

HARRY DE WINDT

FROM PARIS TO NEW
YORK BY LAND

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New York by Land

TO MY WIFE

PREFACE

Many who read the following account of our long land journey will not unnaturally ask: "What was the object of this stupendous voyage, or the reward to be gained by this apparently unnecessary risk of life and endurance of hardships?"

I would reply that my primary purpose was to ascertain the feasibility of constructing a railway to connect the chief cities of France and America, Paris and New York. The European Press was at the time of our departure largely interested in this question, which fact induced the proprietors of the *Daily Express* of London, the *Journal* of Paris, and the *New York World* to contribute towards the expenses of the expedition. Another reason is one with which I fancy most Englishmen will readily sympathise—viz., the feat had never before been performed, and my first attempt to accomplish it in 1896 (with New York as the starting-point) had failed half way on the Siberian shores of Bering Straits.

The invaluable assistance rendered by the United States Government in the despatch of a revenue cutter to our relief on the Siberian coast is duly acknowledged in another portion of this volume, but I would here express my sincere thanks to the "Compagnie Internationale des Wagonslits" for furnishing the expedition with a free pass from Paris to the city of Irkutsk, in Eastern Siberia. In America the "Southern Pacific" and

"Wabash" Lines extended the same courtesies, thus enabling us to travel free of cost across the United States, as guests of two of the most luxurious railways in the world.

45 Avenue Kléber, Paris,

October 1903.

PART I

EUROPE AND ASIA

CHAPTER I

THROUGH EUROPE. THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY

The success of my recent land expedition from Paris to New York is largely due to the fact that I had previously essayed the feat in 1896 and failed, for the experience gained on that journey was well worth the price I paid for it. On that occasion I attempted the voyage in an opposite direction—viz., from America to France, but only half the distance was covered. Alaska was then almost unexplored and the now populous Klondike region only sparsely peopled by poverty-stricken and unfriendly Indians. After many dangers and difficulties, Alaska was crossed in safety, and we managed to reach the Siberian shores of Bering Straits only to meet with dire disaster at the hands of the natives of that coast. For no sooner had the American revenue cutter which landed us steamed away than our stores were seized by the villainous chief of the village (one Koari), who informed us that we were virtually his prisoners, and

that the dog-sleds which, during the presence of the Government vessel, he had glibly promised to furnish, existed only in this old rascal's fertile imagination. The situation was, to say the least, unpleasant, for the summer was far advanced and the ice already gathering in Bering Straits. Most of the whalers had left the Arctic for the southward, and our rescue seemed almost impossible until the following year. When a month here had passed away, harsh treatment and disgusting food had reduced us to a condition of hopeless despair. I was attacked by scurvy and a painful skin disease, while Harding, my companion, contracted a complaint peculiar to the Tchuktchis, which has to this day baffled the wisest London and Paris physicians. Fortunately we possessed a small silk Union Jack, which was nailed to an old whale rib on the beach (for there was no wood), much to the amusement of the natives. But the laugh was on our side when, the very next morning, a sail appeared on the horizon. Nearer and nearer came the vessel, scudding close-reefed before a gale which had raised a mountainous sea. Would they see our signal? Would the skipper dare to lay-to in such tempestuous weather, hemmed in as he was by the treacherous ice? Had we known, however, at the time that the staunch little *Belvedere* was commanded by the late Capt. Joseph Whiteside, of New Bedford, we should have been spared many moments, which seemed hours, of intense anxiety. Without a thought of his own safety, or a valuable cargo of whales representing many thousands of pounds, this gallant sailor stood boldly in shore, launched a boat, which, after a

scuffle with the natives and a scramble over floating ice, we managed to reach, and hauled us aboard the little whaler, more dead than alive. A month later we were in San Francisco, far from the fair French city we had hoped to reach, but sincerely grateful for our preservation. For twenty-four hours after our rescue no ship could have neared that ice-bound coast, and we could scarcely have survived, amidst such surroundings, until the following spring.

A glance at a map will show the route which I had intended to pursue in 1896, although, as this land journey has never before been accomplished (or even attempted), I was unable to benefit by the experience of previous explorers. From New York we travelled to Vancouver, thence across the now famous Chilkoot Pass to the Great Lakes and down the Yukon River to the sea, crossing Bering Straits in an American revenue cutter to the Siberian settlement of melancholy memory. From here I hoped to reach the nearest Russian outpost, Anadyrsk, by dog-sled, proceeding thence along the western shores of the Okhotsk Sea to Okhotsk and Yakutsk. The latter is within a couple of thousand miles of civilisation, a comparatively easy stage in this land of stupendous distances. Had I been able on this occasion to reach Anadyrsk, I could, all being well, have pushed on to Yakutsk, for Cossacks carry a mail, once a year, between the two places. But the connecting link between that miserable Tchuktchi village and Anadyrsk was missing, and so we had to submit to the will of fate.

Follow now on a map my itinerary upon the last occasion, starting from Paris to Moscow, and continuing from Moscow to Irkutsk by the Trans-Siberian Railway. Here we strike in a north-easterly direction to Yakutsk by means of horse-sleighs. Reindeer-sleighs are procured at Yakutsk, and we then steer a north-westerly course to Verkhoyansk. From Verkhoyansk we again proceed (still with reindeer) in a north-easterly direction to the tiny political settlement of Sredni-Kolymsk, where we discard our deer (for there is no more moss) and take to dog-sleds. A journey of nearly two months, travelling almost due east, brings us to East Cape Bering Straits, the north-easternmost point of Asia, and practically half way from Paris to our destination.

From here the journey is fairly easy, for the beaten tracks of Alaska now entail no great hardships. Remote Eskimo settlements like that at Cape Prince of Wales are naturally as primitive as those on the Siberian side, but once Nome City is reached, the traveller may proceed (in summer) to New York solely by the aid of steam.

I shall not weary the reader with details of my preparations. Suffice it to say that, although the minutest care and attention were lavished on the organisation of our food-supply, lack of transport in the Far North compelled me to abandon most of our provisions and trust to luck for our larder, which was therefore frequently very meagrely stocked. Indeed, more than once we were within measurable distance of starvation, but this

was the more unavoidable in so far as, even at Moscow, I was compelled to abandon several cases of provisions on account of a telegram received from the Governor-General of Siberia. The message informed me that reindeer were scarce, dogs yet more so, and that, unless the expedition travelled *very* light, it could not possibly hope to reach even the shores of the Arctic Ocean, to say nothing of Bering Straits. Nevertheless, even at the outset of the journey I was blamed, and that by totally inexperienced persons, for abandoning stores so early in the day; a certain British merchant in Moscow expressing surprise that I should have "made such an egregious error" as to leave any provisions behind. I fancy most explorers have met this type of individual—the self-complacent Briton, who, being located for business or other purposes in a foreign or colonial city, never leaves it, and yet poses as an authority on the entire country, however vast, in which he temporarily resides. I can recall one of these immovable fixtures in India, who had never stirred from Bombay save in a P. and O. liner, but who was good enough to advise me how to travel through Central Baluchistan, a country which I had recently explored with some success! The Moscow wiseacre was perhaps unaware that during hard seasons in Arctic Siberia the outfit of an expedition must be strictly limited to the carrying capacity of dogs and reindeer. However, this gentleman's ignorance was perhaps excusable, seeing that his experience of Russian travel had been solely gleaned in a railway car between Moscow and the German frontier. I am told that the

same individual severely criticised me for not travelling through Siberia in summer, thereby avoiding the severe hardships arising from intense cold. He was, of course, unaware that during the open season the entire tract of country north-east of Yakutsk is practically impassable owing to thousands of square miles of swamp and hundreds of shallow lakes which can only be crossed in a frozen condition on a dog-sled. Even the natives of these regions never attempt to travel between the months of May and September.

Paris is my home, and I am not ashamed to own that, like most Parisians, I suffer, when abroad, from a nostalgia of the Boulevards that a traveller were perhaps better without. It was therefore as well that our departure for New York took place on a dreary December day, when the beautiful city lay listless and despondent, swept by a wintry gale and lashed by gusts of driving sleet. The sky was sunless, the deserted thoroughfares rivers of mud mournfully reflecting bars of electric light from either side of the street. As my cab splashed wearily up the Rue Lafayette I thought that I had never seen such a picture of desolation. And yet it were better, perhaps, to remember Paris thus, than to yearn through the long Arctic night for the pleasant hours I had learned to love so well here in leafy June. Bright days of sunshine and pleasure in and around the "Ville Lumière!" cool, starlit nights at Armonville and Saint Cloud! Should I ever enjoy them again?

"The De Windt Expedition" left Paris on December 19, 1901. Preliminary notices of the journey in the French Press had

attracted considerable notice in Paris, and a small crowd of journalists and others had assembled at the Gare du Nord to wish us God-speed. We were three in number—myself, the Vicomte de Clinchamp (a young Frenchman who acted as photographer), and George Harding, my faithful companion on many previous expeditions. The "Nord Express" was on the point of departure, but a stirrup-cup was insisted upon by some of De Clinchamp's enthusiastic compatriots, and an adjournment was made to the Buffet, where good wishes were expressed for our safety and success. After a hearty farewell the train steamed out of the station amidst ringing cheers, which plainly told me that Paris as well as London contained true friends who would pray for our welfare in the frozen North and welcome our safe return to "La Belle France."

Moscow was reached three days later, and here commenced the first of a series of minor but harassing delays which relentlessly pursued me throughout the Asiatic portion of the journey. While alighting from the train I was suddenly seized with such severe internal pains, accompanied by faintness and nausea, that on arrival at the Slaviansky Bazar (the best Hotel, by the way, in the place), I was carried to bed. The attack was inexplicable. Harding, ever a pessimist, suggested appendicitis, and a physician was hastily summoned. The medicine-man gravely shook his head: "You are very ill," he said, and I did not dispute the fact. "Can it be appendicitis?" I asked anxiously. "Appendicitis," replied the Doctor; "what is that? I never heard

of the disease!"

Morning brought me some relief, and with a not unnatural distrust of Russian medical methods, I resolved to return at once to Berlin and consult Professor Bergmann. To abandon the journey was now out of the question, but our medicine-chest was up-to-date and I could at any rate ask the famous surgeon how to treat the dread disease should it declare itself in the wilds of Siberia. The next morning saw me back in Berlin, and by midday my mind was at rest. I was suffering from a simple rupture of long standing, but hitherto quiescent, which only required rest and proper treatment for at least a fortnight. "Then it must be in the train," I said, explaining the situation and the priceless value of time. So, after some discussion, I departed with the Professor's good wishes, which, however, were conveyed with an ominous shake of the head.

Two days later I arrived in Moscow, only to be confronted by another difficulty: our rifles, revolvers and ammunition had been seized at the Russian frontier, and at least a fortnight must elapse before we could obtain them. Moscow fortunately boasts of an excellent gun-maker, and I was able to replace our armoury with English weapons, though, of course, at a ruinous expense. But time was too precious to waste. We had now but a little over four months in which to reach Bering Straits, for by the middle of May the bays and estuaries of the Arctic begin to break up, and open water might mean imprisonment (and worse) on these desolate shores throughout the entire summer. So I

purchased revolvers, two rifles and a fowling-piece at about five times their usual cost, and hoped that our troubles were over, at least for the present. I should add that the arms had left London six weeks previously, and that I was furnished with a special permit to introduce them into the country. But Russian methods are peculiar, and fortunately unique, I was unaware before our departure of the fact that if a gun is consigned direct from its English maker to a gunsmith in Russia it goes through without any trouble whatsoever. Otherwise, it may take six months or more to reach its destination.

The New Year was passed in Moscow, and a gloomy one it was. From an historical and picturesque point of view the city is intensely interesting, but otherwise it is a dull, dreary place. Russian cities, not excepting Petersburg, generally are, although the English novelist generally depicts them as oases of luxurious splendour, where love and Nihilism meet one at every turn, and where palaces, diamonds and silver sleigh-bells play an important part, to say nothing of that journalistic trump card, the Secret Police! I wish one of these imaginative scribes could spend a winter evening (as I have so often done) in a stuffy hotel reading-room, with a *Times* five days old, wondering whether the Russians will ever provide a theatre sufficiently attractive to tempt a stranger out of doors after nightfall. In summer it is less dismal; there are gardens and restaurants, dancing gipsies and Hungarian Tziganes, but even then the entertainment is generally so poor, and the surroundings so tawdry, that one is glad to leave

them at an early hour and go sadly to bed.

The distance from Moscow to Irkutsk is a little under 4000 English miles, the first-class fare a little over a hundred roubles (or about £12), which, considering the journey occupies nine days or more, is reasonable enough. There are, or were, two trains a week,—the "State" and Wagonlits expresses, which run alternately. The former is a Government train, inferior in every respect to the latter, which is quite as luxurious in its service and appointments as the trains run by the same company in Europe.

At 10 P.M., on January 4, we left Moscow, in a blinding snowstorm, a mild foretaste of the Arctic blizzards to come, which would be experienced without the advantage of a warm and well-lit compartment to view them from. For this train was truly an ambulant palace of luxury. An excellent restaurant, a library, pianos, baths, and last, but not least, a spacious and well-furnished compartment with every comfort, electric and otherwise (and without fellow travellers), rendered this first "étape" of our great land journey one to recall in after days with a longing regret. But we had nearly a fortnight of pleasant travel before us and resolved to make the most of it. Fortunately the train was not crowded. Some cavalry officers bound for Manchuria, three or four Siberian merchants and their families, and a few Tartars of the better class. The officers were capital fellows, full of life and gaiety (Russian officers generally are), the merchants and their women-folk sociable and musically inclined. Nearly every one spoke French, and the time

passed pleasantly enough, for although the days were terribly monotonous, evenings enlivened by music and cards, followed by cheery little suppers towards the small hours, almost atoned for their hours of boredom.

