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THE CONVICT MINES OF KARA.



IN the vast sub-arctic wilderness of the Trans-Baikal (By-kal'), nearly 5000 miles by road from St. Petersburg and more than 1000 miles from the coast of the Pacific, in a dreary, lonely valley between two lateral spurs of the Yablonoi (Yah'blo-noy) Mountains, there is a little chain of log prisons, gold placers, and convict settlements, known to the Russian public as the mines of Kara (Kah-rah'). When, in your morning papers, you read a dispatch from St. Petersburg saying that such and such "Nihilists" have been tried, found guilty, and condemned to death, but that the Tsar has been pleased to commute their sentence to penal servitude in the mines, it is to the mines of Kara that reference is made. I purpose to describe, in the form of a simple personal narrative, a visit that we made to these mines in the late fall and early winter of 1885, and to set forth, as fully as space will permit, the results of our attempt to investigate the condition of the Kara prisons and to obtain trustworthy information concerning the life of the political prisoners. The subject is one of more than ordinary magnitude, and I shall be prevented by space limitations from dealing with it upon a scale commensurate with its importance; but I can draw, perhaps, a rough outline sketch of an East Siberian convict establishment, and give the reader an idea of what is meant in Russia by "Katorga" (Kat'or-gah), or penal servitude.¹

The mines of Kara are distant from Chita (Che'tah), the capital of the Trans-Baikal, about 300 miles; but for more than 200 miles the traveler in approaching them follows a fairly good post road, which runs at first through the valley of the Ingoda (In-go-dah') and then along the northern or left bank of the Shilka (Shil'ka) River, one of the principal tributaries of the Amur (Am-moor'). At a small town called Stretinsk (Stray'tinsk), where the Shilka first becomes navigable, this post road abruptly ends, and beyond that point communication with the Kara penal settlements is maintained by boats in summer and by sledges drawn over the ice in winter. For two or three weeks in autumn, while the ice is forming, and for a somewhat shorter period in the spring, after the river breaks up, the Kara mines are virtually isolated from all the rest of the world, and can be reached only by a difficult and dangerous bridle path, which runs for a distance of seventy or eighty miles, parallel with the river, across a series of steep and generally forest-clad mountain ridges. We hoped to reach Stretinsk in time to descend the Shilka to the Kara River in a boat; and when we left Chita, on Saturday, October 24, there seemed to be every probability that we should succeed in so doing. The weather, however, turned suddenly colder; snow fell to a depth of an inch and a half or two inches; and Wednesday morning, when we alighted from our telega (te-lay'ga) on the northern bank of the Shilka opposite Stretinsk, winter had set in with great severity. The mercury in our thermometer indicated zero (Fahr.); our fur coats and the bodies of our horses were white with frost;

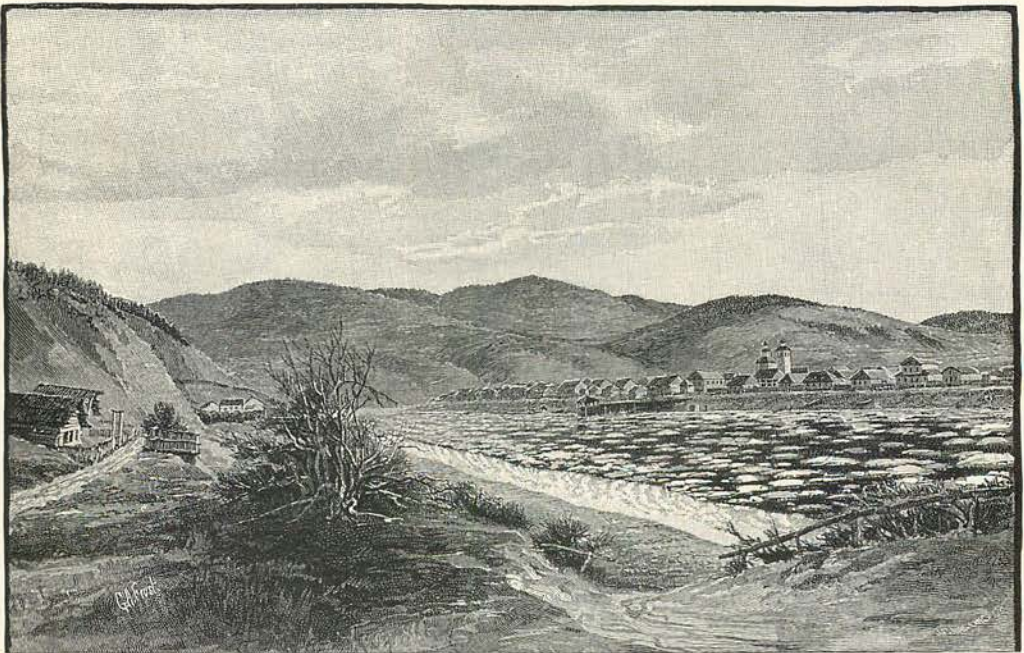
¹ "Katorga" is a corrupted form of the Greek word *κατέργον*, "a galley," and it points to the fact that in Russia, as in many other European countries, the

galleys were once manned by hard-labor convicts. The word is now used to designate penal servitude in the Siberian factories or mines.

and the broad, rapid current of the Shilka was so choked with masses of heavy ice as to be almost, if not quite, impassable. A large open skiff was making a perilous attempt to cross from Stretinsk to our side of the river, and a dozen or more peasants, who stood shivering around a small camp-fire on the beach, were waiting for it, with the hope that it would come safely to land and that the ferrymen might be persuaded to make a return trip with passengers. After watching for a quarter of an hour the struggles of this boat with the ice, Mr. Frost and I decided that it would be hazardous to attempt, in an open skiff, the passage of a rapid and ice-choked river half a mile wide, even if the boatmen were willing to take us; and we therefore sought shelter in the small log house of a young Russian peasant named Zablikoff (Zab'lee-koff), who good-humoredly consented to give us a night's lodging provided we had no objection to sleeping on the floor with the members of his family. We were too much exhausted and too nearly frozen to object to anything; and as for sleeping on the floor, we had become so accustomed

possibility of reaching the Kara mines at that season of the year by an overland journey across the mountains.

Descending the river in a boat was manifestly impracticable on account of the great quantity of running ice; we could not waste two or three weeks in inaction, and the horse-back ride to the mines over the mountains seemed to be the only feasible alternative. There were, on our side of the river, a few horses that Zablikoff thought might be hired; but they belonged to a merchant who lived in Stretinsk, and in order to get permission to use them, as well as to obtain the necessary saddles and equipments and secure the services of a guide, it would be necessary to cross the Shilka to the town. This, in the existing condition of the river, was a somewhat perilous undertaking; but Zablikoff offered to accompany me with two or three of his men, and early Thursday morning we carried his light, open skiff down to the beach for the purpose of making the attempt. The weather had moderated a little, but it was still very cold; the river had become an almost continuous



THE SHILKA RIVER AND THE TOWN OF STRETINSK.

to it that we should have felt out of place if we had tried to sleep anywhere else. We therefore had our baggage transported to Zablikoff's house, and in half an hour were comfortably drinking tea in the first decently clean room we had seen since leaving Nerchinsk (Ner'chinsk).

