

# THE EXILES. A RUSSIAN STORY.

After waiting a few minutes, Yegor and M. Lafleur saw the head of a seal emerge prudently from the ice. The quickest of the two bears gave it a blow with its claws which brought it half dead out of the water. Then the bears precipitated themselves upon the amphibious creature, tore it to pieces, and began to devour it.

This was a favorable moment to attack them. Yegor, who had had all the trouble in the world to restrain the two Siberian dogs and keep them silent, released them. On hearing their bark, the bears seemed uncertain as to whether they should allow themselves to be attacked or beat a retreat. But already M. Lafleur had fired a ball at each of them. The bears hesitated no longer, and seeing that they had to deal with resolute hunters, vanished behind the ice blocks.

CHAPTER XXVII.—YERMAC PAYS HIS DEBT.  
Then began an animated chase across the blocks of ice. Yegor and M. Lafleur advanced, guided by the furious barking of the dogs. But the bears were still faster; from time to time, the hunters saw them climbing over the icebergs, white as themselves, and altogether out of range of their guns.

As they went along, M. Lafleur told Yegor, who put but slight faith in what he said, that when the ice of the sea commences to form, in the month of September, the white bear female captures and kills a great number of seals which it hides in the hollows of some rock. Afterwards, it goes into the interior of the country to gorge itself with lichens, in order to create in its stomach a sort of mechanical obstruction; then, it returns to its magazines of provisions and fills itself with as much seal fat as it can hold. This done, it takes up winter quarters in a hole it has dug in the side of a glacier.

After a certain period of seclusion, it brings forth one, two, and sometimes three cubs. In this crystalline crib, it nourishes and exercises its progeny in walking until the commencement of April, when, in their turn, the seals begin to bring forth young. Then, the ursine family quits its retreat, the mother marching at its head and snuffing the air. It seeks out and follows, thanks to its scent, the invisible track of a seal as far as the spot where the poor creature is rearing its young offspring. When the bear has found the igloo of the seal, easy to recognize because of its round shape (like the igloo of the Eskimau), it makes a spring, bounds upon the top of the slight habitation, and makes such good use of its four paws and its weight that it breaks it in, immediately seizing upon the young seals with which to regale its cubs.

Yegor observed to M. Lafleur that so many fables circulated in regard to the polar bear that it behooved one not to believe too readily everything said concerning it, especially its wintering by means of voluntary burial.

Suddenly, as they were advancing a little distance apart, a third bear, putting the dogs of the scent—the dogs were running too far forward—surged up from behind a block of ice and came towards them with that confidence in its strength or that ignorance of danger which characterizes the bear of the Arctic Ocean.

Yegor perceived it as it was treacherously advancing; he took aim at it, and M. Lafleur, quickly turning about at this moment, sent a ball after the bear, but missed it. Yegor waited until the animal came nearer. When it was within ten paces, he fired twice and hit it.

The bear, feeling itself wounded, stopped for an instant and howled; but it immediately took to flight, tinging the snow with its blood.

M. Lafleur vainly discharged his gun at it. The bear scampered away, and soon disappeared among blocks of ice whither it was impossible to pursue it.

The dogs, badly trained for the chase, obstinately clung to the tracks of the first two bears, and the hunters ran a great risk of returning empty-handed—a prospect more than disagreeable, considering the scarcity of provisions.

Meanwhile, Nadege and Ladislav, who had remained in the hut beside the fire, grew anxious at the long absence of the hunters. Yermac, seated opposite to them, looked at them in silence, avoiding, when they spoke to him, any other reply than a motion of the head or a shrug of the shoulders.

The look of this taciturn man weighed upon Nadege. Wab, doubtless hearing in the distance the barking of the two Siberian dogs, began to howl in a fashion that made an impression on the young girl.

She put on her warmest garments and, followed by Ladislav, ventured out of the hut. The twilight had begun early, and the state of the sea seemed to her a sufficient cause for uneasiness. Clouds, harbingers of a tempest, were heaped up to the east. Mists were rising from the ocean. Soon she saw the water, beaten by the hurricane, spring up in immense shoaves and fall back noisily upon the white promontories.