Nevertheless, I cannot recommend this railway journey, even as far as Irkutsk, to those on pleasure bent, for the Trans-Siberian is no tourist line, notwithstanding the alluring advertisements which periodically appear during the holiday season. Climatically the journey is a delightful one in winter time, for Siberia is then at its best—not the Siberia of the English dramatist: howling blizzards, chained convicts, wolves and the knout, but a smiling land of promise and plenty even under its limitless mantle of snow. The landscape is dreary, of course, but most days you have the blue cloudless sky and dazzling sunshine, so often sought in vain on the Riviera. At mid-day your sunlit compartment is often too warm to be pleasant, when outside it is 10° below zero. But the air is too dry and bracing for discomfort, although the pleasant breeze we are enjoying here will presently be torturing unhappy mortals in London in the shape of a boisterous and biting east wind. On the other hand, the monotony after a time becomes almost unbearable. All day long the eye rests vacantly upon a dreary white plain, alternating with green belts of woodland, while occasionally the train plunges into dense dark pine forest only to emerge again upon the same eternal "plateau" of silence and snow. Now and again we pass a village, a brown blur on the limitless white, rarely a town, a few

wooden houses clustering around a green dome and gilt crosses, but it is all very mournful and depressing, especially to one fresh from Europe. This train has one advantage, there is no rattle or roar about it, as it steals like a silent ghost across the desolate steppes. As a cure for insomnia it would be invaluable, and we therefore sleep a good deal, but most of the day is passed in the restaurant. Here the military element is generally engrossed in an interminable game of *Vint*¹ (during the process of which a Jew civilian is mercilessly rooked), but our piano is a godsend and most Russian women are born musicians. So after *déjeuner* we join the fair sex, who beguile the hours with Glinka and Tchaikovsky until they can play and sing no more. By the way, no one ever knows the time of day and no one particularly wants to. Petersburg time is kept throughout the journey and the result is obvious. We occasionally find ourselves lunching at breakfast time and dining when we should have supped, but who cares? although in any other clime bottled beer at 8 A.M. might have unpleasant results.

The Ural Mountains (which are merely downs) are crossed. Here the stations are built with some attempt at coquetry, for the district teems with mineral wealth, and in summer is much frequented by fashionable pleasure-seekers and invalids, for there are baths and waters in the neighbourhood. One station reminds me of Homburg or Wiesbaden with its gay restaurant, flower-stall, and a little shop for the sale of trinkets in silver

¹ Russian whist.

and malachite, and the precious stones found in this region—Alexandrites, garnets and amethysts. But beyond the Urals we are once more lost in the desolate plains across which the train crawls softly and silently at the rate of about ten miles an hour. I know of only one slower railway in the world, that from Jaffa to Jerusalem, where I have seen children leap on and off the car-steps of the train while in motion, and the driver alight, without actually stopping his engine, to gather wildflowers! We cross the great Obi and Yenisei rivers over magnificent bridges of iron and Finnish granite, which cost millions of roubles to construct. Krasnoyarsk is passed by night, but its glittering array of electric lights suggests a city many times the size of the tiny town I passed through in a *tarantass* while travelling in 1887 from Pekin to Paris. So the days crawl wearily away. Passengers come and passengers go, but this train, like the brook, goes on for ever. Although the travelling was luxurious I can honestly say that this was the most wearisome portion of the entire journey. But all things must have an end, even on the Trans-Siberian Railway, and on the tenth day out from Moscow we reach (unconsciously) our destination—Irkutsk. For it is two o'clock in the morning and we are aroused from pleasant dreams in a warm and cosy bed to embark upon a drive of about three miles through wind and snow in an open *droszky*. But we are now in Eastern Siberia, and comfort will soon be a thing of the past.

CHAPTER II

THE PARIS OF SIBERIA

We arrived in Irkutsk on the eve of the Russian New Year, when business throughout the Empire comes to a standstill, and revelry amongst all classes reigns supreme. It was, therefore, useless to think of resuming our journey for at least a week, for sleighs must be procured, to say nothing of that important document, a special letter of recommendation, which I was to receive from the Governor-General of Siberia. But a resplendent *aide-de-camp* called at the hotel and regretfully informed me that State and social functions would keep his Excellency fully occupied for several days. It was hopeless, he added, to think of getting sleighs built while *vodka* was running like water amongst the people. So there was nothing for it but to await the end of the festival with patience, without which commodity no traveller should ever dream of visiting Asiatic Russia. He is otherwise apt to become a raving lunatic.

Irkutsk has several so-called hotels, the only one in any way habitable being the "Hotel Metropole," a name which has become suggestive of gold-laced porters and gilded halls. It was, therefore, rather a shock to enter a noisome den, suggestive of a Whitechapel slum, although its prices equalled those of the Carlton in Pall Mall. The house was new but jerry-built, reeked of drains, and swarmed with vermin. Having kept us shivering for

half an hour in the cold, a sleepy, shock-headed lad with guttering candle appeared and led the way to a dark and ill-smelling sleeping-apartment. The latter contained an iron bedstead (an unknown luxury here a decade ago), but relays of guests had evidently used the crumpled sheets and grimy pillows. Bathroom and washstand were supplied by a rusty brass tap, placed, *pro bono publico*, in the corridor. Our meals in the restaurant were inferior to those of a fifth-rate *gargotte*. And this was the best hotel in the "Paris of Siberia," as enthusiastic Siberians have christened their capital.

Irkutsk now has a population of over 80,000. It stands on a peninsular formed by the confluence of two rivers, the clear and swiftly-flowing Angará (which rises in Lake Baikal to join the river Yenisei just below Yeniseisk), and the small and unimportant Irkut river. It is an unfinished, slipshod city, a strange mixture of squalor and grandeur, with tortuous, ill-paved streets, where the wayfarer looks instinctively for the "No-thoroughfare" board. There is one long straggling main street with fairly good shops and buildings, but beyond this Irkutsk remains much the same dull, dreary-looking place that I remember in the early nineties, before the railway had aroused the town from its slumber of centuries. Even now, the place is absolutely primitive and uncivilised, from an European point of view, and the yellow Chinese and beady-eyed Tartars who throng the business quarters are quite in keeping with the Oriental filth around, unredeemed by the usual Eastern colour

and romance. On fine mornings the Market Place presents a curious and interesting appearance, for here you may see the Celestial in flowery silk elbowing the fur-clad Yakute and Bokhara shaking hands with Japan. The Irkutsk district is peopled by the Buriates, who originally came from Trans-Baikalia, but who have now become more Russianised than any other Siberian race. The Buriat dialect is a kind of *patois* composed of Mongolian and Chinese; the religion Buddhism. About every fourth Buriat becomes a Lama, and takes vows of celibacy. They are thrifty, industrious people, ordinarily of an honest, hospitable disposition, who number, perhaps, 300,000 in all. This is probably the most civilised aboriginal race in Siberia, and many Buriates now wear European dress, and are employed as Government officials.

The climate of Irkutsk is fairly good; not nearly so cold in winter as many places on the same latitude; the summers are pleasant and equable; but the fall of the year is generally unhealthy, dense fogs occasioning a good deal of pulmonary disease and rheumatism. The city, too, is so execrably drained that severe epidemics occasionally occur during the summer months, but in winter the dry cold air acts as a powerful disinfectant. In spring-time, when the river Angará is swollen by the break-up of the ice, inundations are frequent, and sometimes cause great destruction to life and property. Winter is, therefore, the pleasantest season here, for during dry warm weather the clouds of black gritty dust are unbearable, especially on windy

days. Indeed, the dust here is almost worse than in Pekin, where the natives say that it will work its way through a watch-glass, no exaggeration, as I can, from personal experience, testify.

There was little enough to do here during our five days of enforced inactivity, and time crawled away with exasperating slowness, the more so that the waste of every hour was lessening our chance of success. But although harassed myself by anxiety, I managed to conceal the fact from de Clinchamp, whose Gallic nature was proof against *ennui*, and who managed to find friends and amusement even in this dismal city. In summer we might have killed time by an excursion to Lake Baikal,² for I retain very pleasant recollections of a week passed, some years since, on the pine-clad margin of this the largest lake in Asia, sixty-six times the area of the Lake of Geneva. Now its wintry shores and frozen waters possessed no attraction, save, perhaps, the ice-breaker used by the Trans-Siberian Railway to carry passengers across the lake, a passage of about twenty miles. But even the ice-breaker had met with an accident, and was temporarily disabled. So there was literally nothing to do but to linger as long as possible over the midday meal in the dingy little restaurant, and then to stroll aimlessly up and down the "Bolshaya," the main thoroughfare aforementioned, until dusk. This is the fashionable drive of the city, which on bright days

² "Lake Baikal is about twenty miles from Irkutsk. It is 420 miles in length, its breadth varying from ten to sixty miles. Its average depth is rarely less than 819 ft., but in parts the ground has been touched only at 4500 ft. The natives believe it to be unfathomable."—"Side Lights on Siberia," by J. Y. Simpson.

presented an almost animated appearance. There is no lack of money in Irkutsk, for gold-mining millionaires abound, and I generally spent the afternoon watching the cavalcade of well-appointed sleighs dashing, with a merry clash of bells, up and down the crowded street, and sauntering amongst the groups of well-dressed women and brilliant uniforms, until darkness drove me back to our unsavoury quarters at the Metropole. My companions generally patronised the skating rink, a sign of advancing civilisation, for ten years ago there was not a pair of skates to be found throughout the length and breadth of Siberia. Thus passed our days, and the evenings were even longer and more wearisome. Once we visited the Opera, a new and beautifully-decorated house, but the performance was execrable, and "La Dame de Chez Maxim" unrecognisable in Russian dress. There were also other so-called places of amusement, which blazed with electric light from dusk till dawn, where refreshments were served at little wooden tables while painted harridans from Hamburg cackled suggestive songs to the accompaniment of a cracked piano. In these establishments we used to see the local millionaires (and there are many) taking their pleasure expensively, but sadly enough, amidst surroundings that would disgrace a *dive* in San Francisco. The company was generally very mixed, soldiers and flashily-dressed *cocottes* being alone distinguishable, by their costume, from the rest of the audience. For although the Siberian woman of the better class has learnt of late years to dress well, wealth makes no difference to

the garb of mankind. All of the latter have the same dirty, unkempt appearance; all wear the same suit of shiny black, rusty high boots, and a shabby slouch-hat or peaked cap. Furs alone denote the difference of station, sable or blue fox denoting the mercantile Crœsus, astrachan or sheep-skin his clerk. Otherwise all the men look (indoors) as though they had slept in their clothes, which, by the way, is not improbable, for on one occasion I stayed with an Irkutsk Vanderbilt who lived in palatial style. His house was a dream of beauty and millions had been lavished on its ornamentation. Priceless pictures and *objets d'art*, a Paris *chef*, horses and carriages from London, and covered gardens of rare orchids and exotics. No expense had been spared to render life luxurious in this land of dirt and discomfort. Even my host's bedroom was daintily furnished, *à la* Louis XV., by a French upholsterer. And yet he slept every night, fully dressed, on three chairs! There is no accounting for tastes—in Siberia!

Although the "Bolshaya," in which most of the *café chantants* are situated, is bright with electric light, the back streets of the city are lit by flickering oil-lamps, and here the stranger must almost grope his way about after dark. If wise he will stay at home, for robbery and even murder are of frequent occurrence. A large proportion of the population here consists of time-expired convicts, many of whom haunt the night-houses in quest of prey. During our short stay a woman was murdered one night within a few yards of our hotel, and a man was stabbed to death in broad daylight on the busy "Bolshaya." The Chief of Police told

me that there is an average of a murder a day every year within the precincts of the city, and warned us not to walk out unarmed after dark. There was no incentive to drive, for the Irkutsk cab, or *droszky*, is a terrible machine, something like a hoodless bath-chair, springless, and constructed to hold two persons (at a pinch) besides the driver. There is no guard-rail, and it was sometimes no easy matter to cling on as the vehicle bumped and bounded, generally at full gallop, along the rough, uneven streets.

Three days elapsed before the business of the city was resumed and I was able to turn my attention to the purchase of sleighs. Fur coats and felt boots we were already provided with, but I had determined to obtain the Arctic kit destined to protect us from the intense cold north of Yakutsk from the fur merchants of that place. Finally, when the fumes of *vodka* had evaporated, at least a dozen sleigh-builders invaded my bedroom early one morning, for the Irkutsk papers had published our needs. The whole day was passed in driving about to the various workshops and examining sleighs, some of which appeared to have been constructed about the same period as the Ark. It was not easy to make a selection from the score of ramshackle *kibitkas* which were hauled out for my inspection, especially as I had a very faint notion of the kind of sleigh required for the work in hand. Fortunately, my friend the Chief of Police, white with rage and blazing with orders, burst into a yard as I was concluding the purchase of a venerable vehicle, which bore a striking resemblance to Napoleon's travelling carriage at

Madame Tussaud's, and which would probably have come to pieces during the first stage.

"Son of a dog," furiously cried the official to the trembling coach-builder, "don't you know that this gentleman wishes to go to Yakutsk, and you are trying to swindle him into buying a 'Bolshaya' *coupé*!" And in less than a minute I was being whirled away towards the Police Station, where a number of the peculiar sleighs required for this journey are kept on hand for the convenience of travellers.

"That man is an infernal scoundrel," said the Chief of Police, when told that Napoleon's *barouche* was to have cost me 150 roubles. "I will give you a couple of good Yakute sleighs for half the money. You can only use them on the Lena." And when I saw the primitive contrivances in question I no longer marvelled at their low price.