We devoted most of the remainder of the day to a discussion of our situation and of the

field of swiftly moving ice, intersected by narrow lanes of black open water, and a belt of fixed ice extended from the shore a distance of forty or fifty yards, becoming thinner and thinner as it approached the water's edge. Out over this treacherous surface we cautiously pushed our skiff, holding ourselves in readiness to spring into it quickly all together at the in-

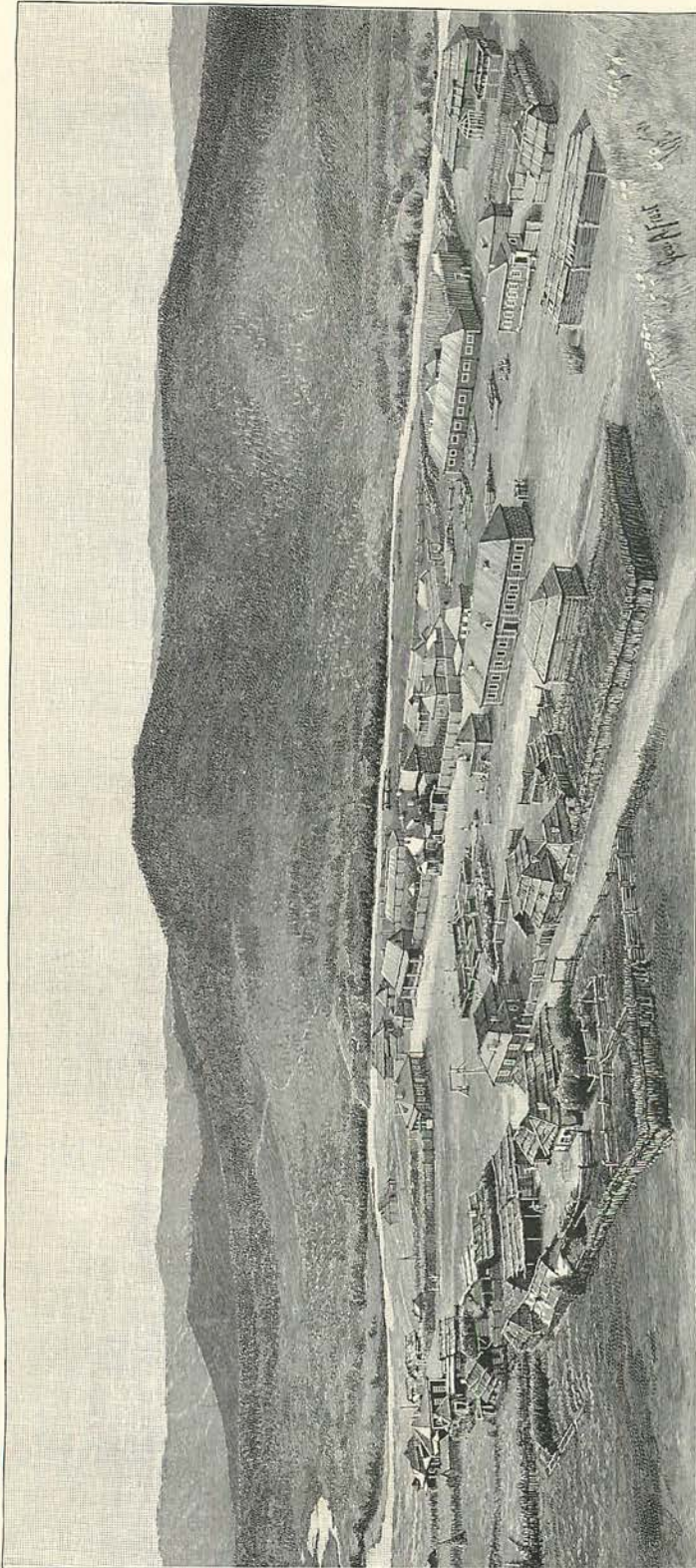


LIVING-ROOM OF RUSSIAN PEASANT'S HOUSE AT UST KARA.

stant when the ice should give way under our feet. Four or five yards from the black, eddying current the ice yielded, we felt a sudden sinking sensation, and then, with a great confused crash we went into the water, Zablikoff shouting excitedly, "Now! Into the boat!" The skiff gave a deep roll, first to one side and then to the other, as we all sprung into it; but fortunately it did not capsize, and in another moment we were whirled away and swept rapidly downstream amid huge grinding ice-tables, which we fended off, as well as we could, with oars and boat-hooks. As soon as the first excitement of the launch was over, two of the men settled down to steady rowing, while Zablikoff, boat-hook in hand, stood in the bow as pilot and guided our frail craft through the narrow lanes of water between the swiftly running ice-floes. We were carried downstream about half a mile before we could reach the opposite shore, and when we did reach it the making of a landing on the thin, treacherous edge of the fast ice proved to be a more difficult and dangerous task than even the launching of the skiff. Three or four times while we were clinging with boat-hooks to the crumbling edge of the ice-foot I thought we should certainly be crushed or capsized by the huge white fields and tables that came grinding down upon us from above; but we finally broke our way into the stationary ice-belt far enough to get shelter. Zablikoff sprung out upon a hummock and made fast a line, and after being immersed in the freezing water up to my hips

as the result of an awkward jump, I gained a footing upon ice that was firm enough to sustain my weight. The weather was so cold that getting wet was a serious matter; and leaving Zablikoff and the men to pull out the boat, I started at a brisk run for the town and took refuge in the first shop I could find. After drying and warming myself I sent a telegram to Mr. Wurts, the Secretary of the United States legation in St. Petersburg, to apprise him of our whereabouts; found the owner of the horses and made a bargain with him for transportation to the first peasant village down the river in the direction of the mines; hired an old guide named Nikifer (Ne-ke'fer); procured the necessary saddles and equipments, and late in the afternoon made, without accident, the perilous return trip across the river to Zablikoff's house.

As early as possible on Friday we saddled our horses and set out for the mines, taking with us nothing except our blanket rolls and note-books, a bag of provisions, the camera, and about a dozen dry plates. The weather had again moderated and our thermometer indicated a temperature of eighteen degrees above zero; but the sky was dark and threatening, a light snow was falling, and as we rode up on the summit of the first high ridge and looked ahead into the wild, lonely mountainous region that we were to traverse, I felt a momentary sinking of the heart. I was still weak from my sickness in Troitskosavsk (Troy-its-kosavsk'), winter had set in, and I feared that



CENTRAL PART OF THE PENAL SETTLEMENT, KNOWN AS THE KARA LOWER DIGGINGS.