Under the influence of a violent north-east wind, the yet free waters of several open spaces threw up unheard-of toro enormous blocks upon the plains of ice which they broke into fragments. Plates of ice rose to the summits of the waves, dashed against each other with a crash and disappeared covered with foam. The waves rushed upon the blocks and buried them; but, the next instant, the same blocks, rising again to the surface, scattered the water around them, and, hurling themselves upon the nearest masses, struggled until they got them under. A resonant and continual cracking of the breaking ice mingled with the noise of the waves uplifted by the wind.

The explorers of the polar seas affirm that no word can describe the nature of this noise. It is at first under the convulsed and trembling ice, like the hissing of a thousand arrows, an infernal din in which the sharpest voices yelp mingled with the deep, and the roaring becomes more and more savage. The ice breaks in concentric cracks; its broken fragments roll one upon another. Then begins a ferocious, titanic strife, a headlong combat which recalls the battle of the elements in the first ages of the world. These masses march, meet, strike each other and dash against each other, changed by a hidden power and seeming to obey passions.

Above those convulsive scenes, the reflection of the ice gives the sky a strange aspect and illuminates it with a supernatural light.

Wab, still with Nadege, began to howl without respite.

Ladislav strove to calm his sister's fears. He told her—which was true—that Yegor and M. Lafleur were hunting among the chains of icebergs situated in the west, and that the free waters could not reach there to excite their sudden ravages.

But the terrified Nadege advanced cour-

ageously over the sea, in the direction in which she might hope to meet Yegor, whom she regretted having allowed to venture so far. The young girl thought that in the dim light the hunters would guide themselves by the barking of Wab; she counted upon the intelligence of Yegor's dogs, and followed the faithful animal which, in all probability, would go in the direction where the hunters were.

Suddenly, it seemed to her—and to Ladislav also—that the solid plain over which they were advancing was in motion beneath their feet. They were not deceived. Soon the oscillations were more marked. Beneath their steps, the ice cracked and split. Several black clefts furrowed the snow at random—they were crevices in process of formation.

Nadege wished to go back, but behind them now a canal had opened, encumbered with moving ice. At this sight, the young girl began to utter despairing cries. The last "I" led in vain to quiet her. Wab barked louder than ever. The vast cake of ice upon which they were, floated. Suddenly, a wave lifted it, dragged it away, and precipitated it with irresistible force upon the frozen surface.

The shock was terrible! A prolonged cracking resounded beneath their feet, and they felt that the wave, in withdrawing, had borne away enormous fragments of the broken block.

Nevertheless, they arose unhurt. Guided by the instinct of Wab, they began to run in the direction opposite to the tempest, over a field of ice several feet thick, which seemed likely to remain motionless and resist all the efforts made by the waves to separate it; but there, the ice blocks, strongly pressed one against another and bristling with jagged points, opposed a thousand obstacles to the retreat of the two poor creatures.

Soon Ladislav, utterly exhausted, was incapable of advancing further. Nadege took him in her arms, lifted him up, and, though an instant before almost ready to swoon, found sufficient strength to bear the child far from the perilous spot.

Looking about for help, Nadege perceived Yermac, who had been drawn from the hut by the din of the tempest and the barking of Wab.

The chief of police came towards them. He was speedily stopped by a crevice which Nadege had not yet seen but on the brink of which she soon arrived. The young girl gave vent to a heart-rending cry on seeing the insurmountable gap which had opened before them. It was a deep and very long fissure, full of water and bounded on the right by a perpendicular icebergs. It appeared to be seven or eight feet wide.

Nadege and Ladislav seemed to have no other resource than to wait upon the spot until the wind should cease and new ice form and become strong enough to bear them, which would take place in a few hours. But the garments of both, wet with salt water, had frozen upon them. Immobility and waiting, therefore, meant death!

Yermac had found a more prompt means of aiding them. Pieces of ice of different sizes lay upon the edge of the crevice; he thought he could make a bridge of them, and immediately fell to work. At the first block he removed, Nadege comprehended his generous intention and felt all her hope revive.

Some pieces of ice scattered about in the crevice, following the motion of the water, others fastened themselves to the opposite side of the crevice, and soon the bridge was firm enough for Ladislav first and then Nadege to cross it. The child had no sooner let go his sister's hand than Yermac seized him and drew him over. After this trial, Nadege traversed the bridge of ice without assistance. As to Wab, the animal had followed Ladislav and then returned to Nadege as if to invite her to fear nothing.

Ladislav embraced the chief of police. Nadege knew not how to express her deep gratitude to him for his intervention in the midst of their great danger.

