

BOTCHKAREVA SPENDS NIGHT IN WOODS AND CONSEQUENT WEEKS IN HOSPITAL

Russian Joan of Arc Tells of Her Harrowing Experience While Trying to See Her Husband, a Political Prisoner in Alexandrovsk

Graphic Story of Journey of Prisoners on the Way to the Northern Fastnesses of Siberia and the Criminals' Queer Code

Copyright, 1919, by Frederick A. Stokes Co. This story, told by Maria Botchkareva and translated into English by the author, is published by the Frederick A. Stokes Co. under the title of "Yasha."

THIS STARTS THE STORY In the early summer of 1917 the world was thrilled by a news item from Petrograd announcing the formation by one Maria Botchkareva of a women's fighting unit under the name of "The Battalion of Death." With this announcement an obscure Russian peasant girl made her debut in the international hall of fame. This is her story told by herself. The first installment, told of her early childhood. While still a child she became helper in a little village store. At fifteen she became dissatisfied with her lot and procured a position as domestic in a well-to-do family, where the son of the house wins her heart and then deserts her. She marries a man in her own class, who beats her, and she leaves him. He finds her working on a ship in Barnaul and she tries to commit suicide by jumping into the river. She is rescued and in the hospital is reconciled to her husband. But his promises are not kept and again she leaves him. For a year she works as foreman of a concrete gang, at the end of which time her health failed. A woman, posing as her friend, proves to be a white slave. Maria escapes, wanders the streets and prays for guidance. A young man befriends her; they love each other; they become husband and wife by civil agreement. He is arrested for helping a political to escape and Maria makes preparation to accompany him to prison.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES At the Central Prison I received another shock. I wouldn't be admitted without a pass. I did not know that it was necessary to have a pass, I argued. But the warden in charge, a dried-up old man, with a flowing white beard, angrily shouted "No! No!" at me. "Get out of here, it's against the law; you can't be admitted. Go to Irkutsk and come back with a pass, and we will let you in."

"But I traveled a thousand versts to see him," I pleaded, in tears. "I am worn out and hungry. Allow me to see him just for five minutes—only five short minutes. Is there no mercy in your heart for a weak woman?" With this I broke down and became hysterical. The harsh little warden, and his assistants in the office became frightened. Yasha was brought in for a brief reunion. The few minutes that we were allowed to pass in each other's presence gave us new strength. He told me of his new assignment, and I of mine to him, and we decided that I go to the Governor General, Kniazev, to entreat his mercy.

The day was on the decline when I started back to the railway station. I reached the river by twilight and managed to catch a ferry to the island. But it was dark when I landed there, and I lost my way trying to cross the island to the other ferry.

I was cold, hungry, exhausted. My feet were swollen from wandering for several hours in a frantic effort to find the right path. When at last I got to the other side it must have been about midnight. I saw the lights across the water and called with all my remaining strength for the ferry. But there was no response. Only the wind, shrieking through the woods back of me, echoing my cries. I kept calling all night, but in vain.

When it dawned I gathered my last energies, stood up and called again. This time I was observed, and a canoe was sent after me. Unfortunately, it was in charge of a boy, I was too sick to move, and he could not carry me to it. I had to creep on all fours to the boat. With the boy's aid, I finally found myself in the canoe. It took him a long time to ferry me across, and I was in a state of collapse by the time we reached the other side. I was taken to the Kuznetsov Hospital in Irkutsk again, where I lay dangerously ill for several weeks. During this time I lost all of my hair and half of my weight.

After my visit to Yasha he naturally told his prison mates of it, being proud of my loyalty to him, but when days and weeks passed by, and I did not return, his comrades began to tease him about me.



Siberian halting station

"A fine babe is yours. You may indeed be proud of her," they would torment him. "She found some other husband. A lot does she need you, a prisoner. They are all alike, yours and ours." Yasha took such droveries very much to heart. He was in complete ignorance of my whereabouts and finally made up his mind that I had betrayed him. As soon as I was released from the hospital, I went to the Governor General, in whose office I was told that Yasha had been sentenced to four years' exile. Obtaining a pass, I went to Alexandrovsk to see him. But Yasha would not see me. Believing his comrades' taunts, confirmed by my two months' absence, he resolved that he was through with me. I was naturally at a loss to account for this abrupt change, and went bitterly. Some of his acquaintances, who had been brought downstairs, saw me cry and reported to him my emaciated appearance. Then he came down. Visitors were not allowed to come in contact with the prisoners at Alexandrovsk. There were two steel gratings in the office, separated by a distance of a couple of feet. The prisoner was kept behind one grating, while the persons who came to see him were placed behind the other. They could not touch each other.