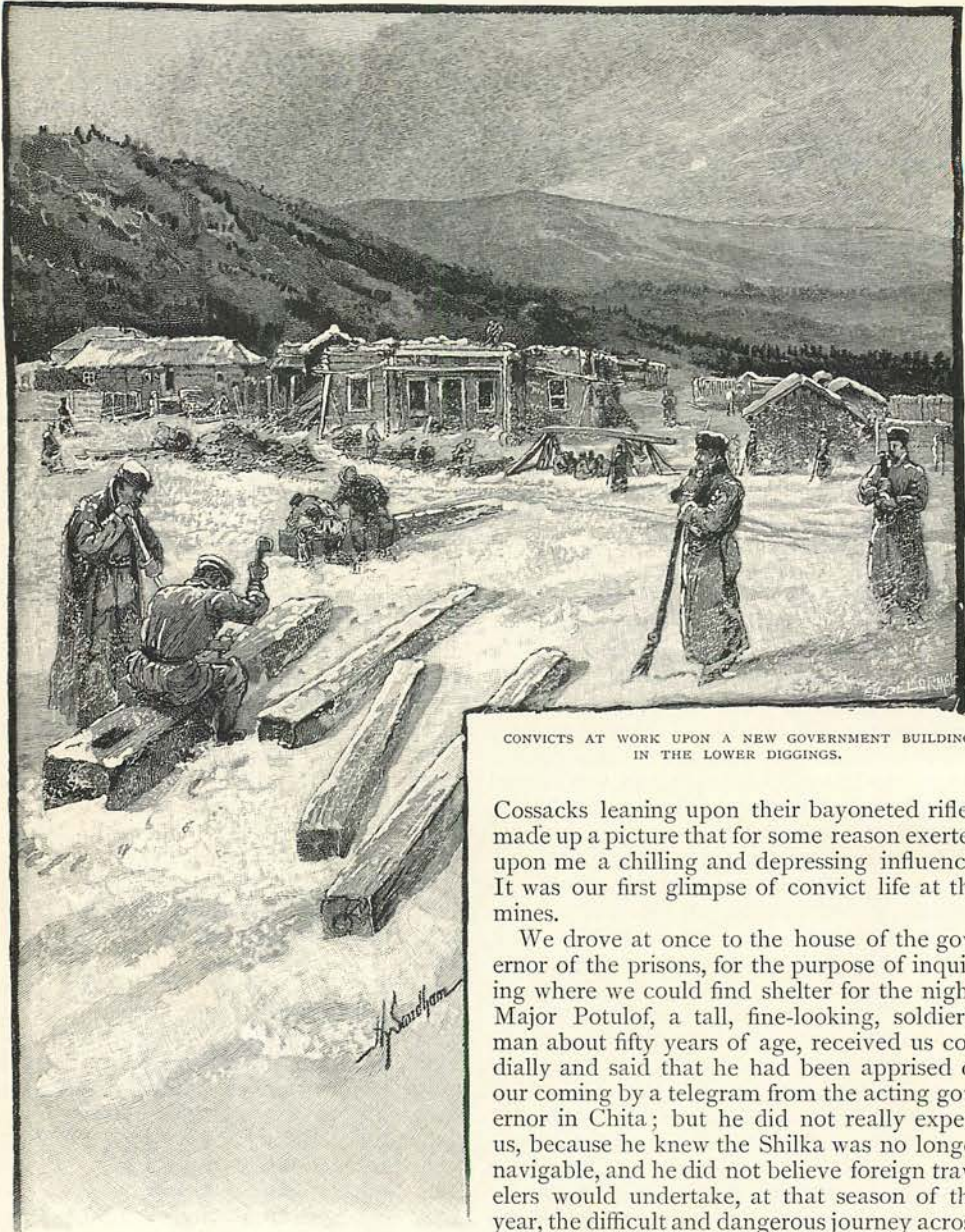
my slender stock of reserve strength would not carry me through a ride of eighty miles on horseback over such a trail as this was represented to be. Moreover, our winter equipment was scanty and not at all adapted to such a journey. Presuming that we should be able to descend the Shilka in a boat, we had not provided ourselves with fur sleeping-bags; our sheep-skin overcoats were not long enough to protect our knees; we had not been able to obtain fur hoods; and our felt boots were so large and heavy that they would not go into our stirrups, and we were forced either to ride without them or to dispense with the support that the stirrups might afford. Fortunately the trail that we followed was at first fairly good, the weather was not very cold, and we succeeded in making a distance of twenty miles without a great deal of suffering. We stopped for the night in a small log village called Lomi (Lo'me), on the bank of the Shilka, slept on the floor of a peasant's house, in the same room with two adults and five children, and Saturday morning, after a breakfast of tea, black bread, and cold fish-pie, resumed our journey with fresh horses and a new guide. The weather had cleared off cold during the night, and our thermometer, when we climbed into our saddles, indicated a temperature of eight degrees below zero. The bodies of the horses were white and shaggy with frost, icicles hung

from their nostrils, and they seemed as impatient to get away as we were. With our departure from Lomi began the really difficult part of our journey. The trail ran in a tortuous course across a wilderness of rugged mountains, sometimes making long détours to the northward to avoid deep or precipitous ravines; sometimes climbing in zigzags the steep sides of huge transverse ridges; and occasionally coming out upon narrow shelf-like cornices of rock, high above the dark, ice-laden waters of the Shilka, where a slip or stumble of our horses would unquestionably put an end to our Siberian investigations. That we did not meet with any accident in the course of this ride to Kara seems to me a remarkable evidence of good luck. Our horses were unshod, and the trail in many places was covered with ice formed by the overflow and freezing of water from mountain springs, then hidden by a thin sheet of snow, so that it was impossible to determine from the most careful inspection of a steep and dangerous descent whether or not it would afford secure foothold for our horses. Throughout Saturday and Sunday we walked most of the time; partly because we were too nearly frozen to sit in the saddle, and partly because we dared not take the risks of the slippery trail. Three days of riding, walking, and climbing over rugged mountains, in a temperature that ranged from zero to ten degrees below, finally exhausted my last reserve of strength; and when we reached the peasant village of Shilkina at a late hour Sunday night, a weak and thready pulse, running at the rate of 120, warned me that I was near the extreme limit of my endurance. Fortunately the worst part of our journey was over. Ust Kara (Oost Kah-rah'), the most southerly of the Kara penal settlements, was distant from Shilkina only ten or twelve miles; the trail between the two places presented no unusual difficulties; and about noon on Monday we dismounted from our tired horses in the large village at the mouth of the Kara River, hobbled with stiffened and benumbed legs into the house of a peasant known to our guide, and threw ourselves down to rest.

The mines of Kara, which are the private property of his Imperial Majesty the Tsar, and are worked for his benefit, consist of a series of open gold placers, situated at irregular intervals along a small rapid stream called the Kara River, which rises on the water-shed of the Yablonoi Mountains, runs in a south-easterly direction for a distance of forty or fifty miles, and finally empties into the Shilka between Stretinsk and the mouth of the Argun (Ar-noon'). The name "Kara" — derived from a Tartar adjective meaning "black" — was originally used

merely to designate this stream; but it is now applied more comprehensively to the whole chain of prisons, mines, and convict settlements that lie scattered through the Kara Valley. These prisons, mines, and convict settlements, taking them in serial order from south to north, are known separately and distinctively as Ust Kara or Kara mouth, the Lower Prison, the Political Prison, the Lower Diggings, Middle Kara, Upper Kara, and the Upper or Amurski (Am-moor'skee) Prison. The administration of the whole penal establishment centers in the Lower Diggings, where the governor of the common-criminal prisons resides, and where there is a convict settlement of two or three hundred inhabitants and a company or two of soldiers in barracks. It seemed to me best to make this place our headquarters; partly because it was the residence of the governor, without whose consent we could do nothing, and partly because it was distant only about a mile from the political prison in which we were especially interested. We therefore left our horses and our guide at Ust Kara with orders to wait for us, and, after dining and resting for an hour or two, set out in a telega for the Lower Diggings. The road ran up the left bank of the Kara River through a shallow valley averaging about half a mile in width, bounded by low hills that were covered with a scanty second growth of young larches and pines, and whitened by a light fall of snow. The floor of the valley was formed by huge shapeless mounds of gravel and sand, long ago turned over and washed in the search for gold, and it suggested a worked-out placer in the most dreary and desolate part of the Black Hills.

We reached the Lower Diggings just before dark. It proved to be a spacious but straggling Siberian village of low whitewashed cabins, long unpainted log barracks, officers' tin-roofed residences, with wattle-inclosed yards, and a black, gloomy, weather-beaten log prison of the usual East Siberian type. The buildings belonging to the Government were set with some show of regularity in wide open spaces or along a few very broad streets; and they gave to the central part of the village a formal and official air that was strangely at variance with the disorderly arrangement of the unpainted shanties and dilapidated drift-wood cabins of the ticket-of-leave convicts which were huddled together here and there on the outskirts of the settlement or along the road that led to Ust Kara. On one side of an open square, around which stood the prison and the barracks, forty or fifty convicts in long gray overcoats with yellow diamonds on their backs were at work upon a new log building, surrounded by a cordon of Cossacks in sheepskin "shubas," felt boots, and



CONVICTS AT WORK UPON A NEW GOVERNMENT BUILDING
IN THE LOWER DIGGINGS.

Cossacks leaning upon their bayoneted rifles, made up a picture that for some reason exerted upon me a chilling and depressing influence. It was our first glimpse of convict life at the mines.

