in the roadway.

Maurice had barely time to see Grodno and the officer struggling over the possession of a revolver when a sharp trumpet-blast echoed through the air. A clash of steel seemed to shake the ground, and then round a slight curve in the road came at full tilt a squad of Cossacks, brandishing their naked swords. They surrounded the waggon with a circle of men six deep, and when Grodno gave up the fight in despair, and turned to flee, he was hemmed in beyond all hope of escape. A fierce expression passed over his face, and then he calmly folded his

arms as a sign of submission.

Hamid lay motionless in the road, his greasy garments stained to match the scarlet of his fez, and close by was Phil, his face pale and corpse-like.

The rescued officer saluted the commander of the Cossacks, and conversed with him for ten minutes or more, pointing from time to time at Maurice and Grodno, and the two motionless forms on the ground. He was plainly much puzzled over the affair. From the few words of the Cossack's reply which Maurice was able to understand he inferred that these soldiers had been in pursuit of them since the time of their escape.

Fearing lest Phil was badly injured, if indeed not dead, he moved towards him, but was roughly ordered back. At the same moment the conversation ceased, and two of the soldiers came forward with the runaway black horse, which they attached to the waggon, dragging the dead animal to the side of the road.

Grodno, whose arm was apparently broken by the officer's bullet was placed on the back seat unpinioned. Maurice was put behind, his arms bound behind his back, and Hamid's limp body was stowed away at their feet.

Phil, to Maurice's delight, now recovered consciousness, and sat up, looking about him in a dazed, stupefied manner.

He was hastily bound, and placed on the front seat beside the officer, who had volunteered to drive.

By this time people were in sight coming across the plain from the distant village, but instead of turning back in that direction the officer drove straight ahead, and the waggon rolled smoothly over the grassy road, surrounded on all four sides by the stern-visaged Cossacks.

An hour later another village started up from the horizon, with its same monotonous Creek crosses, and presently they entered the long, straggling street, with dingy grey houses, and halted before the posting-station, a very unpretentious structure of logs. The people of the village flocked out to see the new arrivals, but the presence of the Cossacks kept them at a respectful distance.

A brisk little man with piercing black eyes arrived presently, whom Maurice rightly divined to be a doctor. He glanced carelessly at Phil's bruised forehead,

and prescribed a dose of vodka, which fiery potion was at once produced, and poured down the patient's reluctant throat.

He shrugged his shoulders at Grodno's arm, and deftly enveloped it in splints and bandages, an operation which the convict submitted to without a murmur of pain.

When he came to Hamid, and saw the ugly wound in the breast his countenance became more grave, and he directed the unconscious man to be carried into the station. The Cossacks dismounted and took their prisoners inside, placing them in different corners of the room, where conversation was impossible.

A big samovar was steaming on the table, and the soldiers were soon gulping down cups of hot tea, and devouring cold meat, pickles, and salted cucumbers. The officer and the commander of the troops were doubtless taking their refreshment in a private apartment. Phil, hidden by a couple of burly Cossacks, was invisible to Maurice. Grodno, a few yards away, glared at him with a look of hatred. He might as well have spared himself the trouble, for Maurice paid him not the least attention. He was thinking very seriously over the events of the past two days, and beginning to realise what a foolish and reckless thing it had been to accept the chance of escape offered by these two convicts. He and Phil would probably be held equally guilty with Grodno and Hamid, and the penalty for the crimes committed by the two ruffians would be, under Russian law—death. This Maurice realised with a shudder. He was amazed with Grodno's audacity in attempting to assassinate a Russian officer on a public road, and actually within sight of a village. It could only be accounted for by the dire necessity for procuring money and a change of clothes, and since the officer had baggage in the wagon with him, the undertaking seemed to offer both. Had not Maurice interfered when he did, the officer and the driver would, undoubtedly, have been shot.

It was a clever ruse of Grodno's to shoot the horse first, and thus put the waggon and its occupants at his mercy.

There was one hope—a very slim one. If the rescued officer could only be made to understand that he owed his life to the boys he might extend them valuable aid; but just there was the trouble, as Maurice told himself. Did the circumstances justify the boy's story.

The struggle between Hamid and Maurice was absolutely unseen, while the scuffle between Phil and Grodno might be easily misconstrued; and, as a clincher, would the officer believe that Maurice was hastening to his aid when he hurried down the road with his club. These reflections left him in a very unenviable frame of mind, which was not at all relieved by the scant supply of food which the Cossacks at last condescended to give him.

About noon he and Phil were taken to another room, where the officer and the Cossack captain were seated at a table smoking pipes. The officer, to Maurice's great satisfaction, was able to speak English very well, and he cross-questioned the boys very closely, demanding first of all to know what their share was in setting fire to the convict barge.

He treated them with a certain consideration which gave Maurice courage to relate the whole story in a frank, straightforward way which seemed to carry conviction with it. He saw that a favourable impression had been made, and quick to seize the opportunity, he turned to the officer, and said, imploringly.

"I beg of you, sir, the privilege of saying a few words more. You addressed us as Cummings and Burton. I assure you that those not our names, that an awful mistake has been made, a fearful crime committed--"

"Stop!" interrupted the officer, sternly. "Not a word on that subject, or I shall change my intentions regarding you. I have heard of your audacity in accusing a prominent and influential Russian of a most absurd charge. For your own good I advise you to cease. You surely must be aware of the convincing proofs arraigned against you."

His face was so grave and his tone so severe that Maurice lost all hope of obtaining a hearing, and made no further attempt to speak.

"As for your complicity with these two assassins," continued the officer, in a calmer tone, "I believe your story, and for the service you have done me, I shall afford you what aid I can, though I assure you that you are in a most serious position. Your two companions will undoubtedly be shot, and the chances are that you will meet the same fate. I am Lieutenant Brosky, and I happen, fortunately, to be connected with the government at Tomsk, whither I am now bound. I shall, therefore, be present at your trial, and will state what facts I possess in your favour." CHAPTER VIII

Lieutenant Brodsky turned away, as a sign that the interview was ended, and was about to rap on the table for the guards who were outside in the hall, when Maurice asked, respectfully.

“Will you be kind enough to tell us to what part of Siberia we have been sentenced? No one will give us any information.

The lieutenant spoke a few words to the captain, and then turning to Maurice, replied.

“I can tell you nothing now. I promise you that you shall know what your original sentence was when you arrive at Tomsk.”

He signalled to the guards, and the boys were led away to the larger apartment downstairs.

Grodno was still sitting in moody silence in his corner, and the Cossacks were filling their pockets with food and their canteens with tea.

Outside the sturdy ponies were stamping restlessly, and through the window Maurice saw the waggon standing at the station door. Another horse had been found to match the one shot by Grodno.

A bugle blast assembled the Cossacks in haste, and the boys were rebound and placed in the waggon. Grodno was fastened securely on the back of one of the horses, and given in charge of two Cossacks. At the last minute Lieutenant Brosky appeared, and took the front seat; when just on the point of starting, an incident occurred which, for the moment, diverted the boys from their troubles.

Amid the throng of curious villagers standing a little distance from the waggon, the keen eyes of Lieutenant Brosky detected the cowardly driver who had run away from him that morning, and was lurking in the background, hoping to escape detection.

The angry officer seized his whip, and sprang from the little waggon with a single bound. Another leap carried him into the midst of the affrighted peasants, who scattered in every direction, and catching his man by the neck, he dragged him back before the station, and applied the whip with merciless energy. The fellow howled and screamed most piteously, but the officer continued the castigation until the whip split in his hand, and then tossing the fragments in one

direction and the limp peasant in the other, he coolly climbed into the waggon and with a merry blast of the bugles, the convoy wound across the steppe, on its way to Tomsk. Hamid was not with the party. His condition was probably too serious to permit removal; but Maurice noticed that two of the Cossacks remained behind, doubtless to await the Turk's recovery.

At the time the convict barge had been set on fire it was more than a hundred miles from the city of Tomsk, and as the fugitives had covered but little ground in their flight, the journey was of short duration.

The Cossack ponies and the horses that drew the waggon were animals of great strength and endurance, as are all Siberian horses, and after two brief delays at wayside posting-stations, Tomsk was reached late the following evening. They crossed the dark river and drove into the wide and populous streets of the town. On all sides the boys were surprised to see large and imposing buildings, and churches of various denominations. As the hour was late, but few people were in the streets, and these barely glanced at the little cavalcade as it wound rapidly through the town.

The challenge of the sentries rang sharply on the air as they halted before a huge military-looking stockade, pierced by a large gate, and flanked at its corners by guard-houses.

They passed through the gateway into the courtyard and the huge forwarding prison of Tomsk was before them; not a single large building, as might have been expected, but a dozen or more one-storey log houses grouped about the enclosure without any attempt at regularity. A large number of soldiers were pacing to and fro with loaded rifles on their shoulders, and owing to the mildness of the night hundreds of convicts were sleeping on the grounds. When the new arrivals entered, many of them sat up with a harsh clanking of chains. The officer of the prison quickly came forward, accompanied by Captain Stanisla himself, and the prisoners were once more placed in his custody.

Lieutenant Brosky drove away immediately without even glancing towards the boys; the Cossacks trotted out of the enclosure, and the recaptured fugitives were marched off to an isolated log building with heavy doors and barred windows.

The boys were not slow to realise the serious change in their situation. The guards roughly fastened chains to their legs, and thrust them into a dark, ill-

smelling room containing absolutely nothing but a dirty straw bed in one corner. The door was closed and locked, and they were alone in darkness.

“What do you suppose they will do with us?” asked Phil, in despairing tones; “not that it matters much, for I don’t seem to care any more what becomes of me, I have lost all hope.”

“No, Phil, don’t give up,” said Maurice, firmly; “the outlook is very hard, but all hope is not gone. We can’t tell what may turn up yet in our favour. Have courage, Phil—have courage. Lieutenant Brosky may get us free of this present scrape, and when we learn just where they are going to take us—and, you know, the lieutenant promised to tell us—then we can see better what our chances are.”

Phil, however, refused to be comforted, and paced the floor of the narrow apartment until compelled to lie down from sheer weariness. Maurice was far from feeling the confident manner which he had assumed. He was deeply impressed with the gravity of their present scrape, and even should they avoid punishment for that, through lieutenant Brosky’s influence, he realised that Siberian exile offered no hope of escape. Vladimir Saradoff would take every precaution on that score.

At the thought of his treacherous uncle, Maurice ground his teeth and clenched his fists.

Presently he became more composed, and sat down on the bed beside Phil. If any aid could reach them it must come from one source—home. His guardian and Phil’s friends would make a determined effort to find the boys. But here again Vladimir Saradoff would no doubt be ready with some cunning tale to explain their disappearance.

Little did Maurice dream of the startling truth as he sat on the wretched couch, thinking of the home and the friends that he would probably never see again.

He fell asleep at last, and when he woke the guards were tramping heavily past the prison, and from an adjoining cell came furious cries and savage cursing, doubtless the wretched Grodno, in a feverish delirium caused by his wound.

His ravings continued until daylight, completely putting an end to the boys’ sleep

They were provided with a scanty, unpalatable breakfast, and then left alone

until after midday, when a file of soldiers led by a young officer entered the cell. They were taken outside, where they found Grodno supported by two guards, his ugly face flushed with fevers. He glared at the boys with malignity, and even made an effort to spring at Maurice, but was held back by the soldiers. They marched across the courtyard between crowds of convicts who surveyed them curiously, and, as a close observer would have discovered, pitifully.

Maurice recognised among them many familiar faces, his fellow-voyagers on the convict barge, and he was glad to see that they had escaped the terrible death to which Grodno's crime had so nearly consigned them.

Near the gates stood the office of the prison—a gloomy two-storey building. Soldiers were all around it, some on guard duty, some chatting in groups, others holding fiery black horses, belonging no doubt, to officers who were inside. The boys were ushered into large, dimly-lighted room and in a barred enclosure along one side. Around a large table, lighted by a lamp, sat half a dozen stern-looking men in officers' uniform, among whom Maurice recognised Captain Stanisla, the Cossack captain who recaptured the fugitives, and Lieutenant Brosky. The rest were strangers. Two men were writing at a table near by, and a dozen soldiers occupied a long bench across the room, but all was very quiet and still.

“They are waiting for some person,” whispered Maurice to Phil. One of the guards observed the conversation, and rapped the boys sharply on the shoulders with the flat of his sword.

In a very short time wheels rattled up to the door, and a tall, stout man entered the room and took a seat at the head of the table. He had a heavy grey beard and moustache and was dressed in a summer uniform of light linen. He conversed briefly with Lieut. Brosky, a proceeding which Maurice gladly noted, and then the trial—if such it could be called, was formally begun.

The boys' suspense was augmented by the fact that all was conducted in Russian.

The first to be examined was Captain Stanisla, who spoke for ten or fifteen minutes, and from stray words understood here and there, Maurice knew that he was relating the circumstances of the fire.

At the close of his explanation he was subjected to a close cross-examination.

Lieutenant Brosky and the Cossack captain followed with brief addresses, and at this point the prosecution seemed to rest. The officers conferred briefly among themselves, and then, to the utter consternation of the boys, Grodno was called forward.

He advanced eagerly in spite of his wound, and started to speak in an excited voice.

He was speedily compelled to be silent, and to content himself with answering the questions that were put to him.

The interrogations were brief. and as the convict was led back to the pen he threw a glance of hateful triumph at the boys.

At that moment Maurice lost all hope, and the grave, severe faces of his judges seemed to confirm his belief. He made no attempt to speak, knowing only too well that it would be useless.

The officer in the white suit conferred with his companions, and then, rising to his feet, announced what was evidently the verdict of the court. Grodno gave a loud cry as the words fell from the officer's lips, and then the prisoners were hurried from the room. A few paces beyond the door they were met by Lieutenant Brosky, who whispered to Maurice as they passed hurriedly by. "You are all sentenced to be shot. Grodno has lied infamously. Don't despair yet. I will do what I can."

With these words ringing in their ears the boys staggered across the prison-yard, oblivious to everything around them, and sank down in the corner of the cell. The guards went silently away, and even Grodno's piteous wailings from the adjoining cell were unheeded and unheard.

Hours passed, and still they tossed in wretched misery on the hard pallet. Phil broke completely down and cried bitterly, while Maurice, brave lad that he was, could hardly repress his tears. He made no effort to encourage Phil by false hopes, for he knew how precarious was the aid that Lieutenant Brosky had promised. Death stared them in the face. If ever there was an example of the disastrous consequences of bad company, Maurice felt that this was one, and bitterly did he regret having had anything to do with the two convicts.

Grodno, out of revenge, had sworn that the boys were equally guilty with

himself, and now they must pay the penalty.

Supper was brought to them, but was left untouched, neither had any desire to eat. Engrossed in their own sad thoughts, they even paid little attention to each other, pacing the floor constantly and starting nervously at every strange sound from without. So the hours wore on and night came.

Grodno was silent, and the only sounds that broke the stillness were the heavy tread of soldiers and the occasional rattle of steel.

Condemned men are often said to sleep soundly the night before execution, and the boys were no exception. They fell asleep side by side, and only woke when the grey dawn was stealing in at the grated window. Outside were heard strange noises, a steady tramp of feet, a harsh rattle, and then a terrific discharge of firearms seemed to shake the building.

Frightened and amazed the boys rose to their feet. Footstep were heard in the corridor; they came nearer and nearer. The door creaked and opened, and Lieutenant Brosky entered, accompanied by two soldiers.

CHAPTER I

I have been fortunate,” he said, in a grave voice, “Grodno was shot outside of the stockade but a few moments ago, and the Turk will suffer the same fate as soon as he can be moved to Tomsk, but your sentence has been commuted, and you will go instead to the mines of Kara.”

“The mines of Kara,” exclaimed Maurice, blankly, and for the moment, as his mind reverted to what he had read and heard of that dread place, he felt half sorry that their lives had been spared.

Then came a revulsion of feeling, and he thanked the Lieutenant warmly for his intercession.

Phil, to whom the mines of Kara meant nothing, fairly broke down, and was profuse in his gratitude.

“I did no more than my duty,” said Lieutenant Brosky, coldly. “I believed your story, and stated my belief to the Governor of the Province. He was pleased to commute your punishment. Your original sentence, which I promised to ascertain for you, was ten years at the mines.

“That has now been increased to thirty years, so you can face the worst. Remember that what I have done for you is in return for your assistance when those two ruffians attacked me. Here our intercourse ends. It is not likely that we shall meet again.

As the lieutenant turned to leave the prison, Maurice, seeing his last chance slipping away, sprang forward imploringly, but the officer motioned him back, and in an instant the door had closed behind him. “We ought to be thankful that our lives have been saved,” said Phil, as Maurice threw himself face downward on the bed, and presently he asked, “Where are the mines of Kara, and what are they?”

“You will know when we reach there,” said Maurice. “They are gold mines that belong to the Czar, and are nearly two thousand miles from here. That’s all I care to say about them,” and in spite of Phil’s entreaties, Maurice firmly refused to talk any more about the mines of Kara.

They spent two days of gloom and hopelessness in the Tomsk prison, and at daybreak on the third morning they were rudely turned out into the enclosure, which was half-filled with wretched exiles waiting, apparently, for some event of importance.

The delay was brief. The large gates were thrown open, and between lines of armed soldiers, the convicts, answering to their names which were called out by an officer with a book in his hand, passed outside, each man receiving at the gate a sum of money equivalent to ten cents. On this they must subsist two days, as the Russian government allows its exiles but five cents a day while on the march.

The boys almost forgot their own troubles in the pitiful sights around them, for many of the prisoners were accompanied by wives and children.

The exile party was speedily made up. The extra clothes and baggage which many of the convicts possessed were piled up in waggons, and while this was going on pedlars and peasant women crowded freely in through the guards, with various kinds of food, which was bought up eagerly.

At last came the order to start, and the whole column was quickly in motion. A squad of Cossacks, in their handsome green uniforms, led off, and were followed by the disorderly throng of men, women, and children marching between three broken lines of soldiers. The infirm and the sick, and the very small children came next, riding in telegas—a species of rude waggon—and a sullen convoy of half a dozen Cossacks, guarding the baggage waggons, with their loads of grey bags, brought up the rear.

The boys turned once for a last look at Tomsk, already fast fading on the horizon, and then, with faces pale and stern, they marched away to the eastward, where thousands and thousands march every year—never to return.

The period of suffering and misery that began with the departure from Tomsk almost defies description. Day after day they trudged on, living on the scanty food that their meagre allowance was able to purchase, and sleeping at night in foul crowded exile station-houses which are built along the road at intervals of from thirteen to twenty miles.

Every third day they rested, and these halts the boys soon learned to regard with uncontrollable horror, for during the whole twenty-four hours they remained shut

up in the close, unhealthy station houses.

Thus spring passed into summer, and summer turned to autumn, and still the exile party pressed wearily forward, leaving many of their number at different points along the route.

There were times when the boys found it difficult to convince themselves that the past was not all a dream—that they had ever known a brighter, fairer country than this desolate Siberia, and then as there were occasions when the past became all too realistic and vivid, and the remembrance of their hopeless condition and of Vladimir Saradoff's crime sank into their hearts like heated iron.

The boys suffered much from the chilling rains and cold winds' came with the early autumn, and many a weary mile they marched with dripping garments flapping about their aching limbs.

It was on a crisp, cool September evening that Irkutsk was reached, and the sun was setting lightly on the white walls and golden domes of this powerful capital of Eastern Siberia, when the boys crossed the river on a pendulum ferry-boat and entered the streets of the city.

The party now numbers scarcely a hundred, many died on the way, and many had been left at different points on the route.

Those remaining were either political prisoners or belonged to most desperate grade of criminals.

To reach the prison, the party were compelled to cross a section of the city, and the boys were amazed to see the broad, well-paved streets, the imposing buildings, the shop windows filled with articles of luxury, and the well-dressed people who occupied the sidewalks.

"It seems like a dream," observed Maurice to his companion; I cannot believe that we are in Siberia. How like an American city this is, Phil, and how long it seems since we left home!" he added, sadly. Phil made no reply. He raised his sleeve and brushed away the tears which were rolling down his pale cheeks.

The mournful procession moved on rapidly, attracting but little attention from the people.

The central portion of the city was soon left behind. and they entered a more squalid neighbourhood with dark, narrow streets and gloomy, dingy houses. The sidewalks now appeared to be more crowded, and from the attitude of the people it seemed as though something unusual was going on.