Let me describe the comfortless conveyance in which we accomplished the first two thousand miles of the journey across Siberia. A Yakute sleigh has a pair of runners, but otherwise totally differs from any other sleigh in the wide world. Imagine a sack of coarse matting about four feet deep suspended from a frame of rough wooden poles in a horizontal triangle, which also forms a seat for the driver. Into this bag the traveller first lowers his luggage, then his mattress, pillows, and furs, and finally enters himself, lying at full length upon his belongings. There is a thick felt apron which can be pulled completely over its occupant at night-time or in stormy weather. This sounds warm

and comfortable, but is precisely the reverse, for after a few hours the porous felt becomes saturated with moisture (formed by bodily warmth and external cold), rendering the traveller's heavy garments damp and chilly for the remainder of the journey. There is nothing to prevent the *Koshma*, as this covering is called (*Cauchemar* would be a better name!), from resting upon the face during sleep, and frost-bitten features are the natural result. So far, therefore, as comfort is concerned a Yakute sleigh is capable of some improvement, for, even in fine weather, the occupant must raise himself up on his elbows to see anything but the sky above him, while in storms the damp, heavy covering casts him into outer darkness. Under the most favourable circumstances little is seen of the country travelled through, but, as the Chief of Police consolingly remarked, "Between here and Yakutsk there is nothing to see!"

Provisions were the next consideration, and these were obtained from a well-appointed store on the "Bolshaya." We now had but a dozen cases of condensed foods, &c., left, and these I wished to keep intact, if possible, for use in the Arctic regions. On the Lena road the post-houses were only from thirty to forty miles apart, but as they only provide hot water and black bread for the use of travellers, I laid in a good supply of canned meats, sardines, and tea to carry us comfortably, at any rate, through the first stage of the journey. With months of desolation before us our English tobacco was too precious to smoke in civilisation, so a few hundred Russian cigarettes were added to the list.

At last came the welcome news that the Governor-General would grant us an interview. Accompanied by an *aide-de-camp*, we drove to the Palace on the banks of the Angará, and were ushered into the presence of the Tsar's Viceroy, who governs a district about the size of Europe. General Panteleyéff was a middle-aged man, with white moustache, light blue eyes, and a spare athletic figure, displayed to advantage by a smart dark green uniform. The General is a personal friend of the Emperor, and the cross of St. Andrew and a tunic covered with various orders bore witness to their wearer's distinguished career. He received me most cordially, and asked many questions regarding the land-journey, which had apparently aroused considerable interest in Russian official circles. The General, however, had no great faith in the proposed line to connect his country with the New World.

"We have our hands too full in the Far East for the next century," he said, with a smile, "to meddle with Arctic railways."

His Excellency assured me of every assistance as far as Nijni-Kolymsk, the most remote Cossack outpost on the shores of the Polar Sea, on ordinary occasions a year's journey from St. Petersburg. "Beyond Kolymsk," he added, "I fear I cannot help you. The Tchuktchi region is nominally under my control, but even our own officials rarely venture for any distance into that desolate country. But you will first have to reach Nijni-Kolymsk, and even that is a voyage that few Russians would care to undertake; and beyond Nijni-Kolymsk you will have yet another

two thousand miles to Bering Straits. Great Heavens! what a terrible journey! But you English are a wonderful people!" Here a secretary entered the apartment with a document, which the Governor rapidly scanned and then signed.

"Your Imperial passport," he said, placing the paper in my hand, "which will ensure civility and assistance from all officials you may meet as far as the Kolyma river. Beyond that you must rely yourselves and the goodwill of the natives, if you ever find them! May God preserve you all."

So saying, with a hearty shake of the hand, the General touched a bell, the *aide-de-camp* appeared, and I was re-conducted to my sleigh, rejoicing that nothing could now retard our departure. Amongst other privileges the passport ensured immediate relays of horses at the post-stations. As there are no less than one hundred and twenty-two of these (from fifteen to twenty-five miles apart) between Irkutsk and Yakutsk, and as the ordinary traveller is invariably delayed by extortionate postmasters, this clause was of the utmost importance. In many other ways also the document was a priceless one, and without it we could scarcely have reached the shores of America.

It may be that I have unduly underrated the attractions of Irkutsk to the average public. If so, the reader must remember that every hour of delay here was of importance and meant endless worry and vexation to the leader of an expedition which had not an hour to lose. There is no doubt that Irkutsk must in a few years become a teeming centre of commercial activity.

The social aspects of the place will then no doubt improve under the higher civilisation introduced by a foreign element. The resources of this province are limitless, for the soil has up till now, minerially speaking, only been scratched by idle fingers. Further afield we hear of important discoveries of valuable minerals in Manchuria, while the output of gold in the Lena district has been trebled by modern machinery within the past four years. Coal has also been recently discovered within a short distance of Lake Baikal, and is already being exported in large quantities to the Pacific ports. Irkutsk has, no doubt, a great commercial future, but should I ever return there I shall, personally speaking, be quite satisfied to find a decent hotel. Such an establishment run on modern lines would certainly yield fabulous returns. At present the only available restaurant is that of the grimy and verminous Metropole, and even here the local millionaires cheerfully pay prices for atrocious food and worse wines which would open the eyes of a Ritz.

Perhaps the most pleasant memory which I retain of Irkutsk is a cheery little supper which was given in our honour by a Mr. Koenigswether and his wife and brother on the eve of our departure. The travellers, who had only arrived that day, were visiting the city on business connected with the purchase of furs, and a chance word dropped in the purest French by Madame at the dinner-table linked our parties inseparably for the remainder of the evening; indeed, until the next day. Madame Koenigswether, an attractive little *Parisienne*, seemed to cast a

gleam of sunshine over the gloomy dining-room in which we had partaken of so many melancholy meals. The trip here from Paris had already imbued her with a passion for further exploration, and I verily believe that she would have accompanied the expedition to Yakutsk if not restrained by her less enthusiastic male companions. Bed on such an occasion was not to be thought of, so we visited the theatre and *café chantants*, ending the evening with a supper at the Metropole (previously ordered by the fur merchants) which proved that money, even in Irkutsk, will convert a culinary bungler into a very passable *chef*. Our departure for the North took place very early on the morning of January 19, and I have since heard that nothing would induce our merry little hostess to seek her couch until the tingle of our sleigh bells had died out on the frosty air.

"A New York!" she cried, as our horses sprang into their collars and dashed away down the frosty, silent street.

"N'ayéz pas peur! Nous arriverons," answered de Clinchamp, with a cool assurance which at the time excited my envy, if not admiration!

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT LENA POST-ROAD

The distance from Irkutsk to Yakutsk is about 2000 English miles, but the post-road by which we travelled during the first stage of the overland journey is, properly speaking, no road at all. After leaving Irkutsk the traveller crosses about 150 miles of well-wooded country, until the upper waters of the Lena river are reached.³ In winter time the frozen surface of the latter connects the two cities, and there is no other way by land. A double row of pine branches stuck into the snow at short intervals indicate the track, and this is a necessary precaution, as the hot springs of the Upper Lena frequently render the ice treacherous and unsafe. A sharp look-out is, therefore, kept all along the line for overflows, and, when necessary, the road is shifted to avoid them, but notwithstanding these precautions, darkness and drunken drivers often cause fatal accidents. In summer time Yakutsk may be reached by small steamers plying from Ust-kutsk, on the Lena, about 250 miles by road from Irkutsk. The trip takes about a fortnight down stream, and three weeks in the reverse

³ The Lena river has an estimated length of not less than 3000 miles. It rises in the Baikal mountains and flows north and east past the towns of Kirensk, Vitimsk, and Olekminsk to Yakutsk, thence it turns to the north-west and enters the Arctic Ocean, forming a wide delta. The Lena receives several large tributaries, viz., the Vitim, about 1400, the Olekma, about 800, and the Aldan, about 1300 miles long.

direction, but sand-bars frequently cause delays, rendered the more irksome by poor accommodation, stifling heat, and clouds of mosquitoes.⁴

Most people in England have a very vague idea of the size of Siberia. It is only by actually visiting the country that one can grasp the harassing difficulties due to appalling distances and primitive modes of locomotion, especially when the traveller is bound for the Far North. I will, therefore, endeavour to convey to the reader, as briefly as possible, the area of this land of illimitable space, and cannot do so better than by quoting the graphic description given by the American explorer, Mr. George Kennan.⁵ He says: "You can take the whole of the United States of America, from Maine to California and from Lake Superior to the Gulf of Mexico, and set it down in the middle of Siberia without touching anywhere the boundaries of the latter's territory; you can then take Alaska and all the countries of Europe, with the exception of Russia, and fit them into the remaining margin like the pieces of a dissected map. After having thus accommodated all of the United States, including Alaska, and the whole of Europe, except Russia, you will still have more than 300,000 miles of Siberian territory to spare. In other words, you will still have unoccupied in Siberia an area

⁴ This must be very slow travelling, for Dobell, the traveller, writes: "When I descended the Lena from Ust-kutsk in the spring of 1816, I was only fourteen days going to Yakutsk in a large flat-bottomed boat."

⁵ "Siberia and the Exile System," by George Kennan.

half as large again as the Empire of Germany." According to the census of 1897 the entire population of Siberia is little more than that of the English metropolis.

A couple of Yakute sleighs sufficed for ourselves and entire outfit. I rode with de Clinchamp in the leading vehicle, while Harding and the bulk of the stores followed in the other. At first sight, the Yakute sleigh appears to be a clumsy but comfortable contrivance, but very few miles had been covered before I discovered its unlimited powers of inflicting pain. For this machine does not glide like a well-behaved sleigh, but advances by leaps and bounds that strain every nerve and muscle in the body. In anything like deep, soft snow it generally comes to a standstill, and the combined efforts of men and horses are required to set it going again. However, for the first three or four days, good progress was made at the rate of about 200 versts⁶ in the twenty-four hours, for we travelled night and day. There was no incentive to pass the night in the post-houses, which were generally of a filthy description, although luxurious compared to the Yakute Yurtas and Tchuktchi huts awaiting us up North. On the Lena post-road, stages were only from fifteen to thirty miles apart, and with a fresh *troika* (three horses harnessed abreast) at such short intervals, our rate of speed for the first week was very satisfactory. Between Irkutsk and the river Lena part of the road lies through dense forests, which are generally infested with runaway convicts, so we kept a sharp look-out and revolvers

⁶ A verst is two-thirds of an English mile.

handy. Only a week before we passed through this region a mail-cart had been held up and its driver murdered, but I fancy news had filtered through that my expedition was well armed, and we therefore reached the Lena unmolested.

The weather at Irkutsk had been comparatively warm, and we were, therefore, unprepared for the intense cold experienced only forty-eight hours after our departure. Although on the evening of the 19th the thermometer had registered only 10° below zero Fahrenheit, it suddenly sank during the night to 65° below zero, where it remained until the following evening. Oddly enough, a dense mist accompanied the fall of the mercury, rendering the cold infinitely harder to bear. Our drivers declared that this climatic occurrence was most unusual, and the fact remains that this was the lowest temperature recorded during the entire journey south of the Yakute Yurta of Yuk-Takh, several hundred miles north of Yakutsk. There we had to face 75° below zero, but then Yuk-Takh adjoins Verkhoyansk, the coldest place in the world. But the dry frosty air of even this remote settlement inconvenienced me far less than the chilly breeze of a raw November day on the Paris Boulevards with the mercury half a dozen degrees above the freezing-point. On the Lena this Arctic cold only lasted for about eighteen hours, and then slowly rose again, after remaining at about 50° below zero for a couple of days. The severest cold afterwards experienced south of Yakutsk was 51° below zero, and that only upon one occasion. Otherwise it varied from 2° above to 40° below zero, but even

that was sufficient to convert our provisions into a granite-like consistency, and at first wearisome delays were occasioned at the post-stations by the thawing out of petrified sardines and tinned soup converted into solid ice. Milk, frozen and cut into cubes, was conveniently carried in a net attached to the sleigh, and this, with tea, was our sole beverage. For a case with a few bottles of Crimean claret, which we had taken to enliven the first portion of the journey, was found when broached to contain nothing but fragments of red ice and broken glass. Even some cognac (for medicinal purposes) was partly frozen in its flask. On the same day de Clinchamp, removing his mits to take a photograph, accidentally touched some metal on the camera, and his fingers were seared as though with a red-hot iron. Perhaps our greatest annoyance on this voyage was the frequent deprivation of tobacco, that heavenly solace on long and trying journeys. For at even 40° below zero nicotine blocks the pipe-stem, and cigar or cigarette freezes firmly to the lips. The moustache also forms a mask of solid ice, and becomes an instrument of torture, so much so that on the third day out on the Lena ours were mercilessly clipped.

The post-houses on this road are, as I have said, luxurious as compared to the accommodation found among the Arctic races of Siberia, but I fancy those accustomed to "roughing it," as the word is generally understood in England, would find even a trip as far as Yakutsk rather a trial. Of course, these establishments vary from the best, which are about on a par with

the labourer's cottage in England, to the worst, which can only be described as dens of filth and squalor. All are built on the same plan. There is one guest-room, a bare carpetless apartment, with a rough wooden bench, a table, and two straight-backed wooden chairs, and the room is heated to suffocation by a huge stove, which occupies a corner of the room. The flimsy plank partition is unpapered, but generally plastered with the cheap, crudely coloured prints sold by pedlars. Some of these depicted events connected with our recent war in South Africa, and it is needless to add that the English troops were invariably depicted in the act of ignominious flight.⁷ I purchased one, in which three distinguished British Generals were portrayed upon their knees imploring mercy of Mr. Kruger, and sent it to England, but it never reached its destination. This work of art had been "made in Germany."

