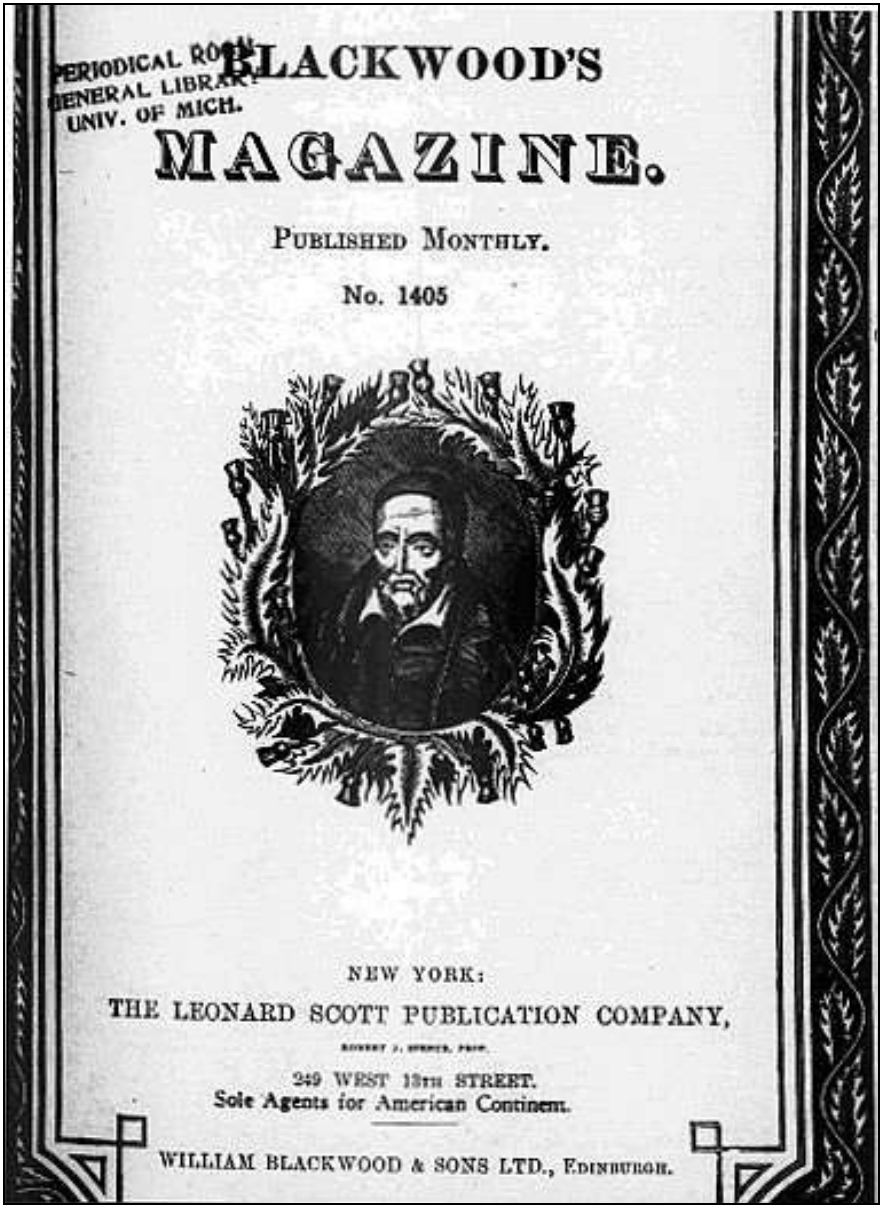

HALCYON DAYS IN THE URALS

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I.

THERE are not many, even among Russians, who know the delightful scenery, the charms of nature and the splendid shooting of the southern Urals. They are not like the Alps or Pyrenees; they are more like the rounded hills of Scotland, but covered completely with dense and even virgin forests. Game swarms. In my young days at least there was any quantity of capercailzie, black game and hazel hen, and bear, too, in plenty, with elk as well; reindeer appeared in winter, and roe deer were common.

