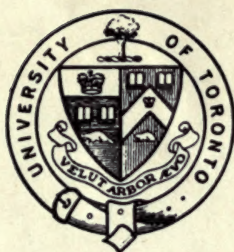




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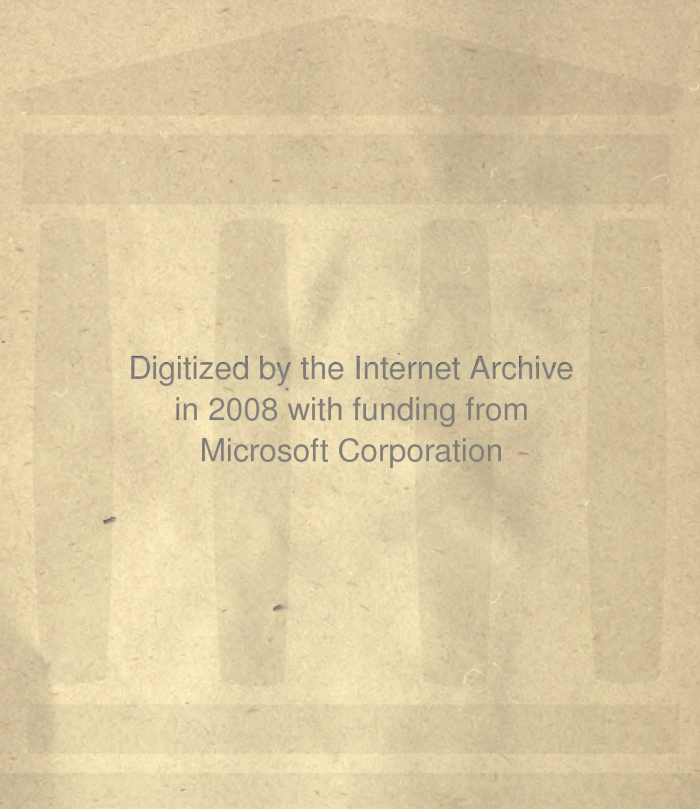
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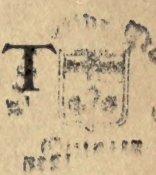


IN THE TAIGA.

[Frontispiece.]

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IN FAR NORTH-EAST SIBERIA



Russia

BY

I. W. SHKLOVSKY ("DIONE")

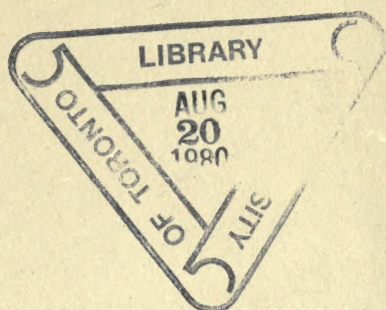
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IN FAR NORTH-EAST SIBERIA

CHAPTER I

KOLYMA DISTRICT

I

“Look ! There is a glimpse of Kolyma ! What a delightful place it is !”

Thus with pride, mingled with affection, speaks your native guide when, on your journey from Yakutsk to Sredne Kolymsk, you reach the top of the Alazeisky Range, which forms the natural boundary of the two districts of Verkhoyansk and Kolymsk.

Strong as may be your desire to reach Sredne Kolymsk, you will probably consider that the native, in his patriotism, exaggerates somewhat, for it is difficult to imagine anything more depressing than the view of the Kolyma district as seen from the Alazeisky Range. The mountains themselves are not high, only about 3,000 feet, but the intense cold blights all vegetation except at the base. Ascending, one comes from time to time upon weak, thin larches, strangely spiral, the effect of the cold, which here reaches a terrible degree (60° Cent. and even lower). The mountain tops are bare.

Sharp-cut against the grey sky is a solitary, leaning cross, hung with partridge feathers, tufts of horsehair, rags, etc., offerings to the "Spirit of the Mountain." With the sleeve of your fur coat brush off the powdery snow from the cross, and you will then read some affecting inscriptions, made by unwilling tourists, sending their last farewells to the dear distant homeland.

The white twilight of polar winter's sunless "day" veils the horizon, deepening the impression of sadness. Everywhere the glance falls on endless fields of snow; and one light undulation of low hills runs northwards to the shore of the Arctic Ocean.

In summer it is scarcely less depressing. On the top of the mountain range, as on all the mountains of the extreme north-east, are marshes, and these are also to be found at the foot. The nearest habitation is 300 versts distant. The forest is scanty, and everywhere are endless marshes. Imagine a boundless plain, whose even, mossy ground is splashed by huge whitish patches of reindeer moss, in which the foot sinks as in a sponge, the footprints immediately filling with water. At first your horse (for the only way of travelling in the summer is on horseback) walks on comparatively hard ground, but gradually sinks deeper and deeper in the thick layer of moss. The cast horns of many deer show white on the reddish ground. More and more plainly sounds the muffled squelching underfoot, and now, instead of firm ground, there is only a slop of mud and moss, in which your horse sinks to the belly. Presently the moss is left behind, and all around is a bright

green plain, and you are glad that at last your horse can walk on firm ground. But disappointment quickly comes. Treading on this plain, the horse sinks belly-deep in the rusty water, below which is the squelchy mud. The guide warns you to follow his horse's track, step by step, as otherwise you risk falling head first into the small, marshy river. The horses, breathing heavily, struggle hard to extricate themselves. Now one staggers and falls on his side. Quickly free you your feet from the stirrups. Even with luck you may find yourself shivering waist-deep in the marsh, while the guide hastens to raise the horse.

The hotter the summer, the deeper the marshes and the more painful and dangerous the travelling. Beyond Andylakh there is an occasional lonely hut, and the character of the place changes towards the winding, marshy River Alazei, which falls into the ocean. The ground becomes more hilly and there are many lakes, some of which are frozen throughout the year. On a hot summer the ice melts only at the edges of these lakes, and there the pike come to play in the sun. The River Kolyma runs like a great artery through the vast country, the area of which is 604,756 square versts (268,780 square miles), several times larger than France. For nearly ten months in the year the country is ice-bound. Near Sredne Kolymsk the ice on the river thaws in the middle of May, and begins to freeze again at the end of September. At the mouth, lat. 70°, often in the middle of August it is possible to travel on the ice. The amplitude of summer and winter temperature is about

100° ($-62.8 + 28$). In consequence of the intense cold the ground becomes frozen to the depth of more than 700 feet. In the summer it thaws only to about ten inches near Sredne Kolymsk, and near Nijne Kolymsk to about six inches.

The eternal frost does not allow the roots of the trees to strike very deeply into the earth, so that they are almost on the surface. Consequently the severe winds of autumn and spring tear numbers of trees out of the earth, making the taiga (virgin forest) impassable, and the occasional traveller is obliged to cut his way through, axe in hand.

The severe cold makes the cultivation of any vegetation impossible, and most of the inhabitants are obliged to lead the same kind of life as that led by the mysterious Kangienici (who lived probably in the age of mammoths), fish, and sometimes deer, forming their only food. Cows are found only near Sredne Kolymsk and Verkhne Kolymsk, and there are but few of these. For 6,060 inhabitants (that is, one to 9,979 versts) in this region there are only 597 head of cattle.

Here, life is only a bitter struggle with all the horrors of cold and famine, coupled with the lack of the first necessities of life and of all comforts.—BARON VRANGEL.

At the end of the nineteenth century, thousands of people were living the life of troglodytes, knowing nothing of bread, obliged to do without salt, obtaining fire by the primitive method of friction, not knowing the use of soap, having no linen, and wearing their fur clothing upon their naked skins.

In this manner live not only savages but Russians,

and all are in constant fear lest the river should thaw too late, or that the water should overflow the fishing-places, for then would begin starvation with all its horrors, including death.

And so what does the future hold for them ? Complete extinction, the fate of the Kangienici will without a doubt be theirs. The entire disappearance of human beings from the district is merely a question of time.

In 1889 there were 194 births and 456 deaths. In fifty years' time, should the conditions remain the same, there will not be a single man left. Then the country will be like the terrible picture drawn by Byron in his poem, "Darkness," "Herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—a lump of death."

The Russians brought with them two terrible diseases—smallpox and syphilis. In Kolymsk in the year 1889 smallpox swept away the whole tribe of the Koriaki, which tribe, however, is mentioned in books on anthropology and ethnology as being still in existence. Of the tribe of Chuvantsi one man only remained. In November, 1891, I saw this "last of the Mohicans" at Soukharnoe, a little village at the mouth of the Kolyma, 130 versts north of Nijne Kolymsk. Of the tribe Yukagir, which in the eighteenth century consisted of several thousand people, there remain now only a few men. Vrangél tells us of three large Yukagir villages near the river Omolon. In July, 1891, I visited these 'villages'; one had altogether disappeared; in the second one house remained; in the third two houses; and these were all the traces that were left of the aborigines of the Kolyma district. The other natives go a long way

round in order to avoid the Yukagir villages, the inhabitants of which are practically rotting alive with syphilis and scurvy—a frightful combination. In the smallpox epidemic of 1885 there perished about 1,000 Chooktchi—nearly one-half of that robust and energetic tribe.

The country is isolated from the rest of the world by an endless ring of marshes and a chain of mountains. It is 3,000 versts to Yakutsk, the nearest “civilised” centre—and what versts! It is necessary to cross two ranges of mountains, two large rivers and numbers of small ones; there is no road, and none but the savage guides can find the way. At best the journey from Yakutsk to Sredne Kolymsk takes fifty days, at the worst four months and often longer. Communication between the Kolymsk country and Yakutsk is maintained by means of an infrequent post (once in four months) and by traders.

The Kolymsk trader, a distinct species of humanity, spends all his life in the polar deserts. Early in October, when the marshes begin to freeze, the loaded transports start from Yakutsk. The principal articles of merchandise consist of “block” tea, tobacco, vodka, and damaged cotton goods. The Yakutsk horses are very hardy, and during the entire journey they are satisfied with the pasture which they dig with their hoofs out of the snow.

In March the transports reach Kolymsk, where some of the merchandise is sold, but the principal part is sent on dog-sledges to the Chookotsk fair at Annui, or Annui fort, which is 250 versts east of Nijne Kolymsk, on the neutral ground between



YUKAGIR TENT.

[Face page 6.]

Russian territory and independent Chooktchi. The formidable word "fort" must not be misunderstood, for the place consists merely of several deserted log huts surrounded by a driftwood fence, which on one occasion collapsed when a tipsy, mischievous Chooktcha tried to climb it. Here, in April, come Chooktchi, Russians, and Lamouts, who have to guard the fort; and then the Russian *ispravnik* takes advantage of the hatred which for centuries has existed between the Chooktchi and Lamouts.

The traders receive furs and mammoth tusks in exchange for tea, tobacco, and vodka; the sale of the last-mentioned commodity is not officially permitted, but nevertheless it is brought there in huge "fiagas," or kegs. For one bottle and a half of adulterated vodka, specially prepared for the fort with leaf tobacco and copperas, the trader receives a beaver skin from the Chooktchi. The usual method of sale is as follows:

As soon as the fair is opened the Chooktchi eagerly look for their "friends" the traders, and demand vodka. The trader says that he has none for sale, though to a friend perhaps he may give a little for nothing; and then he offers a cup of unadulterated vodka—that is, vodka free from copperas. The Chooktcha begins to beg and implore the trader to give him enough vodka to drink until he falls helpless on the ground (this being the only measure for spirits which the Chooktchi understand). The trader refuses and turns out the savage, who smacks his lips, clicks his tongue, and sways himself to and fro in simulated

drunkenness, in order to explain more clearly how much "lively water" he wants. Then, as though by accident, the trader stumbles against the keg so that the liquid within makes a "gulp" as it moves; at this sound the savage would give all that he possesses for the liquor, and the trader takes advantage of this moment.

At the beginning of May the traders leave Sredne Kolymsk for Yakutsk, taking with them furs and tusks, and also a few good-looking savage girls whom they buy from the clan. The price of a girl in the Farthest North-East is one block of tea and one cup of vodka, a little less than the price of a reindeer. During the journey these girls form the harem of the trader, and on reaching Yakutsk they are sold to brothel-keepers there or at Vitim and Kirensk, where a woman's body is worth a high price, those being the first settlements to which the gold miners come after leaving the goldfields.

Although the road to Sredne Kolymsk is difficult, the trader makes an immense profit, each journey to the Farthest North-East giving him a clear profit of from 10,000 to 15,000 roubles. All the people living on the banks of the Kolyma are the perpetual slaves of the traders, to whom they are always in debt, the noose being ever tightened more and more round their necks.

The traders undertake to deliver flour and salt to the Government stores at Sredne Kolymsk, receiving from the Government 24s. for forty pounds of flour, but instead of flour the traders deliver at the stores "receipts" which they have purchased for a trifling

sum from the Cossacks. The trader pays 6s. for the "receipt" and at the store he receives 24s. for it. Salt also is delivered in much less quantity than the trader is paid to deliver. Consequently all the inhabitants of the lower river banks are without salt for the greater part of the year ; and as at the Government store flour costs 28s. for forty pounds, nobody can afford to buy it. During the time that the store existed at Sredne Kolymsk, *not a single pound of flour was sold.*

At Nijne Kolymsk one brick of tea costs 16s., a pound of leaf tobacco costs 6s., and one yard of damaged cotton material 2s., and as the natives (and certainly the savages) do not possess any money they live entirely upon raw frozen fish, without salt. Instead of tea they drink a decoction of red bilberries, and they smoke suède, which they cut up like tobacco. They have no linen but wear their fur garments over their bare skin.

Such is the result of a connection between a primitive country and the civilised world.

Let us look at the inhabitants of this region. Legend says that "Once there were, on the shores of the Kolyma, more hearth fires than there are stars in a clear sky."

This was probably a very long time ago. From the sixteenth century onwards the district was a battle-ground. First came the Lamouts, after them came the remnant of the defeated Yakuts, who had risen under the leadership of Djennik (see farther). They brought tidings of new and terrible warriors, who soon followed. In the chapter headed "The

Extinction of the Kangienici " I relate the legend describing the disturbed condition of the country on the eve of the coming of the Russians.

II

The conquest of Siberia is said, not inaccurately, to be without parallel in history. In 1581 Isker was taken by Ermak, and in 1648 the Cossack Simon Deshnef and the trappers, Fedott Kolmogoretz and Ankudinof were already at Cape Chukotskoi. In sixty years the Russians had conquered all the immense continent from the Urals to Behring Strait, or, more exactly, to Desjniev Strait—on the diagonal more than 10,000 versts—whereas in North America during two and a half centuries the boundaries had scarcely been investigated. We know what urged the Russians to the Far North-East—the beaver and the obscure talk of "glittering rivers," about which the polar savages tell so many wonder stories. The traders took the "glittering rivers" to mean "golden sands," and not a few lives were lost in the search for gold. In fact, for sixty years the conquest of Siberia was only a beaver hunt, in which the hunters regarded neither their own lives nor those of the natives with whom they came in contact. The pages of this part of the history are written in blood and tears. Every step towards the North-East was accompanied by the suffering, martyrdom, and death of the defeated people. The less they resisted, the more they were tortured. Nevertheless it was a wonderful campaign, this of a handful of people. The far north-east of

Siberia was not conquered by one great army, but by a few score trappers and the beaver hunters of Siberia. In 1628 a Cossack, Vassili Bougor, with six companions travelled on ski from the Yenisei to the Lena, and settled by that mighty river. In ten years' time the Cossack Vassili Bouzig, with ten companions, voyaged in a small boat through the Arctic Ocean to the mouth of the Yana and founded the village of Oustyansk. At the same time Cossacks under the leadership of Michael Stadukhin also voyaged in a small boat through the Arctic Ocean, a distance of 2,000 versts, and arrived at the mouth of Kolyma. With neither map nor compass, and in a clumsy boat, with scarcely any provisions, this handful of men accomplished a deed which, 250 years afterwards, a succession of splendidly equipped expeditions tried repeatedly to emulate, in the search for the North-East Passage, a problem finally solved by Nordenskiöld. Therefore we must recognise the personal courage and super-human energy of those early conquerors of the Far North-East, and we cannot withhold from them our tribute of praise and admiration.

Let us see what the descendants of these conquerors are now. Into what have they developed during two and a half centuries? They have completely degenerated. The observer will be struck by the remarkable fact which is stated in the formula that "the less resistance the Russians met with from the natives the more they lost of their own nationality." Indeed, at Yakutsk, at Verkhoyansk, and at Sredne Kolymsk, where their foes were Yakuts who offered scarcely any resistance, the Russians became completely "Yaku-

tianised," as will be seen later; while in Nijne Kolymsk, where the Russians met with a valiant foe—the Chooktchi, who have only during the last twenty years ceased to harass the Russian camps—the descendants of the conquerors preserve the pure Russian tongue, and in the district about the mouth of the Kolyma still can be heard the ancient Russian songs and legends, the words and expressions of which are obsolete now in European Russia, and only to be found perhaps, in the twelfth-century poem, "Prince Igor."

The Russians live in three "towns" on the banks of the Kolyma, Verkhne (Upper), Sredne (Middle), and Nijne (Lower) Kolymsk, and in a few small hamlets that are between the last-mentioned town and the Arctic Ocean. It is scarcely wrong to state that each town represents a separate clan, having its own customs, its own dialect, and, in some cases, its own language. In Sredne Kolymsk, for instance, the inhabitants understand Russian only imperfectly, and always converse among themselves in Yakutian. About Verkhne Kolymsk there is not much to be said, as there are only nine inhabitants. About 100 Lamouts are scattered over a district of about twenty to 180 versts in the neighbourhood of the town. Officially it is reckoned that there are also about forty Russian *meschani* (*petit bourgeois*), but for a long time these have ceased to exist as such, having, incredible as it may seem, lapsed into savagery—that is to say, they have wandered into the mountains with the Lamout. The same thing, though with some difference, happened, as we shall see, at Nijne Kolymsk.



SREDNE KOLYMSK.

Sredne Kolymsk, or Sredne, as it is called, is the queen of the country, consisting of twenty or thirty little flat-roofed log huts scattered about on the left bank of the Kolyma, and on both sides of the narrow but deep little River Ankoudine. In Sredne Kolymsk is centred all the administration of the country; for there reside the *ispravnik*, who is also the chief judge, the commandant of Annuiski fort, the head of all the "army," which consists of eleven Cossacks, who possess neither uniform, nor colours, nor firearms. The inhabitant of Sredne Kolymsk is very proud of his "town," and looks down upon the resident in Nijne Kolymsk, scorning him in much the same way as a European dandy of the town looks down upon a yokel.

The inhabitants of Sredne Kolymsk consist of *meschani* (*petit bourgeois*) and Cossacks. The latter form the aristocracy of the town, and their financial position should be fairly good, for each Cossack from his birth receives a half ration—that is, forty pounds of rye flour per month—and from the age of seven years, a full ration (eighty pounds). Unfortunately, after this flour come many hunters in the shape of traders, who taking advantage of the Kolymyans' love of vodka, and their childish carelessness and lack of foresight, characteristic of all savages, buy in advance a whole year's supply of flour at the rate of 6s. for forty pounds, payment being made in vodka at 6s. a bottle, or in block tea or tobacco. Afterwards the traders sell this flour to the Government storekeeper at the rate of 24s. for forty pounds.

On account of this ration system the birth of each

little Cossack increases the wealth of the family, and in connection with this a remarkable fact may be mentioned. Should a Cossack girl be pregnant she is besieged with suitors willing to marry her, for it will mean a "ration" should the expected child be a boy¹; thus there is a kind of lottery dear to the heart of the Kolymyan. Should a married couple be childless, the husband lends his wife to a Cossack who already possesses several "rations," and should a boy subsequently be born, the happy husband gives half the yearly ration to his "partner." This arrangement is of such common occurrence throughout Kolyma, and, if I am not mistaken, Verkhoyansk as well, that it is considered quite as a business arrangement, and I have been assured that a written contract to this effect is sometimes made. I have this from an authentic source, though I myself never saw such a contract.

The living of the *petit bourgeois* depends entirely upon the amount of fish they catch, but generally the whole store of fish is gone by the end of spring. The river is not entirely free from ice until the end of June. The nets are set on St. Peter's Day. Until then the fishing-places are flooded and blocked by driftwood brought down in abundance by the inundations. By the month of March all the store of fish is consumed, and the inhabitants begin to eat the food usually given to dogs, such as fishbones, entrails, and half-decayed fish. At this time it is impossible to enter the house of a Kolymyan because of the nause-

¹ According to law, an illegitimate child is recognised if the mother be a Cossack.

ating, overpowering stench of rotting fish, and towards the end of spring conditions become worse and worse. In May the inhabitants are forced to eat their leather leggings and straps, also the skin of nalim (eel-pout), which in summer is used instead of glass for the windows. To live in Sredne Kolymsk then is torture. The sight of the yellow, swollen faces and glittering, hungry eyes drives one mad. Gaunt, half-dead dogs stagger weakly in search of the corpses of their companions and greedily devour them. The brooks melt and their waters pour over the frozen surface of the river. But it is now the end of May, the river darkens, the brooks melt and pour into the river; then comes a tremendous crash, the ice breaks and the river is freely flowing. All the inhabitants crowd to the banks, exclaiming :

“She is moving, our little mother Kolyma.”

Beyond the town, where the river makes a sharp curve, there is an accumulation of immense blocks of ice, four and a half yards thick, forming a dam of one verst and a half. The river then presents an awe-inspiring sight. The huge blocks are forced up, piling one on another with a grinding noise. The sound of the cracking ice is deafening, and it is not possible to hear one's voice. High above the dam, the water rises and overflows its banks, but the inhabitants do not trouble themselves about it even when the water floods the houses up to the windows; that is merely a trifle—the overflow which will bring the fish. Their hearts ache only for the river :

“How she suffers, our little mother Kolyma,” they say pityingly as of a woman in travail.

Suddenly with a tremendous roar of cracking, the ice-dam breaks, the masses of ice shoot along the river, not in one solid floe, but broken up by the melting portions. The people dance on the beach, fire guns, and shout :—

“ She is flowing ! ”

Expectant mothers come to the banks and say :

“ This will help us much ; now our delivery will be easier.”

In every house the people are preparing for fishing, making their boats and preparing their nets. The boats are made without a single nail, and are sewn together with twisted willow strands. Soon all Sredne Kolymsk will be empty. All the people will go fishing. They leave all their possessions in the unlocked houses, merely fastening a little wooden bolt as a sign that the master is absent. Theft is unknown there, as is likewise the prison, that necessary accompaniment of civilisation, for in this district there are very few criminal settlers, those pests of the Yakutsk district. Only in rare cases are criminals sent to the Far North-East, and although there are some in the neighbourhood of Sredne Kolymsk there are none in the town itself.

After one day's fishing, all the miseries of the winter are forgotten. Men and dogs alike are satisfied. The traders despise such inferior fish as pike and eel-pout, taking only the liver of the latter and throwing the rest away. During the fishing season, the Kolymyan is as extravagantly generous as a savage. No visitor is allowed to go away empty-handed, and the present usually consists of 120 to 160 pounds of nelma. The

small traders, in their greediness, take advantage of this state of things, and during the summer they drive all round the fishing-places treating the fishermen to vodka, receiving in return a boatful of fish and yukala at the low rate of about 1s. 2d. to 1s. 6d. for forty pounds, which in the following spring they sell back again at the price of 5s. for forty pounds.

In the fishing season the Sredne Kolymyans are quite transformed. Usually phlegmatic, lazy, and silent, like their beloved nelma, they become totally different beings, working in turns without cessation, setting the nets three times in the twenty-four hours, and during the whole of the time laughter, jokes, and singing are constantly heard. It is true that the songs are nothing much ; for example, here is one :

My last year's love has no straps on her moccasins,
 And this year's love wears best horseskin moccasins.
 About you, my love, there is much talk.
 Can it be, my love, that the tale is true ?
 She betrayed me for a low Yakut,
 And the low Yakut captured my love.

The songs are most frequently to be heard in the Yakutian tongue, and those Russian songs and stories which exist have been " Kolymised," so to speak.

During the fishing time the love-making and match-making also begin. It must be said that, with regard to woman's virtue, the attitude of the Kolymyan is the same as that of the Yakut or Chooktcha—it is of no importance to him. The girl who is already a mother marries without difficulty, and should she be the daughter of a Cossack, as already explained, her children form her dowry. I remember one incident. An inhabitant was complaining that he had no children.

“Why,” I asked, “isn’t Vanka your son?”

“No, he is my wife’s child, born before our marriage.”

“Who is the father?”

He was greatly astonished at this question. He had been married ten years, and had never once troubled to find out who was the father of the child who lived in his home with him.

On the 20th of July, St. Elias’ Day, they begin to light the lamps of fish-oil, for the summer is drawing to a close, the sun beginning to decline, and the days are very short, but the fishing continues, and is more and more plentiful. The Kolymyans know of only two ways of preserving fish, curing and salting. As salt is very scarce only one pound is used to forty pounds of fish; consequently, by the end of the summer the fish already begins to turn bad. It is wonderful what centuries of custom will do, for these people are so accustomed to the taste of tainted fish that they prefer it to the fresh, which to them seems tasteless. Several years ago an attempt was made to introduce the method of smoking the fish. In Sredne Kolymsk at that time there was an *ispravnik* (afterwards tried for dishonesty) about whom the people used to say: “If we can survive *Ispravnik V.*, then fire and water cannot destroy us.” *V.* received from Yakutsk some smoked fish, with official instructions:

“As there is a shortage of salt perhaps the *ispravnik* will find means to introduce a method of smoking the fish.”

The same day he called the people together, and thus gave his instructions:

“ Here, you dogs ! ” he shouted. “ In future don’t dare to salt the fish. Smoke it ! ”

To this the people made the natural objection :

“ Our fathers always salted the fish, and they lived well enough. Why should we do differently ? ”

V. dismissed them with threats of flogging and imprisonment.

The fishing began. The catch was laid on the bank, where a smoke-drying shed had been erected, but as nobody knew anything of the process of smoking, the fish was partly roasted and not smoked at all ; consequently it very soon went bad, and by the autumn the poor people were eating fish that was quite putrid. By the following spring it was worse and worse.

“ We were all nearly dead,” say the people, referring to this period. Ispravnik V. threatened that the following year also he would not permit the fish to be salted and the people were most unhappy at this prospect, but, fortunately for them, V. was recalled to Yakutsk, and a new ispravnik arrived. Hardly had he alighted from his sledge when a deputation waited upon him.

“ Your honour, must we smoke our fish ? ” they asked timidly.

“ That is your affair,” he replied.

“ So we may salt it ? ” cried the deputation, incredulous in their joy.

“ Do as you like. It is not the ispravnik’s business.”

“ Friends, friends, we may salt it ! We may salt it ! ” the deputation shouted madly, gesticulating wildly.

That day was assuredly the happiest for a century past. The priest was asked to offer a thanksgiving ; bells were rung, and guns fired, all day long.

The drying shed remained as a monument to future generations of the hardships of former times. And, now, when they wish to date an event, the people say : " That happened before, or after, we smoked our fish." With the 1st of September the fishing comes to an end, and with it ends the happy days of the people of Kolymsk.

III

The men of Sredne Kolymsk are of medium, even low, stature, with ill-developed muscles. The head is Yakutian in type, with retreating forehead, oblique eyes, broad cheekbones and lower jaw. There is scarcely any hair on the face, but with age there comes a downy growth. Because of our bearded faces they called us old men, though the oldest of us was scarcely thirty years of age. Some of our number might have been considered handsome by Europeans, but the native women thought them monsters, because of their " dog-like, hairy faces " and their " eyes of ice " (meaning grey or blue eyes), for beauty, in their opinion, cannot be where the eyes are not brown, " like a calf." Further, though none of us were over six feet, we seemed as giants to the Kolymyans.

The intelligence of the Sredne Kolymyan is very poor. He has scarcely any memory, and can only with great difficulty learn to repeat three or four words in succession. Should he try to learn to read, he

may struggle for several years, and then, should he discontinue the effort for a few months, he would forget everything completely.

A few adults can count, but only up to thirty-nine, after which number they say thirty-ten, thirty-eleven, and so on. Their mental outlook is, of course, limited and narrow. Two of my friends from the cream of Sredne Kolymsk society were sitting with me one day, and I asked one to tell me how many towns he knew.

"Verkhne, Sredne, Nijne, Verkhoyansk," he began rapidly—then he stopped, thought a little, added "Yakutsk," and then became silent. I saw the other man laugh.

"Why do you laugh?" I asked.

"Empire," gravely replied he, "the fool has forgotten the most important town!"

The Sredne Kolymyans think that beyond Verkhoyansk lies Russia, the land of wonders and fairy tales.

The more cultivated people who have been to Yakutsk think that Russia lies just beyond Irkutsk.

The Kolymyans do not consider themselves Russians. "We are Kolymyans," they say.

As already mentioned, they speak Russian very imperfectly, their language being Yakutian and the Yakutian Pantheon has left a marked impression upon their religion. They firmly believe that there are four gods, one for each of the four corners of the sky; two saviours—one in the East and one in the West—St. Nicholas in the South, and the Mother of God in the North. Sometimes they confuse the latter with the only beneficent deity in the Yakutian

Pantheon, "The Compassionate Mother of Creation." Like the Yakuts, the Sredne Kolymyans believe that illness is caused by a devil entering the body, and the cure consists in a correct diagnosis—that is, in finding out what devil is in the sick man ; and that can only be done by a Shaman.

The influence of the Yakutian mythology can perhaps be seen at its strongest in the ideas concerning the brown bear, which animal is found in large numbers in the Kolymsk country, and is believed by the Yakuts to be an incarnation of their most terrible god, "Ulu-Tayon."

For example, a long caravan of pack-horses will suddenly stop on its way.

"What is the matter ?" ask anxious voices.

"Ulu-Tayon," answers the terrified guide.

And, indeed, the dreaded beast comes out of the forest and sits on its haunches, showing its teeth at them. He fears to attack so many people, but, on the other hand, he does not seem inclined to go away.

All the men huddle together, and the best speaker among them advances a little, removing his cap and saying :

"Ulu-Tayon, we know that you alone are the owner of these parts and we have not come into your territory to insult you, but because our way lies through it. Forgive us, O Ulu-Tayon, for you know very well that none of our sons are bear hunters. Why then should you harm us ?"

Meanwhile some of the Yakuts prostrate themselves and cry : "Have mercy on us, Ulu-Tayon !" Others with trembling hands prepare huge wood fires.

It frequently happens that the bear keeps them there for twenty-four hours, and all the time the Kolymyans supplicate the bear. They consider it a sin to pronounce his name, and they speak of him as "Grandfather" or "he."

The Sredne Kolymyans have no traditions, and they do not know how their ancestors came there. Of the conquerors they remember only Ermak and Ivan Koltzo. In their archives there are most curious documents written on bark, but the greater part of these were sold by the pound by Ispravnik V. In many of the huts documents dating from the early part of the eighteenth century have been used as wallpaper. Small contracts and receipts written on bark, useless for this purpose, were used as fuel.

From Sredne Kolymsk to Nijne Kolymsk the distance is 550 versts by water; in winter, 500. Nijne Kolymsk seems almost like a different country. The "town" consists of a couple of flat-roofed huts situated on the left bank of the river Kolyma, which at that part is nearly five versts in width. On the other bank, just opposite the "town," or rather the "fort," are the mouths of the two rivers Annui (Souhoi and Bistry), which here empty themselves into the Kolyma. On the bank of the first Annui, so legend says, there is a mountain on which there are tombs of the long-vanished, mysterious race, the Kangienici. In Sredne Kolymsk there are none but swarthy faces, while in Nijne Kolymsk there are many fair and pale ones. The men are all of small stature and beardless; among the women are many who are quite good-looking, if one disregards the thick layer of dirt on their faces. They

are the direct descendants of the companions of Michael Stadukhin, in memory of whom one of the tributaries is named. The Chooktchi not only bravely held their territory, but they themselves attacked the enemy. Consequently for nearly two centuries there were at the mouth of the Kolyma two hostile camps, always ready to fight. At Korytovo, a small village a little north of Nijne Kolymsk, I saw an old woman nearly ninety-five years of age who remembered the last Chooktchan attack.

In Lower Kolyma (as in Caucasus in the 'fifties) the Russians greatly respect their recently conquered foes. There is no such feeling of scorn for the despicable Yakuts as exists in Sredne Kolymsk. At festival times in the Chooktchan camp, when the savages celebrate the sunrise, or the rite of sacrifice,¹ they arrange war games, and the young people run races, fire guns, and wrestle. All the young Russians from the lower part of the river come to these games. They take part in all these celebrations and consider it a great honour if they are given the title of "Strong Man," "King of the Marshes," "Bear," and so on. This title, like a coat-of-arms, is handed down from father to son. Moreover, when a young Russian is tired of living in the "fort," he will harness the dogs and drive off to the Chooktchan camp and, frequently, he goes farther on into the Chooktchan territory. The savages heartily welcome the new-comer, who takes one, two or more savage wives and begins to live the life of primitive man. This will last sometimes

¹ Among the Chooktchi there is still the custom of putting the old people to death, should they desire it.

for one or two years, or even longer. It is customary among the Chooktchi to offer to friendly visitors a kind of hospitable prostitution, expecting the same token of amity when they pay a visit to the block-house, and, as the view concerning the virtue of women is as low among the Nijne Kolymyans as among the Sredne Kolymyans, or even lower, the savages seldom meet with a refusal. The Nijne Kolymyans willingly give their daughters in marriage to the Chooktchi, and the women easily accommodate themselves to the savage life, readily sharing the home with other wives. In a year's time they become so acclimatised that when they visit the fort they, like the savages, cannot sleep in the huts; they say that "the roof presses upon them."

Among themselves, the Nijne Kolymyans speak only Russian, but it is like baby language. They cannot pronounce "k," but say "yah" or "l" instead, and they confuse many of the consonant sounds.

The ethics of the Nijne ladies can be thus formulated, "I am wedded, but not sold"; and those of the men, "A woman is not a roll for one man's meal."

The mental capacity of the Nijne is higher than that of the Sredne, and certainly they are more energetic, vigorous, and mobile than the heavy Kolymyans. The Nijne people sing more, and they have their own bards, whose songs, however, are only satirical. They have one peculiar melody, the words to which they vary. The Nijne Kolymyan is a splendid hunter, and one glance at the spoor is enough to tell him not only



what animal's track it is, but also for what purpose it was out, whether seeking prey or not.

The material conditions of life among the Nijne are almost impossible. In Sredne Kolymsk there are a few cattle, and the people occasionally have milk products, whereas in Nijne the only domestic animal is the dog. The summer lasts only two months. Snow begins to fall in August and in summer the ground melts only to the depth of three to four vershok (six inches), and early in November the endless polar night begins. The people's only food is unsalted fish. Miserable country, miserable nature, miserable people !

In Nijne Kolymsk, as in Sredne Kolymsk, the Russian people soon die out. Among the Nijne people there is not one family which is not syphilitic. But there is a more dangerous enemy than syphilis—smallpox. There is a saying among the people that near the fort some time ago the Russians killed a Shaman, Elhalksik, one of the race of the Kangienici, and that before his death he cursed the land. Once in five years the earth opens, the Shaman comes out, climbs to the belfry and there he stands, his head reaching to the heavens, his grey hair, matted with frozen earth, streaming in all directions. The old man has but one foot, and in his forehead one red eye, glittering like live coal. Elhalksik stretches out his one hand, which springs from his breast, and wherever he waves his hand, there gallops the smallpox witch, robed in red fur, her sledge drawn by dogs whose fur is also red. In her hand is a flaming torch, and, whomsoever she touches with her burning brand dies. In this

manner Elhalksik avenges his own death and that of his race. Such is the Nijne legend of the smallpox. This terrible pestilence destroyed in 1889 four Russian villages, and several others were entirely deserted by the inhabitants. There were not enough graves to contain all the corpses, and many were buried in the store-holes under the huts.

IV

In order that the life of this wretched country may continue new blood must be infused into its veins, means must be devised of bringing into the country the first necessities of life, and of selling them at a very low rate, and connection must be established between the district of Kolymsk and Gijiginsk, which latter, until recently, was the land of fairy tales. There was a time when the Gijiginsk people had never seen a ship. Communication was kept up by the seashore and over the mountain ranges of Oli and Tayakhan, of the existence of which my readers probably now hear for the first time. The nearest civilised centre to Gijiginsk was Okhotsk, which for the greater part of the year is entirely isolated. Overland communication was so difficult that the post to Gijiginsk was sent only once or twice in three years, but fortunately there was nothing of great importance to be sent. The inhabitants, consisting of Russians and Lamouts, were almost in the Stone-age phase of civilisation; flour was unknown, and the wild animals were either shot with arrows or snared in rude traps. Fire was obtained by means of friction. Even vodka, so

popular in the Far North-East, was unknown to the Gijiginskans, and the only intoxicating drink they had was an infusion which they made of the crimson fly-agaric. Their only food was the flesh of the deer and a kind of salmon, which they cured, using the best parts for themselves and giving the rest to the dogs. The honour of discovering these nineteenth century troglodytes belongs to the well-known ship-owner, Phillippeuss, whose name is a synonym for a rich man with the savages of the district. The Yakuts on the shores of the Kolyma have a saying : " Rich as Billineuss."

When, sixty years ago, the natives first saw a steamboat, their terror and subsequent delight and astonishment can be imagined. The sea there is shallow, and full of sand banks and reefs, so that ships have to stay eight or nine versts out and send boats ashore, which is not always convenient. Those who founded Gijiginsk in 1638 could not have foreseen that one day large ships would come, or no doubt they would have chosen a site twenty versts further south, where there is a deep sheltered bay.

The first steamboat brought " civilisation " to the natives. Flour was sold to them at a price within the reach of all (about 3s. 3d. for forty pounds), the people began to wash themselves occasionally, using soap for the purpose and not urine as before (after the Chooktchan custom). Printed cotton was introduced, of which shirts were made, suède leather aprons with bibs having been previously worn instead. Block tea and tobacco, formerly very expensive, having been brought on the backs of deer from Sredne



YAKOOTS FROM SREDNE KOLYMSK.

Kolymsk, at once became cheaper, and vodka, that inevitable accompaniment of civilisation, was also introduced. The steamboat came once a year, bringing all necessities and taking back a cargo of skins—fox, squirrel, white fox, and silver fox. An affair which reads like an extract from Rabelais happened about fifty years ago in Gijiginsk. An ispravnik was sent to this place and, whether because of the loneliness and isolation from the world, or from some other cause, he became mad and declared himself to be the chief god of the Yakuts and Lamouts. The people believed in him, as did also the deacon, who had himself become half savage, but the priest kept himself apart from this strange affair. The people began to pay divine honours to the ispravnik. Every day they carried him in solemn pomp through the town, ringing bells incessantly. One year passed and no news of the ispravnik had reached Vladivostok, so the chief official there asked the captain of the steamer to make inquiries. When in summer Phillippeuss (the steamer) arrived in Gijiginsk, the captain asked for the ispravnik, and was told that he was not in the town. As the captain could not stay long, he went away, and the following year, when he returned and made the same inquiry, he received the same reply. The third year the captain received instructions to use all means to discover what had become of the ispravnik. The answer, as before, was that the ispravnik was not in the town. The captain appeared to be satisfied, and went away in the steamer, which however remained a few versts from the town, concealed in the bay. During the night an officer, the

doctor, and a few sailors went in a small boat back to Gijiginsk, arriving there early in the morning. In the distance they heard the sound of bells ringing, guns firing, the beating of drums, the joyous cries and shouting of the people. Everywhere there were huge bonfires. The newcomers then met a most remarkable procession. Borne aloft on a seat was the ispravnik, who was adorned with partridge feathers, ribbons, locks of hair, bells, etc. The "god" sat erect in great pride and dignity. The bearers were eight Lamouts, gaily attired, and all the populace followed, dancing and shouting. In the front came the Shamans, beating their flat noisy drums. All were rejoicing at their deliverance from the great danger of losing their god, but their rejoicing was turned to utter stupefaction when they beheld the officers of the ship which, as they thought, had gone away. Their god was captured and taken to Vladivostok, where he was sent to a lunatic asylum. This occurred in the dawn of European civilisation at Gijiginsk. Now the town consists of 200 inhabitants, forty houses, and one church.

It is important for Kolymsk that the route to the East to Gijiginsk should be found. The district between the rivers Korkodon (a tributary of the Kolyma) and Gijiga is absolutely unknown, and it is only very vaguely indicated on maps, but the road to Gijiginsk lies there and it is known only to the natives.