We drove at once to the house of the governor of the prisons, for the purpose of inquiring where we could find shelter for the night. Major Potulof, a tall, fine-looking, soldierly man about fifty years of age, received us cordially and said that he had been apprised of our coming by a telegram from the acting governor in Chita; but he did not really expect us, because he knew the Shilka was no longer navigable, and he did not believe foreign travelers would undertake, at that season of the year, the difficult and dangerous journey across the mountains. He expressed great pleasure, however, at seeing us, and invited us at once to accept the hospitalities of his house. I told him that we did not intend to quarter ourselves upon him, but merely wished to inquire where we could find shelter for the night. He laughed pleasantly, and replied that there were no hotels or boarding-houses in Kara except those provided by the Government for burglars, counterfeiters, and murderers; and that he expected us, of course, to accept his hospitality and make ourselves at home in his house. This was not at all in accordance with our wishes or plans.

muff-shaped fur caps, who stood motionless at their posts, leaning upon their Berdan rifles and watching the prisoners. At a little distance was burning a camp-fire, over which was hanging a tea-kettle and around which were standing or crouching a dozen more Cossacks, whose careless attitudes and stacked rifles showed that they were temporarily off duty. In the waning light of the cold, gloomy autumnal afternoon, the dreary, snowy square, the gray group of convicts working listlessly as if hopeless or exhausted, and the cordon of

We had hoped to find some place of abode where we should not be constantly under official surveillance; and I did not see how we were secretly to make the acquaintance of the political convicts if we consented to become the guests of the governor of the prisons. As there did not, however, seem to be any alternative, we accepted Major Potulof's invitation, and in ten minutes were comfortably quartered in a large, well-furnished house, where our eyes were gladdened by the sight of such unfamiliar luxuries as long mirrors, big soft rugs, easy-chairs, and a piano.

The Kara prisons and penal settlements, at the time of our visit, contained, approximately, 1800 hard-labor convicts.¹ Of this number about one-half were actually in close confinement, while the remainder were living in barracks, or in little cabins of their own, outside the prison walls.

The penal term of a Russian convict at the mines is divided into two periods or stages. During the first of these periods he is officially regarded as "on probation," and is held in prison under strict guard. If his conduct is such as to merit the approval of the prison authorities, he is released from confinement at the end of his probationary term and is enrolled in a sort of ticket-of-leave organization known as the "free command." He is still a hard-labor convict; he receives his daily ration from the prison, and he cannot step outside the limits of the penal settlement without a permit; but he is allowed to live with other "reforming" criminals in convict barracks, or with his family in a separate house of his own; he can do extra work for himself in his leisure hours, if he feels so disposed, and he enjoys a certain amount of freedom. At the end of this second or "reforming" period he is sent as a "forced colonist" to some part of Eastern Siberia for the remainder of his life.

The prisons connected with the Kara penal establishment at the time of our visit were seven in number, and were scattered along the Kara River for a distance of about twenty miles. The slow but steady movement of the working convict force upstream in the search for gold had left the Lower Diggings and Ust Kara prisons so far behind that their inmates could no longer walk in leg-fetters to and from the placers, and a large number of them were therefore living in enforced idleness. The direct supervision of the common-criminal prisons was intrusted to smatritels (smah-tre'tels), or wardens, who reported to Major Potulof; and

the prison buildings were guarded by detachments of Cossacks from the Kara battalion, which numbered about one thousand men. The two political prisons — one at the Lower Diggings for men, and the other at Ust Kara for women — were not under the control of Major Potulof, but were managed by a gendarme officer named Captain Nikolín (Ne-ko'lin), who had been sent out from St. Petersburg for this particular duty, and who was at the head



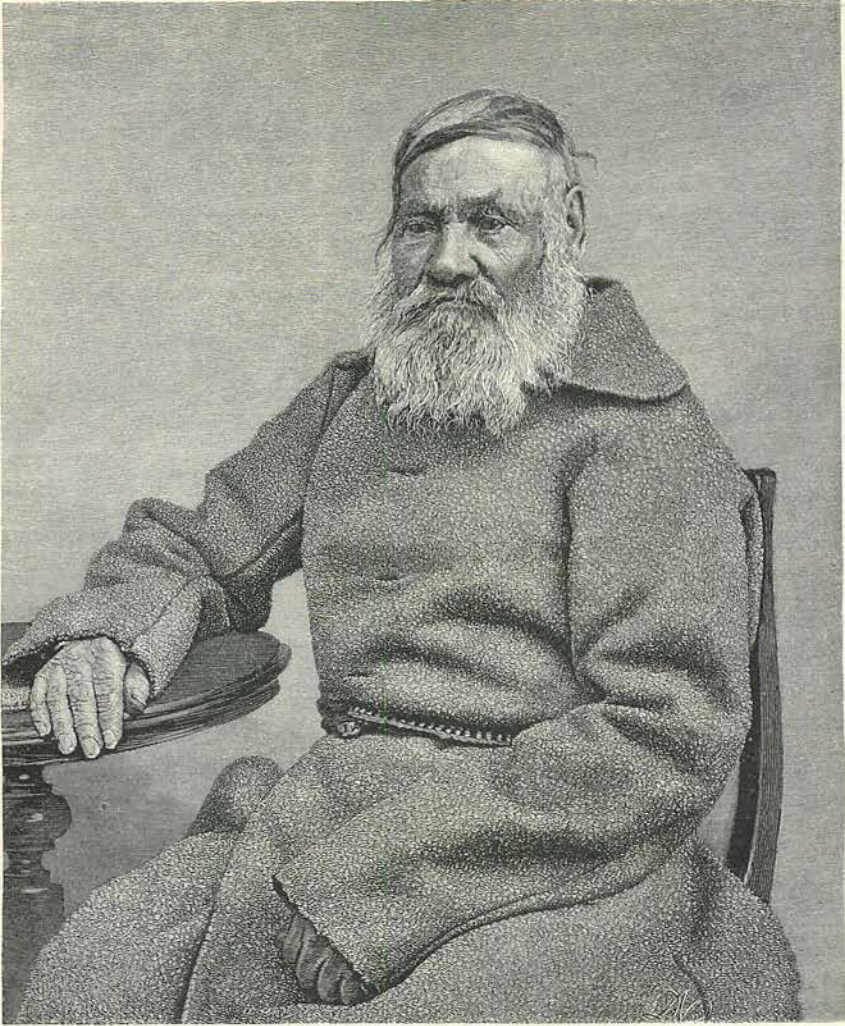
MAJOR POTULOF.

of a carefully selected prison guard of 140 gendarmes. The political prisons had also their free command, which at the time of our visit consisted of twelve or fifteen men and women, who had finished their terms of probation and were living in little huts or cabins of their own on the outskirts of the Lower Diggings. All of these facts were known to us long before we reached the mines, and we shaped our course in accordance with them.

The objects that we had in view at Kara were, first, to go through the common-criminal prisons and see the criminals actually at work in the mines; secondly, to make the acquaintance of the political convicts of the free command; and, thirdly, to visit the political prison and see how the condemned revolutionists

¹ According to the annual report of the Chief of Prison Administration the number of convicts in the Kara prisons and penal settlements on the 1st of January, 1886,—about two months after our visit,—was 2507. This number, however, included 600 or 800 women

and children who had come to the mines voluntarily with their husbands and fathers. (See Report of the Chief of Prison Administration for 1886, pp. 46, 47. St. Petersburg: Press of the Ministry of the Interior, 1888.)



TYPE OF HARD-LABOR CONVICT—SENT TO SIBERIA AT THE AGE OF 65.

lived, even if we were not permitted to talk with them. That we should succeed in attaining the first of these objects I felt confident, of the second I was not at all sure, and of the third I had little hope; but I determined to try hard for all. What instructions Major Potulof had received with regard to us I did not know; but he treated us with great cordiality, asked no awkward questions, and when, on the day after our arrival, I asked permission to visit the prisons and mines, he granted it without the least apparent surprise or hesitation, ordered out his horses and droshky, and said that it would give him great pleasure to accompany us.

It is not my purpose in the present paper to describe minutely all of the prisons in Kara that we were permitted to inspect, but I will sketch hastily the two that seemed to me to

be typical, respectively, of the worst class and of the best.

