

# SIBERIAN EXILE

## Its Beginnings in Half-Civilized Russia.

### CZAR NICHOLAS AND HAPLESS POLAND.

#### Sad Scenes on the Road to the Land of Ice and Snow—The Sorrows of Lifelong Banishment.

The custom of sending criminals and political offenders from Russia to Siberia probably began soon after the conquest of the latter by the Cossacks—that is, about the year 1600. It was the cheaper way of disposing of them, and besides had the merit of placing a long and impassable interval between conspirators and the scene of their plots and machinations. At first exiles were only sent to places on the Volga or Ural, which were then very distant as regarded means of communication. Hardly anything can be imagined more desolate than this cold, inhospitable and little known region when it began first to be used as a place of banishment. An icy ocean rolled to the north of it. Its great rivers, for half the year locked in ice, were even during the summer hardly ripped by boats of the native races. Its broad wind-swept steppes were scarcely less repulsive than its dark and boundless forests. Within its bounds were unknown tribes, and along its northern frontier barbarous Tartars and mysterious Mongolians. Those who were sent by the cruel Czar of the seventeenth century went never to return. The hardships were great, and escape next to impossible. Hope was left behind. The separation from relatives and friends was as complete as that of the grave. Russia was still a savage region, unillumined by lights of Western civilization. Peter the Great, that "beam in darkness," had not yet begun his work of reform. Fortunately, through the first years of Sibirian exile those doomed to it were not and comparatively insensitive to misfortune. Dimitri, the monk Otrepiet, who pretended to be the murdered son of Ivan IV, decreed the banishment of his rival, Vasili Shuiski, to these wilds, but relented and lost his crown, the man who owed so much to his leniency, heading the revolt. Banishment began in earnest in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, when Peter the Great was extending his conquests. Among those whom he exiled was Mouzikoff, his Prime Minister, whose remains were exhumed ninety years after, and found to be so perfectly preserved that portions of the hair and even the clothing were sent to his descendants in Russia as mementoes. This fact is mentioned by Linnæus, the scientist and traveler, to illustrate the preservative qualities of cold and the depth to which the ground is frozen in certain localities in Siberia, which he thinks to be not less than 630 feet. Biron, Minister of the Empress Anna, had exiled 20,000 people before the year 1741. The Empress Elizabeth, youngest daughter of Peter the Great, had an aversion to the taking of human life, but none to torture, the knot and exile, of which she freely availed herself as substitutes.

#### UNHAPPY POLAND.

But however great the pains and deprivations of Sibirian exile might have been, it would probably never have so won the sympathy of the world except for the partition of Poland and the sufferings of Polish patriots. The first dismemberment of this unhappy country occurred in 1772, the second in 1793, and in 1795 the kingdom was finally broken in pieces in spite of the heroic efforts of Kosciuszko, and all that was left of it distributed among the conquerors. Napoleon restored it for a brief period, but by the Treaty of Vienna, which followed his banishment, title to its territory was affirmed to the great Powers which had taken it by force. There followed a period of oppression such as would have been impossible under any other Emperor than Nicholas I. It led to a revolution in 1832, the consequences of which were terrible. Of 245 persons who had escaped, there were condemned in do all seven to from ten to twenty years in iron, nine to death by the sword and 240 to be hung. Children were arrested for singing popular songs. Prisoners were tortured to death over slow fires or driven to madness. The estates of thousands were confiscated, and they were sent into exile. The Poles were scattered in thousands throughout the civilized world. Sixty thousand were sent to Siberia by Nicholas, who declared that he would "make a Siberia of Poland, and a Poland of Siberia." A few years later there was a plot to revolt among the exiles, in which several thousand took part. One thousand were arrested, most of whom were released. Seven of the leaders were condemned to receive 7000 blows of the stick. Six died under the punishment, and one was recovered by extraordinary medical and surgical skill. The refined, sensitive and patriotic people exile was worse than death, and those sent to the forests of the north doubtless regretted that they had not died fighting like thousands of their compatriots in the suburbs of Warsaw. Whole villages were either subjected to the rod or banished. Deaths under the knot or stick were common, though the blows of the latter, by ukase of Peter the Great, were not allowed to exceed 12,000. No Russian nobleman could be knighted, but Polish noblemen were not exempt from this capital penalty.

#### THE BANISHED PIOTROWSKI.

Rufin Piotrowski was an educated Pole, who participated in the uprising of 1833 and escaped to France. Venturing to return in disguise, he was arrested and exiled to Ekaterynski Zavod, which is 250 miles north of Omsk, a town of 30,000 inhabitants, on the Irtysh river. His story, written by himself, is interestingly full of bitterness, but not all of horror. It was the injustice to his country and the banishment that embittered him more than the labor which he was compelled to perform. His companions were the ordinary convicts who make up the majority of exiles. One had shot a traveler for his money; a second had dogged his master into a wood and killed him; a third had stabbed his mistress to the heart; a fourth had participated in a robbery and then murdered his companion; a fifth had robbed the treasury; a sixth had committed forgery; a seventh was an incendiary, and so on through the long list of offenses punishable with exile and hard labor. The military surveillance was strict. Says Piotrowski: "It is not the work which any freeman might perform. Such treatment to political prisoners, who are, with rare exceptions, men of education, is an injury of which only a Czar is capable." He at first was employed in cutting wood, or assisting in the erection of buildings, but finally became an accountant, and so remained till he escaped and made his way again to France through Russia and Prussia, paying his way with money which he had been permitted to earn. His book throws much light on the treatment of exiles during the second quarter of the present century. Most of the political prisoners were allowed to remain in the province nearest to Russia. The convicts were sent beyond, into the more inaccessible regions and the mines, of which he tells plain tales.