Multitudes of peasants in red silk and black velvet trousers surged to and fro, singing and shouting either from excitement or intoxication, probably the latter, for at every street corner was a pedlar's still where the fiery vodka was being sold by the glass or the bottle.

"It's a holiday of some kind," whispered Maurice, "the shops are all closed, and the people are dressed up in their best."

At that moment the exiles were halted in a small square, surrounded by unusually squalid houses, and instantly an eager and curious crowd had hemmed them in. They were pressed against the soldiers, who tried in vain to drive them back on the sidewalk.

A commotion was now heard in front, and mingled with the shouts of the people the boys could distinguish rude music and a hollow beating of drums. An officer galloped along the line, shouting fiercely "Drive the scoundrels from the square! Force your way through with swords and bayonets."

The Cossacks made an immediate attempt to obey this order, for the column pushed forward a few yards only to come to a dead halt again between the surging crowds.

The boys were near the front of the column, and looking over the heads of their companions, they could see a golden image mounted on a pole, and strange-looking banners jammed in among the people. This is a religious festival of some kind," said Maurice, "and those stupid Cossacks have blundered right into it on their way to the prison."

From the crowding and pushing going on in front, it looked as though the mob were disputing the passage of the prisoners.

The outcry was loud and violent, and the commands of the officers with difficulty reached the ears of their men.

A close watch was kept on the convicts, and the soldiers threat ened with sword

and bayonet the excited mob who pressed against them.

Amid all this tumult the convicts maintained the same sullen demeanour, some gazing stupidly on the ground, others carelessly scanning the faces of the people.

Directly behind Maurice and Phil stood a middle-aged man, with a light beard and moustache. He had accompanied the party from Tomsk, and his name was Paul Platoff. This was all that the boys knew concerning him, for, although his refined appearance tempted them on more than one occasion to make his acquaintance, the recollection of their previous experience always checked them in the act. Turning half-round, Maurice saw that this Platoff was gazing into the crowd with an expression of intense excitement on his features. Had he recognized some friend or acquaintance among the people, or was he meditating a sudden escape, basing his hopes on the hostile attitude displayed towards the soldiers, and the murmurs of pity for the fettered convicts?

As these thoughts passed through Maurice's mind, the command to march was thundered out by the officer, and the head of the line began to straggle through the now sundered ranks of the procession.

As the men in front of him began to move, Maurice turned for another look at Platoff, and at that very instant the convict sprang from the line, wrenched the gun from the grasp of the nearest soldier, and swinging it savagely round his head, plunged in among the people, who made no effort to prevent his escape.

Quick as was this daring deed, it did not escape the guards, half a dozen Cossacks from as many different points along the line raised their rifles, and fired at Platoff's retreating form, ignoring the people entirely in their eagerness to arrest the fugitive. The scene that ensued terrified the boys. Cries of pain followed the rifle fire and as the smoke partially cleared, four motionless bodies were lying in the dirty road. Paul Platoff was not among them. He had vanished in the crowd. The sight of these innocent victims changed the hostile feeling of the people to a furore of madness.

A Russian mob is always merciless and cruel, always regards a soldier or a gendarme as a born enemy, and now with shouts of rage that were caught up and re-echoed from every corner of the square, the riotous peasantry closed in on the little group of exiles and soldiers.

For an instant swords and bayonets flashed, and the foremost of the rioters

perished by cold steel, but those behind pressed on more furiously than ever.

The situation became critical in the extreme. The troops, few in number as it was, were scattered along the lines, and being unable to concentrate, were wholly at the mercy of the mob. The tumult was deafening, and with the savage and frenzied yells of the rabble mingled the occasional crack of a rifle or a clash of steel.

Up in front the advance guard of Cossacks were making a brave stand, and the rear guard, too, were apparently holding their own; but along the straggled line the soldiers were going down one by one, and missiles of every description were falling thickly among the panic-stricken convicts.

Something round and black, with a smoking fire, fell at Maurice's feet.

"Back—back!" he cried, frantically clutching Phil by the shoulder, and as they turned to flee, a terrific explosion shook the ground and a red flash briefly lit up the scene of carnage.

CHAPTER X

The explosion of the bomb—for such it undoubtedly was—threw Maurice with stunning force to the ground, and when he staggered to his feet, dizzy and blinded, he believed at first that he was badly injured.

When the smoke and dust cleared partially, he forgot his own pain in the misery around him. Two or three of the convicts lay on the ground groaning piteously.

The bomb had done dreadful execution—and not among those for whom it was intended, for the guards had escaped the flying fragments of iron and glass.

Phil lay among the injured, his face and hair stained with blood. Maurice bent over him in alarm.

“Phil—Phil!” he cried, “speak to me, are you hurt?” Then, as no answer came, he seized the wounded boy in his arms and staggered backward with his burden.

The excitement had now reached the highest pitch. The mob, inflamed still more by the unintentional injury done the exiles, pressed forward against the few remaining soldiers. The whole square was jammed with the furious combatants. The Cossacks fought well—using bayonets and sabre with deadly effect, but against such desperate numbers their bravery was of no avail, and many of them fell under the volley of cobblestones, clubs, bricks, and what other missiles the rioters could lay their hands on.

The rapid approach of darkness made the scene still more dreadful, and as the prisoners realised their situation and saw the discomfiture of their guards, many of them broke from the lines and vanished in the crowd.

The intense excitement gave to Maurice almost superhuman strength, and Phil’s unconscious body seemed an easy burden, as he bore it tenderly into the centre of the line, where the chance of safety from the flying missiles was best. There he paused irresolutely for a moment. The sullen roar of the mob rang in his ears, an occasional red flash lit up the gloom, and the terror-stricken wretches around him were beginning to flee in all directions.

No attempt was made to check them. The few remaining soldiers were busily

engaged in fighting for their lives.

As Maurice still hesitated whether to remain where he was or to trust to the tender mercies of the mob, the situation changed with appalling suddenness. A terrific report echoed over the square—a report that was instantly succeeded by cries of fright and pain—the riotous mob, quick to recognise the crash of artillery, fell into hopeless panic and fled in confusion. Towards the four approaches of the square they surged, shouting, trampling each other under feet, and still the vengeful cannon sent its iron messengers tearing among them.

Retaining his presence of mind, and clinging to Phil with all his might, Maurice was swept into the thick of the struggle. Jostled, squeezed, and bruised, he was carried, without any effort of his own, foot by foot, across the square. Twice he stumbled, and gave himself up for lost, but the press lifted him to his feet again, and he held on to his burden with renewed hope.

Above the roar of the people he heard the whistle of rifle-balls, for it was evident that reinforcements had arrived, and were firing recklessly into the mob. The troops deemed bent on slaughtering as many of the rioters as possible, for the shooting became louder and more frequent, and men began to drop in all directions.

Twice Maurice shuddered when he felt something soft under foot. With every nerve strained to its utmost, he held his own against the pressure, expecting every moment to be riddled with bullets.

Suddenly his foot tripped on something hard, and taking a step upward, he felt the smooth pavement under him. At the same instant there was a stinging pain in his left arm, and his grasp on Phil relaxed. He knew he could go no further with his burden, and yet to remain where he was meant certain death.

To his right, a gloomy building loomed indistinctly out of the darkness. If he could only cross the sidewalk and reach that, he might find a place of refuge till the danger was past.

Summoning all his strength, and still grasping Phil with his wounded arm, in spite of the pain, he began to force his way at right angles through the mob.

It was almost a hopeless task, but he stuck to it, bravely pushing the people right and left with desperate strength.

The air was clouded with powder smoke, and the guns still pounded unceasingly.

Fierce as was the rush of the mob, Maurice fought his way clear across the sidewalk, and staggering feebly up a flight of stone steps dropped in a dead faint on the summit. The ping of bullets brought him to his senses, and he sat up to see Phil lying motionless at his side, and a man in convict garb leaning heavily against the door.

He turned to the boys, and Maurice recognised Paul Platoff. The fugitive's face was white with pain, and his right leg was bound with a crimson bandage torn from his overcoat.

"We are safe for the present," he said, in Russian, pointing to the high wooden canopy over the top of the steps. "Keep low, though, for a stray bullet might strike you."

Maurice nodded gratefully, and immediately stretched himself at full length on the topmost step. A glance upward showed him a high stone building. The windows were tightly closed with iron shutters, and the door was of heavy wood with brass trimmings.

Then he turned his attention to the street, and at once forgot Phil, Platoff, and his wounded arm in the scene beneath him.

The house where he had taken refuge was at the entrance to one of the exits from the square. By good fortune the majority of the rioters had turned in this direction. It had so happened that the troops approached the square from all three of the other entrances, leaving this one alone unguarded, and now the narrow passageway was fast chocking up with the fleeing fugitives, while a horde of cavalry rode at their heels sabring the wretched creatures as fast as they could use their weapons. The roar of artillery and the crack of rifles had almost ceased, but the shrieks of the wounded and the cries of the others made an indescribable tumult.

With a sad heart, Maurice watched the mass withdrawing foot by foot through the narrow street, while the tramp of hoofs and the glare of torches came closer and closer.

Platoff's commanding voice recalled him to his senses.

“Come,” he said, touching Maurice on the shoulder. “You are a brave lad. I watched your heroic struggle through the crowd. Let us try to escape. If we can gain access to this house till the square be cleared, I have friends who will care for us. I am wounded, or I would seek safety there,” and he pointed down at the struggling crowd. Most of this speech Maurice understood, for he had by this time acquired a fair knowledge of the language. He sat up gladly, and turned to Platoff for instructions. The Russian, however, was bending over Phil, and wiping the blood from the boy’s pallid face. “Your friend is not dead,” he said; “a fragment of bomb has grazed his head. He will be all right shortly.”

Reaching within his blouse he drew out a tiny flask, and put it to Phil’s lips. The effect was wonderful. The wounded lad opened his eyes and made an effort to sit up. Platoff propped him against the side of the doorway and turned to Maurice. “Look,” he said, “the Cossacks are coming nearer. Their torches will soon light up our hiding-place. If we would escape there is not a moment to lose.” Half-rising on his uninjured leg, he rattled fiercely at the door, and hammered the heavy panels with his fists.

“The cowards,” he cried, angrily, as no response came from within “They are afraid to open it. But we have still another chance. Force will conquer where persuasion fails.”

He dragged himself to the edge of the steps. The wooden canopy over the door was supported by heavy pillars, and seizing one of these, Platoff, with a desperate effort, wrenched it loose. Handing it to Maurice, he tore a second one from its socket for his own use, and turning to the door he dealt it a sturdy stroke with the heavy weapon.

“Strike, lad—strike!” he shouted to Maurice; “do your best!” and under the double rain of blows the door began to creak and tremble. Carried away by the possibility of escape, which Platoff offered, Maurice once more forgot all prudence, and with nerves wrought to the highest tension he banged away at the resisting barrier with furious energy. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the square was all ablaze with torches and alive with mounted Cossacks and swarms of infantry.

The insurrection had been quickly quelled, and the rear of the mob was fast struggling out through the narrow street, leaving countless dead behind them.

“Harder—harder!” commanded Platoff; “a few more strokes will do it, and then safety.”

As he spoke, a squad of Cossacks clattered down the street, striking right and left at the remnant of the fugitives, and along the sidewalk advanced a turbulent swarm of troops, seeking here and there for some object on which to vent their passion. A torch gleam flashed under the canopy, revealing the fugitives, and the maddened soldiers made a rush for the steps, firing recklessly into the air as they ran. In desperation, Platoff and Maurice redoubled their efforts. Crash! crash! rang the heavy pillars, and crack, crack! went the door on its hinges. The bullets pinged sharply round the daring refugees, and just as the foremost of the soldiers swept up the steps, with gleaming bayonets, the lock gave way before the fusillade, and the door swung inward.

“Inside for your life!” shouted Platoff, and seizing Phil in his powerful arms, he fairly threw him into the dark hallway, and pushed Maurice after him. Springing back to the edge of the steps he snatched the two heavy pillars and swinging them around his head, mowed down the advancing soldiers like ripened wheat.

With a spring he regained the hallway and slammed the door shut in the very face of a furious storm of bullets.

“I have your companion,” he shouted to Maurice; “follow me quick! They will be here in an instant.”

He led the way in the darkness, and Maurice followed closely along what seemed to be a vast corridor. Outside were heard furious cries and rifle-shots, and a clatter of feet. Then the door burst open, revealing a blaze of torches and a multitude of fierce faces.

“Down flat!” shouted Platoff; “they will fire over our heads.”

As they dropped to the floor, trembling in expectation of a volley of bullets, a door at the further end of the corridor opened, and a file of soldiers appeared, led by a young officer with drawn sword. A lamp was burning in the room behind them. For a moment a dire catastrophe impended.

The command to fire was on the officer’s lips, and the soldiers at the outer door already held their hands on the triggers. Caught between two fires, the fugitives devoutly hugged the floor, wishing themselves anywhere but in their present

predicament. The thrilling pause was broken by a Cossack officer, who forced his way up the steps and into the hall.

“Don’t shoot!” he cried to the men. What are you doing here? What does this mean—attacking his Majesty’s storehouse?”

Before a reply could be made, the officer at the further end of the hall cried, “In the name of the Czar, lay down your arms and surrender, or I fire!”

“Hold on—don’t shoot,” exclaimed the Cossack. “What is the meaning of this, you ruffians?” and he turned angrily to the men.

“It is not we who have broken in here,” half a dozen burst out, “it is some of the rioters; they have killed our men, and we demand vengeance.”

The young officer, who had been under the impression that the men at the door were part of the mob attacking the building, now advanced down the corridor with his file of soldiers, and seeing that the game was up, Platoff rose to his feet, crying loudly.

“Don’t shoot—don’t shoot. We are exiles—we do not belong to the mob.”

The soldiers at the door commenced to clamour for their lives but the Cossack officer drove them back from the entrance, and the other troops advancing down the corridor, seized Platoff and his companions.

CHAPTER XI

They were hurried through the corridor into a rear apartment, and the door was quickly closed. The danger was past, however, and the Cossack officer, after driving his men from the house, returned to claim his prisoners.

“Yes,” he said, “these are my men. This is Platoff, the fellow who caused all the disturbance,” and he glared threateningly at the Russian, who was sitting on the floor, nursing his wounded leg.

Then turning to the officer in command of the building, he added, “I shall have to leave these fellows in your charge overnight. I fear many of the convicts have escaped and we must lose no time in retaking them. We have taught your Irkutsk mob a lesson they won’t forget, and we are by no means done with them yet,” and coughing violently, he hurried away.

“Where are we?” asked Platoff of the officer who had arrested them; “what house is this?”

“You have assaulted and broken into the Czar’s storehouse of exile supplies,” was the stern reply, “and I am the officer in command of it.”

This announcement was a great surprise to Platoff. The fact that he had stormed, single-handed, a building held by the soldiers seemed to impress him from a ludicrous standpoint, for he turned towards the boys with a comical expression on his face.

Maurice was trembling in fear of the consequences of this rash act, and Phil was leaning against the wall, very pale and dazed.

A surgeon presently arrived, who dressed the bullet wound in Platoff’s leg, and then the prisoners were led away and placed in separate cells—large, dreary apartments, half filled with huge wooden chests.

Maurice spent a wretched night. He tossed from side to side trying in vain to sleep, and listening to the monotonous tread of the sentry.

At daybreak a file of mounted Cossacks came after the prisoners. Platoff, on

account of his wounded leg, was mounted on horseback, and the boys, heavily ironed, were placed between two columns of soldiers.

As they passed through the square, Maurice could with difficulty believe that it was the scene of last night's struggle.

The place was almost deserted; a few people stood at the street corners, and the shutters of the sombre grey houses were tightly closed, probably to hide the broken windows.

The forwarding prison was soon reached. It was a large, dilapidated building on the outskirts of the city. The boys were separated from Platoff, as soon as they entered the courtyard, and taken away to a large cell, where they were locked up together. Here they spent nearly two weeks of trying suspense, expecting any moment to be led out and shot for their participation in the riot.

The guards visited them daily, but it was impossible to obtain any information from them, and Maurice's entreaties to the commanding officer of the prison were unheeded. Then one cold, raw morning they were hurried through the courtyard in the early dawn. Outside, in the dreary street, an exile party was forming, and, before it was fully light, the long procession was winding over ***** ground towards the distant mines of Kara. That last stage of the journey was more dreadful than anything that had preceded it. Winter set in with arctic severity. and the wretched exiles toiled through snow and ice, shivering in their scanty garments, weak for want of nourishing food, and sleeping at night in road stations where every form of disease brooded in the vitiated air.

Many died, and some were left in wayside hospitals, but Maurice and Phil, fortunately, escaped serious illness, though they grew more emaciated day by day.

One slight consolation alleviated their misery. Paul Platoff journeyed at their side each day, and the strange acquaintance that began on the terrible night of the riot ripened into a deep and lasting friendship. The famous revolutionist, for such he was, possessed many traits which the boys admired. He was kind-hearted and sympathetic, and more than all, he readily believed the tale of crime and sorrow that they poured into his willing ear. Consolation, however, he could not give them. He explained the iniquities and the corruption of Russian justice with a vividness that made his hearers shudder, and he showed them how utterly

hopeless it would be to attack Vladimir Saradoff's intrenched position, even with abundant proofs of the dreadful crime. Of himself Platoff spoke little. He had been neither a terrorist nor an extremist, he said, but had merely laboured in behalf of social reforms.

On the flimsiest of evidence he was convicted and sentenced to Siberia for ten years.

He had been educated at the Moscow university, and was an educated and scholarly man.

These, and many other topics, he discussed with the boys at every opportunity on their long march; and in this way both Maurice and Phil acquired a fluent knowledge of the Russian language that permitted them to converse freely.

Platoff told them much about the mines of Kara, their rules and regulations.

"We are all three political prisoners," he said, "and we shall be treated as such. For some months we shall be kept in close confinement in the prisons. At the expiration of that time, if we behave ourselves in accordance with the rules, we shall be permitted to join the free command, and live outside the prison in cabins—subject, of course, to constant police supervision."

"But how about the mines?" asked Maurice; "shall we not be compelled to work in them?"

"No," replied Platoff; "only the ordinary criminals do that. Politicals never labour in the mines."

"And when once we are allowed to join this free command, and live outside the prison, what are our chances of escape?" continued Maurice. Platoff shrugged his shoulders.

"We won't discuss that," he said; "many escape every year, some striking westward, other down the valley of the Anner towards the Pacific, but all are eventually recaptured and are made to pay dearly for their brief period of liberty. Yet if a chance offered, I think I would take it. Time will tell whether I shall be compelled to serve out my sentence at the mines of Kara."

"How far from the mines is the Pacific Ocean?" inquired Phil.

“Less than a thousand miles,” was Platoff’s answer; “the Anner River leads right to Vladivostok, the Russian seaport.”

“And once at Vladivostok, what chance of liberty would there be?” asked Maurice, eagerly.

“In the harbour,” said Platoff, “there are constantly English, French, German, Spanish, and American vessels—and Russian corvettes,” he added, with a grim smile. The boys scarcely heard the last words. In imagination, they saw a noble vessel riding at anchor, with the dear old Stars and Stripes waving over her deck.

“March lively, now, do you hear!” cried a Cossack soldier, harshly, and with tear-dimmed eyes the boys quickened their steps, while Platoff trudged stolidly forward, buried in his own thoughts.

One thing they had overlooked: In the time that had elapsed since the riot at Irkutsk, and their assault on the Czar’s storehouse, they had come to believe that no further punishment would be inflicted upon them. Even Platoff, who should have known better, was lulled into a false security.

Everything must have an end, and so this apparently interminable sourness, this toiling over desolate Siberian wastes and frozen rivers, was finished at last, and one dreary afternoon in the month of January the mines of Kara burst upon the heart-sick exiles, and presently the command to halt ran up and down the line. In the thickly-fallen snow little could be seen; the dim outline of gloomy houses, groups of exiles moving to and fro, and squads of armed Cossacks in all directions.

For two hours or more, the newly arrived party were kept standing in ranks until their limbs were frost-bitten and the snow was heavy on their heads and shoulders. It was dark when the little column was ordered forward again.

A brief march brought them to a low, gloomy log building, and presently the prison doors were closed behind them, and the long march was ended.

The gold mines of Kara are the private property of his Imperial Majesty the Czar.

