Expiation.

By Ellis Marston,
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ACROSS the white plain stretching between Orenburg and Saratov two sledges with their troikas of horses were swiftly traveling. The snow was falling in great flakes, driving into the faces of the travelers, half blinding them and covering them with a thick white mantle.

"How much farther is it, Ivan?" asked a voice from the first sledge; and the driver, lifting his white mustache and beard from the collar of his capots, answered, "Twenty versts, your Excellency, no more, no less."

A grunt of disgust was the response, and the speaker sank back on his seat, drawing his furs closer around him. The second sleigh kept always at the same distance in the rear of the first; the horses straining at the bit seemed anxious to outstrip the others, but were held sternly in check. In the sleigh two men with bent heads and muffled up to the chin sat silent; one would have ventured to suppose they were asleep. "Shall I pass, Excellency?" asked the driver, turning round, and the man nearest him responded in a stern voice, "No; keep them in sight, and hold your horses."

The snow descended thicker and faster. The sledges with their occupants, their drivers and horses, were now two moving masses of white gliding swiftly along over the sparkling plain.

"Shall we reach the posting station before nightfall?" the first traveler asked anxiously, and the driver responded with a nod; then cracked his whip at a horse which had stumbled, and addressing it as "son of a pig" desired to know if their bones were to be left out on the plains.

Twilight was falling, but the snow threw its own light around. Suddenly the horses in both sledges pricked up their ears, as from a distance borne on the northern wind came a weird, unearthly howl. The driver of the first sledge looked back, and his face became if possible a shade whiter. He stood up and lashed his horses, which broke into a wilder gallop. "Wolves?" asked the traveler quietly, and the driver responded, "Wolves, your Excellency."

In the second sleigh no words were uttered, but the driver also whipped up his horses and the troika flew over the snow in the wake of the other.

The light declined slowly, and there was still enough to see, on the farthest limit of the snowy plain a dark mass following in the wake of the sledges. On it came persistently, ruthlessly, unswervingly, and from it came ever and anon the strange, wild cry which had reached the travelers' ears.

"They are gaining on us," said the first traveler, and the driver responded with a grunt.

"Cannot you go faster?" asked the traveler impatiently, and the driver answered: "No, Excellency, I am already driving the team at their utmost speed. Nevertheless, if your Excellency wishes."

And again he lashed the horses unmercifully.

Suddenly and as if by magic the second sleigh shot ahead, and the horses apparently heretofore held in now went like the wind. Meanwhile the dark mass in the distance had grown larger and darker, and discovered to the unaccustomed eye skirmishers thrown out on either side as well as an advance guard in front.

"Hurry on, hurry on," exclaimed the solitary traveler in an anxious voice, and the driver replied, "Your Excellency had better look to your rifle. You may have to pick off some of the foremost presently."

Just then the horse that had already stumbled fell, and the sledge came to a dead stop. "Up, up, son of a she donkey," screamed the driver, plying his whip vigorously on the prostrate animal. "Do you mean us all to be food for wolves?"

The traveler took out his rifle and a brace of pistols from under the seat and looked carefully to the priming. "I have here provender for half a dozen," he said grimly; and the horse having struggled to its feet the race recommenced. But the delay had brought the pack nearer and now it was distinctly visible, running in regular order and keeping its ranks like a disciplined army.

"Shall I fire?" asked the traveler, and the driver answered: "Your Excellency had better keep your powder for close quarters. It may all be needed," he added significantly.

They were now not going at the same speed as formerly, for the horse which had fallen was evidently acting as a drag on the others, which were young and spirited. The traveler sat with his eyes turned on the advancing pack, and muttered oaths between his teeth. The driver cracked his whip and drove on stolidly. Suddenly the traveler raised his rifle and fired, and one of the foremost wolves fell. There was a distinct pause in the advance of the troop, and a yelping clamor, as they fought around the body of their dead comrade; then the pack swept on, leaving a score or so still snarling and fighting over the carcass.

This check had enabled the sledge to make way, although it was always cumbered by the weakest horse, but now with a loud howl the wolves dashed after it, and were evidently gaining. Again the rifle rang out, this time with both barrels, and a couple of wolves lay bleeding on the white snow; again there was a check and a fight, and some of the number left behind to divide the spoil.