Once a year the Lamouts, mounted on deer, go from Gijiginsk to Sredne Kolymsk, but, as they have

good reason to mistrust the Russians there, they firmly refuse to give any information concerning the route by which they travel. Many years ago the Kolymsk ispravnik first made the attempt to discover the route, but was unsuccessful. In 1889, the Governor-General Svetlitski instructed Ispravnik Karzine to make the attempt. He traced the course of the Kolyma as far as Tyepli Vodi, one of its tributaries; and from there he travelled across the watershed towards the east and reached the slope of the hilly range forming the frontier of the Gijiginsk region. Transport is not difficult across these hills, which are not very high, and are not more than 400 versts in length. They are covered with luxuriant vegetation, and in places where there is no growth of grass the ground is covered with moss; therefore, in summer, loads can easily be transported on the backs of horses, and in winter on deer. In this way the loads brought to Gijiginsk by sea could be taken over the hills to Sredne Kolymsk in twenty-eight days, and the journey continued by boat on the Kolyma. If this road could be opened, the price of flour in Sredne Kolymsk could be reduced to about 4s. for forty pounds and other commodities would be proportionately cheaper. But, in order that the benefit might be general, it would be necessary to prevent the monopolisation of this route by the traders, who are anxious to open it for their own benefit, and who, by exploitation, would drain the life-blood of the country.

On the route Karzine discovered two clans of Yakuts whose existence and whereabouts were hitherto

unknown. He named one Ignativski, in honour of the Governor-General of Irkutsk, and the other Constantinovski, in honour of General Svetlitski.

To the regret of all, General Svetlitski was transferred to another district, and the project was abandoned.



COAST OF THE OCEAN.

CHAPTER II

A YAKUTIAN WEDDING

I

IT was the time of the summer general assembly¹ in Sredne Kolymsk, and Yakuts came from the remotest parts of the district, from Verkhne Kolymsk, Alazei, etc. The "street," if it can so be described, was crowded and noisy. Numbers of Yakuts were constantly arriving on horseback at the house of the clerk where the assembly was held. Petty chiefs of small clans scornfully regarded the "unofficial" people, constantly arranging their bead belts, from which hung old cutlasses, the gift of Catherine II to their ancestors. Near the house there were many horses tied up to poles. The extraordinarily high saddles, with large cushions adorned with copper and silver ornaments, would doubtless greatly astonish the ordinary cavalry man accustomed to Cossack and English saddles. From our windows could be heard the incessant hum of the guttural Yakutian language, which Gilder considered as sonorous and soft as a mixture of Italian and Irish. On these days we were

¹ There are two general assemblies, one in summer and one in winter.

subjected to constant annoyance. The Yakuts are very inquisitive, and each newcomer considered it his duty to come and gaze upon "the people from afar," and for long afterwards in his distant home he will relate to his clan all about our books, our "stone" eyes, our "dog-like," bearded faces, and other marvellous things, eliciting from his hearers cries of great astonishment and incredulity. Added to the inconvenience of this doubtful popularity, the task of receiving in one day ten or twelve of these Yakut visitors was not a slight matter. For each one we had to climb on the roof and open the chimney, which was closed to keep out mosquitoes; next to light the fire and boil the kettle, for the Yakut will not go until he has had some tea. Fortunately, it is not necessary to entertain the guest beyond giving him tea, frozen clotted cream and milk; he will finish it all, rise, cross himself and bow, saying "Thank you," and the visit ends. As my hut was directly opposite the Assembly House I could not complain of neglect on the part of visitors. The Yakuts soon found out that we never sent them away, and the door had hardly closed after one visitor before another came in. Some of them had an artless way of obtaining things. One would come and stand in the doorway, bowing.

"What do you want, friend?" I asked.

The "friend" takes out from his breast a gnawed piece of yukala or half-cured fish and offers it to me, and it would appear that he has travelled 500 versts in order to make this present. After this the "friend" not only feels quite at home, but even considers that he has placed me under an obligation. He removes

his eared cap, loosens his belt, sits down and, when tea is given him, he mentions that he is very fond of bread and vodka. He silently pushes his empty tobacco pouch forward, as a hint that it requires filling; then, taking my knife, suggests an exchange, the transaction being very profitable for the "friend." Next, taking my comb, he uses it on his stiff, harsh, doubtful-looking hair, then, after asking for several other trifling things, he unwillingly takes his departure, casting a lingering glance around to see whether there is anything more for which he can ask. We feared these Yakuts with their presents as we feared fire. But with such guests what could be done? We lacked courage to show them the door. One day I was sitting reading, when the fifth or sixth visitor that day entered, therefore I did not trouble to look up to see what fate had sent me. "B—b—b—be," ejaculated someone behind me, stretching out his hand over my shoulder and pointing with his dirty crooked finger at the letter B, chuckling with self-satisfaction. I turned round quickly. That broad smiling face, those shining cheek-bones and narrow, slanting eyes, now almost lost in a blissful smile, could belong to none other than Spiridon, a Yakut whom I knew, and with whom I intended to visit the Oulooss (a nomad camp) next day. A friend of mine had made his acquaintance at this camp and had introduced him to our little colony. This friend, when at the Oulooss, had endeavoured to teach Russian to Spiridon, but found it impossible to make him learn more than three or four letters. When Spiridon found me with my book open, he could not

resist the temptation of showing what he knew, and was delighted when he found the letter B. He often visited us and listened attentively to our conversation, asking what we had been talking about for so long a time. Great was the astonishment of our Russian friend at the Oulooss when Spiridon shouted out to him "Equilibrist," "Sac-voyage," "Transcendental," bursting into joyous contented laughter. Nevertheless, Spiridon, like all Yakuts, had a good memory. His relatives marvelled at his cleverness, but, alas! there was one exception—his wife, Ouchapine (christened Axinia). She had no great opinion of the talents of her husband, and invariably addressed him as "fool."

"How can you learn anything, you fool? Do you think you can do anything with your brains?" she asked mockingly, when her husband was endeavouring to penetrate the sacred mysteries of A and B. But the time came when Spiridon could exult. He had learned a few letters.

"Well, Ouchapine, am I a fool? Very well. Be it so. But you—clever one. What is that? You don't know? Ha, ha, ha! But I know. That is 'A' (ah)." And in order to utter this sound he opened his mouth like a shark. But it was not so easy to crush his wife.

"You were always a fool and you still are a fool. What is there to boast of in that? A? Well, let it be A, now I know it too!" Hers was the last word.

"Tell me, can you read all these books?" curiously inquired Spiridon as we sat drinking tea. "Can you read this small one, and this big one?" and he pointed

to a large dictionary. "Say, what are they all about? Are there any Yakuts in your country? No? Then who chops wood for you, and who brings frozen cream, and how much paper have you? Can you read as well as the clerk at Oulooss? Very good. To whom do you write all these petitions?"

I told him they were not petitions, but letters to people in my own country. For answer Spiridon shook his head and said:

"Bull speaks with bull by mooing, horse with horse by neighing, swan with swan by screaming, Yakut with Yakut by speaking, and Russian with Russian by letter-writing."

This same Spiridon, who seemed to have so good an opinion of Russians, used, when drunk, the most insulting of Yakutian expressions (icy-eyed) to describe them.

The following day we started for the Oulooss to attend the wedding of a chieftain whom we knew. A ring of marshes encircled the "town," and each little pond in the marshes was full of life. Many kinds of wild fowl constantly flew out from under our horses' hoofs, and occasionally there appeared the marsh-owl with its fantastically-beautiful flight. A flock of flaunting *Phalaropus hyperboreus*, coquettishly turning their heads, were swimming on each little lake. Here and there, like the cry of a peevish child, rose the cry of some small bird, and from the few hillocks came sounds like the bleating of a goat. These proceeded from a kind of water-hen, which, the Yakuts say, utters its call in twelve different languages before rain falls. Compared with the

ever-springing life of these polar marshes, the steppes of Southern Russia seem as dead.

We left Sredne Kolymsk on the 13th of June, the date when, as Yakuts say, "the mosquitoes begin to settle on men." For this reason, or because it was the mosquito month of the Yakuts, this marsh pest gave us no rest during the whole of our journey. The white cruppers of our horses were black with the insects which settled on them, and above us the mosquitoes hung like a black cloud. At first our horses plunged, reared, and rolled on the ground trying to get rid of the torturers, but, finding all attempts useless, they resigned themselves to fate. The drooping heads and mournful eyes of the poor animals expressed the depths of despair. Nets, gloves, and thick coats formed only a temporary protection from the mosquitoes. At each halting-place we made a huge smoky fire, near which our horses remained all the time; but even this did not help much, for if for one moment the wind swayed the column of thick white smoke, whose acrid fumes choked us and burnt our throats, instantly the mosquitoes settled again upon us.

"Look," exclaimed Spiridon, pointing to the mountain range on the horizon beyond the marshes. "Can you see something black on the mountain? Those are the Stone People. Four of them are sitting there. They are all black and are dressed in black. The Stone People do not eat and never do their lips open to say one word; only sometimes they hiss, and then a terrible wind blows, and we know that a great storm will come. Nobody dares to go to them.

Long, long ago, our grandfathers say, a Lamout who was hunting deer reached the spot, and for seven days remained there all the time waiting for the Stone People to speak or to move, but in vain. He then returned home. In his tent he told all to his wife, and that day he died."

A similar legend is told of nearly every mountain range which has lonely peaks on its crest.

On the third day of our journey the ground became more hilly, the marshes were left behind and thick willow bushes showered golden dust upon us. As I had arrived in Sredne Kolymsk during the summer (I had journeyed 2,000 versts on horseback) these two days in the saddle did not tire me, but I was tortured by the mosquitoes, which did not give us a moment's rest, and as the ancient Germans longed for Valhalla so I longed for my hut, on the threshold of which I could make a fire. I worried Spiridon with questions. "How many kyoss further?" The kyoss is the Yakutian measure of length, but it is a very elastic one, for it is the distance to be traversed while ice melts in a kettle, and while water boils, and while meat is being cooked. As the kettles vary in size, the kyoss also varies in length. I do not know why, but the Russians there decided that a kyoss was about ten versts. According to Yakutian reckoning, and taking into consideration the varying sizes of kettles, there is a "large ten versts" and a "small ten versts." I did not know the size of the kettle by which Spiridon estimated the distance, but I felt convinced that he had a very vague idea of figures. "It is only one kyoss and a half farther," he said en-

couragingly. We journeyed for another hour. All the bushes had vanished, and the forest began. We passed the forest and a lake also. I asked again : " How many more kyoss ? "

" Two," he replied firmly.

At last through the trees we saw the gleam of water, and soon we came to a conical tent, covered with earth, the summer residence of the Yakut. Several shaggy dogs, with sharp, wolf-like muzzles, set up a prolonged baying at the sight of our horses in the distance.

On the shore of the large lake, which was flooded with the bronze light of the midnight sun, lay an enormous quantity of fish. There were fat, big-bellied salmon, red-eyed darters, and sharp-snouted pike. In the centre of the lake was the white mass of ice which never melts even in summer. Near the fishing-place were two Yakut women, covered with fish-blood, busily engaged in cutting off the heads and tails, boning the fish, and curing it in the sun, afterwards smoking it over a wood fire. Treated in this way *chiri* is called *yukala* ; *peldiadki*, *hatchirka* ; and pike, *kitchimass*. All the entrails were placed in a kettle and a boy of about ten years old was busily scooping some of this out and frying it over the fire, preparing *salamat*. To the Yakut children, the fishing season is like our jam-making season, and the fish-entrails are equivalent to the scum on the jam !


There were two small low doors in the hut, and in the centre of the floor was a huge fire, the smoke from which partially escaped through a hole in the conical roof. The greater part, however, remained in the

hut, to the discomfort of its occupants, whose eyes and throats were pitilessly tortured by it. Only by lying on the floor was it possible to remain in the hut, but the smoke certainly helped to keep away the insects, swarms of which were hanging about outside ready to come in when the smoke should abate.

As we entered, a frightened gaze was fixed upon us by a small boy of four years old, who was tied up in a corner by a rope of horsehair, being in this manner kept out of the way of his mother while she was at work.

The subject of our conversation was the approaching marriage in the hut of the rich Moksogol, and I heard for the twentieth time how much he had paid for the bride. Five years previously the children had been betrothed at the early age of thirteen, and since then the bride had lived with her parents, Moksogol paying her purchase-money to them by instalments. The bridegroom, or rather the husband, had visited her secretly, according to Yakutian custom, and now the wedding was about to take place, and the husband would take his wife and child to the hut he had just built.

"Many, many people will come to the wedding," exclaimed my hostess, beginning to prepare our luncheon. She took from under a deer-skin a wooden cup full of fish-fat, removed with her fingers the dead mosquitoes and dirt in it, took a bundle of yukala, and placed all on the flat wooden barrel which served as a table. The yukala was dipped in the fish-fat, and this was the usual dainty luncheon in the fishing season. Remembering that Russians were somewhat



fastidious, our hostess produced for our use a flat spoon made of choobuk horn,¹ which she carefully cleaned by licking it. The luncheon proceeded, but not without mishaps. Whenever the smoke abated the hut instantly swarmed with mosquitoes, which settled behind our ears, on our temples, tried to fasten on our eyelids, and, in short, wherever the skin was most sensitive.

The distance from this hut to Moksogol's was only about three versts. Our road lay entirely through meadows of luxuriant grass, which gives excellent hay, but unfortunately reaping cannot begin until the 20th of July, when the meadows are somewhat dry. The cut grass is placed not on the ground, but on poles, to dry, so that the meadows are covered with what look like giant mushrooms, whose stems are the poles and whose heads are the bundles of grass. These hay-cocks are put together in September, when the marshes are slightly frozen. The animals are very fond of this hay, and soon fatten on it. The Yakuts ascribe to this grass a sacred origin. This is the legend :

Jessagai Tayon, the "White God's" brother, calls together all the migratory birds and shows them the way to the south. His seven daughters very often change themselves into white cranes (the Yakuts' sacred bird) and come down to earth to dance on the meadows. Once the kind goddess, Yechsite-Hatin, seeing them dance, took the most beautiful of the girls and said to her :

¹ The choobuk is a very interesting animal, little known to zoology. It is found in the mountains of Tass-Khayata. It resembles a moufflon and is very timid. Its thick fluffy fur is of a bluish colour. The Lamouts make spoons of its flat twisted horns.

"Your destination shall be the 'middle place,'¹ to serve and help the Yakuts."

The girl cried and begged to be set free.

"Do not despise the pagan earth! Turn yourself into grass and nourish the animals of the Yakuts." And so saying the goddess cut the wings of the girl, who became a blade of grass.

Such is the legend.

The ground rose higher and higher as we proceeded, and presently we saw many fenced enclosures, containing large numbers of animals. Evidently we were nearing the home of a rich man. There were cows and horses, bulls with wooden rings through their noses, and merry calves, wearing ingenious wooden muzzles to prevent them from sucking their mothers, gambolled about with their tails erect. We could hear the distant hum of voices, and presently we saw a large hut, shaped like a four-sided pyramid with the top cut off. Close by were two other huts, one a cowhouse, the other for the labourers. Near the door of the chief's "palace" there were ten poles fixed in the ground and to each were tied a couple of saddled horses. Evidently there was a full gathering of guests. Coming nearer, I saw another, but smaller, hut, apparently recently built, and uninhabited, but around it busy preparations were going on. Hardly had we arrived when the chief met us—his Christian name was Innocent, one of the most popular names in all Siberia—hatless and wearing a velveteen coat with enormous puffed sleeves and a magnificent silver belt.

¹ The Yakuts divide the universe into three parts—higher, middle (the earth) and lower. The gods live in all three parts.

He shook hands with me, then escorted me to his dwelling, whence came waves of happy voices.

II

The Yakuts settled on the banks of the Lena, having left the shores of Baikal, whence they had been driven by the Bouriat tribe. After the Yakuts' revolt under Djennik (seventeenth century), their leader, a remnant escaped and reached Kolyma, where they settled. They brought with them to this desert country traces of a higher civilisation. In their language there is a word for "iron," although on the shores of the Kolyma the fugitives used tools made from mammoth tusks and stone. There are also words for "agriculture," "to read," "to write," "letter," and even the term "learned" finds its equivalent in the Yakutian tongue. In the Far North-East all the ideas represented by these words are quite rudimentary. During six centuries the Yakuts were successively conquered by other races, and their extraordinary vitality alone saved them from extinction. Moreover, the Yakuts are the only settlers in the North who increase in numbers. But their condition of chronic subjection did not reflect advantageously upon their moral qualities, which are very bad. Reclus, who so well describes the polar races, gives the Yakuts the very worst of characters, but this eminent geographer was only partly right. The description applies only to the Yakuts of the Olekminsk region, who are in constant association with the Russians. Reclus' opinion was also held by

Vrousevitch, who wrote a most interesting article, "The Civilisation and Life of the Inhabitants of the Yakutsk Region." Judge for yourself of the psychological condition of a people treated as shown by the following sayings :

"You can make a friend of a Yakut only by flogging him."

"Yakuts respect most those who treat them worst."

These specimens of brutal philosophy are related by the American citizen, Gilder, as being the utterances of Ispravnik Varrava. Gilder further relates that once this man, being anxious to travel more quickly to a station 250 versts distant, wished to take some deer which did not belong to him. The Yakuts naturally were unwilling to give them, since their owners would lose eight days' work just for the sake of obliging the ispravnik.

"A loud and lively conversation ensued," writes Gilder, "of which to my regret I could not understand a word, but when I saw the ispravnik suddenly strike a Yakut with his fist and our Cossack at the same time lasso another who was trying to run away, I thought it my duty to ask the ispravnik whether I should begin to beat someone and, if so, on whom should I begin? He answered me that everything was all right and that the people were now obedient and 'well disposed.'" Unfortunately this was the only method employed to make the people "well disposed." Official visits are long remembered by the Yakuts! Here is a little sketch from the diary of a Bishop of Yakutsk : "The Yakut drivers waited for their master

for fourteen days, and where ? In the forest, under the open sky, in November with 46° R. of frost ! They dug a hole in the snow, in which they placed logs, and made a fire to warm themselves."

Cunning, lying, and theft, these undesirable traits of character in the Yakut, are in exact proportion to the amount of contact they have with their conquerors. The Yakuts from distant camps and those who live in camps near the towns, and are in contact with the transported settlers there, form two quite distinct races, so greatly do their characteristics differ. Hospitality is one of the good qualities of the Yakuts. Each passer-by enters at any time any hut he likes, thanks to the custom of keeping the doors unfastened. In the huts the "best place," the seat along the eastern side of the wall, is kept free for visitors and the host offers to them the best he has in the hut. The poor Yakut frequently has only field mice for food, but for the guest he reserves a piece of horseflesh or hare. Sometimes the Yakuts who live on the highway are absolutely ruined by the generous hospitality they show to passers-by.

The Yakutian character should be studied in some far distant camp which has never been visited by transported settlers, traders, or the official having the methods and principles described by Gilder.

At one time the position of head man of the clan was hereditary. His power was unlimited and he might torture his kinsmen and put them to death, or sell them as slaves and take all their possessions. Now the headman is elected to his position, and he has about the same jurisdiction as a Russian village

starosta, the only reminder of bygone supreme power being a cutlass.

Very interesting is the clan's system of the distribution of taxation among its members. At the general assembly the clan is divided into three groups. The first group is composed of the poorest Yakuts, illegitimate children, and transported settlers, who are billeted upon the clan. This group does not bear any responsibility, and is called Itimnit (the paupers' group).

The members of the second group do not pay anything, but are obliged to maintain a certain number of paupers. The last group has also to maintain a certain number of paupers, and, in addition, to pay money, sometimes at so high a rate that it amounts to fifty roubles per head per annum. By means of this arrangement the Yakuts (in the two northern districts of the Yakutsk region) have no paupers; but, in truth, the condition of the Itimnit is very pitiable, for, except the transported settlers, all are the slaves of the chief. The members of the clan had unlimited power over their kinsmen, and in fact the power still remains, for they can keep the men as unpaid labourers, and even sell the young girls to any who want them. I have already mentioned this in the first chapter.

The Yakuts are, no doubt, a very capable race. Their memory is excellent. In all the Yakutsk schools 45 per cent. of the scholars are Yakuts (368 to 428). These scholars are very proud of their race, and modestly call themselves the Greeks of the North, but Reclus gives them a less flattering description.

At Nijne Kolymsk I had an opportunity of meeting the first Yakut who had passed out of the seminary—the priest, Vassili Kariakin, a capable young man, eager for knowledge.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to say anything good of Yakutian education in the remote districts. The Oulooss must send every year a certain number of Yakuts to be educated, and as the “aristocracy” of the place object to having their children educated at the same school as the very meanest and poorest, these Yakut children receive their education, not from the priest, but from the deacon. Alas, what an education! The little Yakuts, after years of painful struggling with the mysteries of A and B, return to the Oulooss, not only unable to read, but even to understand Russian. My memory recalls one of these unhappy victims of “education.” Lakhashka hated learning with all the strength of his wild soul. The teacher, as a rule, was not sparing of the rod, especially with Lakhashka, who was severely birched on his first day at school.

“That is to sharpen your wits!” exclaimed the pedagogue.

The primer was put before the child with the command, “Spell it!” But Lakhashka clenched his teeth and was silent. The poor little Yakut was birched.

“Say A, B!”

Lakhashka remained mute, but his eyes sparkled with hate. The teacher flew into a rage.

“Beat the wretched little Yakut until he can bear no more!” he shouted. And the children, some with

rulers, some with birches, began to beat A and B into the little savage.

Lakhashka did not utter a sound, but, biting his lips till they bled, suffered stoically, until his little tormentors were tired.

God knows what would have been the end of this "education" had not Lakhashka died in the smallpox epidemic of 1889.

III

There were many people in the hut of Moksogol. The fire burned brightly in the huge fireplace, and on the hearth were many copper pans containing mare's flesh. The gaily-dressed guests were seated, not only in the place of honour, but everywhere, even in the most remote corners of the hut. Some were behind the fireplace, the burning logs on which spread warmth around "like a grand lady opening out her warm wraps of striped sable," as the Yakuts have it. On one seat exactly opposite the fire, reclining on a white mare's skin, was the Shaman, conspicuous by his long hair, which reached to his shoulders; all other Yakuts wearing theirs cut short. The eyes of the Yakuts are generally "oily," brown, and expressionless, but the eyes of the Shaman burned with a strange unhealthy brilliance. The pupils, surrounded by rainbow-hued irises, were of abnormal size, conveying a weird, sinister impression. His strange yellow face constantly twitched with a nervous tremor, and his blue wrinkled lips whispered noiselessly. He was about sixty years old. The old man never moved

his eyes from the burning tongues of flame, which surrounded the leafy logs. Perhaps he was communing with An-Oulahan, the Spirit of Fire—"the talkative little old man dressed in bright red fox-skins," whom the white god Ouroun-Ai-Tayon puts in each hut to protect the Yakuts from harm. That same day the Shaman was to perform a mystery, and he was preparing himself, endeavouring to concentrate his thoughts as much as possible on it. I quickly realised the position. The young husband had gone to fetch his wife from her home in another camp, about ten versts away. Although the Yakuts had been "Christianised" a hundred years previously, paganism remained in full strength and to the numerous gods of their pantheon they added Christian saints. Probably there was no marriage ceremony in former times, for though Yakutian legends are extraordinarily rich in detail, the marriages of heroes are only very briefly described.

"The hero enters the hut, sees the beauty seated there, seizes her without delay, bends her like a twig, smells (kisses) her, they cohabited." This constituted the ancient marriage rite, and the present one is not much in itself, the chief ceremonies being centred round the escorting of the bride to her new home. The Yakut chooses his wife from another clan. "The bride who dwells among her own people cannot be happy," says the Yakutian proverb, and "Happy is the daughter who marries far away from the parental home."

The matchmakers go with the bridegroom to the parents of the bride, but all particulars, as to the

dowry, etc., have previously been settled. When the cavalcade arrives at the hut, the matchmakers enter, leaving the bridegroom outside. The mother, elder sisters, and other relatives of the bride come out to meet them, bearing bowls of koumiss and birch-bark jars filled with cream.

“ We know, of course that you may not be hungry, having doubtless brought with you plenty of provision for the way, but, knowing that you were coming, we could not permit anyone else to touch these bowls. We have brought you of our best. Our mares were tended by seven chaste youths, and were milked by seven pure maidens.” So speaks the mother.

The matchmakers accept the proffered refreshment, and then, still standing, repeat the terms of the marriage contract, and when the conditions are agreed to, the bridegroom enters. Often he is only a boy of thirteen. He takes off his belt, in which are his knife, pipe, flint and steel, and offers it to the bride, who is sitting near the fireplace. If she does not like the bridegroom she refuses to take the belt, whereupon all the company depart. Among the Yakuts, and generally among all the polar savages, the condition of women is much better than among the Russian peasantry. But the bride consents, and the marriage ceremony is ended.

Dinner is offered to the guests, after which the bride and bridegroom are put to bed in the same hut. Etiquette requires that the husband should return next day to his home, subsequently visiting his wife in secret.

The same procedure had taken place five years

ago at the wedding of Moksogol's son. He had now concluded the payments of the bride's purchase-money, and, having saddled his best horse, set out upon his journey.

"They are coming! They are coming!" cried merry voices outside. And, indeed, the trampling of horses' hoofs could be heard and everybody ran out. A horseman, with a young woman seated astride on the horse before him, approached the picketing-post. Itinach (the bridegroom) had happened to pass by the lake near which was his bride's home. She came out of the hut as if by chance, to draw water in her birchbark pail. Itinach shouted, picked up the girl, seated her in front of him, and set off at a gallop. The father and brother of the bride were in the hut, expecting this shout. They quickly ran out, rushed excitedly about in alarm, then they sprang on their bare-backed horses and galloped in pursuit for about five minutes, until they reached the marshes, when the pursuers stopped, quietly turned their horses, and in half an hour's time all arrived at Moksogol's hut to share the feast. Two girls, about twelve years old, came out to meet the young couple, and holding the bridle assisted Kitchipyr (the bride) to get down. From the tying-place to the door of the new hut newly-cut grass was laid down. On this grass Kitchipyr walked, curtsying every few steps, as etiquette requires. The doors of the hut were wide open, but the entrance was barred by two thin dry rods held by two girls. Kitchipyr, entering, broke these two rods against her breast, then, picking up the pieces, lit them on the hearth. This ceremony

was to show that the Spirit of Fire now had another priestess.

With the Yakuts the hearth-fire is never extinguished, the glowing embers being easily kindled to flame by the addition of fresh wood. It is considered a great disgrace to a woman should she allow her fire to go out, and she would be teased to death, the shame also falling on her husband. I remember only one example of this occurring, and in consequence the husband and wife were obliged to go to the farthest clan, not being able to endure the taunts of their neighbours.

As soon as the fire blazed on the hearth, they seated Kitchipyr on the seat by the wall and hung a curtain of suède before her. On the threshold of the hut a young colt was killed, and the blood which spouted from the jugular vein was placed in a cauldron. The Shaman, taking some in a small bowl, poured it out on the ground at the door in order that the terrible god, Oulooss-Hannak-Tayon, his wife Han-Hatine, also the Lord of all Evil Spirits, Arsine-Dolai, who "has a mouth at the back of his head and eyes in his temples," might not bring harm into the dwelling. Another small bowl of blood the Shaman poured into the fire, a similar libation to the "Spirit of the Hut," the little old woman, Nyaha Haraksine, who "lives under the pole which supports the roof of the hut"; and also to the "Patroness and Mother Saviour and Compassionate Lady Aisit-Hatine." This kind goddess is the patroness of the Yakuts in general and of the women in particular. It is she who arranges the marriages, decides the fate of the pair, and helps

women in child-birth. According to the endless fairy-tale, "Khan Jargistai," which contains all Yakutian cosmogony, this goddess came to the first woman in her travail, remained with her three days, then left her, declaring that henceforth, so long as the Yakuts should exist, every woman three days after child-birth should rise, wash herself, and feed the cattle.

During this offering to the Penates, the hut was encircled by an enormous leather strap, to which were fastened all the cattle belonging to the young couple. The Shaman put on the sacrificial robe, came out of the hut, and stood in the centre of this living ring. Fuller details of this ceremony I give in the chapter headed "The Extinction of the Kangienici." To all the evil gods the Shaman poured out a libation of koumiss; to the beneficent gods there was no libation, as they were well disposed without propitiation.

It is significant of the individual character of Yakutian theology that no offerings are ever made to the "God of Gods," the Spirit of the Eight-sided Universe (An-ya-Daidyn). To this god is given the title of "The Drowsy," which fact heightens the resemblance that this savage conception bears to the passive Brahma.

"All were gathered together. They killed many cattle. They ate and drank for three days and nights. They made merry. They hiccoughed because of the heavy food. The hungry were filled. The lean were fattened."

Tradition thus describes a marriage feast of former times. Much the same thing happened on this occasion. In twenty-four hours so enormous a

quantity of food was consumed—mare's flesh, raw mare's fat, cream, frozen clotted cream, etc., that the weight of each Yakut must have increased by several pounds. One course followed another in rapid succession, while good wishes to the young people were continually uttered.

"May your teeth ever be stuck in bone-marrow!"

"May your throat be washed with the best koumiss!"

"May your mouth be rinsed with melted butter!"

"May your table never lack sweet fat from the neck of the mare!"

These delicacies were to be the portion of the hosts if the wishes of the guests should have effect.

Everything comes to an end, even a Yakut's appetite; and there came a moment when even the "lean ones" refused more food and the old people fell down, overcome with sleep and repletion. The young people had long been awaiting this moment, and now they went out into the meadow and formed themselves into two separate ranks, men in one, and girls in the other. With decorous and mincing steps these two living walls slowly approached each other.

"Ho, boys, ho! Let us enjoy ourselves while we are young!" chanted one of the men.

"Sing aloud, my throat!" sang a girl.

"Boys, let us dance and laugh while we are still unwed; ere yet the sinews of our strength are drawn out by a woman's little tongue!"

"Girls, let us play while we are still unwed, while we are yet uncaught by the coarse hands of men!"

This was all improvised. Jests, at times coarse,

were freely bandied about. On hearing the merry voices some old women, mostly blind, came out of the hut. Their extreme thinness, their unkempt grey hair, their blind eyes and strange dress, gave them a most fantastic appearance, reminding one of the terrible Druid priestesses mentioned in Michelet's "Histoire de France." The old women listened attentively to the young people's jokes, and they also improvised songs in which they made mention of lost youth, the sweetness of man's embrace, and the sorrow of infirmity. I quote one of these improvisations which I noted down at the time, as a specimen of the wild poetry breathed by these untutored songs :

"How welcome is the warmth of the sun to my aged bones ! How joyful to dance with you, my children ! This may be the last time I shall sing. Soon will the earth cover my sightless eyes. Next year again you will come here to play, but on my grave the young grass will be green. Cold shall I be there, nor can the hearth fire warm my old body. Dance and sing then, O youth ! "

She sang with wild energy : " And I too will dance with you for the last time. For the last time I shall drink the koumiss, and next spring you will gather here again in the sunlight. Then you will remember the old woman, and she will rejoice in her cold grave. She will hear your songs, and from the grave her darkened eyes will see you drink the koumiss. And her happy bones will dance to your merry songs."

Besides improvisations, they sang the customary songs, some of which expressed unbridled licentiousness and sensuality, the utmost plainness of language

being employed. Others, on the contrary, were delicate and sad.

"Friends, let us play at guessing riddles," suggested an old woman.

"Riddle-me-riddle-me-ree. From the roof hang four moccasins."

The answer was : "The four teats of a cow."

"Riddle-me-riddle-me-ree. Every morning the daughter of the Tsar Syrad Omuk comes out to work spells."

The answer to this was "Dawn."

Some of the riddles were quite Yakutian in character.

"Riddle-me-riddle-me-ree. He was born in a hut where he lay quiet and still, but when he arose there came a blizzard."

"We know, we know!" cried many voices. "It is Sata."¹

To please me, they began to ask riddles in praise of Russians.

"They say that My Lord receives chips that have been cut in his country."

Guess, if you can, that the answer is "A letter!"

Sometimes, with Homeric simplicity, they asked the girls riddles, courage to answer which might only have been found in those bold story-tellers who compiled "*Les cent Nouvelles nouvelles*" in the time of Louis XI, supposing, of course, that they had understood Yakutsk!

¹ The stone of Yakutian mythology. It is believed to be inside an eagle, or in the kidney of a black bull with a white patch on his forehead. This stone, when laid on the palm of the hand, causes a storm; and when cast into the water it turns round and round and then becomes still.

The Yakuts cannot boast of a high morality. "Any mare may bear a dead colt, any egg may go bad, any girl may bear a child!" So they formulate their opinion of the virtue of their girls. Conjugal infidelity is very common, but the husband is not distressed or annoyed, except when his hut is taken from him by the lover. "A stranger takes my fire and uses it!" he then complains. Unhappily, also, incest is frequent among the Yakuts.

The wedding feast lasted for three days. Such feasts cost a Yakut half his fortune, but he would be considered disgracefully mean were he not to provide it. Some guests still remained with Moksogol, but I was in a hurry to reach Sredne Kolymsk, for I was to leave the country in December, and, before my departure, I wished to keep my promise to visit my friend the Chooktcha.

CHAPTER III

DOWN THE KOLYMA

"FRIEND, come to the hut of Ermitchen, to eat pountipitchkin."¹

We had made Ermitchen's acquaintance during my first winter in Sredne Kolymsk. Every year the Chooktchi arrive with their herds of deer and encamp at a distance of about ten versts from the town, by the river, where the reindeer lichen grows in great luxuriance. As soon as news came of their arrival, there was an immediate rush of exploiters to the camp, each trying to get there first, unknown to the others. In exchange for tea, tobacco, and vodka the traders received deer, deer's tongues and haunches—that part of the animal which has the two-inch layer of fat so prized by everyone.

Next day, returning in the track of the exploiting traders, came a continuous file of Chooktchans from the camp to "town." Seen in the distance they (especially the women), in their fur garments, presented a remarkable resemblance to bears, a resemblance heightened by their rolling gait.

The Chooktchi do not like to ride to town, and even

¹ Pountipitchkin is the Chooktchi national dish. It consists of frozen deer's fat and flesh, softened by beating with wooden mallets.

when their Erema (Little Tsar) is in camp (he visits town only about six times in ten years) he does not walk or ride, but travels in a sledge, drawn, not by deer, but by twelve Chooktchans, among whom are two women—the best-loved wives of his majesty.

In town the Chooktchi go to each well-to-do person's hut. These children of the marshes have not the faintest idea of etiquette. They examine everything in the house, touch any article strange to them, lick it, click their tongues, and, if they like it, say "Give!" and, without further ceremony, put it in their breast before consent is given. The inmates of the huts do not stand upon ceremony with the savages, but simply turn them out, unless they have designs upon them. We were the principal sufferers, the savages troubling us the most. "The people from afar," they named us, to distinguish us from the Kolyma people and the transported settlers. We had neither the courage nor the heart to turn them out, and meanwhile the visitors remained for twenty-four hours, reinforced by half a dozen fresh arrivals.

Ermitchen was one of these visitors. Regularly every day he would visit me and stay for hours. I had not a single button remaining, nor a chip of a pane of glass which I had carefully brought from Yakutsk, 2,300 versts away, rejoicing at the prospect of having a small eye of glass inserted in the paper covering of my window in summer. The first Chooktchan word I learnt was "Give," and need I add that I learnt it from Ermitchen? I heard this accursed word about thirty times a day. Many a time I summoned up courage to say "No," but Ermitchen asked

with such a consciousness of his right that instead of "No" I said "Yes."

At last the blessed day arrived when the Chooktchan camp departed. Ermitchen paid me a final visit and invited me to visit him at his hut. For three years I had postponed the visit, and at last in July, 1891, I started on the journey. My route was as follows: By water to Nijne Kolymsk, 500 versts, there to remain until the river was frozen hard, then to set off on the ice for Soukharnoe, at the mouth of the Kolyma, to see the "lighthouse" of Lieutenant Laptev, thus grandly designated on the military chart, and, on my way back, to turn off to the Chooktchan encampment, at that time situated at Yegoroutch, a peak to the north of Nijne Kolymsk.

In the "dawn" of the 19th of July—that is to say, when the sun was exactly in the north-east—I and my two companions started from Sredne Kolymsk. Our boat, or karbass, as it is called, merits description. These boats are made by the Lamouts living on the River Yassachna, which falls into the Kolyma about 500 versts above Sredne Kolymsk. In this district only is found the aspen tree, of which wood the boats are made. The thin planks are sewn together with twisted willow-strands, all holes are plugged with moss, and the cracks and interstices filled with resin or gum obtained from the larch tree. There is no part made of iron, and these boats are so fragile and the planks so thin that the greatest care is necessary when stepping in, and special shoes must be worn, made with soft soles and without heels; otherwise the foot would go through the bottom of the boat.

But, notwithstanding the frail nature of the boats, they are quite safe in fine weather, and the people of Nijne Kolymsk use them even on the ocean. Our karbass was somewhat heavily laden. There were kegs of salt for our friends at Nijne Kolymsk, who had seen none since last spring, and our own equipment, including our beds and a chest of tea (about fifty blocks), some for our private consumption, some as "money"—ordinary money having no value in the Kolymsk district. Brick tea constitutes current money, and in the three principal places, Upper, Middle, and Lower Kolymsk, the brick has a particular value at each season in the year. For fish, yukala, deer, fur garments, milk products, and even for labour, payment is made in this unique "coin." In this district, and especially in the north, it is necessary to exchange one's money for tea, just as a Russian tourist exchanges his roubles for gulden when he reaches the Austrian frontier. If we compare brick tea with paper money as a means of exchange, mention must also be made of another medium which ranks as high as gold in rarity and purchasing power, and that is vodka.

All our luggage weighed about thirty pouds (about 1,200 pounds). We had another passenger in our karbass, our draught dog, Kylik, who played us a nasty trick, as will be seen later. For the first few days our journey was very pleasant; the river was like a mirror, the sky clear and bright, the current swift, so that we had easy work at the oars; the course was clear, no shallows, no rocks, no sand-banks, no cross-channels, no shifting sands, nor other obstruc-

tions. We made seventy-five to eighty versts a day, stopping at the zaimkas (fishing-places), which were about twenty-five to fifty versts apart. Near Sredne Kolymsk there are no fishing-places, so the inhabitants encamp elsewhere for the summer.

Each fishing-place has about three or four flat-roofed sheds, and it is difficult to imagine more primitive dwellings. The fire is made on the floor itself, the smoke escaping through a large hole in the roof. After the fire is lit the inmates are obliged to sit on the floor because of the smoke, which chokes them and burns their eyes. In each hut two or three families live. There are altogether five or six draw-nets at a fishing-place. Anyone who chooses may come to fish, as it is "God's property" or "place." Anyone may build a hut there and live in it for three summers, but on the fourth it becomes "God's place" and may become the property of the first newcomer who takes possession of it. It is interesting to note that, besides this custom, the Kolymyans have not the Russian *artel* system privilege, with the exception of the now rare "communal" fishing.

At the fishing-place we were surfeited with local dainties—yukala, varka, and other preparations of fish. Being tourists thirsting for knowledge, we decided to taste everything, but we lacked courage to try the local "jam," which was made of wild-brier berries cooked—in sugar, you think, of course? No; in fish fat! We found it most difficult to decline the kind offers of our hospitable hosts, who wished to load our boat with fish, and we could hardly persuade them to take presents from us, such as flour and

tobacco, for they consider it quite a sin to accept any return for their hospitality.

The water being still and smooth, we kept our course in the middle of the river, where the current ran swiftly. The green bushes and larch-trees on the banks were clearly reflected in the mirror of the river ; occasionally a fish leaped, or a flock of young geese rose suddenly, screaming noisily. All around us was complete solitude.

The shore on one side became more hilly, rising gradually as we approached what seemed to be a fishing-place, although, according to our calculations, the nearest was twenty versts farther on. No huts were to be seen, only an upturned karbass on the shore and some poles on which some nets were hanging. We were wondering what place it could be, when suddenly over the quiet dreaming river came the cry :

“ Friends, come here ! ”

We looked and saw on the bank an excited Yakut, holding his hands high above his head, on which, folded turbanwise, was a printed cotton handkerchief.