In every guest-room, however squalid, four objects were never missing: the sacred Ikon, portraits of the Tsar and Tsarina, and a printed copy of the posting rules. On the wall was generally also a bill of fare, in faded ink, which showed how many generations of travellers must have been duped by its tempting list of savoury dishes. I never could ascertain whether these had ever really existed in the far distant past, or whether the notice was a poor joke on the part of the proprietor. In any case, the *menu*

⁷ I was surprised by the interest displayed by the Russian settlers of this district anent the Boer War. In every village we were eagerly questioned as to how affairs in the Transvaal were progressing.

we found was always the same: hot water, sour black bread, and (very rarely) eggs of venerable exterior, for although the inmates of these stations presumably indulge occasionally in meat, no amount of bribery would induce them to produce it for our benefit. Vermin was everywhere; night and day it crawled gaily over the walls and ceiling, about our bodies, and into our very food, and, although the subject did not interest us, a naturalist would have delighted in the ever-changing varieties of insect life. Of the latter, cockroaches were, I think, the most objectionable, for they can inflict a nasty poisonous bite. Oddly enough, throughout Siberia I never saw a rat, although mice seem to swarm in every building, old or new, which we entered. The Lena post-house has a characteristic odour of unwashed humanity, old sheep-skins and stale tobacco. Occasionally, this subtle blend includes a whiff of the cow-shed, which generally means that one or more of its youthful occupants have been carried indoors out of the cold. In winter there is no ventilation whatsoever, save when the heavy felt-lined door is opened and an icy blast rushes in to be instantly converted by the stifling heat into a dense mass of steam. Indoors it was seldom under 80° Fahrenheit, and although divested of heavy furs we would invariably awaken from a sleep of, perhaps, a couple of hours, drenched with perspiration, in which state we would once more face the pitiless cold. In England such extremes of temperature, experienced day after day, would probably kill the strongest man outright, but here they made no appreciable difference in our

bodily health.

It was no doubt rough travelling along the Lena, and yet the pleasures of the journey far outweighed its ills. Before reaching the river our way lay across vast deserts of snow, with no objects visible save, at rare intervals, some tiny village almost buried in the drifts, its dark roofs peeping out here and there, and appearing at a distance like pieces of charcoal laid on a piece of white cotton-wool. Beyond these nothing but the single telegraph wire which connects Yakutsk with civilisation. Coated with rime it used to stand out like a jewelled thread against the dazzling sky, which merged imperceptibly from darkest sapphire overhead to tenderest turquoise on the horizon. Who can describe the delights of a sleigh journey under such conditions, or realise, in imagination, the charm and novelty of a wild gallop over leagues of snow behind game little Siberian horses, tearing along to the clash of yoke-bells at the rate of twenty miles an hour! In anything but a Yakute sleigh we should have been in an earthly paradise.

And on fine evenings, pleasanter still was it to lie in the sleigh snugly wrapped in furs, and watch the inky sky powdered with stars—Ursa Major (now almost overhead) sprawling its glittering shape across the heavens, and the little Pleiades twinkling like a diamond spray against dark velvet. At times I could make out every lonely peak and valley in the lunar world, and even distinguish far-away Polaris twinkling dimly over the earth's great mystery. The stars are never really seen in misty Europe.

But a week, ten days, elapses and so little progress is made in the alarming total of mileage that the heart sinks at the mere thought of the stupendous distance before us. Few villages are passed and these are invariably alike. A row of ramshackle huts; at one extremity the post-house with black and white *verst* post, at the other a rough palisade of logs about twenty feet high, enclosing a space from which a grey column of smoke rises lazily into the frosty air. The building is invisible, but it generally contains one or more unhappy exiles wending slowly towards a place of exile. Every village between Irkutsk and Yakutsk has its *Balogan*, or resting-place for political offenders, but in the Far North beyond the Arctic Circle prison bars become superfluous. Nature has taken their place.

There can be no doubt that, for monotony, this journey is unequalled. After a few days surrounding objects seemed to float by in a vague dream. Only the "scroop" of the runners and jingle of the sleigh-bells seemed to be hammered into the brain, for all eternity. And yet, even the bells in their own way were a godsend, for they were changed (with the yoke) at every station, and I liked to think that every one of the hundred and twenty-two stages were accompanied by a different tune! There were other drawbacks to complete enjoyment. On the whole, the weather was still and clear, but occasionally the sky would darken, down would come the snow, and we would flounder about, sometimes for hours, lost in the drifts. Logs frozen into the river, fissures in the ice, and other causes rendered upsets of almost daily

occurrence, but it was generally soft falling. I remarked that as we proceeded further north the post-horses became wilder and more unmanageable, and it was often more than the drivers could do to hold them. Twice our sleigh was run away with, and once de Clinchamp and myself were thrown with unpleasant force on to hard black ice. On another occasion the *troika* started off while the driver was altering the harness, and went like the wind before we could clamber on to the box, seize the reins, and stop them. The unfortunate *yemstchik*⁸ was dragged with them, and I expected to find the poor fellow a mangled corpse, but we pulled him out from under his team badly cut and bruised, but otherwise little the worse for the accident. He had clung like grim death to the pole, or the heavy sleigh must have crushed him.

During daylight we could afford to laugh at such trifles, but at night time it was a different matter. To tear through the darkness at a breakneck pace at the mercy of three wild, unbroken horses required some nerve, especially when lying under the *koshma* as helpless as a sardine in a soldered tin. For the first few days overflows were a constant menace, especially at night when sleep under the apron was out of the question, for any moment might mean a plunge through the ice into the cold dark waters of the Lena. I generally had a clasp-knife ready to slash asunder, at a moment's notice, the ropes which secured the apron to the sleigh. After a time I could lie in the dark and tell with unerring precision whether the sleigh was gliding over the river or the land, and

⁸ Driver.

whether, in the former case, the ice was black and sound or that dread element, water, was rippling against the runners. If so, out came the clasp-knife, and there was no more *koshma* for that night. During the first week we frequently passed places where hot springs had broken through the ice. One or two of these holes were quite near the track, and might well, on a dark night, have brought the expedition to an untimely end.

Talking of ice, we noticed a curious phenomenon in connection with it while journeying down the Lena. On clear sunny days the frozen surface of the river would appear to be sloping downwards at a perceptible gradient in the direction in which we were travelling; occasionally it would almost seem as though we were descending a fairly steep hill, had not the unrelaxed efforts of our teams suggested the optical delusion which, as long ago as 1828, was observed by Erman the explorer, who wrote: "I am disposed to think that this phenomenon was connected with the glistening and distortion of distant objects which I remarked not only in this part of the valley, but frequently also on the following days. This proved that the air was ascending from the ice and therefore that the lower strata were lighter than those above in which the eye was placed. Under such circumstances a plane perfectly horizontal and level in fact would appear depressed towards the horizon, or, in other words, it would seem to slope downwards." Scientists must determine whether this be the correct explanation of this strange deception of nature, which was often noticeable on the Lena, although we

never observed it elsewhere.

We reached Ust-kutsk (the first town of any importance) on the sixth day. This place figures largely on most English maps, but it is little more than an overgrown village. A church with apple-green dome and gilt crosses, a score of neat houses clustered around the dwelling of an *ispravnik*,⁹ perhaps a couple of stores for the sale of clothing and provisions, and a cleaner post-house than usual: such is a "town" on the banks of the Lena. With the exception of Ust-kutsk there are only three, Kirensk, Vitimsk, and Olekminsk, places of such little general interest that they are chiefly associated in my mind with the four square meals we were able to obtain during those three weeks of incessant travel. At Ust-kutsk, for instance, we refreshed the inner man with a steaming bowl of *schtchi* or cabbage soup followed by the tough and greasy chunks of meat that had been boiled in it, and the meal tasted delicious after nearly a week on black bread, an occasional salt fish and dubious eggs. Our own provisions were so hopelessly frozen that we seldom wasted the time necessary to thaw them out into an eatable condition. There are salt-mines near Ust-kutsk from which about 50,000 *poods*¹⁰ are annually exported throughout the Lena province, and the forests around here contain valuable timber, but agriculture did not seem so prosperous here as in the districts to the north and south. Oddly enough the cultivation of the land seemed to improve as we

⁹ An official who combines the duties of Mayor and Chief of Police.

¹⁰ A "pood" is thirty-six English pounds.

progressed northward, as far as Yakutsk, where, as the reader will presently see, the most modern methods of farming have been successfully adopted by a very peculiar and interesting class of people.

I was told that during the navigation season, from June until the latter end of September, Ust-kutsk is a busy place on account of the weekly arrival and departure of the river steamers. But lying silent and still in the icy grip of winter, this appeared to me to be the most desolate spot I had ever set eyes upon. And we left it without regret, notwithstanding that a darkening sky and threatening snow-flakes accompanied our departure, and the cold and hunger of the past few days had considerably lowered the high spirits in which we had left Irkutsk. Up till now monotony had been the worst evil to bear. In summer time the river as far as Yakutsk is highly cultivated, and smiling villages and fertile fields can be discerned from the deck of a steamer, but in winter, from a sleigh, nothing is visible day after day, week after week, but an unvarying procession of lime-stone, pine-clad cliffs, which completely shut out any scenery which may lie beyond them, and between which the bleak and frozen flood lies as inert and motionless as a corpse. Even at Ust-kutsk, nearly 3000 miles from the Arctic Ocean, the stream is as broad as an arm of the sea, which enhances the general impression of gloom and desolation. But in this world everything is comparative, and we little dreamt, when reviling the Lena, that a time was coming when we should look back even upon this apparently earthly

Erebus as a whirlpool of gaiety.

When we left Ust-kutsk at about 3 P.M. night was falling fast, a proceeding which scattered snow-flakes followed with such vigour that only a few *versts* had been covered when we were brought to a standstill by a dense snowstorm, which, with a northerly gale, rapidly assumed the proportions of a blizzard. Providence has mercifully ordained that a high wind seldom, if ever, accompanies a very low temperature or on this occasion (and many others) we should have fared badly. But here and in the Arctic a fall of the glass was invariably accompanied by a rise of the thermometer, and *vice versâ*. During this, our first storm, it was only eight degrees below zero, and even then it was impossible to face the wind for more than a few moments at a time, for it penetrated our heavy fur coats as though they had been of *crêpe-de-chine*, and cut into the face like the lash of a cat-o'-nine-tails. I had never experienced such a gale (although it was nothing to those we afterwards encountered), for the wind seemed to blow from all points of the compass at once as we blundered blindly along through the deep snow, pushing and hauling at the sleighs as well as our numbed hands and cumbersome garments would permit. So blinding was the snow we couldn't see a yard ahead; so fierce the wind we could scarcely stand up to it. Suddenly both teams gave a wild plunge which sent us sprawling on our faces, and when I regained my feet the sleighs were upset and the horses, snorting with terror, were up to their girths in a snow-drift. I then gave up all hopes of

reaching a station that night. For over an hour we worked like galley-slaves, and suddenly when we had finally got things partly righted, the wind dropped as if by magic, and one or two stars peeped out overhead. The rapidity with which the weather can change in these regions is simply marvellous. We often left a post-house in clear weather, and, less than an hour after, were fighting our way in the teeth of a gale and heavy snow. An hour later and stillness would again reign, and the sun be shining as before! We now quickly took advantage of the lull to push on, and in a few hours were rewarded by the glimmering lights of a post-house. We had reached the village of Yakurimsk and, being fairly exhausted by the cold and hard work, I resolved to stay here the night. This was our first experience of frost-bite (both faces and hands suffered severely), which is not actually painful until circulation returns, and care must then be taken not to approach a fire. I have always found that snow, vigorously rubbed on the frozen part, is the best remedy. The stage between Ust-kutsk and Yakurimsk was a short one, only about eighteen *versts*, but it took us six hours to make it. When we awoke next morning bright sunshine was streaming into the guest-room, which was older and filthier than usual. But it possessed a cracked and cloudy looking-glass which dimly reflected three countenances swollen and discoloured beyond recognition. For we had neglected to anoint our faces with grease (Lanoline is the best), but after this experience never neglected this essential precaution.

The postmaster at Yakurimsk, a decrepit Pole of benign but

unwashed exterior, informed me that the woods around his village swarmed with bears, and that on payment of a few roubles for beaters he could ensure us a good day's sport. But although the offer was tempting I did not feel justified in risking the delay. Wolves had also been numerous, but had, as usual, confined their attacks to pigs and cattle. Before visiting Siberia I had the usual fallacious notion concerning the aggressiveness of this meek and much maligned animal. I remember, in my early youth, a coloured plate depicting a snow scene and a sleigh being hotly pursued at full gallop by a pack of hungry and savage-looking wolves. In the sleigh was a Cossack pale with terror, with a baby in his teeth and a pistol in each hand. I fancy that, in riper years, I must have unconsciously based my estimate of the wolf's ferocity on this illustration, for I have now crossed Siberia four times without being attacked, or even meeting any one who had been molested. The only wolf which ever crossed my path was a haggard mangy-looking specimen, which, at first sight, I took for a half-starved dog. We met in a lonely wood near Krasnoyarsk in Western Siberia, but, as soon as he caught sight of me, the brute turned and ran for his life!

Our drivers and horses were exchanged at every station so that the severe work of the previous night did not retard our progress after leaving Yakurimsk. The weather was fine and we made good headway until the 28th, on the afternoon of which day we reached the second town of Kirensk. A few miles above the latter the Lena makes a wide *détour* of fifty to sixty miles and the post-

road is laid overland in a straight line to avoid it. It was a relief to exchange, if only for a few hours, that eternal vista of lime-stone and pines for a more extended view. The Kirensk mountains are here crossed, a range which, although of no great altitude, is precipitous and thickly wooded, so much so that in places the sleighs could scarcely pass between the trees. The climb was severe, but a lovely view over hundreds of miles of country amply rewarded our exertions. The glorious panorama of mountain, stream, and woodland stretching away on all sides to the horizon, intersected by the silvery Lena, was after the flat and dismal river scenery like a draught of clear spring water to one parched with thirst. Overhead a network of rime-coated branches sparkled against the blue with a bright and almost unnatural effect that reminded one of a Christmas card. A steep and difficult descent brought us to the plains again, and after a pleasant drive through forests of pine and cedar interspersed with mountain ash and a pretty red-berried shrub of which I ignore the name, we arrived, almost sorry that the short land trip was over, at Kirensk.

