

## ON THE ROAD TO SIBERIA.

THE STORY OF A POLISH PRISONER.



BRIGHT sunny day in June—the sky blue and intense, with the deep waters beneath it, and flecked here and there with light silvery clouds—hardly a breath to ripple the glassy surface of the soft ground-swell that comes rolling gently in, trying to lap the white cliffs of Dover; sea-

birds flapping lazily along, scarce deigning to dip for a tempting morsel; everything inciting to lounging and idleness.

It seemed in vain to try and battle against the general drowsiness; energy itself had died out—even the most recent and most thrilling of stories failed to rouse me, and I was about to succumb to the universal somnolency, when a faint curl of distant white smoke told me something fresh might be stirring, as the Calais boat steamed quietly in.

“Hallo! you here?” and a hearty slap on the shoulder made me fairly start round, to find myself face to face with my wandering and erratic cousin, Charlie Norton.

“I think I may with greater justice return the compliment. Where do *you* come from? Have the mountains of the moon or the deserts of Australia been last honoured by your presence?”

“Not quite so far this time,” was the laughing rejoinder. “I have only just come from Berlin, and am now waiting to meet a friend rescued from the clutches of that ‘paternal government’ you are so fond of. Poor Von Falken! He only narrowly escaped ending the rest of his days in Siberia!”

No further need now to rouse me; my interest was thoroughly excited.

“Do you mean that your friend actually managed to escape?” I asked.

“No—but thanks to that ‘man of iron,’ Bismarck, he was at last liberated. But there he is—come with me, and you shall hear the tale fresh from the fountain-head.”

The steamer had by this time come in, and was slowly disgorging her freight of “kinds.” Charlie, never gifted with too much patience, could hardly await the landing of the different passengers ere pouncing on his friend, and giving his servant directions about the luggage, he carried him off to the “Lord Warden,” where he insisted on my accompanying them.

I found Herr von Falken a most charming and delightful companion, and gifted with great conversational powers. Had it not been for the settled look of intense suffering, which never left him, even when talking on ordinary topics, I could not have imagined him as having ever gone through all the terrible hardships of which he gave us the following graphic sketch while sipping our after-dinner Mocha, and soothed with the grateful fumes of pipe and cigar.

It was the beginning of the year 1862—the Polish insurrection was at its height—every day fresh arrests were made, and long trains of political prisoners sent off to Russia. Von Falken took no part in the rising (being at that time employed in looking after the estates of Count C. in Polish Lithuania), but although far away from the scene of action, he was falsely accused, and in spite of his protestations, taken into custody by order of the Governor of the Province, brought before the “Search Commission,” and sent on to Kovno, where he was sentenced to death, but afterwards *reprieved*, and given life-long banishment to Siberia instead.

Time passed—still he remained in prison, and was almost beginning to think he had been forgotten, when on the Saturday before Easter, 1865, an officer entered his cell at seven in the morning, telling him to prepare forthwith for his dreary journey. A few minutes later he was taken to the prison courtyard, where he found about forty other fellow-sufferers, with several ladies among them.

All wore the prison dress, and most of them were chained, but Von Falken, being a Prussian, was allowed as a great favour to retain his own clothes.

The garb of the Siberian convicts, without any difference as to rank, consists of a coarse linen shirt, trousers of some rough hairy material, stout leather shoes, a long coat of the same stuff as the trousers, on the back of which a square of yellow stuff is fastened, like a huge ace of diamonds, and a cap of the ordinary military shape, also with a yellow square in the centre. Rags take the place of stockings, and this, with a chain about three feet long fastened round the ankles, completes the costume. To this a sheep’s-skin great-coat is added in the winter.

Women condemned to Siberia wear the same dress as the men, only instead of the trousers they are allowed to use their own clothes under the men’s convict dress.

The “fatherly” Russian Government permits the nearest relatives of the exiles to accompany them to Siberia, but they have to submit to the same treatment as the prisoners during all the long and weary journey. Notwithstanding this terrible ordeal, numbers take advantage of this permission, especially among the Poles; thus mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters were in close attendance on the long train of exiles, ready and willing to undergo any suffering and fatigue, if only they could help or comfort their loved ones. All honour to those noble souls!