Through this Kara valley lies a scattered chain of prisons, mines, and convict settlements.

At the Lower Diggings centres the administration of the whole settlement. There resides the governor of the prisons, and there in barracks, dwell a military force sufficient to quell any insurrection that may arise.

Closely connected with the Lower Diggings lies Middle Kara, where the gloomy prison of the working convict force is located. There, in company with the ordinary and vicious criminals, Maurice and his companions had been placed, though the significance of the fact did not once occur to them.

The interior of the convict prison was gloomy and wretched beyond description. The floor and the walls were covered with the accumulated dirt of years, the narrow windows admitted through their dusty panes a meagre supply of light, and the atmosphere was vile and stifling. Long, slanting platforms of bare, unplanned boards served for sleeping purposes. A few benches were scattered about, but not half enough to accommodate the inmates of the prison.

Inside the doorway the newly-arrived exiles, not more than thirty in number, were halted, and an officer with a paper in his hand called out the names one by one, and checked them off as they were responded to.

The commandant of the prison, a tall, bearded officer with a harsh face, stood in close proximity to him, closely watching the proceedings.

When the last name had been called the officer rolled up the paper and handed it to the commandant, saying, "There now, Captain Daroman, my duty is done, and I will leave these fellows under your authority. Take good care of them, and don't give them too rich food, or they will all get dyspepsia.

The officer laughed at his own weak witticism, and passed out of the door, which one of the Cossacks held open for him.

The weary exiles made a motion to press forward into the room, but Captain Daroman waved them back with his hand.

Then in a hoarse voice he began to speak, briefly going over the prison rules, and reciting at length the severe punishment in store for anyone daring enough to break them. Maurice watched him closely, and read in the lines of that cold, stern face the evidence of a pitiless and malignant disposition.

Wretched indeed would existence be in that prison under the will of Captain

Daroman.

He ceased at last; and as he turned away, Paul Platoff stepped quickly forward.

“Captain Daroman,” he said. respectfully, “I am a political prisoner, and so also are these two men,” designating Maurice and Phil. “I should like to know why we have been brought here, instead of to the political prison at the Lower Diggings?”

CHAPTER XII

Captain Daroman wheeled like a flash, an ugly expression on his face.

“You mutinous dog!” he shouted. “Beginning already, are you? I’ll make an example of you for the benefit of the others!”

He turned towards his soldiers, apparently on the point of giving some orders, while Platoff’s face flushed crimson, and his hands quivered nervously.

However, Captain Daroman suddenly changed his mind, and he turned once more to Platoff, with a grim smile hovering on his lips.

“So you wish to know why you are here, do you? So this place is not good enough for you? You’ll find out before you get through, let me tell you. What’s your name? I can readily guess, though; you are Platoff, the revolutionist. Stand to one side, there, and let your two friends come forward, too. Birds of a feather must flock together.”

Maurice and Phil timidly advanced a few paces from the other prisoners and the commandant surveyed them with a lowering aspect.

“What are your names?” he asked, fiercely.

Maurice hesitated. To proclaim himself under the false title by which he had been arrested would be a tacit acknowledgment of the name, while to tell the truth would undoubtedly cause serious trouble, and excite Captain Daroman’s wrath to its fullest extent.

At this critical moment Platoff came to the rescue.

“Their names are Cunningham and Burton,” he said, respectfully. “They are but little acquainted with the Russian tongue.”

Maurice attempted to utter a feeble protest, but a glance from Platoff silenced him. The commandant scanned the paper he had in his hand.

“Platoff, Cunningham, Burton,” he muttered under his breath. then looking up keenly, he said “And so you think it is strange that you were not taken to the

political prison? Have you forgotten Irkutsk on the night of the twenty-second of September? Have you forgotten the riot, the slaughtered soldiers, the attack on the Czar's storehouse? Did you think to escape the penalty of those misdeeds? Justice does not sleep in Russia. You were tried and convicted without your knowledge. Sentence was given—you say you did not know it? Very well, I have the decree of sentence here. It is enough for you to know that you are condemned to work out your time at hard labour in the mines, instead of idling in a political prison. In me you will have no lenient taskmaster. I know how to deal with fellows like you. Now go, and be prepared in the morning to handle your picks in the Czar's gold-mines."

Captain Daroman turned haughtily away, and the crowd pressed forward, dragging Maurice and his companions with them.

Dazed by what they had just heard, they dropped mechanically on the wooden platform.

It was difficult at first to realise the full import of Captain Daroman's words.

The truth dawned on them gradually, and their own fate was brought more vividly to mind by the arrival of a convict party from the mines—a haggard group of men, soaked to the skin, who entered with a clanking of chains between a file of soldiers.

Toil and sleep ever the same without rest or change—such is life at the mines of Kara.

Platoff first fell into a paroxysm of anger, but it presently passed off, and he went calmly to sleep, an example which the boys, through sheer weariness, were forced to imitate.

Maurice awoke first. A faint streak of grey was shining through the dirty window, and as he sat up rubbing his eyes a drum began to beat, and the convicts around him left their hard beds without an instant's hesitation.

"Come," said Platoff, seizing Maurice by the shoulder, "delay will insure a speedy punishment."

Phil was up by this time, and they joined the crowd, who were dressing towards the door. A Cossack officer stood at the entrance, book in hand, and at once

proceeded with the morning verification. The men answered to their names as they were called out, and then scattered through the room.

A few moments later breakfast was served, consisting of weak tea and black rye bread, and, as soon as this was over, the working parties were made up for the day. Two gangs started from the prison, each surrounded by a squad of Cossacks. Maurice and Platoff were in one of these, and Phil was in the other. They marched past the few scattered log buildings that surrounded the prison, and tramped for an hour or more up the gloomy valley. The sky was dark with clouds, and a fine snow was falling. The mining operations on the Kara River had reached a point some distance from the settlement, thus forcing on the convicts the additional misery of a long tramp through the snow each morning and evening.

The gangs consisted of twenty men each, and as soon as they reached the spot work was begun. Each party was instructed by an officer, while the Cossacks, drawing a complete cordon around the convicts, built fires to keep themselves comfortable.

The gold-bearing sand along the banks of the Kara River lies buried under a stratum of clay and gravel varying in depth from ten to twenty feet. This is dug out by picks and carted away until the bed of sand is exposed, and the gold is washed out by rude hoppers. Under the watchful eyes of the overseer the men laboured unceasingly. It was a sad sight, the grim soldiers pacing through the drifting snow or grouped about the fires, the wretched toilers bending to their work with aching limbs, and in fitting harmony was the clank of chains, the creak of the wheelbarrows, and the monotonous tap of the picks. To Maurice this unaccustomed labour was especially severe. In a short time his back ached, and his hands were blistered. Platoff tried to encourage him from time to time, but he was compelled more than once to stop work from exhaustion. The overseer showed some leniency towards those convicts who had just arrived from Irkutsk, and these short periods of rest were not rebuked. At midday a lunch of tea and bread was served, and then the labour continued until late in the afternoon.

They marched back to the prison at sunset, so weary that every step was torture. The principal meal of the day was now served, consisting of weak soup, rye bread, and a small quantity of meat, and then the convicts went to sleep in rows on the bare platforms, some with their coats rolled up for pillows, other without pillows at all. To Maurice and Phil the first week at the mines was a

period of horror, and for the first time they began to realise the unutterable misery of their situation. Platoff, with whom they were still able to converse at night, gave them no hope, and indeed they could see for themselves how perilous an attempt to escape would prove under the circumstances. One poor fellow had made a dash for liberty while returning from the mines at sunset, and his bullet-riddled body was brought to the prison on a plank.

“Try to keep up your courage, and wait,” said Platoff; “that is all I can tell you. It may be that harder times are before us. Captain Daroman was summoned away the day after we arrived here. When he returns we shall feel the change. Do you wonder now that men turn against the Czar and his government?”

“No,” said Phil, with a bitter laugh, “I am surprised at nothing, Platoff, I am getting desperate myself. Some day I shall lose control and turn on these fiends.”

Platoff looked at the lad grimly, noting his flashing eyes, his heaving chest.

“You will be shot,” he said, quietly, and then to himself he added. “He’s a fine fellow, with good stuff in him; we might do something after all. I’ll have to look into the matter.”

Platoff was right. The next day Captain Daroman returned, and the predicted change came with a vengeance. The supply of daily food was shortened, all conversation was strictly forbidden, and the wretched toilers in the mines were refused a moment’s rest with the exception of a scant ten minutes for lunch.

For a time these hardships were borne without complaint, but it soon became evident that the commandant had a special hatred against the three political prisoners, and he lost no opportunity of displaying his feelings.

One bitterly cold morning the convicts were trudging in pairs over the snow-clad plains to their daily toil.

Maurice and Platoff marched in front, and close behind them was Phil, who had been transferred to their gang some time before. They had barely left the settlement, and were passing along the base of a hill part way up in which stood half a dozen straggling cabins.

“Some of the free command live there,” whispered Platoff, and Maurice looked with envy at the homes of the unfortunate people who were yet ten times better

off than himself.

Suddenly he saw to his great surprise a girl standing by the roadside a few yards ahead.

She was not more than sixteen, slender of figure, and dressed in a long fur cloak and cap. Her gaze was fixed compassionately on the approaching convicts, and Maurice's heart thrilled as he met a pitying glance from her dark eye."

The sight of this innocent young maiden in such a strange place reminded him irresistibly of home, and for a moment a mist swam before his eyes and he staggered against his companion.

"Who is that, Platoff?" he asked, in an undertone. "What can such a creature have to do with this miserable place?"

"She must belong to the free command, replied the Russian, "a daughter probably of one of the exiles. And yet she does not look it," he added, after a closer survey.

The convicts filed slowly past, and still the girl stood motionless as a statue her dark eyes looking unutterable sympathy at the doleful procession.

Near the end of the line came Captain Daroman, mounted on a Cossack pony. He frequently accompanied the working parties to the mines, to see how much gold was being washed out, and this was one of his inspection days.

Strange to say, he was in a passably good humour this morning, and his flushed face showed that he had been indulging rather heavily in vodka.

From under his fur cap he observed the girl by the roadside, and as the pony brought him opposite, he slipped out of the saddle, and stepped up to her before she had time to move.

"Well, my pretty maiden, have you a kiss for me this morning?" he asked, with a smile. As the startled girl recoiled, he threw his arms around her.

She uttered one loud cry, and struggled fiercely to free herself.

Maurice wheeled round and took in the situation at a glance. There was no help

for the girl. The convicts never even turned their heads, and the soldiers marched stolidly forward.

It was no business of theirs. She was only an exile's daughter.

One brief second Maurice stood thus, his eyes flashing, his hands clenched. Then loose from Platoff's detaining grasp, he bounded from the ranks. Two Cossacks ran forward, but he slipped easily between them, and springing at Captain Daroman, he seized him by the throat, tore him by main force from the struggling maid, and flung him with all his strength to the ground.

CHAPTER XIII

Cossacks and convicts alike were petrified at the lad's daring deed, and for a moment no one stirred.

Phil made a motion to follow his companion, but Platoff fiercely held him back. Then Captain Daroman staggered dizzily to his feet. He drew his sword and sprang with a savage cry at Maurice, who was standing calmly in front of the girl he had rescued.

The lad's fate seemed to be sealed, but just when the weapon was within a foot of his head, the captain stopped short, and cried, in a voice hoarse with passion: "No, no! my fine fellow, that's too merciful for you!" He sheathed his weapon, and turned to the soldiers:

"Bind him to that tree yonder," he shouted, "and shoot him instantly!"

The Cossacks sprang forward, and Maurice was speedily tied to a large tree that stood a few yards distant near the base of the hill.

The convicts huddled affrightedly together, and the girl, who seemed unable to comprehend the meaning of the scene, edged away from the spot, looking with unutterable terror at Captain Daroman.

The commandant gave several sharp, quick orders, and a dozen Cossacks advanced from the line. They dropped their rifle butts with a ringing clatter to the frozen ground, and then raised them to their shoulders.

Maurice, pale and trembling, faced the glaring muzzles.

He knew that in another moment the leaded volley would pierce his breast, and yet he faced the prospect with a calmness that surprised himself. All his past life was surging through his mind, but still he saw distinctly every detail of the scene before him, the awe-struck convicts, the agitated faces of Phil and Platoff, the firing squad of Cossacks, and the ferocious countenance of Captain Daroman.

"Why did they not fire?" he wondered, vaguely, and then he began to utter a silent prayer.

“Take aim!” shouted the commandant, and the twelve black muzzles centred together. Maurice closed his eyes with a shudder. A low sob burst from Phil, and Platoff ground his teeth.

“Fire!” was already trembling on Captain Daroman’s lips, when a startling interruption occurred.

The young girl sprang across the rifles, and threw herself in front of Maurice.

“I forbid you to shoot,” she exclaimed, facing the soldiers, “release this man or you shall all be punished; and you,” she added to Captain Daroman—“you shall pay dearly for this insult.”

“I forbid you to shoot.”

The commandant swore a fearful oath.

“Take her away!” he shouted to his men—“drag her to one side. and finish this dog here!”

Half a dozen Cossacks advanced towards the courageous girl, but she held her ground, and met them with flashing eyes. In another instant they would have seized her roughly, but just then a clatter of hoofs was heard, and a young Cossack officer, mounted on a black horse, galloped up to the party.

He surveyed the scene for a moment, then flinging the lines to a soldier, he leaped from the saddle and approached the girl, doffing his cap respectfully as he did so.

“Miss Lora,” he said, “your father the colonel has sent me in search of you. He feared you had strayed off and lost your way.”

A revolving bombshell could not have caused greater consternation than did the quiet speech of this young officer. The soldiers lowered their rifles instantly, the convicts began to whisper excitedly among themselves, and Captain Daroman’s face assumed an expression that none who saw it can ever forget.

“You have come just in time,” replied the maiden. “I have suffered insult at the hands of that man,” pointing to the trembling commandant, “and this convict here, who saved me from the wretch, was about to be shot for his noble deed.”

The officer turned sternly and inquiringly towards Captain Daroman, who now came unsteadily forward. "Sudekin, who is that girl?" he asked in a husky voice. "I thought she belonged to the free command yonder."

"She is the daughter of Colonel Melikoff, the governor of the mines," replied the officer, "she went out for a walk this morning, and wandered up here from the Lower Diggings. I was sent in search of her. It looks as though you were in a pretty bad scrape this time, Daroman."

The commandant grew still paler. "But tell me," he whispered, "can nothing be done to smooth matters over? Why, I didn't even know that Colonel Melikoff had a daughter."

"She just came on a visit from Irkutsk," replied Sudekin, coldly. "Everything rests with *her*, Daroman; don't talk to *me*."

The commandant hesitated a second or two, and then in a cringing manner that must have been bitter as gall to his proud spirit, approached the girl.

"Miss Melikoff," he began humbly; but at the first word she indignantly moved to one side.

"Before you dare speak to me," she said, angrily, "release that brave man there."

The commandant gave the necessary orders, and then, while the soldiers were unbinding Maurice, he made an abject apology, and in the most piteous tones begged that his offence might be overlooked and kept from reaching her father.

It was a strange scene, the savage Captain Daroman suing for mercy in the presence of his own soldiers and of the convicts who had felt so often his iron rule.

The girl listened calmly to his appeal, and, when he had finished she walked proudly away like an offended princess, not deigning to give him so much as a glance.

"Take me home, Lieutenant Sudekin," she said; "I have heard quite enough."

The lieutenant pointed across the plain. "A sleigh was ordered to follow me," he replied. "I see it coming now." The conveyance quickly reached the spot with a

merry ringing of bells.

Miss Lora darted a grateful glance at Maurice and stepped in among the furs. The driver whipped up the horses, and the sleigh sped rapidly off, attended closely by Lieutenant Sudekin on his black charger.

Captain Daroman watched until it was dim in the distance. Then turning on Maurice one glance so venomous and malignant that the lad shuddered, he put spurs to his pony and galloped off without a word.

“Get in line there,” cried the sub-officer, harshly. The convicts instantly obeyed, the Cossacks surrounded them with shouldered rifles, and the interrupted march was resumed as calmly and monotonously as though the event had never occurred.

Maurice, assisted by his two companions, staggered forward with the utmost difficulty. He was suffering from a violent reaction. He had bravely attacked the commandant and faced the certainty of death without a tremor, but the sudden restoration to hope was too much for him.

The officer in command perceived his enfeebled condition, and feeling doubtful as to the bearing which the recent incident would have on the young convict, he wisely concluded to be on the safe side and act with leniency.

He gave Maurice a few drops of vodka from his own flask, and mounted him on a pony until the mines were reached. This treatment was speedily effective, and Maurice was able to work as usual with his fellow-prisoners, for the officer refused to extend his leniency any further. He was kept rigorously apart from Phil and Platoff, however, and put to work some distance away.

The rest of the day was not destined to pass uneventfully. During the noon period of rest an ominous incident occurred, and one from which Maurice drew an inference favourable to himself. Twenty mounted Cossacks rode up to the mines, headed by a middle-aged officer with dignified bearing, who sternly asked for Captain Daroman.

When told that the commandant had not accompanied the convicts to the mines, he appeared much concerned, and presently the whole party rode away at full speed.

Trudging home at sunset, three different squads of soldiers were encountered, and on reaching the settlement suppressed excitement was visible on the faces of all whom they met. Within the prison much whispering was going on among the convicts, and the new arrivals were speedily acquainted with a dozen different versions of what was indeed a startling tale.

The facts of the case, as gleaned from these different stories, which had entered the prison in some unaccountable manner, appeared to be as follows.

Captain Daroman, on leaving the convict gang that morning, had returned in haste to the prison, changed his clothes in his own apartment, armed himself heavily, and then galloped away on a fresh horse, in what direction none observed.

Shortly after his departure a troop of soldiers arrived from the Lower Diggings with a warrant for his arrest. It was no secret that the commandant had sought safety in flight, and now half the force in barracks was scouring the country in pursuit.

Maurice was jubilant, as he sat on the bare platform, eating his frugal supper, with Phil and Platoff by his side. Their fellow-convicts had been crowding about them, eagerly discussing the momentous affair, and now at last they were comparatively by themselves

“And how do you think this will affect us Platoff?” asked Maurice. “Will it lighten my sentence, or is it even possible that I shall obtain a fair hearing from the governor, and be permitted to tell him our story? I feel sure that I should convince him of the truth.”

Platoff gravely shook his head.

“Don’t be too hopeful, my friend,” he replied. “There are complications in this affair that you are unable to see. To me, with my knowledge and experience, they are only too plain. You have performed a brave deed, it is true, and protected from insult the daughter of Colonel Melikoff; but, at the same time, you have broken the severest of prison rules and committed a flagrant crime, for which the penalty is death.”

“And would not the one offset the other?” demanded Maurice, with indignation. “Would the circumstances count for nothing?”

“Colonel Melikoff is known as the most stern and rigid disciplinarian in all Siberia,” answered Platoff, soberly. “I fear that he may insist on making your case an example to the other prisoners. You assaulted an officer—an unpardonable crime.”

“Yes, and saved his daughter,” assented Maurice, hotly. “Can he overlook *that*?”

“He can overlook *anything*,” said Platoff grimly. “Listen, I can tell you what kind of a man Colonel Melikoff is in a few words. Do you remember in one of Victor Hugo’s romances the gunner who allowed a huge cannon to tear loose from its fastenings on shipboard during a storm, and then, after a terrific combat, in which his life was jeopardised a hundred times, overturned the monster and saved his comrades?”

“Yes, I have read that,” said Maurice.

“Very well,” resumed Platoff, “the commander of that vessel first rewarded that man for his bravery, then shot him for his negligence Colonel Melikoff is a second Marquis de Lautenac.”

“But you don’t think I’m in any danger of being shot?” asked Maurice, in a horrified whisper.

“No,” said Platoff, “it’s not quite so bad. You may know all to-morrow, and then it is possible that I shall have something to say to you.”

Platoff refused to explain himself any further, and presently, in spite of his troubles, Maurice was sleeping soundly.

The morning verification was presided over by Lieutenant Sudekin, who it seemed had been appointed temporary commandant of the prison. Before starting for the mines, it was whispered among the convicts that Captain Daroman had not been caught, and this rumour was presently verified, for the working gangs started out that morning in custody of less than half the usual guard of Cossacks, and the cordon of troops around the prison was correspondingly small. It was soon evident that the new commandant had no intention of dealing more leniently with the convicts than his predecessor. All that day the boys toiled hard under the watchful eyes of the overseers, and not the slightest conversation was allowed.

