

IN A SLEDGE THROUGH FAMISHED RUSSIA.

BY E. W. CARES BROOKE.

THE delights of sledge locomotion were not vouchsafed to those who journeyed through Russia during the terrible winter of the famine. Unusual quantities of snow fell from one end of the land to the other. Many of the paths when once blocked were not reopened because of the dearth of horses and the weakness of the few that had been kept alive, while the practicable roads and paths were, as a rule, very uneven. The difference between the easy progress of a launch on the calm surface of the river, and the helpless pitching of a coaster in a dirty night on the Channel, is not greater than that of sleighing on the levelled drives of St. Petersburg and Moscow, compared with the struggle



READY TO FACE THE THREATENING STORM.



A RUSSIAN SCENE.

to get across the snow-blocked country outside the towns. This comparison is not a far-sought one, for people subject to seasickness are almost invariably seized with vomiting when sledging over bad roads. It is also an extremely arduous means of locomotion, and often at the end of a hundred-miles' drive I didn't know on which side to lie down to rest, so bruised was my body from my having been continually thrown against the sides of the sledge, and occasionally clean over them into the snow.

I served my apprenticeship in a sledge with M. Alexander Novikoff, on Madame Olga Novikoff's estates at Novo Alexandroffka, in the northern part of the government of Tamboff. Amongst other things, he initiated me into the *modus operandi* to be followed in case of a snowstorm. These storms constitute the great danger of sledge-travelling in Russia. The dry branches and wisps of straw which are placed in the snow to mark the highways are frequently covered up or carried away by the force of the storm. If this happen, the traveller is helpless, scarcely daring to move lest he miss his foothold on the hard-beaten track and sink girth deep in the soft snow that lies on either side of it. Should he find himself in such a position, he is to be congratulated if he has horses that know the locality, for he can then give them their heads, and in all probability they will drag the sledge safely to the next post-station, even in a blinding snowstorm, through which it is impossible to see a couple of yards ahead. The sagacious animals can feel when they are on the beaten track by the resistance of the

snow to their hoofs. But should the horses be strange to the country, or should they happen to run wide of the path and sink in the deep snow, they must be cut loose and allowed to take care of themselves while the traveller turns his sledge on end, bottom against the storm, and makes himself as comfortable as he can in the shelter it affords.

As the snow beats against the bottom of the sledge it forms a bank over which the storm will drive, and if the weather-bound voyager be not suffocated or starved, there is little danger of his being frozen to death, for the heap of snow accumulated around the sledge will keep him warm.

"Touch your nose occasionally," said M. Novikoff, who was explaining this as we drove in a high wind one morning.

I put my gloved hand up and felt where my nose ought to be. There was nothing! I took off my glove and tried again.

"Look here," I said. "It's gone!"

"Rub it," replied M. Novikoff, who continued talking as if the loss of my nose was a matter of the smallest concern.

I gathered a handful of snow from the collar of my furs, and applied myself to the task of getting life back into my nose.

It was not long before I ran near to having to put M. Novikoff's instructions into practice. I was making a journey with Count Alexis Bobrinsky to his estates in the government

of Samara, where the famine was working terrible ravages amongst the peasants. We started from the railway town of Sizrán on a hundred and fifty miles sledge drive into this part of wildest Russia. As the journey proceeded, the roads became worse and worse. Immense quantities of snow obstructed them, and frequently we were obliged to harness

the three horses in tandem and put a man on the leader to pick out some sort of a path. The track lay over the ice of the Volga. It might be supposed that travelling on the surface of the frozen river would be easier than over the uneven, unmade country roads. It is not always so. When this great river freezes, the floating masses of ice are driven upon one another until the surface is not unlike what a choppy sea would be were it possible to freeze it instantaneously. A thick layer of snow gives the appearance of a level path; but appearances are



DEATH AND DESOLATION.