The river being already bronze in the light of the departing sun (now in the north, close to the indented forest line, which meant that the new day was beginning), we decided to put up there. The oarsman therefore pulled round, and the karbass turned heavily towards the shore. As we drew nearer, we saw that the Yakut was holding up an enormous sturgeon which he had just taken from the net. A few more strokes and the keel grated softly on the sandy shore. The sturgeon was placed in a rush basket in company with salmon and fat-bellied chiri, and the Yakut ran

towards us, with a woman and some children, the latter almost naked, their clothing consisting merely of a greasy leather tunic. Our karbass was lifted by the thwarts and carried ashore, and we were conducted with much respect to the log fire, on which the kettle was merrily singing. Then the questions began :

“ Where are you going ? ”

“ What news from Sredne ? ”

“ How is the fishing going on there ? ”

Meanwhile the woman cut the backbone from the still quivering sturgeon, chopped it into small pieces, and served it to us on a small wooden board, on which the stinking dirt lay an inch thick. There was a cloud of mosquitoes in the air, and we dared not lift our nets from our faces. We sat down wearing our thick suède gloves, and even the Yakut shook his head and buried his swollen face in the smoke of the wood fire. Not without reason do the natives call the mosquitoes “ children of the devil.” When all the news was told, we pushed off from the shore, but that day we did not go far, for a light mist lay on the river. The midnight sun was blood-red. The noisy seagulls were silent, only occasionally the cry of some marsh bird rose in the distance. It was time to sleep. The slight morning breeze had driven away the mosquitoes, and, as there was no dwelling wherein to stay, we drew near to the hilly right bank of the Kolyma, where, rising almost perpendicularly from the water, was a steep cliff with rusty stony sides. Larch trees grew here and there on this rock, their roots encircling it like claws. At the bottom of the

cliff were masses of drift-wood brought down by the flood. This forest wood is as dry as gunpowder. Presently we had a huge fire burning on the beach and a tripod erected over it. We settled ourselves on elkskins round the fire, and at that moment we all felt cosy and comfortable, although beyond that shore lay the great hilly waste which extends to the Pacific Ocean—that dreary waste upon which no European foot had yet trodden, and where even the Lamout hunters only occasionally venture. The monarch of the place is the shaggy Ulu-Tayon (bear), who alone is at home there. But now, how sweetly we slept under the warm hareskin blankets until it was time to continue our journey.

Sometimes we amused ourselves like children, grown-up and serious as we were. There are numerous islands in the Kolyma, large and small, some less than a verst in extent, some as long as ten or twenty versts, and even more. Here there are wonderful echoes, some repeating five or six times and more, each repetition being deeper and harsher, others repeating only once, but with marvellous distinctness, not only words but whole sentences. All that evening we three “icy-eyed” Russians (for so the Yakuts called those of us who wore spectacles) amused ourselves by shouting and calling, thereby giving much hard work to the merry little spirit of the forest, Barilakh,¹ whose shoulders are covered with fur, and who is so small that she can hide behind the pile of fallen larch needles.

¹ The Yakuts say that the echo is the little sprite Barilakh mocking the people.

Occasionally through the bushes on the shore we had glimpses of wild deer, or of a big horned elk pensively regarding our boat. Here there were large numbers of wild deer and elk, and in the mosquito season, in order to escape from their winged tormentors, the animals take to the water, leaving the marshy shore for the rocky one, and finding shelter in the mountains. Woe to the elk or deer should he cross near a fishing-place where the fishermen can see him, for instantly each man gets into his narrow canoe (made of thin larch planks, sewn with deer sinews, and seating one man only) and in a few minutes they surround the quietly swimming animal, who is helpless, for he swims so deep in the water that a canoe can easily pass over his back. They kill him with short-hafted spears.

One deer gives about 160 pounds of flesh, and an elk about 720 pounds. The prize is equally divided into as many shares as there are draw-nets in the fishing-place, and this is done even should the animal be perceived or killed by one man only.

On the third day of our journey the scenery changed. A north wind blew, the Kolyma "went mad," as they say here, and its surface was covered with great greyish waves, white-crested with foam. Our karbass rocked violently, the blades of the oars could not dip in the water, and the waves broke heavily on the nose of our boat, drenching us. Woe betide us should the steerman's hands grow numb, and let the boat come broadside on to the waves!

The water beginning to break over our boat, we made for the shore—no easy task, for the river was

two miles wide. Each man worked at an oar with all his strength, but wind and waves were so strong that the boat scarcely moved. At length we somehow reached the shore, or, rather, the huge sand-bank which was about a verst in length. To complete our happiness, heavy rain fell, and in a few minutes we had not a dry thread on us, and, as it was not possible to be more wet than we were, we resigned ourselves to fate. We found a dry place under the cliff, where we made a fire of driftwood, put up our tent, and soon our misfortunes were forgotten over hot tea and yukala.

Suddenly, from the rock above, there leaped right over us and the fire some sort of brown animal, which fell on the ground and half turned towards us, evidently terribly frightened, clicking its teeth together. Immediately the most primitive of weapons, burning logs from the fire, came into use. One strong blow stunned the unwelcome guest, and a succession of blows dispatched him. It was a northern wolverine (*Gulo borealis*), which had probably been disturbed in his lair by the smoke of our fire. During our twelve days' journey this was the only animal we encountered, although we often saw on the shore the huge footprints of a bear.

About 230 versts from Sredne Kolymsk there is the enormous Pomasskin. On the top of the mountain, among the wild-rose bushes, there were about twenty graves nearly level with the ground, one of them distinguished by a big, bent pole, half decayed by time. These were the famous "graves of twenty Russians" of which I had heard when I started from Yakutsk.

"Who were they?" I asked the old Yakut Moksogol (his Russian name was Nicholai), who lived at the bottom of the cliff.

"The snow has fallen many times since that happened," he began. "Some Russian soldiers came and wanted to build a town on the mountain. They began to fish, and they caught a sturgeon. But, my friend, it was a strange sturgeon, for it had only one eye, and that was on its forehead. 'Oh, comrades,' said one old man, 'do not eat it, or some evil will happen.' But they laughed. They cooked and ate the sturgeon and lay down to rest, but only the old man rose up again, for he had not eaten of the fish; all the others were dead. They are buried here, and this pole marks the grave of their chief."

What are these graves? Whence came the people who lie buried in this most desolate spot? How can the Yakuts know such a word as "soldier," when throughout the entire region there are no military? To all these questions I can only reply that I do not know.

On the sixth day of our journey we came to Kresty, the largest village between Sredne and Nijne Kolymsk, for here there are five "smokes." The inhabitants are Yakuts and a mixture of Yakuts and Russians.

"Are you going to Nijne or Omolon?" suddenly cried a familiar old cracked voice from the shore. I looked and scarcely believed my eyes when I saw Loukotseff, or Youkotseff, as he pronounced it, an old Cossack of seventy-five who for a very long time had been sentinel at the communal barn in Sredne Kolymsk, having been chosen by the other Cossacks

to fill this post, the only "official" one in Kolymsk. And this was quite an exceptional post! There was no likelihood of anyone breaking into the barn, even if it had not possessed the huge lock which so astonished the American explorer, Gilder. There were no passwords, no change of guard, no inspection. The sentinel had no uniform, but wore his own private clothing, and he carried an old flint-lock rifle dating from the time of Catherine the Great. This gun had not been fired for 100 years, and not only was it unloaded but the flint was not in place. Loukotseff, not having gone fishing, had accepted the post of sentinel on behalf of all the Cossack "Regiment." In summer when the sun warmed his old bones, he would go to sleep on the balcony of the barn which he was guarding. With Homeric simplicity he would divest himself of shirt, trousers (the barn was in the most crowded part of the town) and boots; and, perfectly naked, after the Yakutian custom, would get into his hareskin sleeping-bag, first placing his old gun beside his trousers on the staircase below to guard the premises.

"Where are you going, grandfather?" was Loukotseff's greeting, as he removed the plug of syerka¹ from his mouth.

We were very friendly with one another and he had often invited me to visit him and chew syerka. He always called me "grandfather" and "old man," because of my beard, although he might have been my grandfather, for he was quite thrice my age.

¹ Syerka is a preparation of boiled larch-gum, which nearly everyone in Siberia chews.

“ Well, brother, and who is guarding the barn for you ? Did you engage someone ? ”

“ Why should I ? My old woman looks after it,” phlegmatically replied the old man, beginning to chew his syerka meditatively.

True—I might have thought of that. Besides his position at the barn, Loukotseff had another occupation. He milked our cows, and when he was thus occupied, his wife took his place as sentinel. She was an old woman of seventy years and was an “ emiriat-chka.”¹ She would sit motionless beside the gun, staring fixedly before her with her faded, protruding eyes, chewing syerka and waiting patiently for her husband’s return after milking the cows, a task which usually occupied about two hours. During her husband’s absence she made a splendid Cossack. Nowhere in Russia could such an extraordinary sight be seen.

The fishing at Kresty was going on very well, but life in the village was poisoned by the haillak (transported criminal) Titov, who had recently been sent there. This man must have committed many great crimes to have merited the punishment of being sent to the farthest north-east of the Kolyma region, which bears the official title “ Unsuitable for human habitation.” A common criminal is sent on from place to place in succession, according to the number and gravity of the offences which he commits ; beginning with the Irkutsk province on the Lena, next Olekminsk, next one of the Oulooss in the Yakutsk district,

¹ A name given to a woman suffering from a nervous complaint peculiar to the Yakuts.

then to Verkhoyansk and Indigirka, and finally to the Kolyma district, where he remains, for the simple reason that it is not possible to send him any further north. Thus, it will be seen that to the Far North-East none but the veriest prison dregs are sent—inveterate and irreclaimable criminals.

The haillak knows perfectly well that all is ended for him when he is once in Kolymsk; escape is impossible, for no human being can penetrate the polar forest, and to his exasperation is added a gloomy despair. He is sent to a Yakutian camp (Oulooss) and the Yakuts have to maintain him. They build a hut for him, give him a horse, supply him with meat, fish, frozen cream, tea—in a word, everything. In their reckoning each haillak costs the Oulooss ten or twelve roubles per month, and this, when the Yakuts themselves are obliged to live on bark, flavoured with a little sour milk, and when in the Verkhoyansk region they are obliged to eat field-mice so that they may not die of starvation. In order to protect their wives and daughters from the haillak, the Yakuts give him an orphan girl with whom to cohabit. Pitiable indeed is the plight of this wretched girl! Her terrible tyrant rules her with fist and cudgel, and her face is never free from bruises. The haillak so despises the Yakuts that, though he may live for years among them, the only word of their language which he will condescend to learn is “give!” Life under these conditions is equally intolerable on both sides. The Yakuts regard the haillak as vermin, as a savage, wicked beast that drains their life; as an evil satyr who will violate wives and daughters in the presence of their husbands

and fathers. On the other hand, the criminal forced to live among savages, who do not understand him, feels his position to be worse than solitary confinement. Finally, driven to desperation, he does something terrible in order to compel the authorities to remove him from this accursed region. While I was in the Kolymsk district one of these criminals, without any reason, threw the child of a small chieftain into a fire and held him there with an iron rod until he was burnt to death. Despair gave courage to the Yakuts. They sprang upon him, bound him, and took him to Sredne Kolymsk, and from there to Yakutsk, where he was sentenced to twelve years' hard labour.

Near Nijne Kolymsk there is a clan of eighteen Yakuts who have to maintain fourteen of these transported criminals. It is difficult to believe, but it is a fact that the entire clan are the slaves of the haillaks. The Yakuts give to each haillak everything necessary—draw-nets, nets, dogs, sledges, etc. ; the savages themselves, having no nets of their own, work for him, receiving for themselves only one-third of the total catch. Very often the haillak will trade all the things for drink, and then demand new ones.

On my journey to Kresty I heard much about Titov. The Yakuts, both men and women, trembled all over when they pronounced his name. Titov was about fifty years old, and was a strong, healthy man. Immediately on his arrival he demanded a hut, a horse and dogs (there were no cows in the neighbourhood), nets, and a woman, and he threatened to burn their village if his demands were refused. They gave

him what he asked. Next he demanded a monthly supply of meat, fish and tea, and this also he received, but still he was not satisfied. He would not cast the nets himself. "Why should I get my feet cold and wet casting the nets? I was not sent here to work."

The pretensions of these haillaks and their irritation against the unfortunate savages were quite extraordinary.

"What do these dogs deserve for giving me block tea to drink? Why, in Russia I did not know there was such a thing, and here these rascally Yakuts show me what it is!" So said a criminal to me one day. Titov took all the yukala and fish that he wanted from under the very eyes of the owners. He fed his dogs with the best salmon, which he had taken from the Yakuts, and finally he sold his nets and demanded new ones.

"Why cannot he treat us like men?" complained Ivan (a half-breed, with a Yakut father and a Russian mother) at whose hut we were staying. "Dogs are not spoken to as he speaks to us."

All the villages decided to send a deputation to the *ispravnik* at Sredne Kolymsk, begging him to send the haillak elsewhere, or they would leave the place and encamp in another district. The poor innocent savages are heavily punished, instead of the guilty criminal! But what is the explanation of their abject fear of the haillak and their subservience to him? One reason is of remote origin. The ancestors of the Kolymyan Yakuts were fugitive insurgents, who escaped after their defeat under Djennik, their leader. These people fled to Kolyma in deadly fear

after the horror of the suppression of the revolt. The ferocious tortures and executions of that time are still kept in remembrance by song and story from one generation to another. The Yakuts tremble at the mere mention of "Russian," and a haillak is to them the personification of all the cruel enemies mentioned in those terrible stories. The Yakut always calls him "Tayon" (lord or master), and the haillak treats the Yakuts as his ancestors treated theirs, the poor savages enduring it all; indeed, they believe that the haillak is sent to them in order to make their lives bitter. That is one reason. Another is the absolutely unprotected condition of the Yakuts. The region is so vast that the solitary Russian official is unable to help them even if he wished to do so. It is terrible to speculate on the ultimate fate of these poor savages, when, as is probable, criminals will be sent in greater numbers to the remotest parts of Siberia. Then will the Farthest North-East be a veritable hell, where the groaning and torment of the wretched savages will never cease except with their lives.

Kind-hearted people tried to find out how to help a score or so of lepers—a very laudable scheme—but perhaps kind-hearted people will also be found willing to find out how to cure, not a few score, but the whole race of Yakuts of a not less terrible leprosy, which is eating away their morals and destroying their economic position; and the name of this leprosy is haillak.

All the men had gone "goose-hunting." When the geese are moulting and before the new feathers have come, the birds are unable to fly, and the men choose

this time for the "hunt." The birds are driven to a backwater and there beaten to death with sticks, oars, or the stocks of rifles. At one time these birds were killed by the thousand, but now the results of the "hunt" are more modest, though still very great. As this hunt takes place in summer, and continues during several days, the slaughtered geese decompose very quickly, but the natives are so little fastidious that they eat the game, the presence of which makes itself felt at many yards' distance. Next day we rowed on, and would have been glad to have another oarsman, as beyond Kresty the river widens considerably, but we did not succeed in finding one. Some of the men were goose-hunting, some fishing, and others were awaiting the ispravnik, whose arrival was daily expected; but Ivan, with whom we were staying, gave us two dogs who could help us by towing the boat when the north wind blew, and with our own dog, Kylik, we therefore had three dogs to help us in this way.

In exchange for the tea and tobacco we gave him, Ivan gave us a long strap of elk-leather to use as a tow-rope. How delighted we were at the prospect of having a little relief when the wind should blow, but how quickly disappointment came! We had not long to wait for the wind; we harnessed the dogs and at first all went well; but after about twenty versts the dogs suddenly scented some wild beast or other, and pulled with all their strength. The strap broke and the dogs, freed from restraint, laid back their ears and raced away. Ivan's dogs returned to Kresty, but our Kylik, whether he would or not, was

obliged to remain with us and do the work of three dogs !

This was a great misfortune, for we had now reached the most desolate part of the river. The nearest habitation was by the Omolon, 130 versts farther on, and the river continued to widen. The nearer we came to the ocean, the stronger the north wind blew, and we were but three men. At last we made an arrangement that while one man steered, another rowed, and the third rested ; each man rowing in turn for one hour. Sixty versts from Kresty, the mountainous cliff on the right bank ended in the steep, gloomy mountain Khanjiboy, the mountain range then turning eastward towards the Chookotsk land. Khanjiboy is the theme of song in the epics of the Chooktchi and Lamouts. Near this mountain lives the giant Sana—the Hiawatha of the Chooktchan legend ; and, lying in a Chooktchan hut, listening to the adventures of this giant, it seemed to me that I was hearing the story of Hiawatha in Longfellow's wonderful poem, couched in primitive language. Sana formed the first Chooktchan pair from snow ; he taught them how to make fire with friction, how to harness the deer, how to make and sew their garments, and all other necessary things he taught them. He designed nothing but good for men, but the evil spirit Chapak always endeavoured to thwart his plans. Once Chapak came to Khanjiboy, and, seeing Sana asleep, killed the kindly giant and began to devour him, but, when he bit through the skull, all the good, benevolent thoughts in the mind of Sana were liberated, and, in the form of butterflies, flew everywhere.

Ever since then, when a Chooktcha catches a butterfly, he rubs it against his forehead saying: "O Sana, give me light!"

Khanjiboy is still held in great respect, not only by the Chooktchi but also by the Russians. The mountain is a landmark in the marshy plain, for by it the Chooktchi know their whereabouts, having nothing else to guide them, as there are no roads. Northward from Khanjiboy the shores of the river are perfectly flat, and beyond the margin of low bushes begins the endless tundra (marshy plain), which the Nijne Kolymyans call the sea. Here and there on the tundra, like frozen waves, rise low sandhills, covered with *Betula nana*, cloudberryes and *Vaccinium uliginosum*. All the rest is a mass of rusty-coloured moss, splashed here and there by whitish patches of reindeer lichen. It is difficult to imagine anything more depressing and monotonous than these shores of the Kolyma beyond Khanjiboy. Immense masses of sun-bleached driftwood, resembling the whitened bones of some huge monster, lie along the shores, and where there is no such obstruction the view is still more depressing, for on the low, flat bank are scattered many little round hillocks covered with black moss; hillocks of such strange form that they seem to be the heads of drowned people, whose bodies are covered with sand, the heads with their matted hair alone being visible. The line of the distant opposite shore seems to melt into the horizon.

It was the end of July, the sun was beginning to set, and the evenings grew very cold. The summer

was unusually hot this year, but in this latitude at this time, snow frequently falls, although it soon melts. At Sredne Kolymsk, on the 11th of June, 1888, very heavy snow fell and remained for twenty-four hours. In July, 1890, the thermometer often fell many degrees below zero, so it would not have been astonishing had heavy snow fallen in this latitude.

On the eighth day of our river journey, exhausted, frozen and shivering, we reached the Omolon. About a hundred years ago there lived by this river three large clans of the race Yukagir. Vrangél writes of their great deer-hunting expeditions in the autumn, when herds of these animals crossed the river Omolon, and many hundreds of savages took part in the hunts; but, alas! there are only eighteen people remaining to-day of those three great clans.

Nobody was on the bank, so, after beaching our karbass, we went in search of the Yukagir huts. Had we not been utterly exhausted, with a distance of 150 versts between us and the next village, we, like all Russians, would have preferred to pass on without visiting these unhappy savages.

We could see nothing through the high, thick willow bushes; but suddenly there appeared about a dozen people, old and young, who ran to meet us, shouting joyfully in welcome. Some put their arms through ours, others helped to carry our belongings; and in the Yakutian tongue they said:

“Come, friends, come and rest!”

Through the bushes, as we went along, we caught sight of conical huts with holes in the top, through which smoke was issuing; and the savages led us,

with great respect, to the largest and best of the huts. They hastened to spread bear and deer skins on the floor, that we might rest comfortably, and the women put a kettle on the fire; their metal breastplates chinking as they moved. They all sat round us.

"Now, friends, tell us the news," said the oldest among them.

"We so seldom see any passers-by," said another.

Ah, yes, hapless people, it is indeed seldom that you see passers-by!

Why were our hearts wrung with pain when we were thus warmly welcomed? Why were we choked with painful emotion which we strove to repress, as we looked upon these poor, kind savages? The unfortunate creatures were nothing but living corruption! One, instead of a nose, had a decaying hole in his face, the eyes of another were set in horrible red, suppurating orbits; a third resembled a death's head, with his lips fallen away from the rotting yellow teeth. The conquerors had not only swept away almost all of this amiable people, but had infected the remaining few with two terrible diseases—small-pox and syphilis. Absolutely all on the Omolon are syphilitic; and in their case it would seem that syphilis is united with the even more horrible disease of leprosy. There does not appear to be any other explanation of this living decay of the sufferers, for, in Nijne Kolymsk, although nearly everyone is syphilitic, nowhere are there to be seen such living corruption as these dwellers by the Omolon. And this is why Russians make a wide detour in order to avoid the pitiable remnant of a once great tribe, and

this is the reason why these poor creatures so seldom see a stranger. Although we lived constantly among syphilitic people we had found preventive means of escaping infection, so that we were not in any personal danger ; but painful distress wrung our hearts, and the kinder the poor savages were to us the more our hearts swelled with grief and pity for them.

We were delighted to learn that on the opposite bank, in the Kolymyan fishing-place, there was a Yakut who would be glad to row with us to the next little village of Timkino (fifty versts from Nijne Kolymsk), where there are many fishing-places. It is true that the Yakut availed himself of our need to charge us four times as much as he ought, but we were greatly relieved at having the help of another oarsman. Beyond the Omolon the Kolyma is four or five versts wide, the current is slow, there are frequent winds, and, without the help of one who knew the river we could never have reached Timkino. In this place there were only Russians, and it was not necessary to show our knowledge of Yakutian, for there was no one who understood a word of that language. Although they all spoke and understood Chooktchi they, unlike the Nijne Kolymyans, spoke Russian among themselves.

At each fishing-place we were welcomed as dear friends. All the people had been without salt for eight months, and we had brought some with us. When we gave a present of two cupfuls of salt we were thanked as though it had been, not salt, but gold.

The last ten versts to the "fort" made themselves felt. We got into the sand-banks, and

for three hours had to wade waist-deep in the cold water, dragging our heavily-laden boat. At last we reached deep water, but were so exhausted that we had no strength to row, and we were almost in a state of collapse. It was the twelfth day of our journey, and we began to feel that we had undertaken a task beyond our powers when we attempted to do the rowing ourselves. We sat with our hands hanging helpless, when suddenly our steersman shouted "Draw-nets ahead!" Columbus himself could scarcely have rejoiced more at the sight of land. And, indeed, it was the end of the reach, and round the bend of the river we saw a row of boats on the shore. We had arrived at Nijne Kolymsk, or the "fort," if you prefer that name. The buildings were all hidden by the bushes, but we had already been seen. Tiny people, whom I with my short sight mistook for children (they were adults and even old), ran down from the hill to the river, the women waving their arms and screaming excitedly.

We were the first arrivals from Sredne Kolymsk in the course of four months and were the bearers of news from the "civilised" world, for to the Nijne Kolymyans, Sredne Kolymsk is the capital. Hurrying down the steep bank was our dear friend the monk, Father Victor, the head of the Chooktchi mission, and there also were other friends who were expecting our arrival.

"Oh, friends, what a big man!" said a woman's frightened voice, as I jumped from the boat to help to pull it ashore; and among those Lilliputians I seemed a giant, although I had never dreamt of a

time when I should be regarded as one. At last our misfortunes were ended, and we were among our dear friends. We hastened to relate all the news and gave them the letters which had reached Sredne Kolymsk by the summer post (the post comes from Yakutsk once in four months). We had brought with us a large bundle of Russian and foreign newspapers, the most recent of which bore the date 3rd January, 1891, and it was now the 1st of August in that year; we had also some of the "latest" newspapers dated November and December, 1890.

We ascended the steep bank. Beyond in the distance was Panteleikha, the large double-crested sopka (extinct volcano), forty versts from the town, its peaks, already snow-clad, gleaming like bronze in the light of the setting sun. Before us was a swampy hollow, across which some rough bridge was thrown; there were a few box-like huts, and a little way off stood a half-ruined log-tower, minus roof and door, all that remained of the blockhouse. At last we were with friends in a clean hut, and feminine hands, even in this far polar region, gave a touch of cosy comfort to the poor dwelling. The first part of my undertaking was accomplished, and now, before starting on my journey to the ocean's shore, I had a period of two months in which to rest and wait until the river should be frozen.

NOTES

Almost all the prisoners in the Yakutsk prison whether sentenced or under trial, excepting a small number of Yakuts, belonged to the exiled element.



The total number of the exiles in this region is 6,090 (5,155 men and 935 women).

Classified into districts the numbers are as follows :—

	Men.		Women.
Yakutsk ..	3,805 ..	..	693
Olekminsk ..	740 ..	..	122
Viluisk ..	471 ..	..	114
Verkhoyansk ..	76 ..	..	2
Kolymsk ..	63 ..	..	4
	<hr/> 5,155		<hr/> 935

Deducting from this total 154 political prisoners (132 men, 22 women) and 1,233 religious fanatics¹ (754 men, 479 women) there remains a formidable army of haillaks, numbering 4,703, who are an intolerable burden on the shoulders of the unhappy Yakuts.

The above figures are taken from the Revision of the Yakutsk district, 1889.

¹ Members of a sect who, in accordance with their peculiar ideas, inflict upon themselves a certain mutilation, which, being an offence against the law, is punished by exile.

CHAPTER IV

NIJNE KOLYMSK

I

IN the year 1891 the summer at Nijne Kolymsk was very warm. The 15th of August had passed, and yet the snow had not come, only the double-crested Panteleikha showed white against the horizon, for on its summit snow had fallen in July. Nijne Kolymsk was quite deserted, and there were not more than five people in the town. Everyone had gone fishing, and all the doors were locked, and the windows boarded up. In this respect Nijne differs from Sredne Kolymsk, where the doors are closed by a mere slip of wood in token of the absence of the inmates. At Nijne more solid protection was necessary, for there were several haillaks there, and in Sredne there were none. But even the haillaks had gone fishing. My comrades had gone to arrange for a boat for themselves, and also to obtain firewood for our winter store. Someone had to remain behind to take care of our possessions and to prepare our dwellings for the winter, and I was chosen. It was very lonely and depressing. I used to wander about the sleepy kingdom. Not a sound anywhere! All the dogs had been taken to the fishing-place, and

other domestic animals there are none here. The nights especially were dreary, because of the increasing darkness. The solitary lamp of fish-oil smoked and spluttered, and its flame was a mere glimmer. The dark walls of the hut seemed merged in the greater darkness beyond, and the silence was unbroken by the slightest sound. It was like being in one's coffin. I was oppressed with still heavier gloom when the lamp flickered up momentarily, for then, on the uneven log walls, black shadows began to move, as though a monstrous shape were fluttering its ruffled wings. It was a great relief to me when some of the fishermen came back from time to time, for it is indeed hard to be a polar Robinson without any living companionship, not even that of a dog. The natives, finding me thus alone, always asked in wonder how it was that Russians were not afraid of ghosts and could sleep alone in a hut. It is curious that these people of Nijne Kolymsk are fearless in the open, Nature having familiarised them with all kinds of danger. A man will go alone, armed only with a rude spear, against the dreaded white bear; he will pass whole weeks quite alone on the tundra, on the shore of the ocean, and generally he fears nothing in the open air; but not for worlds would he stay alone in a hut. The monotony of polar nature, bad food, and constant privation, all combine to make him extremely nervous. During the long winter very many suffer from hallucinations, which in all cases take one or other of two forms—a woman with fire in her hands or a corpse. This is doubtless the explanation of the general fear of ghosts.

After the departure of the occasional visitors I was again alone in the sleepy kingdom. Nobody came from higher up—that is to say, from Sredne Kolymsk—and during my four years' stay at that place I did not once experience such a feeling of utter isolation from the world as I felt in those few months when I was the only inhabitant of Nijne Kolymsk.

On the 18th of August snow fell heavily, and remained, and with the snow came my "Friday" in the shape of my native friend Peter, known in Nijne as "Pancake," and, looking at his round flat face, the aptness of the nickname was evident.

"Brother," he exclaimed joyfully, "the shoals are coming in !"

This was very good news, as the fishing had been poor for the last few days ; winter was approaching, and the fish had not yet appeared in any great quantity, and as the principal food of both people and dogs consisted of herrings, a scarcity of these fish meant a terrible famine. I was very glad to hear Peter's news, not only because the herrings were coming in, but because they were in that part of the river near the fort ; therefore, this meant the return of the inhabitants and I should no longer be alone. Next day, in fact, some of them returned, with three of the draw-nets. In one respect there is a marked difference between the people of Sredne and Nijne Kolymsk. Nobody at the latter place is ashamed to work, but a Sredne Kolymyan would be greatly insulted if he were asked whether he did work of any kind.

“Why should I work?” he would reply with offended dignity. “We are rich and can hire a man.” A Sredne Kolymyan merchant when he pays a visit to a friend living only a few yards away will not for any consideration walk to the house; he orders his dog-sledge to be harnessed. The Sredne aristocrat understands one thing very well, and that is how to cheat the Yakuts and Lamouts, giving them vodka prepared with coarse tobacco in exchange for costly furs. It is quite different in Nijne Kolymsk. Nobody there is ashamed to work. Even the clergy go with their own nets to fish, and it is with pleasure that I recall my acquaintance with the priests at Nijne, Father Victor and Father John, who had formerly been in America and on the shore of Hatanga. When fishing, Father John would tuck his cassock into his leather belt, and draw the cord of the net, while at the same time his son, the deacon, would draw the net into the boat, the scene vividly bringing before me the Biblical picture of the fishermen Apostles. What a contrast between the ecclesiastics of Sredne and Nijne Kolymsk!

In a couple of days the river shores near the fort were swarming with vigorous life. A strong cold wind blew from the north and the temperature was 1° Cent.

Knee-deep, and some waist-deep, in the cold water were the fishers, working hard at the nets. Each draw consisted of 5,000 or 6,000 herrings, and had the nets been larger, the catch would have been much greater; but the nets at Nijne were small. Moreover, the fishers are afraid to cast the nets in

the deepest part of the river, where the fish are in greatest abundance, but content themselves with fishing close to the shores. The great difficulty is not in emptying the net, but in clearing it of the fish which are entangled in the meshes, for special dexterity is needed to extricate them. The men do this with their fingers only, and imagine what it must mean to pull out with numbed and frozen fingers several thousand fish, standing, meanwhile, in the icy water ! At night it is worse, for then the boatmen cannot see the shore workers, and can tell their whereabouts only by the light of the occasional wood fires on the beach.

In three or four days about 18,000 or 20,000 herrings had been caught, which were placed in a wooden enclosure specially made for this purpose, and the fishermen ceased from their labours. The river was already beginning to freeze, and on the banks lay uneven ridges of newly-formed ice deposited by the waves as they beat upon the shore.

The traders now sent agents to bargain for the fish. For 1,000 herrings they paid one rouble, for 5,000 they gave one bottle of vodka (prepared with copperas, as already described), and the following spring they will sell this same fish at the rate of 1,000 for ten roubles.

The weather was still warm, and in a few days' time it was scarcely possible to go near the enclosure, especially when the wind blew from that direction, because of the smell from the decomposing fish, which already asserted itself. When a continuance of warm weather could no longer be expected, the enclosure

was opened and the fish were thrown out on the beach to freeze, and, when frozen, it was stored in the barns. There is a special measure, or reckoning, used for the fish. They are laid in piles of 250, water is poured over them, and the frozen pile is called Kalimso.

By the early part of September the River Kolyma was frozen over. In Sredne Kolymsk, when this occurs early in the season, arrangements are made for the only form of communal fishing known there. During the four years of my stay I only once witnessed this communal fishing.

A place is chosen where the river is narrow and makes a sharp turn. All the nets in the place are set together in the river, completely obstructing its course. The entire population comes to this fishing as to a fair. An overseer is chosen to direct operations, and an assistant to divide the catch equally among all. The fishing lasts for two days. The ice in the river must first be broken before the nets can be set. Men break the ice, the women and girls cut the wooden poles to which the nets are to be fixed, and the children carry them either on their shoulders or on dog-sledges. There is a constant hum of voices, the noise of laughter, joking, and singing rising like waves in the air as the fishers chant an improvised song. The assistant divides the catch into "numbers," or shares, one for each person, whether adult worker or small child whose work has been merely to carry a few poles. For each three nets and for each dog-team there is a "number" or share.



YUKAGIR WOMEN.

[Face page 90.

This communal fishing is fast going out of use, much to the grief of the older people, who lament the passing of an old custom. By the end of September the severe frost had set in, though I was assured by the natives that it was "quite warm." The Nijne Kolymyans clothed themselves, like the Chooktchi, in moccasins of variegated furs, fur trousers and short fur skirt with hood. Some of them went to the mouth of the Kolyma to fish under the ice, others engaged in the preparation of the three products of native enterprise—mammoth tusks, and skins, in readiness for the traders' agents, who were expected to arrive at the first possible opportunity.

II

From the researches of Pallas, von Ber, Brandt, Midendorf, Fr. Schmidt, Chersky, and others, we know that the mammoth, an animal of the elephant family, used to live (at any rate for part of the year) in the polar region of Siberia, in conditions which differed very little from those of the present time. In the interminable marshes and through the virgin forest, the mammoths wandered in great herds, as will be related later. Geologically speaking, it is only a short time ago that the mammoth became extinct, for, in places near rivers where landslips have occurred, there have been found, not only skeletons, but entire carcasses of mammoths, with flesh, skin and fur complete, and with the blood frozen in the arteries; all in a complete state of preservation.

According to the accepted interpretation of an obscure passage of Pliny, mammoth tusks, in ancient times, formed an article of merchandise, with tusks of elephants and seals. The first mammoth tusk was brought to England by Josias Logan in 1611. It had been found in the basin of the River Petchora, and its discovery caused a great sensation. Logan wrote thus to a friend: "Nobody could ever have dreamt that there could be such an article of merchandise in Muscovy." Russians, however, had known since 1582 of the existence of mammoth tusks and bones. Mammoth skeletons were first mentioned by Vitsen, who, during his stay in Russia in 1686, had collected many stories about mammoths. In 1692 the Russian Ambassador, Evert Isbrandt Idess, a Dutchman by birth, was travelling through Siberia to China. He mentioned the finding of a mammoth's carcase near the Yenisei at Touroukhansk, having heard of it from his guide. The natives believe that the mammoth used to live underground, and that his tusks were the means by which he bored his way upwards through the slime and clay, and that when he reached the sandy layer he was suffocated by the sand which loosened and fell upon him, and this, they say, is why mammoth carcasses are always found in the sand layer.

All the native legends concerning this animal have been collected by Müller in his work, "*Leben und Gewohnheiten der Ostiaken unter dem Polo Arctico wohnenden, etc.*," Berlin 1720. The author was sent to Siberia as a prisoner of war during the Swedish war. Probably he himself believed many of these stories.

In 1771, an entire mammoth carcass was found in a landslip near the River Vilui, lat. 64° . The head and feet are still to be seen in Petrograd, but the remainder of the carcass was eaten by the Yakuts and their dogs. In 1843 Midendorf discovered, near the River Taimur, 75° north latitude, the perfectly preserved body of a mammoth, and, later, Schmidt made a similar discovery in the tundra to the west of the Yenisei, 70° north latitude. In Midendorf's opinion the carcass he discovered was brought up by the current from farther south. On the other hand, Schmidt found that the stratum in which he made his discovery lay directly upon the layer of sea-clay in which were embedded many shells of a northern species still existing in the Arctic Ocean. The layer of sea-clay was succeeded by alternating layers of sand, and decomposed vegetation exactly resembling the kind of turf of which the tundra is composed. In the mass in which the mammoth was embedded were found branches and leaves of the dwarf birch (*Betula nana*), and two northern species of willow (*Salix glauca* and *Herbacea*) are still to be found. It should be remembered that Brandt, Schmalhausen, and others proved that the remnants of food found in the teeth of the Vilui mammoth consisted of the leaves and "needles" of trees, similar to those still growing in Siberia, and from this the conclusion can be drawn that the climate of Siberia in the mammoth age was the same as it is at the present time. It must be borne in mind that the discovery was made near a marshy river, which rises north of the forest region; therefore it cannot be concluded

with Midendorf that the carcase was brought up from the forest district in the south by the overflow of the river. Schmidt emphatically declares that if the mammoth did not live all the year round in the northern region of Siberia, at least it went there, as do the deer, for part of the year. In 1877, a magnificently preserved species of mammoth (*Rhinoceros tcherskii*) was found near one of the tributaries of the Lena, 69° north latitude. Schrenk says that this mammoth was altogether constituted for life in the coldest regions, for in the district where it was found the temperature in winter is 67·5° Cent., but the short summer is unusually warm, so that luxuriant vegetation flourishes on the marshes. Besides the extensive pasturage which the animals found in the north mention must be made of the fact that, in places sheltered from the wind, where the river overflows its banks, there is a thick growth of bushes, which extends far beyond the forest belt, and their tender juicy leaves were, no doubt, a dainty food for herbivorous animals. Indeed, the most dreary spots in the farthest north-east of Siberia may be described as being rich in vegetation in comparison with the sun-dried regions where only the camel can find food, as, for example, the eastern shore of the Red Sea. The most recent discovery of a mammoth was made in 1889, between the River Balakhna and Hatanginsk Gulf, fifteen versts from the shores of the Arctic Ocean. This mammoth was found in a clayey stratum, and was lying on its back with the head embedded in the clay. The mammoth's skin was complete, but the natives, when they removed the

tusks, dug away the earth from the carcase, which decomposed on exposure to the air. It lay there for two years before scientists could examine it, and by that time only one complete foot remained.

According to Midendorf's reckoning, 40,000 mammoth tusks have been brought from Siberia during the last hundred years, and it is therefore possible to estimate the number of mammoths which once existed in the North. The tusks are found in the greatest quantity near the shores of the Arctic Ocean ; those found on the shore itself being of smaller size than those found in the interior of the country. From this fact we may deduce that the younger animals, being more active, wandered farther than the old ones, who were perhaps more conservative as to habits. Heaps of tusks are to be found in the Lakhovski Islands, as in times of storm the waves wash out hundreds of them from the sand-dunes, but on the mainland these tusks are mostly found on the banks of the smaller " earth " ¹ rivers after the spring overflows, when the flood washes out the bases of the banks and there is a consequent fall of the earth (landslip), revealing heaps of tusks. Mammoth tusks, or horns, as they are called here, have, from time immemorial, been used by the natives instead of iron. At the bottom of the dried-up lakes in the Kolymsk region were found roughly-made arrow-heads made from mammoth tusks side by side with rude axes of rough, unpolished stone, and to the present

¹ Rivers with banks of slimy mud. Earth rivers are so called to distinguish them from " stony " rivers, which are rivers having rocky banks.

day the natives use tusks for making arrow-heads, spear-heads, etc., but these articles are exquisitely polished, and among the Chooktchi I saw beautiful breast ornaments made entirely of ivory plates. The trade in mammoth tusks is extremely profitable to the traders, though not to the hunters. In summer, when the water is low, search is made for tusks. Every "landslip" or fall of the "earth" river bank is most carefully scrutinised, in case a tusk should be protruding somewhere from it. If the trader cannot at once take away the tusks which he has found, he places a special mark upon them in token of ownership and leaves them until his return in winter. The Lamouts are the most successful in the search for tusks, for not only do they know each little river, but they can even predict in what places there will be landslips in the following spring. For a pair of tusks weighing sixty or eighty pounds the trader pays on the spot the value of twelve or fifteen roubles in merchandise, and sometimes a single tusk is three yards long and 120 pounds in weight. Every year the number found, though still immense, is less and less. In Yakutsk only sixty roubles is paid for forty pounds of ivory, but in 1889 the traders sold a number of tusks for 57,600 roubles, a clear profit being made of not less than 40,000 roubles. Therefore, to the natives the trade in mammoth tusks brings but a trifling recompense, the utmost profit to an individual family in one year being about five roubles, and that not in money, but in tea and vodka.

Another occupation of the Nijne Kolymyans, the preparation of suède from deer-skin, is remarkable,



(1)



(2)

(1) REINDEER ON THE TUNDRA.

(2) FORT ANNUI.

chiefly for the microscopic profit which it gives. Russians learned this work from the Chooktchi, in all its details, even to the names of the instruments used. Working six or seven hours a day at the preparation of suède, the workwoman receives, at the most, four kopeks (1d.) a day ; at the least, one kopeck ($\frac{1}{4}$ d.) The trader buys the suède for fifteen or twenty kopecks, which he pays in tea, each brick of which costs him eighty-five kopecks, but which he values for trade purposes at three, four, or five roubles, and in Yakutsk he sells this suède for two and a half roubles.