Although not the largest, this is the prettiest and cleanest-looking town on the Lena. Perhaps our favourable impressions of the place were partly due to the dazzling sunshine and still, delicious air. Dull skies and a fog would, perhaps, have made a world of difference; but as, under existing conditions, Kirensk afforded us the only interval of real rest and enjoyment on the Lena, we were proportionately grateful. And it was almost a pleasure to walk through the neat streets, with their gaily-

painted houses and two or three really fine stores, where any article from a ship's anchor to a gramophone seemed to be on sale. A few mercantile houses and a busy little dockyard, with a couple of river-steamers in course of construction, explained the prosperous appearance of this attractive little town, which contrasted cheerfully with all others which we saw in Siberia. The inn was quite in keeping with its surroundings, and perhaps a longer time than was absolutely necessary was passed there, for *déjeuner* was served, not in the usual dark fusty room reeking with foul odours, but in a bright, cheerful little apartment with comfortable furniture and a table set with a white cloth and spotless china by a window overlooking the river. There was a mechanical organ, too, which enlivened us with "La Marseillaise" and "Loin du Pays" as a pretty waiting-maid in Russian costume served us with some excellent cutlets and an omelette, which were washed down with a bottle of Crimean wine. These culinary details may appear trifles to the reader, but they had already become matters of moment to us. And the sun shone so brightly that the claret glowed like a ruby in the glass as we drank to the success of the expedition and our friends in far-away France and England. And so susceptible is man to the influence of his surroundings that for one fleeting hour New York seemed no distance away to speak of!

After leaving Kirensk the horses were harnessed *gusem* or tandem fashion, for it is here necessary to leave the river and travel along its shores where the roadway becomes a mere track

three or four feet wide through the forests. As our sleighs were unusually broad, this caused some trouble, and once or twice trees had to be felled before we could proceed. When Vitimsk was reached, on February 2, the drivers there flatly refused to embark upon a stage until the breadth of our sleighs had been reduced by at least one-third. Fortunately the weather changed for the worse, and snowstorms and a stiff Northern gale would have greatly impeded us, so that the lost time was not so precious as it might have been. There is no inn at Vitimsk, but the post-house was clean and comfortable, and the *ispravnik*, on reading the Governor's letter, also placed his house and services at my disposal, but I only availed myself of the latter to hasten the alteration to the sleighs. The only wheelwright in Vitimsk being an incorrigible drunkard, this operation would, under ordinary circumstances, have occupied at least a week; under the watchful eye of the stern official it was finished in forty-eight hours. Politically, I am a Radical, but I am bound to admit that there are circumstances under which an autocratic form of Government has its advantages.

Until Vitimsk was reached we had met but few travellers during our journey down the Lena, certainly under a score in all, which was fortunate, considering the limited accommodation *en route*. But at Vitimsk I was destined to come across not only an Englishman but a personal friend. The meeting, on both sides, was totally unexpected, and as on the evening of our arrival I watched a sleigh drive up through the blinding storm and a

shapeless bundle of furs emerge from it and stagger into the post-house, I little dreamt that the newcomer was one with whom I had passed many a pleasant hour in the realms of civilisation. The recognition was not mutual, for a week of real Siberian travel will render any man unrecognisable. "Pardon, M'sieu," began the stranger, and I at once recognised the familiar British accent; "Je reste ici seulement une heure." "Faites, monsieur," was my reply. But as I spoke the fur-clad giant looked up from the valise he was unstrapping and regarded me curiously. "Well, I'm d-d," he said, after a long pause, "if it isn't Harry de Windt." But Talbot Clifton had to reveal his identity, for months of hardship and privation, followed by a dangerous illness, had so altered his appearance that I doubt if even his mother would have recognised her son in that post-house at Vitimsk. Clifton had already passed a year among the Eskimo on the Northern coast of the American continent, when, in the summer of 1901, he descended the Lena as far as its delta on the Arctic Ocean. Here he remained for several months, living with the natives and accompanying them on their fishing and shooting expeditions. In the fall of the year he returned to Yakutsk, where he contracted a chill which developed into double pneumonia, and nearly cost him his life. My friend, who was now on his way home to England, had only bad news for us. The reindeer to the north of Yakutsk were so scarce and so weak that he had only just managed to struggle back there from Bulun, on the delta, a trifling trip compared to the journey we were about to undertake.

Moreover, the mountain passes south of Verkhoyansk were blocked with snow, and, even if deer were obtainable, we might be detained on the wrong side of the range for days, or even weeks. All things considered, I would rather not have met Clifton at this juncture, for his gloomy predictions seemed to sink into the hearts of my companions—and remain there. However, a pleasant evening was passed with the assistance of tobacco and a villainous mixture, which my friend concocted with fiery *vodka* and some wild berries, and called punch. I doubt if, before this notable occasion, Vitimsk had ever contained (at the same time) two Englishmen, a Frenchman, and the writer, who may claim to be a little of both.

Talbot Clifton left early the next day, and before sunset the sleighs were finished and we were once more on the road. From Vitimsk I despatched telegrams to the Governor of Yakutsk and the London *Daily Express*, and was surprised at the moderate charges for transmission. Of course, the messages had to be written in Russian, but they were sent through at five and ten kopeks a word respectively.¹¹

Vitimsk is, perhaps, less uninteresting than other towns on the Lena, for two reasons. It is the centre of a large and important gold-mining district, and the finest sables in the world are found in its immediate neighbourhood. Up till four years ago the gold was worked in a very desultory way, but machinery was

¹¹ A kopek is the one-hundredth part of a rouble; the value of the latter is about 2s. 1d.

introduced in 1898, and last year an already large output was trebled. This district is said to be richer than Klondike, but only Russian subjects may work the gold.

Olekminsk (pronounced "Alokminsk") was now our objective point. I shall not weary the reader with the details of this stage, for he is probably already too familiar, as we were at this juncture, with the physical and social aspects of travel on the Lena. Suffice it to say that a considerable portion of the journey was accomplished through dense forests, during which the sleighs were upset on an average twice a day by refractory teams, and that the filthiest post-houses and worst weather we had yet experienced added to the discomfort of the trip. Blizzards, too, were now of frequent occurrence, and once we were lost for nearly eighteen hours in the drifts and suffered severely from cold and hunger. Nearing Yakutsk travellers became more numerous, and we met some strange types of humanity. Two of these, travelling together, are stamped upon my memory. They consisted of an elderly, bewigged, and powdered little Italian, his German wife, a much-berouged lady of large proportions and flaxen hair, with a poodle. We met them at midnight in a post-house, where they had annexed every available inch of sleeping space the tiny hut afforded.

A gale and gusts of sleet rendered further progress impossible for that night, and I was therefore compelled to break in upon the conjugal privacy of the couple and their faithful companion. Monsieur, who was sleeping on the floor, at once made room

for us, but Madame, who (with the poodle) occupied the bench, fiercely resented the intrusion and threatened de Clinchamp, the first to enter the room, with summary vengeance if he did not at once retire. This my friend politely did, but it was so bitterly cold outside that I battered at the bolted door of the guest-room until the little Italian emerged, and volubly explained the situation. His massive consort, it appeared, invariably disrobed at night (even in a Lena post-house!), and was not prepared to receive visitors. Gallantry forbade further discussion, and we shared the postmaster's dark closet with his wife and five squalling children. The room, about ten feet by four, possessed the atmosphere of a Turkish bath, and an odour as though it had, for several months, harboured a thriving family of ferrets. But with a lady in the question there was nothing to be done. When we awoke next morning the strange couple had departed. I never saw them again, but from what I afterwards heard at Yakutsk their mission to that city was such a shady one that I question if "Madame's" modesty was not assumed for the occasion.

The remainder of the journey from here to Yakutsk was accomplished without further incident, and the town of Olekminsk so resembles its predecessors as to need no description. We reached the place late at night, but the *ispravnik* was more hospitably inclined than others we had met, and gave us supper while the teams were changed. One of the dishes would certainly have found favour in a Paris restaurant—a fish called "Nelma," which is found only in the Lena,

and is served uncooked and in thin frozen slices. Ices and champagne terminated the little repast, which was presided over by our host's pretty wife. The only other guest was one Vassily Brando, a political exile, whose intimacy with the *ispravnik* was strangely at variance with all that I had heard and read concerning exiles in the remoter parts of Siberia. Brando, a Jewish-looking person with keen dark eyes, was undergoing a sentence of eight years here after the usual term of preliminary imprisonment in Europe. During his incarceration Brando had taught himself English, which he now spoke almost fluently. This exile told me that Olekminsk contained twenty other politicals, and was preferred to any other town or village on the Lena as a place of detention. Neither he nor his companions could travel for more than ten versts in any direction without a special permit from the Governor of Yakutsk, but, as the poor fellow pathetically remarked, "That's no great hardship!" The exiles at Olekminsk may frequently receive letters and communicate with their friends (under the supervision of the authorities), and the solace of modern literature is not denied them so long as it is not connected with Socialism. Brando was an ardent admirer of Rudyard Kipling, and could, I verily believe, have passed an examination in most of his works.

We took leave of our kind host, Captain Bereskine, at midnight. It was bitterly cold (30° below zero), and I was, therefore, surprised when we alighted at the first post-house, after a long stage of thirty-five miles, to find our host smilingly

awaiting us with sandwiches, cigarettes, and a bottle of cognac! He had passed us on the road, determined, even at considerable discomfort to himself, that we should travel, at any rate through his district, in comfort. Such a thing could never have occurred in any country but Siberia, where hospitality is looked upon (amongst Russians) as the first duty of man. Just imagine leaving your host on a cold winter's night in England to travel from London to Edinburgh and finding him waiting at, say, Hitchin to bid you a final farewell. But the *simile* is weak, for there is a vast difference between an open sleigh and a sleeping-car.

An interesting personality we afterwards met on the road to Yakutsk was Dr. Herz, the famous naturalist, whom we fortunately came across in a post-house, for it gave me an opportunity of a chat with the Doctor anent his now well-known discovery, the "latest Siberian Mammoth," which he was conveying in sections, packed in twenty sleighs, to Irkutsk. Dr. Herz gave us, like Talbot Clifton, very disheartening accounts of affairs north of Yakutsk. The Doctor had travelled here from the Kolyma river (our goal on the Arctic Ocean) only with the greatest difficulty on account of the scarcity of reindeer and the dangerous condition of the mountain passes. The task of conveying the mammoth, even as far as this point, had been an almost super-human one, but no trouble or expense had been spared in the preservation of this antediluvian monster, which is undoubtedly the most perfect specimen of its kind ever brought to light. The animal was found frozen into a huge block of ice,

as it had evidently fallen from a cliff overhead, for the forelegs were broken and there were other signs of injury. The flesh of the mammoth (which measures about twenty feet high) was of a pinkish colour and as fresh, in appearance, as during the monster's lifetime, countless ages ago. Some grasses found in the mouth had been carefully preserved, and have since been analysed with the view of ascertaining the age of the prehistoric monster. Time was now of the greatest importance to Dr. Herz, for everything depended upon the arrival of his treasure in European Russia in a frozen condition. A few days of warm muggy weather nearing Europe might render futile the task of many months of hardship. So our interview was of short duration, but I am glad to say that the eminent Professor eventually met with success, and that his priceless addition to the treasury of natural history now occupies a niche of honour in the Imperial Academy of Science in Petersburg.

Nearing Yakutsk the country becomes unutterably wild and desolate. Forest trees are now replaced for miles and miles by low withered scrub and dwarf fir-trees on either side of the river. As we proceed the Lena gradually widens until it resembles a succession of huge lakes, where even our practised drivers have some difficulty in finding the way. The Russian language is now seldom heard, for in the villages a kind of native *patois* is spoken. And yet the country is more thickly populated than upriver, although the pretty Russian *isba* has given place to the Yakute *yurta*, a hideous flat-roofed mud-hut, with blocks of

ice for window-panes, and yellow-faced weirdly clad inmates, with rough, uncouth manners and the beady black eyes of the Tartar. And one cold grey morning I awaken, worn out with cold and fatigue, to peer with sleepy eyes, no longer down the familiar avenue of ice and pine-trees, but across a white and dreary wilderness of snow. On the far horizon, dividing earth and sky, a thin drab streak is seen which soon merges, in the clear sunrise, into the faint semblance of a city. Golden domes and tapering fire-towers are soon distinguishable, and our driver grows proportionately loquacious as his home is neared. "Yakutsk!" he cries, with a wave of his short, heavy whip, and I awaken de Clinchamp, still slumbering peacefully, with the welcome news that the first important stage of our long land-journey is nearly at an end.¹²

¹² This was on February 14, 1902, and 7800 miles (out of a somewhat alarming total) now lay behind us. To reach this from Irkutsk we had employed 720 horses, at a cost of under £70 for both sleighs.

CHAPTER IV

THE CITY OF THE YAKUTE

During our stay in Yakutsk we were the guests of the Chief of Police, an official generally associated (in the English mind) with mystery and oppression, dungeons and the knout. But Captain Zuyeff in no way resembled his prototype of the London stage and penny novelette. By rights our host should have been a cool cynical villain, always in full uniform, and continually turning up at awkward moments to harass some innocent victim, instead of which he was rather a commonplace but benevolent individual devoted to his wife and child and consumed with a passion for photography, which was shared by many of the exiles under his charge. I once had occasion to go to his office and found Zuyeff in his shirt sleeves, busily engaged in developing "Kodak" films with a political who had dined at his house the night before! But this would never have done for a transpontine audience.