deceptive, and the passage of the sledge soon shows up the irregularities. At one moment the sledge is on end, being strained over the front of an enormous block of ice; the next instant the vehicle goes down with a shock on the other side, nearly knocking the horses off their feet as it overtakes them. A moment later it is skidding sideways down another incline, or is careering half sideways, half backwards off the track, menacing to drag the horses after it,

At Chvolinsk, a Volga-side town, we had to cross the river and leave the regular post track. We were met with a refusal on the part of owners of post horses to take us any farther, for the very cogent reason that, owing to the famine, nine-tenths of the live stock in the neighbourhood had died of starvation, and they had no horses left that were strong enough for the work. With difficulty we obtained "free" horses to take us across the river to Douchovnitzko, a distance of four miles, and there we expected to be able to procure cattle to complete the stage.

A heavy snowstorm was raging, and when

three miserable brutes were put into the sledge, the prospect of their covering even four miles did not seem encouraging. The leader was so weak that it might have been pushed off its feet with a single blow. We started, but at the end of the street the horses would not face the storm, and tried hard several times to bolt back. After some delay, they were coaxed into line and eventually made their way slowly down the banks of the Volga. Here they tried again to bolt home, and missing the beaten track, they sank up to the girths in the soft snow. The leaders dragged the shaft horse after them, the sledge capsized, and the Count and myself were precipitated into the deep snow, from which we had to roll back on to the hard track as it was impossible to get a foothold. The sledge driver was beside himself with rage. He wept and howled, and thrashed the

horses, which were sinking deeper in the snow in every struggle they made to escape. Their cries of fear were almost human. While the driver was unharnessing them, the *chasse-neige* was burying the sledge. It only needed this to land us in such a predicament as M. Novikoff had described.

Although Chvolinsk was not more than three hundred yards distant, it would have been impossible to have struggled back to the town on foot. As soon as the horses were free of the harness, they scrambled back to the track, and the united efforts of all hands were successful in dragging the sledge out of the snow and getting the shafts round towards the town.

While the horses were being re-harnessed, it was found that the leader was too frightened and weak to be of any use to us, so we drove it away, trusting that its intelligence would enable it to take care of itself. The remaining animals were got into harness again, and the sledge moved back towards the town. It was now the turn of the shaft horse to make a mis-

take. Running wide of the beaten track—which by this time was quite obliterated—it fell and dragged the sledge with it, and we were once more thrown into the deep snow. In an instant we floundered back on to the path, and for the second time horses and sledge were rescued.

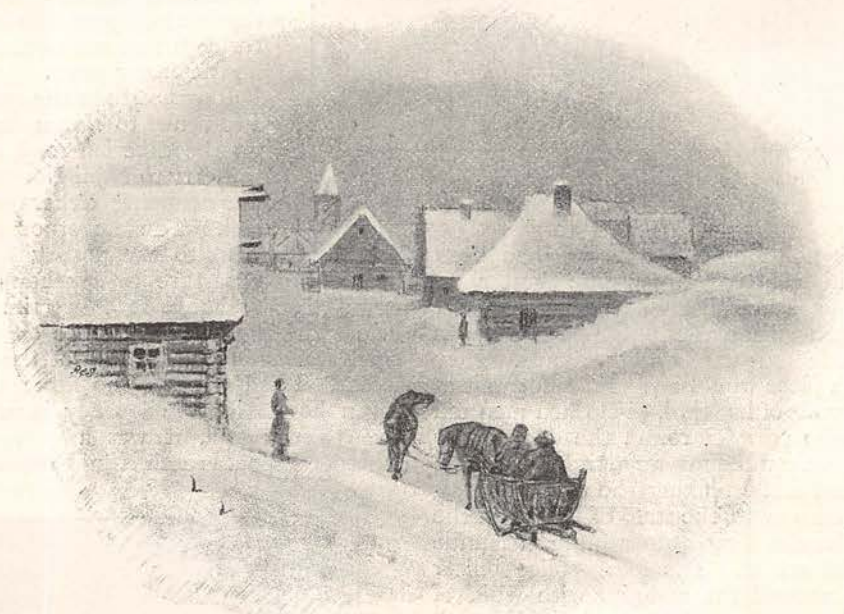


DISPENSING WITH THE SERVICES OF A STARVING HACK.