This was the setting in which I was permitted to meet Yasha. We both cried like children, he, at the sight of my thinness, realizing that he had wronged me in suspecting me of faithlessness. It was a pathetic scene, this meeting behind bars. Yasha told me that he would not be exiled before May. As I offered to accompany him into exile, it was necessary for me to spend the several intervening months at some work. I also had to get permission to join Yasha in exile.

I found work with the same asphalt firm, but now as a common laborer, earning only fifty kopecks a day. At intervals I would go to Alexandrovsk to see Yasha. One time I was working at a job in the Irkutsk prison, and it was not long before the prisoners knew that I had a husband in Alexandrovsk, for there was a complete underground system of communication between the two prisons. On the whole, I was well treated by convicts. The winter passed. Toward Easter of 1918 I succeeded in obtaining permission to have myself arrested and sent to Alexandrovsk, in anticipation of my exile with Yasha. I was put in the women's building, in which were detailed a number of women criminals. What I endured at their hands is almost beyond description. They beat me, but I knew that complaining would make my lot more bitter. When supper was served to us the matron asked me if I had been maltreated. I answered negatively, but she must have known better, for, turning to the women, she instructed them not to punish me.

My reply to the matron somewhat improved my status with my prison-mates, but they forced me, nevertheless, to wait on them and do their dirty work. In addition to these sufferings, the food was putrid. The bunks in which we slept were unclean. Eight of us were in one tiny cell. I saw Yasha only once a week, every Sunday. I spent two months in this voluntary imprisonment, but it seemed like two years to me, and I looked forward eagerly and impatiently to the day of our starting on the open road to exile.

SNARED BY BRUTAL GOVERNOR MAY had come. The Lena had opened and become navigable. The heavy iron doors of the prison were unlocked and hundreds of inmates, including Yasha and me, were mustered out in the yard to prepare for exile. Every winter the huge prison at Alexandrovsk would gather into its walls thousands of wrecked human beings, murderers, forgers, thieves, students, officers, peasants and professional persons, who had transgressed against the tyrannical regime. Every spring the gloomy jail would open its doors and pour out a stream of half-broken men and women into the wild Siberian taiga and the uninhabited regions bordering on the Arctic.

All spring and summer this river of exasperated humanity would flow through Alexandrovsk into the snow-bound north, where they languished in unendurable climatic conditions and succumbed in large numbers in the land of the six months' night. Tens of thousands of them lie scattered from the Ural Mountains to Alaska in unmarked graves.

So finally we were to breathe some fresh air. There was bustle and bustle before our party was formed. There were about a thousand persons in it, including twenty women. Our guard consisted of five hundred soldiers. We were to go on foot to Katchugo, near the source of the Lena, a distance of about two hundred versts. Our baggage was loaded on wagons. We made thirty-five versts in the first day, according to schedule, stopping for the night at an exile-station on the edge of a village. The Siberian roads are criss-crossed by such stations—large wooden buildings of barn-like construction, with iron doors and grated windows. Empty inside, but for double tiers of bunks, they are surrounded by high fences, with a sentry box at each corner. They offer no opportunity for escape. We supped on food we had brought from the prison, and turned in for the night. Our party was divided into groups of ten, each group choosing a trusty charged with the purchasing of food. Beginning with the second day, each of us received an allowance of twenty kopecks.

There were about one hundred political in the party, the remainder being a conglomeration of criminals. The two sections did not get along well, and there was a continuous feud. Men and women were packed together. Besides, there was a privileged group with us. It consisted of the long-sentence convicts, in chains, who were always given priority by the un-written law of the criminal world. They would be first to use the kettles

to prepare their food. Until they were through none of us dared approach the fire. Their word was law. They were always given the right-of-way. Even the soldiers and officers respected their privileges. One of them was the chieftain of the party, and if he pledged himself, in return for more freedom for all of us, to guarantee that there would be no escapes, his word would be taken without question by the commander of the guard, and it never was broken.

The weather was fine the first three days. We made thirty versts the second day and the same distance the third day, but then it began to pour and the roads became almost impassable. The mire was frightful, but we had to walk our scheduled thirty versts. Many in our party fell sick. We looked forward to the next exile station with keen hope, so soaked were we and so fatigued. We longed for a roof and a dry floor and nothing else. We forgot our hunger, we did not feel the vermin that night, for as soon as we reached the station we dropped like dead in deep slumber.

We had a two days' rest upon our arrival at Katchugo and were allowed to bathe in the Lena when our chieftain made himself responsible for our conduct. We found a small party waiting to join us at Katchugo. A member of this new group was recognized by some of the exiles as an alleged betrayer of his comrades in a raid and was dragged for trial before the entire body. Here I witnessed a remarkable scene, the trial of a criminal by criminals. There was as rigid a code of morals in the underworld as in any legitimate government and just as relentless a prosecution. A call went out that there would be a trial and the privileged criminals in chains were chosen as judges. The accused were called upon to state their charges in the hearing of the whole party. They told of the accused man's betrayal of a comrade in a robbery some time before.