Yakutsk (which was founded in 1633 by the Cossack Beketoff) presents, at a distance, a rather imposing appearance, quickly dispelled on closer acquaintance. For a more lifeless, depressing city does not exist on the face of this planet. Even Siberians call this the end of the world. The very name of the place suggests gloom and mystery, for the news that filters through from here, at long intervals, into civilisation is generally associated with some tragedy or disaster, such as the awful fate

of poor de Long and his companions of the *Jeannette* in the Lena delta, or more recently the Yakutsk Prison Mutiny. The Tsar's remotest capital is composed mainly of time-bleached wooden buildings of gloomy appearance even on the brightest day. We saw Yakutsk at its best, for in summer time the dusty streets and dingy dwellings are revealed in all the dirt and squalor which were concealed from our gaze by a clean mantle of snow. There are no public buildings to speak of, but the golden domes of half a dozen fine churches tower over the dull drab town, partly relieving the sombre effect produced by an absolute lack of colour. Even the palace of the Governor is a mean-looking one-storied edifice, scarcely fit for the ruler of a province seven times the size of France! A Cossack stockade of great age faces the palace; and its dilapidated wooden walls are tottering with age, but are yet in keeping with most of the houses around them. There is a legend concerning this fort (erected by Cossacks in 1647) which may, or may not, be true. The natives granted these first settlers as much land, for the erection of a citadel, as they could encircle with a limited number of reindeer skins. But the wily Russians cut the skins into thin, very long strips and took possession of an extensive site for a town. At present Yakutsk is a city of the past, one may almost add of the dead, where ghosts walk in the shape of surly Russian traders clad in the fashion of a century ago, and sinister-looking fur-clad Yakutes. And yet the dead here may be said to live, for corruption is delayed for an indefinite period, so intense is the cold. Shortly before our

arrival a young Russian girl was exhumed for legal purposes, and her body was found in exactly the same condition as when it was interred five years before. This however is scarcely surprising in a soil which is perpetually frozen to a depth of six hundred feet.

The uncanny sensation of gloom and despondency which here assails the traveller is not mitigated by the knowledge that, to reach Yakutsk you must slowly wade, as we had done, through a little hell of monotony, hunger, and filth. To leave it you must retrace your steps through the same purgatory of mental and physical misery. There is no other way home, and so, to the stranger fresh from Europe, the place is a sink of despair. And yet Yakutsk only needs capital, energy, and enterprise to convert her into a centre of modern commerce and civilisation. Gold abounds in all the affluents of the Lena; last year the output in the Vitimsk district alone was over a quarter of a million sterling, and the soil is practically untouched. Iron also exists in very large quantities, to say nothing of very fair steam coal near the delta; and there is practically a mountain of silver known to exist near the city. Lead and platinum have also been found in considerable quantities further afield. Were the Yakutsk province an American State the now desolate shores of the Lena would swarm with prosperous towns, and the city would long ere this have become a Siberian El Dorado of the merchant and miner.¹³ As it is the trade of this place is nothing to what it could be made,

¹³ In face of these natural resources it is satisfactory to note that a line from Irkutsk to Yakutsk could be laid with little difficulty.

in capable and energetic hands, within a very short space of time. Here, as everywhere else on the river, the summer is the busiest season. In August a fair is held on the Lena in barges, which drift down the river from the Ust-kutsk with European merchandise of every description. In the fall the barges are towed back by steamers, exporting furs, fish, and ivory to the value of twenty million roubles, the goods brought in only amounting to about a twentieth part of that sum. Steamers run frequently in the open season both up and down the river as far as Bulun in the Arctic Ocean, which tiny settlement yearly exports large quantities of salt fish, furs, and walrus tusks.¹⁴

In former days before the Russians annexed the Amur river there was regular communication between Yakutsk and Okhotsk, on the sea of that name, but although the road, or rather track, still exists, it is now rarely used.¹⁵ However, American and Chinese goods do occasionally find their way into Siberia by Okhotsk, for the latter is a free port, and if merchandise is destined for the Lena province, it is cheaper to send it in this way than *viâ* Vladivostok and the Amur, especially as steamers now visit the Sea of Okhotsk every summer, sailing from Vladivostok and making the round trip *viâ* Gijija, Ayan, and Okhotsk.¹⁶ In winter time, when the track is in good condition, the trip from Okhotsk to Yakutsk occupies about a fortnight, with horse

¹⁴ Steam navigation on the Lena river was introduced in 1885.

¹⁵ See projected railway route, chap. xix.

¹⁶ The Port of Ola is now also called at.

sledges. In summer the goods are carried over the mountains to the head of the Nelkan River, which is reached twice during the season by steamers plying from Yakutsk, a journey of two weeks up stream and about half the time down. The Nelkan district is said to be fabulously rich in gold, so much so that Mr. Siberikoff, a prominent Siberian millionaire, lately visited the place with a view to constructing a railway to connect Nelkan with Ayan, on the Sea of Okhotsk, a distance of about two hundred versts.¹⁷ The line would be a costly one, but the country is said to be so rich, that no expense is to be spared in opening it up. Steamers also run from Yakutsk up to Viluisk, but the trade with this place amounts to very little, £5000 or £6000 in all, every summer. Near Viluisk is the Hospital for Lepers founded some years ago by the English nurse, Miss Kate Marsden. In view of the conflicting statements which have appeared in England regarding this institution it is only fair to say that the lady in question is still spoken of in Yakutsk with respect and affection, and that the infirmary, which after much suffering and hardship she contrived to organise, is still in a flourishing condition. In 1901 it contained more than seventy patients in charge of a physician, his two assistants and three sisters of charity.

As for the climate here it is no better and no worse than other places in this latitude, although Yakutsk is said to be the coldest place in winter and the hottest in summer in the world. But this is probably a mistake, for I carefully searched records

¹⁷ This line is now commenced. See chap. xix.

of the temperature kept daily for the past fifteen years, and found that the greatest summer heat experienced during that period was 78° Fahrenheit in the shade, which is cooler than an average English summer; 69° below zero appeared to be the greatest cold here between the months of October and March, while at Verkhoyansk we experienced 78° below zero, which is, I imagine, about as low as the thermometer can fall on this earth. Winter here begins in September, and by the first week in October the country is ice-bound, and semi-darkness and 55° to 65° below zero continue until the spring. In May the Lena breaks up, flooding the country for hundreds of miles and isolating Yakutsk for about a month, during which you can neither get to the city nor leave it.¹⁸ During the three months of summer dust and clouds or mosquitoes render life almost unbearable. And yet Yakutsk is a paradise compared to a certain settlement, which I shall presently describe, within the Arctic circle.

The day following our arrival a lunch was given in our honour by the Governor at the Palace, a ramshackle old building, comfortably furnished, but with no attempt at ostentation. The household was more like that of an English country house, and there was none of the stateliness and ceremony here which characterised the Governor's Palace at Irkutsk. Nor was I sorry

¹⁸ The Lena is not perfectly free from ice until the end of May or early in June. By October 20 it is generally frozen over. "It is a peculiarity of these northern rivers that their waters are mainly derived from the melting snows in June and July, when the Lena, for example, overflowing its banks, spreads here and there to a width of 60 miles or more."—"In the Lena Delta," by G. W. Melville.)

for it, for in this land of hunger and long distances man can well dispense with formality and etiquette. We sat down over a score to lunch, including half a dozen ladies, one, at least, of whom was young and attractive, and as daintily gowned as though she had just returned from a drive in the Bois de Boulogne. But Madame V— the bride of a Government official had arrived here too recently to acquire the mildewed appearance (I can use no other term), which every woman seems to acquire after a prolonged residence in Yakutsk. The meal was a merry one and was followed by music and dancing until nightfall, when another repast was served. By the way, although the pangs of hunger had often assailed us on the road, the frequency of meals here was our greatest trial. For they seemed to continue at short intervals throughout the twenty-four hours. The house of our host, the Chief of Police, was, for Yakutsk, an extremely quiet and orderly one, and yet I never once succeeded in getting to bed before 4 o'clock in the morning, chiefly because the principal meal of the day was only served at midnight. Breakfast at 9 A.M. consisted of such dainties as black bread, smoked fish, and *cheese!* This was followed at mid-day by a heavier meal, where wines, beer, and fiery *vodka* played an important part. At 3 P.M. a dinner of several courses was discussed, and at 8 P.M. tea (accompanied by sweets and cakes) was again partaken of. The midnight supper aforementioned wound up the day. A sideboard in the dining-room was laid out with salt fish, ham, *caviar*, raw cucumber, &c., for snacks at odd moments! There was seldom more than about

three or four hours sleep, but a siesta was generally indulged in from 4 to 7 P.M., and a stay of ten days here convinced me of the wisdom of this arrangement. Most of the men passed their evenings in gambling at cards, but the women appeared to have absolutely no occupation of a rational kind. The entire city only boasted of three pianos, but nearly every house possessed a gramophone, which generally provided the music after dinner, when the ladies would sit in a silent circle and listen to the ruthless assassination of Massénet and Mascagni, while the men played cards or walked up and down the room chatting and smoking, and frequently adjourning to the buffet, which in Yakutsk is seldom far distant. Once a month an amateur performance is given at the club, and we attended one of these entertainments, which was of a wearisome description, commencing at about 6 P.M. and lasting till long after midnight. Of course there was, as usual, plenty to eat and drink between the acts.¹⁹

As sometimes happens in this world men here are far better off than women, for the former are occupied during the day with their professional duties, and, if so inclined, they can obtain excellent fishing and shooting within a day's journey. The Verkhoiansk mountains can be reached in under a week,

¹⁹ The Russian Admiral Von Wrangell (who visited Yakutsk in 1820) wrote: "The inhabitants are not in an advanced state of intellectual cultivation. They pass much of their super-abundant leisure in somewhat noisy assemblages where eating and drinking play a principal part. After dinner, which is a very substantial meal, and at which *nalivka*, a liquor made of brandy, berries, and sugar, is not spared, the gentlemen pass the afternoon with cards and punch, and the ladies gather round the tea-table."

and here there are elk, wild sheep, and other big game, but for the unfortunate fair sex life is one eternal round of hopeless monotony. There is not even a regiment to enliven the dreariness of existence, for the garrison consists of about one hundred and fifty Cossacks, with only a couple of officers in command. Nor is there a newspaper; only a dry official journal printed once a month, while the telegrams received by the Governor are sent round to subscribers of one rouble per month. In summer it is possible to walk or drive about, notwithstanding the mosquitoes, but in spring or winter-time the women here are often kept indoors for days together by the floods or piercing cold. No wonder that physical strength is soon impaired by an idle life, stimulants, and the eternal cigarette, or that moral laxity should follow the daily contamination of spicy scandal and pernicious French literature. I have heard Siberians assert that Yakutsk is the most immoral city in the world, and (with a mental reservation regarding Bucharest) I felt bound to agree with them. For if only one-half of the tales which I heard concerning the gay doings of the *élite* here were true, then must the wicked little Roumanian capital "take" (to use a slang expression) "a back seat." Apparently this state of affairs has existed for some time, for when Admiral Melville, of the *Jeannette*, was here twenty years ago, searching the coast for his unfortunate shipmates, he attended a reception given on New Year's Eve by the Lieutenant-Governor, and was told by the latter that, "on that night, as on no other, every man had his own wife at his side instead of some

other man's."20

At the time of our visit Yakutsk contained under a score of political exiles, who seemed to be no worse off, socially, than any one else, for they moved freely about in society and were constantly favoured guests of the Chief of Police. The exiles, however, were not permitted to take part in the private theatricals I have mentioned, a restriction which caused them great annoyance. Their loud and unfavourable criticisms from the stalls on the evening in question were certainly not in the best of taste, and, to my surprise, they were not resented by the Governor's staff. This incident will show that, in Yakutsk at any rate, the "politicals" are treated not only with leniency but with a friendly courtesy, which on this occasion was certainly abused. Mr. Olenin, an exile whose term of banishment was expiring, told me that he had no fault whatever to find with Yakutsk as a place of exile, so much so that he had resolved not to return to Russia at the end of his sentence, but to remain here and complete an ethnological work upon which he was engaged. As will presently be seen (in the eighth chapter), I do not in any way hold a brief for the Russian Government, although I have occasionally been accused (in the English Press) of painting its prisons in *couleur de rose* for my own private ends. I simply state what I saw on this and subsequent occasions, and am glad to say that in Yakutsk the condition of the political exiles was as satisfactory as it could possibly be made in such a rigorous

²⁰ "In the Lena Delta," by G. W. Melville.

climate and amidst such cheerless surroundings.