III

Two more weeks passed. The winter had now set in, although the Nijne Kolymyans continued to assure me that it was still "warm." No one had, as yet, arrived from Verkhne Kolymsk, and the people at the fort strained their eyes looking for the coming of the agents from Sredne Kolymsk. The tea and tobacco were all gone, and the drunkards suffered terribly, as the store of vodka, too, was exhausted. The small quantity which the agent had saved was carefully hidden in a hole dug in the snow, until the time came to visit the Chooktchi. It was a special sport among the Nijne Kolymyans to watch where the traders hid the keg of vodka and to steal it afterwards. Although they would consider it very wrong to steal money or goods, they thought it a very great achievement to steal vodka, and were very proud when they succeeded.

With equal longing we, also, looked for the arrival of the Sredne people. Each time I went on the flat roof to close the chimney, I stood for a long time looking eagerly for the file of sledges, for the agents ought to bring with them the autumn post, which arrives at Sredne Kolymask on the 1st of October. What news would there be for us? What was happening in the other world thousands of versts beyond the ice-belt which surrounded us? These questions filled my mind with torment, and I was seized with a mad impatience, mingled with a dread of possible bad news which the longed-for post might bring. Involuntarily I thought of Shakespeare's words :

“Methinks some unborn sorrow ripe in fortune's womb
Is coming towards me, and my inward soul
With nothing trembles.”

I was unwilling to think that there, in that far-off world, life was commonplace and ordinary as formerly.

Still the post did not come. Perhaps the Omolon had not frozen over, and there might be a channel in the river. St. Michael's Day, the 8th of November, arrived. The sun showed his red disc on the horizon for the last time before his long disappearance; the long polar night of two months had come, and we had only a grey twilight each day from twelve to half-past one. The fort presented a more than usually depressing appearance, as the box-like huts had been “iced” for the winter. They were covered with snow, so that they looked like little snow-hills, each topped with its chimney, made of

logs spread over with clay, and with their ice-paned little windows the huts looked like eyes blinded by cataract.

And still the agents did not come ! At last, when the patience of the Nijne Kolymyans was exhausted and they were preparing to go to meet them, a joyful shout came from the blockhouses : “ They are coming ! ”

And there, on the little gulf made by the river’s overflow, appeared a file of dog-sledges, and we heard the shouts and cries of the drivers as they urged the dogs on.

Sarcastic comments were passed on all sides by the Nijne Kolymyans. The Sredne Kolymyans have a great opinion of themselves, and are ashamed to wear the kukashka (fur shirt with hood) when in town ; they wear instead a jacket of velveteen lined with fur. Wearing this garment, a Sredne Kolymyan walks proudly about the street and when he is invited to a “ ball ” he wears it, for he disdains to dress like a low Yakut—that is to say, a plebeian. The doors of the upper class are open to him because he wears boots. While he wears moccasins he is nobody, but as soon as he puts on boots he becomes an aristocrat, boots being the patent of nobility in Sredne Kolymsk. It is not easy to get these boots, for they have to be ordered from Yakutsk and they are very expensive ; therefore, they are treasured and are handed down from father to son as valuable heirlooms.

The Nijne Kolymyans despise the Sredne Kolymyans as limited and incapable, but they envy them to a certain extent as having better manners.

"Hold them in, brothers, hold them in, or they will take you back to Sredne!" they cried jeeringly to the newcomers, who were trying their utmost to prevent the dogs from jumping aside to fight with the others, for between the dogs of Nijne and Sredne Kolymsk there existed the same antagonism as between their masters.

"How many bottles of vodka have you brought?" asked impatient voices.

"None at all," replied the agent, in Yakutian, for, like all Sredne Kolymyans, he spoke Russian with difficulty.

"What do you mean by that?" they asked irritably.

Someone interpreted the sad news.

"Then what is in those kegs?"

"Fish-oil."

Exclamations of sorrow, anger, and disappointment were heard on all sides and, indeed, their grief and disappointment were great, after having waited for so many months, to have their hopes blighted! In the evening of that same day, I was looking through my mail, and pictures of the distant world rose before me as I read. It was very noisy at the fort, for, to the loud howl of the hundred newly-arrived dogs was added the answering howl of the 400 resident ones. Oh, how they howled! It is possible to become accustomed to anything, to sixty degrees of frost, to the long polar night, to the lack of bread, but not to the howling of dogs. The noise has a specially maddening effect upon nerves already strained by the long sunless days, and I

felt on the verge of frenzy. Suddenly I heard the sound of a dog-sledge under my window. Evidently a stranger had arrived, for the words of command to the dogs were different from those used by the Sredne Kolymyans. It must be "Pancake," the drunkard, who, hearing of the arrival of the traders' agents, had come in from the fishing-place; and I was not mistaken. When he had unwound his long squirrel-skin muffler and unbuttoned his fur-lined velveteen coat, I noticed that the expression of his face was unusually mysterious.

"I have come after the Sredne people," he whispered. "They have brought three gallons of vodka. They stayed one night at the fishing-place, and when I found that they had the spirit with them I could not sleep. I went to bed, but did not close my eyes all night!"

"What are you saying, Peter? That is not vodka; it is fish-oil!"

"Oil, indeed!" he repeated scornfully. "I know vodka, and I know the difference between it and oil. Tell me, is it not cold now outside? Pour oil into a keg, will it move about? No, it will freeze. And in his flagon there was liquid, for it made a noise when it was shaken. The agent is hiding it, for he wants to take it to the Chooktchi; but he must give me some, for he owes me a bottle and a half. I am just going off to see him." And in spite of my repeated invitations to stay to tea, Peter hurried away, turning round on the threshold to say: "I shall tell you afterwards what I am going to do."

Presently a deputation of young people waited on

me. "Friend, will you lend us your hut? We want to give a little party." As mine was the largest hut, this request was frequently made to me during the winter.

Young people of both sexes came to the party, also the local bard, bringing his home-made balalaika. The Sredne Kolymyans in whose honour the party was given wore their fur-lined velveteen coats and bore themselves haughtily, looking with disdainful tolerance upon the Nijne Kolymyans, whose invitation they had deigned to accept, and chatted condescendingly with them. My hut became a dancing saloon. The only illumination was a lamp of fish-oil, hanging from a stick wedged into a crack in the log wall. I had placed my hut entirely at the disposal of the young people, who at once removed my bed, table, and books, leaving only the seat by the wall. First of all, refreshments were offered. A board was brought, on which was a mountain of sliced, frozen fish, and for a few minutes nothing was heard but the sounds of chewing, munching, and hiccoughing. After tea had been taken, the bard began to pick at the strings of his balalaika, and presently smothered laughter arose at the satirical song which followed, for it had been composed to annoy the Sredne people, at whose incapacity the bard jeered, ridiculing their futile efforts to restrain and guide the dogs. The bard was the author of many satirical and topical songs very popular with the Nijne Kolymyans, any incidental occurrence providing a theme, the most fruitful source of inspiration being household scandal of an intimate nature. Directly anything happened,

the bard would begin to thrum on his balalaika and to improvise suitable words.

I remember a Russian friend, Jacob, who soon after his marriage went to the Chooktchan camp to buy deer. The day of his expected return came, but not Jacob, and his wife (of the local aristocracy), quite distracted with anxiety, went to the chief and asked him to send some men in search of her husband. Directly the party left the fort they met Jacob. He had been delayed, having stayed to talk with some friends three versts from Nijne. This incident greatly amused everyone, and an hour later the bard had composed a song on the subject and was singing it for the young people's amusement.

When dancing began, the Sredne Kolymyans had their revenge, for their costume, especially the coat, made a great impression on the ladies present. They were in full dress—fur-boots, wide fur trousers and fur-lined velveteen coats—and, thus attired, they danced the trepak to the only tune they know. Rivers of perspiration poured down their faces, but, nevertheless, they danced for hours. My comrades and I, who had come to witness the proceedings, sat at the back of the fireplace, out of the way of the dancers. The whole evening's enjoyment was spoilt by the arrival of Peter, in a hopeless state of intoxication. He was deadly pale, and the poisonous vodka had excited his brain. It happened that among the guests was his beloved, a gay and lively half-breed girl, but she had deserted him for the superior attractions of Feodor, who, in all the glory of boots and velveteen coat, danced with her all the evening.

"Let me get hold of him! He wouldn't laugh at me then! What if I have only a common leather shirt and he has a velveteen coat!" Peter muttered in the corner, but nobody took any notice of him.

"Brother," he said to me, "let us go to the Chooktchi to-morrow. There is nothing to do here. Ermitchen has often asked me to visit him." Peter had frequently requested me to go, and as my old friend Ermitchen also had invited me to visit him at his hut I decided to arrange with Peter next day about it, as he would then be in a better condition.

The party dispersed at five o'clock in the morning. The Nijne Kolymyans arrange these little festivities once a week during the winter, as they cost nothing.

The next day we soon made our arrangements, and for a few bricks of tea Peter undertook to accompany me to Soukharnoe and from there to the Chooktchan camp; and the same day we started on our journey.

IV

The dogs were harnessed, but were all in confusion. Botchikar suddenly found it absolutely necessary to scratch his right ear, and he promptly sat down and proceeded to do it, looking seriously meanwhile at Peter, as though saying: "You see, I am busy." Amerishan suddenly remembered an insult received the previous day from another dog, and flew at his throat; a third found rolling in the snow a more agreeable occupation than dragging a sledge; but Peter's shouts, with the accompaniment of blows, soon restored order. Now they yelped with im-



READY TO START.

patience, wagging their tails and straining eagerly forward. Peter shouted, and we had scarcely time to jump in before the dogs dashed off into a furious gallop. I held on tightly to the bar of the sledge, or I should have been thrown out on the snow, while Peter, using a stout stick as a brake, dragged it hard through the snow until the dogs slackened their mad pace. Presently they wanted to stop where the huts showed white on the bank; this place was called Pogromnaya, a fishing-place, three versts from the fort, and there, a hundred years ago, the Russians were severely defeated by the Chooktchi, who came unexpectedly to avenge the destruction of their camp. They killed nearly all the young Russian traders and carried off their wives. After this defeat a mutual agreement was entered into and the Russians ceased to oppress the Chooktchi, who, on their part, refrained from attacking the Russians, and eventually both peoples lived in peace and mutual respect.¹

Twilight had gone, and night's profound darkness had fallen. Directly overhead sparkled the brilliant pole-star, the eye of the "Shepherd of the Heavens," as the natives say, and further away were the three deer with their Lamout hunters (Orion). Presently there appeared a faint whitish glimmer in the north-east, and in an instant, as though traced in phosphorus, an arch of light flashed across the black sky. Along

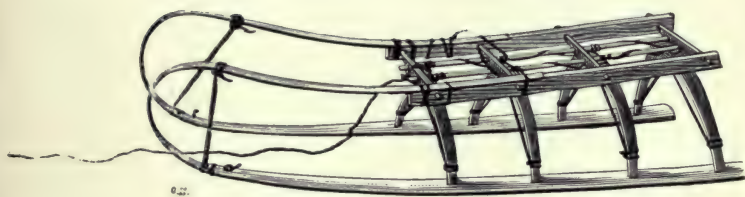
¹ Recently when mention was made in newspapers of the Chooktchi, their number was given as 150,000, but this is an over-estimate. A hundred years ago Captain Pavloutski explored all the Chooktchan country, but he never saw more than 3,000 people at one time. He estimated the total at 10,000. Billings thinks this an over-estimate. Nordenskiöld gives it as 3,000 and on my own investigation I believe this celebrated explorer to be right.

the whole extent of the arch ran translucent waves of light, colourless and phantom-like as in a dream. Suddenly there spurted out a vast wavy river of multi-coloured fire, the arch glowed with a green brilliance, and far out over the entire expanse of the heavens rays of blood-red light were flung, reaching to the "sieve of the beautiful Ourgal" (Pleiades). It seemed as though the heavens reflected the gigantic fires lit on the shores of the Arctic Ocean by the giants Oulahan-kigi, who, according to native legends, have their dwelling place there. Suddenly the arch was extinguished, and only a few greenish points of light flashed here and there on the horizon. So wonderful and awe-inspiring is the sight of the Northern Light that one feels the truth of the native proverb: "Who looks long on the heavenly light becomes mad."

Fifty degrees of frost made its presence known, and notwithstanding all the heavy fur clothing, our feet were numbed and our hands ached terribly; our backs tingled as though pricked with needles. I was not yet accustomed to jump from the moving sledge and run beside it to warm myself. Every time I attempted it I was flung violently down on the snow and had to call out to Peter to stop. Presently we saw a few lights on the bank. We had arrived at Koritovo, and we stopped at the lonely hut of Ivan Selivanoff, who welcomed us heartily, and assisted us to detach our frozen beards from our own fur mufflers, and to pull off our close-fitting fur shirts, a task which I could not as yet manage. A bright fire shed its inviting warmth around; the kettle on the tripod sang merrily, and



CHOOKTCHAN CHILDREN.



CHOOKTCHAN SLEDGE.

[Face page 106.]

the housewife prepared the supper of sliced fish. Unfortunately, I had forgotten to bring salt with me, and now I had the prospect of being without any for a fortnight to come. Swift says that our constant use of salt is the effect of luxurious habit, designed chiefly as a thirst provocative, but I cannot understand how the natives can possibly eat fish without salt, for it is hard to imagine anything more nauseous; and even they are often sick after eating boiled fresh fish, and for this reason the Nijne Kolymyans prefer to eat their fish uncooked and frozen. In "Nordische Reisen," Kastren writes with disgust and loathing that the natives of Obdorsk are "steeped in coarse brutishness; they eat fish raw, not thinking it necessary to cook it." But very likely the unhappy Obdorskians had no salt.

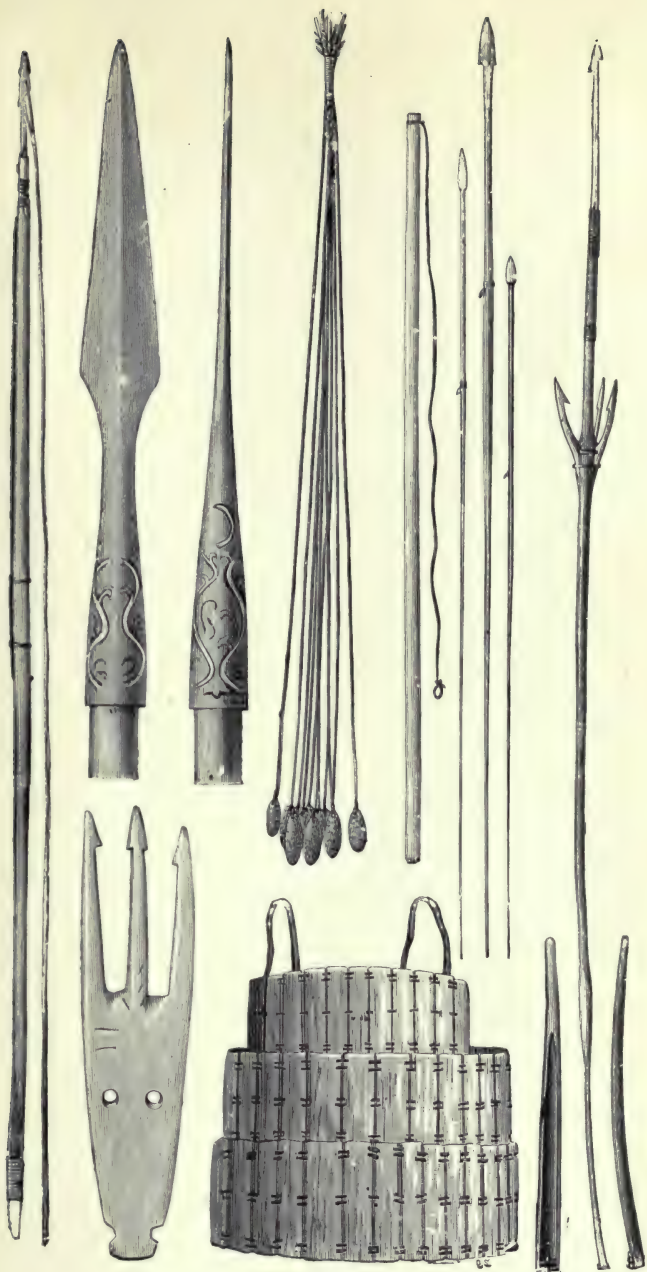
There was a tiny baby crawling on the floor, holding a large piece of raw frozen fish in its little hands, for here the mothers have nothing else to give their children.

Next day we had left the forest region behind us, and the larch trees were smaller and thinner as we went onwards until we came to some that were not more than a yard high and no thicker than a finger. At last even these trees were left behind, and on our right there was a low range of hills turning eastward towards the land of the Chooktchi. The highest peak in the range is called Yergorytch, and there is a quaint Chooktchan legend concerning it. On the top of it is a hole (which unfortunately I had no time to inspect) and within this hole a featherless bird lies sleeping under a covering of snow. When the bird

awakes and flies out, fire and smoke come with her. These hills should be of interest to geologists.

The next evening we stayed at the fishing-place at Kabatchkov, where, in 1882, there were eight dwellings, of which only one is now left, the inhabitants of the others having died of smallpox. In this place, as in others before mentioned, the corpses were buried in holes dug out under the huts.

On the third day of our journey we reached Soukharnoe, the last Russian habitation in the Farthest North-East. Dreary indeed is the aspect of this little hamlet. On the right bank of the Kolyma are five or six log huts, behind them is a range of bare rocky hills, and in the extreme north a purple cloud encircles the horizon ; there lies the ocean. The huts at Soukharnoe are small, and so low that a man of medium height cannot enter without stooping, and the European, whose back is not so supple as that of a native, must crawl in on all fours. The interior is so small that one can hardly turn round in it. The inhabitants are isolated from the rest of the world for nearly all the year, and the climate of Nijne in comparison seems quite warm. When I arrived at Soukharnoe the people there were without tea and tobacco, as well as salt. They were reduced to smoking suède and drinking an infusion of whortleberry leaves—a veritable troglodyte existence ! And their clothing was that of troglodytes ; nobody, of course, had any cotton underclothing, and the fur garments were worn over the naked body. Their language consists of only about 200 words. They can count as far as ten, as a rule, but the women to



CHOOKTCHAN WEAPONS.

[Face page 108.

less than that number. It seemed as though I had been magically transported many thousands of years into the remote past, to the dens of the mysterious Kangienici, whose arrows of mammoth ivory are still to be found at the bottom of lakes. Probably in their day they also built their dwellings of driftwood and procured fire by friction, using the gut string of a bow like that I now saw hanging on the wall. Here there was a large collection of spears, stone scrapers used for tanning and an entire set of fishing implements made of mammoth ivory. A thousand years had passed without bringing any change; moreover, these nineteenth-century troglodytes had brought with them 200 years ago some sort of civilisation, but it has absolutely vanished, and there is left of it no trace whatever. There is one, Fedor Litchkin, who was guide to Baron Meidel's expedition. He is the last of the Chuvantsi tribe who once lived by the Bolchoi River, but have now disappeared from the face of the earth, leaving no trace behind; and absolutely nothing is known about them. Fedor Litchkin knows the Chooktchan language perfectly, but his own he does not know at all.

Soukharnoe is ten versts from the ocean's shore, and as the brine mingles with the river water the people are unable to drink it. Many jelly-fish are caught in the fish-nets and also a certain kind of salt-water fish having nine fins and enormous jaws full of teeth.

Next day I went to the mouth of the Kolyma, 70° north latitude. On the high slaty promontory stands the "lighthouse of Lieutenant Laptev," as

it is grandiloquently described on the official charts. In reality it is a bent, timeworn erection of driftwood. There before us was the dreary ocean, which had swallowed up so many brave men who had tried to wrest her secrets from her. Its still frozen surface was broken by huge mountains of ice, and a few ruined huts on shore at the foot of the cliff completed the dreary scene. Misery and despair seemed to emanate from those snow-covered ruins.

In 1733 Vitus Behring designed an extensive plan for a succession of expeditions to solve the problem of the North-East Passage. Ships were to be sent two at a time so as to be able to render mutual assistance, and the plan provided for two ships to be sent from each of five places at the mouths of European and Asiatic rivers.

One of the ships in the expedition of 1740 was forced by the ice to the mouth of the Kolyma, where it had to remain for the winter. All the crew suffered terribly from scurvy, and many died; the provisions gave out, and Laptev constructed a lighthouse to show their whereabouts to the companion ship which was at the mouth of the Alazei for the winter.

In 1755 two merchants, Shallahourov and Bakov, undertook the journey of discovery of the North-East Passage to Kamschatka, and they started from the mouth of the Lena in 1760. In 1763 they were beaten back by the ice to the mouth of the Kolyma, where they spent the winter in a hut which still remains and bears the name of Shallahourov Barracks. Famine and scurvy carried off half of the company

and Bakov also, but Shallahourov was not discouraged by misfortune and privation. In 1764 he proceeded further east, and he perished in Chaoon Bay, if we can trust the Chooktchan account. The Kolyma has many martyrdoms and heroic deaths to its account. The ill-fated "Janet" was lost not far from this spot, and later the "Rodgers."

That there is a current off the shore of the Chooktchan land there can be no doubt. The "Black Stream" goes as far as Behring Straits, and afterwards proceeds along the coast of Siberia. At Soukharnoe I saw a bamboo which had been brought by this unknown current. Somewhere between the Rivers Kolyma and Bolshai it turns northward and, according to Nansen's theory this current is trans-polar.

The natives believe in the existence of an inhabited land somewhere in the extreme north. In 1764, Sergeant Andreev reported that to the north of Bear Island he saw in the far distance what he thought was a large island, towards which he travelled on the ice; but he did not complete his journey, for, seeing on the ice and snow the tracks of many deer sledges belonging to an unknown people, he deemed it prudent to return, as his party was so few in number.¹

Many have denied the existence of such land, but Vrangél considers it possible. The Chooktchi, Kargaouli, according to Lertchkau, and the now extinct tribe, Chuvantsi, all believed in the existence of an inhabited island in open sea in the extreme north; but it seems to me that should such land exist, which is not improbable, it cannot

¹ Captain Billings' book, page 190 (St. Petersburg, 1811).

be of any great extent, or it would somewhat modify the climate of the shore near the mouth of the Kolyma. At Soukharnoe, 70° north latitude, it is not so cold as in Sredne Kolymsk, and the north wind brings warmth with it, which is a sign that it blows from the open sea.¹

Beneath the cliff the dogs were barking, impatient to set off. I came down from the peak which I had climbed in order to see the lighthouse, and we returned as quickly as possible to Soukharnoe.

Nowhere had I seen so many emiriatchkas as in this place. I have already mentioned that the people, especially the women, are extremely nervous, the nerve diseases of the latter manifesting themselves in two forms: "menerik" and "emiriatchka." The former is the same as demoniacal possession, but the latter takes various forms, in the mildest of which the afflicted woman will start and cry out at an unexpected sound; in a more severe case she will repeat any sentence which has especially struck her—sometimes a long piece of verse in a language unknown to her, exactly reproducing intonation and accent, just as she has heard it. I remember one instance of this. We were returning from Nijne Kolymsk and we stayed for a night at a Yakut hut. After we had removed our wraps there entered an unusually tall Yakut, very old, and dried up like a mummy, his features set like bronze. He had just come from the lake, where he had been fishing, and with his crooked, claw-like fingers he began to pull out of the net the still leaping

¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century the expedition of Captain Mikelsen proved that there was no land in Beaumont Sea.

fish entangled in it. The sight reminded me of Long-fellow's poem, and I quoted aloud :—

With hookèd fingers,
Iron-pointed hookèd fingers,
Went to draw his nets at morning—
Salmon trout he found a hundred.

Great was my astonishment when I heard these words repeated ; and I turned and saw a Yakut woman, evidently an emiriatchka, for in her normal condition she would certainly be quite incapable of repeating two words of any foreign language. She leaped up in fright when she saw my friend, whose spectacles had evidently terrified her ; and seized a log to attack him. Then she cried, “ Abass ! ” and began to imitate every movement she saw, though she would not have been able to act upon a suggestion of any kind. The young people, for their own amusement, will dance, stand on their heads, etc., in the presence of an emiriatchka woman, and she will reproduce all their actions until she falls down from exhaustion.

This peculiar nervous disease is worse and more pronounced in the case of older sufferers ; and a violent emiriatchka will sometimes spring, knife in hand, upon an object or a person. I saw emiriatchkas only among Russian settlers and Yakuts, and I never saw a male afflicted with this disease. I wandered about for two weeks among the Chooktchi, but did not see one case. It may be that only people from a comparatively milder climate are subject to this illness, as, for instance, Russians and Yakuts, but not the aborigines of the polar region, such as the Chooktchi.

I told Peter that we would start next day on our journey to the Chooktchi.

“No, friend, no! You must not!” he replied.

“Why not?”

“Because the ‘chief’ will soon begin to blow.”

I know that the Soukharnoe people call the terrible north wind by this name, and I had been told of the awful things that had befallen the people who had been seized in its clutches, but I was somewhat sceptical. That evening the hut trembled and shook under a terrific gust of wind.

“The ‘chief’ is beginning to blow!” muttered the terrified Soukharnoeans, and they began to stock their huts with wood, fish, and blocks of ice. After the first gust the wind kept up a continuous, monotonous scream, like the sound of escaping steam from a million engines, dreadful to hear, and the hut shook violently. The moss plugging the cracks in the log walls was cut out by the wind as though with a chisel, and its icy breath whistled through the hut. I wanted to know what it was like outside. “Don’t go out,” said my host; “‘the chief’ will not like it.”

But, seeing that I was determined to go out, they fastened a long strap round my waist, holding the end firmly in their hands. Hardly had I opened the door when I was flung violently to the ground. The hard snow, congealed by sixty degrees of frost, was dug out by the fury of the wind, and the air was full of ice crystals, which whipped my face like molten metal, and in an instant my cheekbones were frozen. I was as one blind in the impenetrable darkness which sur-

rounded me, and the only sound to be heard was the insistent howling of the wind, which dominated all else.

Where could I go ? Where was the door ? Had it not been for the strap held so firmly by my friends, it would have gone hard with me, for I could not possibly have found the door ; but I managed to crawl on all fours to the threshold.

“ Well, friend, what did the ‘ chief ’ say to you ? ” my hosts asked jestingly, when, half-frozen, I crawled into the warmth of the hut. For weeks afterwards I bore on my face the traces of the “ chief’s ” freezing kisses.

Now began the monotonous indoor existence. The wind seemed to have abated in fury, and the screaming was dulled, because of the heavy snow which covered the hut. We kept the fire constantly burning in order to keep the chimney clear, and to ventilate the hut a little, for its inmates were ten men and twelve dogs and the heavy, stifling atmosphere pressed upon our temples like a leaden weight. In spring, when the Soukharnoeans go seal-hunting, the north wind is a great hindrance to the traders, for they are compelled to remain inactive in a hut on the shore. The hut is exceedingly small, and a fire is kept constantly burning in the middle of the one room. Sometimes the wind blows continually for eight days, the hut is entirely covered with snow, and, the provisions being exhausted, the traders are compelled by hunger to eat their leather straps, boots, and bags. Sometimes during their imprisonment they hear the growling of bears, who, scenting prey, have come in search of it ;

and finally, when the tempest is over, all the inmates of the hut are dead from starvation.

Reckoning by my watch, the wind blew for three days, and when it ceased we climbed out of the hut through a little window specially made in the roof for this purpose. Where were the huts? Buried entirely under the snow, whose smooth, even surface was lit by the brilliant light of the moon. Frequently it happens that sledges are driven over the roofs of the huts, as there is nothing to show that there is anything beneath the snow. We now began to cut trenches and to help dig the others out of the huts. Everyone had a tale to tell of his sufferings during the time of the "chief's" anger.

Peter washed the broad runners of the sledge with warm water in order that they should freeze over and so run easily over the snow, for the next evening we were to recommence our journey, and I should have to become a polar René,¹ to camp with the Chooktchi, and make acquaintance with this little-known tribe, for the accomplishment of which purpose I should not have minded staying even longer in the snow-buried hut waiting for the tempest to cease.

¹ The hero of "Atala," by Chateaubriand.



CHOOKTCHL.

CHAPTER V

AMONG THE CHOOKTCHI

I

BRILLIANT moonlight flooded the snow-covered plain. So bright was the light that it sharpened even the blurred outlines of the snow-covered piles of drift-wood, which lay along the shallows of the river bank, where it had been thrown up by the flood-tide which had brought it down. The moon's disc became paler, and we could scarcely distinguish on her face the girl with the pail and willow branch in her hands, who, the natives say, was stolen from earth by the moon to be her friend and companion in her lonely night journeys. The cause was readily to be explained by the numerous haloes and false moons surrounding the moon herself. All the Soukharnoeans came out on the beach, their keen ears having already caught the sound of approaching dog-sledges.

"Many people are coming!" they cried. Faintly from the distance came the cries of the dog-drivers, and presently four sledges appeared on the slope of the hill. The first three carried loads covered with suède, securely bound with straps of walrus skin. The fourth had apparently no load, but there was a passen-

ger beside the driver. An ample parka, bordered with beaver fur and a hood edged with fox-tails, showed that the wearer was a wealthy merchant. The other arrivals were easily recognised ; I had often heard their names in Nijne Kolymsk. They were the most adventurous spirits of the fort and Pokhotsk—the brothers Shkouliat, Amchat, and Moundoukhan. A song relating to the last mentioned was often sung by the girls in the neighbourhood. “Moundoukhan went to the marshes, and slew the fat deers, and shared it with all.”

When annoyed or displeased with a man a girl will proudly explain : “How dare you make fun of me ? I was once Moundoukhan’s sweetheart.”

The fur collars and clothing of the new-comers were frozen, their eyebrows also, and they were powdered all over with rime, like the fur of the bears in winter.¹ After unharnessing the dogs, they related how they were caught by the north wind when about twenty-five versts from the little hamlet of Kabatchkov, and how the dogs had found the way themselves to the place.

“Where are you going, boys ?” asked the Soukharnoeans.

“To the Chooktchi, to the Shellatski,”² was the reply ; so evidently they were going my way, for they meant to visit Ermitchen, who was at present in camp near Soukharnoe, and afterwards to go farther on.

¹ The bears who do not take refuge in their winter dens before the severe frost begins have a covering of ice and frost over their fur.

² From Cape Shellatski, by Chaoon Bay, there are the settlements of the Dog Chooktchi, who are therefore known in that part as the Shellatski.

The man in the beaver parka appeared to be the traders' agent, known to the Nijne Kolymyans as "One-eyed Ague," and he also was going to visit the Chooktchi, but to my great relief I discovered that his destination was another camp, "Gorlo," on the left shore of the Kolyma ; for the scene on the arrival of a trader among the natives was too painful and unpleasant to witness. In five minutes all the hamlet knew that "One-eyed Ague" had brought with him a bottle of vodka, for which the game of "goat" was to be played, the prize going to the winner. This game of cards, the invention of some polar traders, had become a passion with the natives, from the district of Verkhoyansk to the shores of the Arctic Ocean, and if a trader wished to dispose of an article at three times its already high price he "goated" it. The method is as follows : The trader stakes a brick of tea and invites twelve players, each of whom stakes one rouble (2s.), the player who first makes twenty-one tricks taking the brick. In this way the trader gets an extraordinarily high price for his goods, without any personal risk of loss. Having no money, the savages stake fish or furs instead. "Goat" attracts many for whom play has a fascination, for the savages are as passionately fond of gambling as they are of vodka ; and the aristocracy play a game something like "banker." The passion for gambling led to the introduction of lotteries, and when a native wishes to get rid of an article he raffles it ; and the poorest person, without even bad fish in store, will give a rouble for a ticket. All kinds of things are raffled—a copper kettle, an old gun, a lady's coat (which had

done duty for about thirty years in different places before making its appearance in Sredne Kolymsk), etc. Tickets for all these articles find eager purchasers, and, in order to increase his chance of winning, a Kolymyan will buy a ticket for his dog, or even for any inanimate object. Sometimes we saw in the lottery lists such entries as "Dog Amerishin, No. 15," "A certain old cup, No. 28," etc. Six or eight Yakuts will club together for one "lot," and great is their joy when they win a handful of starch, or a lady's coat, which they do not know what to do with. "Goat" has also become as popular with the Chooktchi as with the Nijne Kolymyans.

The excitement of the Soukharnoeans can be imagined when they heard that there was something to be "goated," and that the something was a bottle of vodka. "One-eyed Ague" thoroughly understood the psychology of the Nijne Kolymyans, who were so fond of drink; and he sat now by the fire, quietly smoking while the impatient natives ran in and out constantly asking when the game was to begin; but, apparently not noticing their excitement, he diplomatically led the conversation to the subject of fish, meanwhile carelessly shaking the keg in his hand, causing the precious liquor within it to give forth a "gulping" sound. Finally, when the impatience of the natives had reached its climax, he rose and said with a show of reluctance: "Well, shall we 'goat' it? But perhaps you cannot afford the price, for this bottle shall not go for less than 240 big fish." In local reckoning this meant twelve roubles, just double the usual price of vodka; but immediately twelve

players were forthcoming, each of whom staked twenty fish.

"One-eyed Ague" made an extra charge for the cards, which were so old, greasy, and begrimed that the pips and figures were scarcely visible. For play, all went into a large hut. Skins were thrown down on the floor and "goat" began. The players were very excited, their faces pale and hands trembling, but "One-eyed Ague" sat on the bench quietly smoking.

"What are your cards like?"

"Only small ones, and the puppy (knave) of diamonds, but he didn't take a trick."

This kind of conversation went on between the players and the surrounding spectators. It was sad to see these gamblers, and the more so since the game would certainly end in a drunken debauch, for "One-eyed Ague," in preparing the vodka had not spared tobacco and copperas. In the hut where I was staying there were a number of people, those who were old and no longer took part in the gambling, for they had no possessions of their own to stake, and their children did not give them anything. Natakha, a lively, smart little woman, the wife of our host, attended to the fireplace, and in her thin voice sang an improvisation about her recent illness and recovery.

"What are all those songs about Moundoukhan?" I asked her, and her answer interested me.

Moundoukhan was a brave fellow who, when he grew tired of living at the fort, would harness his dogs and drive away into the distant parts of the Chooktchan land. Everywhere he found friends, but

once he and a companion went to a camp where they had never before been. The savages surrounded them and unceremoniously began to examine their clothing and belongings. Then came the chief, who, after feeling muscles, invited them to a wrestling match, for those savages are passionately fond of this sport. In this case, as the Chooktchans were many and strangers to the two adventurers, the wrestling might have proved disastrous to them, for they were unarmed, save for knives. Moundoukhan whispered to his comrade not to show the white feather, and the chief continued to pull and push them, finally striking Moundoukhan to provoke him to fight, whereupon Moundoukhan gripped him and flung him down, the chief's head striking against a deer's horned head which was lying on the ground, so that he was badly hurt. The two friends gave themselves up for lost, but the chief arose, wiped the blood from his face, and said:—"I am strong, you are stronger; let us be friends," and he presented Moundoukhan with two fat deer, and the other Chooktchans gave him many fat haunches. He stayed for three weeks at this camp. The Chooktcha gave him his daughter for a wife and upon his departure presented him with a fur coat the like of which nobody at the fort possessed.

Moundoukhan took away the presents and shared them with his friends in Nijne Kolymsk, and for this reason the songs were composed in his honour.

"Brother," asked an old man, "tell me why so many people come to search our sea?"

I told him of the new polar expedition then being arranged.

"Don't you know? They say our Tsar lost a third of his Empire in the sea, and they are trying to find it," said an old Cossack, who in his young days was at Yakutsk, and who had been with Baron Meidel's expedition.

"No," replied another old man, who had been with the expedition of Augustinovitch and Neyman, "in that case they would all be Russians, but why should Americans come here?"

I explained that now people wanted to go over to the other shore of their cold sea.

"Well, then, doubtless they will see the people who live in houses with golden roofs," said the old man confidently, doubtless referring to the mysterious island-dwellers of whom there were so many legends among the natives and Russian settlers on the Arctic shores.

A little girl now ran into the hut. She was the daughter of a neighbour and was called Douka (Eudoxia), although her name was Anyourka, change of name being frequent among the Nijne Kolymyans, who hope thereby to escape the evil eye of the Shaman.

"Where have you been, sister?" asked Natakha.

"Into every house in Soukharnoe; I did not miss one," replied the girl in her thin little voice.

"What is the news?"

"In Vanchourka's house the kettle was on the fire; it has been on for a long, long time, and it hasn't boiled yet."

"Poor things!"

"And how is 'goat' getting on?"

"It is all over, and they are all sucking away at the

spirit." And the newsvendor, having delivered her news, ran off to another hut.

Presently our host returned, disturbed and sad—twenty fish is a great loss in winter to a Soukharnoean, as it represents five days' food.

We all retired early to rest, for we were to start off next day. Soon I awoke with the sensation of a leaden weight on my chest. I was suffocating, but I had no power to move. I cried out, in a loud voice as I thought, but only a choking gasp came from my burning throat. Something serious was happening, for I could hear the heavy breathing of the other inmates of the hut, but not only was I unable to rise but I could not form a clear idea of what was wrong. Someone on the floor shouted wildly, and our host, the strongest of us all, awoke, sprang up, but immediately fell down again. "Brother," he called to me, "are you asleep? It must be the fumes!"

He managed to get out of the hut and, climbing on to the roof, opened the chimney, but the keen, fresh air turned him giddy and he fell from the roof. The cold, ice-laden air came through the wide open door and, with a groan, somebody on the floor got up. Our host crawled back into the hut and heaped some logs on the fire, which blazed up brightly. We had had an experience, common enough in Soukharnoe, and had narrowly escaped suffocation; in another hour or two we should all have been dead. There were thirteen of us in the hut; six awoke of themselves, but it was with great difficulty that we succeeded in arousing the others, who were lying unconscious under the bench. The Soukharnoeans used the most drastic



CHOOKTCHA (MAN).

[Face page 124.

measures to revive the sufferers : They dragged them out, stripped them naked, and sat them in the snow for a few moments.

The dawn of the polar " day " was breaking, the tail of the Great Bear was almost perpendicular to the earth, the Three Kings had almost disappeared, and the cold seemed less severe, for the light, scarcely perceptible breeze that was blowing had brought warmth with it.

" Well, we have not been drunk, but we feel as if we had," was the jesting remark of one of the revived sufferers.

An hour later we started on our journey, in good spirits. We had four sledges, and after travelling twenty versts we halted to rest the dogs. We were at the frozen sandbanks in the shallows of the river, and at the foot of an immense pile of driftwood, from under whose snowy covering protruded the trunks of larch trees, whose knotted roots, like claws, clutched the frozen sand. Very interesting is the phenomenon to be observed on these little islets in the month of June. During the time of the overflow, the flood brings down huge blocks of ice, which tear away with them parts of the bank, together with shrubs and trees, and the entire mass travels swiftly with the current until it reaches the shallows, where it is stopped by a sandbank in the mouth of the Kolyma. The trees and shrubs in this huge mass begin to sprout and blossom in the summer, and one may see wild roses blooming and green grass growing above the ice-bound earth beneath, which, melting in the rays of the never-setting sun, becomes soft and friable, and

in a few days the trees, in full leaf, freed from their icy covering, fall down on the sandbank below, whence they are carried onwards by the flood to the mouth of the Chookotsk River or to Bear Island. It is strange to see there, on the ice, green trees and flowering shrubs from the forest region far away.

At the foot of the driftwood pile a huge fire was soon burning, and our breakfast did not take long to prepare, as it was, of course, the usual frozen fish, cut into slices. The wind carried brands to the pile of driftwood, which caught fire, and, before we left, was burning steadily, and would probably continue to burn for days to come.

The wind blew stronger and stronger, bringing with it the particles of fine snow, which half-blinded us.

“How far is it to Chooktchi?” I asked Peter.

“In ordinary times I should say about five versts, but at present I should say about twenty versts.” The answer was neither lucid nor consoling.

It was certainly not so cold, but the darkness momentarily deepened, and we had to cover our faces, for the snow was falling thickly, almost in masses. Luckily the wind was favourable, for had it been contrary we might have been overtaken by a misfortune such as befell the unhappy Captain Putnam, of the steamer “Rodgers,” sent in search of the “Janet.” He was overtaken by a blizzard near the mouth of the Kolyma, at about five minutes’ journey from the Chooktchan camp, and he with his sledge was blown far out on the frozen ocean. Finding that he had lost his way, he decided to wait where he was until the morning; but during the night the ice broke up, and



CHOOKTCHA (WOMAN).