There went up cries, "Kill him! Kill him! The traitor! Kill him!" This was the usual punishment for one found guilty. It was the custom of the authorities to watch the proceedings and never interfere with the carrying out of a sentence. As the mob was closing in on the accused

my heart sinking within me, the judges called for order and demanded that the man be given a hearing, too. All white and trembling, he got up to tell his story in detail. "There were two of us," he began, "in the scheme to rob a banker. It was decided that I force my way into the house through a window, hide there and signal to the other fellow at the opportune moment. I found that the banker had gone for the evening to a club and concealed myself in a closet, waiting for his return. My comrade kept guard without hearing from me for a couple of hours. "When the banker returned he sent his valet for something in the closet in which I was hidden. Discovering me, the latter raised an alarm, and some servants ran out to call for help just at the moment when my comrade was about to enter the house. He was caught. I managed to escape through the window and the garden. I am innocent, comrades. I have been a criminal for many years and I have a clean, honorable record."

He then proceeded to enumerate the major accomplishments of his career and the chiefs under whom he had worked and those robbers with whom he had cooperated in the past. He must have mentioned some very important personages as immediately a number of voices were raised in his favor. Some got up and eulogized the connections of the accused, while others quizzed him. The deliberations lasted for several hours, resulting in the acquittal of the man.

The entire party, at the conclusion of the rest at Katchugo, was taken aboard a huge roofed barge. A thousand people in one hole! The prison at Alexandrovsk, the exile station, were paradises in comparison with this unimaginable man-made burrow. There was no air and no light. Instead of windows there were some small openings in the roof. Many fell sick and were left lying there without care, some dying.

In our group was the woman Kitova, with her husband and two children. We cooked and ate our food together, enduring a great deal at the hands of the criminals. There were quiet people among the latter, and they suffered from the whims of the leaders and their lackeys. There was a case of such a man, who happened to cross the path of an old criminal. The latter did not like the way he looked at him, and the poor man was beaten and, without any ceremony, thrown overboard and drowned. We were all locked up for it inside the barge and were denied the privilege of going out on the deck. It was the most cruel of punishments, worse than a long term in prison.

We changed barges on the way, spending about two months on the water, having made about three thousand versts upon arriving at Yakutsk at the end of July. We were beached at night, but it was almost as light as day, though much colder. Our joy at landing was indescribable.

The local politicals all came out to welcome us. We were marched to the Yakutsk prison, where our roll was called. Here the women were separated from the men, and those who voluntarily accompanied their husbands were set free. I then went to the office to inquire about the fate of Yasha, and was told that it was probable that he would be sent farther north. I was cared for by the local politicals, who sheltered me and gave me new clothing and money with which to purchase food and cook dinners for Yasha. Yakutsk is such a distant place that the prisoners there are allowed considerable freedom. I was nicely treated by the officials when I took the dinner-pail to Yasha, and was permitted to remain with him as long as I desired, even in privacy. Shortly afterward Yasha was informed that he had been assigned to Kolyma, within a hundred versts of the Arctic Ocean, where the snow never melts and the winter never relaxes its grip. The news struck us as a bolt from the blue. To be buried alive in some snowbound hut! What for? To live like beasts in that uninhabitable region from which only few return to this world!

There was still one ray of hope. Governor Kraft, of Yakutsk, had the reputation of being a very kind man, and he might reassign Yasha if I begged him. Yasha had been advised to appeal to the Governor, and he sent me on this mission. The Governor's office was in his home. He received me very kindly, even shook my hand, and invited me to be seated. He was a tall, erect, black-bearded man of middle-age, and

he showed every consideration for me as I told my story. I proposed to him to open a sanitary butcher-shop in Yakutsk if he allowed Yasha to remain there, as the local butcher-shops were impossibly filthy. He at first refused my suggestion, but, apparently on second thought, bade me follow into his apartment, where he seated me at a table, and, filling two glasses with wine, invited me to drink with him. I declined, wondering as to the reason for this extreme friendliness. He drew nearer to me, laid his hands on my coat and removed it. Before I recovered from my astonishment he seized my hand and kissed it. Started and indignant, I jumped to my feet. "I will give you a thousand rubles, room for a butcher-shop in the market, and keep your husband in Yakutsk, if you will agree to belong to me," the Governor declared, trying to calm me. I lost my self-control. "Scoundrel! beasts! you men are all alike! all! all! High and low, you are all depraved." Grabbing my coat, I ran out of the house, leaving the Governor speechless.

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