Two or three days passed thus, and still Maurice heard nothing from Colonel Melikoff, nor was the fugitive commandant recaptured.

“He’s sure to be caught, sooner or later,” said Platoff; “It’s only a question of time.”

On the fifth day, however, many of the absent troops returned, and it began to look as though Captain Daroman had made good his escape, for the time at least.

“They have forgotten me,” said Maurice, one night, as he sat on his hard bed, thinking of the pretty dark-eyed girl who had passed like a vision across the wretched monotony of his life; “she believes me to be some low criminal, no doubt,” he added bitterly to himself.

“No,” said Platoff, glancing up from the cup of tea he was drinking; “be assured Colonel Melikoff has not forgotten you. He never overlooks a crime against the rules and discipline of the prison, as you will know before long.”

A week passed by—a week of heart-sickening toil and misery—and then Platoff’s prediction came true, though not just in the way he had anticipated.

CHAPTER XIV

It was bitterly cold, and the snow was falling thickly, but weather counts for nothing at the mines of Kara, and the convicts shivering in their thin garments worked with feverish energy, hoping to put some warmth into their aching limbs and bodies.

Phil and Platoff were driving their picks, into the hard stratum of clay and gravel, and Maurice in company with half a dozen others was wheeling the stiffened clods to a distance. Close by stood the watchful overseers, stamping their feet continually, and clapping their arms together, while in the background, out of the snowy mist, loomed the soldiers, pacing to and fro in their heavy coats, or grouped about the feeble fires, where the tea was warming for the noonday lunch.

With increasing regularity, the long string of wheelbarrows continued to load and unload, and when midday came, the weary toilers with the picks had uncovered a large surface of smooth and yellow sand.

The overseer came forward, and looked at it with evident satisfaction. "That is good work," he said, briefly; "to-day you may have thirty minutes' rest."

Some of the convicts cheered, and flung 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 stones and clods of earth, the hungry men began to devour greedily the black bread and tea served out to them.

The Cossacks stacked their arms, with the exception of two or three sentinels, 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 brow of a rocky hill sloped to the river. It was barren and strewn with boulders and half a dozen stunted birches. A few feet below the crest a spring of icy water poured out, and after 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 towards 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 towards 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 careless, 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 Melikoff,” 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, though it is almost hopeless. 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 Anner.

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 that your actions do 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. Heed 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 already hidden clothes and money. 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 him, a degraded convict, wearing the prison stripes, and this aristocratic young Russian, the daughter of famous Colonel Melikoff.

"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 those 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 sympathise 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 Melikoff, 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 shall never see you again, but I shall pray for your escape. Good-bye."

“Good-bye,” 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 brains a vision of far-off America and friends he had never expected to see again, and 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 honoured 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 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 the 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

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 kamera, 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 kamera 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 Melikoff’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 a thousand miles to the north of Kara,” replied Platoff, grimly, “inhabited by a barbarous, half-civilised 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 of 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 Anner, 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 coolness 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 girls says:

““The prison lies in a large courtyard, enclosed 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 avenue 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.

“That disposes 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 shall be inspected. To-morrow 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 dreaded ordeal, but 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.

Platoff rapidly and cleverly applied the chloroform to three of the sleeping men, and then turned to the fourth, a tall, repulsive ruffian by the name of Jocka, who was lying on his side with his arms over his face.

The saturated rag 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, waited 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 scoundrel 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 realised a moment later, for Platoff's muscular arm 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 platforms and at his bidding he 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 lamp-light. "If they discover us now, we shall 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 uniform and gun. Do you understand now?"

CHAPTER XVI

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? It's 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 is with you."

These words roused Maurice from his stupor. He alone could retrieve 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, high boots, and the low cap.

"Now," he whispered, "take the gun and go out into the corridor. Bolt the cell-door, and pace slowly up and down. Keep your face away from the lamp-light when the officer of the guard comes past; he may say nothing 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 realised 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 forty feet long by ten in width. Six doors open upon it, three on each side, and at the 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 corridors, and once from the main portion of the prison came the 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 in learning of his escape he forgot the ordeal in store for him. The 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 the angle, a young lieutenant with dangling sword, and a pair of eyeglasses 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 efforts 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. The next word reassured him.

“Russo,” said the other, “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 plunged 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 halfway up the corridor. A moment later, and he had vanished round 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 through his interview, 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 caution had been overlooked, and then, dropping 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 deep, 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 gain 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 round 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 shall 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 peep. “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. He 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 overhead 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 turned 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 plied 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 further-reaching weapon, announced that the log was loose. He prized 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 long. Outside was revealed the thickly-falling snow and the grey outlines of the palisade.

“The coast is clear,” said Platoff, after a brief survey. “The glare from the fires is visible at each end of the passage, but I don’t think there is much danger of being disturbed. I don’t intend to run any risks, though, so you two will remain inside till all is ready.”

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

It was harder work than he had expected. 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

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Platoff, “was I not 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 stockade we may be seen by the men on guard in the sentry-house 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, just around the angles were twenty or thirty 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 some twenty yards distant.

“The sentry,” he whispered; “his back is turned. We must drop together and run. Don’t lose sight of me.”

At this moment, when the danger was most critical, a startling interruption came from the prison-yard. Round the front angle strode a sentinel, rifle on shoulder. He marched down the avenue beneath the very noses of the frightened fugitives staring straight ahead under the visor of his cap. He failed to see the log

projecting from the stockade, and catching his foot on the end, down he went with a crash full length on the ground.

“Jump quick!” whispered Platoff, and all three sprang from the stockade together, landing heavily on the snowy crust below.

“Don’t rise,” said Platoff; “follow me on hands and knees.” He crawled away into the darkness at a speed which the boys found difficult to equal, glancing to their right, they saw the sentry still motionless at his post; whether he was facing them or not, it was impossible to tell. Foot by foot they left the stockade behind, and still the silence was unbroken. Then on the night air rose a single loud cry. It was answered by a shout, and then another and another boom thundered the little cannon in the courtyard, and the echoes quivered through the valley

Platoff leaped to his feet. “The alarm gun,” he exclaimed. “The whole settlement knows we are free. Run as you never ran before, and keep me always in sight.”

With great strides he plunged forward over the snow. Close at his heels came Maurice and Phil, amazed at their own speed. The sentry, catching a fleeting glimpse of the fugitives, raised his rifle and fired. The bullet whistled overhead. He fired again and again, shooting aimlessly into the night.

Six times the rifle cracked, and the red flash blazed briefly athwart the darkness. Then came silence—an ominous, fateful calm, and the daring fugitives fleeing across the valley heard nothing but the rapid tramp of their own footsteps. In single file they sped over the deepening snow, facing the cutting blast and breathing quickly through closed teeth.

Platoff ran at the head, every muscle strained, his ear alert to catch the faintest sound. From time to time he uttered cheering words to his companions.

Before them and on both sides was darkness, but looking over their shoulders, they saw the twinkling lights of the prison still perilously close at hand.

Twice Maurice stumbled, exhausted by the fearful strain, but Platoff dragged him to his feet with new encouragement.

Then Phil gave out almost entirely, and his companions had to help him along between them.

“You must keep up,” said Platoff, impatiently. “See, we are on the downward slope now. The river is not far off. Once there, we are comparatively safe.”

“Listen! what is that?” cried Maurice, and as he spoke, a dull noise was heard in the distance that seemed to grow more distinct every second. Platoff threw himself upon his knees, and put his ear to the ground. “As I thought,” he exclaimed. “the mounted Cossacks are coming. They will spread in all directions, and carry on the search in squads of three and four. Now is the time to show your speed. Here, give me a hand, each of you.”

He dashed off again, fairly dragging his companions with him. Faster and faster they ran, louder and louder grew the trampling of hoofs in their rear, and then, with a sudden effort, they checked themselves on the bank of the Kara.

“He we are!” exclaimed Platoff, fervently; “there is one important thing in our favour. The direction in which we must go is the very last one that will be suspected. But it will be a very terrible ordeal, and full of suffering. Can you endure it, do you think?”

“What do you mean?” asked Maurice, not quite catching his meaning.

“The water,” was the reply—“the icy channel of the river. We must wade for several miles. It is our last and only hope.”

Little wonder that the boys recoiled at this prospect. They were suffering intensely now from the bitter cold. Platoff gave them no time for deliberation.

He plunged sturdily off the bank into the running waters and they followed without hesitation. The Kara River is a river only in name. The channel is shallow and not more than thirty yards broad at the widest part. The water flows swiftly over a gravel bed and among big stones that rise in profusion above the surface. Being fed entire[ly] by mountain springs it never freezes in winter, though a fringe of ice forms on the edges and floating cakes are borne down with the current. The fugitives waded into mid-stream through water waist-deep.

“We must throw these bloodhounds off the track,” said Platoff, “and I think I know how to do it.”

He led the way across to the other shore, and climbed out on the bank.

“Now come with me,” he said to Maurice. “No, you stay here, right on this rock,” he added to Phil, who started to follow, “two of us will be enough.”

He dashed off at right angles to the stream, and halted thirty or forty yards from the bank. Then still facing forward, he began to take great strides backwards towards the river, bidding Maurice do the same.

“It will appear as though there were four of us,” he remarked, “but no one will notice that.”

“But what will they do when they come to the end of our tracks?” asked Maurice.

“They won’t wait that long,” laughed Platoff. “If they discover that we have crossed the river at this point, they will dash off at full speed without attempting to stick to our footprints.”

They soon reached the water again, much to Phil’s relief, who could not imagine what they were trying to do.

The mounted pursuers were alarmingly close to the river by this time, and without a second’s delay Platoff started up the channel, followed closely by the boys. Their sufferings were almost forgotten in the fear of recapture. They pressed forward over the slippery stones, waist-deep at times, but mostly barely knee-deep.

It was snowing so fast and thickly that only the merest outlines of the shores could be seen.

As Platoff had predicted, the tramp of the horses now seemed to come from various directions, as though the troopers were spreading over the plain.

A stray light was visible here and there, and occasionally the cannon boomed above the noise of the water, spreading further and further the news of the escape.

Before the first of the horsemen reached the river the fugitives were some distance up stream, and it was impossible to tell whether their tracks were discovered or not. At times the sounds of the pursuit seemed to die out in the distance, only to return closer than before. Beyond a doubt the Cossacks were on

both sides of the stream, and the general location of the fugitives seemed to be suspected, for the horsemen could be heard galloping to and fro within a limited space.

The darkness of the night and the driving snowstorm placed the odds against the pursuers.

“They will never think of looking for us in the water,” remarked Platoff, “we are safe here if we can only hold out.”

That was a formidable “if,” however, and the sufferings which the boys endured that night they will never forget. Toiling painfully from rock to rock they crept up stream through the icy current. At first the pain was agonising, but presently their limbs were benumbed and weak, and they found it difficult to move. sometimes they crept out on big rocks, and stamped up and down, or rubbed their legs with their aching hands until they were able to proceed again. Several times mounted soldiers passed close by along the shore, and the fugitives bent low among the stones until the danger was over. Not a murmur escaped Platoff’s lips.

He went resolutely forward, seeking out the easiest channel and showing the boys the way. The force of his example helped them to endure their sufferings with comparative fortitude. For two hours they marched up the bed of the river, stopping for short intervals of rest. The immediate danger seemed to be past. Occasional sounds of pursuit still floated up the valley, but no horsemen had approached for a long time, and the lights of the prison had long since vanished.

It was a joyful moment when Platoff announced that the mines were close at hand, and his prediction was verified ten minutes later when the sharp ridge of the hill appeared before them. They scrambled out of the water and started in single file up the slope past the very spot where Lora Melikoff had been hidden during the eventful interview. The snow was knee-deep, but had ceased falling. On the top of the ridge Platoff halted and pointed to the distant lights of the settlement three miles away. “I have entered that prison for the last time,” he said, impressively. “and done my last day’s work in yonder mines. I will never be taken back alive.”

He was silent for a moment, and then, in a more cheerful tone, he resumed. “But it is time to seek the cave. We must journey two miles along this ridge.”

“Won’t our tracks in the snow be discovered?” asked Maurice, as they started briskly off.

“It will soon snow again,” answered Platoff, and fill up our tracks beyond all discovery. Between now and then it is not likely that any of our pursuers will visit the mines.

The truth of this statement was readily apparent, and the boys followed their leader with lighter hearts than they had known for many months, walking rapidly to restore the circulation to their benumbed limbs. The way was rough and stony, but Platoff pressed on without stopping, and finally paused by the side of a huge rock.

“Yonder are the pine-trees,” he said, pointing ahead: “it must be the place, for I have noted the spot while marching to the mines, and they are the only trees on this ridge.”

CHAPTER XVIII

The party pressed eagerly forward, and were soon standing in the shadow of the pines. The trees were indeed seven in number, all of mammoth size, and growing close together on the very verge of the cliff. Huge rocks were scattered about in all directions.

“Now for the cave!” said Platoff, as he began to go over the ground enclosed by the seven trees, inspecting every stone and peering into each cranny. The boys joined in the search, but in spite of their efforts the location of the cave remained undiscovered. With nervous haste they went over the ground again and again, afraid to confess their own fears.

Finally Maurice crept to the verge of the cliff, and looked down. The rock had a sheer descent for a distance of forty or fifty feet. At its base the hill sloped more gradually towards the valley. Four feet below the edge was a narrow platform on which grew a few scrubby pine-shoots.

Impelled by a singular impulse, Maurice cautiously lowered himself to this ledge, and stooping low, was confronted by a hole of impenetrable blackness.

“The cave!—the cave!” he cried, and Platoff and Phil were quickly at his side. Together they crawled into the opening which led downward at a sharp angle. The passage became wider and higher, and in a short time they reached a level space.

“I have found something,” exclaimed Platoff, who was ahead. “Clothes, firearms—yes, and matches,” he added, joyously—“a tin box of matches.”

The boys heard something rattle, and then their eyes were blinded by a bright light. They were able to see clearly in a moment, and the sight that met their gaze was a strange one. They were standing in a circular cavern, twenty feet in diameter, and six feet or more in height. The floor and walls were dry, and the atmosphere was warm and pleasant.

“Here are the things which that brave girl has provided,” said Platoff, pointing to a heap on the floor. “She has overlooked nothing—there are even candles,” and taking one from a box, he lit it with the burning match, and placed it in a crevice

on the floor. With trembling hands they turned over the articles, uttering cries of delight at every new discovery.

There were three complete outfits of clothes—coarse, heavy garments such as are worn by Russian peasants, including trousers, flannel shirts, and thick, warm coats. In a canvas hag were two silver mounted revolvers, with accompanying boxes of shells, and a sharp knife in a sheath, while another and larger bag contained a supply of provisions—bread, tea, and dried meat, enough for two weeks at least, Platoff declared.

In addition there were a dozen candles, while it remained for Maurice to make the most important find of all, in Platoff's estimation—a leathern belt which proved to contain one hundred rubles in silver.

“With that money,” asserted the Russian, “we can purchase food along the way, and we shall be regarded with less suspicion. Everything is now in our favour. I believe that we can reach Vladivostok in safety. Heaven bless that noble girl!” Platoff broke off abruptly and covering his face with his hands, sank to the floor, overcome with emotion.

The boys, too, lost all control of their feelings. Phil sobbed aloud, and Maurice, with an overflowing heart, knelt on the rocks and uttered a grateful prayer.

At last Platoff rose to his feet, and dashed the moisture from his eyes.

“We had better change our clothed he said, “or we shall be ill from that long journey in the waters. This suggestion was welcomed, and the boys flung off their wet garments with all haste. Their new attire proved to be an excellent fit—so much so, indeed, that Platoff's curiosity was aroused.

“If that girl knew nothing of your companions,” he observed shrewdly, “how did she choose such suitable garments?”

“She probably had seen both Phil and me,” replied Maurice, with a smile, “and knowing that my third companion was to be a Russian, she naturally procured a larger set of clothes. You Russians are a big race, you see.”

“Yes, yes—that's it,” remarked Platoff, well satisfied with the explanation.

How the brave maiden had succeeded in getting the things and conveying them

to the cavern was a problem none could clearly understand. It had undoubtedly been accomplished with considerable risk to herself, with help from other arms. From that moment Maurice felt that, in spite of his unjust treatment, he would always have a soft spot in his heart for a nation that could produce such specimens of young womanhood.

Sleep was impossible under the circumstances, and all remained awake until a faint grey streak shining into the cavern announced the approach of dawn. Platoff crept to the entrance to make a reconnoissance.

“All is well,” he declared, on his return. “Our hiding-place is perfectly safe. The pine-scrubs on the ledge hide it completely. It is snowing hard, and our footprints have been destroyed long ago. And besides,” he added, “they would never search for us here. It is even probable that, when they fail to discover us, they will believe we have perished under the snow, and will abandon the pursuit. We will remain here for a week at least, probably two weeks. Then it will be safe to start.”

“What kind of country must we travel through?” asked Maurice, [“i]s it wild?”

“Yes,” said Platoff, “the valley of the Anner is wild and desolate. The post-road follows the river, of course, with stations at long intervals, but we must avoid that. There are wolves and deer in the hills and fish in the river, while in the vicinity of Vladivostok fierce tigers are said to abound. But with our arms we need have little cause for fear.”

Platoff spoke more fully concerning the valley of the Anner, answering the boys’ questions with a readiness that proved him to be acquainted with the general nature of the country.

At last, after a hearty meal, they went to sleep with a feeling of absolute security.

When they awoke, it was apparently late in the afternoon. It was still snowing, and so thickly that from the mouth of the cavern it was impossible to see any distance into the valley.

For several days this storm continued, and the fugitives felt thankful indeed for their secure refuge. The time passed monotonously it is true, but they had plenty to eat and were comfortably warm. Melted snow supplied them with water.

On the fourth day the weather changed, becoming clear and cold. From the ledge it was possible to see across the valley to the settlement. The prison and many of the houses were in plain view, but at such a distance all seemed peaceful and serene.

Late that afternoon, before the sun went down, Platoff pointed to two dark spots approaching the prison from different directions.

“They are mounted Cossacks returning from the search,” he said, confidently; “it will soon be safe for us to leave.”

“But will they give up the search entirely?” inquired Phil.

“Yes, so far as concerns the soldiers in garrison at the mines,” answered Platoff. “Of course our escape with full descriptions has been telegraphed all over Siberia, and at every village and posting station they will be on the lookout for us, but we will keep away from all such dangerous places, trust me for that.”

The change in Platoff during the last few days had been marvelous. He actually seemed to have grown taller, and the weary hopeless expression had departed from his face, leaving it bright and sparkling with animation. His taciturn, moody disposition was gone, and he beguiled the weary hours spent in the cavern with tales and incidents that were absorbingly interesting to the boys. Thus the time went swiftly by, and they woke on the sixth morning to find the air mild and damp, and a drizzling rain coming down steadily.

“This puts an end to all pursuit that may be going on,” said Platoff; “it is impossible for horsemen to travel through the slushy snow. To-day we will spend in preparing for the start.”

“But how can we travel better than horses in such weather?” asked Maurice.

“Wait till to-morrow,” said Platoff, knowingly; there may be a chance.”

The Russian’s prediction was still unfulfilled when evening came, but some time during the night Maurice woke and sat up shivering. Outside he heard the wind roaring, and a cold air was drifting down the cavern mouth. Wrapping some of the abandoned clothes about him he fell asleep again. Then he began to dream. He was riding on horseback over a snowy plain that stretched far in the distance. By his side, mounted on a black horse, was Lora Melikoff, her dark hair

streaming in the wind, her cheeks aglow with excitement. A steady tramp, tramp! was ringing in his ears—the din of pursuing Cossacks—and ever and anon rifles cracked sharply and the whistling bullets hissed overhead. But suddenly the plain vanished and a great black gulf was before them. Faster and faster sped the horses; still closer came the awful chasm; and now they were treading on the brink. Crash! crash! They toppled over the edge— Then came a ringing voice in his ear and a hand on his shoulder.

“Come, get up. The morning has come and the rain is over.”

Maurice sat erect, rubbing his eyes with his fists.

“Lora—where is Lora?” he asked.

“Ah, you have been dreaming,” said Platoff, with a merry laugh. “Come out to the ledge. Did I not predict a change in the weather? Well, it is already here, and to-night we may bid farewell to our cavern.”