And truly the sacrifice they brought was no small one! Most of them, women of high rank and birth, had left home and position, ease and comfort, to brave the horrors of such a transport! Packed closely into iron-barred trucks—far from clean—together with rough men, women, and soldiers; exposed to cold, hunger, and fatigue during the long and terrible



march on foot, lasting for more than a year, always under strict military surveillance: all this they willingly submitted to, and not a word of complaint or regret ever escaped those brave, unselfish lips! A four hours' journey of terrible discomfort brought the party to Wilna, where they were all placed indiscriminately in the common prison, and kept there during the Easter holidays. Several other transports of political prisoners having also arrived at the same time, the place was so crowded that Von Falken and Prince M. were thrust into a cell with some twenty-six ordinary criminals. Those days of their captivity were too horrible ever to be forgotten!

After five days (which seemed like so many months), their journey was continued to St. Petersburg. Men, women, and children, no matter what their rank or age, were kept close prisoners in the van, and for three days and nights no one was allowed egress under *any pretext whatever*, soldiers with loaded rifles keeping guard over this Elysium! Thanks to the ladies who had accompanied their friends, and who had provided themselves with money (which opens almost every door in Russia), many hardships were alleviated and comforts procured, and as the engineer kindly supplied boiling water from the engine, they were enabled at times to enjoy that never-failing Muscovite luxury, tea.

Arrived at St. Petersburg, a fine trait in the Russian character was conspicuous. Much as the Polish insurrection was disliked by all parties, yet these poor exiles, who were paraded through the principal thoroughfares of St. Petersburg, were only looked upon by the inhabitants as unfortunate victims, in need of their help and compassion; and as the long train passed through the streets, the people thronged round them, offering both money and food, the soldiers finding it utterly impossible to keep the crowd back. Some gave as much as fifteen and twenty roubles, and even more, the poorer classes eagerly coming forward with copper coins. One small child pressed her two kopecks on Von Falken, and would take no denial! He never parted with them, and showed us them as pendants to his watch-chain! While at St. Petersburg their treatment was much improved. They were placed in a large building, intended for an orphanage, together with a number of other political prisoners, all bound for Siberia, but they were allowed to mix freely, and were not cramped as to room.

While waiting here, Von Falken, through the kindness of the colonel in command of the convoy, got a letter sent to the Prussian Embassy, asking permission to see the ambassador and state his case. In reply, M. de Magnus came to see him, and advised him, as the ambassador was away, to write direct to the Emperor, and hand in his appeal to the Prussian Consul at Moscow, and he would write to him, and tell him to send it to the ambassador, who would himself hand it to the Emperor. He then bade farewell to Von Falken, leaving a considerable sum of money with him, together with a letter to the Prussian Consul at Moscow.

It was with a somewhat lighter heart that our friend

prepared for his further route, and although the journey to Moscow was far worse than anything they had yet encountered, fresh hope and courage filled his breast as he looked forward to a speedy release.

When they reached the old Muscovite capital, the concourse of people was even greater than at St. Petersburg, all eager to show their sympathy towards the captives, who, after a short delay, were lodged in a splendid villa, standing in the midst of beautiful gardens and surrounded by a magnificent park. This lovely spot had been the home of a wealthy merchant, who having fallen under suspicion during the Crimean War, his property (which was very large) had been confiscated, and he himself ended his days in Siberia!

Von Falken's health, having been greatly undermined by the long confinement, now fairly broke down with the fatigues and hardships of the journey. By order of the doctor who looked after the Siberian prisoners in Moscow, a German, he was placed in a bright cheerful room by himself, and was pronounced utterly unfit to proceed on his journey.

Next day, feeling somewhat stronger, Von Falken began his epistle to the Emperor, telling him the whole circumstances of the case, and how, notwithstanding that the court-martial had declared him innocent, the governor, General Mouravieff, had had him arrested and condemned. He further asked the Emperor not for *mercy*, but for *justice*, and a revision of his case.