There were now only about twenty left of the originally large pack, but these, excited by the nearness of their prey, dashed on, led by a grim, gray old wolf. The progress of the sledge had become slower and slower, and the wolves, making a sudden dash, surrounded it on all sides. The driver laid about him lustily with his whip; the traveler brought down the butt end of his musket on the enemies' heads and, firing his pistols, wounding several, but withal there seemed little chance of escape, until the driver by a sudden happy inspiration cried out: "If your Excellency will but keep the devils in check for a few seconds I will provide them with a banquet that will suffice them." And running up the horses he sprang to the ground, cut the traces on the side of the weaker horse and loosed its head; then, springing back to his seat, whipped up the remaining two, who, freed from their unlucky comrade, flew swiftly and lightly over the snow.

There was a horrible scream, as the wolves fastened on the horse, which was quickly pulled down and torn to pieces.

"We have escaped them this time, thanks to this," said the driver, piously kissing a leaden medal which hung from a ribbon round his neck; "but look there," and he pointed with his whip to where in the distance the two divisions were galloping up to join their comrades.

The traveler smiled grimly as he put away his rifle and pistols, covering them carefully from the snow. "That was a narrow shave," he said. "How much farther to the posting station?"

"Yonder, your Excellency," and the man pointed to where, far ahead, a little group of buildings, covered with snow, was barely visible on the white landscape.

Another half hour brought the sledge safely into the yard of the posting-house; and the traveler hurried into the building.

"Some supper, a bed and a team of your best horses by the break of day," he said to the host, a stout man, clad in dirty sheepskin garments.

"The supper and the bed, barin; but as to the horses, I regret that it is impossible. My last troika has just gone on ahead, and I shall not have fresh ones until to-morrow at midday."

"How?" cried the traveler, raising his hand, while his face became a fiery red. "Did I not send you word yesterday that I should want your best horses?"

"It was your Excellency, was it?" asked the host, scratching his head in a perplexed manner.

"Dimitri Varanzoff," said the traveler.

"Ah, yes. That was the name they gave."

"Do you mean to say, son of a serf, that you have given my team to others?"

"I have offended unwittingly, barin. They gave the name and I gave the horses—an hour or more ago."

"And who are they? Speak, slave——"

"The party that arrived last before your Excellency. Their horses are still smoking in the stable and utterly done up."

The traveler glared at him and swore loudly, to which, however, the host paid not the slightest attention, being probably used to the proceeding. Then Dimitri Varanzoff retired to the inner room, where he paced up and down, pulling at his beard, and muttering dispiritedly to himself.

"I have it," he exclaimed at last. "'Tis Paul Staroski. He has ferreted out my designs; he alone has so large an interest at stake, ruined as he is. Now I understand the Cossack leaving me as suddenly as he did—he whom I esteemed a faithful servant. He was sent to the house as a spy upon me, and my letters, my papers, have doubtless been ransacked while I dwelt in fancied security. May the devil and all his angels fly away with the Cossack spy and his master, Paul Staroski," he exclaimed with renewed fury.

Just then the host entered with a dish of the stew, which he placed on the table, with a large loaf of bread and a bottle of vodka, and the traveler being very sharp set, made a hearty meal despite his chagrin, and afterward, wrapping himself in his rugs, threw himself on a sofa and was soon snoring lustily. Meanwhile in the kitchen the driver was busily discussing his meal and gossiping with his host.

"The barin seems put out," said the landlord; "but how is a poor fellow to know which is which? Yesterday came a message by letter to have ready a troika of the best horses by 5 o'clock to-morrow morning. Three of my very best I accordingly kept, and many oaths and threats did I come in for from other travelers because I would not part with them. An hour or two ago came a troika, the horses smoking hot, driver and travelers in a fever of impatience. 'A troika for Dimitri Varanzoff!' they cried; then swallowed some vodka and a few morsels of bread, and were off like the wind. 'Dispatches of importance for the Governor of Moscow' were all the words the driver uttered to me. Now comes your barin, gives the same name and also demands horses. What is a poor fellow to do?"