#### AN EXILE'S PRIVILEGES.

Convicts were allowed to marry and their children to go where they pleased. The necessities and most of the comforts of life were obtainable. He confesses that he had never lived so well in France. His table was furnished most of the time with game, fish, soup, beef and white cakes. There were 3000 Jewish exiles, nearly all in the villages about Tomsk, on the Obi. Jews and Tartars stood highest in social morality, which was at a low ebb. The population he estimated at 3,000,000, distributed over a region as large as all Europe. His treatment by his guards and the officials in charge of him was uniformly kind. They pitied him, but did not venture to doubt the justice of his sentence by the Little Father, the Czar. Some convicts expressed to him a preference for life in Siberia. The whole country was fast developing. The trade in furs was large, new mines were being worked, forests cleared, agriculture extending, and towns and cities rapidly growing. Irkutsk was even then considered the focus of Sibirian civilization, and was called the St. Petersburg of Siberia. The chief divisions of the country were gubernias. These were divided into provinces, which were subdivided into gubernias. Bokhara had not at the time been taken by Russia, but trade was maintained with that Mohammedan metropolis by means of caravans, which left every spring. That sweet but this romance "The Exiles of Siberia," relates to the reign of Nicholas. It describes the adventures of one Elizabeth, whose noble parents had been cruelly exiled to a village near Tobolsk. She conceived the dream of obtaining their pardon, and accomplished that object by making the journey to Moscow, proceeding most of the distance on foot, and pleading her cause with Alexander I on the day of his coronation, a noble lover giving her aid at the last moment.

#### A BITTER ENGLISH VIEW.

An English novelist has written a vindictive and superficial sketch called "The En-

slaves of To-day," in which he describes the Sibirian exile as he claims to have seen it. Private arrests are, he says, still common, and before the friends of a prisoner are aware of his apprehension he is spirited away to the quicksilver mines beyond Lake Baikal. To the man's wife, if he has one, this is equivalent to perpetual widowhood. This secrecy is said to be for the purpose of avoiding needless public scandal. To be sentenced to the mines is to be sentenced to death by slow torture. If the offender has money he may possibly obtain a mitigation of his sentence. Convicts are forwarded in convoys, which start early in the spring. They perform the journey on foot attended by mounted Cossacks armed with pistols, lances, and long whips. Tamburines follow to carry those who fall lame or ill by the way. The start is always made in the night, and care is taken that the convoy shall pass through the towns on the road after dark. All are numbered on a brass plate fastened to the breast. The women wear black hoods, and have a separate escort. In leaving large cities all are lettered, but the letters are removed when the country is reached, except from dangerous convicts. Says the writer: "Any foreigner who has been at St. Petersburg during the spring and has chanced to come home late from the Easter balls may have met one of these dismal processions filing through the streets on a quiet march. The Cossacks crack their whips to warn loafers off, and scamper up and down the line with lanterns tied to lance-points, which they lower to the ground at every moment to see if letters have been dropped. Murderers, thieves, nihilist conspirators, felon clergymen, mutinous soldiers and patriotic Poles, all tramp together as fast as they can go, and perfectly silent. Then come the women, shivering and sobbing, but not daring to cry out because of those awful whips. These are sure to be some young girls among them—ex-students convicted of nihilism, or Polish girls accused of hatching plots—and these are mixed up elbow to elbow with hardened adventurers sentenced for bank-note forgeries and with flat-footed Muscovite drabs who have killed a husband or child under the influence of vodka."

#### ON THE ROAD.

Mass is said at a church outside the city, where a priest preaches the clemency of the Czar. The escort is not usually uniform. At night the convoy bivouacs in a pine forest. The route is through Nijni Novgorod, where the exiles are taken in a steamer down the Volga to the Kama, which they ascend to Perm, whence a great highway leads across the Ural mountains to Ekaterinberg, Omsk, and other Sibirian districts. Those who have seen the city of Michael Strogoff or read Jules Verne's highly imaginative description of the wanderings of the "Courier of the Czar," will remember that he followed the same route. It is by this route also that the survivors of the *Jeanette* may be expected to return to Russia. Corporal punishment is the chief method of discipline in Siberia. Discharged exiles return to Russia in caravans, and are interned in interior towns, where their lot is that of lepers, people fearing to speak to them or fear of exciting suspicion. The exiles who live in the mines are convicts of the worst type and political offenders of the best. They work and sleep in the depths of the earth. Iron gates, guarded by sentries, close the lodges or streets at the bottom of the shafts, and the miners are railed off from one another in gangs of twenty. Two holidays are allowed yearly. All other days, Sundays included, they toil under the lash till their joints are racked with pains, their eyebrows drop off, and they become faint as skeletons, lose the use of their limbs, and finally die in infirmaries.