Without further incident, the return to Chvolinsk was accomplished, but the storm continued, and interrupted our journey for about thirty hours.

The paths across the desert of snow were often as though a devastating army had passed over them. At nightfall wolves prowled the country, and fed on the bodies of the cattle which had fallen dead by the side of the sledge tracks. Every now and then I came upon one of the brutes. It would trot leisurely from the carcass and watch the

blade of the axe through my head instead of by the side of it. Turning sharply round I found my face close to the blade of a brightly polished axe-head. A Tatar lad had thrown it over the back of the sledge as a kind of grappling hook, and, hanging on to the handle, he ran behind for an hour or so with the razor-like edge remaining by the side of my head the while. I felt like pushing it off in sign of protestation, but I did not do so for fear the young Tatar might attempt to grapple the sledge a second time and put the



HOSPITABLE BUT UNINVITING.

passage of the sledge, its lean form exaggerated out of all proportion by the evening mists. There was no danger for the living, because the plains were strewn with dead cattle, and wolves are cowardly creatures when running singly.

Out on the Ural steppes, away from town and village, the lower animals paid their tribute to the plague that occasioned so much suffering amongst men. There are hundreds of thousands of birds on the desert between the Volga and the Ural which are entirely dependent for their subsistence on the leavings of horses, the sundry ears of corn that fall from laden sledges, and the broken food thrown to them by people who traverse the country.

Every little thing breaks the monotony of journeying across these Russian plains. I recollect one afternoon hearing talking close

blade of the axe through my head instead of by the side of it.

I have not mentioned my equipment for this formidable journey through a famine-stricken land. It was of the simplest. I had a portmanteau and a hold-all, and what the hold-all would not hold was strapped in my travelling rugs until their bright colours caught the eye of an artful driver, who managed to "leave" them at a spot the police never succeeded in discovering. In the hold-all I carried a small supply of beef tea and dry biscuits, to be prepared for such emergencies as a delay *en route* or snowing-up might occasion. I also carried a packet of candles, for I knew that wherever there was a food famine it was accompanied by an oil famine. The biscuits were in turn frozen and sodden. In sledge travelling nothing is proof against the frost and snow.



CHANGING HORSES AT A POST-STATION.

At one point of my journey I had been living on beef tea, spread like butter on biscuits, for about a couple of days when I arrived at a village where famine bread was being handed out to starving peasants. How welcome a piece would be! I did not wait in the dreary file of haggard, ill-clothed men and women, who crowded round the door of the building, but pushed my way straight into the bakery, and while making the usual journalistic inquiries as to the state of things in the stricken hamlet I took up a lump of famine bread and ate it. The local police officer probably noticed the appetite with which I devoured this piece of black, insipid bread, for with a tact that amused me immensely when I thought of it afterwards, he invited me to lunch with him. The invitation was conditional, though the spirit in which it was given was not the less kindly for that.

"You are a journalist," he said. "If you come into my house I shall be obliged to ask you to show me your passport. If it is not inconvenient to you to have your passage through my district reported, come and lunch with me."

At that time I was laying low and working under the illusion that my movements had not excited the attention of the authorities. It would not do to spoil my work for the sake of a lunch.

"How will you advise St. Petersburg of my passage?" I asked.

"By letter to the Governor. He can do as he likes."

It took me very few seconds to decide. I was at least three days' distance from the governmental town. By the time the

authorities received the police officer's report I should be—I hadn't the faintest idea myself where—certainly far from the hospitable place where this incident was happening.

I had a nice lunch, and, with the aid of the little German that the officer spoke, I learned a good deal, and was shown much that interested me. On leaving, I looked at my passport and noticed that the *visé* was No. 1, indicating, perhaps, that I was the first foreigner who had passed through that out-of-the-way locality for many years.