This petition he gave to the Prussian Consul, who came to visit him, and who promised to arrange that Von Falken should not be sent on till the Emperor's decision was made known, which promise was further strengthened by Prince Obolinski, the governor, who also came to see him. Thus poor Von Falken was indulging in the vain hope that perhaps at the eleventh hour he might yet escape his terrible doom.

The exiles are always granted an eight days' rest at Moscow, and during this period Von Falken was allowed free intercourse with his friend Prince M., who had already shared his cell during his three years' imprisonment. They had both been sentenced to life-long banishment to Irkutsk; thus a joint misfortune had cemented a true friendship, and now, forgetting his own misfortune, the prince was overjoyed at the prospect of his friend's release. But, alas! the day of parting arrived only too soon—they would probably never see each other again in this life—Von Falken was speechless with grief, but Prince M., giving his friend a tearful embrace, said, "Farewell! when you return to your own beautiful country, your beloved Germany, oh, do not forget your poor friend!" The convoy moved off, and Von Falken, still weak and faint from illness, was taken back to his room. He never saw his friend again!

During his stay at Moscow hundreds of exiles arrived every week. They were mostly Poles, doomed to forget their Fatherland in the mines of Siberia—men and women of all ranks and ages, and generally accompanied by some loving and devoted relative.

Truly, some men's losses are other men's gains, and the beautiful grounds of the unhappy merchant's



villa being easily guarded, unusual freedom was granted to the prisoners, who were permitted to roam about the gardens under surveillance.

Marvellous instances of devotion occurred, and traits of such sublime self-denial, that Von Falken felt that adversity truly often brings out what is noblest in the human character.

Among the various couples that wandered about the park, one especially attracted Von Falken's notice. It was a beautiful young countess and a nobleman, who had met in the prison at Kovno, and had fallen in love, become engaged, and got married by means of a most wonderful lover's alphabet. The prisoners in the two wings of the prison managed to communicate with each other by a system of telegraphy, so simple that even Siemens or Halske might have liked to patent it. The twenty-four squares formed by the iron window-bars represented the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, and the telegraphist, pointing from one square to another, would finish the word by a double stroke of the fingers. Thus words ran into sentences with wonderful rapidity, and anecdotes, messages, riddles were shot backwards and forwards to lighten the tedium of the captives.

The couple in question soon became quite expert in the use of these signals, and the lovely countess and the talented young nobleman fell in love and betrothed themselves in this original manner. After their engagement had been completed behind the barred window, the marriage was publicly celebrated in presence of all the prisoners, and what made it still

more touching was the fact that the countess had already gained her freedom, and he—was condemned to hard labour for life! But she was true to her love, and determined to accompany the man to whom she had given her heart, though she knew it was into life-long exile.

Von Falken's hopes of a speedy deliverance were, however, doomed to disappointment. The Emperor had suddenly started off to the bedside of his son at Nice, and after waiting for nearly three months, the governor declared he could no longer undertake the responsibility of retaining him at Moscow. He was extremely sorry, he said, but the fresh orders he had received concerning the Polish prisoners were peremptory, and left him no alternative, so Von Falken must prepare to start with the next convoy. Both the doctor and the Prussian Consul interfered on his behalf, but with no success. On the 14th June, in company with 280 other unfortunates, the journey to Siberia was continued, and he became a "number," his individuality, nay, his very existence, wiped off the record of civilisation.

He paused. "I cannot tell you all my further sufferings. The time is hardly ripe for that. Some day, perhaps, if you care about it, I will tell you the rest of my tale. Suffice it for the present that, through friends and true friendship, I am once again free—a man—not merely a cypher! Oh, you English! Thank Heaven, on your bended knees, for the freedom that is yours by right." To which I added a silent, though heartfelt, Amen!

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BIRDS OF THE MONTHS.

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NOVEMBER—SEA-GULL.

STORMS of autumn sweep the sea,  
Inland, on the blast upwinging,  
Come white-breasted Sea-gulls, bringing  
Fresh breaths of the wild and free.

KATE T. SIZER.