[Face page 126.]

he was carried still farther away. For several days he was seen on the ice-floe in the open ocean, but it was impossible to render him any assistance, and the unhappy man perished of cold and starvation.

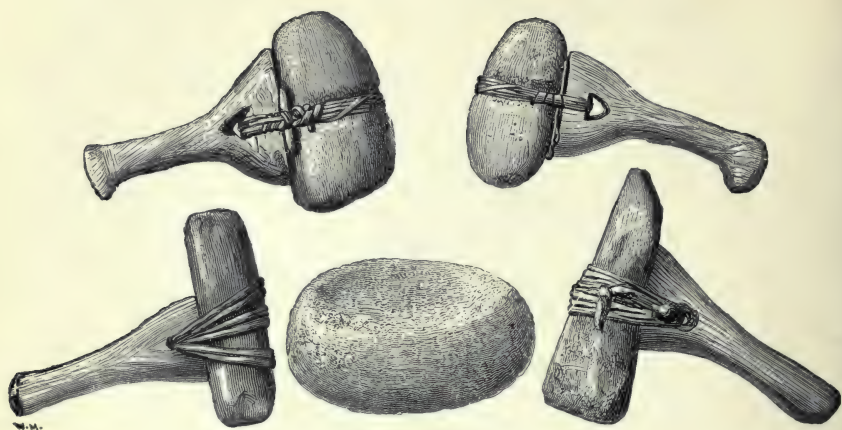
Soon the darkness became so dense that I could not see Peter, who sat in front of me. The dogs walked slowly and aimlessly; the sledge tilted first on one side, then on the other, and sometimes completely overturned. I held on to the rail of the sledge with all my strength, for had I let go I should have fallen out and could never have found the sledge again in the darkness.

Suddenly the wind howled, and Peter shook my arm, shouting something of which I could not hear a word, for his voice was lost in the roaring of the wind. We had left the river bank, and were crawling about somewhere in the mountain. The dogs turned off in another direction, it seemed, for now we no longer felt the wind. What was it? Where were we? For we were now at a standstill. Peter shouted to the dogs, but they did not move; so holding on to the harness, we went to the leaders to find out what was wrong. I sank waist deep in the soft snow, and my outstretched hands touched something firm, yet yielding. "A tent!" joyfully shouted Peter. The dogs had brought us to the camp, and now they were lying quietly down by the tent. The Chooktchan tent is practically two: the outer one of suède, and the inner of deer skins, fur inwards towards the room, forming a warm lining without any opening. With some difficulty we got into the outer tent and shook the snow from our coats and moccasins.

“Get up, friend !” cried Peter. There was a movement and a groan from within, and presently a golden ray of light gleamed under the lifted flap of the inner tent, and there appeared a well-known face with frost-bitten cheeks and sleepy, screwed-up eyes. It was my old friend Ermitchen, who used to worry me so with his frequent visits at Sredne Kolymsk. He was delighted to see us, evidently, for he vigorously rubbed each of his cheeks in turn against mine (which was his manner of embracing) and showed us that we were welcome visitors. He led us into the inner tent, carefully closing the flap afterwards, and we found ourselves in a stifling atmosphere, saturated with human exhalations. Six persons were sleeping on the floor, wrapped in deer-skins, their heads also covered with fur wraps. A large bowl of seal-fat, with a handful of moss for wick, lighted and warmed the tent. How comfortable and warm it seemed after our journey in the blizzard ! Ermitchen unceremoniously pulled the covering from a woman who was sleeping entirely naked under it, and she at once arose and proceeded to prepare supper ; but I did not wait for it. I fell down like a log on the place shown to me, and the next moment I was sleeping heavily.

II

There is no part of the world which has not been the arena of a battle between two races, each striving to thrust out the other. And at one time there was a fight for the possession of the cold Chookotsk land, situated between 64° and 71° north latitude, for that



CHOOKTCHAN STONE HAMMERS AND LAMPS.

[Face page 129.]

territory of which it has been said, "The Chooktchan land is nothing but a mass of bare rocks, and the climate is quite unbearable." Along the shores of the Arctic Ocean as far as the Behring Strait, there are to be seen, here and there, remains of ancient habitations. The Chooktchi say that the tribe of Onkilon once dwelt there, but were conquered by them and expelled to the islands in the Arctic Ocean. Dr. Almkvist and Lieutenant Nordkvist, the companions of Nordenskiöld, give the following description :—

"On the isthmus connecting Cape Irkaipi with the mainland we found a Chooktchan village consisting of sixteen tents, and here we also found numerous remains of the ancient dwellings of the Onkilon. Excavations showed that these dwellings were constructed of whale ribs. Among the mountainous heaps of refuse we found the bones of different species of whales and also of white whales, walrus, seal, deer, bears, dogs, foxes, and various kinds of birds. Besides these remains of the results of their hunting, we found axes and other weapons made of stone and bone, which were still attached to their handles of wood and bone, although they had been lying in the ground for not less than 250 years. There were also some leather straps and sheaths.

"On the highest point of Cape Irkaipi there were also the remains of ancient dwellings surrounded by rude piles of stones, with no substance to hold them together. This was probably the last stronghold of the Onkilon."¹

Probably during the thirteenth century the Chook-

¹ "The Voyage of the 'Vega,'" chap. VII, 181-183.

tchi arrived in the Far North-East, having come round by Behring Strait. Staff-Surgeon Robeck, of Captain Galla's Expedition in 1791, compiled a dictionary of twelve languages of alien tribes, several of which are extinct. If we compare the Chooktchan language with the dialect of the savages who lived on Kadiak Island, off the continent of America, we shall be struck by the resemblance between them ; and there is no doubt that the two languages are identical. It is evident that the newly-arrived conquerors, the Chooktchi, were accustomed to the sea, for those who settled on the seashore seemed quite at home there ; while those who went to live inland were at first in a very bad plight until they began to keep and to breed deer, of which occupation they had formerly no knowledge. The following is a characteristic Chooktchan legend :—

“ There came from beyond the sea a Chooktcha man and woman. They built a tent, but they found it very hard to live, as they knew not what to do to get food. One day the flap of their tent was lifted and the head of a white bear appeared. The man and woman were greatly terrified, but the bear said to them : ‘ Do not be frightened. I am the lord of the place, and you shall not die, for you shall make friends with my son the wild-deer.’ And going outside the tent they saw a deer with a white doe standing there, and from that time the Chooktchi began to breed deer.”

In honour of the deer, certain holidays are observed, which I shall describe later. Another benefactor of the Chooktchi is the giant, Sana, who is mentioned in the third chapter.



DRAWINGS MADE BY CHOOKTCHI.

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Between the new-comers and the aborigines (Onkilon) a hard struggle began, but they were not equally matched, for the aborigines were of low stature, the Chooktchi being much taller. Legend says that the Onkilon went away in two parties to the land that is visible from Cape Yakhan. If, then, the assumption of the eminent geographer Markham be true, that the Onkilon and the Esquimaux are the same race, the distance travelled by these polar emigrants was enormous. They journeyed in search of a land of promise in 83° north latitude and perhaps even higher. In the Parry Islands, in Barrow Strait, there have been frequently found recently the remains of huts, sledges, and other things similar to the débris found in the dwellings of the Onkilon. The further journeyings of these Siberian wanderers have not yet been traced, but it is certain that in the fourteenth century they came to Greenland from the north; therefore, the Onkilons, if they be the same race as the Esquimaux, had crossed the Arctic Ocean. Moreover, in the fourteenth century the "dwarf people" (skalinger) came to Greenland, rooting out the Icelanders who had come five centuries before, under their leader, Eric the Red-haired. However this may be, the Chooktchi in the fifteenth century had fully established themselves as masters of the territory formerly inhabited by the Onkilon. Their nearest neighbours were the peace-loving Kangienici and the Lamouts, with whom they frequently fought. Between the last mentioned and the Chooktchi there burnt an unquenchable hatred, of which full advantage was subsequently taken, and is still taken, by the Russians.

In 1646 the Russians first came into contact with the Chooktchi. Coming up the River Kolyma from the Arctic Ocean, the Russian adventurers noticed on the shore a row of tents, and near them some people who were unlike any tribe they had previously met. The Russians approached the shore, laid down knives, kettles, axes, etc., and pushed off again. The Chooktchi took the articles, placing on the bank in return furs, walrus-tusks, and various articles made from the latter.

Assuming that these strange people were inhabitants of a district where fur-bearing animals were to be found in great abundance, the Russian traders decided to conquer them, but great was their astonishment when the Chooktchi rushed courageously upon them, instead of fleeing in alarm at the first gunshot, as all other savages did. In a previous chapter I have mentioned the prolonged struggle which, with alternating fortune, was waged during 150 years between the Russians and the Chooktchi. News of this strange, war-like tribe spread all over Siberia, and reached other countries. Mention of the Chooktchi in West European literature was first made by Witsen, who in the second edition of his work (1705) says, on the authority of Vladimir Atlasof, that the inhabitants of North-Eastern Asia are called Chooktchi, but he does not give any details about them. Some Swedish captives at Tobolsk translated a Tatar manuscript in which mention is thus made of the Chooktchi: "North-East Asia is inhabited by two somewhat similar tribes, the Chooktchi and Shellatski, and southward, by the Eastern Ocean, there is a third



DRAWINGS MADE BY CHOOKTCHI.

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tribe—the Olyutorski. These are the fiercest tribes in the whole of Northern Asia. They do not want any intercourse with the Russians, whom they mercilessly slaughter when they meet ; but the Russians also kill the Chooktchi whenever they encounter them.” On the map Lotterus (1765) the Chooktchan Peninsula is marked in a different colour from that used to mark the Russian possessions in Siberia, and underneath was written : “ Chooktchi, natio ferocissima et bellicosa Russorum inimica qui capti se invicem interfecerunt.”

In 1777, Georgi, author of “ Beschreibung aller Nationen des russischen Reichs,” in the second volume of his book, page 350, states the following : “ They are more savage, fierce, proud, indomitable, thieving, lying, and revengeful than their neighbours, the nomad Koriaks. They are as cruel and dangerous as the Tougouse are friendly and amiable. Twenty Chooktchi can conquer fifty Koriaks. The forts in the neighbouring districts are in constant danger of an attack, and their upkeep is so expensive that one of the oldest established of them, Anadirski, was recently abandoned by the Government.”

Such was the unenviable reputation which the Chooktchi had acquired in countries far distant from their own. The Russians used all means to suppress this race. First Cossacks were sent, then Lamouts, then a regiment of soldiers, but all was in vain, and finally, as has already been mentioned, efforts were made to live at peace with them. The results were astonishing and unlooked for, “ natio ferocissima et bellicosa ” proving to be amiable and peaceable

neighbours. In times of famine the people described as ferocious and revengeful saved the Russians, not once, but many times, from starvation, by generous gifts of deer.

At present the Chooktchi are divided into two tribes, according to their occupations—Deer Chooktchi and Dog Chooktchi—the difference of language between the two tribes being very slight. The Deer Chooktchi know no other language but their own, but among the Dog Chooktchi there are many who know ordinary English words, such as ship, rum, gun, shirt, etc. The least intelligent of them can count in English up to ten, but they do not know one Russian word. Their knowledge of English is the result of their contact with American whalers. The Chooktchi are a trading race, and the Deer tribe exchange the tobacco and tea which they receive from the Russians for knives, guns, and occasionally rum, from the Dog tribe, who obtain these articles from the islanders of Behring Strait, who originally receive them from the Americans. Thus, the Chooktchi are often in possession of excellent Winchester rifles, while the Cossacks are armed with old-fashioned flint-locks.

Russians and Chooktchi meet once a year on neutral territory at Annuiski fort, where the Lamouts are on guard, and the Russian missionary then makes the annual attempt at the conversion of the heathen to Christianity. The preaching and instruction are given through an interpreter, who knows, perhaps, enough Chooktchan to be able to say : “ How much ? ” “ How many ? ” “ A little.” “ How much vodka for a beaver-skin ? ” “ How much vodka for a white

fox ? ” Moreover, being a Nijne Kolymyan, the interpreter’s mental capacity is extremely limited, and abstract ideas are absolutely beyond his comprehension. Therefore the success of the attempts at conversion can be easily imagined ! I give two examples. One occurred about eighty years ago, and the other in recent times. The first is mentioned by Vrangél in his book :—

“ At the fair, a young Chooktcha, by the aid of a present of several pounds of tobacco, was persuaded to be baptised. The ceremony took place in the presence of a number of spectators. The new convert stood quiet and calm until the time came for his triple immersion in the huge trough filled with icy water, but to this he would not consent. He shook his head vigorously, and volubly gave many reasons for his objections, but nobody understood his arguments. At last, after much persuasion from the interpreter, and a promise of more tobacco, the convert consented, and bravely jumped into the ice-cold water, but instantly leaped out again, shivering with cold, and exclaiming : ‘ My tobacco ! My tobacco ! ’ And all arguments and persuasions failed to induce him to plunge in twice more, and the ceremony remained incomplete.”

The second instance is taken from the article written by Riyebkof in the paper *Siberia*, 1885 :—

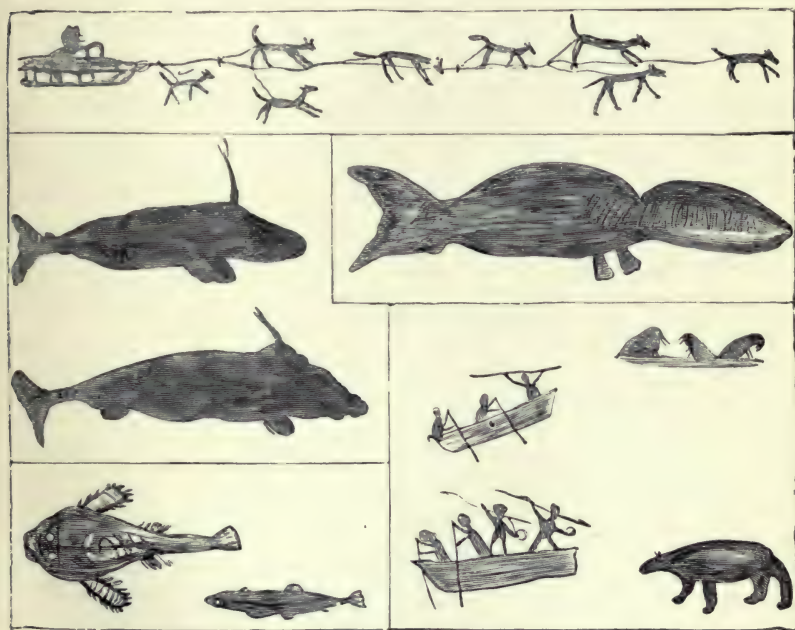
“ Many deer belonging to a converted Chooktcha had died, but those belonging to the unconverted savage were strong and healthy. The convert therefore prayed to the God of the Russians whose eikon was in his hut ; but, notwithstanding his prayers

his animals sickened and died, until of his once large herd only about one-fourth remained. What was to be done? One morning he placed the eikon in his breast, harnessed the dogs and drove off to the forest. There he fastened the eikon with a strap high up on a large tree, removed his cap, said a prayer, and then said: 'O God of the Russians, do not be angry, and do not harm me, for I have done you no harm. I might have thrown you away in the marsh, or elsewhere but I have put you where a Russian passing by can see you and take you.' And from that time the convert reverted to the faith of his fathers and his tribe."

Sometimes converts will return the next year to be re-baptised, if there is any advantage to be gained by it; but at home in their tents they retain their old idols, their former religion and customs, practise polygamy, etc. Conversion is only attempted in the case of the Deer Chooktch, who live side by side with Russians, but the possibility of converting the Dog Chooktchi cannot even be considered.

Each of these two tribes has its own chief, who, however, is not treated with any special respect by his subjects; it is only in times of war that he is of any importance.

The tribe of Dog Chooktchi is split up into several clans, living in small hamlets along the shores of the Arctic Ocean from Cape Shellatski to Behring Strait. Each hamlet consists of from three to twenty-five tents, so that in all the population amounts to 125 to 130 people, more than are living in Nijne Kolymsk. These clans generally live at peace with each other,



DRAWINGS MADE BY CHOOKTCHI.

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though occasionally there are fierce fights. During my stay in May, 1891, news was received at Nijne Kolymsk that one clan at Cape Shellatski had been completely wiped out. Some Russians, accidentally visiting the place, had found eighteen corpses, some of which had been partly devoured by dogs, and, lying about in confusion, were broken spears, knives and several Winchester rifles. Investigation or inquiry of any kind could not be thought of, as the affair happened in the Chooktchan territory.

It is difficult to estimate the total number of Chooktchi. I once asked a Chooktcha the question. He looked at me, took up a handful of sand and, holding it towards me, said: "Count!" Pride of race spoke in this answer, the same pride that makes the Chooktchi style themselves "men." As a matter of fact, they number 3,000 at most. The principal occupations of the Dog Chooktchi are fishing and seal-hunting. Occasionally they kill whales, but only those stranded on the sandbanks at low water. It sometimes happens that, notwithstanding the numerous harpoons embedded in its body, the whale has sufficient strength to get away, only to die somewhere farther away; and, should the waves beat him back upon the shore, the Chooktchi there immediately inform the clan whose harpoons are in its body. A feast begins. Savages and dogs surfeit themselves with whale-flesh to an incredible degree. The people's faces and garments are smeared with grease, and the smell of blubber is noticeable beyond the village. They eat all day long, but at last sleep overpowers them, and the overworked stomachs demand rest. A

Chooktcha drops down asleep, still chewing a piece of flesh, while his devoted wife sits beside him, and with her fingers pushes a piece of fat into the mouth of her sleeping husband. The feast lasts until the waves wash away the remains of the prize from the shore, and then famine begins.

Among these Chooktchi, as with all polar savages, hospitality is very strongly developed, Chooktchi, Russians, and even Lamouts (whom they hate) freely visiting any hut and remaining as long as they please. Lieutenant Bove thus formulates their hospitality: "To-day I eat and sleep in your tent, to-morrow you eat and sleep in mine." Moreover, hospitality includes hospitable prostitution, which is in full strength among these people. I have already alluded to this custom in a previous chapter. They generously sheltered the crew of the "Rodgers," gave them food, drink, and clothing, and conducted them to the Russian villages, where the first Russian whom they met treated the shipwrecked Americans very roughly, and took Gilder and his companions with him, thinking to keep them until the summer, when, being strong and big men, they could be useful as fishermen. However, someone at Nijne Kolymask told this Russian Vanker (as Gilder calls him in his book) that the men of whom he wished to make labourers were themselves accustomed to have men working under them.

III

I opened my eyes and saw a curious picture. If only I could adequately describe the interior of the hut

in which I lay ! When a child, I used to amuse myself by covering beetles with empty cardboard boxes ; now I myself was covered over with a box (which, however, was made of fur) about nine feet by seven feet by seven feet. This box was strengthened by thickly interlaced whale-ribs. In the middle of the hut there was a saucer-lamp of blubber with a wick burning in it, and there was another in a corner. A little Chooktcha boy, naked as a Cupid and very dirty, crept close to me, staring in wonder and amazement with his narrow sparkling eyes. Another little Chooktcha was crying dreadfully somewhere or other, but where I could not see. " Surely," I thought, " they cannot keep their children on the roof ! " For the crying came from somewhere aloft. In the corners of the hut were heaps of deerskins, also some lances with short handles tied with straps. In one corner less dirty than the others were lying three pieces of wood about a foot long, with rounded heads, and a row of black holes along the wood. Beside these were the horned heads of several deer. Around the saucer-lamp sat several Chooktcha ladies, who had slipped their fur coats down and were naked to the waist. Their breasts were tattooed in stripes and little rings. The ladies were bordering a snow-white parka with strips of wolverine fur. The first to notice that I was awake was a little Chooktcha boy, who screamed with fright when I looked at him, and crept to one of the women, from the shelter of whose protection he cast sidelong glances at me just like a little wolf cub. When the ladies saw that I was awake, one of them hung the kettle over the fire and brought in deers' tongues,

boiled meat, and a pile of cakes made of deer-fat mixed with flesh. The food was placed on the skin side of a fur on the floor.

"Friend, I have cooked this for you," said she in Chooktchan. The instinct of coquetry, existing even in this latitude, made her soften the hard "che" into "tze" as she spoke, this being the Chooktchan idea of grace of speech and manner. Here all the ladies rose as Peter and Ermitchen came, or, rather, crawled, into the tent. Ermitchen was radiant as usual. The fluffy hood trimmed with wolves' ears which he wore was not becoming to his amiable countenance, which showed the scars of many frostbites. We shook hands and all sat down. To my great relief the screaming of the invisible baby ceased. Poor little thing! He also was in a special fur box, hanging from the ceiling, in one of the corners of the hut.

Supper began. I had lost some of my fastidiousness through my experiences with the Yakuts, Lamouts, and Yukagir, but the grossness and absolute lack of all decency and reserve among the Chooktchi revolted me. After the meal was ended I was obliged to turn my head in order to avoid seeing the subsequent proceedings, to which the pen of Swift could doubtless have done justice, but I spare my readers.

A friendly conversation went on all through the meal. Ermitchen's manner with the ladies (his mother and wives) was kindly and simple, and I liked his kind behaviour to the children. The little naked boy was now quite fearless, and he even tried to climb on my knee when I enticed him with a piece of sugar.

“What are those?” I asked Peter, pointing to the pieces of wood in the corner. “Their eikons,” he replied. “The Chooktchi get ‘living’ fire from them. There will soon be a holiday here, brother, firstly, because an old woman has just died, and, secondly, because a wild deer has wandered into the herd.” I knew already that when this latter happened it was customary to send for the Shaman, who places the herd under a spell for three weeks, during which time their owner will not sell a single deer, even though he were offered a whole bottle of vodka for it. When the spell is ended, the wild deer is lassoed and ceremoniously killed, his head afterwards being solemnly placed among the household “gods.”

Meanwhile, Ermitchen had repeatedly tried to find out whether I had any vodka, for he could not imagine that I would pay a visit to the Chooktchi without. I did not wish to miss any of the preparations for the forthcoming ceremony, so we went to the tent where all the people had gathered together. It was very much larger than the tent we had just left. On the floor sat very many Chooktchi, among them Moundoukhan and the brothers Shkouliata, who had remained behind at the time of the blizzard. Their faces were so serene and untroubled, their conversation so unrestrained and cheerful, that one could scarcely believe it was a death-chamber. The dead woman lay in the corner, dressed in white festal garments and covered over with the skin of a deer that had been killed while I was asleep. Tea was prepared, and the hostess threw the first cupful under the skin which covered

the dead woman, and, during the meal, the best piece of fat also. Then the ceremony began. The sons of the dead woman went out, lassoed two white deer, and took them to the west of the camp. They placed the head of a wild-deer at the east of the camp, a wolf's head at the north, and a dog's head at the south.

"All is ready!" cried the sons, and from the tent three old men came slowly out, each holding a large drum made of willow covered with suède. They marched slowly round the camp, stopping at each head, and beating the edge of the drum with a whale-bone in such a manner that a continuous rolling vibration was produced. Then the old men chanted in a slow, drawling manner that as Galga was now going to the mountains they asked her to pray the great gods to be kind to the Chooktchi, to protect the deer from the evil spirit, and, above all, to keep away the smallpox witch, who three years before had destroyed half the camp with the touch of her flaming torch. Three times the circuit of the camp was made, and then the chanting ceased, and only the rolling of the drums was heard. This was evidently a signal, for immediately the two white deer were brought and were stabbed to the heart with knives. The poor animals swayed, staggered a few steps, then fell to the ground, where they made a few convulsive movements with their graceful, delicate hoofs, as though trying to kick death away. The Chooktchi closely watched the death-struggle, for from it they forecast the future, as I afterwards learned. All those present smeared their hands and faces with the



CHOOKTCHAN BONE-CARVING.

[Face page 142.

blood of the sacrificed animals, and the amiable countenances took on a savage, fierce expression. The women rapidly skinned the dead deer, and poured blood into the stomachs, which were half full of partly-digested moss, the favourite dish of the Chooktchi. A little of this delicacy was placed in the mouth of the dog's head, that the dead woman might be protected on her journey to the mountains. Some was also placed in the wolf's head, which represents Chapak, the evil spirit, that no harm may happen to the deer. The Chooktchi and Nijne Kolymyans chopped the marrow-bones of the deer into small pieces, and greedily sucked out the still warm and steaming marrow, their lips and cheeks smeared with blood like the vampires, with stories of whom my old nurse had terrified me in my childhood. It interested me to see this example of the duration of a custom through many centuries, for in this same manner did paleolithic man eat, as can be proved by the bones found in England in Kent's hole, Galicia, and in the Kieltz province.

Meanwhile the old woman made a fire, and each Chooktcha threw into it a driftwood log. One old man, who was dancing to the sound of a drum, threw into the fire the shoulder-blade of a deer and each person present threw in a piece of fat. When the thick smoke had cleared, the old man took out the shoulder-blade, and, after carefully examining the cracks caused by the fire, announced that the dead woman would be favourably received by the Great Spirit.

The short twilight of the polar day was drawing to

a close, and the day's ceremony was over. All the women in the camp were busy preparing food—mountains of meat-cakes, and a mixture of deer's fat and seal blubber, with other delicacies beloved by the Chooktchi. By next day all this food would be entirely consumed.

IV

Everyone in the camp rose very early, and the sound of animated voices came from the tents. During the night several families had arrived with their tents from the neighbouring camp, and the young people were bustling about the new arrivals. A harnessed sledge stood ready by the tent in which the dead woman lay. Within were all her household belongings—a copper kettle, an axe, her favourite little bell, etc. The body was still covered with the deerskin. The three old men already mentioned paced with measured steps round the fireplace, asking as they passed the body, "Do you wish to depart?" and the woman present replied:

"Pass on!"

After the question had been asked the third time, they carried the dead body to the sledge, securing it firmly with a leather strap. It was strange to see the serious expression on the faces of the young Russians present as they watched these mysterious proceedings, which they evidently held as sacred as did the Chooktchi themselves. The body was taken to the west of the camp, where, two versts distant, the immense pile of driftwood could be seen. At

this moment a Chooktcha drove furiously to the spot, evidently having had no mercy on his deer, for their large black eyes were dull and their delicate legs trembled with exhaustion. The man leaped from the sledge before it stopped, and gave a packet to the son of the dead woman, saying something which I did not hear. Afterwards I found that the man had owed some tobacco to a friend, who subsequently died before the loan was repaid, and the borrower now availed himself of this opportunity to return the tobacco by the old woman now making her journey to the mountains.

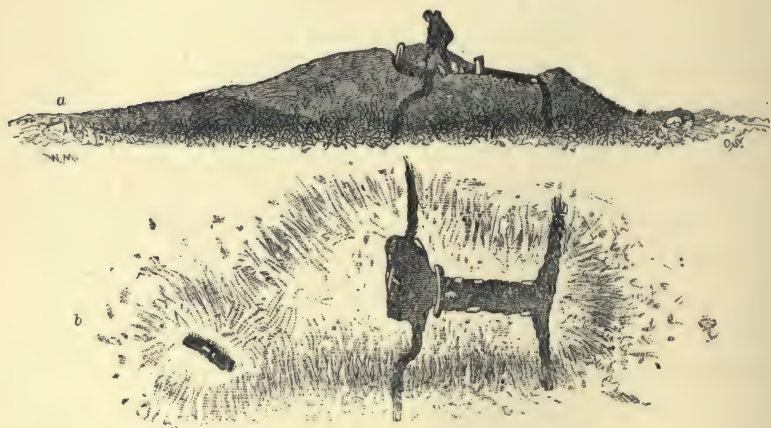
I did not go with the procession to the funeral pile, not wishing to witness the painful scene, but afterwards Peter told me that the deer who had drawn the "hearse" were slaughtered, and the people smeared themselves with the blood. Then the dead woman, the sledge, and the dead deer were all placed upon the funeral pile, which was then set alight. The dry wood blazed fiercely and the Chooktchi danced round the burning pile while the limbs and sinews of the dead contracted with the heat, but they evidently did not wait until the fire burned out, for they all returned in two hours' time. This is not the only form of burial customary among the Chooktchi. Sometimes the dead bodies, fully dressed, and with spears in their hands, are placed, together with all their ornaments and utensils, upon the snow-covered tundra, where the bodies are soon devoured by wolves and white polar foxes. Only the great Shamans are buried in the earth. Among the Chooktchi the old people are put to

death by their children, and so far as I could find out, the old people themselves take the initiative, for they believe this rite to be most acceptable to the gods, who will therefore give glory to the hunters and warriors. This ceremony took place twenty-five years ago not far from Nijne Kolymsk, and mention was made of it in the Yakutsk diocesan journal. A feast now began. The women had prepared mountains of food, and a veritable battle was waged in the large tent, the savages tearing from each other pieces of boiled deer's flesh, fat, smoked tongue, etc., and in a short time nothing remained of the mountains of food. Afterwards games were played, the most interesting part of the festival, at any rate, for the young people. At the further end of the lake, which was six versts long, a deer and a packet of tobacco were fastened to tree stumps. These were the prizes. Several competitors sat astride their narrow sledges, and, at the word of command, drove at top speed, the winner receiving the deer. Then there was a running race, which was thus arranged: The competitors ran round in a circle, dropping out when exhausted, and the one who kept up longest received the packet of tobacco. So far the Russian inhabitants had taken no part in the contest, but now a Chooktcha suggested a wrestling match, and Moundoukhan stood forward. The Chooktchi method of wrestling differs from the Russian. The wrestlers grip each other by the shoulder and endeavour to throw each other to the ground. Moundoukhan and his adversary puffed and struggled for a long time, and at last Moundoukhan pulled the savage over so that

only his black moccasins were seen in the air, to the great entertainment of the spectators. The rule was that the vanquished one should give something of his own to the victor. The favourite game was next played. Eight strong young fellows put another man on a walrus-skin, and tossed him up, pulling the skin away from beneath, and the art consisted in the skill with which the tossed one came down on his feet.

It was now quite dark, but the games went on. Among others, they played the "deer" game, imitating the deer playing in the pasture lands. Very late that night Peter and I left the camp, our departure leading to a little friction between us. I had given Ermitchen two bricks of tea in exchange for a Shaman's drum, but as I was placing it in my sledge Peter strongly protested, saying that the dogs would not carry such a thing, and that a blizzard would come, or some other misfortune would happen. However, seeing that I was determined to take this "devil's present" with me, Peter suggested as a compromise that the drum should not be carried in the sledge, but dragged along by a strap fastened to the back of it. To this I would not agree, and finally I placed the drum in the bottom of the sledge. Peter was very angry with me throughout the journey, and everything untoward that occurred he attributed to the presence of the drum. But this was not all. We put up for the night at a hut, and, fearing that the frost would spoil the drum, I took it in with me. When the warmth of the room caused the skin to relax, the drum began to vibrate

a little, and at the sound the inmates of the house were terrified and looked at me with great severity. Even my acquaintances from Nijne seemed to think I had committed an act of sacrilege, and, to tell the truth, I was relieved when one of them, as though by accident, pricked the skin of the drum and so stopped the vibration. I threw away the now ruined drum, and once more my friends smiled and forgave me my great offence.



REMAINS OF ONKILON HUT (p. 129).

CHAPTER VI

THE EXTINCTION OF THE KANGIENICI¹

My Chooktcha friend, Nouta Noukhva, and I went in canoes up the Annui River, which district is characterised by a desolation remarkable even in the Kolymsk region. During a week's journey we did not see one human habitation. My companion was much stronger than I, and more accustomed to these canoes, which require much care and dexterity in management to avoid capsizing. I became terribly fatigued, and lagged behind more and more. Nouta several times turned his boat round (a dangerous thing to do), and shouted to me: "Pull harder!" At last he took pity on me, and, turning his canoe towards the shore, said: "Let us have a sleep." Nothing could give me greater pleasure, for my hands were very painful, my back aching terribly, and my feet were benumbed. The bank was hilly, and from it a steep, mountainous cliff rose perpendicularly, its rusty sides scantily covered with bushes

¹ A race now extinct, which lived by the Annui River, and also, probably, by the Kolyma. I believe this is the first article which has ever been written giving any information about this race. Billings' secretary, Mr. Sower, barely mentions the existence at one time of such a race.

and heath. Close by was a great pile of driftwood, and while my companion made a fire I wandered along the bank of a little stream in search of wild red currants. My Chooktcha companion could not understand my passion for these "sour herbs," as he called them. In his opinion, a man must like meat, deer's flesh, fish, yukala, and perhaps the flesh of young seal, but how a man could possibly suck herbs like a bear was more than he could understand.

The river wound through many reaches of the rocky bank, and the echo was so clear and distinct that a word spoken in a whisper was repeated in a stentorian bass. The stream by which I was walking was also very winding in its course, and the banks were soft and swampy. I jumped from one little hillock to another, grasping the bushes for support, but once or twice I fell into the stagnant water, to the great fright of some young grebe, which cried out, flapping their unfledged wings. Following a sharp turn of the bank round the rocky cliff, I beheld a sight which startled me into an involuntary exclamation. There were rows of Arangas¹ all over the side of the cliff. The beams were grey and bent with age. Could it be that these were the graves of the Kangienici, and that I was now at the foot of the Mountain of the Dead of which I had so often heard at Sredne Kolymsk, but which I had always considered to be a fairy-tale? There was something especially solemn and awe-inspiring in

¹ The ancient graves or biers of polar savages. Each body lies on two beams.

the sight of these strange, long-forgotten graves, lit up by the red light of the midnight sun. The sharp cry of the grebe, repeated by the echo, made me start nervously. It seemed as though from above the beams came a cry warning the dead that a Russian had come to disturb their rest. When I returned to the spot where we had left the boat, a large fire was burning, the kettle was singing, and yukala was being cooked. I spoke to Nouta of the graves I had seen, and he said that the Kangienici would "melt" at the appearance of a Russian. Then he told me the story of the Kangienici :

Long, long ago, so long ago that the grandfather of our oldest men—men so old that their faces are bearded—were not yet born, there were many more people living by the Kolyma than there are now, for in those days there were no Russians there, nor those Russian diseases¹ which not even the most powerful Shaman can cure. On the banks of the Annui there lived seven tribes of the Kangienici. What grand men they were ! In the spring they went to the ocean and fought and struggled with the white bear, but with each other they never fought. Why, indeed, should they fall upon each other with knives when there was plenty of fish in the rivers and enough wild animals in the woods for all ? Every year, when after his two months' sleep the red eye of the sun looked from behind the mountain, the Kangienici assembled here. Here lived the oldest Shaman, Ilighin, who had seen more often than anyone living the snow in autumn and

¹ Smallpox and syphilis.

the first ice of the year on the rivers. His word was law to all, and at the general assembly he it was who made offerings to the gods, who forecast the future and foretold if the fishing would be good, and if they would have many wild deer, and whether the trappers on the ocean shore would be overtaken by the blizzard.

It was early in January, and the beginning of the short polar day. The sun which had been hidden for so long now appeared, and flooded the snow-covered tundra with his rays. Godlike was the sun, with his glowing aureole of rays, on which smaller suns sparkled like diamonds. Around the hut of old Ilighin were several hundred conical tents of leather, each having for greater warmth an inner lining of deer skins, with the fur side to the interior of the hut. The Kangienici had come from all the camps on this festive occasion, and even from the Far East came the hunters from the shore of the Pacific Ocean. The young girls were in holiday dress, and wore large breastplates, made of rounded discs of metal linked together, over tunics embroidered with deer sinews dyed in various colours. The girls walked about hand-in-hand, exchanging remarks about the young hunters. The old women, mostly blind (because the evil spirit had eaten away their eyes), sang improvised songs of the years to come, when the young people would gather together again at holiday times, and see the sun, but the old would be lying out on the Mountain of the Dead. Several young hunters were engaged in rubbing a large heavy

walrus skin with bear's fat, in order to make it more supple and elastic, for use in their favourite holiday game, which was played thus : A youth lay down on the skin, which was firmly held by eight hunters ; he was then tossed up, and his skill consisted in so turning in the air as to come to the ground on his feet.

The sun had already risen, but the solemnities had not yet begun. All were waiting for the arrival of Ilighin's grandsons, the brave hunters who had travelled on the last ice of spring to the distant source of the Kolyma, and were now expected to return.

" Here they come ! " " They are coming ! " cried joyous voices on all sides. And, on the slope of the hill appeared a file of sledges, on which the riders were seated astride, the harnessed dogs barking in joyful greeting of their native place. The newcomers were quickly surrounded, for they must have much to tell. They had seen Lamouts and Yukagir. But sad and worn were the frost-bitten faces of the hunters.

" Why have so few returned ? Seven went away and only three are here ! Where are the others ? "

Silently, without replying to these anxious questions, the hunters unharnessed the dogs, unloaded the sledges and went into the hut, where a bright fire was burning.

" What have you to tell us ? " said old Ilighin.

" We have nothing to tell you."

" What have you heard ? "

" We have heard nothing."



“What have you seen?”

“We have seen nothing.”

This was the usual formula. Then, having removed their fur coats and sat down by the fire, the eldest grandson began the tale.

“Our journey brought us misfortune, grandfather. The Lamouts now have a new illness, of which no one has ever heard before. Because of it the body is covered with blisters, and it burns and rots away in three days. A strange tribe from the west had come and brought this illness with them. No one could understand their language, no Lamout, no Yukagir, no Chooktcha; but they called themselves Sakha (Yakuts). What is this tribe we do not know. The Lamouts said that these people were in great fear, and had told terrible tales of the horrors that had happened in the west, beyond the mountain of Tass-Hayata.

“The new illness killed our four comrades. And other people, grandfather! There was a strange tree in the mountains such as none of us had ever seen before. Its bark was grey, and bitter as gall, and its leaves continually trembled¹ as did the fugitive Sakha. Here, grandfather, is some of the bark; we brought it for you.”

Ilighin was greatly troubled as he listened to this story. Then he attentively examined the bark of the unknown tree, and became lost in meditation. A terrible new illness which burns and destroys men in three days; an unknown tribe flying in fear from

¹ The aspen tree. There is a legend among the savages that this tree only makes its appearance before the coming of Russians.

a terrible conqueror ; and, finally, this strange, bitter bark ! All these were signs of the will of the Spirit of the Mountain. But what did it all portend ? Silence fell upon all in the hut ; silent even were the little ones, who crawled on the floor, clutching pieces of frozen fish in their tiny fists. No sound was heard but the crackling of the fire in the chimney corner. At last Ilighin spoke.

“ Friends, there will soon be a great change, whether for good or evil I do not know. I shall call upon my guardian spirit, and ask him to take me on high in the western heavens and there I shall inquire of the gods.” Ilighin spoke thus, and then lay down in the corner on a white bearskin, and spoke no more that evening. All were very quiet and downcast ; the girls especially were sorry that this bad news had come on the holiday, for the festivities, perhaps, would be abandoned. The oldest women, the Shaman’s usual assistants, now began to put everything in readiness for the mystic service—the drum, the sacred robe covered with symbolic signs and tokens, the most important among which were a disc of mammoth ivory on the breast, and a figure whose hands were joined together, as were also the feet ; also a fish made of bone hanging by a strap from the back of the robe ; this last was the bait for the guardian spirit.

Meanwhile the last sun-rays of the two hours’ polar day were dying. The girls and the young hunters wandered about dejectedly.

“ Good-bye to holidays ! Good-bye to merry games ! Good-bye to races ! Good-bye to tossing !

Good-bye to everything ! And what more will Ilighin say ? ”

The fire on the hearth was dying ; the flames flickered up for an instant, then died out, and the logs fell apart into embers, on which shone a faint blue flame. Darkness gradually closed in from the curved walls of the hut, and enveloped all, save a narrowing ring round the fireplace. When all the embers were dead someone raked them out, and scattered cinders over them ; the ring closed and complete darkness filled the hut. So darkens the sky when the north wind blows from the ocean. From a faint rustling sound it was evident that Ilighin had moved from his position to the middle of the floor. The occasional cry of the mountain-hawk sounded outside the hut, the plaintive call of the seagull was heard, and some strange bird uttered a hoarse cry. Then, like lightning flashing from a dark cloud, like sudden thunder, came the sound of the drum, and, as though heralding a tempest, waves of sound filled the hut—sound that expressed the cries of a thousand birds fluttering through the dark, cloudy sky, in terror of the approaching tempest. Louder and louder rolled the thunder of the drum, and convulsive shudders ran through the nerves of those who listened ; while, above the mingled sounds of the tempest and cries of terrified birds, the voice of the Shaman chanted :

“ Mighty master, fulfil all my desires ! Grant all my requests ! ” And faint, scarcely audible sounds came from somewhere afar off, for in the hut was the body of the Shaman, but his spirit had “ gone forth

on the sound of the drum to the western heavens, to the top of the mountain where there is no day, but continual night, where there is always mist, and where the moon is but a thin crescent." There dwells the terrible god Chapak, the spirit of all diseases. Suddenly a terrifying sound struck like a knife into the breast of each one present. There was the clash of iron, and the sound of a body falling heavily to the floor. The Shaman's assistants quickly threw fresh logs on the fire, and soon a crackling river of flame filled the low chimney corner. In the light that filled the hut the Shaman was seen lying unconscious on the floor. That was a bad sign, and all hearts sank. The assistants began to rattle bone castanets as they pronounced the sacred formula !