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In the fortress of Kazan the reveille had sounded, and in the courtyard a band of men were standing with pickaxes, mattocks and spades on their shoulders. An officer in uniform read over their names rapidly, to which they responded, and then they were marched out to the outworks, and set to work digging and carting the soil to make room for the erection of fortifications.

These workmen, many of them fine-looking men, were political prisoners, banished for crimes real or imaginary to this dreary fortress, where they lingered out the weary years in work for which they were totally unfitted. One of the men, a thick-set figure, with grizzled hair and beard, had been already an inmate of the fortress for three years, and was looking forward to another three, before being allowed to return home. His reputed crime was selling plans of Russian fortresses to an alien power. He had been an officer in the army, and had consequently exceptional means of information on the subject. He passed by the name of Ivan Petnoff.

On the previous day a fresh batch of prisoners had arrived, and Petnoff found himself working side by side with a tall military looking man with black hair and beard, whose face had been frightfully injured as if by an explosion. When the officer on guard passed beyond earshot, the two men began to converse in low tones. "Who are you, and whence do you come?" asked Petnoff.

"My name is Michael Strogoff, and I come from Moscow," said the other after a second's hesitation. "May I ask you the same question?"

"Here I am called Petnoff; but in Orenburg my name was Varanzoff," said the other laconically and sadly.

The newcomer started. "And you are here for——"

"Charged with selling plans of Russian fortresses to the Turks; a crime of which I am innocent."

"We are all innocent," rejoined the other, shrugging his shoulders; and then, as the officer turned on his beat and came toward them, they broke off their conversation and bent steadily over their work. From that day these two men became sworn friends and allies. So much so at least as was possible under the circumstances; and being members of the same working gang they were thrown much together.

At last Strogoff, whose less robust frame could not so well withstand the effects of the work and exposure, fell sick; and his friend devoted all his spare time to waiting on him. The man was indeed sick almost unto death, and was eventually left by the doctor to die. But Petnoff fed him with the choicest morsels he could beg or steal, and at last cheated the grim monarch of his prey.

When Strogoff once more got about he was but a poor, attenuated mortal, and quite unfit for work. "You have been my good angel, Petnoff," he said, as his friend sat beside him one evening when the day's work was over. "If we are ever set free from this infernal place you shall find that my gratitude will be boundless."

Petnoff smiled somewhat drearily. "I have heard men say the same things to their comrades before, many times," he said, "and when they say it they mean it. But in the comfort of their own homes they forget these dreary wastes and the comrade they have left behind pining in captivity. You will remember me for a week, my friend—possibly a month—then I shall be forgotten."

"May heaven then forget me," said the other vehemently. "I have in my sickness been busy making plans for our escape."

Petnoff shook his head. "Do not think of it," he said. "I have known men to escape and I have seen them brought back"—and he paused, shuddering. "Do not speak again of it."

But a week afterward Strogoff broached the subject once more. "I have friends in Novgorod," he said. "If we can but get there we are safe. My brother is an officer of the garrison; I am certain that with skill, patience and secrecy we can leave this place."

"But to get away from here and to traverse all these versts; that is the difficulty."

"Ah, but as I told you, I have not wasted the time while I have been ill. The Cossack who brings us our food has a wife and family in Novgorod. He knows my brother; was indeed at one time his servant. I have promised him and all that help us great rewards. My brother is rich and will not grudge to pay, I know what I have promised. It is so arranged, and when I am a little stronger we will avail ourselves of the first opportunity that presents. Be you but patient and watchful and we may yet see him and liberty."

A fortnight afterward the Governor of the Province came to Kazan on a tour of inspection of the various forts under his jurisdiction and it leaked out among the prisoners that several wagons of ammunition, as well as provisions, were to be sent to the fort in the course of the following week.

"Now is our time," whispered Strogoff to his friend; "Vassilis assures me that we can be stowed away in one of the returning wagons in company with broken arms and damaged gunpowder. He has my orders to bribe the escort largely, so that they may shut their eyes until we are safe within the walls of Novgorod."

There was unusual bustle in the fortress, as a long train of wagons entered the gates; and all the prisoners were set to work to store away the ammunition and provisions which had arrived.