I obtained from Mr. Olenin a plain and unvarnished account of the Yakutsk prison revolt, and subsequent "massacre," which aroused such indignation in England a few years ago. It was then reported that the political exiles here were subjected to such cruelty while in prison that they unsuccessfully tried to starve themselves and then mutinied, upon which both men and women were mercilessly butchered. As a matter of fact, at the commencement of the incident the exiles were not confined in prison at all, but were living in provisional liberty. What really happened was this. A party (numbering about half a dozen of both sexes), which was bound for Verkhoyansk, carried more baggage than usual, and the season being far advanced, the Governor of Yakutsk directed that the exiles should start forthwith without their belongings, which should be sent after them as soon as possible. Otherwise, he explained, the politicals might not reach their destination before the break-up of the roads, which would probably mean death from starvation or by drowning in the floods. But an angry discussion followed this edict, and as the politicals were assembling in the open street for departure a young student lost his temper and fired his revolver, killing a policeman. A general *mêlée* ensued, during which several persons were accidentally killed and wounded, for a large crowd had been attracted by the sound of firearms. The exiles, Fuff, Minor, and Pik, were shot dead on the spot. A young woman, Madame Gouriévitch, about to become a mother,

was bayoneted, and died in great agony. Finally, after a hard struggle, the culprits were secured and confined in the prison, where some of them did undoubtedly try to starve themselves in order to escape execution. The case was tried at Petersburg, and three of the ringleaders, Zotoff, Haussmann, and Bernstein, were duly hanged in the Yakutsk gaol. Zotoff, who had been badly wounded during the fight, had to be carried on his bed to the scaffold. The other exiles received long terms of imprisonment at the political prison at Akatui, where I saw and conversed with them in 1894.²¹ The women were sent to Viluisk, but have since been liberated.

Criminal convicts here are also well cared for, although the prison, which contained about ninety inmates, was old and dilapidated, like almost every other building in the place. But the wards appeared to be fairly clean and well warmed, a comfortable infirmary adjoined the building, and also a home maintained by private subscriptions for the children of prisoners. Enforced idleness seemed to be the chief complaint from which the convicts were suffering, for during the long winter months it is naturally difficult to find them employment.

Being aware that Russian officials are seldom overpaid, the lavish style in which they entertained us astonished me, for provisions of all kinds must, I imagined, always be at famine prices in a town within measurable distance of the Arctic regions.

²¹ For further details of this prison see "The New Siberia," by Harry de Windt. Chatto and Windus, London. 1896.

But inquiry proved that I was entirely wrong, and that living here is as cheap, if not cheaper, than in Irkutsk. It used not to be so when, in former days, Yakutsk was surrounded by vast marshes, often submerged, and apparently quite useless for the purposes of cultivation.²² But these are now converted into fertile plains of grain and pasture, this innovation being entirely due to the "Skoptsi," a religious sect exiled from European Russia, who, by dint of thrift and industry, have raised a flourishing colony on the outskirts of the city.²³ Cultivation was formerly deemed impossible in this inclement region, but now the Skopt exile amasses wealth while the Russian emigrant gazes disconsolately at the former's rich fields and sleek cattle, and wonders how it is all done. For the Skoptsi are up-to-date farmers, employing modern American machinery, which they import into the country *viâ* Vladivostok. And their efforts have been amply repaid, for in 1902 the sale of corn and barley, formerly unknown here, realised the sum of over a million roubles. Thirty years ago this district contained but few herds of cattle, and now nearly two million roubles' worth of frozen meat is annually exported to the various settlements up and down the river. The inhabitants of Yakutsk are also indebted to these industrious exiles for the fact that their markets are now provided

²² The explorer Dobell wrote: "In the autumn of 1813 I found that agriculture had advanced no further than Olekma (Olekminsk), 600 versts above Yakutsk."

²³ The Skoptsi faith, the practice of which is strictly forbidden in Russia, entails a life of absolute chastity. This sect can only acquire new members by election, since both sexes so mutilate their persons that they can neither beget nor bear children.

with vegetables of most kinds, although only the potato was procurable some years ago. Now cabbages, beetroot, carrots, radishes, cucumbers, and lettuce are to be had in season at a reasonable price, to say nothing of delicious water-melons in August, but I could not find that any other kind of garden-fruit was grown here, although wild berries are both numerous and delicious.

The Skoptsi exiles, who number about six hundred, inhabit a village called Markha about seven versts from Yakutsk. Every man and woman in the place (there are of course no children) is a Skopt. We visited Markha one bright morning, driving out with the Governor, his staff and several other officials in about a dozen sleighs in all. Breakfast had been prepared for us at the house of the wealthiest Skopt in the village, and we did justice to it with appetites sharpened by the drive through the keen frosty air. There was a breeze and the cold was piercing, but once indoors the sun streamed into the room with such force that I was compelled to move my seat away from a window. One might have been lunching in the late spring at Nice or Beaulieu. The scrupulous cleanliness of Markha after the dirt and squalor of most Siberian villages was striking. Our host's sitting-room contained even palms and flowers, artificial, of course, but cheerful to the eye. He himself waited on us during the meal, and continually plied his guests with champagne and other rare vintages, for the Skopt, although a miser at heart, is fond of displaying his wealth. Avarice is the characteristic of these

people, although they are kind to their own poor. We visited an institution maintained solely by the village for the old and decrepit of both sexes, and this place would have done credit to a European city. On the way to this establishment we passed several windmills, a rare sight in Siberia, also a number of corn and saw mills driven by steam. The engines were of American make, also all the agricultural machinery, which was shown us with pardonable pride. In every shed we entered the cattle looked sleek and well fed, and the poorest and tiniest hut had its poultry yard. The Lena Province now contains over 300,000 head of cattle, and their number is yearly increasing. When the Skoptsi first came here, forty years ago, cows and oxen were numbered by the hundred.

Books and European newspapers were plentiful in all the houses we visited in Markha, and the Skoptsi with whom I conversed were men of considerable intelligence, well up in the questions of the day. But their personal appearance is anything but attractive. Most of the men are enormously stout, with smooth flabby faces and dull heavy eyes, while the women have an emaciated and prematurely old appearance. The creed is no doubt a revolting one, physically and morally, but with all his faults the Skopt has certain good points which his free neighbours in Yakutsk might do well to imitate.²⁴

²⁴ When a Skopt dies, his property is confiscated by the State, but he generally finds means to dispose of his wealth in other ways. Occasionally it is buried in remote places, where it remains if not discovered by accident.

Although the Yakutes form the bulk of the population in Yakutsk (the entire province contains about a quarter of a million) they do not mix a great deal with the Russians, and we saw little of the better class. As a race the Yakutes are not interesting, while in appearance both sexes are distinctly plain, and often repulsive. The type is Mongolian; sallow complexion, beady eyes, flattened nostrils and wiry black hair. The men are of medium height, thick set and muscular, the women ungainly little creatures, bedizened with jewellery, and smothered with paint. Some marry Russians and assume European dress, which only adds to their grotesque appearance. Notwithstanding their defects the Yakutes are extremely proud of their birth and origin, and consider themselves immeasurably superior to the Russians, who, they say, are only tolerated in the country for commercial purposes. A Yakute is therefore mortally offended if you call his chief town by anything but its native name: "The City of the Yakute."

Many Yakutes grow wealthy in the fur, fish or ivory trades, and are so shrewd in their dealings that Russians have christened them the "Jews of Siberia." But although cunning and merciless in business matters this Siberian financier becomes a reckless spendthrift in his pleasures, who will stake a year's income on the yearly Yakutsk Derby (which takes place over the frozen Lena), or squander away a fortune on riotous living and the fair sex. All who can afford it are hard drinkers, and champagne is their favourite beverage. The men of all classes wear a long blouse of

cloth or fur according to the season, baggy breeches and high deerskin boots,—the women loose flowing draperies adorned, in summer, with bright silks and satins, and in winter with costly sables. A lofty head-dress of the same fur is worn in cold weather. The poorer Yakute is a miserable mortal. He has no warlike or other characteristics to render him of any interest whatsoever, like, say his Tchuktchi brethren in the Far North. For the Yakute peasant is too stupid to be treacherous, and as cowardly as the Tchuktchi is brave, and, while his wealthier compatriots have learned to a certain extent the virtue of cleanliness, the poor Yakute is generally nothing but a perambulating bundle of filthy rags, the proximity of which, even in the open air, is almost unbearable. But this is only amongst the peasantry. The town-bred Yakutes are more civilised and cleanly in their habits, and many are employed by the Russians as domestic servants. All Yakutes pay a pole tax of four roubles to the Russian Government, those possessed of means paying in addition an income tax. Ten years ago taxes were levied in furs, but they are now paid in coin of the realm. I was surprised to find that these natives are self-governed to a certain extent; minor crimes, such as theft, petty larceny, &c., being judged by prominent men in the towns and the head-man of each village. Murder and more serious crimes are dealt with by a Russian tribunal in Yakutsk.

I shall not forget my surprise one day when nearing Yakutsk to overhear one driver apparently addressing another in pure Turkish, a language with which I am slightly acquainted. The

mystery was explained by Captain Zuyeff, who told me that there is such a marked resemblance between the language in question and Yakute that a merchant from Constantinople would readily be understood in the market-places of this far-away frozen land. Many words are precisely similar, and the numerals up to ten are identical (see Appendix). On several occasions, while crossing the Yakute region, the natives failed to comprehend my meaning in Russian, but when I spoke in Turkish they at once understood me²⁵.

We experienced considerable difficulty in getting away from Yakutsk, indeed had I not possessed my invaluable passport the expedition would probably have remained there. For every day invitations came pouring in for days ahead, and the entertainers would not hear of a refusal. At last, however, firmness became necessary, and I insisted (being empowered by my magic document to do so) upon immediate preparations being made for our departure, although every official in the place urged me to abandon a project which they averred could only end in disaster. By suggestion of the Governor a Siberian Cossack from the garrison, Stepan Rastorguyeff, joined the expedition

²⁵ This race is supposed to be a Turkish branch of the Turanian stock. Latham informs us that their language is intelligible at Constantinople, and that the majority of their words are Turkish; observing, also, that their traditions bespeak for them a Southern origin. He says: "The locality of the Yakutes is remarkable, it is that of a weak section of the human race pressed into an inhospitable climate by a stronger one, yet the Turks have ever been the people to displace others rather than be displaced themselves."—"Frozen Asia," by Professor Eden.

to accompany us so far as I should deem expedient, for our further progress now bristled with difficulties. This man was employed to escort political exiles to the distant settlement of Sredni-Kolymsk, near the Arctic Ocean, and was therefore acquainted with the best way of reaching that remote post, indeed he afterwards proved an invaluable addition to our party.

It seemed hard that fate should have selected this year of all others to render the journey from Yakutsk to the north almost an impossibility. In the first place reindeer were so scarce and weak that the 1800 odd miles to Sredni-Kolymsk (which can generally be accomplished, under favourable circumstances, in four or five weeks) might now take us three months to cover. In this case failure of the journey and a summer in this dreary settlement would be our fate; for from May until October, Sredni-Kolymsk is isolated by marshy deserts and innumerable lakes, which can only be crossed in a sled. Throughout the summer, therefore, you can neither reach the place nor leave it.

A still more serious matter was an epidemic which had been raging amongst the Yakutes of the far north, and a fear of which had driven the Tchuktchis (or natives of the coast) into the interior of their country and along the seaboard in an easterly direction until their nearest settlement was now nearly six hundred miles distant from Sredni-Kolymsk, at which place I had calculated upon finding these natives, and utilising them as a means of procuring food and lodging and guidance along their desolate coast. Now, however, over six hundred miles of

ice without a stick of shelter or mouthful of food stared me in the face. It was also suggested that, if many of the Tchuktchis had perished from the dread malady the remainder might have retreated in a body inland, in which case death from starvation seemed an unpleasant but not unlikely contingency. For beyond the aforesaid six hundred miles lay another stretch of about 1600 miles more, before we could reach our destination: Bering Straits.

Lastly, Sredni-Kolymsk had itself suffered from so serious a famine that an expedition had lately been despatched from Yakutsk to the relief of the sufferers. Provisions there would therefore be unprocurable. Also, most of the dogs in the Kolyma district had perished from a scarcity of fish the previous season, and as dogs were our sole means of transport along the Arctic Coast, the reader will admit that, all things considered, my expedition did not leave Yakutsk under the rosiest of conditions!

Nevertheless I cannot hope to adequately repay the kindness shown by every official in Yakutsk, from the Governor downwards, during that trying time, for it was undoubtedly their timely assistance which eventually kindled the bright flame of success out of the ashes of a forlorn hope. As soon as it was realised that my resolve to proceed northward was inflexible, every man worked to further my ends as though he himself was embarking upon the hazardous trip. Even the Governor was continually concocting plans to render our voyage as easy as possible, and to that end despatched a Cossack three days ahead of us, so that reindeer might be forthcoming at the stations

without delay. But his Excellency evidently looked upon the scheme as a mad one, and my daily anxiety was lest he should suddenly take the initiative, set the wires in motion with Irkutsk, and put a final stopper on our departure for America—overland.

We now disposed of our cumbersome Yakute sleighs and exchanged them for "nartas," or reindeer-sleds, each drawn by four deer. A "narta" is a long narrow coffin-shaped vehicle about 7 ft. long by 3 ft. broad, fitted with a movable hood, which can be drawn completely over during storms or intense cold. The occupant lies at full length upon his mattress and pillows, smothered with furs, and these tiny sleds were as automobiles to wheelbarrows after our lumbering contrivances on the Lena. A reindeer-sled is the pleasantest form of primitive travel in the world, over smooth hard snow; but over rough ground their very lightness makes them roll and pitch about like a cross Channel steamer, to the great discomfort of the traveller.

Furs were my next consideration, for here we discarded civilised clothing and assumed native dress. The reader will realise what the cold must have been when I say that we often shivered inside the covered sleighs (where, however, the temperature never rose above 10° below zero), under the following mountain of material: two pairs of Jaeger singlets and drawers, thin deerskin breeches and three pairs of thick worsted stockings. Over this a suit of Arctic duffle (or felt of enormous thickness), and a pair of deerskin boots reaching above the knee and secured by leathern thongs. Then a second pair of deerskin

breeches and a garment called by the Yakutes a "kukhlanka," a long, loose deerskin coat reaching to the knees, with a hood of the same material lined with wolverine. Under this hood we wore two close-fitting worsted caps and a deerskin cap with ear flaps. Two pairs of worsted gloves and one of bearskin mits, reaching almost to the elbow, completed the outfit. I had hoped to procure furs for a moderate price in Yakutsk. But for some occult reason deerskins cost almost as much here as in Moscow. The good old days are past when peltry was so cheap and European goods so dear, that an iron cauldron fetched as many sable skins as it would hold! Stepan also insisted upon the purchase of a number of iron horse-shoes, which he explained were to be affixed to our moccasins in order to cross the Verkhoyansk mountains in safety. But the method did not strike me at the time as practical, and I afterwards had even less respect for its inventor.