" The heavy clouds roll. Chapak is coming, terrible as a homeless bear roaming in winter. Awake, Shaman ! "

Ilighin arose, pale and dull-eyed, and began to turn round and round slowly before the fire, his long matted hair falling on his shoulders. Faster and faster he revolved, the onlookers gasping and holding their breath, their heads becoming giddy as they watched the rapid twisting movements of the old man. His eyes were bloodshot, and his lips were flecked with foam. With wonderful agility, considering his age, the Shaman leaped more than a yard into the air, the bone disc on his robe clattering with his wild movements. At last the climax of his exaltation came, and he began to utter incomprehensible words, " speaking *khorro* language," as the savages

call it. All those in the hut listened terror-struck to the harsh sounds which seemed to tear the throat of the Shaman as he uttered them. Suddenly he was silent and stood motionless, holding his hand to his ear as though listening ; then he sank slowly to the floor. All hearts sank at the anticipation of evil. Ilighin sobbed bitterly. " Oh, friends," he said at last, " slavery and death await us in the future ! Soon, from the west, to the shores of our river, will come the mighty conquerors, who will make our lives hard and bitter as the bark of that strange tree which the hunters brought to-day. None will be spared. Those of us who do not fall at the hands of the conquerors will be destroyed by this strange illness which is burning the people of Kolyma."

Even the bravest of the hunters paled and bent their heads as they listened ; the women wept aloud ; and despair, born in this tent, quickly spread throughout the camp.

Winter passed. The sun no longer set. The bushes put forth their new green leaves, and the mosquitoes forced the deer from the marshy shore of the river to the rocky shore. At this season the shores of the Annui teem with life : long guttural chants are heard from the fishermen seated in their boats ; and the young hunters light wood fires on the beach to drive away the mosquitoes, and then, to the sound of music, they dance in pairs round the fires, imitating the young deer in spring. But now no sounds of song and dance were heard, no laughter and merry voices, and even the fishing was abandoned.

“Why think about next winter, when no one knows what will happen to-morrow?”

Once more the Kangienici assembled in the hut of Ilighin, but not for merrymaking. The conquerors were near. Already they were on the Kolyma, and each day brought news, more and more terrible.

“Their faces are covered with hair.”

“The people from the west carry in their hands thick sticks which send thunder and death far and near.”

“Their knives are made of a strange shining substance which goes of itself into the body.”

“The hearts of the conquerors are as hard as their knives; they have no mercy or pity for anyone.”

“They torture the people to make them tell where they have hidden their rare furs, and to tell them where are the ‘glittering sands’ of which the Kangienici have never heard.”

So had spoken the people who had fled from the shores of the Kolyma, and now the unhappy hunters who had returned asked the Shaman what they should do.

“Friends,” began the Shaman, when all were assembled. He wore his sacred robes and held his tambourine in his hands. “Friends, our gods cannot help us now. The conquerors have come from the west to find their gods, which they esteem more than anything else in the world, and nothing will stop them. And, alas! for us, their gods are here among us!”

And the Shaman took from under his robes a

beautiful and rare black foxskin, through whose long, untrimmed fur grey threads showed here and there.

“Let us, then, ask the gods of the conquerors not to allow them to kill our hunters, nor torture our old people and children; therefore, let those who have these gods in their huts bring them here. And think not to hide them, for the people from the west will certainly find them, though you should swallow them.”

All the people brought skins of various animals: sable, grey beaver, coal-black fox, and the fur of the fire-fox, from which, when shaken, showers of sparks fall. This skin is the most valuable of all and is worth a hundred beaver skins, for such a fox can be found perhaps only once in a hundred years. All these furs were placed in a huge wicker basket, and taken to the hill, where a festival was held in honour of the gods of the conquerors. The basket was smeared with the blood of a newly-killed snow-white doe, and upon the basket were placed cakes of deer's flesh and fat. The Kangienici mingled joyous laughter with rivers of tears. The hunters' voices arose in merry song, then suddenly trembled and broke in grief. The sun had gone from the north to the east, and the cargoose were fluttering about the river when the sad ceremony ended.

“Let us now prepare the place of honour for the gods of the conquerors,” said Ilighin.

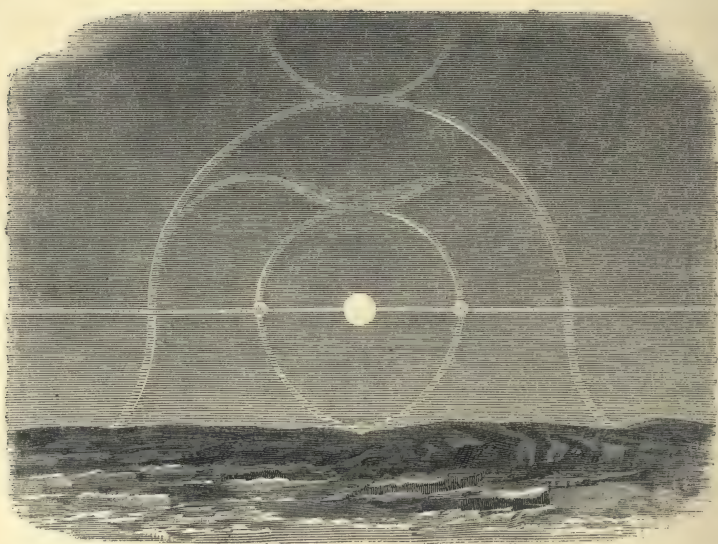
To the east of the camp was a large lake, always frozen over, and even in hot weather the ice only melted a little at the edges, and there the pike came

to play in the sun. In this lake dwelt Ah-i-sit, the "Mother Protectress," the beneficent goddess of the Kangienici. Clothed in a rich coat of striped sable bordered with wolverine, and with beaver hood and knee-pads of wolf-skin, Ah-i-sit often came from the lake to help women in difficult childbirth. Also she often came to help them to take the deer across the river and to assist the hunters in the chase. The basket of furs was lowered into an ice-hole in the lake, and doubtless Ah-i-sit, being so good, would make the conquerors' gods kinder, now that they had been brought to her as guests.

"But what was that?" Everyone started. "Was it thunder?" No; the sky was quite clear. "Is it possible?" Shrieks of deadly fear came from the camp where the women and children had been left. There was no doubt. The indefinable horror had come! No one thought of resistance. Can one stop the blizzard, or the north wind in autumn? A wild, panic-stricken flight ensued, and the people fled like a herd of deer pursued by wolves. The prophecy of Ilighin was fulfilled. There are no dwellings now on the Annui. Death reigns now where once life was like a bubbling spring, and of the Kangienici are left only the graves on the mountain side. Those whom the conquerors spared were destroyed by the deadly disease which they had brought with them. The "little old red woman" was drunk with the blood of the people; and now every five years she comes to intoxicate herself again, but it is to the conquerors themselves that she comes, and Ilighin sometimes comes out of the earth to show her a

small hamlet where she can find much blood to drink. She drives madly through the country, in her sledge drawn by dogs with blood-red fur, and so she will continue to do until the shores of the Kolyma shall be as desolate as the shores of the Annui.

This was the story told to me by Nouta Noukhva.



REFRACTION-HALO.

CHAPTER VII

YAKUTSK

“BROTHER, where is Jacob going?” inquired an old Kolymyan who had never been out of Sredne Kolymsk.

“To Odessa.”

The old man looked quickly at me in astonishment.

“And where will Michael go when he leaves here?”

“To Toula.”

The old man’s face expressed a greater degree of astonishment.

“And you, where will you go?”

“To Elizavetgrad.”

He looked not only astonished, but incredulous. It was evident that something was troubling him, for he removed the plug of syerka (chewing-gum) and said :

“Then, not one of all of you here will go to Russia, but only somewhere near it?”

I then began to explain to him that beyond the Yakutsk country there are many towns, all of which are in “Russia,” but the old man’s face showed utter incredulity, and it was evident that he wanted to reply “Rot!” but did not dare. I recalled this conversation when my time came to start for “Russia,”

as we, using Kolymyan terminology, called the distant world which lay beyond the marshes and mountain-ranges. "*Una earum veniet quae dicet tibi abi,*" said my friend who was remaining behind, as I and my travelling companion were dressing to start on our journey. Yes, we had waited four years for this hour, and now that it had come our hearts were wrung with sorrow and we wished that it might be postponed. And yet, during the past eighteen months, when I knew for certain that I was to leave the place, I had counted every day. Swiftly I recalled many incidents of the past four years. We had arrived here in summer, and had found ourselves in the plight of Robinson Crusoe after his shipwreck. We had no dwelling, no winter store of food, or fuel, and we had to get everything ourselves; firstly, because, as it was summer time, all the natives were away fishing; secondly, it was the middle of July, and severe frost would begin in another month or so. A German writer makes the paradoxical remark that in each man there is the embryo of an inventor, but that the conditions of life atrophy this embryo in most of us, and I think he is right. First of all, we began to mow the grass so as to provide hay for the horses we should be obliged to have, and who would bring our wood to us from the forest. We selected a large swampy meadow, and on the highest slope of it we built a tent, and near it we made a camp fireplace. At five o'clock every morning we all went to work in the meadow, one of us remaining behind. Our clothing was a mixture, half European and half Asiatic. While mowing we were often

knee-deep in the cold rusty water. All our mowers were excellent workers, athletic, and having a knowledge of country life, for, as a rest from University studies, they had often gone to work with the scythe; but the haymakers were typical townsmen, weak and nervous, who had never before held a rake. In the second chapter I have already mentioned that haymaking in Kolymsk is not at all like haymaking in Russia. Each haymaker had to stick a pole two feet high in the ground, and on the top he fastened the bundle of cut grass, which would have rotted if allowed to remain lying on the wet ground, and the men had to work standing waist-deep in water, but, notwithstanding these difficult conditions, we jested and laughed over our work. At twelve o'clock everyone began to look towards "headquarters," our tent a verst away, and at last we saw the smoke, and heard the sound of a gun, which greatly alarmed the seagulls which were flying about. After the gun was fired, a flag was hoisted on the tent-pole, the flag being a coloured scarf. Our cook had signalled "Dinner." The menu was simple: boiled fish without salt or bread, and "brick" tea without sugar, and as we could not do any fishing, having no nets, the fish was stale and rather perfumed. Things were even worse when, the people being away, we could not obtain even this stale fish, for then we had to content ourselves with deer flesh, which we obtained from the natives on condition that we should give them some in return during the winter. Heavens! What meat it was! When it was taken out of the boat, all noses turned up in disgust. It was slimy

and covered with a thick layer of mildew, and before it could be put in the cauldron, our cook had to rinse it for about half an hour in the lake, after which the water for some distance round was coated with a disgusting, opalescent, slimy scum ; but our hard work enabled us to eat even such food as that. After dinner we rested for an hour, and then worked on until late in the evening, until the white mist hung over the lake like a milky cloud, and the noisy cargoose were silent. Then the gun summoned us to supper. Again the same sort of fish ! Again brick tea ! After this meal we had a longer rest, and we sat round the fire smoking a mixture of coarse tobacco and bark ; some of us gazing in melancholy fashion at the fire, or looking at the odd bird with rusty wings which, perched on the tent ridge, was glancing with sharp, bright eyes at the strange people. Then sleep, deep and profound, enveloped us, and we dropped like logs on our deerskins.

When haymaking was over, the work of building a suitable stove began. In Sredne Kolymsk, an exile (a religious fanatic, exiled for his opinions) had made about 2,000 bricks—unbaked, because the clay here, being very bad, had to be mixed with slime and therefore would not stand fire. These bricks were left behind after his departure, and we bought them for the purpose of building a proper stove, instead of the wooden ones in use among the natives. The friend entrusted with this task had never seen how this work was done, and he had to think out the process for himself, his guide being the diagrams in “Ganot’s Physics.” The stove-builder, therefore,

remained in town while all the others went to the forest for the winter's store of wood. The construction of one stove occupied two weeks, for the builder had to fetch water for mixing the clay, and to carry the bricks upon his shoulders. It was a theoretical stove, if one may so describe it, having been constructed entirely on theoretical principles ; it was lopsided and bulging. Still, it was not only practicable for cooking, but it gave out much heat. The stove-builder afterwards became a master-builder, and next year had a gang of workmen, making bricks, of which different stoves were constructed by all of us—Russian stoves, open chimney fires, Dutch stoves, etc., all clumsy, lopsided and bulging, but all giving out great heat. Where is the bard who could sing of our brickmaking company ? Imagine a large hole in which four men mixed the clay with their bare feet, meanwhile hotly discussing metaphysical questions, and while one man, in proof of his statements, was quoting at length from “ Transcendental Logic ” he literally fell from empyrean heights into the mud. Then he said : “ Well, gentlemen, is the clay ready ? ” Metaphysics were forgotten and brickmaking began, occasionally interrupted by a sad complaint from one of the disputants : “ I can't get my brick out of the mould ! ”

All these scenes, now gay, now sad, rose before me. . . .

It was now late in the autumn, and we still had much work to do ; we had to coat our huts, put ice-panes in the windows, and chop logs. At last all was finished and we could at least feel that we

should not freeze or starve during the winter. With what passionate love (to use the words of our revered Tolstoi) did we take to our books once more, after having been torn from them for several months. Our rough, horny fingers, grown unaccustomed to the pen, held it with difficulty. We had many books, and each post brought us newly-published works, Russian and foreign, on different subjects, for our relations and friends did not forget us. We wanted to read and study all these books. The polar night came, and we had not enough candles, but a wick floating in a saucer of fish-oil answered the purpose equally well. This "passionate love" of books sometimes took rather an unhealthy form with us, who, in the summer, had worked fourteen or fifteen hours a day, and it seemed as if we could not spare a minute from study—the one thing which could enable us to transfer ourselves, in thought at least, to that other world, far away from the sad and cheerless reality. In the depth of winter we arranged a "ball" for the sake of diversion, and I well remember one which we got up at Christmas, 1890, when we had a play as well, the first dramatic performance ever given in Siberia in this latitude! But, heavens, what difficulties we had to surmount! In our extensive library we had not one play in Russian. The stove-maker, who proved to be an enthusiast in theatricals, suggested making a translation of "Le Médecin Malgré Lui" or "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme," but someone found a Russian play by Stchedrin. The parts were at once written out, and the stage managers (the stove-builder and the "poet")

began to build a stage. The wood necessary for it was still growing in the forest, the metal rings, etc., had yet to be made ; some material must be found with which to make curtains, decorations, costumes, and make-up ; and, most important of all, we had somehow to turn out the lodgers already in the hut we intended to use as a theatre, for this large hut had been built for a special purpose, and it was always full of people. If the ice-window fell out of a friend's hut, or if a chimney caught fire, or if one felt lonely and wanted company, he would take his deerskin and sleeping bag and go to "Pavlovsk House," as we called it, and at the time when our play was arranged there were nine lodgers in the hut. We had first to entreat, then threaten to throw pails of water over them before they would leave. Work began in feverish earnest. Travelling rugs supplied curtains, sheets of coloured paper and strips of blue calico were used for decorations. Our greatest difficulty was how to provide costumes for the parts, for uniforms were necessary. One we managed to make from the remnants of a "uniform" belonging to a forestry student among us, but, as it was not possible to manufacture any others, we almost abandoned the idea of performing this particular play. However, we hit upon a plan. We soaked paper in red ink and used it to cover the buttons of our long grey overcoats, and with red calico we made facings and stripes as required. Thus we had a uniform, certainly, though of an unknown regiment, but he who would fail to recognise it as a military uniform must indeed be a grumbler and a sceptic,

and of such there were none among us. Three men worked day and night at the stage, even sleeping there, and at last all the preparations were finished. The news of our play created an immense sensation in Sredne Kolymsk, and the most ingenuous of the people asked us if they might be invited, while those who had seen a little more of the world and been in Yakutsk asked us if we had among us a fire-eater and a tight-rope walker. To our great regret, we could not invite the inhabitants to our play. Christmas came and on Christmas Eve native masqueraders came to us, wearing each other's special dress, a Yakut wearing the costume of a Chooktcha, and vice versa, others wearing a skin over their clothes, another wearing a woman's chemise and a plate on his head, over which a coloured handkerchief was tied. We invited all the masqueraders, even the children, to come in; they danced to the music of our violin. They were specially curious to see our "little house," as they called our stage and scenery, about which fantastic tales had been spread, and local plebeians and aristocrats had come to have a look at it. The night of the performance arrived. The hall was gaily illuminated by ten candles, which the manager had with great difficulty obtained from the local shop. The audience were in festive array, but what a medley of costumes! One wore a handsome morning coat, fur trousers and Chooktchan moccasins; another, a native's fur coat, the rest of his dress being European. The ladies, however, were dressed neatly in European style, though we wondered how they had managed, not only to save their dresses, but to wear them with

such elegance and taste that our Asiatic dress was noticeable by the contrast. There was a great noise going on behind the curtain. In order to provide make-up for the actors, one enthusiastic supporter of the drama sacrificed his beautiful black beard, of which the maker-up (the former stove-builder) had fashioned a small moustache for one, an enormous one for another, and with the remainder supplied hair to the bald patch of a third. Tooth-powder was used to whiten the face of one, and the same material was thickly sprinkled on the hair of the "Prince," who was wearing a huge gold star on his coat. The fair eyebrows of another man were blackened with burnt cork and the blue shading under his eyes was done with powdered blue pencil. The actors stood in a row waiting their turn to be made-up; one "captain" of a doubtful regiment asked the stove-builder to make him unrecognisable. The prompter put on his blue spectacles and declared that his eyes would come out of his head in the effort to see, but it would have been dangerous to have another candle, as there was no room for it on the stage. The bell (borrowed from a dog's harness) rang for a third time, the stage-manager called out: "Curtain!" and the play began. After the performance there was a dance and refreshments, consisting of a pie made of dark flour, fat and horse-flesh, and tea with sugar.

Our entertainment was over and the dreary, endless winter continued and the time crept on, insensibly as it seemed to me, now that the hour of my departure had arrived. I wore a fur waistcoat, fur jacket and hood, double hood, fur trousers, two pairs of fur

stockings and moccasins over them. The garments were light and comfortable, but I was streaming with perspiration. The solemn farewell moment had arrived, the faces I had seen daily, the fellow exiles with whom I had lived and whose interests I had shared for years, would in an hour's time be far from me, and in all probability we should never meet again. "Don't forget to write and tell us what is going on in the world," said one. The poet read aloud part of some verses he had written on my departure, expressing the grief they felt at remaining behind. The exile who was returning with me was in a state of feverish excitement, and tears were running down his cheeks. The guide who was to take us to Yakutsk busied himself with preparations for our departure. Near the hut were several sledges, to which horses were harnessed, loaded with bags of dried bread and frozen meat—the provision for fifty days' journey. It was now December and the thermometer registered 52° Cent.

"Good-bye ! Good-bye !"

The sledges started. The night was dark, and the dogs howled and yelped as we set off as though crying out the polar farewell hymn of suffering and cold.

"Good-bye !" we heard faintly from the distance. Mingling with the sadness of parting was another feeling. It was with a full heart that I left the place where my life's best years had been spent ; so we feel when we leave the spot where we have buried our nearest and dearest, and in Sredne my youth and freshness lay buried.

Good-bye for ever, degenerate country of cold and famine, but, at the same time, country in whose dreary desolation there is yet a wild unique beauty, never to be forgotten by those who have once seen it.

We were already travelling over the narrow track in the forest and the sledges were bounding over the frozen hillocks. The first night we had not far to go to our first halting-place, a hut in the marshes about ten versts away. It was customary for all travellers from Kolymsk—merchants, ispravniks, and others—to spend the night there. Was it for us to be an exception, when next day we must use the same horses to continue our long journey to the next povarnia (an empty log-house) ?

II

It was the white twilight of the polar day. The frosty air was intensely cold. From early morning, when the stars faded, we had been travelling slowly over the virgin snow which lay in even “zastrougi”¹ from the effects of the recent winds. The sledge rocked from side to side as we passed over. The harness is worth description. To the heads of the runners a hoop is attached and the horse is fastened to the hoop by a strap, and our guide rode the horse. While on even ground we went too slowly, but when we reached a declivity the guide let the horse go at full speed, the sledge bumping behind over the hillocks and crashing through the young trees. We

¹ The ripples or waves of snow caused by the polar winds. Their formation is so regular that it is possible to judge from them, as by a compass, the direction of the different countries of the world.

had to hold tight, for the sledge sometimes bumped up about half a yard from the stones, the bushes whipped our faces, the horse meanwhile galloping at full speed, not daring to slacken, for then the sledge would bump against his legs and he would begin to kick, in which case we jumped out at once, regardless of rolling down a dozen yards. But at last our sledges got down "safely" to the lake, turning over on the way, as is always the case, and the horse continued to drag the overturned sledge for some time along the snow. But this was a trifle. The serious trouble was that the empty log-house was forty-five versts away, and horses can only do five versts an hour, and in nine or ten hours the frost will go through the thickest fur clothing and boots. Salvation lies in walking. We worried our guide that day with repeated questions, "How many more versts?"—and we began to ask the questions after we had only been an hour on our journey. Night had already fallen, and through the frosty darkness the Great Bear shone in the sky, but we could not see the log-house. To all our questions we received the same reply: "It is still far off." So we lay down on our sledges, covered ourselves over with furs and waited with forced resignation. I shall never forget that night of our journey. We rode through the interminable taiga, which presently gave place to marshes whose hard-frozen hillocks threatened to overturn our sledge, then to lakes, then again through the forest, where the trees barely left room for our sledge to go. In some places there was a thick growth of bushes whose thickly interlaced twigs struck us painfully in the face when we forced them

apart. It became more and more difficult to go on. The tired horses with difficulty wearily dragged the sledges out, heedless of the encouraging cries and shouts of the drivers, which did not help them at all. A sudden gust of wind blew ; it became very cold and the night grew darker. Away in the south-west a white patch permeated with green light shone in the sky. The taiga took on a fairy-like appearance. The dark sky, seen through the trees, appeared like arches and the tall graceful trunks of the larch trees were like the columns of a vast building. The faint light of the moonless night was heightened by the snow and the earth seemed flooded with moonlight, which played upon the walls of this fairy building. It was necessary to gaze long and steadily in order to break the illusion even momentarily, but next moment again appeared great palaces with graceful springing arches, lofty columns, and exquisite capitals ; and again it seemed that pale moon rays played upon the white walls. . . .

We were unwilling to break the illusion ; indeed, we wished to give full play to the imagination, which willingly transported us at once many thousands of versts away. But the narrow little track grew more winding, and twisted snake-like in and out among the trees. Our guides constantly hailed each other and the cries were at once mysteriously repeated, dry, sharp, and clear, by an echo, somewhere far away in the taiga. . . .

The horses stood still to breathe ; silence reigned around. Only sometimes one could hear the mysterious sounds of the forest. A long howl—a sound of snap-

ping twigs as something made its way : it seemed as if it was creeping near—nearer. . . .

The black uprooted tree-trunks took on fantastic outlines, sometimes appearing like crouching bears, sometimes like the freak monster of Yakutian legend, the three-legged monster who carefully treasures the magic stone of Sata, which can turn an old man into a strong youth. A nervous thrill runs through one, thought is suspended, and lethargy steals over the senses.

“ Here is the log-house,” suddenly cried the driver’s cheerful voice.

Now at last we were safe for the night in the “ Bear ” log-house, which I had been assured in Sredne Kolymsk was haunted. It was a low structure with an ill-fitting door, and badly-made wooden chimney, which every moment threatened to set the building on fire. The hut was always empty between the rare visits of travellers. Unattractive as it looked, it was the only shelter in this polar waste, and how eagerly we strained our eyes looking for this troglodyte dwelling after long hours of journeying in the frost ! Our guide quickly chopped some wood (great numbers of withered trees lay near the hut), made a fire, brought from a neighbouring creek a piece of ice, and placed it in the kettle. In half an hour’s time the temperature within the hut had risen so high that we ventured to remove our fur coats and “ boas,” first having to tear away our frozen beards from the latter. We unpacked our provision bag, from which vapour was rising, and took out some frozen cream, so cold that our fingers stuck to it ; but what will not habit do ?

Having no mercy on our teeth, we bit and chewed the frozen cream and drank hot tea, and the delightful warmth ran through our bodies. As long as the fire burned in the chimney it was warm in the log-hut—that is, close to the fire, it was 8° Cent. of heat, though on the seats by the wall there was the same degree of cold. But as soon as the fire burned out, the temperature fell to 15° Cent. below zero. Therefore the fire had to be kept burning throughout the night. Supper was ready—pieces of fat mare's flesh. The guides unharnessed the horses, who accommodate themselves wonderfully to the climate and know of no other food than that which they can dig out from under the snow.

It was warm under our hareskin coverings, and very soon we were asleep. There was only one misfortune. Knowing that Europeans feel the cold more than the Yakuts, our guides slept like the dead, not intending to stay up to look after the fire. The intense cold (18° Cent.) awoke us and we found our coverings were powdered with rime, and our fur hoods frozen. The fire was almost out; only a few embers were left glowing, covered by grey ash. We had to come from under our coverings to put some wood on the fire and blow it into a blaze, the Yakuts meanwhile snoring so suspiciously loudly that it was evident that the cunning fellows were not asleep, but were patiently waiting until the cold compelled us to attend to the fire.

The next morning we set off again on our endless journey to the next log-hut. Our tired horses went still more slowly, making only four versts an hour.

The little stations on the Yakutsk track are from 150 to 300 versts distant from one another. They are maintained by the rich merchants who build them, and the merchants themselves live in town. These lonely "stations," or huts, are quite isolated in the taiga, and are attended to by the Lamouts or Yakuts, but the condition of the stations is most wretched. The means of communication are very limited, and those that do exist are very inadequate. The horses and deer are half-starved and worn out, because their drivers use them to carry their own loads when they are not otherwise being used, and at many stations it is necessary to wait several days for the horses to have rest and food. Travellers should carry with them as much provisions as possible, otherwise, thanks to the station-keeper, they may find themselves stranded, without any food whatever, twenty days' journey from the nearest dwelling, as happened to me in 1888 when I reached the little station of Tastakh on my way to Sredne Kolymsk. At the end of the year, on payment of a small sum, the station-keeper receives from the district officials a certificate to the effect that the station has been kept in an ideal condition; and once more torture begins for the post-carrier and for the infrequent travellers. The merchants use their influence to own the stations themselves; when, however, the station is kept by a Yakut it is really well kept, and the animals are in better condition and sufficiently fed.

It was not till the fourth day that we reached Maloi, the first station from Sredne Kolymsk. How eagerly we looked to the hut after three nights spent

in the log-house. My friend and I strained our eyes until they were really painful, so anxiously did we look for the light of the "yurta" through the trees, and a hundred times we mistook a red-glowing star for the light. At last in the obscurity we saw the dimly outlined hut, looking very much like a snow-hill. The noise of our arrival brought the Yakuts running to help us out of our sledges, but they rendered us a still greater service by pushing us through the wide open door. The full polar costumes we wore made us of huge width and we could not possibly have got through the doorway without being pushed from behind. But we were in the hut. The pungent atmosphere of a cowhouse surrounded us. From behind the chimney came the low phlegmatic moo-ing of a cow. Two little spotted calves rested their heads on each other's necks and looked wonderingly at us. Women bustled about the hut, piling up the fire and boiling the tea-kettle. After the cold and the log-houses, this hut seemed the most ideal dwelling in the world. Our host helped to detach our frozen beards from the fur mufflers and to help us off with our fur shirts, an operation not at all easy for inexperienced travellers; and after this we had to change our boots, and to remove our outer trousers of fur, and only when all this was done could we at last approach the fireplace, where a broad roaring river of flame burned away in the low, wide chimney. Tea was ready. Everybody was called, and on the table were plates of rye biscuits and a plate of little pieces of sugar. It was amusing to see the collection of utensils that made their appearance. One Yakut drank from a wooden cup,

another from a scoop, another from a plate, another from a piece of broken pomade-pot, by some miracle transported here, and another drank from the frying-pan, regardless of the traces of fish-fat in it. My fellow traveller, Mitrofan Daourov, found great pleasure in repeating the phrase, "Place your cups, and pour out some tea." The fastidious traveller would do well to turn his head aside to avoid seeing how the Yakuts clean the cauldron at the end of the meal. The hostess first takes out all the bones, which she gives to the children; after that she scoops out with a flat horn-spoon as much as possible of what is left, but round the sides and bottom were left traces of the food, traces which no spoon could remove. But this matter is very easily remedied. Fingers are called into requisition for this, fingers whose cleanliness leaves much to be desired. At last, even fingers cannot remove any more, but the Yakuts still suspect the existence of some nourishing elements on the sides of the cauldron, and tongues now come into action. This is the children's business. Some red-cheeked, slant-eyed Bouksan or Amoukchan or Itiniak, on whose flat, short-nosed dirty face garden produce might have been sown, puts his shaggy head into the cauldron and begins to lick it with scrupulous care. After this last operation you can wager that not the least trace of food remains in the cauldron. This unpleasant ritual always takes place even when you feed the Yakuts well, and have, moreover, given them a little store of food besides.

The first thirteen days of our journey had dragged along with terrible monotony. The same slow,

painful progress of the horses, alternating with the galloping down the mountain side, the log-houses and huts—all alike. On the fourteenth day we passed over the Alazeisky Range—the frontier of the Kolymyan region. The ascent is gradual, and the mountains are not especially remarkable; they are more like rows of hills. Following the local custom we tied little pieces of rag on the pole at the crest of the mountain. White partridge feathers, different coloured ribbons, bunches of horsehair, all these were offerings to the Spirit of the Mountain. As the ascent of the range is easy, the Yakuts do not think it necessary to waste too many offerings, finding that the spirit is kind enough without them. It is different on the terrible Verkhoyansk Range, where merchants, as well as Yakuts, throw to the spirit money, pieces of butter, fat, etc.

But to the “station” it was still seventy versts. There all our torture would end, for, instead of horses, deer are used from that place onwards. For greater expedition we decided to choose the three best horses and ride them, leaving the other horses to follow slowly with our loads. Mitrofan, who had been on this journey before, offered to be our guide. In our polar dress, with our high Yakutian saddles, and on our ugly, unkempt horses, we did not look very graceful cavaliers, but our horses were strong and went well, and we asked no more. The silver horns of the young moon had appeared and gone, and Orion was standing high when at last we reached the hut. Several Lamouts in their graceful, beaded costumes ran out to meet us. We could hear the soft rhythmic Lamoutian

tongue, mingled with the guttural sharp Yakutian. The end of our misery had come. Next day we should start in sledges drawn by deer, to make the remaining journey of 2,000 versts. I dismounted with much difficulty, my back and feet aching badly. A Lamout without a fur-coat, in spite of the frost, with his hair hanging to his shoulders, crossed his arms on his breast and, bowing, invited us to enter the wide-open door.

The late I. D. Tcherski, a well-known Russian explorer, who died in 1893, called the Lamouts "The French of the North," and this title is very appropriate. The Lamouts are fond of dress, and know how to dress. While the Yakut "dandy" looks very clumsy in his national dress, with puffed sleeves, the costume of the Lamout is very effective, and has a theatrical character. The fur caftan, fitting to the waist, bordered with a fringe of different coloured fur, shows the apron underneath, the most characteristic part of the Lamouts' toilette. It is made of the skin of very young deer, and is embroidered in fanciful designs with beads and dyed deer sinews. The fur cap and high moccasins reaching to the belt are also embroidered with beads. The waist is encircled by a belt, from which hangs the hunting knife, powder horn, and bag with bullets, also a small pair of tweezers with which to pull out any hairs that may appear on the chin. The Lamout is always gay, always ready to dance, and to imitate the playful deer. Armed with only a knife, he will go alone against the bear which the Yakut regards as a god. The face is a warm brown, and has a frank, dignified expression. The honesty of these people is extraordinary. The

Kolymyan merchants believe the word of a Lamout whom they see for the first time, knowing that his word is more reliable than any document. If a Lamout says "Yes," nothing in the world would induce him to say "No." I shall give one of numerous examples.

A Kolymyan merchant trades only with Lamouts, who once a year come to this merchant even from the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk and get from him powder, lead, tea, and tobacco. As the Lamouts cannot count, the merchant notes on a paper the articles and quantities he gives them. The next year they return, with fox, bear, and squirrel skins, show the paper to the merchant, who then takes skins to the value of what he has given them. It may happen that a Lamout does not return the following year, but the merchant is not at all uneasy, for the unpunctuality can be explained in two ways: either the Lamout had gone far into the trackless forest, where no European foot has ever been, or else his hunting had not been successful. But in two, or perhaps three, years he appears again, bringing his paper with him, and pays his debt in full, to the advantage of the merchant. Another example: A Lamout received goods from the grandfather of B. Many years elapsed, but he did not return. After thirty-five years the grandson of the Lamout came to the grandson of B. and showed him the worn piece of paper, on which it was scarcely possible to read the faded ink-tracings. The reason why the original debtor had not returned was that his tribe had fled from the smallpox into a distant part of the country, and only two or three men sur-

vived. Without powder and lead, and suffering terribly from privation, they somehow managed to live. After many years the grandson of the debtor collected furs sufficient to discharge the debt. Then making the journey partly on foot, and partly by riding on deer, he travelled for many weeks until he reached Sredne Kolymsk with the worn yellow slip of paper which his grandfather had given him many years before.

Unfortunately smallpox and vodka quickly kill off the aborigines, and poverty walks hand in hand with their decline. There are no longer any wealthy owners of herds of a million deer. Poverty compels these free children of the mountains to go to the stations, which they do most unwillingly. Klaprot in his "Asia Polyglota" mentions that the Lamouts are of Chinese origin. He says that the word Lamout comes from the Chinese word *Lam*, which means "sea," and means "the people who live by the sea" (Sea of Okhotsk), and many ethnological books group in one Lamout, TOUNGHOUSE, and YUKAGIR, but that is absolutely wrong. It would be difficult to find anywhere in the world any two races living near each other and in the same period having more strongly marked differences in language, legends, tradition, and characteristics than these above-mentioned peoples. But this mistake is made even yet, and in some books the Lamout and Yukagir are described as being the Omok tribe (an extinct tribe). The Lamouts call themselves Eeven, but the Yakuts call them Amouk, which means "stranger," although that name would better apply to themselves.

The monotonous snow plain only varied by occasional bushes, to which white deer horns are tied, as also to the bent cross. We travelled in single file. On the first sledge a Lamout sat sideways with his feet on the runners, guiding the long caravan, and urging on the deer by a special whistle. How changed was the scene ! On my way to Kolymsk four years before, I had passed through this place, and then it was a spongy, soft marsh, through which the guide managed to find, by what signs we knew not, a firm pathway, or we should have sunk deep in the marsh. He always warned us to follow exactly in his tracks, and this warning was necessary, for one of our party who did not obey was lost for three days, when the guide found him, half starved, and bitten by mosquitoes, for he had accidentally burnt his hat and net.

But here is the little River Alegnekh, in which I was nearly drowned four years ago. Now it is winter, and only its steep, high banks show its direction ; but in summer ! I recall my never-to-be-forgotten journey. Like all mountain rivers, the Alegnekh has a very swift current. Sixty yards below, where it falls into the large River Seleniak, was the ford, which was deep, the water reaching to my saddle. Some of the horses had already got ashore, while others were climbing the landslips. I was in the water. In order to cross a swift mountain river safely one must keep the horse's breast against the current. A horse slipped as it was climbing, and fell. The load it carried fell into the water, and one bag, containing all our provisions, sank to the bottom ; a second and a lighter one, containing our chemicals, was carried

towards me by the current. I bent down to seize it, but unconsciously pulled at the bridle in doing so. The current carried us on into deeper water, and my exhausted horse was drowning. I got off, and tried to swim, but my heavy boots, filled with water, weighted me down and dragged me to the bottom. Fortunately for me, the bank was near. But now, what a difference! How comfortably we journeyed across the frozen river. If anyone wants to travel through the polar marshes, it must only be in the winter. The cold, the nights spent in the log-houses, the fatiguing travelling—all are trifles when compared with flooded rivers, deep marshes, and mosquitoes. On the fifteenth day of our journey we reached Indigirka. In a lonely hut, waiting for our deer to rest, we spent our Christmas. The Yakut women put on over their ordinary leather tunics a long robe of gaily-coloured cotton material, then brought armfuls of hay and strewed it on the floor. A stump of wax-candle was put in the place of honour in the corner and on a piece of smoke-begrimed paper was a roughly-made wooden cross. All the people, adults and children, stood in a row before the cross. An old man crossed himself and stood motionless, and all the rest followed his example. Again the old man crossed himself and said "Christos!" The others repeated the word, and this is the only prayer which the savages know. After standing still for a time the old man blew out the candle, the savages shook hands with each other, and the banquet began. The hostess cooked several hares and partridges. "Sol novus oritur," said I to my friend, quoting the hymn now

being sung in Catholic countries. When will the sun of truth and love shine over these cold regions and warm these poor, pitiable savages? Can it be that it will shine only when all this region will be a grave?

Mitrofan became sentimental. He remembered his native Kolymask, and how the people there spend their Christmas, walking in masquerade, etc.

"There," he said, "you put your ear to the barn and you will hear the frozen fish talk to each other, and from their conversation you will know your future. Or go to the yard and lie down under a horse and listen. One young Kolymyan did this one Christmas Eve, and he heard one horse say to another: 'Brother, do you know what will happen to this man?'

" 'What?'

" 'He will be blind in a year's time.'

"And next year the boys, when playing, threw some sand in his eyes, and darkness fell upon him. But you must always listen quietly to the end, whether it is pleasant or not, for if you get up too soon you will die."

The old Yakut was listening attentively to this conversation in an unknown language. "What are you saying?" he asked. Mitrofan told him. "Oh, yes," he mumbled. "And this evening you will see more than that. If you have a bear foot-bone, go with it to the woods; there you will find the moccasins of the forest bogie. If you wear these moccasins no one can see you, and even if you take off the shining things from the ispravnik's shoulders nobody will notice."

Several other Yakuts joined in the conversation,

which turned on real and not fanciful subjects. We learned that a Russian woman was travelling from Yakutsk, and that she had a frozen tongue (which meant that she did not know the Yakutian language). We found afterwards that it was a nurse who had come from Petersburg to Kolymsk. Heaven knows who tells all the news to them, but the Yakuts always know what is going on 2,000 versts away from their huts. If anyone starts from Verkhoyansk, everyone in Sredne Kolymsk knows about it in a week's time.

IV

The station of Kyuriliak. Beyond it begins the mountain-range of Tass-Khayata, the wildest part of the whole route. Three hundred versts of the most difficult travelling lay between it and Tasstakh, but there was consolation in the fact that the means of travelling were excellent here, as the station was kept by Yakuts.

It was New Year's Eve, and therefore the station-keeper drank with Mitrofan all night long ; for as the merchants had recently passed that way there was plenty of vodka. Next morning Mitrofan, beaming with gracious amiability, gave us New Year congratulations, but later on it was necessary to look after him carefully, in case he fell out of the sledge ; the station-keeper rendered him a last friendly service by strapping him firmly to it.

Very soon after leaving the station we saw the mountains. They seemed to surround us. At first

the defile was fairly wide, but it narrowed as we proceeded, and, looking back, the mountains appeared to be closing in behind us. Perfect silence reigned around. It would be long before we came in sight of a human habitation. On all sides there were great clefts in the mountains. No European had as yet been to this place. In 1889 a Chooktcha girl came to Nijne Kolymsk with a large herd of deer. She belonged to the nomad tribe in the mountains of Tass-Khayata (a tribe which died out from smallpox), and until the arrival of this girl those mountains had been regarded as uninhabited; now it was first known that a tribe had dwelt there and had died out.