He led the boys to the opening, and the first touch of the cold, piercing air made them shiver. A cry of astonishment burst from their lips. The sky was intensely blue and clear, and in the sunlight, as far as the eye could reach, hillside, valley, and plain sparkled like myriads of diamonds.

“The cold is intense,” remarked Platoff, but it has done us good service. An icy crust has formed on the snow overnight that will bear us. At the same time it is not strong enough for horsemen. Our opportunity for escape could not be better. At sunset we shall be off—off for Vladivostok and freedom.”

The brave Russian’s voice shook with emotion, and a tear trickled down his cheeks. Brief as that day really was, it seemed an eternity to the impatient fugitives. The provisions—of which a considerable supply remained—were divided into packages, one for each man.

Platoff took one of the revolvers and the belt of rubles, giving the other revolver to Maurice and the knife to Phil.

The Cossack uniform and the prison clothes which might have done good service in case of cold or wet they were compelled to leave in the cavern. To take them along would have imperilled safety and afforded sure means of identification. All day long Platoff lay at the cavern mouth watching the valley.

Not a creature came that way. and when the setting sun was succeeded by a misty twilight he gave the word to start.

Slowly and deliberately they climbed down the ledge to the top of the hill, and standing in the shadow of the seven pine-trees, glanced back at the darkening valley with its dread associations.

“Forward!” cried Platoff, and turning to the south-east, they crossed the ridge, and went with cautious step down the slope beyond.

Alternately sliding and crawling they gained the valley and travelled for an hour or more over the frozen crust. Then a hill loomed darkly before them, and an hour later they reached its crest, weary and footsore.

“There,” exclaimed Platoff, with a wave of the hand, “behold the valley of the Anner,” and glancing down the long, frozen slopes, the boys saw vaguely and dimly the great water highway that flows to the far Pacific, now chafing and fretting under its icy fetters.

For some minutes they stood thus, strangely fascinated by the splendour of the night.

Then the impressive silence was disturbed by a sharp cry from Platoff—a cry that echoed swiftly down the valley from peak peak, as though giants were signalling each other.

CHAPTER XIX

Platoff's outcry gave the boys a severe fright. When they turned round, the Russian was striding towards a dark object a few yards away.

"It was a foolish thing to shout so loudly," he said. "I forgot the echo. It was done before I had time to think. But see, I have made a fortunate discovery."

Hurrying to the spot, the boys were surprised to find half a dozen wheel barrows deeply imbedded in the snow.

"A year ago, or more, mining operations were begun beyond this ridge," said Platoff, "so one of the convicts informed me. These wheelbarrows were either forgotten or purposely abandoned. and now they will do us a good turn."

"In what way," asked Maurice.

For answer Platoff pointed to the long slope of frozen snow.

"Time is precious," he said, "and to make our way down that slippery incline would be a difficult task. By taking these wheel barrows apart we can go to the bottom of the valley in two or three minutes. The risk will be slight, for no trees or rocks can be seen."

With some difficulty, the clumsy barrows were torn loose from the frozen snow, and the shallow wooden beds detached from the wheels.

Platoff chose a good position on the brow of the hill, and fixed himself as comfortable as possible in the strange sled.

"Don't start until I am a hundred yards down," he said to the boys. "If there is danger ahead, I will shout, and you can alter your course."

He pushed himself gently off, and went skimming down the hill at prodigious speed.

"Now, there, off we go," said Maurice; "hold tight, Phil, and don't be scared." He slipped over the crest, and plunged downward. For a moment the clumsy box grated over the icy crust, then it went off with a rush that took Maurice's breath

away, and his remembrance of what followed was always of the dimmest nature. Frightened at the terrific speed and the stinging force of the wind, he clung to the sides with all his might. Hissing like a buzz-saw, the sled whizzed down the first couple of slopes, then with a succession of heavy bumps it shot over a ridge and entered upon a longer and steeper incline.

With a rush like a sky-rocket it covered this half-mile stretch, and then leaped into the air, Maurice cried aloud as he felt himself falling, and clutched the sledge all the tighter. A crash—a crack—a blinding shower of snow, and then he knew that the ride had ended.

Overhead he saw the stars shining, and struggling through the masses of light, powdery snow that enveloped him, he gained the edge of the crust, and climbed into the open air, none the worse for his adventure save a slight sensation of dizziness. A dark figure was visible some distance away, and an instant later he was clasping hands with Platoff.

“Phil!—where is Phil?” he demanded, anxiously.

Platoff made no reply, and together they ran over the crest. A dark hole yawned before them, and, leaning over the brink, Platoff inserted his arm and helped out the missing boy. Phil opened his eyes and then his mouth.

“Well, that beats all the toboggan slides ever I saw,” he said, looking up at the hills behind him with such a comical expression that his companions laughed.

“Thank Heaven we are safe!” said Platoff; “that was a perilous leap,” and he pointed to the sharp cliff, twenty feet above them, over which the sled had plunged.

“All’s well that ends well,” replied Maurice. “I wonder if we lost anything on the way.”

Nothing was missing, however, and, after a brief rest, all were ready for the start. A succession of slight hills and ravines now separated the party from the river.

“Somewhere below us lies the post-road,” said Platoff; “it will not be safe to approach any nearer. We must keep back along the edge of the valleys. Our ride down hill has given us a big start. We can gain a safe hiding-place before daylight.”

The journey was resumed in single file, Platoff assuming the lead, and for hours they travelled over slippery ridges and through dark, thickly-wooded hollows. The cold was intense, but they moved at too rapid a pace to suffer from it. At the first appearance of dawn, Platoff cast his eyes about for a hiding place, and finally chose a deep, secluded valley with a forest of spruce and fir on all sides. They slept at intervals during the day, and in spite of the risk a fire was kept up, and fed with branches from the trees. One of the party remained constantly on guard. At night the journey was resumed over the hard crust.

For nearly two weeks the weather remained pretty much the same, and the fugitives made satisfactory progress. They kept far back from the river, and although they frequently saw wolves at a distance and heard them howling among the hills, the brutes made no attempt to molest them. No signs of pursuit were encountered, and with each night's journey they felt more hopeful of ultimate escape.

It was now early in the month of March—a whole year since the boys had first crossed the Russian frontier. Their main sufferings had been from cold, but they were cheered by the hope of warmer weather. In a month or more, Platoff said, spring would come, and their discomforts would then be over. By great economy the supply of provisions had been made to last, but now in the beginning of the third week of their flight, barely enough food was left to last them two days, and the future outlook was dark.

The day had been spent in hiding at the foot of a rocky hill. Water was close by—a mountain spring that was too cold and rapid to freeze. At sunset Platoff shared with the boys a scant supper of bread and dried meat.

“To-morrow,” he said, “we must obtain food in some way. If we do not succeed in shooting any deer, extreme measures will be necessary. I shall endeavour to find a village and buy provisions.”

“Are there people living near here?” asked Maurice.

“Oh, yes,” replied Platoff, “Siberian towns are scattered all along the posting-route, at distant intervals, of course. We have seen nothing of them because, we have kept far back in the forest. It may not be necessary, though, to take any such risks. Who knows what a day may bring with it?”

Platoff spoke thus hopefully to encourage the boys. In his own heart the prospect

was gloomy enough, and therefore what happened in the course of the next few hours was all the greater a surprise.

They travelled rapidly that night, covering mile after mile of forest land, and hearing constantly the howling of wolves in different directions. The accounts of the ferocity of the Siberian wolves, however, are greatly exaggerated. It is seldom that they attack men, and the government sleighs have never been molested.

“Hereafter,” said Platoff, “I think we will sleep at night, and travel in the day. The risk will be little greater, and we can make much better speeds

“That will be splendid,” said Maurice; “it always makes me weary to hear the wolves howling.”

“They are more than usually noisy to-night,” replied Platoff, “and they will become more dangerous as we near the Pacific. In daylight they lose their courage and are cowards.”

They travelled on in silence for a time. Suddenly Platoff halted and raised his hand. Far off in the forest a great tumult was heard. It swelled in volume each moment, until the boys could distinguish the howling of wolves, and the scurrying of feet over the snow. At intervals a branch cracked sharply above the din.

“They are coming this way,” said Phil—“what shall we do? where shall we go?”

“Hush! don’t be alarmed,” exclaimed Platoff, “stay just where you are.”

Motioning the boys back, he crept forward to the brink of the ravine which they had been about to cross. Down this hollow the wolves were evidently coming, and their furious outcries had a significance for Platoff which the inexperience boys failed to understand. He drew out his revolver and examined it carefully. Then turning to Maurice, he called out, guardedly, “Get your weapon really—be on the safe side, you know.”

The wolves were close at hand, and as Platoff crept a yard or two further down the ravine, a deer broke into view through the spruce thicket, and dashed swiftly past him. The poor animal was nearly exhausted, and ran with difficulty. Taking a quick aim at the shadowy figure Platoff pulled trigger. As the report echoed

through the ravine, the deer was seen to fall, but it rose again quickly and speed on in flight. That brief delay was fatal. With wild howls, half a dozen wolves burst from the forest, and, overhauling the fugitive in half a dozen leaps, bore it still struggling to the ground not twenty yards from where Platoff stood.

The boys, hearing the outcry and not knowing what was taking place, were inclined to run, but Platoff turned round, and shouted:

“Follow me now, we can easily drive off this handful of wolves.”

Then he vanished down the ravine, pistol in hand. Maurice cocked his revolver, and followed, shouting to Phil, who was armed only with knife, to keep in the rear. He reached the bottom of the gully almost at Platoff's side, and his hasty glimpse of the struggle made plain the Russian's eagerness for the conflict.

The first glimmer of dawn shed a dim light on the scene, and the grey forms of the wolves outlined against the snowy whiteness of the ground afforded a fine opportunity for aim.

The struggles of the wounded deer were over, and his assailants were swarming over its body, tearing the flesh with such ferocious haste that the approach of Platoff and Maurice was unheeded.

“We must have that meat,” whispered Platoff. “it will keep us for weeks,” and raising his revolver he aimed at the nearest wolf, a huge gaunt brute, which toppled over simultaneously with the report. At the same instant Maurice fired, but unfortunately made a miss, and the remaining wolves, angered at this interruption to their feast, sprang in a body at the daring intruders.

Crack! crack! went Platoff's revo[l]ver, and down went the foremost animal, staining the snow a dark crimson. His second shot crippled another, which retreated with a mournful howl.

Maurice, who remained admirably cool under this trying ordeal, killed a third by careful shooting, and the remaining uninjured brutes, two in number, very wisely retreated up the slope. The wounded wolf had crawled away under cover.

“Hurrah! we've done it!” cried Maurice, with pardonable glee and as he spoke a loud outcry was heard from Phil, who had remained on top of the slope. Platoff was off like a streak with Maurice at his heels, and gaining the ridge they were

horrified to see the lad struggling with one of the fugitive wolves. The crust had broken, and both were floundering about in the snow beneath.

Platoff reached the spot in a couple of leaps, and actually seizing the brute by the throat, lifted him up and flung him a yard or two away. He reached for his revolver, but it was missing and snatching the knife from Phil, who was now rising unsteadily to his feet, he turned just in time to meet the rabid animal's attack. The wolf was not a large one, but what he lacked in size he made up in ferocity and for a moment Platoff's position was one of extreme peril. The brute landed on his breast, and for a second or two he tottered. Then recovering himself, he clutched the woolly throat in one hand, and with the other struck repeatedly with the knife. The muscular blows went home, the brute's efforts relaxed, and down he went on the blood-stained snow, a limp and lifeless heap. Platoff coolly wiped the blood from his hands, and examined the scratches on his arms and breast.

He met the rabid animal's attack

"I'm not hurt," he said, in answer to the boys' eager inquiries, the marks are only skin-deep. I dropped my revolver somewhere, or I should 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 halfway 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 ear, 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 travelled 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 venison, 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 Anner 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 twenty 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 you a fair idea of what we have done. We have been on the road nearly seven weeks, and I think we have averaged nearly a hundred miles a week. Taking off one hundred, which is a good allowance for our deviations, we have marched six hundred miles down the Anner, and are only four hundred miles from the ocean. Bear in mind, though, that our most dangerous journey is ahead, and that we have to make still greater circuits.”

“Then we are at least halfway?” 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 towards the river. Our rubles must now be turned to some account. Food we must have. If we continue eating this half-raw flesh we shall 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 scored with recent sled-tracks. A solid bridge of logs was built across the stream, and not twenty yards off, down a slight incline was the Anner. Not a habitation 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 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 team of three horses harnessed abreast. The one inmate, 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 speeds plunged down the slope, dragging the heavy sledge behind them. The mouth of the stream, with its fringe of treacherous ice, was 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 sleighs 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 realised the danger, of course, and felt momentary 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, instead of the rebuke they had expected.

“Be ready when I need you,” he said, and plunging instantly into the water, he swam towards 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 towards 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 towards 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 crust as the current swept the horses to the spot. Grasping the nearest one by the bridle, he turned his head towards 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 considerately 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 the rescue I should now be at the bottom of the Anner. 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 gaze on the party. He was a fine-looking man, 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 towards the road, and anxiously feeling his wet clothes 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 plunge. The ice is forming on them already. I should advise you to lose 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 Toluar, a town fifty miles behind. In their haste they left their passports in my possession, and I have them now. Beyond Toluar 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 towards 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 realise 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 grey eyes were truth itself.

Quickly the dry clothes were donned, the fire was smothered with wet snow, and they climbed into the big sledge. Under its front seat was an empty space just big enough for Phil, and he was snugly tucked in place with rugs.

"Wear these," said Nicolas Poussin, handing Platoff a pair of green goggles and Maurice a huge fur cap and tippet. "Sit there," and he motioned to the rear seat under the leather hood.

"Remember," he added, "your names are now Louis Miroff and Serge Lyapin. Don't forget."

He climbed up in front and seized the lines. The horses dashed away on a gallop, jingling their bells, and the sledge scraped merrily over the frozen crust towards the Pacific.

CHAPTER XXI

They travelled forty miles that day, reaching at 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 unsparing hand. Spring was not far off, and he was anxious to reach Vladivostok before the mild weather made sleighing impossible. Well snuggled 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 and Russian officers, but no unpleasant incidents occurred. Nicolas Poussin's passports carried them through all dangerous places.

Sometime 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 him but he bore all without complaint.

Day by day traveling 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, Vastak 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 present 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.

"I will show you where we are," he said, abruptly; "you remember that we left the Anner some days ago, and turned up the bed of the Ussuri. Here you see is the Anner running to the north-east, while the Ussuri flows directly north. Consequently, we are traveling south. We have reached this point," designating a spot on the map, "and now Vladivostok is but two hundred miles away. I have brought you further than I hoped to do. You see it will be dangerous to continue the use of these passports, for the men whose names you hear are known to many of the officials between here and the Pacific. For your safety and mine we must part. I will provide you with sufficient food, and if you are cautious you will reach the coast in safety."

"Yes, you are right," said Platoff, with emotion; "to-morrow we will leave you. Better that we should take the risks of recapture than—"

"Stop!" said Poussin, "you forget. I wish to hear nothing. I don't know who you are, understand, or where you are going. You saved my life; that is all I choose to remember."

A commotion was suddenly heard outside, and he turned to the window. The interest depicted on his face drew his companions to the spot.

Out in the station-yard, a Cossack surrounded by an inquisitive crowd was nailing a big white placard to one of the gate-posts. The distance was too great to distinguish its contents. Maurice and Platoff exchanged significant glances, but before they could speak the starosta flung open the door and entered.

"A courier has arrived with proclamations," he said, breathlessly. "It seems that the escaped convicts who were seen near Toluar have eluded pursuit and cannot be found. Of course, they have not reached this neighbourhood yet, but the

government wishes to be on the safe side, and so they are posting notices from station to station.”

“Ah,” said Poussin, coolly, “we heard something of that on our way. And so they have slipped off from the soldiers, have they? Well, they will be caught sooner or later. Have you one of the placards with you? It would be wise for us to read the descriptions in case we run across the fellows.”

The starosta rushed out of the room and into the yard.

“Keep cool,” said Poussin; “there is not the slightest cause for fear. I saw these placards a month ago.

The fellow was back in an instant, paper in hand. “Here, you read it,” my eyes are bad, “said Poussin, and he handed it to Platoff.

Maurice, to conceal his emotion, turned to the samovar and drew a cup of tea; but Platoff coolly took the paper, and read aloud, in a calm, clear voice.

“TWO THOUSAND RUBLES REWARD.”

“The above sum will be paid for the arrest of three convicts who escaped in February from the mines at Kara; one tall and light-haired, his companion of medium height, and dark. At the time of their escape two of them wore the prison garb, the other was attired in a Cossack uniform.

“They are journeying down the Anner valley, and all persons are hereby warned to extend no aid whatever under the severest penalties.

GENERAL MELIKOFF.

“Governor of the Mines of Kara.”

“Rather a meagre description,” said Platoff, laying the paper aside.

“Ah, but their clothes,” exclaimed the starosta—“that is a sure identification. It is impossible that they could have procured others.”

“Were the convicts still wearing the prison clothes when seen near Toluar?” asked Poussin suddenly.

“It was not the men who were seen,” said the starosta, “only traces of them—a trail in the snow, and hot ashes of fire.”

Platoff darted a reassuring glance at Maurice.

“Well, my good man,” broke in Poussin, “depend upon it the rascals will be captured, and serve them right; and now be sure to have a fresh relay of horses ready at early dawn. I must reach Vladivostok before a warm spell sets in.”

The starosta promised obedience, and left the room.

“A good sleep will be necessary,” said Poussin; “we shall have a hard day’s journey to-morrow.” He spread his rugs on the floor and stretched himself flat. Platoff filled his pockets with bread and meat and hurried away to give Phil his supper. He was back in ten minutes.

“The boy is all right,” he whispered to Maurice, “and the sledge is in a safe place. It won’t be disturbed.”

They carried on a whispered conversation for a few moments with Poussin snoring heavily at their side, and finally both fell asleep.

Maurice woke some hours later with a confused din ringing in his ears. He sat up listening intently, and presently the vague sounds resolved themselves into a clatter of hoofs—the tread of hurrying feet and a babel of voices. A yellow glare was shining into the room, and rushing to the window, he saw a dozen mounted Cossacks standing in the station yard.

Two or three peasants were holding blazing torches, and a fast-increasing crowd was pouring in at the gate. At that instant Maurice felt a hand on his shoulder, and turning he saw Platoff.

“Lost!” hissed the Russian, “we are betrayed. The soldiers are seeking us. Look at that scoundrel,” and he pointed to the starosta, who was standing to one side conversing with the captain of the Cossacks.

“They shall not take me alive. I swear it,” he added, fiercely, and springing across the room he tore his pistol from his coat.

Maurice, pale and trembling, turned from the window.

“Quick!” exclaimed Platoff, “follow me. We may escape through the rear.” He moved towards the door as he spoke, but before he could reach it Nicolas Poussin came sleepily forward.

“Ha! how’s this? What does all this noise mean?” he asked.

Platoff dragged him to the window, and pointed to the soldiers in the yard.

“They are seeking us,” he said; “some wretch has put them on our track. It is not yet too late to escape, provided a way is open in the rear. My only fears are for your safety. How can you explain? How can you extricate yourself from your perilous position?”

“I do not believe the soldiers are here for that purpose,” said Poussin in a calm voice, but the pallor of his face belied his words. “I advise you to wait before you attempt anything rash.”

“They are coming,” cried Platoff, as footsteps were heard in the next apartment, and rushing to the door he propped his huge frame against it, calling on Maurice to assist.

“Be careful—be careful,” said Poussin, nervously; “don’t go too far.”

A sharp rat-tat-tat was heard on the panels, and as no one answered, the familiar voice of the starosta called on them to open.

With a sudden change of demeanour, Platoff seized the handle and flung the door far back.

The torch gleam from the yard revealed the starosta and a burly captain of Cossacks standing on the threshold.

CHAPTER XXII

The starosta evidently failed to notice the consternation that his visit had produced.

“Pardon—a thousand pardons, your honour!” he exclaimed, volubly, addressing Poussin, who had pushed his way to the front. “I am sorry that I must disturb you, but I really have no choice, as your honour can readily see for yourself. This is a government position, you know, and, of course, I must be very careful —”

“What are you talking about?” interrupted Poussin, angrily, glancing aslant at his companions, who had edged across the room. Speak and explain yourself.”