The Ust Kara prison, which in point of sanitary condition and overcrowding is perhaps the worst place of confinement in the whole Kara Valley, is situated on low, marshy ground in the outskirts of the penal settlement of the same name, near the junction of the Kara River with the Shilka. It was built nearly half a century ago, when the Government first began to work the Kara gold placers with convict labor. As one approaches it from the south it looks like a long, low horse-car stable made of squared but unpainted logs, which are now black, weather-beaten, and decaying from age. Taken in connection with its inclosed yard it makes a nearly perfect square of about one hundred feet, two sides of which are formed by the prison buildings and two sides by a stockade

about twenty-five feet in height, made of closely set logs, sharpened at the top like colossal lead-pencils. As we approached the court-yard gate, an armed Cossack who stood in the black-barred sentry-box beside it presented arms to Major Potulof and shouted, "Starshe!" (Star'shay)—the usual call for the officer of the day. A Cossack corporal ran to the entrance with a bunch of keys in his hand, unlocked the huge padlock that secured the small door in the larger wooden gate, and admitted us to

has a suggestion of damp decaying wood and more than a suggestion of human excrement—and still you will have no adequate idea of it. To unaccustomed senses it seems so saturated with foulness and disease as to be almost insupportable. As we entered the corridor, slipped upon the wet, filthy floor, and caught the first breath of this air, Major Potulof turned to me with a scowl of disgust, and exclaimed, "Otvratitelni tiurma!" (Ot-vra-te'tel-nee tyoor-ma')—"It is a repulsive prison!"



A KAMERA, OR CELL, IN THE UST KARA PRISON.¹

the prison court-yard. Three or four convicts, with half-shaven heads, ran hastily across the yard as we entered, to take their places in their cells for inspection. We ascended two or three steps incrustated with an indescribable coating of filth and ice an inch and a half thick, and entered, through a heavy plank door, a long, low, and very dark corridor, the broken and decaying floor of which felt wet and slippery to the feet, and where the atmosphere, although warm, was very damp, and saturated with the strong peculiar odor that is characteristic of Siberian prisons. A person who has once inhaled that odor can never forget it; and yet it is so unlike any other bad smell in the world that I hardly know with what to compare it. I can ask you to imagine cellar air, every atom of which has been half a dozen times through human lungs and is heavy with carbonic acid; to imagine that air still further vitiated by foul, pungent, slightly ammoniacal exhalations from long unwashed human bodies; to imagine that it

The Cossack corporal who preceded us threw open the heavy wooden door of the first kamera (kah'mer-ah) and shouted, "Smirno!" (Smeer'no)—"Be quiet!" the customary warning of the guard to the prisoners when an officer is about to enter the cell. We stepped across the threshold into a room about 24 feet long, 22 feet wide, and 8 feet high, which contained 29 convicts. The air here was so much worse than the air in the corridor that it made me faint and sick. The room was lighted by two nearly square, heavily grated windows with double sashes, that could not be raised or opened, and there was not the least apparent provision anywhere for ventilation. Even the brick oven, by which the cell was warmed, drew its air from the corridor. The walls of the kamera were of squared logs and had once been whitewashed; but they had become dark and grimy from lapse of time, and were blotched in hundreds of places with dull red blood-stains where the convicts had crushed

¹ This picture is the reproduction of a rough, hasty sketch made by Mr. Frost from memory. The number of prisoners that the cell contained has been intention-

ally diminished in order not to hide the nares, or sleeping-platforms. The point of view is the threshold of the door.

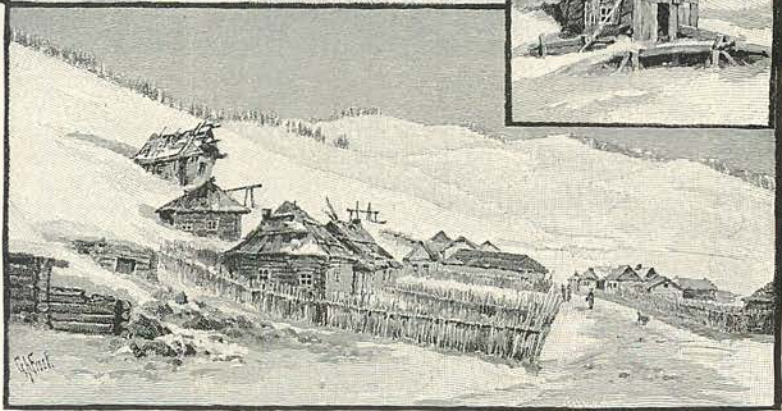
bed-bugs. The floor was made of heavy planks, and, although it had recently been swept, it was incrustated with dry, hard-trodden filth. Out from the walls on three sides of the room projected low sloping wooden platforms about six feet wide, upon which the convicts slept, side by side, in closely packed rows, with their heads to the walls and their feet extended towards the middle of the cell. They had neither pillows nor blankets, and were compelled to lie down upon these sleeping-benches at night without removing their clothing, and without other covering than their coarse gray overcoats. The cell contained no furniture of any kind except these sleeping-platforms, the brick oven, and a large

it gave me an impression of freshness and comparative purity. We then went through hastily, one after another, the seven kameras that composed the prison. They all resembled the first one except that they varied slightly in dimensions, in shape, or in the number of prisoners that they contained. In the cell shown in the illustration on page 171 I noticed a shoemaker's bench on the sleeping-platform between the windows, and the foulness of the air was tempered and disguised, to some extent, by the fresh odor of leather. Even in this kamera, however, I breathed as little as possible, and escaped into the corridor at the first opportunity. The results

of breathing such air for long periods of time may be seen in the Kara prison hospital, where the prevalent diseases are scurvy, typhus and typhoid fevers, anæmia, and



wooden tub. When the door was locked for the night each one of these 29 prisoners would have, for 8 or 10 hours' consumption, about as much air as would be contained in a packing-box 5 feet square and 5 feet high. I could discover no way in which a single



VIEW NEAR UPPER KARA, AND HOUSES OF THE FREE COMMAND.

cubic foot of fresh air could get into that cell after the doors had been closed for the night.

We remained in the first kamera only two or three minutes. I think I was the first to get out into the corridor, and I still vividly remember the sense of relief with which I drew a long breath of that corridor air. Heavy and vitiated as it had seemed to me when I first entered the prison, it was so much better than the atmosphere of the overcrowded cell that

consumption. No one whom we met in Kara attempted to disguise the fact that most of these cases of disease are the direct result of the life that the convicts are forced to live in the dirty and overcrowded kameras. The prison surgeon admitted this to me frankly, and said: "We have more or less scurvy here all the year round. You have been through the prisons, and must know what their sanitary condition is. Of course such uncleanness and overcrowding result in disease. We



CONVICTS AT WORK IN ONE OF THE KARA GOLD PLACERS.

have 140 patients in the hospital now; frequently in spring we have 250."¹

¹ In 1857, when the famous, or infamous, Razgildeyef (Raz-gil-day'yef) undertook to get for the Tsar out of the Kara mines 100 poods (about 3600 pounds) of gold, more than 1000 convicts sickened and died in the Kara prisons from scurvy, typhus fever, and overwork. Alexander the Liberator was then Tsar, and it might be supposed that such awful misery and mortality in his own mines would inevitably attract his attention, and that he would devote at least a part of the gold bought with a thousand men's lives to the reformation of such a murderous penal system. Nothing, however, was done. Ten years passed, and at the ex-

Most of these cases come from a prison population of less than one thousand; and the hos-

piration of that time, according to Maximoff (Max-im'-off), there were at the Kara mines "the same order of things, the same prisons, and the same scurvy." (See "Siberia and Penal Servitude," by S. Maximoff, Vol. I., p. 102. St. Petersburg: A. Transhel, 1871.) Nearly twenty more years had elapsed when we visited the mines in 1885, and the report still was, "We have more or less scurvy here all the year round."