The way became more and more difficult. Everywhere enormous rocks with most trying ascents and descents, and, finally, the tarine, a characteristic feature of polar regions. Through the intense cold the river in the valley freezes down to its bed; mountain rivulets, sometimes of a high temperature, pour their waters on to the frozen surface of the river, which rapidly freezes again, and new streams pour over the frozen mass. This constitutes a tarine. It is easy to recognise one from a distance, because of the vapour which always hangs over it. The tarine must be crossed, for there is no other road. The deer slip and fall on the mirror-like surface, splashing up water which instantly freezes at 60° Cent., and this frozen spray falls on the face, stinging like molten metal. It is still worse when the tarine is hidden under snow, for then one suddenly falls through into water about three feet deep, and this icy bath, taken involuntarily, perhaps in the middle of the night, when

it is impossible to change one's garments, may have serious results.

The ring of mountains seems to close in more upon us as we proceed. The granite cliffs stand up like a gigantic wall, and on the top, large overhanging rocks, like teeth, threaten every moment to fall. Our half-breed guide(Martyan)pointed out two wild rams standing on the top of the rocks, but only the quick eye of a savage could see them, and to us they were not visible ; moreover, I was trying hard to remember when I had seen our guide before. Surely I knew those grey, prominent eyes, with their malicious expression, those hanging lips, that hoarse voice, but where I had met them I could not think. It was not until we reached the station that I remembered. It was four years ago, when we lost all our provisions in the Alegnekh. We journeyed for two days without food and became so weak with hunger that we could scarcely sit our horses. Twenty versts from a dwelling we encountered Martyan, who, taking advantage of our deplorable condition, sold us a few rotten pike at 2s. each, the proper price being one farthing !

In the most desolate part of these mountains is the station of Elair-siebeet (the valley of slaughter). Its situation is such that a continuous wailing, moaning noise is heard. Two hundred and thirty years ago the Lamouts in ambush here sprang out unexpectedly upon some Russians and Yakuts and killed them all ; and the natives say that the wailing noise is made by the wandering spirits of the dead. Through the valley runs the River Dogdo, in which it is said gold is to be

found, but for the truth of this I cannot vouch. The river was covered by a tarine, and we got over it safely, but in the spring of 1888, when we passed here on our way to Sredne Kolymsk, what infernal torments we suffered at this spot! The ice on the river stood up in ridges and hills, and our unshod horses slipped and fell; we had to balance ourselves as well as we could on the mirror-like ice; moreover, the strong contrary wind threw us down, and we had to crawl on our hands and knees for a mile and a half, holding the bridles in our teeth.

On the fifth day we came to the end of the mountains; one more difficult ascent up Toumou-tilakh (the cave of the winds) and behind us the range of Tass-Khayata would close like a granite wall. Before us there lay the terrible Verkhoyansk Range, and then our polar steeplechase would be over.

We were evidently nearing a town, for we frequently came upon huts, and not only rested, but stayed one night near Verkhoyansk with Russians, if this word may be used to describe people whose faces, habits, and language in no respect differed from the Yakuts. Later I found that their faith also was that of the Yakuts. Our old host told me that he had recently lost two cows. His son was ill and the Shaman was called in. He demanded a cow as the price of a cure but, notwithstanding the high doctor's fee, the boy died. The old man met the Shaman and abused him, calling him a scoundrel. "Ah," said the Shaman, "you abuse me! Very well. For that I shall send two evil spirits into your belly." The terrified old man bribed him with another cow not to do this.

"But," said my friend, when he heard the story, "why did you give him another cow? He only meant to frighten you."

"Frighten me! You ask Ivan how the Shaman jokes!"

"No," said Ivan, the broad-cheeked half-breed, "you must not joke with the Shaman. One summer I laughed at him and he was angry and said: 'Let the evil spirit enter your belly.' I went to my hut, lay down on the bench, and I felt the evil spirit tearing at me with his claws. I suffered, but I shut my eyes. Then he scratched at me again and clicked his teeth. For two days I could not eat a piece of fish, and then I went to the Shaman, and begged him to cure me. That is how he *jokes*!"

The full moon was shining, surrounded by false moons and a halo of rainbow-hued light. Suddenly there was a great commotion in the hut, and all the inmates ran out into the yard.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The moon is fainting."

The eclipse of the moon was beginning, but the spectacle did not alarm anyone, only the women and girls said pityingly: "Poor thing!"

The Yakuts have an interesting legend to explain the eclipse:

The Oulooss gave a poor orphan girl to a rich man to work for him. He was very cruel and overworked her. One night he sent her with a pail to draw water from an ice-hole. The girl slipped, broke the pail, and spilt the water. She stood and wept. "No one to pity me," she cried. The sun pitied her and came

down, and the moon also. "The girl is mine, I will take her," said the sun, "for I am the elder."

"The girl is mine," said the moon, "you work in the daytime and it is cheerful for you. I am lonely at night." So the moon took her away to the "high place." The girl was terrified and grasped at a willow twig, which broke away, and she took it with her. She is still to be seen in the moon, holding the pail and twig, but sometimes she longs so for the earth that she faints, and then the moon darkens with grief until the girl revives.

It took us a month to reach Verkhoyansk from Sredne Kolymsk. The "town" consists of twenty to thirty huts, situated on the bank, not of the Yana, as may be thought from the name, but of two huge pools, called by the unpoetical name "Lakes of Filth." In the summer these "lakes" entirely justify their names. The Verkhoyansk people have their pride. Here is situated the "Pole of cold," here are manufactured all the climates of the Old World, here are generated the cyclone and anti-cyclone, whose movements are attentively observed in thousands of meteorological stations. Is not this sufficient cause for pride? But the people are still more proud of the fact that in their valley are born all the songs that are sung.

An unhappy, half-educated exile had been sent in his youth to one of the southern towns in the Irkutsk region. There he spent most of his time drinking, and when drunk he committed all manner of wild and foolish actions, so that he was sent successively from one place to another until finally he was

sent to Verkhoyansk, where he entirely despaired and gave way completely to drink, so that he became a wreck of humanity. He wrote numerous songs, which became very popular among the Yakuts and traders. These songs were mostly on the same topics—the misery of the writer, his exile, his unhappy surroundings, and his longing for rest in the grave.

We stayed two weeks at Verkhoyansk, and our departure from there was attended by misfortune. Our guide, who was drunk, took us by mistake to the taiga, went to find the right way, forgot all about us, and, finding a hut, went to sleep there. This was at midnight with 60° Cent. of frost. With Mitrofan's help we somehow got out of the taiga and returned to Verkhoyansk, and it was not till the next evening that we finally left the town.

After leaving Verkhoyansk we travelled on for five days, and in the hut where we were now resting we found strange companions. There were Yakuts of all ages, but most of them were children from ten years of age to tiny babies in arms. They were waiting for a priest. In this region it often happens that Yakuts are born, get married and die without even seeing a priest, and when by chance a priest comes he baptises the children, marries the parents, and says the funeral service for perhaps twenty dead.

We were approaching the terrible Verkhoyansk Range. Once more we had to traverse the infernal road over huge stones and tarines. The south side is comparatively easy, as it slopes upwards to the summit, but the declivity on the north side is incredibly steep, and at a short distance from the top

the descent is almost perpendicular. This is the deer-track, and winding down the face of the cliff, almost at the edge of the precipice, is the perilously narrow horse-track. The mountain is 4,000 feet high. When we were at the foot the sky was clear and the sun shining brightly, but when we reached the summit the wind was howling so that we could not hear each other speak. The wild gusts of wind threw us down, and threatened to throw us like feathers over the precipice. We tied our sledges together, making a sort of raft, and fastened straps round the runners to get a grip on the snow. The deer we harnessed to the back of the raft. The Lamouts began to slide the raft very cautiously down the track, but it rapidly gained impetus, and rushed downwards at such a terrific speed that, had it not been for the deer harnessed to the back, the raft would have been dashed to pieces. Meanwhile we crawled slowly down the horse track, very often on all fours, or rolling down like balls, our thick fur clothing fortunately protecting us from hurt. Certainly the Spirit of the Mountain did not treat us kindly ! The descent occupied about three hours, and fresh trials awaited us at the foot. There was no tempestuous wind, but the valley of the River Tookolan, through which our road lay, was thickly strewn with large stones over which the sledges bounded like a boat on stormy waves. About twenty times I flew out of my sledge like a stone from a sling. This infernal road continued for twenty versts until we reached the log-house.

The Verkhoyansk Range is remarkable in many respects. It marks very sharply a difference in

vegetation. Birch, aspen, and pine trees grow on the south declivity, while on the north there is one kind of tree only—the larch.

The River Yana rises out of the Verkhoyansk range. Vrangél, Augustinovitch, and Tcherski found on this range shells in the Trias. These fossils belong to the Mesozoic formation.

At the summit of this range, as of all the polar mountains of the Far North-East, the temperature is warmer than in the valleys. This curious fact may be explained by the perfect stillness of the air in the valleys in this latitude. The warmer air ascends, and icy air from the mountain-tops pours downward like a cascade. This explains the absence of glaciers on the tops of polar mountains, when one might expect to find the snow-line beginning low down in this latitude. In the Chookotsk land there is a mountain fantastically named “Northern Parnassus” by the first explorers. Its height is 7,000 feet, but there is no snow-line.

Every year the traders lose scores of horses in the difficult journey across the Verkhoyansk Mountains. There is another way. The River Toomoorkan runs through the range, and its valleys might prove a very good road, but it has never yet been explored, although some traders have endeavoured to send their merchandise by this way. To show the utter desolation of this part I give the following example: A Verkhoyansk trader, S., went himself by this route with his caravan, in the autumn, when light snow was falling. He dozed and on waking up found that the guide had gone on ahead and he was left

behind with several loaded horses. The falling snow had covered the tracks, and the trader found himself in a gorge in such a wild place that he realised that he was lost. The snow fell more and more heavily ; a day or two passed, and no one came. He had provisions and also a large quantity of deerskins. With the latter he managed to make a tent, and this Robinson Crusoe lived for forty days until at last he was found. "I nearly went mad with fear," he said.

The last log-house was Aldan-Ana-Souhokh (the house without doors). It was built about eighty years ago and the builders forgot the doors. Vrangeli saw it like this in the 'twenties and we found it in the same condition in the 'nineties, so you see that custom is strong here. The log-house might equally well be called "the house without chimneys," as it does not possess any. The fire is made on the floor, to the imminent danger of the walls, and the smoke escapes through a hole in the roof. It is not easy to warm oneself under such conditions.

Now we are in a civilised part, and horses take the place of deer. From Aldan the distance between the stations is only about twenty or twenty - five versts, and on each side of the road there are signs of habitation, fences and enclosures of ploughed land. In every hut there is a primitive grindstone mill (so primitive that it might have been the one to which Samson was chained) to grind the oats for their cakes. To us in the polar regions there were signs that we were nearing Europe. During the past four years Yakutsk represented the only civilised centre for us. It is true that the

hypercritical Gmelin did not think very much of this centre. I venture to quote from the bibliographical rarity "*Reisen*" (page 172, vol. ii.), by Gmelin, of whose impartiality and honesty all polar explorers hold so high an opinion !

"All the holidays are devoted more to the devil than to God. Drunkenness and licentious behaviour give a very bad example to the numerous heathen, who see the greatest pleasure of the inhabitants that consists in drunkenness ; and not the drunkenness confined to one occasion, one evening, for example, for the drunkenness that infects all the people at these times is such that no astrologer could find even one happy hour when they are sober, for to them all hours are the same. On Christmas Day a kind of infection seizes the people, like a fever, from which on the second or third day all become quite mad. The illness culminates on the fourteenth day in a general madness, which does not end for five or six weeks. During the week before Lent they are seized with a fresh paroxysm, from which they recover in eight days. In spring, at Easter time, this madness returns, with the difference that, owing to Lent, the attack is shorter but fiercer and ends on the seventh day. Like convalescents who are just recovering from a serious illness, the people only very gradually resume their normal life—that is to say, they are drunk for only four days in the week. Sometimes the madness returns with double strength, and then they are drunk for eight days at a time. I consider that drunkenness is a disease which, like epilepsy, ends only with death."

Such a statement of the habits of the Yakuts is given by Gmelin.

In the huts at Ana-Souhokh we could see that, like the Yakuts, the people hold firmly to old customs, but there is no time to note them now, for to-day we sleep at the last station, Touroo-oulyak, on the River Lena, and to-morrow we have only to cross the river and we shall be in Yakutsk—after fifty days' travelling. The worst part of our journey to the "south" is over.

CHAPTER VIII

ON THE RIVER LENA.

I

FOUR years had passed since I was last in Yakutsk, and during that time, living beyond the pale of civilisation, I had constantly longed to see a "town" to which such a term as "civilised" could be applied. Our journey from Touroo-oulyak was on the frozen Lena over low-lying islands which in flood-time are submerged.

"How far is it to Yakutsk?" I constantly asked our guide.

"Not far," he always answered.

Several times I removed the fur hood, which half covered my face, in order to see better, looking eagerly for a sight of the town, but forty-five degrees of frost soon compelled me to put it on again quickly. Presently our sledges began to bump over immense frozen dunghills; the town was not far off. The nearer we approached the more numerous were these dunghills, until at last no ice was to be seen for them. Coming nearer we saw a number of barges, and high on the hill there were neat little wooden houses with their glass windows sparkling in the sun. Glass!

This seemed to me the height of luxury, as it was four years since I had seen any. In Sredne Kolymsk ice is used for window-panes instead of glass in winter, and in summer the skin of nalim.

But here come the inhabitants—a Yakut beside a bull, a Yakut behind a bull, a Yakut astride a bull. It seems as if the only inhabitants of Yakutsk are Yakuts and bulls. The swarthy faces, with their narrow, oily eyes, turn in our direction. I wore the latest Chooktchi fashions, a long fur coat of deerskin, fur trousers, moccasins, boots bordered with beaver (a gift from a Chooktcha friend), fur hood bordered with fox paws, and gloves of fox-fur; but this costume, which was the envy and admiration of all the “dandies” on the Arctic shores, only excited astonishment here.

“Where do you come from, master?” was repeatedly asked.

“From Kolymsk, friend.”

“How far!”

They began to put the usual questions: “What news?” etc., but I promised my driver a good tip if he would drive on as fast as he could. Now we came to mazes of crooked streets, with large one-storied houses. How beautiful this town appeared to me after the desolate polar region! Again we met Yakuts and bulls, but with the addition of other elements. Here is the red-bearded, cunning face of the criminal settler. He wears a cloth coat lined with goat-fur, and here are more and more of them. Here is a man with a womanish, beardless face. He wears a rich beaver coat. This is a member of a

certain fanatical sect, exiled on account of the customs of his religion. Occasionally a man dressed in European clothes is to be met with. There are no hotels in Yakutsk, for there are seldom any visitors, and those who do come have friends with whom they can stay. And I had one such friend here. In half an hour's time everyone knew of the arrival of men from Kolymsk, and visitors quite unknown to me came to ask for news from the north, and also whether I had any furs or yukala, of which the Yakuts are so fond. At first I wondered why they asked me for furs, as I was not a trader, but they told me that it was only an excuse to see and talk to the new arrival.

There was unusual excitement in Yakutsk about an affair which had happened a few days previously. It was customary, at Christmas time, throughout the holiday, for all classes to go out in masquerade. Singing and playing on musical instruments, they went in groups from one house to another, and at each house where the inmates were willing to receive the masqueraders a lantern was hung out. All the big officials consider it their duty to receive them, but on this occasion some unpleasantness had occurred. The Vice-Governor gave a kind welcome to the masqueraders, and they began to perform a little "play," in which different official institutions were represented, the local police, the court, the Treasury, etc. One masquerader wore the uniform of a general, and the others addressed him in verse, petitioning for various reforms. Their requests were modest, and were wittily expressed, and the Vice-

Governor applauded the masqueraders and touched glasses with them. They next went to the house of another official, again they performed their little show, were well received, thanked and their health drunk. And so on to a third and a fourth house, by which time the masqueraders began to show signs of the frequent health drinkings. Their tongues were loosened, and they added new couplets to the verses. The masquerader representing the general began to talk, and then to make speeches in parody of the speeches of a local official. It was quite an excitement. Next day search was made for the "general," and rumour said he was to be exiled to Kolymsk. None of the masqueraders could be found anywhere; however, at last they presented themselves to apologise for their freak. They were all young local officials and teachers. The punishment was not very serious; they were placed under arrest only for a few days. Everyone was talking of this affair when we arrived. But a fresh scandal arose, extraordinary even for Yakutsk. The day I arrived I stayed at my friend's house till nine o'clock, and when I rose to go my hostess said: "Mr. S., have you a revolver with you?" I looked at her in astonishment, for I had travelled, without such a thing not only in Sredne Kolymsk but all through the Chooktan land. Arms were only necessary there in summer, when one might possibly encounter a bear. "Victor, see our friend home," said my hostess to her husband. He dressed, took a revolver, opened the case, looked to see if the weapon was loaded, and we went out.

Absolute stillness reigned. All the houses were

dark and securely fastened, and afar off one solitary light twinkled. Not a single lantern lit the streets. Suddenly my friend stopped. Two figures were outlined in the darkness.

“ Who goes there ? ”

“ Yakuts ! ” announced the unknown.

I went on ; one of the Yakuts was armed with a stout cudgel, the other had something like a large poker.

We reached home and had to knock many times and answer many questions before I was let in, and then I found out the reason. There had been a series of murders and burglaries, and all the town was excited. Quite close to Yakutsk, under the famous “ Three Firs,” several residents of the town were robbed and murdered. As there are many criminal settlers in the neighbourhood murders were not of very infrequent occurrence, but in this case the chief of the gang was K., a very well-known personage in Yakutsk, who was in the habit of giving parties, inviting many people to play cards, and drink champagne ; meanwhile the other members of the gang robbed and killed the passers-by. This was discovered quite by chance. Moreover, it was found that much assistance was given to the gang by a policeman named Nikitka. An attempt was made to hush up the affair, but I do not know the result, for I left Yakutsk before the matter was settled.

This succession of discoveries had terrified the townspeople and they trusted only in their own strength ; therefore, they always went out armed and in groups, never singly.

In a town so remote there is an abundance of material for a romance of crime.

II

The Russians discovered the River Lena in 1628. Ten bold fellows, under the leadership of Vassili Bougor, travelled on skis from the Yenisei to this greatest of the north rivers, on the banks of which 150,000 Yakuts lived. The savages were divided into nine Oulooss (tribes), and each tribe into several clans or families. It must be remembered that the Yakuts brought with them from Lake Baikal traces of a rather higher civilisation ; nevertheless, these ten bold adventurers managed to subdue this great people. All the ten were traders. In 1636 Captain B. came to the Lena and established stockaded settlements. A very interesting legend is told by the Yakuts of the conquest of their region. The legend (with slight variation) is to be found among Russians as well as Yakuts.

The central figure in the legend is the warrior, Dygyn, a petty chief of the Yakuts. Here is the legend as it was told to me by an old Cossack :

“After Ermak had conquered Siberia, and was drowned in the River Irtish, his lieutenant, Ivan Koltzo, said : ‘Now that he is dead, why should I care for my life ? I will go and fight.’ Then the Cossacks went in boats along the rivers, and when they reached the end of one river they carried the boats on their shoulders to another one, and they built stockaded settlements between the two rivers.

They conquered many of the natives, but themselves suffered much. Sometimes they were compelled by hunger to eat their own people. At last they came to the Yakutian land. A great number of natives came to meet them, and said : ' Say, friends, what is the news ? ' ' I want to trade with you,' said Koltzo. ' Will you sell me as much land as a bullock's hide will enclose ? ' It was done. The Yakuts were stupid savages then, and they are stupid savages now. But Koltzo deceived them. He cut the bull's hide into thin strips and with them enclosed a large piece of land, built a tower on it, and said :

" ' Now I am going to fight you ! ' And they fought. The Yakuts had their great warrior chief Dygyn. They say his shoulders were three yards round. The Cossacks stayed in the tower and shot with their guns, and the Yakuts sent their arrows to the Cossacks. Dygyn was thinking. The Cossacks had no food, and they came out of their tower to get some. Now they had a very bad time. Dygyn was a very brave warrior. He killed a great many Cossacks, but nobody could kill him. Then Ivan Koltzo played a trick. The Cossacks hung out a heavy block from the tower, and under it they placed all kinds of dolls and ribbons. Then Koltzo sent a message to the Yakuts : ' Let us have peace. Come to us as friends.' The foolish Yakuts believed him and went into the tower. Dygyn went also. While they were looking at the dolls and ribbons Koltzo ordered the Cossacks to cut the cords holding up the block. It fell down and crushed them all, and they all died. Koltzo tore out Dygyn's eye, put it in

spirit, and sent it to the Tsar. That was an eye indeed; thirty pounds it weighed! But the Tsar said: 'Why did you not bring me this giant alive?'

"And from that time the whole of the region was ours. The Yakuts ran away to the forest, to the marshes, to the mountains, and the Government could hardly find them afterwards."

As a matter of fact, the Yakuts did not run away directly after the death of Dygyn.¹ In 1638 the first Governor was appointed, Peter Golovin, and another to help him, Gliyebof, and a priest, Efim Filatof. They all arrived in Yakutsk on the 6th of June, 1640, accompanied by "streltzy" (regulars), Cossacks, various small officials, and traders.

"The Government of this place began with heavy taxation, not certainly for the profit of the Government, but for the officials," says Moskvin, a Yakutsk merchant, whose manuscript chronicle, "The Officials of Yakutsk and Their Doings," covers the period ending 1821.

The conquered people were oppressed, tyrannised over, and tortured under the pretext of punishment for not paying the taxes, but they were not told the amount they ought to pay. Reduced to despair by robbery, torture, and execution, the Yakuts rebelled, but they were no match for the Russians with their firearms, and the rebellion was soon put down. This was followed by a succession of terrible punishments and executions. By order of Golovin, the Yakuts had their noses and ears cut off, eyes put out, or were buried alive in the ground up to the eyes. In the

¹ Dygyn was a petty chief, an historical personage.

prison at Yakutsk the torturers and the executioners were hard at work from morning till night. But, fortunately for the country, the Governors did not agree about the division of the booty and Gliyebof, who considered himself injured, sent such a very strong message of complaint to Moscow that in 1645 Soushelef, a secretary, was sent to Yakutsk to inquire into the matter, and next year Golovin was dismissed. He was sent to Tobolsk, where he was racked and unmercifully knouted. Two large manuscripts, weighing about a hundred pounds, were filled with the account of his misdeeds. After him a succession of governors was sent, but none remained long; most of them were arrested soon after appointment, but things were not on this account any easier for the Yakuts. Their condition became intolerable when, in July, 1675, Governor Andrew Barnishov was sent to Yakutsk. "On his appointment," says the chronicle of Moskvín, "he took very strong measures, whether because of circumstances or of his own wish is not known, but during his period of office there were terrible executions every day by various cruel methods. The sufferers were Russian Dissenters and Yakutian chiefs.

It must be said that from the first year of its existence Yakutsk was the destination of exiled Dissenters and political offenders, the latter often arriving with their tongues cut. Governor Barnishov never sat down to table without having previously sent someone to capital punishment, which he gave for the most trifling offences. The victims were quartered, impaled, boiled alive in a cauldron, etc.

When the Governor happened to be in a good humour he, as a special favour, ordered hanging instead of the other methods ; unfortunately, he was very seldom in a good humour. On the 3rd of July, 1678, this Governor was sent to Tobolsk for having received bribes. Then came Governor Priklonsky, in 1682, when the Yakuts made their last attempt at rebellion. They were joined by the Dissenters and some Cossacks who had married Yakutian wives, and the rebellion ended in the complete defeat of the insurgents. The leader, Djennik, the chief of the Kangalaks Oulooss, was taken wounded and sent to Yakutsk, where he died in the torture-chamber. He was flayed alive, his newly-born child wrapped in the skin, while the mother was put on the rack.

The remnant of the insurgents fled to the Vilui, the Yana, and the Kolyma, and on the banks of these rivers they settled. The fugitives brought to these far-away regions terrible accounts of their conquerors, and the dread of the Russians was so great that when, in the course of their campaign against the natives, the Russians came to the Kolyma district they met with no resistance except from the Lamouts at the gorge of Ell-air-Sibiet.¹

To this day, in the farthest north-east of Siberia you will hear in some dark hut, lighted only by the fire, the story of the dreadful death of Djennik, told in monotonous recitative by an old blind woman.

The Yakutian epics are remarkable for their wonderful richness of imagination and wealth of description.

¹ In the mountains of Tass-Khayata, between the rivers Yana and Indigirka.

The old woman describes in minute detail the terrible operation of flaying, and what kind of knives were used ; and on the seats by the wall are the listening Yakuts, with pale, terrified faces, too frightened to utter a word.

The beginning of the eighteenth century saw in European Russia the breaking-up of the old régime, though to Yakutsk not the faintest echo of this reform had penetrated. But the place began to fill with many exiles, who found it impossible to keep their position under the new order of things in Russia, and many high personages ended their days in the polar marshes. So in Sredne Kolymsk, in the reign of Elizabeth, suffered and died Count Golovkin, a Cabinet Minister, and also his wife, who followed him into exile. When he was very ill, he was forced to attend church on holy days, and there endure insults, and to hear the priest, after the Liturgy, read the Act of Accusation drawn up by his enemies. The Governor was, as before, the chief in Yakutsk, and it was not very safe for a Commission of Inquiry to go to him. Very often the Governor would order the Commissioners to be put in irons, beaten with the knout, and sent back to Irkutsk. Here is a sketch of that time : On the 28th of June, 1730, a new Governor came, Sjadovsky. According to the chronicle, he was an egregious thief. At last, in 1733, he exceeded all bounds and appropriated the whole cargo of 11,670 pounds of flour, cereals, and iron goods which was to be sent to Okhotsk. The Governor of Okhotsk informed the Irkutsk Provincial Government, who sent a Commission of Inquiry, including the

Governor of Okhotsk, an officer, and a clerk. In February, 1733, this Commission arrived at Yakutsk, began their investigation on the 7th, on the 9th they ordered Sjadovsky to be arrested ; next day he was put in irons, brought to court and the Irkutsk provincial government order was read to him. The inquiry began, but it was so difficult to discover the truth that the Commission almost gave it up. Suddenly they had a brilliant idea. Sjadovsky certainly ought to be punished. What could be worse for him than to make him elucidate all that was so obscure and puzzling in the affair ? Sjadovsky was brought in chains to the court, strongly guarded by twenty-four armed men, placed at a table, and ordered to write a clear statement of what he had done. But something unheard of happened in the court. A Cossack chief, a priest, a vicar, with several Cossacks and others, suddenly attacked and overpowered the guard, released Sjadovsky, shut the gates of the fortress and barricaded it. Then they held a solemn service of thanksgiving for their deliverance from their enemies. The Commissioners, left outside the fortress, surrounded it with an army and prevented anyone from entering, while any who came out were tortured and executed. The Commissioners seized all money that arrived by post, sent an account of the whole affair to Irkutsk, and requested the Vice-Governor to send them assistance in the shape of another regiment of soldiers. Then a siege began. Finding things somewhat dull, and, having nothing to do, the Commissioners began to interfere with the wives and daughters of the inhabitants. Their method was simple. It consisted

in sending two soldiers to bring the selected victim to the Commissioners. Amongst others thus sent for was the beautiful wife of Captain Pavloutski, and when her husband tried to protect her Commissioner Pisaref ordered him to be beaten for "resisting the law." Yet this Captain Pavloutski was the polar hero, the terror of the Chooktchi, who in 1742 perished in the struggle with these people. To this day the Chooktchan women terrify their children with the name of Pavloutski, and his sword is handed down as an heirloom from one generation to another of the Chooktchan chiefs.

Meanwhile the besieged were weary of remaining in the fortress and they made a successful sortie; the enemy were beaten and their leaders taken prisoners. Sjadovsky had the Commissioners fettered and put in prison. Two days later one of them wrote a humble petition imploring pardon, and Sjadovsky, taking pity on him, released him, and appointed him Commissioner, not certainly to investigate his own doings, but those of his former fellow-commissioners. On the 19th of February Sjadovsky sent off an account of these matters, and the colour he gave to it may be gathered from the fact that the wronged wife of Pavloutski sent her petition with his. Sjadovsky's account ended with the request that Pisaref should be sent without trial or inquiry to Zshigansk, where there were only six inhabitants.

The official reply from Irkutsk was quite as remarkable as the petition. Having forgotten why the Commissioners had been sent at all, they thanked Sjadovsky for his explanation and gave him per-

mission to confiscate all Pisaref's belongings and to exile him anywhere except Zshigansk, because the Vice-President of the Board of Trade had already been sent there, and he was not allowed to speak to anyone, nor to have any writing materials.

So ended this extraordinary affair.

III

When I read "Gulliver's Travels" it never entered my head that I might one day be in the position of Dr. Lemuel Gulliver, when he returned from his travels in distant lands. But such came to pass. After having been accustomed to the extremely primitive manner of living in Kolymsk, it was very difficult for me to adapt myself to more civilised customs. When a Kolymyan for the first time leaves his native wilds and comes to Yakutsk, of which from his childhood he has heard so many wonderful stories, he is quite bewildered, and for the first month he cannot go out alone without losing his way. He must be carefully watched or he will overeat himself with bread—a hitherto almost unknown luxury—and he will drink vodka day and night, for it costs only 1s. a bottle, instead of 6s., as at Kolymsk. It is true that I did not lose my way about the streets of Yakutsk, but in other ways I certainly supplied food for merriment to my friends there. They begged me, jestingly, not to snatch at the bread, warning me of the sad fate of my companion, Mitrofan, who made a festival of his arrival and devoured seven pounds of brown bread! And there was indeed some reason for their jests.

From the first day of our arrival at Sredne Kolymsk we were convinced of the truth that local conditions there made of us willingly or unwillingly men such as Byron describes in "Don Juan":

But man is a carnivorous production,
And must have meals, at least one meal a day ;
He cannot live, like woodcocks, upon suction,
But, like the shark and tiger, must have prey.

We tried to alter the menu of a "carnivorous production," but we could not succeed. We were obliged to do entirely without bread, though necessity made us extremely inventive. In order to economise flour we invented "fish bread." We kneaded boiled fish (removing all bones) with the dough, and of this we made loaves. To twenty-five pounds of flour we added fifteen pounds of fish. But even this kind of bread was too expensive. There were rare periods when from being "carnivorous productions" we became strict vegetarians, that was in spring, between the 28th of May and the 14th of June, when all the winter store of food was gone. The fishing-places were then covered with water, ice, and driftwood brought down from the upper part of the river. Life at such times was very hard. Everywhere one saw famine-swollen, livid faces with fever-bright eyes, from which despair looked out. The natives ate boiled leather straps, fish-bones which had been thrown away in autumn, the hard fish-skin used for window-panes, etc. Incredibly thin dogs, trembling with weakness, wandered about, many of them suffering from a disease peculiar to these conditions of starvation; it causes paralysis of the hind-quarters and

swelling of the head. This disease kills them in three or four days, and their corpses are devoured by the surviving dogs. There is no food to be purchased even for money, excepting flour at the Government store, and the price is so high that no one can afford to buy it (28s. for forty pounds). So at these times we became vegetarians. In order to make our flour last until fishing began, we divided it strictly into daily portions of three-quarters of a pound, and no more. Those who had good appetites were very inventive, and one of them discovered how to make a new dish, which we called "decoction." It consisted of wild sorrel, boiled in salt-and-water, and flavoured with sour milk, if any remained from the winter store. The inventor had a weakness for his own dish, and unselfishly gave up much time to its preparation. He went out in the early morning, gathering sorrel, to the astonishment of the natives, who could not understand why we wanted "grass." By dinner-time the bag was full, and he prepared his dish, but, to his mortification, very few of his comrades cared to eat it, notwithstanding his invitation: "Please, gentlemen, eat as much as you like—it is not a ration."

The invention of another of our party had more success. The flour is brought in bags to Sredne Kolymsk, and during the long journey by rivers and deep marshes the flour often gets wet, and in the bottom of each bag were large solid yellow blocks of hard flour. These lumps we crushed with a hammer and, adding water, made paste for our bookbinding and wall-papering. But one day we went into our

general hut, which we called "Pavlovski House," and were astonished to see one of our friends hammering these dry pieces of flour into powder with a smith's hammer.

"What are you doing?" we asked.

"Help me, and you will see," was the enigmatic reply.

He soon had some helpers, and the hard lumps were broken up and put through a sieve. To our great surprise, the inventor proceeded to make dough of the flour thus produced. The new invention spread like wild-fire and that spring no paper-hanging was done!

The inventor also tried to persuade us to fry our bread in candle-grease—that is to say, the melted-down ends left from our store of candles, made of deer-fat, which certainly we might use for food without being considered savages. To this plan, however, we would not agree, as we did not wish to give up our candles.

Thus it will be seen that there was good reason for my friends in Yakutsk to warn me against eating too much bread, as Mitrofan did, to his subsequent discomfort. On my first day at Yakutsk I was surprised that no sensation was caused by the arrival of the post. How different it was at Sredne Kolymsk, where the post came only once in four months. For days before it was due we talked of nothing else, and when at last it arrived a breathless Yakut ran to us with the news, and then ran to the police (local post-office), though certainly for the Yakut there could be nothing. After the Yakut all the town ran, the boys

crying out : " The post has come ! " Our little party outran others, the " bricklayer " being first of all. He left his stove in summer and his books in winter only when the post arrived. Our poet wrote some humorous verses, describing how the " bricklayer " rushed along, stumbling over his fur-coat as he ran. And, after reading the letters, what endless conversation and discussion of " new " reviews dated the previous year ! It can, therefore, be understood how strange it seemed to me to hear complaints of Yakutsk being so far away from Russia, considering that letters arrived from Moscow in forty-five days. Forty-five days ! And the summer post from Yakutsk to Sredne Kolymsk takes four months.

At one time Yakutsk sent out a body of explorers, who with little means accomplished more than other expeditions which were better equipped. Among them were Michael Stadukin, Dejnev, who discovered the strait between the two continents, Nikita Shallaourov, Lakhov, Bakhov, Laptev, Pavloutski, and Sergeant Andreef, who first brought news of having seen land beyond Bear Island. At that time Yakutsk was the centre to which went all the energetic, enterprising, and adventurous, also those who wanted rich furs. Trade in furs still goes on there, but the traders take no interest in anything beyond the furs they get, for which they pay in vodka. If the modern Yakut knew anything of the former generations of trader-explorers, he might with reason be proud of them, but they perished, like the race of giants, leaving no trace. On the banks of the Aldan, near Yakutsk, iron ore is present in great quantities, and enormous blocks



of it found on the surface of the earth are sold in the town for a trifling sum. The Yakuts smelt iron in the same way as did the ancient Greeks. They place the ore in the fireplace and pile coal round it, maintaining the heat of the fire by means of hand bellows. When the carbon is burnt away, they break up the masses of slag, and the metal they find they work with hammers. Of the iron are made the hunting-knives famous in that region. No attempt is made to mine the earth for the rich reserves of iron which are undoubtedly there.

Lately the number of students at Yakutsk has increased, but not long ago the majority of merchants and traders were entirely illiterate, and even the most aristocratic among them spoke only Yakutian. Now there is a seminary, also a secondary school, preparatory schools for girls, a Yakutian missionary school, and five municipal elementary schools. The total number of scholars in all the schools is 488, out of 6,499 inhabitants. The secondary school was founded in 1892 and the account is interesting. Thirteen years previously the town authorities asked permission from the Government to open a secondary school for modern subjects without classics, and permission was granted to open a preparatory school in classics. The Yakuts, who only imperfectly understood Russian, were compelled to learn the details of Latin grammar, by means of which they would of course bring civilisation and culture to their native Oulooss ! And even now the scholastic system leaves much to be desired.

I quote a passage from " The Yenisei Province in

the Tercentenary of Siberia," by Choudnovski, a book which gained a prize from the local Government ; its accuracy cannot be doubted :

" We often read in the Siberian newspaper of the behaviour of the school teachers. Scandals of all kinds, rioting, disputes about mining interests, etc., fill up the lives of these educators of our youth. In most cases they come from all parts of Russia, having few qualifications, caring nothing for their duties, thinking only of their appointment and salary. In most cases their qualifications are doubtful ; university graduates are very rarely to be found among them. We know teachers of mathematics who found great difficulty in solving a simple arithmetical problem, teachers of Russian literature who knew little of the grammar and had finished their own education at a secondary school."

In " Siberia as a Colony," by Yadrintseff, there is an instance given by a Siberian about his own school.

" I remember that my school had a collection of teachers who, instead of teaching us, gave us all kinds of comic and equilibristic performances. One related anecdotes, another was a German whom we laughed at and teased nearly to death, a third chased us with his crutches, and others, vodka-drinkers, placed boys on guard at the windows and in the corridors to warn them of the approach of an inspector. We had no time to learn."

" But in our province," says Choudnovski, " it was not necessary to guard against the visits of inspectors, for they themselves were the leaders of all the rioting and drunkenness."

This is the gloomy picture drawn by Choudnovski, who was well acquainted with the schools in Yenisei province, which is not far from Russia. It is easy to imagine the state of affairs which existed in the remote province of Yakutsk, and what kind of classic literature was there taught to the Yakuts. After thirteen years, permission was given to open a school for modern subjects without classics. Education has now made great strides in Yakutsk. I even know several Yakuts who went in carts by a slow and tedious journey to Tomsk, 4,500 versts from Yakutsk, and there studied at the university, afterwards passing the examinations with great distinction. The late Governor of Yakutsk, Svetlitsky (afterwards transferred to Irkutsk), was especially kind to the students, and after his departure sincere grief was long felt by everyone. Every Yakut knows of Governor Svetlitsky, who was the most humane and enlightened of men, and whose influence had an ennobling effect even upon the rough people whom travellers meet in Yakutsk.

I arrived in Yakutsk early in February. The town is practically dead from that time until the beginning of June, when from higher up the river the boats come, like floating shops, to the town. Then the town is full of life. Caravans arrive from the north with furs, tusks, and musk. In a week's time all this merchandise is sold, the new arrivals have departed and the town is again dead, only reviving when there is some scandal or remarkable crime.

IV

“ Yes, I shall serve here another year or two, and then I shall apply for permission to go further south, where it is warmer,” said the ispravnik of Verkhoyansk to me once. I was acquainted with the local expressions, and I understood that “ south ” did not mean Italy or even Crimea, but merely Olekminsk. In what terms, then, shall I express my long journey, whose first halting-place, Irkutsk, was 2,813 versts distant? This journey had to be made as quickly as possible, because it was the 6th of March. When I left Yakutsk, spring was close at hand, and 2,600 versts of the journey were on the frozen River Lena. There was no longer need for log-houses or halting-places on the way, for the stations are only thirteen to twenty versts apart, much to the grief of travellers by the post cart, as, besides the heavy charge per verst of four and a half kopecks for each horse, there is often an extra charge for the equipage, and, in addition, a tip to the driver, besides the Government toll. As there are 170 stations between Yakutsk and Irkutsk, the cost of the journey is about 350 roubles—253 roubles for relays of horses, thirty-four for Government toll, thirty-three for the carriage, and thirty for the driver’s tip. The tip is an absolutely necessary expense, though at each station there is a notice expressly forbidding the driver to ask for it. But let a passenger refuse to give it! The driver will go as slowly as possible, and will overturn the sledge twenty times, throwing the traveller out, and often

sousing him in icy water. The stations are always high up on the steep, rocky bank of the river. The horses are harnessed, two men with difficulty holding the eager animals by the bridle, as they carefully lead them down the dangerous landslips. Suddenly the men jump aside, and the horses gallop madly forward, dashing clouds of frozen, powdery snow into your faces. They gallop like this for three versts before the driver can hold them in, and at the same wild pace they ascend the steep hill to the next station. All the stations are alike—a log-hut of two rooms, one for travellers and the other for drivers. Hanging on the clean walls is a cuckoo-clock, slightly damaged, for, though the cuckoo utters his call, he tries in vain to come out of his little door. Under the clock is a description of the journey to the next station, from which you learn that in summer you must travel by boats towed by horses, and that in spring and autumn there is no road, only a horse-track over the mountains. The other walls are hung with crude coloured prints with the description underneath, “How the Mice Buried the Cat,” and illustrated folk-songs, perhaps a country girl dancing, and a few verses of the folk-song underneath the picture. Sometimes there are pictures of a slightly free style—for instance, a soldier in a cart seated between two country women, an arm round each of them. Evidently the tastes of the station-masters are wonderfully alike, for the same pictures are in all the stations from Yakutsk to Sijgalov. Occasionally one finds on the table a book with a very old leather cover. Open it and you will see “The News of Russian Literature, 1804.” An

anonymous author, in an article entitled, "Thoughts of a Lonely Sage," tries to persuade the chance traveller to give up the noise of the world and the delights of pleasure for the virtue of nature. Ah! evidently the lonely sage's arguments were wasted, for certainly the natives of the Lena district cannot be suspected of possessing much virtue. I had travelled much in the Far North-East, and there the savage was always my friend. I have slept in a hut with Chooktchi, whom Lotterus describes as "*natio ferocissima et bellicosa*," and Georgi also states in his book, "*Beschreibung aller Nationen des russischen Reichs*," that "The Chooktchi are more savage, rough, obstinate, fierce, thieving, treacherous, and revengeful than all other neighbouring savage tribes" (page 350). On the contrary, while I lived among this "thieving" tribe, nothing of mine was ever stolen, and those "fierce" savages never gave me cause to remember that I had left my revolver in my hut. There it lay, forgotten, rusty and unloaded, for in Sredne Kolymsk there was never any need to use it.