At this moment, Yegor and M. Lafleur, preceded by the two dogs, made their appearance, arriving, not without some trouble, from the west.

They also had suffered, the wind rendering their progress very toilsome by lifting the snow and hurling it in their eyes. This snow thus agitated disarranged their route by forming, as do the shifting sands, ravines, little valleys, and hillocks which they were forced to go around, sinking the knees in a fine dust.

The surprise of the hunters was extreme on seeing Nadege and Ladislav upon the ice, their garments covered with an icy coat and stiff with stalactites, and Yermac beside them, wet also and shining with ice—for he had not spared himself while working. They were soon informed of what had taken place by Ladislav.

"Ah! Monsieur Yermac!" cried Yegor, "you are better than you would have us believe. To-day you have saved the lives of all of us!"

But, after the joy of finding each other again safe and sound, there was a disappointment—the hunters had brought back nothing from their rough day's chase.

As to the chief of police, the day had been favorable to him. Once again he was square with Yegor. It was a good omen for him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—THE TCHOUKCHIS.  
There was no change in the disheartening situation of the fugitives, except, apparently, an alteration in the arrangements of the chief of police. Yermac's attitude was less haughty. He allowed himself to be a trifle familiar with the lad and the young girl whom he had saved from certain death; but the exiles felt that he maintained a reserve from which he would not depart. His cold kindness resembled that of a jailer to whom prisoners are confined; his consideration and willingness to help did not go beyond a certain limit fixed in advance. Besides, he persisted in refusing to touch the few provisions which appeared upon the common table.

In the midst of their penury, with famine threatening them if the Yakouts did not soon return, the fugitives had a stroke of good luck.

Wab succeeded in capturing unaided a deer of the same species as that recently killed by Yermac. The dog leaped at its throat and did not let go until the animal was strangled. This exploit accomplished, the brave dog returned to the hut, and displayed such a desire to have Yegor follow that the young man did so, the dog leading him to the spot where the victim lay. The two other dogs were keeping guard over the precious prey. The deer was drawn triumphantly to the hut and the dogs were not forgotten, especially Wab.

Yermac, still indigestible, limited himself to remarking to Wab:

"M. Lafleur, seeing the difficulty of placing his hand on a bear, fell back upon the seals. I made a harpoon and used the Siberian dogs to discover the retreats of the amphibious creatures. The dogs, gifted with keen scent, led him to a number of those narrow

openings that the seals make in the ice and through which they breathe—and get harpooned. The Parisian, despite cold and hunger, passed days and nights in watching for a prey that defied his inexperience as a fisherman, as the bears had defied his lack of skill as a hunter.

Finally, supreme success reached the fugitives one evening in the shape of two old Tchoukchis, male and female. Suffering from hunger and thirst—for thirst is as imperious and difficult to satisfy in these deserts of snow as it can be in those deserts where the sun scorches the sands—they had come from the Bay of Tchoumouk and were going along the coast in search of a station of natives, there to beg for some provisions. They had perceived the smoke escaping from the roof of the hut and had come to ask for hospitality.

"Tchora!" said they, in one voice, as they entered. This meant good evening.

Yegor regretted the absence of his faithful Tokel, who knew a little of the language of the Tchoukchis, and answered at random:

"From their miserable looks more than their gestures, the fugitives understood what they wanted, and, although the supply of provisions was approaching the end, the two poor wretches had for supper enough to furnish the two meals of the next day, and that succeeding, for their appetites seemed immense, their hunger insatiable.

The type of these natives recalled the Mongolian type of the old world, combined with the type of the Indians of the north of America—the Behring's Strait—a field of solid ice for a part of the year serving as a bond of union between the two races as between the two continents.

The man wore several reindeer skin blouses; his head was covered with a hairy hood which also covered his shoulders beneath his outside garment. His shoes were made of bear skin with the hair on the exterior. His wife, who was covered with a number of tunics, tied at the hem so as to form pantaloons and with sleeves open at the wrists, had her face tattooed with stripes of dark blue.

Despite the hunger which tortured him, the Tchoukchis seemed deeply impressed by Nadege's beauty which was altogether new to him. He could not take from her his admiring and curious eyes, and, as he examined her, he entered into a talk with his wife in which the word kamakay was often repeated. (A kamakay is a chief of a tribe.)