“Why, don’t you know?” said the starosta, in a surprised tone. “Didn’t you hear the noise and see the Cossacks in the yard. His Excellency the government Inspector will be here in an hour or two, and this room must be made ready for him. He was not expected so soon; but it seems that he fears the warm weather will set in before he reaches the Pacific. He has come clear from Petersburg. This is the commander of the Cossack advance-guard, who always precedes his excellency some miles,” and the starosta indicated the officer at his side, who at once muttered out an apology for disturbing the travellers at their rest.

Back in the shadow of the wall, Platoff and Maurice drew a sigh of relief that was audible in the doorway. Poussin, too, was overcome by the sudden transition from despair to hope; but he retained his self-possession admirably, and replied, with a well-assumed touch of indignation.

“It is shameful that travellers should suffer these inconvenience but since it is his Excellency the Inspector who wishes our apartment we will gladly give it up. Convey to him our best regards on his arrival. And now where can we sleep for the remainder of the night?”

“I can put you on the floor of the post-room.” said the starosta, doubtfully. “If your honour doesn’t object to the other occupants.”

“And who else is there?” asked Poussin.

“Well,” replied the starosta, counting on his fingers, “there are four peasants, and two soldiers, and a Cossack Lieutenant, and three drunken Buriats, and a merchant from Tomsk, and a dog—”

“That will do,” interrupted Poussin. “I don’t want to hear any more. I see that the moon is shining. Travelling will be good. Fetch me a relay of the best horses you can get, and at once, mind you. We will start immediately, and make up for loss of rest at the next station we reach.”

“But your honour,” stammered the starosta. “I’m afraid—horses—they are scarce, and his excellency will want—” Here he paused and glanced over his shoulder; but the Cossack, having lent his presence to the edict of expulsion, had made his way unnoticed into the courtyard.

Poussin readily interpreted these little manoeuvres.

“Get me the horses, and I will give you ten rubles extra,” he said. “I want provisions also. Put me in sufficient for five days’ travel. One cannot procure food fit for a dog to eat at the stations between here and Vladivostok.”

“But food is even scarcer than horses,” said the starosta, with a greedy twinkle in his eye. “All that can be procured will be consumed by his excellency and party.”

“Provide what I want, and I will pay your price,” replied Poussin. “Make haste now, and get our sledge ready. I will start at once, and his excellency can have this room.”

“Yes, your honour,” said the starosta, “I will do my best,” and bowing low, he departed. Poussin carefully closed the door after him and crossed the room.

“You heard all our conversation?” he asked, abruptly.

“Yes,” said Platoff. “Thank Heaven we are safe. It was a terrible fight, and I was sure that all was lost. Your coolness preserved us from a fatal blunder. You are a wonderful man.”

“Yes, it is true that we are safe for the present,” answered Poussin. “But what I have just heard has a hidden meaning that I only could understand. You remember my telling you that I journeyed from Irkutsk to Toluar in company

with two men under whose names and with whose passports you are now travelling?”

“Yes,” said Platoff, “I recollect.”

“Well,” resumed Poussin. “those men, Miroff and Lyapin, are both Russian officers, although they traveled incognito, and the passports made no mention of their rank. From Irkutsk they were sent ahead by his Excellency the Inspector, and when we arrived at Toluar a telegram reached them containing instructions to await the arrival of the inspector at the station. They travelled with me, you see, in order that their ranks might not be suspected. His excellency was not due at Toluar for some weeks, but it appears now that he has journeyed with unusual rapidity. He will be here in an hour or two. Miroff and Lyapin are with him. An examination of passports will lead to the discovery of our ruse, and disaster will follow.”

Poussin threw himself on a chair and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

“A bad state of affairs, indeed,” said Platoff; “what can be done.”

“Little, I fear,” replied Poussin. “I have ordered the sledge at once, and we may gain some hours on his excellency. It all depends, however, on a single thing—the examination of the passports. It is possible that no such inspection will be made, since the inspector and his party are of such high rank. In that event all will go well, and by hard travelling we can reach Vladivostok before the inspector. But if the passports are requested by the officer who examined ours last night, and he hears the names of those men, the coincidence will at once strike him, and discovery will follow.”

“Either Cossacks will then be sent in pursuit, or orders will be telegraphed to the next station to arrest us on our arrival.”

“But the chances are in our favour,” exclaimed Maurice, eagerly; “at least, as it seems to me. If these men had procured other passports, and these passports had been examined at various points along the route, points at which our passports had also been examined, would not this discovery have been made long ago?”

“Yes,” assented Poussin.

“And, in that event,” resumed Maurice, “would it not have been a simple matter

to telegraph orders for our arrest?”

Again Poussin nodded assent.

“Very well,” added Maurice, triumphantly, “it is plain that their passports have not heretofore been examined, why, then, would they be at this particular point?”

“That is clever reasoning,” said Poussin. “You are right. The chances are greatly in our favour. Moreover, it is barely possible that these men are not with his excellency at all. One cannot tell what may have happened. Perhaps they were sent back to Irkutsk, or ordered to remain at Toluar. But we will take no chances on that. To stay here an hour longer is dangerous.”

At that instant a rap at the door was heard, and a second later the starosta entered.

“All is ready,” he said. “the fresh horses and the provisions. Ah, your honour, you little know with what difficulty I procured them. If it came to his excellency’s ears. I should lose my place.”

“You are an extortionate rascal,” said Poussin, coolly, “you can tell lies like a Buriat. “I won’t quarrel over the price, though; I am in haste to leave. Here is the money for the horses, including the ten extra rubles. How much for the provisions?”

“Eight—eight rubles,” stammered the starosta. “I assure you, your honour, they cost me seven and a half—”

“They didn’t cost you two,” said Poussin, scornfully; “but here, take your moneys and dropping the coins into the outstretched hand, he led the way out, followed by Platoff and Maurice, bearing the rugs.

It was two o’clock in the morning. The post-yard, lit by the glaring torches of the soldiery, was weird and unnatural. A splendid troika—three powerful black horses—were attached to the sledge, and the restless animals were stamping impatiently. Platoff and Maurice took the back seat and drew the furs around them. A slight movement of the rugs in front showed that Phil was still safe in his retreat. He doubtless was curious to know what was going on.

Poussin deliberately made an inspection of the food he had bought to see that

everything was there; and finally climbing to his seat, he roughly ordered the station attendants out of the road and chirruped to the horses.

They trotted through the yard, and turning the angle at the gate under the very eyes of a dozen Cossacks, dashed off down the frozen deserted street. The low houses, dim and gloomy, shot past like streaks, and skimming over a slight ridge, the darkness was relieved by a bar of light shining from the military outpost—a small wooden structure by the roadside.

“I forgot all about that,” muttered Poussin, as he pulled up his horses in obedience to the stern command to halt.

Two or three soldiers were lounging inside, and the officer who came forward with a lantern was the same man that examined their passports that morning. He held up the light and scrutinised their faces.

“Ah, yes, I remember you. You just came last evening.”

“Yes,” replied Poussin; “we have been turned out of our beds,” and he related in good-humoured tones how the expected arrival of the government Inspector had deprived them of their room, and started them off a few hours ahead of their usual time.

“Then you are not connected with his excellence’s party,” asked the officer.

“Why—no,” said Poussin, thrown off his guard by the question.

“But your companions are,” said the officer, and pulling a document from his pocket he hastily unfolded it.

“I find both your names here,” he said, looking at Platoff: “Louis Miroff and Serge Lyapin. This is a list of the inspector’s party brought to me an hour ago by the captain of his excellency’s advance guard, in order that I might copy it for my monthly report. Seeing your names upon it, I supposed you had preceded the inspector. May I ask why you are leaving again before his arrival?”

Platoff’s courage rose to meet this trying emergency. “We belong to his excellency’s party,” he answered, in a firm voice, “my companion and I, we are travelling incognito for reasons that must remain secret.”

Then seeing that the officer hesitated, he added. "You saw the passports properly made out in our own names, surely that is sufficient."

Perhaps there was an ill-suppressed touch of eagerness in Platoff's voice. The officer's suspicions were plainly aroused.

Without replying he held his lantern to Platoff's face, and turned it on Poussin, who sat white and miserable on the front seat. That woebegone countenance confirmed the officer's doubts

"I must put you to the inconvenience of a brief delay," he said, "no doubt all will be explained, but I dare not assume any risks. I will despatch a man at once to bring the captain of the Cossack guard. He will know you, of course."

The other moved quietly forward and caught the horses' lines, while three soldiers with rifles in their hands came out of the station and stood near the sledge.

"Yes," said Platoff, "he will know us. Oh, yes, the captain will know us—" His lips trembled, and he caught Maurice's wrist in a convulsive grasp.

Poussin never turned his head. He was trembling like a leaf. Ten seconds—twenty—half a minute.

No one moved or spoke.

Suddenly Platoff straightened up. With one quick marvellous leap he sprang behind Poussin and snatched the lines and the whip from the nervous fingers. He shouted fiercely, and brought down the lash with stinging severity on the spirited horses. They reared in the air, tore madly from the officer's detaining grasp, and before the amazed soldiers could realise what had taken place the sledge was dashing like a meteor into the gloom.

"Down!" Platoff shouted to Maurice, and sweeping Poussin into the bottom of the sledge with one arm, he tightened his grip on the lines and dropped low himself.

Crack, crack. crack, crack—for two or three minutes the rifles popped continuously on the frosty air, and the bullets tore through the leather hood, and splintered the woodwork on all sides. Then the last shot echoed and died away.

and the flashes of red fire vanished, leaving the night darker than before by contrast.

CHAPTER XXIII

Platoff's brave deed would probably have resulted disastrously had it not been for the presence of mind which prompted him to drag his companions to the bottom of the sledge. This, no doubt, saved their lives; for although the ballets whistled by on all sides, no one was struck.

When the firing ceased, Platoff rose to his feet and looked back. The lights of the military post had vanished behind a slight crest. In the village beyond, which was on somewhat higher ground, a few scattered lights could be seen.

"Are they coming?" asked Poussin, as he rose and climbed on the seat.

"No," said Platoff, "I can't hear any sounds of pursuit. They have no horses, you know."

"All seems quiet behind us," said Maurice, who was leaning over the back seat.

"What's the matter? Who was shooting?" demanded a smothered voice, and Phil poked his head and shoulders from under the rugs.

Platoff briefly explained what had just taken place, and then turned his attention to the horses, which had stuck to the road in spite of the lack of guidance, and were dashing forward at a tremendous pace.

"Hand me the lines," said Poussin. "I will drive now," and with a touch of the whip he urged the horses to still greater efforts.

"Stop," said Platoff, "for your own safety you must put us off by the road. Your peril is too great already—it will be increased if you are caught in our company. Put us off right here, and we can easily escape to the hills."

"No," replied Poussin, "I will do nothing of the kind. At present there is no danger. The military outpost is nearly half a mile from the post-station in the village. To give the alarm, it is necessary for one of the soldiers to go there on foot. Of course, the Cossacks will at once start in pursuit, but their horses are pretty well worn out, while ours are fresh. The next station is fifty miles distant. I can keep in advance of our pursuers at least that far. When daylight comes, I

will let you out, and you can seek safety in the hills. Your absence will not be discovered until I reach the station, where, of course, I shall be arrested at once.”

“Ah, my friend, escape with us,” implored Platoff. “Together we will reach the coast and sail on some friendly vessel to a better country than this. Don’t trust yourself to the mercies of those tyrants. They will inflict some terrible punishment—”

“I do not fear,” interrupted Poussin. “I can make an explanation which I think will save me. I have not time to explain now. What I have done for you was only a debt. You saved my life; I hope I have saved yours. Remember your identity is unknown to me. It is even possible that the authorities will not discover for some time who my strange passengers were. Your disguise is effective, and the fact that a third man was concealed in the sledge will never be known.

In spite of Platoff’s continued entreaties, Poussin remained firm.

Holding the horses with a skilled hand, he urged them on unsparingly, and the sledge skimmed over the frozen ground at a speed which made the landscape on each side one dizzy blend. Hour after hour passed on. The dark sky paled gradually, and a grey light stole over the frozen plain until the distant hills were dimly seen. Morning was close at hand, and yet no trace of the pursuit was visible. Eastward the rugged hilltops were flecked with pale crimson mist beneath which the morning sun was creeping upward. The atmosphere was clear and radiant, revealing every tree and rock for miles around. Still the horses sped on untiringly, their nostrils white with foam, their glossy flanks damp and steaming.

Platoff and Poussin were on the front seat, Maurice and Phil behind. All were grave and silent, scanning the landscape intently, straining their ears to catch the slightest sound.

It was Maurice who sounded the alarm. His sharp cry echoed on the frosty air, his arm pointed straight to the northward, and turning quickly, all saw on the rolling crest of a distant hill a single black streak moving in a serpentine course down the slope.

“Cossacks,” ejaculated Platoff—“a whole company, at least. They are coming at full speed.”

“Be calm,” said Poussin. “They are fully two miles distant. The time has come to part.”

He touched up the horses, and they dashed at a furious gallop over the level ground. His companions, turning in their seats, watched the approaching soldiers until they gained the plain and vanished behind the gentle undulations of the road. A moment later the sledge swept over a ridge, and Poussin drew up the panting horses in the hollow of a wooded ravine. A bubbling mountain stream poured down from the hills and emptied into the Ussum, some yards distant.

“There is no time to lose,” said Poussin, as the fugitives sprang to the ground. “Take these provisions, take a rug apiece, strike back into the heart of the hills, and wade up the bed of the stream until the road is out of sight. Make a wide detour to reach Vladivostok. God be with you and help you to escape. There will be plenty of vessels in the harbour at this time of year. Vladivostok is now but one hundred and seventy miles away by the road. Do you need anything else?”

“No,” exclaimed Platoff. “We have everything. Heaven grant that no harm come to you! “I have known many brave men in my time, but none that would have dared to do what you have.”

“Go,” said Poussin, huskily. “Don’t delay, remember I must lead your pursuers far off the track that you may have time to escape.”

One at a time they clasped the brave merchant’s hand fervently and with tears in their eyes.

“Good-bye, good-bye,” they called out, chokingly.

“Farewell,” said Poussin. “God be with you,” and bringing down the whip on his restless horses, he swept up the ravine and vanished from sight over the pine-crowned ridge.

The halt had been of less than two minutes’ duration. The Cossacks were still two miles in the rear, and the chances of escape were good.

The fugitives had climbed out of the sledge on some loose stones that bordered the stream.

Platoff led the way carefully down to the water’s edge, and stepping fearlessly

in, they waded briskly up the shallow channel, thus leaving no trace behind to show that the sledge had been relieved of its load at that point.

For fully a mile they remained in the water, penetrating deeper and deeper into the forest.

The weather was sligh[t]ly milder, but the snow was still covered with a firm crust, and their feet made no impression on it as they turned aside from the stream and ascended the hill.

The country was wild and rugged—more so than it had been at any time. The forest was gloomy and dim, and the hills were gaunt and rocky, full of precipices and dark chasms.

“We are very near the Chinese border,” said Platoff, “that is why the scenery is so wild and lonely. The country is uninhabited.”

Fortified by their long rest, the fugitives travelled all that day at a rapid pace, covering at least twenty-five miles, and when twilight came on they halted among a heap of loose stones and made themselves comfortable with the rugs that Poussin had given them, which they had carried on their backs all that day. Not daring to light a fire, they ate their supper cold, and then not being able to sleep, talked for an hour or more over the situation.

Platoff was much distressed about Poussin.

“I fear that he will be punished severely,” he said; “the government will never overlook such a thing as this, and yet he spoke as though he would be able to make a satisfactory explanation.”

“Yes, he did,” said Maurice; “perhaps he has some influence at Vladivostok.”

“Either that,” replied Platoff, “or he is a man of wealth and can bribe the officials here to overlook his indiscretion. Money is a powerful agent in this part of Siberia, six thousand miles from St. Petersburg.”

“How about the pursuits?” asked Maurice.

“Well,” said Platoff, “of course they will make an effort to scour the country, but we can readily avoid the soldiers. The coast will be closely watched, though, and

that is where we shall encounter the most difficulty. At present we have little to fear. You must remember that our identity may not even be suspected yet, although the discovery must be made sooner or later. Don't worry over the situation, but keep up your courage," and with this admonition Platoff wrapped himself tighter in his rug, and went calmly to sleep.

Maurice and Phil did not remain long awake. The spot they had chosen was a sheltered nook between a dozen big rocks, into which no cool wind could penetrate, and all slept as only weary men can, waking strengthened and refreshed at early dawn.

Platoff slipped away on a reconnoissance, and returned in half an hour with the welcome news that no intruders were in the neighbourhood.

"I think we can risk a little fire this morning," he said, and gathering a few pine-cones and dried tips of branches, he lit them and held a tin flask of cold tea in the flames.

He smothered the fire with snow, and the warm beverage was a grateful addition to the breakfast.

On that day they first journeyed two or three miles to the westward, drawing still closer to the borders of Mongolia, and then headed slightly to south-east, where Vladivostok lay. The same wild and barren country prevailed, and Platoff marched with great caution, keeping his revolver ready for immediate use, and bidding Maurice do the same. This was not from any fear of meeting the Cossacks, for danger from this source was slight, but because they were now in the neighbourhood frequented by large and ferocious tigers, and a casual encounter with one of these monarchs was not at all improbable.

Once huge footprints were seen in the snow, and the boys felt their hair beginning to rise on end.

On a closer examination it was seen that the marks had been made during the last thaw—perhaps a month before—and were frozen solidly in the crust.

For three whole days they neither met tiger nor other peril, but marched on steadily to the south, sleeping at night in crannies among the rocks. The fourth morning the air was warm and a thin rain was falling. The long-delayed spring had come at last.

“It’s useless to travel,” said Platoff; “in this slush we could not make half a dozen miles. We will stay right here until the weather changes. Vladivostok is less than a hundred miles distant. Let that be a consolation to you.

Fortunately the camping-place they had chosen the previous night was eminently suitable for a protracted stay. It was a shallow cavern hollowed from the base of a high cliff, and running back half a dozen feet—its face open, of course, and protected from wind and rain by a thick screen of young fir-trees.

Thanks to Poussin’s generosity, it was needless to worry about food. They had plenty and to spare. Still it was a dreary four days that they spent in that rocky nook, with nothing to do but eat, sleep and talk. It rained hard day and night, the snow faded away, and the ice melted, and the grass underneath began to spring up with amazing rapidity. In four short days winter yielded to spring, and frozen Siberia was blossoming a Paradise.

“The ice is breaking on the rivers,” said Platoff, “and in the harbour of Vladivostok. The ships will anchor now in the golden Horn, and the flags of all nations will float in the breeze.”

On the morning of the fifth day the march was resumed. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky, and birds were singing sweetly in the forest.

The fugitives pressed forward with elastic step, snuffing the crisp, cool atmosphere, and bathing their faces in the warm sunlight that penetrated the foliage.

At noon they halted beside a spring of ice-water. They ate a hearty meal, and then, slightly fatigued by the brisk morning walk, dropped lazily on the short grass for a brief siesta.

CHAPTER XXIV

When Maurice awoke some time later both of his companions were sleeping soundly. The sun was far to the west, and the air was chilly and piercing.

He threw off the rug and sat up. A rustling sound not far away attracted his attention, and looking across the forest he saw a deer—a big buck with branching horns—strolling past an open glade, thirty yards distant,

With sudden excitement he extended a trembling hand for his revolver, and rose to his feet. He was hungry for fresh venison, and here was too good a chance to be neglected. The tinned food and musty cheese put up by the starosta was beginning to grow wearisome.

He delayed for a moment, uncertain whether to awake his companions or not.

“Better let them sleep,” he thought; “I shan’t be gone long.”

The deer by this time had crossed the glade and vanished in the forest beyond, so Maurice started off briskly, intending to make a wide detour and get ahead of his victim.

He ran up the valley for nearly a quarter of a mile, keeping close to the base of the hill, and then crept cautiously down into the hollows peering ahead through the leafless branches of the trees.

In this sheltered retreat patches of snow still lay here and there on the ground, and through one such spot—an open glade—Maurice tramped heedlessly.

Still he saw no trace of the deer. He paused and listened intently, but the forest was very still. He drew back into a clump of bushes and sat down on a fallen log.