"To-night, to-night," muttered Strogoff to Petnoff; "feign to sleep, but keep yourself awake."

In the gray, cold morning, when the earth had not yet awoke from its slumber, the empty wagons lumbered out of the courtyard, accompanied by an escort of twenty men on their way to Novgorod.

In the last wagon, concealed under a covering of loose hay, and in the near vicinity of old disabled guns and damaged gunpowder, crouched Strogoff and Petnoff, with their Cossack deliverer, breathless and half naked, their hearts palpitating with anxiety and fear. The guards and the outposts were safely passed, after what seemed to the poor captives an eternity of time, and they dared at last to raise their heads and to converse in low tones.

"Are the soldiers safe?" asked Petnoff fearfully.

"All bought," answered Strogoff; and the Cossack, joining in, remarked that he hoped there would be no mistake about payment, as he had given his word that the promises would be redeemed when they reached Novgorod. Then he produced a loaf of bread, a lump of cheese and a bottle of vodka, and they ate and drank and were mightily refreshed.

The day was declining as they neared their journey's end, and in the distance they could see the towers and cupolas of Novgorod. The horses, which had gone all the time at a quick pace, were whipped up and broke into a gallop, and the half empty wagons lumbered and banged along over mud and ruts, making the journey anything but an easy one to the occupants of one of them. When they were within a verst of the city they heard the crack of rifles in the distance, and looking cautiously from the wagon, were aware of a body of cavalry on the verge of the horizon. "Our flight is discovered," said the Cossack in dismay, and they looked into each other's face, which was blanched with terror.

"But they are yet far off," said Strogoff; "and if we are once inside the gates of Novgorod, we are safe."

The Cossack spoke a few words to the nearest soldier, who immediately galloped on to the front; and presently they heard the cracking of whips, and were made painfully aware that the pace had quickened.

But the troop of horsemen were coming on at a rapid gallop and would soon be within rifle shot; and although the wagons kept on at their utmost speed, their pursuers gained upon them.

"Only half a verst—only half a verst," groaned Strogoff. "Holy Saints! To be captured in sight of safety."

At a few hundred yards from the gates a bugle call rang out from the nearest wagon and instantly the gate was thrown open and they could see the sentries inside standing awaiting their entrance. A shot whistled over the heads of the fugitives, another burst through the tarpaulin covering the wagon. In his fear and anxiety, Petnoff forgot all prudence, and standing up he parted the covering and stood fully exposed to the pursuers. In an instant he was thrown to the floor of the wagon and covered by some heavy body as a volley of rifles rang out. He was half stunned but supposed that he must be wounded. Then he heard the great gates clash to behind the wagon, which stopped instantly and he was lifted out. "Ah," he said, seeing that he was covered with blood, "I am wounded." Then he saw that men were carrying away on a litter something covered over, from which the blood dripped as they went along. That night, after Petnoff had been refreshed by a bath and a supper, he was summoned to an upper room in the garrison. It was a poor little room, meanly furnished, and on a small camp bed lay something covered over with a sheet. An officer in rich uniform stood beside it. As Petnoff approached he turned back the sheet and revealed the dead face of Strogoff.

The escaped fugitive threw himself by the corpse of his friend and covered the cold face and hands with tears and kisses.

"He gave his life for yours," said the officer huskily. "He received his death wounds in shielding you; and he only lived an hour after he was brought in here."

"Ah! my friend! my friend!" cried Petnoff.

"Before he died," resumed the officer, "he was able to converse a little, and I then learned for the first time who was the companion of his flight, of which he had managed to send me word beforehand. He told me to tell you that this was his expiation."

"Expiation," repeated Petnoff, bewildered.

"Carry your thoughts back nearly four years to a journey you made by sledge from Orenburg to Sanator, when you were attacked by wolves."

Petnoff nodded.

"You were passed en route by another sledge containing two men, who took advantage of your arrangements and using your name got possession of the team you had ordered."

Again Petnoff nodded, wondering to what this might tend.