Lastly provisions had to be purchased. Our original outfit brought from London comprised rations sufficient for six weeks; but this I was determined not to break in upon, unless absolutely necessary, before the Arctic coast was reached. There was hardly any food to be procured between Yakutsk and Verkhoyansk, and, according to Stepan, still less beyond that isolated village. A reindeer-sled was therefore packed to its utmost capacity with black bread, salt fish, various tinned provisions, and a portion of some animal unknown, weighing (in a raw condition) about 100 lbs. I use the term "animal unknown," as, when cooked at the first station, the latter looked and tasted exactly like horse-flesh.

I mentioned the fact to Stepan, who was already installed as *chef*, and he informed me that horse was regarded as a great delicacy by the Yakutes, and fetched twice the price of any other meat in their city. "It was bought as beef," added the Cossack, "so that anyhow we have got the best of the bargain." There was nothing, therefore, for it but to fall to with knife and fork, and with as little repulsion as possible, upon the docile friend of man!

We started for the unknown with a caravan of six sleighs in all, of which two were loaded down with food and baggage. The night of our departure, February 21st, was fine, and a crowd assembled in front of our host's house to bid us farewell. But although long and lingering cheers followed us out of the city, I fancy many of these well-wishers regarded us more in the light of harmless lunatics than as pioneers of a great railway which may one day almost encircle the world. Just before our departure (which was preceded by a dinner-party), a picturesque but rather trying ceremony took place. Farewells having been said we retired to don our furs and were entering the sleds when our hostess recalled us from the frosty night air into the drawing-room, where the heat was that of a hothouse. "You must not take your furs off," said our host, as I was divesting myself of a portion of my cumbersome costume, "remain just as you are." And so we returned to the brightly lit apartment, where the guests had assembled, and here, with a solemnity befitting the occasion, they turned toward the sacred "ikon," and knelt and prayed for our safety and success. This is an old and pretty Russian custom

now obsolete in Europe. And I was almost ungrateful enough to wish, as I knelt in my heavy furs, streaming with perspiration, that it was no longer practised in Siberia! But the affecting little ceremony was soon over, and after a final adieu to our kind hosts, my caravan slid silently down the snowy, starlit street. An hour later the lights of Yakutsk had faded away on the horizon, and we had bidden farewell to a civilisation which was only regained, six long months later, at the gold-mining city of Nome in Alaska.

CHAPTER V

THE LAND OF DESOLATION

Lieutenant Schwatka, the famous Alaskan explorer, once remarked that a man travelling in the Arctic must depend upon his own judgment, and not upon the advice of others, if he would be successful. The wisdom of his words was proved by our journey from Yakutsk to Verkhoyansk. Every one at the former place, from the Governor downwards, assured me that certain failure and probable disaster must inevitably attend an attempt to reach Verkhoyansk in under six weeks. Fortunately I turned a deaf ear to well-meant, but unwise, counsel, for in less than nine days we had reached the place in question, and had left it again on our way northward in under a fortnight from the time we left Yakutsk. I should add that our rapid rate of speed was entirely due to Stepan, without whose aid we should probably have taken at least three times as long to complete the journey. But the wildest of Yakute postmasters was no match for our Cossack, whose energetic measures on previous trips had gained him the nickname of *Tchort* (or "the devil") on the Verkhoyansk track. And a devil he was when drivers lagged, or reindeer were not quickly forthcoming at the end of a stage!

There are two routes from Yakutsk to Sredni-Kolymsk, near the Arctic Ocean, which was now our objective point. These cannot be called roads, or even tracks, for beyond

Verkhoyansk (which is only one-third of the distance) the traveller must depend almost entirely upon his compass and the stars. The oldest route to the Kolyma is now very seldom used, although Von Wrangell travelled over it in the early part of the nineteenth century. On this occasion the Russian explorer avoided Verkhoyansk, and, proceeding some distance south of the route we selected, passed through the ruined, and now deserted, town of Zashiversk. By Stepan's advice we chose the Verkhoyansk route, as being the one best known to the Cossack, for it is the one by which political exiles invariably travel. Politicals, Cossacks, and natives alone visit these desolate northern wastes, unless it be a special mission like ours or that of Dr. Herz. The Governor of Yakutsk had held his post for nearly twenty years, and yet had never summoned the courage to visit even Verkhoyansk. Nor could any of his officials advise me, from personal experience, which road to select, although their remarks on the subject recalled the darkie's advice to the cyclist as to the best of two pathways across a swamp: "Whichebber one you travels, Boss, I guess you'll be d-d sorry you didn't take de udder!"

Horses were used for the first three stages out of Yakutsk, along a narrow track through the forests, vaguely indicated by blazed trees. It was anything but pleasant travelling, for our light *nartas* were specially adapted to the smooth, level stride of the reindeer, and the ponies whisked them about like match-boxes, occasionally dashing them with unpleasant force against

a tree-trunk. It was, therefore, a relief to reach Hatutatskaya on the second day, and to find there thirty or forty sturdy reindeer tethered around the station. The method of harnessing this animal is peculiar. Each sled is drawn by four deer, two abreast. In front of the four wheeler is a kind of miniature sled, or platform on runners, on which the driver sits to control the two leaders in front of him. There are no reins, the entire team being managed by a thong attached to the off-leader, and the traces are secured by a loop round the neck, and inside the outer leg of each deer. The latter carried no bells, and although it may sound childish to say so, we missed their music terribly at first. The driver is armed with a long pole, which, however, he seldom uses, for, if the Yakute has a virtue, it is kindness to animals. A plaintive cry, which sounds like "*yahee*," is uttered to urge on a team, and it generally has the desired effect, for the Siberian reindeer is the gamest animal in the world. I have seen them working incessantly day after day, growing weaker hour by hour, and yet bravely struggling on until the poor little beasts would fall to the ground from sheer exhaustion, never to rise again. We lost many during the long and trying journey to the Arctic, and I shall always recall their deaths with a keen pang of remorse. For their gentle, docile nature made it the more pitiable to see them perish, as we looked helplessly on, unable to alleviate their agony, yet conscious that it was for our sake they had suffered and died.

The distance from Yakutsk to Verkhoyansk is 934 versts, or about 625 English miles. Most of the way lies through a densely

wooded region and across deep swamps, almost impassable in summer. About half-way the Verkhoyansk range is crossed, and here vegetation ceases and the country becomes wild in the extreme. Forests of pine, larch, and cedar disappear, to give place to rugged peaks and bleak, desolate valleys, strewn with huge boulders, and slippery with frozen streams, which retard progress, for a reindeer on ice is like a cat on walnut-shells. The *stancias*, as the deer-stations are called, are here from forty to sixty versts apart. There are no towns in this region, or even villages in our sense of the word, for a couple of dilapidated huts generally constitute the latter in the eyes of the Yakute. As for the *stancias* they were beyond description. I had imagined that nothing could be worse than a Lena post-house, but the latter were luxurious compared to the native *yurta*, which is merely a log-hut plastered with mud. You enter a low, narrow aperture, the door of which is thickly padded with felt, and find yourself in a low dark room considerably below the surrounding ground, with a floor of beaten mud, slippery with the filth of years, and windows of ice. The walls are of mud-plastered logs, also the ceiling, which would seriously inconvenience a six-foot man. As soon as the eye grows accustomed to the gloom you find that a rough wooden bench surrounds the apartment, and that one portion of it is strewn with wet and filthy straw. This is for the guests. When it was occupied we slept on the floor, and there was little difference, except that cattle also shared the *stancia*, and were apt to walk over us during the night. A fire of pine-

logs was kept blazing on the clay hearth night and day, and the heat was sometimes so overpowering that we suffered almost as much from it as from the deadly cold outside. But the stench was even worse to endure, especially when cooking operations were in progress, for the Yakute will not look at fresh pure meat. He prefers it in a condition that would repel a civilised dog, and the odour that used to emanate from a mass of putrid deer-meat, or, worse still, tainted fish, simmering on the embers, is better left to the imagination. At first we suffered severely from nausea in these unsavoury shelters, and there were other reasons for this which cannot here be explained. Suffice it to say that it was a constant source of wonder to me that even this degraded race of beings could live amidst such bestial surroundings and yet survive. Vermin had up till now been a trifling inconvenience, but thousands on the Lena were here succeeded by myriads of the foe, and, for a time, our health suffered from the incessant irritation, which caused us many days of misery and nights of unrest. Stepan told me that in summer the *stancias* were unapproachable, and this I could well believe seeing that we were often driven out of them during dry and intense cold. But in the open season only Cossacks attempt to travel through with the mail to Verkhoyansk, once each way. The journey, which is made on horseback, is a perilous one, owing to unfordable rivers and dangerous swamps, and the mail carriers are occasionally drowned, or lost in the marshy deserts, where they perish of starvation. Stepan had once made the summer trip, and sincerely

hoped he might never have to repeat the experiment.

Travellers on this road are luckily rare, so that the post-houses seldom contained any guests besides ourselves. The *stancias* were crowded enough as it was with the Yakute postmaster and his generally numerous and disgusting family, several deer-drivers, and perhaps two or three cows crowded into a space of about thirty feet square. We travelled throughout the twenty-four hours, and only stopped at these places sufficiently long to thaw out some food and swallow a meal. The *stancias* were too far apart to work on a schedule, and we generally left one rest-house with very vague notions as to when we should see the next. On one occasion we were compelled to lay-to in a storm for eighteen hours (although the *stancia* was only a couple of miles away), and to subsist during that time on chocolate and black bread, frozen to the consistency of iron.²⁶ But luckily the weather was, on the whole, favourable. Most of the nights were clear, and at first there was a bright moon, which was also an advantage, although at times our way lay through forests so deep and dark that it became necessary to use lights. We left Paris supplied with an elaborate electric outfit, which now, and in after-days, would have been a godsend, but the lamps and cumbersome batteries had to be abandoned with our other stores at Moscow. Probably the cold would have rendered the wires useless, at any rate I consoled myself by thinking so.

Two days' hard travelling brought us to Tandinskaya. This

²⁶ On such occasions Christy's "Kola Chocolate" is invaluable.

is the best *stancia* on the road, and we therefore seized the opportunity to make a good, substantial meal and snatch a few hours' sleep before proceeding to the next rest-house, which was nearly a hundred miles distant. At Tandinskaya we changed teams, successfully resenting the extortionate charges made by the postmaster. All the *stancias* on this road are leased by the Government to Yakute peasants, who are legally entitled to receive three kopeks a verst for every pair of deer. This sum includes post-house accommodation, such as it is; but as we always added a rouble or two for the use of these filthy hovels, Stepan was the more incensed at this postmaster's rascality. The latter claimed payment for about fifty versts more than we had actually covered, so Stepan averred, although the distances north of Yakutsk are very vague, and the Cossack was probably wrong. It was amusing to compare the mileage as given in the only post-book of this road (compiled in the reign of the Empress Catherine) with the real distances, which were invariably twice as long. The officials of those days probably reflected that, if three kopeks must be paid for a verst, the latter had better be a long one. And the Yakute, knowing no better, suffered in silence.

On leaving Tandinskaya, we travelled some miles along the river Aldan, a tributary of the Lena, which is dangerous in winter on account of numerous overflows. Our drivers, therefore, proceeded with caution, walking some distance ahead of the sleds, and frequently sounding the ice with their long poles. It was bitterly cold, for a breeze was blowing in our faces, and the

deer, as usual, slipped and slithered in all directions, continually upsetting the sleds. This became such a common occurrence that, after a couple of days, we took it as a matter of course, and I would often awaken from a nap inside the hood to find myself proceeding face downwards, the sled having overturned. But the driver would merely halt the team and replace the *narta*, with its helpless inmate, on its runners, with the indifference of a child playing with a toy horse and cart. Luckily the deer never attempted to bolt on these occasions, but waited patiently until their burthen was placed "right side up."

To-day the wind became more boisterous, and the cold consequently more piercing every mile we travelled. We had left Tandinskaya about ten at night, and towards morning Stepan calculated that we had covered twenty miles in seven hours. The stars had now disappeared, and snow was falling fast, also the wind had risen to a gale, which percolated the felt hoods and furs like a stream of iced water. At daybreak the weather turned to a blizzard, which raged for twenty-four hours and nearly buried us in snow; but when the storm lulled a bit we struggled painfully on for about fifteen miles, and hailed the sight of a *povarnia* with delight, for it meant, at any rate, shelter and a fire. *Povarnias* are merely mud-huts erected at intervals along the track, when the *stancias* are long distances apart. They are dark, uninhabited hovels, generally half full of snow, and open to the winds, and yet these crazy shelters have saved many a traveller from death by cold and exposure on this lonely road. A *povarnia* contains

no furniture whatever; merely a clay hearth and some firewood which previous travellers have left there, perhaps weeks before. For on leaving these places every one is expected to cut fuel ready for those who come after. Sanga-Ali was the *povarnia* we had now reached, and it was almost blocked by snow which had drifted in through the open doorway. But we set to with a will, and were soon crouching over a good fire on which a pot of deer-meat was fragrantly simmering. Here we remained until early next morning, taking it in turns to pile on fresh logs, for when the flame waned for an instant the cold became so intense that to sleep in it without a fire might have had unpleasant results.

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