Then, after having noticed M. Lafleur's harpoon in a corner, the Tchoukchis seemed astonished that he had not been given slices of seal fat to eat. M. Lafleur made him understand by gestures that he had tried to capture seals, but without success. At this, the native, designating himself by striking his chest and pointing to the harpoon and dogs, promised to give, as soon as day dawned, a lesson to the Parisian whom he took for a Russian.

The next day, in fact, the native was not long in harpooning a seal. Guided by the dogs, he reached a breathing-hole of these creatures. Then, he sounded the snow with the harpoon to the depth of two or three feet; for the seal cuts its breathing-hole through the ice, but stops at the coating of snow. The little opening found, the fisherman waited patiently and in silence until the seal came to breathe the air. At the second or third breath, the harpoon, swiftly penetrating the snow, plunged into the head of the animal.

The seal dived, and drew out to its full length the line prepared in advance, which was fifteen yards long. This line is fastened to the iron of the harpoon and the other extremity is in the hand of the harpooner. The breathing-hole of the seal, immediately cleared of the snow which covered it, was enlarged so as to permit the passage of the body of the animal when it should become exhausted. The native speedily drew the seal from the hole and carried it to their hut.

There, after the lesson in fishing, took place the lesson in cooking.

While the man cut up the seal, the woman, in order to be useful, made oil for the lamp by chewing pieces of the fat of the animal. She toiled so industriously at her singular work that she soon filled a wooden jar with oil of her manufacture.

The seal cut up, the native, by way of example, stretched himself upon his back to be fed by his wife with pieces of the fat, which she stuffed in his mouth as one stuffs a chicken.

"It's all over!" cried M. Lafleur, after partaking of the seal fat. "You no longer need be uneasy about my food, my friends. As long as there are ice and seals, I shall not be a burden to you and will abandon to you my share of everything else!"

Yermac, who had allowed to be piled up before him seal steaks, raw liver, and slices of fat, hesitated what to do. He had not tasted of the deer strangled by Wab, and for very many days his food had been terribly lacking both in quality and quantity. At length, he decided to taste the seal flesh, and followed the example of the Parisian.

The Tchoukchis, having met with success, no longer hesitated about swallowing all the pieces of the seal within his reach. He ate pounds and pounds of it, and, when he had reached the last stages of repletion, threw himself flat upon the floor of the hut, abandoning himself to the gigantic work of digestion.

The next day, the natives, revictualled for a time, departed without ceremony, carrying away the remains of the seal and stealing a small and curiously worked skin bag in which matches were kept.

The fugitives soon had reason to repent of the kind reception they had given them. Meanwhile, M. Lafleur profited by their teachings. One day, after having harpooned a seal, he drew it out of its hole. As he knelt upon the ice, he felt himself familiarly tapped upon the shoulder and thought that Ladislav had come up behind him. He pulled the harpoon from the flesh of the animal, but the hand upon his shoulder grew heavier. The Parisian turned and nearly fell backward on perceiving a huge white bear which had watched the details of the "harpooning and shamelessly claimed the animal captured. The bear, taking advantage of the deference shown it by M. Lafleur, who yielded place to it, as may readily be believed, seized upon the seal and carried it off, without as much as a growl of thanks, in the direction of its den. From that moment, M. Lafleur no longer went harpooning unless armed with his gun.

The chief of police had, it seems, acquired a taste of seal flesh. After having followed the Parisian once or twice, he borrowed his harpoon and succeeded in capturing a superb seal, the best cuts of the fat of which he carefully laid aside.

This astonished Yegor.

"What does he want with that supply of fat?" asked he of M. Lafleur.

What did he want with it! Seeing that the Yakouts did not return, he was resolutely thinking of flight and getting ready his provisions for his journey.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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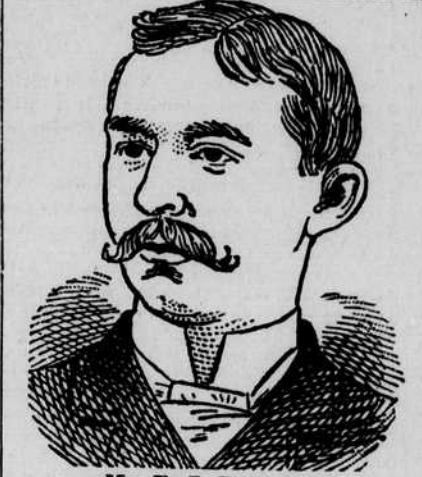
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