The number of cases of sickness treated in the Kara prison hospital and lazarets in 1886 was 1208. The average daily number was 117. (See Report of the Chief Prison Administration for 1886, pp. 46, 47.)

pital records do not, by any means, represent the whole aggregate of sickness in the Kara penal settlements. Many convicts of the free command lie ill in their own little huts or cabins, and even in the prison kameras there are scores of sick whose cases are not regarded as serious enough to necessitate their removal to a hospital that is perhaps overcrowded already. A convict in the early stages of scurvy may therefore lie in a prison kamera for a week or two, poisoning with his foul, diseased breath the air that must be breathed by men who are still comparatively well.

After visiting all the kameras in the men's prison, we came out at last into the pure, cold, delicious air, crossed the court-yard, went through another gate in the stockade, and entered the women's prison—a similar but smaller log building, which contained two large cells opening into each other. These rooms were well warmed and lighted, were higher than the cells in the men's prison, and had more than twice as much air space per capita; but their sanitary condition was little, if any, better. The air in them had perhaps been less vitiated by repeated respiration, but it was so saturated with foul odors from a neglected water-closet that one's senses could barely tolerate it. The floor was uneven and decayed, and in places the rotten planks had either settled or given way entirely, leaving dark holes into a vacant space between the floor and the swampy ground. Into these holes the women were evidently in the habit of throwing slops and garbage. I went and stood for a moment over one of them, but I could see nothing in the darkness beneath; and the damp air, laden with the effluvium of decaying organic matter that was rising from it, seemed to me so suggestive of typhoid fever and diphtheria that I did not venture to take a second breath in that vicinity. The kameras in the women's prison had no furniture of any kind except the plank sleeping-platforms, which, of course, were entirely destitute of bedding. I did not see in either room a single pillow or blanket. In these two cells were imprisoned 48 girls and women, 6 or 7 of whom were carrying in their arms pallid, sickly-looking babies.

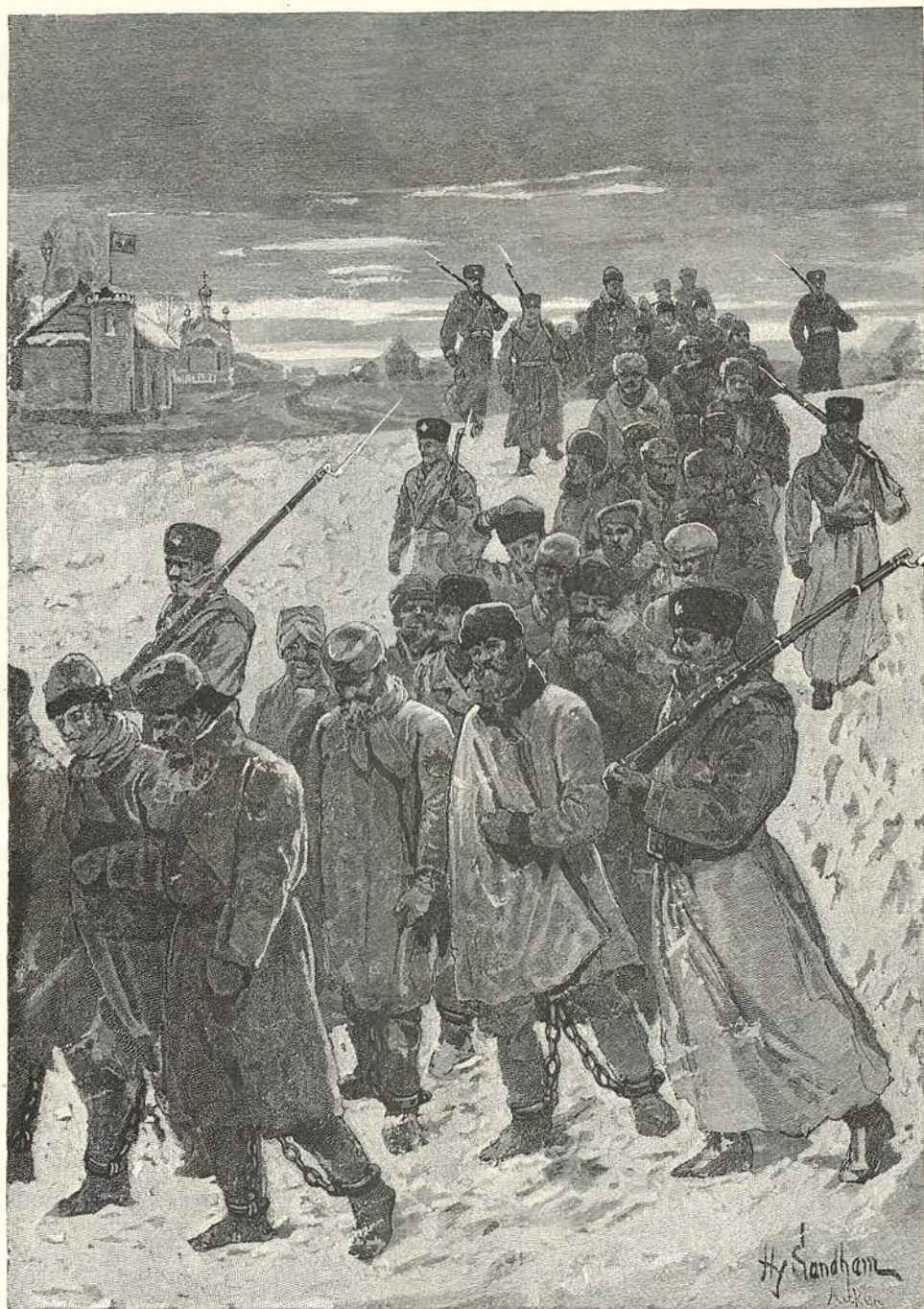
At every step in our walk through the two prisons Major Potulof was besieged by unfortunate convicts who had complaints to make or petitions to present. One man had changed names with a comrade on the road while intoxicated, and had thus become a hard-labor convict when he should have been merely a forced colonist, and he wanted his case investigated. Another insisted that he had long since served out his full prison term and should be enrolled in the free command. Three more

declared that they had been two months in prison and were still ignorant of the nature of the charges made against them. Many of the convicts addressed themselves eagerly to me, under the impression, apparently, that I must be an inspector or "reviser" sent to Kara to investigate the prison management. In order to save Major Potulof from embarrassment and the complainants from possible punishment, I hastened to assure them that we had no power to redress grievances or to grant relief; that we were merely travelers visiting Kara out of curiosity. The complaints, and the manifestly bad condition of the prisons, seemed to irritate Major Potulof, and he grew more and more silent, moody, and morose as we went through the kameras. He did not attempt to explain, defend, or excuse anything, nor did he then, or at any subsequent time, ask me what impression the Ust Kara prisons made upon me. He knew very well what impression they *must* make.

In another stockaded yard, adjoining the one through which we had passed, stood the political prison for women; but Major Potulof could not take us into it without the permission of the gendarme commandant, Captain Nikolin. From all that I subsequently learned with regard to this place of punishment, I have little doubt that, while it is cleaner and less overcrowded than the common-criminal prisons, it does not rank much above the latter in comfort or in sanitary condition.

Early Tuesday afternoon we visited the Middle Kara prison, which was perhaps the best one we inspected at the mines. It was distant from the Lower Diggings about three miles, and was reached by a road that ran up the right bank of the Kara River through a desolate, snowy valley, dotted here and there with the dilapidated huts and cabins of the free command. More wretched and cheerless places of abode than these can hardly be imagined. Readers who remember the so-called "shanties on the rocks" in the upper part of New York City can form, perhaps, with the aid of the illustration on page 172, some faint idea of their appearance. The best of them could hardly bear comparison with the poorest of the Irish laborers' houses that stand, here and there, along our railroads, while the worst of them were mere dog kennels of driftwood and planks, in which it was almost incredible that human beings could exist throughout a Siberian winter.