But here, on the Lena, where the villages are so close together, I was often advised to keep my revolver ready for use, and when I remarked that my possessions were too poor to tempt anyone, I was told that here one could be "snuffed out" for the sake of a shilling. As I was obliged to ride day and night, I must admit that I felt rather nervous when I started from a station at midnight; moreover, the driver whistled like a highwayman, shouting to the horses, "Get on, robbers!" The horses are well used to these

cries, and they at once laid back their ears and galloped at full speed. It is worse when the driver, seeing that you are not asleep, begins to "amuse" you with a story of a rich trader who at that particular place was waylaid by thieves, throttled, robbed, and thrown into an ice-hole in the river.

For the first few days our journey lay through the Yakutsk district. Everywhere throughout the little vales were scattered huts in fenced enclosures. The drivers are always Yakuts or Russians who have lived among Yakuts for a long time. There is a vague tradition that many years ago the Yakuts lived in the south by the sea near the Mongols,¹ but that in the time of the great warriors they went farther north to the Lena. They were pursued by the Mongols, who tried to kill them all, but happily the moon waned, and, as the Mongols never make war between full moon and new moon, the Yakuts took advantage of this interval to travel as fast as possible to where they now live. The Yakuts in this part of the country are healthier, more energetic, and less oppressed than their brothers in the Far North-East, for the criminal settlers have not so much liberty. The Oulooss tries at first to get rid of the criminal by giving him butter, a sack of barley meal, and 10s. if he will go away and never return, and those who do return meet with a very unpleasant reception. Frequently there are terrible murders, the Yakuts throwing the criminals into ice-holes, which they can do without fear, for the criminals, being outlaws, have no rights.

At those stations where the drivers are Yakuts,

¹ Probably by Mongols is meant Bouriat.

travellers who do not speak the language are often placed in a very awkward position. How is it possible to explain yourself to a man who to all your questions replies: "I don't understand"? Very often the following scene occurs:

"Put some straw in the sledge!" and the man brings a cushion.

"Here it is!"

"Straw, you dirty idol's mug!"

"Here it is," repeats the Yakut, placing the cushion in the sledge.

The traveller, becoming angry, tries to show him by gestures that he wants an armful of straw. The Yakut, interpreting this in his own way, pushes the traveller into the sledge and begins to strap him in.

"Call somebody who understands me!"

An "interpreter" comes, a Russian resident, who knows very little of his own language, and at last the traveller succeeds in making his wants understood. Usually he takes up a little straw and says: "Lots! lots!"

The Russian drivers in some villages have become almost entirely like the Yakuts among whom they live. They have narrow, slanting eyes, broad cheekbones, and hairless faces; and of Russian they know only a few words.

But ask your driver if he is a Yakut.

"No, I am Russian," he will reply, with offended dignity.

The children of these settlers do not differ in any way from Yakuts.

The River Lena is the great artery and the only

means of communication throughout the Yakutsk region. The people are settlers here, whether they like it or not, their ancestors having been compelled to become drivers, and all the villages are quite near the banks, the country beyond being an absolute waste. Of all Siberian rivers the Lena is the most picturesque in its wild, fantastic beauty. The banks are mountainous, sometimes gently undulating, sometimes steep and precipitous. They are of red sandstone, and the formation is so regular that it seems the work of man and not of Nature. In some places where a landslip has occurred, the overhanging mass would fall into the river, were it not supported by a giant column of the same red sandstone. On the extreme edge of the landslip runs a narrow, winding towpath. The banks rise sheer and steep like walls built by Cyclops. The rows of graceful larches and Siberian silver-firs clinging to the rocks seem like warriors climbing the heights to reach a fortress, and on the crest of the rocky height are a few tall isolated firs, looking like soldiers who have already reached the top. The banks are of the same red sandstone, alternating with layers of grey granite, and huge, sharp-pointed masses hang threateningly over the river below. Still farther along, the banks are of vari-coloured slate and green porphyry, presenting a fairy-like and fantastic appearance, and they are all hollowed out by deep caves. In one of these, 150 versts from Yakutsk, Dr. Keeber found an extraordinary thing. In the middle of the cave, there were several larch-trees, growing out of the stony ground in absolute darkness. In several places warm springs

run from the mountain into the river, and the smell of sulphuretted hydrogen is spread far around. Beyond each bank runs a wall of mountain range, torn open here and there by tributaries of the Lena, whose basin encloses an area of 925,000 square miles. To these mountains, especially those in the east, no European has yet penetrated. Two hundred and forty years ago Poyarkov, a Cossack chief, with a brave companion, nearly perished in the attempt to explore these mountains, in which only the Lamouts are quite at home. Apparently the Evil Spirit of Yakutian legend, when he quarrelled with the Great White Spirit, spat out more masses of earth on the right bank of the Lena than on the left. According to this legend the earth was originally covered with water. The Evil Spirit and the Great White Spirit disputed as to which was the more powerful.

“What can you do?” asked the Great White Spirit.

“I can dive into the water and bring up a piece of clay,” replied the Evil Spirit. And he did so, and brought up the clay in his mouth.

The White Spirit took it and of it made the earth, but it was quite flat. However, the Evil Spirit had not given up all the clay he had brought, but had kept some in his mouth. The White Spirit, noticing this, struck the Evil Spirit on the back of the neck, causing him to spit out the clay, and wherever it fell mountains appeared.

On the fourth day of my journey I reached the small town of Olekminsk, 600 versts from Yakutsk. It consists of two parts, Olekminsk itself and the

settlement of the religious fanatics. This settlement is much better arranged and more prosperous than the town, all the skilled work being in the hands of these people, who not only supply the town with vegetables, dairy products, and bread, but also send these articles to the goldfields.

The eternal frost layer begins at a depth of five feet from the surface. The depth of this frozen layer is unknown, but when a well was dug at Yakutsk, the earth was still frozen at 385 feet below the surface. The temperature at the depth of seven feet was 11·25 Cent., and at 385 feet it was 3·12. When Gmelin first mentioned this eternal frost layer no one believed him; he was laughed at by learned people, because his discovery contradicted the theory of internal heat. It was only in the 'forties of last century that Midendorf verified Gmelin's discovery, made so long before, and convinced the world of the existence of this phenomenon, which had always been known to the natives of the country.

III

It was the tenth day of my journey. The river, which at Yakutsk was fifteen versts wide, was here considerably narrower, and villages were more numerous. We had already passed the first goldfield of Olekminsk district—the settlement of Matcha—and we were approaching the “noblemen's village,” tales of which are told even in the province of Perm. Signs of the vicinity of the goldfields appeared in the shape of spirit stores, which, like a chain, encircle

the goldfields, ensuring that not a single gold-miner can leave the place without also leaving with the spirit storekeeper the fruits of his long toil. These storekeepers of the Lena are real potentates, for by means of their wealth they hold in their hands this enormous district, together with its officials. Besides the exploitation of the inhabitants, who are always in their debt, these "kings" do incredible things. In an excellent article about the Lena, Ptitzin relates that these "kings" committed several murders. It was said by the inhabitants that, under the unreformed laws of Siberia, if a wagon-load of murdered people and a wagon-load of gold were taken before the judge the accused would be set free. The court twice acquitted "kings" charged by the Governor, who then referred the matter to the Senate, when, the guilt of the accused being clearly proved, they were sent in chains to hard labour in the mines. Many other instances could be quoted. A spirit storekeeper is generally a coarse, uncultivated, brazen-faced being, always half-drunk. His income is often £3,000 a year, nevertheless he lives in dirt and squalor, and will even rob his labourers of their bread. He usually employs criminal settlers, who, being outlaws, have no appeal against injustice, and therefore can be robbed with impunity. To pay anyone "settler's wages" means to underpay or to cheat him. Siberian newspapers are full of stories about these spirit storekeepers. One of these settlements is called by the peasants the "noblemen's settlement," because the people there live by the sale of drink and do not work in any way. This state of things still existed in 1892.

Near the town of Vitim are the famous goldfields of that name, and in 1892 one of them yielded 111 pouds (4,440 pounds) of gold ; and the rich percentage of gold can be judged from the following : 100 pouds (4,000 pounds) of sand yield 0·053 poud of gold. There are not many goldfields in the world so rich as these. In all the Vitimsk goldfields the total for 1892 was 291 pouds (11,640 pounds), but this was not the greatest find.

There are 7,500 men at work in these goldfields. This work is always very laborious, and in Yakutsk goldfields it is worse because of the stratum of "frozen earth."¹ Work in the open goldfields is very hard, but it is still harder in the mines, where sometimes the workers are knee-deep in icy water. After their cruelly laborious toil they do not get very much rest in their common barracks, where the hygienic conditions leave much to be desired ; and, as their food also is bad, all the gold-miners suffer greatly from gastric complaints. In the spring of 1892 there were about a hundred deaths from dysentery. Siberian papers mentioned the fact, but it was not alluded to in European Russian papers. Scurvy is very common also among the gold-miners, but there is a natural specific for this complaint, the wild garlic,² which grows on the goldfields, and which effects a radical cure in a short time. On the 10th of September, the weary worker who has endured constant cold, hunger, and suffering, receives the wages of his months of

¹ The reader will remember that this was in 1892, but these goldfields are now the property of the Anglo-Russian Company, and the conditions are very different.

² *Allium ursinum*.



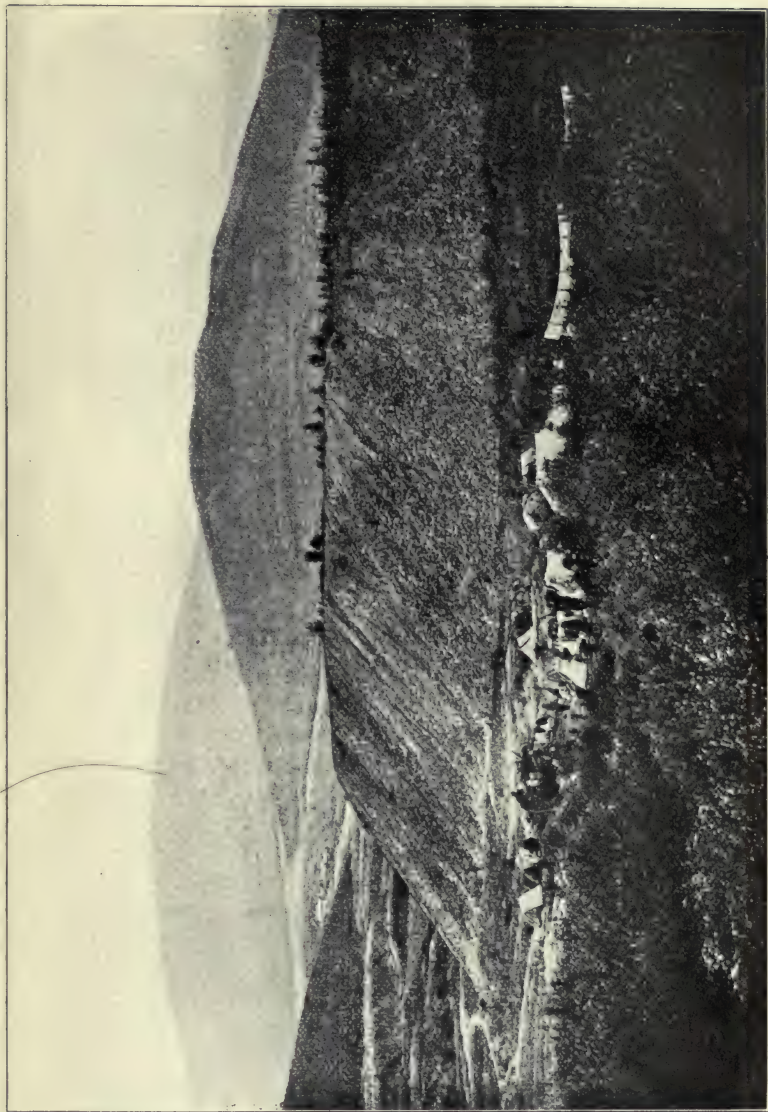
THE GOLDFIELDS.

[Face page 230.]

arduous toil, and suddenly finds himself a man of capital. Hitherto he has not had a penny in his pocket, and has subsisted entirely on credit from the company's store. It is true that he does not possess all his wages, but the sum remaining after the deduction for his store account is quite considerable for a man to whom sixpence is a large sum. While at work he was like a dumb animal, the slave of the company ; now imagine the large crowd of workers suddenly free. In the nearest village they try to get at once all the pleasure they have missed during their year's work, and Vitim is full of wild pleasure-seekers, bent on enjoyment. The numerous shopkeepers, spirit sellers, and public-house keepers have been waiting for this day. The gold-miner begins by discarding his dirty, worn clothing, purchased at a ruinous price on credit at the company's shop, and buys new boots, velvet trousers and caftan, and beaver hat. He wears several silk shirts at once, each of a different colour, and of varying lengths in order to show them all. He buys not one watch, but two, and then he gives himself absolutely free rein. He hires three women, harnesses them to a cart, and drives about the village, shouting madly. Or he will buy a very expensive shawl, and will hire four men to carry him, seated in this novel conveyance, from one public-house to another. Another is more ingenious. He buys several lengths of printed cotton, which he spreads on the muddy ground. On this he dances, bottle in hand, and, to show his utter disregard of money, a specially hired horse is led behind him and musicians follow after. He longs to feel himself for a moment in the

position of a master who can beat his servants, and he hires peasants for this purpose, paying them 10s. for each smack in the face he gives them. Sensuality assumes monstrous proportions. Not only are all the young women of the place at their disposal, but numbers of prostitutes come specially from Yakutsk and Irkutsk. It must be remembered that many of the gold-miners bring with them about two or three thousand roubles, including, besides their wages, the price given them for the gold they have washed and the nuggets they have found for themselves (5s. to 7s. for each zolotnik).¹ Moreover, many are clever enough to steal some of the gold. All this money is left at Vitim. Very often the men are killed while in a drunken state, for to rob them is considered a mere nothing. Every year, after the 10th of September, there are about twenty dead bodies found in the river, or among the bushes on the banks. Many men disappear and are never found, for under the spirit stores are cellars, which keep their secrets. All these facts were given to me by an official who thoroughly knew the local customs and manners, and had often assisted at investigations of crimes. In most cases the murderers escape scot-free, for among the workers there are 40 per cent. of criminal settlers, who have no relatives, and no one troubles to bring the murderers to justice. Two or three days after the mad debauch all the money is gone, and their fine clothes, gold watches, and massive hand-wrought gold rings, like fetters, go into the hands of the spirit storekeeper and

¹ The maximum earnings of a worker are 1,240 roubles a year, and the average 550.



A GOLD-MINERS' CAMP.

the women of the town. Finally the men either sign a new contract to work in the goldfields or work for the Vitim peasants by smuggling spirit to the gold-miners ; but only the more daring fellows undertake this latter occupation, for they run the risk of being beaten severely or even killed outright by the Cossack guard at the goldfields.

Thus in a few days the people at Vitim earn very easily the means to live throughout the year "like noblemen," and such was the state of affairs until 1890 ; but afterwards the company arranged that the men did not go to Vitim with their earnings. After being paid they were sent by steamer to Kirensk. But what was the result ? Was there an end to the wild debauchery ? Not at all. It only took place farther south.

Now I am in Vitim. This village resembles a small provincial town, with good houses and large shops ; but over all is the shadow of decay and departed prosperity. The "noblemen," unaccustomed to work, and their only means of livelihood, the gold-miners, having gone, cannot do anything, and the youngest and more energetic take up the trade of smuggling spirit from the store to the goldfields.

There is a club in Vitim, but it, too, lies under the same shadow as the shops and spirit stores. I visited this club. It was on the second floor of a wooden house. The principal room or hall was thirty paces in length, but so low that a tall man could touch the ceiling with his hand. The walls were hung with cheap paper, having a design of shepherds, deer, and cows. Round the room was a row of chairs of all

shapes and sizes ; in the corner there was a printed dance programme on the wall, the dances being quadrille, lancers, and a " Russian dance." Four rooms opened from this hall. On the floors were heaps of corks, torn cards, but not a trace of newspapers or books. A great deal of gambling took place at the club and much money was lost ; but the place had evidently not been heated for some time, for there was frost on walls and ceilings. I believe that this building has since been burnt down. But of what further use was it when there were no longer any " noblemen " to frequent it ? The saying of the ancient philosophers that the death of one brings life to another is justified in this instance, for the decay of Vitim was the prosperity of Kirensk, which in two or three years doubled in size, and from a small insignificant place became a town full of life.

IV

At last, on the fifteenth day of my journey from Yakutsk, we crossed the frontier. During my three months' journey from Soukharnoe, on the shore of the Arctic Ocean, I had travelled 5,000 versts and had been all the time in the Yakutsk province, which is under the administration of one Governor.

Here the distances are measured by thousands of versts, and the time of travelling by months. The river now was only one verst wide, but the scenery was even more picturesque than before. About 300 versts before reaching Kirensk, at the station Chastye Ostrova, are the well-known Schoki (cheeks), enormous

perpendicular rocks 600 feet in height. They rise in gigantic rows, one behind another, like the wings of a stage scene, and because of this formation the echo is wonderful, a single rifle-shot being repeated a hundred times with a noise like the roar of a cannonade.

Many ships are lost between these rocks, for the river is narrow, the current swift, and even a light wind stirs the waves into tremendous breakers, which, especially during the thaw, quickly rise to the height of many feet and as quickly fall, dashing the ships to pieces against the rocky cliffs.

Soon we saw the last of the Yakuts, but the "Russian" inhabitants of Kirensk have so strange an appearance that they are not inaccurately called "White Yakuts." Their accent in speaking Russian is also Yakutian, sibilant, indistinct, and guttural, so that it is difficult to recognise the language. It was interesting to notice that in one village all the people spoke with a sibilant accent, in another with a guttural.

In a third village all the people were suffering from goitre, a disease very common here. "Goitre is not a deformity, but a beauty," says the local proverb. Nevertheless, the unhappy sufferers hide this "beauty" in large scarves. The peasants attribute this disease to the use of unboiled water from the River Lena.

Whether they like it or not, the people here must earn their living as post-drivers, for the ground is even less productive than in the Yakutsk region, the stony substratum being only thinly covered by a layer of sand and clay, and where there is a growth of fir-trees the ground is covered by a thick layer of moss, rendering cultivation impossible. Attempts were made to

burn away the moss, but underneath it was a thick layer of turf, which caught fire, and smouldered for a very long time ; and after it had burnt out nothing was to be seen but hillocks and holes—no ground that it was possible to cultivate.

The best agricultural land lies at the junction of the Cherepannik with the Lena. At the times of overflow the river floods the surrounding land, leaving behind large blocks of ice, which the peasants are obliged to break, and the winter crop is ruined nearly every year. In 1889 vessels sailed through fields and meadows, so deep was the inundation, and the earth was so soaked with water that it was not possible to plough it before May, and sowing was not over until the end of June. The work on the ungrateful earth is so arduous that the only people who can be spared for post-drivers are boys and the goitre monstrosities, who are incapable of doing labourers' work on the land. It is sad to see these miserable creatures endeavouring to learn by practical experience all the windings of the Lena and to master the drivers' expressions, which must be used when the tow-rope is caught by some obstacle, or when the boat is in shallow water, or when the man leading the horses must guide them through the long creek. Moreover, notwithstanding the Government grant of £130 to £150 a year for each pair of horses, the tax on the post-carrier is often a very heavy one, because the peasants have no choice but to be post-carriers. They must give their horses for all kinds of Government service ; they must drive the criminal exiles to their destination. These are the ordinary duties of a post-carrier. The criminals are continually

being driven from one place to another, from Irkutsk to the province of Yakutsk to settle there, in which case they are escorted there by Cossacks. From Yakutsk to Irkutsk they come either when their punishment is lessened or remitted, or when they are to be sent elsewhere to serve a hard labour sentence. In the latter case the criminals are in chains; in the former they are transported in a quite unusual way. We came to a little village and, while we were waiting at the station for a change of horses, a boy of eleven came up. He was wrapped in a red shawl, and only the tip of his red nose was visible. Over his shoulders was a large sack of Russian leather.

“ Well, boy, what do you want ? ” asked the station clerk.

“ Give me a receipt ; I have brought you two criminal settlers,” replied the boy gravely, taking a book and a sheet of paper from the bag and handing it over. This boy was the driver and escort combined !

“ Hullo ! So you have brought criminals again ! They come and come, devil knows from where ! Do you make them out of clay, or what ? Three have been brought to-day already.”

In a few minutes some peasants arrived at the station-hut, and began to dispute as to whose turn it was to be driver. I went along to the drivers' room to have a look at the criminals whom the boy had brought. One of them was a Tartar from the Caucasus, a tall man of six feet high, his legs bowed from constantly being on horseback. One glance at him was sufficient to show me that the poor fellow was in the last stage of consumption. His large sad eyes

burned with the fire of fever, and he grasped his chest as a succession of racking coughs seized him. He could move only with great difficulty. I could not find out anything from him, as he did not understand Russian. The post-driver entered the room, scowling angrily, for it was his turn to drive. He kicked the Tartar, who was sitting on the harness, and cursed him angrily. The man did not understand his words, and he only looked sadly at the driver, which angered the latter still more. He struck the Tartar with his fists and poured out a torrent of curses. The old man took a handful of dust from the floor, put it on his head, and, kneeling, raised his eyes and clasped hands to heaven, murmuring "Allah! Allah!" A terrible cough racked his anguished breast, and in his eyes there was such an expression of tragic suffering that the driver was silent.

"Why do you insult the poor old man? Can't you see he is ill? It is not his fault," said one of the peasants, and one kind soul gave a straw cushion to the old man, another put a piece of bread and some baked potatoes into the breast of his coat, and even the driver himself tried to do something to make amends for his cruelty. Meanwhile the other convict was sitting on the seat with his hands clasped round his bony knees, which showed through holes in the convict clothes he wore. His round eyes were fixed on the new boots which the driver was wearing. This convict was about fifty years old.

"What fine boots you have," he said at length, and, recognising the Little Russian dialect, I asked: "Are you from Poltava Province?" happy at finding

a fellow-countryman. The convict looked at me, then again at the boots he had already remarked on, then after a moment's pause said : " Yes."

I found afterwards that he was a convict who had many times attempted to get back to Russia, tramping as far as he could, but each time he had been captured and sent farther into Siberia. Now they were sending him from Verkhoyansk.

" As soon as I can I shall take my bags and try again to get back. What else can I do ? I can't work, my chest hurts me, and there is only one thing left for me to do—to die on the tramp."

Tramping was to him the object of his life. He did not even think or hope for any happy ending to it. He, like most of the tramps, had been caught on the frontier of Perm Province ; nevertheless, some power compelled him once more, against his will, to resume his aimless wanderings.

V

I was in a great hurry. I was obliged to make haste, for it was the end of March, and spring was near. The mountain crests were clear of snow, and rivulets ran down the sides. On the frozen surface of the river there were dark patches of thinner ice where the water underneath was flowing.

Very often our sledges went into deep water over the ice. Here and there the ice began to melt at the margin of the river. The utmost speed was necessary in order to reach Katchouga, the last village on the Lena route. The weather was very capricious. On

the same day there would be brilliant sunshine, then heavy rain, and after that rain and snow together. Once we were caught in a snowstorm on the river, about ten versts away from the station. The icy snow fell so thickly that it was impossible to see, and suddenly my sledge stopped.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"The emigrants."

"Couldn't they find another stopping-place?" I grumbled, as I got down from my sledge.

Right in our way was a sledge with a covering of sacking. The poor little thin horse stood with drooping head, and seemed resigned to fate, not even trying to turn his head away from the snow that fell thickly upon it. Seated on the snow was a tall peasant dressed in incredibly torn, ragged clothes, his face and pose expressing the utmost despair.

"They are coming from the hungry places and are going to look for work at the goldfields. So many of them try it; but there they won't take on any Russians, and certainly a man in bark shoes is worth nothing," proudly said my driver.

In this neighbourhood the people were more prosperous, and therefore inclined to despise the starving emigrants.

"Sidor!" (Isidorus) called a weak voice from under the sacking. I looked, and under the ragged covering lay several children and a woman apparently ill with fever.

These were the first emigrants I had met. They had been driven by famine from the province of Penz, and they were going to the goldfields, not knowing

that no delicate people or those with families would be employed there.

Afterwards, on my way from Irkutsk to Tomsk, I met large caravans several times a day, a veritable exodus from the famine-stricken villages to Siberia, where they hoped to find "free land and clear water," their Land of Promise.

At the village of Oust-Kout the first signs of European civilisation begin; the telegraph-wire goes from this village across the wild mountains. Oust-Kout is associated with the name of Habarov, the most daring and enterprising Russian adventurer of the seventeenth century. This beaver-trapper found not only his native village, but the whole province, too limited for his energies, and he travelled to Oust-Kout, where he lived for a long time and eventually died there. He was for a time an agriculturist and a salt refiner, but these peaceful occupations did not satisfy his adventurous spirit. In 1649, when there was a vague rumour of a large river in the west (Amur) Habarov petitioned the Governor of Yakutsk to allow him to go at his own risk, with companions, to conquer the natives of the district for the Tsar.

In Oust-Kout was raised nearly all the regiment of 140 men, who conquered not only the natives, but even the Chinese soldiers who were armed with cannon, rifles and catapults. For some time Habarov was the potentate of Amur; his name was a terror to the kind-hearted Manchurians and Mongols as far as Kalgan. But Habarov also had his Francisco de Bobadilla. A certain nobleman, Zenovieff, was sent to Amur to find out what was going on

there, and the brave Habarov was taken to Moscow; but though he returned to Oust-Kout, it was only in the modest rôle of a petty official of the Government. They were afraid to send him to Amur, although he promised to conquer and annex Manchuria for the Government. While remaining inactive at Oust-Kout he was obliged to see the places that he had conquered given back to the Chinese, and soon the whole of Amur was restored to the Chinese by the Russian Ambassador.

We rushed through the town of Verkholsensk, which scarcely deserved to be called a village, and the same day crossed the Lena (which was not 700 feet wide at this place) to Katchuga. The ice cracked with a dull sound, and the whole surface of the river was flooded with half-melted ice. I crossed in a boat. If the future Trans-Siberian Railway should have a short loop-line from Irkutsk to Katchuga, connection would be established between the far-off Yakutsk and the rest of the world. Although steamers come only as far as Oust-Kout, flat-bottomed boats would be able to go much higher up the river.

At Katchuga we left the forest quite behind us, and then began the slightly undulating, absolutely bare Bouriat Steppe. After long travelling through a region where the horizon was a forest or mountains it was strange to be on a wide, bare plain. Everywhere in the distance on all sides were scattered the camps of the Bouriat, which are sharply distinguished from the camps of the Yakuts, the people of the latter being one large tribe, divided into several clans. The Bouriat are one tribe, settling in many different camps,



BOURIATS.

[Face page 242.]

the huts quite close to each other, and the camps enclosed by a wooden fence. Near the huts are the corrals, surrounded by hedges, where the animals pasture in winter ; and in the summer the Bouriards cut the luxuriant grass for hay. But what first attracts the notice of the traveller passing through the steppe are the goatskins with heads and horns placed on tall poles outside the huts. These are sacrifices to the numerous gods. The Bouriards who live in the Irkutsk Province are known as Barga Bouriards and Transbaikal or Mongol Bouriards. Both came from Mongolia, having been driven out by some nomad tribe. The Bouriard legends say that the warrior Bahak Irban was in the service of Syan-Han, who was very jealous of his wife, and wished to punish Bahak Irban very severely. But Irban called the Bouriards together and led them to the north to the land of Agan. Here they encountered Yakuts, whom they drove further north. This was probably in the thirteenth century. At that time the Bouriards had the custom of putting to death all the old people over seventy years of age ; this ceremony was known as " swallowing the fat " and is thus described :—

At the age of seventy the old man or woman gave a feast to the family and relations, and at the end of the feast the old person was forced to swallow a long ribbon of fat. Part of this was successfully swallowed, but the rest, remaining in the mouth, choked the victim.

There were several traditions among the Bouriards concerning the disappearance of this custom, but they all tell the same story—viz., that a son, pitying his father, and not wishing to kill him, hid him in a box.

The old man afterwards gave wise advice to the son and so saved him from death. All were then convinced that old people were of some use, and so the custom of swallowing the fat was abolished.

When the Russians first made their appearance, the Bouriards were the aborigines of the region. The atrocities of the Russian leader caused a great number of the Bouriards to return to Mongolia; from whence they were obliged again to come back, for they had found an even worse chief in the ferocious Han-Galdan. At the present time the Bouriards are divided into several clans, which are called "bones," the ancient name of the clan.

The late Stchapof,¹ on his mother's side a Bouriard, stated that of all Siberian natives the Bouriards had more than others preserved the ancient form of communal life. The poor Bouriard considered he had a perfect right to demand food and hospitality from the rich. When an animal was killed for food everyone came for his share at table; and the host was recognised only by the fact that he took his portion last of all. The young girls, if they wanted iron ornaments to wear in their hair, took them without ceremony or payment from the smith who made them, though he would sell these articles to strangers not of the community.

The harvest was for the benefit of all, and each person took what he required from the common store of grain. The communal idea showed itself not only in the festivals of the Bouriards, but in their communal

¹ A well-known writer of the 'sixties, a professor of the Seminary in Kazan.

hunting, which, until recent times, took place every eight or twelve years. The hunt was supervised by the hereditary chief, who had the powers of a dictator. The results of the hunt were equally divided among all, both adults and children. It is interesting to note that in the Far North-East, in the Kolyma region, a custom analogous to this communal hunting is still preserved ; also the product of the communal fishing was divided among all, regardless of age. At the present time the custom of communal hunting no longer exists.

There was no snow on Bouriats Steppe, and instead of comfortable sledges we now travelled in an uncomfortable cart. After having been nineteen days on my journey, knowing no bed but my sledge, I was anxious to get to Irkutsk as soon as possible, but my wishes in that respect did not always coincide with those of my Bouriat drivers. Either it was one of their festivals, or else they did not want to get up in the middle of the night to harness the horses. At each station I was advised to spend the night there. I had to use all my eloquence to explain the reasons why I wanted to get to the town as soon as possible, but the difficulties of this task may be understood when I mention that I did not know a word of the Bouriat language, nor did they understand Russian. Vainly I explained in Russian and then in Yakutian (in the faint hope that they would understand the language of their conquerors of 600 years before). The Bouriat only shook his hands in energetic protest and said :—

“ To-morrow.”

In despair, I shouted :

“ I will give you a tip for vodka ! ”

This acted like a charm, and horses were immediately forthcoming as if by magic.

True there was no travelling carriage to be had, and I had to be satisfied with a “ cabriolet ” ; nevertheless, I was glad to have even that, for I was happy in the prospect of reaching Irkutsk next day. The Bouriats “ cabriolet ” is something quite remarkable. Imagine two enormous wheels connected with an axle on which rests a wooden framework resembling ladders, and that is all ! It jolts terribly ; each hillock, each hole shakes one’s whole body as though the inside were being torn.

The night was marvellously still and clear. The sky was full of stars. The dogs barked and howled in some distant camps. My Bouriats was apparently dozing, but occasionally he roused himself and shouted to the dogs, and immediately afterwards his head fell to one side, and a strange noise was heard. I could not decide whether it was snoring, or whether my driver was trying to sing his national song. In the faint light I could see in the distance the strange shape of the “ Shamans’ Mountain,” which to the Bouriats is sacred, and to which not long ago it was customary to take the Bouriats to make a deposition on oath.

Up to the beginning of the eighteenth century the Bouriats, like all the Turko-Mongolian race, had the Horro religion, known to us as “ Shamanism.” This religion is also professed by Ostiaks, Samoyedes, Yuraks, Yakuts, Lamouts and TOUNGHOUSE.

In the time of the dynasty of Di-tyn, Shamanism

was introduced into China under the name of Tyau-Shen, but, though it had no success there, it is important to mention the fact, because in 1747 there were published in the Manchurian language the regulations of the rites and ceremonies of Shamanism, the only printed catechism of the old Mongol religion. There is also in existence an English translation of this catechism. I shall try to give briefly the substance of this religion.

The world is ruled by a passionless god, "The drowsy Spirit of the Eight-sided Universe"; he has neither shape nor form; he is neither life nor death. I could not get even from the most learned Shaman a more definite statement of this belief. Involuntarily the thought comes into one's mind that this is probably a vague, shadowy idea of Brahma, the dark mind of the savage being unable to form a clearer conception of an abstract idea. The world is ruled by the "Bald Father" (in Bouriat terminology), who cannot be angered, and who cannot be entreated, as his decisions are unchangeable. Therefore, it is absolutely useless to offer prayers and sacrifices. This god is deeply interested in all that concerns man; he is stern, or, more accurately speaking, powerful, for the Mongolian mind cannot imagine attributes such as goodness and mercy, but only omnipotence and impotence. The Yakut name "Almighty" quite shows this idea.

Arsin Dolai (the chief of the seven Oulooss of the wicked spirits, Abaghi) sends all evils and illness upon mankind, and the essence of the Horro religion is how to discover the means of propitiating this terrible god who afflicts men so grievously, not in

revenge for their misdoings, but in the plenitude of his power. The ideas of life and death are original. Each man has allotted to him two shadows, and liars have three. After a man's death these shadows return to the Abaghi, and are given the duty of guarding the guilty Abaghi whom Arsin Dolai consigns to the "iron barn"; but the spirit of the dead man becomes a Yer, or wandering spirit, invisible except to the Shaman. In the "central place" (the earth) there are a multitude of these Yer, and in the words of Milton:—

Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth,
Unseen, both when we wake, and when we sleep.

These Yer are the active helpers of the evil spirits, for they can enter the bodies of people on earth, and so afflict them with all kinds of diseases: rheumatism, gastric and nervous diseases, etc. Besides Yer there are in the universe many wicked—that is to say, "powerful"—gods, whose greatest pleasure it is to torment men, maim their animals, tear the nets of the fishers, etc. None can implore the god save those who from their birth are set apart by the good spirits, the Shamans, male and female.

In one of the stories of the Bouriats the Shamans say: "We know what others do not, for all that is hidden we discover." Although amongst the Shamans one occasionally finds a conscious deceiver, the majority of them firmly believe in their power and knowledge, and they will only take very small fees for their services. The spirits are not pleased with the power which the Shamans have over them and they try to revenge themselves in every possible way.

“Our gods are always angry with us, and we suffer greatly because of this, but we cannot cease, we must Shaman,” so said one of them. Each Shaman has the power of taking the form of an animal, and so can go about the world. This beast-form is given to him by his spirit protector, who guides him in this form round the universe during the performance of the “mystery.” I have already described this ceremony. Like a ray of light in the dark outlook of Shamanism upon hostile nature shines the only beneficent spirit, the woman goddess, who acts disinterestedly for the benefit of all mankind. The Yakuts give her the title “Mother Protector and Teacher and kind, sympathetic Mother Creator.” In 1727 Buddhist missionaries came to Mongolia and converted to Buddhism the Trans-Baikal Bouriats and the natives of the Tounkinsk Valley. Buddhism became confused with the Horro religion. At one time there were many Buddhist monasteries in the Trans-Siberian district and several hundred in the province of Irkutsk. Now their number is less. The missionaries brought to the Bouriats the art of writing, and translated the sacred books in the Tibetan language into the Mongolian. At the present time one of the largest monasteries is Goosin-osersk, where the chief of the Buddhist and Lama religions in Siberia has his abode. There also is a large library of books in the Mongolian and Tibetan languages.

Every year a great number of the faithful visit the monastery. The services are accompanied with the greatest pomp.

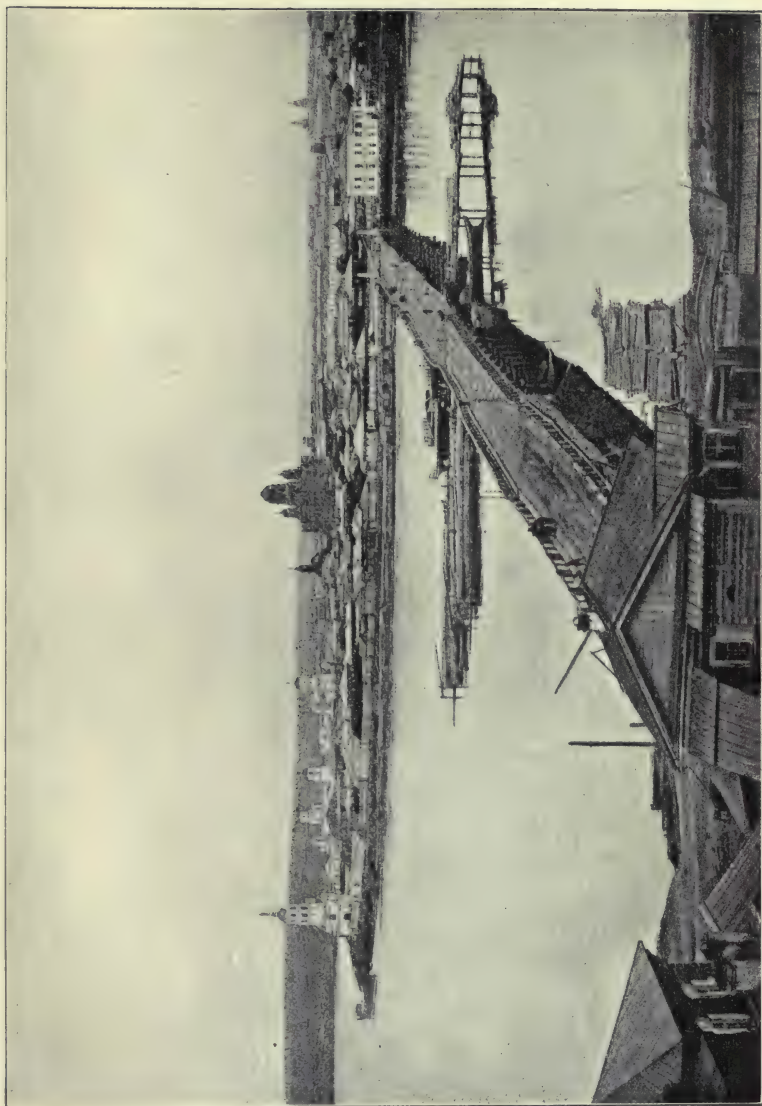
The Yakuts and Bouriats are the only Siberian

natives who are not dying out, but, on the contrary, are rapidly increasing in number. The Bouriat have a much brighter future before them than their constant enemies the Yakuts. The Bouriat are a gifted and hardy race, who are willing to learn and who have already produced several notable savants, at the head of whom stands Dorjse-Banzarof, who, notwithstanding his university education, lived and died a Buddhist, and was interred with all the pomps of the Lama religion. The Bouriat are hard-working and capable, and their national self-respect favourably impresses the tourist.

On the twentieth day of my journey I reached Irkutsk. I was unaccustomed to a European town, and the clean wide street, through which I quickly rushed, made a wonderfully strong impression on me. It was a beautiful day in spring. I felt that my face, roughened and tanned by exposure to all kinds of weather, and my ugly Chooktchan dress formed a sharp contrast to the fashionably dressed people who crowded the wooden sidewalk. They stared at me and followed me with their eyes. I was in terror lest the boys should run after me shouting and whistling ; but, luckily, it was not necessary for me to go to the hotel, for in my savage costume I might not have been allowed to enter, so I drove straight to the house of my friend.

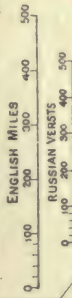
Ah ! At last there is the house ! They saw me from the window and ran to meet me.

Now quickly I must cast off my Asiatic attire and assume the appearance of a European !



IRKUTSK.

THE PROVINCE OF YAKUTSK





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