"These men," continued the officer, "were my brother and myself. We had, by the hands of a Cossack servant introduced into your house, obtained copies of the plans of towns and fortifications which you had been commissioned by the Russian Government to make. These copies we sold to the Turkish Government for a large sum, leaving you to suffer the consequences. Had the crime been fully proved against you, a traitor's death would have been your portion; but they gave you the benefit of the doubt, and imprisoned you for a crime you never committed. We were well recompensed, and thought little of you. What would you? We are Poles—and every Russian is to us an enemy, to be served as we would willingly serve the whole race. Then my brother went to St. Petersburg, where I was to have joined him, and in the new world we were going to found a colony for our oppressed nation, but he was singularly incautious—my poor Paul! He was suspected and arrested—tried—but, as in your case, full proof was wanting. I have labored for his liberation. But a mightier hand than mine has set him free."

"Hasn't she a past?" inquired the gossipy man.

"Yes," answered the sensational actress, "but it isn't much use to her. Somehow she doesn't seem able to get any of it into the newspapers."—Washington Star.

Fair Riders.

One of the first requisites, whether the rider be delicate or strong, is moderation. Riding for speed subverts the very end of the exercise—it is like rowing or running or doing anything else for speed; it finally conquers the conqueror—and the most sickening, harrowing sight is the continuous race. The associations of wheelmen should do all in their power to suppress these public exhibitions of human idiocy.

Another essential, especially for women, is an appropriate dress, and there is no law against a gentleman also being appropriately dressed. I never could understand why it was necessary that a man should wear the garb of a circus clown in order to ride a wheel. In the past year or two women have come nobly to the rescue in the matter of genteel dress. The short hair, the bloomer and the chewing-gum have well nigh disappeared. The plain cloth, medium width, medium length gown is no hindrance and has the further advantage and economy of being a good rainy-day gown for walking. Another essential is to learn how to ride. Many are riding without this knowledge. There are a few mechanical principles to be observed. One is to have the gearing so arranged so as to have the pedal on a level with the foot when the foot is xetended.

Another is to have the saddle so placed as to bring the weight of the body directly over the pedal when the latter is at its lowest point.

Still another is to lower the handle-bars sufficiently to allow the body to bend forward slightly from the hips—not stooping from the shoulders, thereby compressing the lungs. Nearly all beginners bend the spine backward from the hips. As a rule, young children, if the gearing is correct, take the normal position.

Finally, the rider should sit, as in a chair, upon the bones or tuberosities of the pelvis, and should on no account allow the weight of the body to rest upon the tissues situated between these bony prominences. Indeed, the danger of serious injury resulting to children and adults from riding a saddle constructed in ignorance of correct anatomical principles is so great that it is always wise to refer the saddle question to a competent physician.

Beside the very important question of saddle is that of the wheel itself. It must be thoroughly well made of the best material and it must not be too light. Too light a wheel gains no momentum while the jar—to speak of—vibration are disagreeable, if not injurious.

There must be a certain weight and solidity. Finally, the wheel by its economy of money and time, permits the rider to avail himself of new scenes and places, giving pleasurable sensations, the absence of which in exercise for health alone is the reason why health seldom responds to the call of such perfunctory exercise. The heart is not in it.—Dr. Farrah H. Stevenson in Leslie's Weekly.

It is not the earth but the sea that has produced the largest plant in the world. That distinction is held by a seaweed, known as the "nereocytis," which frequently grows to a height of more than 300 feet. The stem of the plant is as strong as an ordinary rope, and large quantities of it are dried and used as rope by the inhabitants of the South Sea Islands, where the curious vegetable ropes are found. This seaweed usually grows to a depth of from 200 to 300 feet. As soon as the plant takes root a spear-shaped balloon is formed, which grows with the stem toward the surface of the water. This balloon frequently has a diameter of six feet or more. It has, of course, an upward tendency, and therefore keeps the stem growing until it floats on the top of the water. This enormous weed grows in such quantities that large meadow-like islands are formed, which are often so big as to impede navigation. The ropes made from the stems of the plant are used for building purposes, and the balloons when dried make very serviceable vessels.

The Swedes are probably the tallest people in Europe, and have, on the whole, erect, handsome figures. To some extent this advantage is due to physical exercise, for Ling's Swedish gymnastics are compulsory in the elementary schools and much used in other schools and colleges.