The ostensible object of organizing a free command in connection with the Kara prisons was to encourage reformation among the convicts by holding out to them, as a reward for good behavior, the hope of obtaining release from confinement and an opportunity to better their condition. It does not seem to me, how-



CONVICTS RETURNING AT NIGHT FROM THE MINES.

ever, that this object has been attained. The free command is a demoralizing rather than a reforming agency; it promotes rather than discourages drunkenness and licentiousness; it does not guarantee, even to criminals who are actually reforming, any permanent amelioration

of condition; and every decade it is the means of turning loose upon the Siberian population three or four thousand common criminals of the worst class. The custom of allowing the wives and children of convicts to accompany them to Siberia and to live — sometimes alone

and unprotected — in the free command, results necessarily in great demoralization. Such wives and children are supported — or at least aided to exist — by the Government, with the hope that they will ultimately exert a beneficial domestic influence over their criminal husbands and fathers; but the results rarely justify official anticipations. The women and girls in a great majority of cases go to the bad in the penal settlements, even if they have come uncorrupted through two or three hundred overcrowded étapes and forwarding prisons. There is little inducement, moreover, for a convict in the free command to reform and establish himself with his family in a comfortable house of his own, because he knows that in a comparatively short time he will be sent away to some other part of Siberia as a "forced colonist," and will lose all the material results of his industry and self-denial. He generally tries, therefore, to get through his term in the free command with as little labor and as much vicious enjoyment as possible. Hundreds, if not thousands, of convicts look forward with eagerness to enrollment in the free command merely on account of the opportunities for escape that it affords. Every summer, when the weather becomes warm enough to make life out of doors endurable, the free command begins to overflow into the forests; and for two or three months a narrow but almost continuous stream of escaping convicts runs from the Kara penal settlements in the direction of Lake Baikal. The signal for this annual movement is given by the cuckoo, whose notes, when first heard in the valley of the Kara, announce the beginning of the warm season. The cry of the bird is taken as an evidence that an escaped convict can once more live in the forests; and to run away, in convict slang, is to "go to General Kukushka for orders." (Koo-koosh'ka is the Russian name for the cuckoo.) More than 300 men leave the Kara free command every year to join the army of "General Kukushka"; and in Siberia, as a whole, the number of runaway exiles and convicts who take the field in response to the summons of this popular officer exceeds 30,000. Most of the Kara convicts who "go to General Kukushka for orders" in the early summer come back to the mines under new names and in leg-fetters the next winter; but they have had their outing, and have breathed for three whole months the fresh, free



A CONVICT OF THE FREE COMMAND SURREPTITIOUSLY
WASHING OUT GOLD.

air of the woods, the mountains, and the steppes. With many convicts the love of wandering through the trackless forests and over the great plains of Eastern Siberia becomes a positive mania. They do not expect to escape altogether; they know that they must live for months the life of hunted fugitives, subsisting upon berries and roots, sleeping on the cold and often water-soaked ground, enduring hardships and miseries innumerable, and facing death at almost every step. But, in spite of all this, they cannot hear in early summer the first soft notes of the cuckoo without feeling an intense, passionate longing for the adventures and excitements that attend the life of a brodyag (brod-yag', a vagrant or tramp).

"I had once a convict servant," said a prison official at Kara to me, "who was one of these irreclaimable vagrants, and who ran away periodically for the mere pleasure of living a nomadic life. He always suffered terrible hardships; he had no hope of escaping from Siberia; and he was invariably brought back in leg-fetters, sooner or later, and severely punished; but nothing could break him of the practice. Finally, after he had become old and gray-headed, he came to me one morning in early summer — he was then living in the free command — and said to me, 'Bahrin, I wish you would

please have me locked up.' 'Locked up!' said I. 'What for? What have you been doing?' 'I have n't been doing anything,' he replied, 'but you know I am a brodyag. I have run away many times, and if I am not locked up I shall run away again. I am old and gray-headed now, I can't stand life in the woods as I could once, and I don't want to run away; but if I hear General Kukushka calling me I must go. Please do me the favor to lock me up, your High Nobility, so that I *can't* go.' I did lock him up," continued the officer, "and kept him in prison most of the summer. When he was released the fever of unrest had left him, and he was as quiet, contented, and docile as ever."

There seems to me something pathetic in this inability of the worn, broken old convict to hear the cry of the cuckoo without yielding to the enticement of the wild, free, adventurous life with which that cry had become associated. He knew that he was feeble and broken; he knew that he could no longer tramp through the forests, swim rapid rivers, subsist upon roots, and sleep on the ground, as he once had done; but when the cuckoo called he felt again the impulses of his youth, he lived again in imagination the life of independence and freedom that he had known only in the pathless woods, and he was dimly conscious that if not prevented by force he "must go." As Ulysses had himself bound in order that he might not yield to the voices of the sirens, so the poor old convict had himself committed to prison in order that he might not hear and obey the cry of the cuckoo, which was so intimately associated with all that he had ever known of happiness and freedom.

It may seem to the reader strange that convicts are able to escape from penal settlements garrisoned and guarded by a force of a thousand Cossacks, but when one knows all the circumstances this ceases to be a matter for surprise. The houses of the ticket-of-leave convicts in the free command are not watched; there is no cordon of soldiers around the penal settlements; and it is comparatively an easy matter for a convict who is not under personal restraint to put into a gray bag a small quantity of food saved from his daily ration, tie a kettle to his belt, take an ax in his hand, and steal away at night into the trackless forest. It is a well-known fact, moreover, that many prison officials wink at escapes because they are able to turn them to pecuniary account. This they do by failing to report the runaways as "absent," by continuing to draw for weeks or months the clothing and the rations to which such runaways would be entitled if present, and by selling to the local representatives of Jewish speculators the food and garments thus ac-

quired. Not infrequently these speculators have contracts to furnish prison supplies, and they fill them by reselling to the Government at a high price the very same flour and clothing that have just been stolen from it by its own officials. To an unscrupulous prison warden every dead or runaway convict is a source of steady revenue so long as his death or flight can be concealed and his name carried on the prison rolls. Under such circumstances, energetic measures to prevent the escape of criminals or to secure their recapture could hardly be expected.

The prison of Middle Kara, which is situated in the penal settlement of the same name, is a one-story log building of medium size, placed in such a way that one of its longer sides stands flush with the line of the street, while the other is inclosed by a high stockade so as to form a nearly square yard. It did not seem to me to differ much in appearance or plan from the prison at Ust Kara; but it was in better sanitary condition than the latter, and was evidently of more recent construction. As nearly all its complement of prisoners were at work in the upper gold placer when we arrived, I could not determine by inspection whether or not it would be overcrowded at night. Major Potulof told me, in reply to a question, that the number of criminals confined in it was 107. At the time of our visit, however, its *kameras* contained only a few men, who had been excused from hard labor on account of temporary disability, or who had been assigned to domestic work such as sweeping or cooking. The atmosphere of the *kameras* was heavy and lifeless, but it seemed to be infinitely better than the air in the Ust Kara prison, and I could breathe it without much repugnance. By fastening against the walls over the sleeping-platforms large fresh boughs of hemlock and pine, an attempt had apparently been made to disguise the peculiar odor that is characteristic of Siberian prisons. Between these boughs, in some of the *kameras*, I noticed, tacked against the logs, rectangular cards about twenty inches long by twelve inches wide, bearing, in large printed letters, verses from the New Testament. The only ones that I can now remember were: "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out," and "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Whence these scriptural cards came I do not know, but there seemed to me to be a strange and almost ghastly incongruity between the dark, grimy prison walls and the festal decorations of aromatic evergreens—between the rough plank sleeping-benches infested with vermin, and the promise of rest for the weary and heavy laden. How great a boon even bodily rest would be to the hard-