The minutes passed on without interruption, and he had about made up his mind to return to his companions, when a sudden crash echoed through the forest, and he sprang to his feet in wild excitement, just in time to see the frightened deer go past him like a streak.

Something had scared the animal badly.

The possibility that a tiger was lurking in the vicinity made Maurice's blood run cold, but on second thought he was inclined to believe that his companions were awake and searching for him.

Under this impression he was about to leave his hiding-place, and started up the valley, when a sight met his eyes that caused him to crouch deeper in the bushes with a shudder.

Through the forest, less than forty yard distant, came a burly Cossack, resplendent in his green uniform. In one hand he held a rifle, and with the other he led his horse.

Close behind him was a second soldier, also on foot, and leading his steed by the bridle.

They advanced into the open glade, bending over the ground and apparently conversing. Like a flash the truth entered Maurice's mind. They had discovered his footprints in the patches snow, and were following up his trail.

For a moment he gave himself up for lost. The Cossacks were between him and his companions, so that retreat up the valley was cut off. The footmarks showed the direction he had taken, and he was in danger of discovery at any moment.

He had presence of mind enough to remember the steep and rocky hillside behind him. If he could gain that, and climb up the face, he might escape after all. The Cossacks certainly could not follow him on horseback, and on foot the chances were even.

Thrusting the revolver into his belt, he dropped on hands and knees, and crawled off into the forest until the enemy were out of sight. Then rising to his feet, he dashed off across the valley at full speed

A short run brought him to rising ground, and he pressed on up the slope faster than ever, and soon he reached a level stretch at the base of a hill. The first glance brought despair to his heart, overhead were steep and barren rocks, rising many feet in air, and here and there a stunted pine-tree.

To ascend this place was impossible, for the rocky ledges jutted out from the face of the cliff.

He turned and ran at full speed, searching vainly for some nook to hide in, or a break in the rugged precipice that would allow him to ascend. He tore through thorn-bushes and bruised his feet on sharp stones, but these mishaps were unheeded, for he imagined constantly that the Cossacks were on his track.

The path now became blocked with loose boulders, and in his haste among these he tripped and came heavily to the ground.

He rose painfully to his feet—rose to find himself face to face with a monstrous tiger—a huge tawny beast that lay supine on the ground.

The disturbed brute lifted his head sleepily, and surveyed the intruder with glittering eyes. His long, spotted tail twitched and from his throat issued a deep growl.

The tiger made no attempt to rise. He looked at Maurice and Maurice looked at him, and in this position they remained for a full minute. Maurice slid his hand cautiously towards his belt, and the revolver was already in his grasp, when he suddenly remembered that even should he succeed in shooting the tiger—which was improbable—the shot would at once draw the Cossacks to the spot, and he would be in a worse plight than ever. The tiger solved the difficulty by slowly rising, and that broke the spell.

Wheeling round, Maurice darted at the top of his speed back along the cliff. A hoarse growl warned him that the tiger was coming in pursuit, and in desperation he cast his eyes about for a refuge.

Such a place met his sight instantly—a deep crack in the very edge of the hill, running parallel with the ground. It was possibly wide enough for him to crawl in, and without stopping to weigh the chances, he threw himself flat and ran his head and shoulders into the crevice. It was a tight squeeze, but with a prodigious effort he managed to draw his whole body inside and crawl back a few feet from the opening. This he had barely accomplished when the pursuing tiger pounced angrily down the spot, thrust his great paws into the hole, growling horribly all the while. Maurice, seizing a loose fragment of stone, dealt the brute a violent blow on the nose.

He drew back instantly, screaming with rage, and Maurice took advantage of this interval to squeeze still deeper into the crack. The door was of soft, sticky clay, the roof which pressed down on his head and body was covered with stalactites,

and from these fell water with a constant drip.

The situation was decidedly uncomfortable. He could scarcely move his legs, and he had the restricted use of one arm only, while the icy water chilled him to the bone.

Meanwhile, the tiger, squatted outside on the ground, was working himself into a terrible rage. Presently he sprang to the mouth of the crevice, and rolling half over on his side made a vicious dig at Maurice with his forepaws, catching the lad's arm and ripping open the heavy sleeve from the elbow down. The sharp claws tore the flesh and the smell of blood rendered the beast furious. With eyes that shone like fire, and snarling ferociously, he tried again and again to reach his victim, jamming his head against the stalactites and stretching his great claws like india-rubber.

Maurice drew himself as far back as possible, expecting each moment that the great paws would seize and drag him out.

He made no further attempt to strike the brute with the stone he still held in his hand, fearing it would only incite him to greater efforts.

All this time the loaded pistol was still in his belt, but he dare not fire. He could easily reach it, and no doubt he could kill the tiger without difficulty, but the report would surely bring the Cossacks to the spot. If his life was in actual danger he determined he would use the weapon, not before. He little thought how soon the alternate would be presented.

For five minutes or more, the tiger thrust his claws repeatedly into the crevice. Then he drew off a yard or so and sat on his haunches, licking the blood from his nose and whining angrily.

Hope sprang up anon in Maurice's breast, and he began to think that the brute would leave him in peace. But suddenly, with a hoarse growl, the tiger bounded forward again, and with its powerful forepaws began to dig furiously at the soft, miry clay about the mouth of the hole. The loose chunks of dirt flew in every direction, and the cavity grew larger every second.

In a very short time the tiger would be able to enter. Maurice realised that if anything was to be done it must be done at once.

Either he must slay the animal at the risk of being recaptured by the Cossacks, or he must be torn to pieces and devoured. He chose the first alternative. At that moment face to face with the brute's bloodshot eyes and lolling tongue, even the mines of Kara seemed preferable to such a death.

With some difficulty he drew the revolver from his belt and succeeded in cocking it.

The tiger was still pawing away with undiminished energy and even now the cavity thus made seemed to Maurice's eyes fully large enough to admit the brute's head and shoulders.

Still, although in the very jaws of death, as it were, he hesitated to fire.

Then he remembered that with one single spring the tiger could reach him, and in sudden terror he pointed the revolver full at the savage eyes. His finger was already pressing the trigger when an inspiration flashed into his mind that changed the whole course of events.

"The pepper," he exclaimed, aloud. "I'll try it," and lowering the weapon, he thrust his hand into his coat-pocket.

It so happened that among the provisions provided by the starosta had been a small bottle of red pepper.

Platoff, with the Russian fondness for fiery dishes, made frequent use of this on nearly everything he ate, and that very morning having forgotten it when they left their camping place, Maurice had picked it up and put it in his own pocket. Now he suddenly remembered it. He gave a sigh of relief when his fingers closed on the bottle, and drawing it out he pulled the cork out with his teeth.

The tiger suddenly suspended operations, and blew the dirt off his whiskers. Now was the critical moment. Reaching out his arm Maurice dashed half the contents of the bottle into the brutes very eyes.

The effect exceeded his highest anticipations. Sneezing and snarling in one breath, the tiger sprang away from the crevice, and rolled in agony on the ground, completely overcome by the pungent dust.

Maurice held the bottle in readiness for a second onslaught.

Overjoyed at his success he was watching the brute's strange antics, when suddenly over the edge of the hill appeared the Astrakhan cap of a Cossack, speedily followed by the head and shoulders.

Before he could see whether more were behind, a rifle cracked sharply—from some spot up among the rocks, apparently—and the Cossack toppled over backward with a cry of pain.

CHAPTER XXV

The rifle-shot scared the tiger. Roaring with pain, he dashed up the edge of the valley and disappeared.

For a moment all was silent, and Maurice in his hiding-place forgot his fear in astonishment at what had happened. Several minutes passed, and he was thinking of creeping out and making a dash for the forest, when two or three fragments of stone rattled down to the ground not a dozen yards away.

A moment later, a man dropped nimbly from an overhanging rock—a tall, slim fellow, in a torn and faded Cossack uniform, with a rifle in his hand.

Knowing that this stranger must be aware of his presence, Maurice hastily crawled out of his hole and stood upright. As he did so the stranger turned, revealing the haggard features of Captain Daroman.

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

“Don't attempt to use your rifle or I'll put a bullet through you!” he said quickly.

The Russian's face expressed the utmost surprise as he saw who it was that confronted him.

Then, advancing a step, he said, “Put up your weapon. I mean you no harm. We are now companions in misfortune. And so it was you the tiger was after? I would have driven the brute off long ago, but knowing that the Cossacks were in the neighbourhood I dared not fire.”

Something in the Russian face convinced Maurice that he meant no harm. He lowered his weapon and restored it to his belt.

“Quick! let us get away from this,” exclaimed the captain. There may be other soldiers in the neighbourhood. There is no time to lose if we would escape.”

He started off rapidly along the base of the cliff, and Maurice followed close behind, wondering at the strange fate that had brought about this strange meeting with his old enemy.

Suddenly he remembered that he was travelling directly away from his friends, and his heart sickened at the thought that they were probably even now in the custody of the soldiers.

“Stop!” he cried to Daroman; “I must go back. My companions are up the valley a mile from here.”

“Your companions!” said the Russian. “You are not alone, then?”

“No,” replied Maurice, and he briefly explained who was with him.

“But what became of those two Cossacks?” he added, anxiously; “you hit one, did you not?”

“Yes,” said Daroman, coolly. “I shot the foremost fellow in the head. He fell back, and his comrade carried him off down the hill. They did not look for such a warm reception. They have been lurking in the neighbourhood for several days. They discovered my tracks in the snow, and hoped to capture me. They are only stragglers, but larger bodies of troops are not far away. That is why we must leave the locality at once. Of course, you are trying to reach the seaport?”

“Yes,” said Maurice, reluctantly, “that is our object.”

“Well,” said Daroman, “I shall be glad to accompany you. I have had quite enough of Russia, and will endeavour to reach some other country. I know something of the Pacific coast, and of Vladivostok, and that experience is at your disposal if you will accept it.”

“Wait until we see Platoff,” Maurice answered, evasively.

The Russian might be sincere enough, but his past conduct was against him.

They turned down into the valley, Maurice leading the way. Daroman’s assurance that only those two soldiers were in the neighbourhood had quieted his fears. One of them was probably dead, and his companion could do nothing single-handed.

It was nearly sunset when the spring was reached, and to Maurice’s consternation the spot was deserted.

“They have gone away!” he exclaimed. “I must find them before night comes.”

“What’s that?” said Daroman. “Listen!”

A low, clear whistle was distinctly heard, and as Maurice whistled in reply, Phil and Platoff broke from the bushes and came forward.

They regarded Captain Daroman with evident aversion, and Platoff listened with a passive, unchanging countenance as Maurice explained his absence and related his adventure with the tiger, and the meeting with the Russian.

Then Daroman briefly explained his object and wishes, speaking with apparent frankness and sincerity. His thin, careworn face and shrunken limbs excited the boys’ pity, but Platoff allowed no sentimental considerations to influence him.

“You can accompany us,” he said, after a short deliberation; “but bear this in mind, at the first sign of treachery I will shoot you as I would a dog. I have little love for those who wear the Czar’s uniform.”

Daroman’s face flushed.

“You forget,” he replied, “that escape from Siberia means as much to me as it does to you.”

That was the only reference he ever made to the past. By tacit consent the subject was avoided.

“You are sure, then, that only these two Cossacks were in the neighbourhood?” resumed Platoff.

“Yes,” said Daroman, “that is all. They were searching for me, and did not know of your presence.”

“They passed here not half an hour ago,” said Platoff; “that is why we hid in the bushes. The one you shot was lying across the saddle, dead, I have no doubt, and his companion, also mounted, was leading the other horse. This offence only makes things worse. We must be many miles from here before morning.”

Daroman assented to this, and urged an immediate start. Platoff’s suggestion to strike still deeper into the country toward Mongolia was discussed and approved.

They ate a hearty meal—which Daroman devoured with ravenous greed—and just as twilight dimmed the forest the journey was begun.

It was uncertain travelling in the dark, for hills and ravines had to be crossed; but Platoff led the way with unerring sagacity, and when morning dawned they were many miles from the valley where Maurice had met with such a startling adventure.

All that day they pressed forward, and not until darkness came again would Platoff permit a halt. Then they stopped in a thick forest and after a substantial meal prepared without fire they slept alternately, Platoff or one of the boys staying constantly on guard.

In the morning they were off again, and thus for three days they travelled steadily forward, meeting neither man nor beast, and stopping for rest at night. It is true that tigers and wolves were often heard in the forest, but they remained at a distance.

The tedium of the march was beguiled by Captain Daroman, who entertained his companions with the narration of his own wonderful escape and journey. If what he said was true, his sufferings had been frightful indeed, and the boys realised all the more how great was the cause for gratitude on their part.

The captain, no doubt, expected a like return of confidence, but if so, he was disappointed, for Platoff was very reticent and guarded about what he said, and, moreover, cautioned the boys against any information that might react in the future against the friends who had aided them in their escape.

The weather remained good, very chilly at night but pleasant during the day. A scarcity of food now threatened again. The provisions supplied by Poussin were about gone, and on the evening of the fourth day the last remaining scraps were devoured.

“In two days, or three at the most, we shall reach Vladivostoc,” said Captain Daroman; “we must get along as best we can until then. We have weapons, it is true, but it would be unwise to make use of them.”

“We have money, also,” said Platoff, jingling the belt of rubles, it might as well be so much dirt for all the good it can do us.

“It will come of use, though, later on,” he added; “a hundred rubles will be a strong temptation to some ship captain in the harbour of Vladivostok.”

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

“Vladivostok 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 miserable 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 oft 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 further 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 Anner, with here and there a ship riding at anchor, while slightly to the south, a sight never to be forgotten, lay Vladivostok, 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 on 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 storm-cloud, 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

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 could 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 storm-cloud 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 camp-fires not fifty feet apart. A cordon of troops was evidently stretched along the coast several miles north and south of Vladivostok.

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 enclosed by a hedge of prickly thorn-bushes.

Captain Daroman scrutinised the place closely.

"This is a summer cottage belonging to some Vladivostok merchant," he said,

“some wealthy fellow who goes to St. Petersburg in the winter and spends the summer here. The house is empty now, and the owner will probably not return till 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, “none will think of looking for us here. Suppose you make a detour to the house, and if you find no cause for alarm, we will effect an entrance at once.”

Platoff acted on this 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 of value 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 storeys with a small square tower on top. Platoff found a small ladder, plainly made for the purpose, and with it he ascended to this tower. 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 from 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 lapsing 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; “camp fires 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.

“Yes,” replied Platoff, “I was within a quarter of a mile of Vladivostok. 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 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 well that night in spite of the torments of hunger, and, what was of more 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 upstairs 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 shall 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 shall 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 camp-fires. 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 Vladivostok, and from the east window could be seen the straggling camp-fires 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.

Platoff hurled himself on the cossacks

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 the captors.

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

The traitor Daroman was missing, and Maurice searched in vain for his familiar countenance. The cause of his treachery was only too plain. The adverse circumstances which confronted the fugitives, the want of food, the encompassing soldiers, the wind-lashed waters of the harbour, that made escape impossible at present, his own ignorance of swimming, all these things made him hopeless and despondent.

He feared capture, and capture in such company would only make his punishment the worse. Then the loophole of escape appeared. It would slip away, surrender himself to the first Russian officer he could find, and disclose the whereabouts of the three escaped convicts on whose head a heavy price was set, surely this service would offset the misdemeanour that had made him a fugitive from his own Government.

He would be pardoned, probably restored to his rank and position. So he doubtless reasoned, and so he acted. The mines of Kara yawned once more for Platoff and his comrades.

CHAPTER XXVII

That night the storm passed away, and the sun rose on a perfect morning.

The blue Pacific was still beating the sandy coast with white-capped billows, it is true, but the sky was clear and serene, and the sun shone brightly on the town and harbour of Vladivostok.

What a frightful mockery all this glorious beauty seemed to the three prisoners as they passed for a moment through the cottage yard, and entered the closed carriage that had just arrived from the town! Their wan, haggard faces, from which every vestige of hope had fled, seemed to draw sympathy from even the stern and pitiless Cossacks.

The commanding officer took his seat in the carriage, and gave the order to start. He had deferred the departure until now, purposely, no doubt, that his triumph might be seen of men, and to add dignity to the occasion the carriage was surrounded on all four sides by troops of mounted Cossacks.

They rode briskly out of the wooded valley, and turned down the sandy beach, entering the town by its main thoroughfare—a long, narrow street, lined for the most part with wooden houses of a peculiar construction. The sidewalks were filled with people, and Maurice looked with curiosity at the odd types of character—the queerly-dressed Russians, the pig-tailed Chinese, and the dark-featured Koreans.

The triumphant procession—for so it was clearly regarded by the inhabitants—continued on past the Government offices, the Admiralty, with its yellow dome and waving flag, the imposing, carved facade of the Naval Club, and passing through the Chinese Bazaar and the market-place, swept along the wharf, tantalising the wretched prisoners with a brief glimpse of the shipping anchored in the harbour—the flags of all nations that fluttered in the morning breeze.

Then a low, gloomy building came in view, frowning with cannon, pierced with embrasures, and the carriage drew up before the fortress.

A brief sigh escaped Platoff's lips. No one spoke, for strict silence had been enjoined.

Another carriage was standing on one side of the massive entrance—an imposing vehicle glistening with new paints and gilded trimmings. A dozen soldiers of huge stature were guarding it, and one of them seemed strangely familiar to Maurice.

The prisoners got out of the carriage before the gateway which was open to receive them, and marched slowly forward, each between two soldiers.

Just at this time a commotion was heard within, and a sentry on the steps called aloud.

“The inspector is coming, make room for his excellency!”

The officer in charge flushed with pride, and straightened himself an inch or two.

“Halt!” he cried, sharply.

“Rightabout! Forward! Halt!” and the prisoners drawn up beside the short flight of stone steps awaited the arrival of the Inspector.

Maurice fixed his eyes on the arched doorway. He was curious to see this government official who had travelled across Siberia inspecting the Czar’s prisons and penal settlements. A moment later he appeared—a tall, richly-uniformed gentleman, preceded by a young Cossack officer—and at sight of that noble face, the wavy, yellow moustache and beard, and clear blue eyes, Maurice was thrilled with such a strong notion, that he staggered back and would have fallen but for the guard’s firm grip on his arm. The dizziness passed off instantly, and he straightened up trembling, and flushed with excitement.

His excellency halted on the topmost step for a parting word with the commandant of the fortress, who followed him to the door. Then he came quickly down between the presented arms of the sentries, and as his feet touched the bottom, Maurice, with a supreme effort, tore from his guards. and flung himself before the amazed official, crying loudly:

“Colonel Jaroslav! help me! help me!”

All was wild excitement in an instant, and the daring lad was dragged roughly aside, struggling fiercely with his captors.

“Help me,” he cried, with all his might. “You remember, Colonel Jaroslav—St. Petersburg—a year ago in the square—I saved your life—dragged you from the cannons—I had your card—all; for Heaven’s sake, help me. Let me speak a word, just a word—”

Then a burly Cossack clutched his throat, stifling his cry. Another struck him brutally on the mouth, and the officer smote him with the flat of his sword. Still struggling desperately, he was dragged up the steps, and in a few seconds more the fortress doors would have closed behind him.

“Stop! Who is that man?” Colonel Jaroslav’s voice rose sharply above the tumult.

The officer hurried forward, cap in hand. “A convict, your excellency,” he said. “One of those who escaped from Kara two months ago. There are the other two. I captured them last night north of the town.”

The inspector briefly scanned Phil and Platoff, and turned towards Maurice, who stood, white and trembling, on the upper step, held by two soldiers.

“Yes, I recognise your face,” he said, haughtily. “I deeply regret that we should meet again under these circumstances. Yet even the service you rendered me can hardly justify this demand.

“I ask but a brief interview,” said Maurice, eagerly. “For Heaven’s sake don’t refuse me! You will change your mind when you have heard what I have to say.”

“I grant your request,” said Colonel Jaroslav. “You shall hear from me again.” Then, turning towards the officer in charge of the convicts, he demanded, “Can you procure me a report of this case before evening?”

“Yes, your excellency, it can be had from St. Petersburg by telegraph at once.”

“Very well, send it to me without delay,” and passing hurriedly through the crowd, Colonel Jaroslav entered his carriage and drove away.

Dizzy with joy, Maurice followed his guards through the dark hall of the fortress, and was speedily locked in a whitewashed cell with a narrow, grated window overhead.