It was early in the spring when I returned to Kazan from a trip up the Siberian road, and I had to hurry to Nijni Novgorod without stopping either for food or rest. The governor of Kazan very kindly sent to the post-station on the eve of my departure to say how necessary it was that I should reach a railway centre before the break-up of the ice on the Volga cut Kazan off from the rest of the world for weeks. I had relays of no fewer than fifty-seven horses for the journey between these two towns; still, it was a grave question whether I should reach Nijni Novgorod before



FAMISHED PEASANTS TAKE PRIESTLY COUNSEL.

the ice gave way. The Volga, swollen by the volume of water that had fallen into it from the melting snow, rose beneath the ice, and at some spots lifted it and broke it away from the banks. In places the sledge ran for miles through several inches of water. Every now and then it dropped into a pool of slush a couple of feet deep and I was drenched, and everything I had with me was soaked. But this was not the worst. At a spot where the rising river had broken the ice away from the shore one of the horses nearly perished. Making a false step, it slipped into a gaping crevice, but by a miracle the animal struggled out of the water before either the driver or myself had time to realise the gravity of the

accident. It is due to a much-abused country to say that the dangers of travelling in Russia are greatly exaggerated. Storms are always to be feared, and accidents often occur when the ice breaks up, but there is little to be dreaded from either man or beast. I drove 2,000 miles alone through the wildest parts of Russia in the height of the famine and the depth of winter. I carried no revolver or other arm of defence of any kind. There were only two occasions when, had I been armed, I might have been led to use any weapon in my possession; but, in either of these cases, I feel certain that recourse to fire-arms would have cost me my life.

CECCA'S CHOICE.

BY GRANT ALLEN.



I, Signore, she's a handsome woman, and she doesn't forget me, though I'm only a waiter. Every time she comes in, a smile and a nod and "Buon giorno, Luigi!" As you say, like spring. She was always fresh and beautiful.

Yes, I've known her for years—ever since I was no higher than the marble table the Signore's sitting at. She and I are compatriots. We come from the same village. The Signore can see it perched high on the flanks of the Prato Magno when he drives out in the Cascine—a little white speck on the mountain-side by day, a gleam of light through the gloom in the dusk of twilight. San Procolo, they call it. We lived there, Cecca and I, and our friend Marcantonio. He was a boy in those days; but he's a man now, of course. She's Cecca to me still, though you see her a great lady; and she says "Buon giorno, Luigi!" every day to this one when she comes into Doney's for a cup of coffee.

Think you've seen her in London? Si, si, so you would. She lives in England. She's a very great lady there. She married a painter, you know; and he's painted her often, they say, in all sorts of characters. Very distinguished, very rich, in the best society—princes and marquises, they tell me—so no doubt the Signore will have met her in some palazzo.

It was like this, Signore. Oh, yes, I will

recount it if the Signore will listen, for 'tis a story worth recounting, and not everybody knows it. We lived up there in the mountains, you see, looking down upon Florence—Cecca, Marcantonio, and I. Our fathers were peasants. And Cecca was the prettiest girl in all the village. How could it not be so when now she is the most beautiful woman in your great rich London, which is as much bigger than Florence, they say, as Florence than our village? Your park, Cecca tells me, is crowded every day with thousands of carriages—the Cascine nothing to it—and in all of them great ladies lolling back with yellow hair, and footmen in livery sitting stiff up in front of them. And yet our Cecca is the most beautiful of them all! And milords stand and gaze at those full rich lips that I kissed many a time when I was a boy in the mountains. Well, well, the world is strange, a whirligig of surprises; and here in Florence, you may guess, we see a great deal of it.

She had always that golden hair—golden hair, with black eyes and a creamy skin. It was those and her lips that made them paint her for a Magdalen. She looked like a woman who could sin great sins and then repent them. Her face was—what shall I call it?—voluptuous, yet her eyes were so sweet. From a child our people used to say of her, "Little Cecca has the face of a Santa Maddalena."

When we were growing up together—Cecca you may say sixteen, and Marcantonio and I nineteen or twenty—we two lads were just wildly in love with Cecca.