labor convicts was shown in the pitiful attempts they had made to secure it by spreading down on the hard sleeping-benches thin patchwork mattresses improvised out of rags, cast-off foot-wrappers, and pieces cut from the skirts of their gray overcoats. Not one of these mattresses contained less than twenty scraps and remnants of old cloth, while in some of them there must have been a hundred. They all looked like dirty "crazy-quilts" made out of paper-rags in a poor-house, and they could hardly have made any appreciable difference in the hardness of the plank sleeping-platforms. A man might as well seek to obtain a comfortable night's rest on a front-door step by interposing between it and his tired body a ragged and dirty bath-towel. There can be no reasonable excuse, it seems to me, for the failure of the Russian Government to provide at least beds and pillows of straw for its hard-labor convicts. Civilized human beings put straw even into the kennels of their dogs; but the Russian Government forces men to work for ten or twelve hours a day in its East Siberian mines; compels them after this exhausting toil to lie down on a bare plank; and then, to console them in their misery, tacks up on the grimy wall over their heads the command and the promise of Christ, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Mr. Frost and I made a careful examination of ten prisons in the province of the Trans-Baikal, and in none of them — with the single exception of the new central prison in Verkhni Udinsk (Verkh'nee Oo'dinsk) — did we find a bed, a pillow, or a blanket. Everywhere the prisoners lay down at night in their gray overcoats on bare planks, and almost everywhere they were tortured by vermin, and were compelled to breathe the same air over and over again until it seemed to me that there could not be oxygen enough left in it to support combustion in the flame of a farthing rush-light. If any one who can read Russian thinks that these statements exaggerate the facts, I beg him to refer to the description of the convict prison at the Kara Lower Diggings in Maximoff's "Siberia and Penal Servitude," Vol. I., pages 100-103; to the description of the old Verkhni Udinsk prison in Orfanoff's "Afar," pages 220-222; and to the statements of the latter author with regard to East Siberian prisons and prison management generally in the second part of his book.¹ I am not saying these things for the first time; they have been said before, in Russia and by Russians. I do not repeat them because I like to do it; but

because they *ought* to be repeated until the Russian Government shows some disposition to abate such evils.

After we had finished our inspection of the cells in the Middle Kara prison, we made an examination of the kitchen. Hard-labor convicts at Kara receive a daily ration consisting of three pounds of black rye-bread; about four ounces of meat, including the bone; a small quantity of barley, which is generally put into the water in which the meat is boiled for the purpose of making soup; and a little brick tea. Occasionally they have potatoes or a few leaves of cabbage; but such luxuries are bought with money made by extra work, or saved by petty "economies" in other ways. This ration seemed to me ample in quantity, but lacking in variety and very deficient in vegetables. The bread, which I tasted, was perhaps as good as that eaten by Russian peasants generally; but it was very moist and sticky, and pieces taken from the center of the loaf could be rolled back into dough in one's hands. The meat, which I saw weighed out to the convicts after it had been boiled and cut up into pieces about as large as dice, did not have an inviting appearance, and suggested to my mind small refuse scraps intended for use as soap-grease. The daily meals of the convicts were arranged as follows: in the morning, after the roll-call, or "verification," breakfast, consisting of brick tea and black rye-bread, was served to the prisoners in their cells. The working parties then set out on foot for the gold placers, carrying with them bread and tea for lunch. This midday meal was eaten in the open air beside a camp-fire, regardless of weather, and sometimes in fierce winter storms. Late in the afternoon the convicts returned on foot to their cells and ate on their sleeping-platforms the first hearty and nourishing meal of the day, consisting of hot soup, meat, bread, and perhaps a little more brick tea. After the evening verification they were locked up for the night, and lay down to sleep in closely packed rows on the "nares," or sleeping-benches, without removing their clothing, and without making any preparations for the night beyond bringing in the "parshas," or excrement buckets, spreading down their thin patchwork crazy-quilts, and rolling up some of their spare clothing to put under their heads. The clothing furnished to a hard-labor convict at Kara consists — or should, by law, consist — of one coarse linen shirt and one pair of linen trousers every six months; one cap, one pair of thick trousers, and one gray

¹ "Siberia and Penal Servitude," by S. Maximoff. St. Petersburg: A. Transhel, 1871. "Afar," by M. I. Orfanoff. Moscow: Kushnereff & Co., 1883.

Mr. Orfanoff says, for example, — and says it in

italics, — that in the course of nine years' service in Siberia, he "never saw a prison in which there were less than twice the number of prisoners for which it was intended." (Page 233.)

overcoat every year; a "polushuba" (pol'oo-shoo-ba), or outer coat of sheepskin, every two years; one pair of "brodnias" (brode'nee-yas), or loose leather boots, every three and a half months in winter; and one pair of "kati" (kot-tee'), or low shoes, every twenty-two days in summer. The quality of the food and clothing furnished by the Government may be inferred from the fact that the cost of maintaining a hard-labor convict at the mines is about \$50 a year, or a little less than fourteen cents a day.¹

After having examined the Middle Kara prison as carefully as time and circumstances would permit, we proceeded up the valley to a point just beyond the penal settlement of Upper Kara, and, leaving our vehicles there, walked down towards the river to the mines.

The auriferous sand in the valley of the Kara lies buried under a stratum of clay, gravel, or stones, varying in thickness from ten to twenty feet. The hard labor of the convicts consists in the breaking up and removal of this overlying stratum and the transportation of the "pay gravel," or gold-bearing sand, to the "machine," where it is agitated with water in a sort of huge iron hopper and then allowed to run out with the water into a series of shallow inclined troughs, or flumes, where the "black sand" and the particles of gold fall to the bottom and are stopped by low transverse cleats.

The first placer that we visited is shown in the illustration on page 173, which was made from an imperfect photograph taken by Mr. Frost under very unfavorable conditions. The day was cold and dark, a light powdery snow was falling, and a more dreary picture than that presented by the mine can hardly be imagined. Thirty or forty convicts, surrounded by a cordon of Cossacks, were at work in a sort of deep gravel pit, the bottom of which was evidently at one time the bed of the stream. Some of them were loosening with pointed crowbars the hard-packed clay and gravel, some were shoveling it upon small hand-barrows, while others were carrying it away and dumping it at a distance of 150 or 200 yards. The machine was not in operation, and the labor in progress was nothing more than the preliminary "stripping," or laying bare of the gold-bearing stratum. The

¹ This was the estimate given me by Major Potulof.

convicts, most of whom were in leg-fetters, worked slowly and listlessly, as if they were tired out and longed for night; the silence was broken only by the steady clinking of crow-bars, a quick, sharp order now and then from one of the overseers, or the jingling of chains as the convicts walked to and fro in couples carrying hand-barrows. There was little or no conversation except that around a small camp-fire a few yards away, where half a dozen soldiers were crouching on the snowy ground watching a refractory tea-kettle and trying to warm their benumbed hands over a sullen, fitful blaze. We watched the progress of the work for ten or fifteen minutes, and then, chilled and depressed by the weather and the scene, returned to our vehicle and drove back to the Lower Diggings.

The hours of labor in the Kara mines are from 7 A. M. to 5 P. M. in winter, and from 5 A. M. to 7 P. M. in summer. A considerable part of this time, however, is spent by the convicts in going back and forth between the "razreis" (raz-rays'), or "cutting," and the prisons where they spend their nights. The amount of gold extracted from the placers annually is eleven poods, or about four hundred pounds, all of which goes into the private purse of his Majesty the Tsar. The actual yield of the mines is probably a little more than this, since many of the convicts of the free command surreptitiously wash out gold for themselves and sell it to dealers in that commodity, who smuggle it across the Chinese frontier. To have "golden wheat," as the convicts call it, in one's possession at all in Siberia is a penal offense; but the profits of secret trade in it are so great that many small speculators run the risk of buying it from the convicts, while the latter argue that "the gold is God's," and that they have a perfect right to mine it for themselves if they can do so without too much danger of detection and punishment. The cost of maintaining the Kara penal establishment was estimated by Major Potulof at 500,000 rubles, or about \$250,000, a year. What proportion of this expense is borne by the Tsar, who takes the proceeds of the convicts' labor, I could not ascertain. He receives from all his gold-mines in Eastern Siberia—the "cabinet mines," as they are called—about 3600 pounds of pure gold per annum.

George Kennan.