He was rather glad than otherwise that he was separated from his companions. He wanted time to reflect, to collect proofs of the story he must relate to Colonel Jaroslav, for on that interview rested his only hope, and that hope was now a strong one.

He was treated with some consideration. Food of good quality was brought to his cell, and he was given a soft bed in place of the straw pallet that lay on the floor, but he neither ate nor slept.

Morning found him still wakeful and restless. Before the day was half over the welcome summons came from the gaoler, and he was conducted to a luxuriously-furnished room on the first floor of the fortress, where Colonel Jaroslav was seated at a table glancing over some papers.

The gaoler withdrew, leaving them alone.

“Yours is a strange case,” were the colonel’s first words. “I am puzzled at the outset. Sit down and let me hear your story.”

It was half-past ten by a small clock on the table when Maurice began to speak; when he finished the hands pointed to noon. He related everything without reserve, commencing with his family history and the visit to Russia, ending with the perfidy of Captain Daroman and his recapture. He spoke, of course, in English, remembering that the colonel was familiar with the language.

With rapt attention Colonel Jaroslav listened to every word, and at its conclusion he rose and shook Maurice warmly by the hand.

“My poor boy,” he said, with emotion, “your story is true. You have been the victim of an infamous crime, but your sufferings are now at an end. You and your friend shall be freed, I promise you.”

“Thank God,” cried Maurice—“oh, thank God!” and bursting into tears, he buried his face on the table.

“It was a dastardly deed,” resumed the colonel presently, “and were it not for the convincing proofs I could not believe Vladimir Saradoff capable of such a crime. But the evidence is so plain that even the Minister of the Interior cannot fail to be convinced. According to the report of the case which I have, you travelled directly from the frontier to Moscow, where you were arrested, yet I can testify

to seeing you in St. Petersburg , and, what is more, I can remember seeing Ivan, Vladimir Saradoff's servant, sitting on the box of the sleigh.

"That was the scoundrel who stole your papers and substituted the Nihilistic books and the false passports This report states two more important facts which go to strengthen your case. It was Vladimir Saradoff himself who gave Count Paul Brosky, Minister of the Interior the information that caused your arrest, and it is also recorded here that my card was found among your effects when searched. But the most damning evidence of all is yet to come. Do you know why your uncle committed this infamous crime?"

" No," said Maurice, " I do not, unless he hated me on my father's account."

It was partly that, no doubt," resumed the colonel, "but there was a stronger motive. Let me tell you what occurred after your arrest, and you will readily understand all. Late in April. while you and your friend were on your way to Siberia under the names of Cunningham and Burton, two badly decomposed bodies were found in the Neva. On searching them at the mortuary, passports were found made out to Maurice Hammond and Philip Danvers. The papers announced that the boys had been accidentally drowned. Vladimir Saradoff procured the Government certificate of death in your case and forwarded it to America, making at the same time a claim for your mother's fortune, which by her will went to her brother in case of your death. That claim was allowed, your guardian making no attempt to dispute it, and Vladimir Saradoff received your fortune. His crime was plotted with marvellous cunning, and had you arrived at this fortress one half-hour later yesterday morning you would have gone back to Kara never again to return. The workings of providence are truly wonderful."

Maurice's surprise at this story may be readily imagined. His first thought was of Phil, and his friend was sent for at Colonel Jaroslav's request, who considerately left the room, and permitted the boys to remain by themselves.

An hour later they were taken back to their cells— for, of course, they were not yet free—but in the evening Colonel Jaroslav returned and sent for them.

"I have received telegraphic instructions from St. Petersburg," he said. "You will return with me at once, and your case will be placed before the Minister. I regret to say that the man to whom you owe so much, Paul Platoff, the revolutionist, will also be sent back to Russia to undergo solitary confinement in the castle of

Schusselberg. Nicolas Poussin's share in your escape has been discovered. He is now under arrest, and will be heavily fined, if indeed he suffers no worse penalty. The Cossack officer Captain Daroman, will derive no benefit from his treachery. General Melikoff, whose daughter he insulted, directs that he be stripped of his rank and sent into penal servitude at the Island of Saghalien, some miles north of Vladivostok. He is now confined in the fortress."

"Poor Platoff! Can nothing be done for him?" exclaimed Maurice, bursting into tears. "He saved our lives; he is the noblest man living. Ah, if you only knew what we owe to him, Colonel Jaroslav! Can't you do anything for him?"

"Nothing, I fear," said the colonel, sadly, for he was deeply moved by the boy's tears and pleadings. "It is impossible. Paul Platoff must go to the underground dungeons of Schusselberg. He deserves a better fate, perhaps, but there is no hope for him."

"Can we see him?" begged Maurice.

"Not at present," replied the colonel. "You will have plenty of opportunities in the future. He will accompany us to St. Petersburg. The gaoler, at my direction, told him what had occurred, so he knows your good fortune. And now let me advise you to obtain as much rest as possible, for in three days we start back across Siberia. Anner River is now open, and the journey which was so long and painful to you we shall accomplish in a few weeks. Of course, you are still prisoners, and will be under military guards but your treatment will be good; I shall see to that myself."

The boys went back to their cells, scarcely able to realise that their troubles were nearly over. Maurice, in his deep grief over the fate of Platoff, scarcely tasted his supper.

He was unable to sleep, and tossed for hours on his bed.

Near midnight he fell into a restless doze, from which he was roused by a dull, booming sound that seemed to shake the walls of the cell. Then followed half a dozen sharp reports, and as he sprang to his feet in alarm a rush of footsteps passed his cell, and a hoarse voice shouted .

"Drop the boats—quick. He's swimming out into the harbour."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Six feet beneath the level of the flat top of the fortress, on the eastern side facing the sea, extended a paved stone wall twenty feet broad. On the outer edge of this rose a massive parapet deeply embrasured and mounted with frowning cannon that pointed their gaping muzzles day and night on the shipping in the harbour. Seven grated windows directly beneath the roof faced this paved wall, and the middle grating admitted a feeble supply of light to the cell wherein Paul Platoff was confined.

Five minutes before the alarm occurred that roused Maurice from his sleep, two sentries were patrolling before the row of windows now back to back, as they neared the angles of the fortress, now face to face as they approached and met before the middle window. Three lanterns, placed at regular intervals, threw a bright light on the scene, and shining out on the sea, mingled with the wavy reflections from the shipping.

“Have you a light, Ivan?” said one sentry to the other as they met before Platoff’s window.

“Yes,” was the reply; “here is my pipe; hurry and finish your smoke, though, for the night officer will soon be here.”

They halted a moment to exchange fire, and as they moved off again, neither heard a sharp crack that came from a point close at hand.

The distance between them gradually widened, and they were close to the angles of the fortress. When suddenly the grating dropped from the middle window with a tremendous crash, and they wheeled round in time to see a dark figure slip nimbly to the ground and dash towards the parapet.

Crack! crack! rang the two rifles simultaneously, as the sentries rushed forward, but the dark figure gained the top of the parapet unchecked, and leaped wildly into the darkness. A heavy splash told that he had reached the sea, fifty feet below.

The alarm-gun standing ready primed and loaded was touched off instantly, and as the loud boom roused the inmates of the fortress and drew an eager crowd of

officers and soldiers to the spot, the figure of the escaped prisoner was seen for an instant striking boldly out into the harbour.

A score of rifles belched out flame and lead—with what effect none could tell—and a few moments later four boats, manned with armed soldiers, were gliding to and fro over the harbour. From midnight until morning they hunted Paul Platoff in vain. and when daylight came a Russian corvette watched the mouth of the harbour, while the commandant of the fortress, armed with the Czar's authority, searched every vessel in the port—German, Danish, Italian, English, and American.

But Paul Platoff could not be found, and when night came again it was officially reported that the daring revolutionist had found a resting-place at the bottom of the sea.

The two negligent sentries were put in irons, the gratings at the six other windows were strengthened, and the fortress settled down to its usual routine again.

Colonel Jaroslav informed the boys of the sad occurrence. Phil burst into tears, and Maurice, throwing himself on the bed, hid his face in the pillow. When the door had closed behind the colonel, he sprang up.

“Phil,” he exclaimed, excitedly, “don't you believe it! Platoff is not drowned—it can't be true! He has escaped, and we shall see him again some day; I am sure of it.”

Phil was inclined to be sceptical, but Maurice remained true to his convictions, and steadfastly refused to credit his friend's death.

Two days later, in custody of Colonel Jaroslav's own guard of Cossacks, the boys commenced the long six thousand mile journey back to St. Petersburg—first by sea to the mouth of the Anner, then successively by river, carriage, and rail.

On the night of the tenth of July Vladimir Saradoff was sitting at his library table, a cigar in his mouth, and the *Moscow Gazette* on his knee. It was quite unusual to find him in St. Petersburg at this time of year, when the neighbouring mansions on the Nevskoi Prospekt were boarded up, and their owners scattered over the Continent, but he had merely dropped in on his way to Paris from one

of his northern estates, and preferred the comforts of his home and the ministrations of his faithful Ivan to the gloomy solitude of the club.

If any remorse for his fearful crime lurked in his heart, he did not show it. His calm, haughty features expressed self-complacency and content, plainer than words would have told.

“Katkoff’s paper ought to be suppressed,” he muttered tossing the *Gazette* over on the table; “it’s tone is becoming decidedly dangerous.

“Is everything packed?” he added, turning to Ivan, who was standing motionless by his chair; “we take the Berlin express at noon to-morrow.”

“All is ready,” said Ivan, quietly, “except the money. I shall go to the bankers in the mornings

“Get five thousand in large notes,” said his master, “and a draft on Rothschild for the balance. Ah! a letter for me?” as a servant entered with a sealed envelope on a silver salver.

Vladimir Saradoff looked carelessly at the superscription, and broke the seal. He drew out a folded paper, and holding it under the lamp read the following words, hastily written in a bold, dashing hand.

“Not unmindful of past favours I assume the risk of requiting in some measure the debt of gratitude I owe you. A warrant has been issued for your arrest on a terrible charge. I have seen the proofs. I need say no more. Count Brosky is implacable and determined. He fears complications with the American Government, and will not spare you. The boys are now in the city. Flee at once if yet there is time. Even now I may be too late. Burn this note.

“Yours, “VOROUZOW”

He read it through to the end, word for word, and then as the paper fluttered from his nerveless fingers, he dropped heavily into the chair from which he had risen. His lips mumbled, but no sound came, and his face was white as chalk.

Ivan, deeply alarmed by the sudden collapse, sprang to his master’s side with a decanter snatched hastily from the buffet. A spasm passed hastily over Saradoff’s features as he took the glass from Ivan, and the powerful stimulant brought a

flush to his cheek. He glared wildly about the room and then sprang to his feet. In that brief five minutes Vladimir Saradoff had aged—had suffered the agonies of a lifetime.

“Read that,” he cried, tossing the letter to Ivan. “It comes from Vorouzow, private secretary to the court. His information may be relied on. Some person has played the traitor. But never mind, my vengeance will come. Escape is the first thing.”

He shuddered, and passed his hand over his forehead.

“Quick, Ivan,” he cried, with sudden terror, “quick, or I am lost—escape by rail is cut off—they will watch the stations—I must take to the yacht—it still lies at the docks of Vassili Ostroff—I lent it to Count Adlerberg—it waits his arrival in the morning—do you hear me, Ivan?—I must foil these bloodhounds—call a cab at once—see if the street is empty.”

The perspiration was standing in drops on his forehead, and his hands trembled.

Ivan, no less terrified than his master, hurried from the room, dropping the crumpled letter to the floor. Vladimir Saradoff picked it up, and held it over the globe of the lamp. As the last fragment turned to ashes, Ivan returned.

“I have been fortunate,” he panted. “I found a cab close by—the streets are empty. Go quick, they may arrive at any moment.”

Without a word his master dropped into a chair, seized a pen and ink, and cheque-book, and drove his hand rapidly over the paper.

“Here, take this,” he cried; “you must remain behind. Disguise yourself, and you will be safe—go to the bank in the morning—get foreign drafts for this whole amount if you can, and join me in Paris—at the Hotel Bristol. Now a coat, Ivan—a light coat—and my pistols, don’t forget them.”

A moment later he was ready. A few brief injunctions to Ivan, a hasty farewell, and he hurried down the broad stairway, through the long, magnificently-furnished hall, and passed into the street.

He turned, with a bitter malediction on his lips, for a last look at the stately front of his palace—the last time he would ever see it, he knew well—and then bolted

into the cab which the obsequious driver held open for him.

“Catherine’s Wharf, docks of Vassili Ostroff,” he cried; “twenty rubles if you get there in fifteen minutes. Don’t spare your horses.”

The door closed with a bang. The driver mounted his box and lashed his steeds. The cab rumbled briskly over the cobblestones—and then drew up with a jerk.

“Drive on, you idiot!” shouted Saradoff; “go on, I say! Why do you stop?”

The cab started— moved a few paces—and stopped again.

Vladimir Saradoff threw up the blind. A lamp across the way shed yellow light on the street. The driver was standing on the ground. Two dark figures held the horses, and a third was approaching the cab—a tall bearded man in a blue uniform, and a sword at his side.

A little distance off, other figures were visible in the shadow, and the lamp-light fell on gleaming rifle-barrels.

The cab door was thrown open.

“Vladimir Saradoff, I arrest you in the name of the Czar!” said the officer. “Here is the warrant , shall I read it?”

CHAPTER XXIX

But there was no reply. A few seconds passed in silence. Then a flash of light lit up the darkness of the cab, a sharp report echoed through the gloomy street, and the horses, rearing in air made a desperate attempt to break loose.

The police dashed forward, surrounding the cab, and a crowd, sprung from no one knows where, quickly blocked up the street. A lantern was hastily brought, and a surgeon summoned to the spot, but it was too late for medical aid. Vladimir Saradoff had evaded arrest and punishment.

He was taken back to his stately residence and borne through the startled group of servants to his chamber. There they left him alone, and an officer guarded the entrance.

The police took possession of the house, and drove curious spectators from the door all night long, for the news had spread rapidly. The morning journals announced in startling headlines the crime and death of Vladimir Saradoff, and St. Petersburg from the highest to the lowest circles was wild with excitement.

That day the boys were brought before Count Brosky, Minister of the Interior. The proof and testimony that Colonel Jaroslav was prepared to offer were unneeded.

Ivan, Vladimir Saradoff's servant, who had been arrested while escaping from the rear of the house, came forward with a full confession, made on condition that his punishment should be mitigated.

He told all—how the plot had been laid, the false passports and Nihilistic documents substituted for the boys' papers, and how, finally, by bribing an assistant at the mortuary, the genuine passports had been concealed on the persona of two unfortunate wretches found in the Neva.

At the close of the examination the boys were freed with a most profuse and elaborate apology from Count Brosky, and went off in a carriage to the residence of Colonel Jaroslav, whose guests they intended remaining for a few days.

The colonel had promised to do all in his power for them—a promise which he

kept to the letter. Vladimir Saradoff's affairs were at once taken in hand by the government, and through Colonel Jaroslav's influence the fortune of two hundred thousand dollars' of which Maurice had been robbed, was preserved from the wreck, subject, of course, to legal formalities connected with the lad's guardianship.

Colonel Jaroslav advanced him as much money as he needed, and Maurice's first act was to pay the fine of twenty thousand rubles that had been imposed on Nicolas Poussin, and to write that worthy merchant a long and grateful letter.

Phil, meanwhile, wrote home to his father, fearing the shock that a cablegram might produce.

During their stay in the Russian capital. Maurice met Miss Melikoff, who had just returned with her father from the mines of Kara. They had a long and interesting interview, but the part which that young lady played in the boy's escape was kept a rigorous secret.

"Why, my father might actually send me back to work in the mines, if he knew what I had done," said Miss Lora; "he is so awfully strict, you know," and the old general confirmed that opinion on meeting Maurice.

"And so you are the fellow that struck an officer," he said, gruffly "and rescued my daughter, too? Well, young man, I would have shot you for the one and rewarded you for the other," and then he graciously shook hands with him.

The boys greatly enjoyed their stay in St Petersburg, for Colonel Jaroslav was a most delightful host; but their hearts yearned for America, and late in July they parted from their kind friend and the many other acquaintances they had made in the Russian capital, and started by rail across the continent, sailing from Havre a week later.

It was a clear and beautiful August morning when the "Grand Monarque" steamed majestically up New York Harbour.

At the foot of the narrow street which opened on the wharf a motley crowd was gathered, curious to see the two young Americans who had tasted the horrors of Siberian exile, for the papers had proclaimed far and wide their expected arrival.

Off the Battery a tugboat put out to the steamer, containing a tall, grey-bearded

man, whose actions evinced great excitement. He was hoisted on board the “Grand Monarque,” and a moment later Phil was clasped in his father’s embrace, to the delight of the passengers.

“My poor boy—my poor boy!” was all he could utter for a long while, but presently he became more composed, and extended Maurice an affectionate greeting.

“Your guardian is not here, my boy,” he said, as he clasped his hand. “Colonel Hoffman could not come. You will know all later.”

Maurice detected the strange embarrassment in his manner, but before he could ask an explanation the steamer was at the wharf, and they hurried across the landing to a cab that was waiting.

A wild cheer burst from the crowd, and half a dozen reporters sprang forward, note-books in hand.

Turning a deaf ear to the representatives of the press, the boys gained the cab, and Maurice already had one foot on the step, a strong hand seized his shoulder, and he turned half angrily, to meet the honest, tear-dimmed face of Paul Platoff.

With a cry of joy he staggered back, and would have fallen, but the sturdy Russian caught him in his arms, and they wept together, unmindful of the excited spectators, who cheered again and again, and pressed forward so impetuously that the indignant policemen could not drive them back.

Between the mingled embraces of the two boys and the jostling the crowd, Platoff was well-nigh suffocated, but finally they were all bundled into the cab, and were soon rattling up noisy Broadway.

In husky, broken sentences Platoff related how he had gained the shelter of an American sailing-vessel on that terrible night of his escape, and how the noble captain, on learning his story, hid him so securely that the Russian soldiers failed to find him. Two days later, the vessel left for home, and after a long voyage arrived safely at Boston.

“I knew you were safe.” he said, “and I saw the papers that you were coming home on this steamer.”

“I knew it,” said Maurice—“I knew you were not dead. What did I tell you, Phil?”

That night Mr. Danver’s up-town residence was brilliantly lighted in honour of the boys’ return, and many friends called to offer their congratulations, and to shake hands with the brave Russian whose heroic conduct was now being discussed throughout the city.

One thing marred Maurice’s pleasure. Colonel Hercules Hoffman had been thrown from his horse in Central Park a week before, and died two days later, leaving a sealed packet for his ward.

This Maurice opened on the first opportunity, and read with sorrow the shameful confession that threw still more light on Vladimir Saradoff’s crime. The story of the malachite box of jewels, the interview at the Hotel Bristol in Paris, the later correspondence of Vladimir Saradoff—all was told without reserve, and the writer ended by expressing a hope of forgiveness, and willing his fortune to Maurice as a partial restitution.

It must be remembered that Colonel Hoffman, at the time of writing this, knew that the boys had been rescued from their fate, and it must have been a great relief to his burdened conscience to discover that they were not dead, as he, no doubt, had believed.

Maurice generously determined that his guardian’s reputation for honesty and uprightness should not be blotted with this foul story, so he burnt the confession and locked up the secret in his own breast.

He was now possessed of a handsome fortune, for Colonel Hoffman had been worth nearly a hundred thousand dollars himself.

With great difficulty he compelled Paul Platoff to accept a sum that would make him independent for life; and, indeed, it was only through the most dire threats that the brave fellow could be induced to listen to such a proposition.

Platoff was, as we have stated, a man of education, refinement, and ability, and these attainments, which his own Government spurned, he now devoted to his adopted country, becoming a true American at heart.

So now, under the shadow of the stars and stripes—a flag unstained by tyranny

and despotism—Phil and Maurice settle down to a life of earnest work, such as makes existence rich in enjoyment. Yet to Maurice there was still a something wanting, he could not forget the noble young girl to whom he owed his freedom; and, ere a year had passed, he once more paid a visit to the Russian capital. He found the maiden still unwedded, [in] spite of the many brilliant offers she had had. Could it be that her heart still treasured the memory of the youth she had so befriended? It would seem so, for no great persuasion was needed—the father now dead, and so no opposition in that quarter—to induce the fair young Russian to cross the ocean with him for a new home—and there we leave them happy.

THE END