#### FROM AN ENGLISH JOURNAL.

This view of the Sibirian exile harmonizes more with the old theories regarding it. It probably contains an element of truth with much that is, at present at least, falsehood. It would evidently be incomplete without giving with it as a companion piece a description of Siberian prisons found in some letters written two years ago to the London *Times* by a correspondent, who went through Siberia from the Ural mountains to the mouth of the Amoor, visiting nearly all the prisons of the country on his way. Russia has had within a few years an impulse of prison reform, which has extended not only through her European possessions, but through Siberia. They are, therefore, very different from what they were thirty or forty years ago. Englishmen who criticize Russian prisons would do well to remember that before the era of prison reform in England, which is some fifty years ago, there was hardly a jail or a penitentiary in the United Kingdom which was fit for a pig-sty. The reader can compare the statements of one writer with the other and draw his own conclusions. About 20,000 exiles, criminals and others, says the correspondent, are sent to Siberia every year. Of these, no more than 4 or 5 per cent are from the middle or higher classes—that is, are to be regarded as political offenders. The criminal aggregate is not large when we remember that California, with a population of less than a million, has over 2000 convicts in its penitentiaries, to say nothing of its jails and reformatory institutions. At the halting-places of the convoys along the route, which are twenty or thirty miles apart, temporary prisons, called *etappes*, have been erected, which have hospitals and chapels attached. That at Ekaterinburg can accommodate 300 prisoners in winter and 1000 in summer. Political prisoners and common convicts are now sent separately. At Tobolsk there are three hard-labor prisons, which the correspondent visited, and found them no different from those he had seen in Prussia and Poland, except that the convicts seemed to have an easier time. Most of the nine cells in them used for solitary confinement were vacant. Corporal punishment can be inflicted on no man for a first offense. Among two thousand persons in the Kara prisons, there were thirteen confined for political offenses and twenty-eight Poles.

#### CLEAN PRISONS AND LIGHT LABOR.

The prisons were as clean as those in Europe. Of 2000 convicts condemned to the gold mines of Kara nearly all had been put to work in the woods, the mines having become unprofitable. In the mines elsewhere the hours were long in summer, but labor was entirely intermitted during the winter. Political prisoners were everywhere kept apart. Reading matter was found almost everywhere, but rarely used. In fact, there was a general want of occupation, either from lack of work in the mines, from want of systematic manufactures, or the excess of convicts over all possible means of employment. There are twenty-seven offenses punishable in Russia with exile, drunkenness and vagrancy being among the number. Seven hundred exiles escape annually. In 1876 there were 652 who thus left without warning. The exiles formerly went the entire distance from Russian towns on foot. Now they are gathered from different points to a great prison at Moscow. Thence, they are sent, 700 at a time, by rail to Nijni Novgorod, towed by a steamer to Perm, so thence by rail to Ekaterinberg, and are taken on from there to Tiumen, 200 miles distant, in wagons. Once in Siberia they have either to walk, passing the night at the *etappes*, or are towed in barges on the great rivers when these extend along the route. Those going to Kachalin sometimes descend the Amoor in barges, but more recently are taken in large steam-ship direct from Odessa to their destination. Our traveler enjoyed unintermitted opportunities of conversing with the prisoners, but only the Poles complained of cruel treatment. That prisoners had to sleep in the mines was denied by every one, not even the Poles venturing to affirm it. Says the writer, in closing his last letter: "I left Asia with the impression that if a prisoner chooses to behave himself decently well, he may be in Siberia more comfortable than in many and as comfortable as in most of the prisons of the world."

#### THE REAL SORROWS OF EXILE.

There is little doubt that private arrests and secret deportation of exiles from Russia continue. While cruelty is exceptional, the deprivation of property, the separation of families and the want and despair which must attend these conditions are constant. A letter published not many months ago from Yeniseisk stated that political prisoners were again arriving. Among them was a young girl, who had thrice attempted suicide by eating licentier matches. A letter from one exile at Kirmesk stated that a wife had gone mad because her husband was sent further into the wilds. Another writes that, when he works as a smith at a shilling a day, and when he earns nothing, lives on potatoes and onions. An exile, once an Odessa official, keeps himself from starvation by carrying about water at so much a bucket. His wife is at Ekaterinokoff and his children scattered about Russia. At Verkhne-Orsk twelve live huddled together in a tent, often without food. These instances are representative of many more and illustrate the hardships which many exiles have to unjustly suffer, and which reckless crime and folly have brought on the heads of others. The present population of Siberia is about 5,000,000, made up of exiles, the descendants of exiles and Cossacks, persons who have for various reasons come to the country of their own accord, and the native races, who live scattered among the rest.