From the nearest station it was a couple of hundred miles drive. In the little Russian village of Kananikolsk, where the mail road passes to Verkhneuralsk, I left my tarantas and made up a caravan of saddle and pack-horses. With me were a Kirghiz, by name Uraz, and Haibullah, my Tartar servant. We all three had Kirghiz riding horses from the steppe country. Our baggage, consisting of a tent with the necessary camping and travel kit and tools, was carried on five Bashkir pack-horses driven by a native of these fastnesses named Kinjabulat. Kinjabulat knew every path, every track, every nook and cranny in these thick forests and mountains where game was to be found, and all the traditions and legends of his people inherited from the days of his ancestors, the Issedoni of Herodotus; but, like all Bashkirs, he was remarkable for his mental limitations and a high opinion of his own abilities.

It was the end of July, the time of hot and sunny days. Our little caravan plunged at once into the primeval pine forest. The narrow trail wound among immense trunks and dense thickets, and the Bashkir guide rode on ahead. Suddenly his horse stopped, neighed and stood motionless. Neither spur nor whip would make him move a step farther. The creature did not try to bolt, but simply stood as though held up by some obstacle invisible to us.

“What’s the matter with your horse?” I asked Kinjabulat.

“A bear must have crossed the track recently,” he answered; ”horses are very frightened of bears”.

Our steppe horses do not know what bears are, so I pushed mine on, and he walked through the invisible barrier unconcernedly, as did the other Kirghiz horses, and at last the Bashkir animals followed, but very nervously.

“This is a very bad forest; there are many bears here,” Kinjabulat said.
My sportsman’s heart leapt with joy. I foresaw some good shooting, and began to question him.
It was hard to find bear in the forest at this time of year, I was told; it was only by chance that one came across them in the daytime, perhaps in the raspberry thickets, really, it was hardly worth going after them; their skin was in bad condition. Better wait till the first snow. They were easy to track then; better still, come about Christmas, when they were deep in their winter sleep. They would find them in their lairs for me then.
In spite of this advice, I resolved not to be denied now I was on the spot, and to come back in the winter as well.

II.

Our camp was in a delightful place. The opposite bank of the river consisted of high cliffs covered with a fresh green turf, briars and small pines, and larch on top. The river came out of a narrow gorge, made a loop round the camp and wound its way through the mountains and forests. Our bank was flat and sandy, with short grass and a few big isolated alders and poplars.
My chief object in stopping in that district was to explore the great cave of Shulgan, about half a dozen miles from my camp, in a narrow ravine of a small tributary of the Bielaya. There was no trail along the bank, and I had to ride through the forest. I noticed several hives hanging high up in the trees, primitive affairs, simply hollowed - out tree-trunks, each tied to a big pine, with all neighboring branches smoothed off. This was done to protect them against the bears, as if left on the ground they would inevitably fall into the clutches of Mihail Ivanovich, as the Russian peasant, half in fun, half in respect, often calls Bruin. The hives were also protected by an ingenious device consisting of a thick and heavy block of wood hanging on a string from a branch higher up, which dangles just in front of the entrance. This *churban*, as it is called, does not look as though it would be very effective against the paw of a marauding bear, but it is based on a profound knowledge of the creature's character and habits. The animal climbs up to the hive and pushes the *churban* aside with his paw so as to get at the honey. The thing swings back and hits him, which anger him, so that he hits it really hard.

The heavy log, swinging like a pendulum, punishes him severely, and the brute is worked into a rage and sooner or later falls to the ground, either exhausted by the unequal battle or from overreaching himself in his anger. Kinjabulat told me that once he had found a dead bear lying on the ground near a churban. It had hardly gone a hundred paces from the tree; the face, covered with blood, was battered to pieces, and the lower jaw smashed.

We dropped sharply and came to a narrow gorge between lofty cliffs, out of which trickled a small brook. The guide turned up the ravine, which was so narrow that we had to ride up the bed of the stream, where, after a few minutes, we came out to an extraordinary place.

The cliffs, still lofty and vertical as before, widened out to form an open amphitheatre or cirque. Facing us was a waterfall. On our right the cliffs were completely covered with a dense thicket of raspberry canes, the ripe fruit of which filled the air with its aroma. The left side was entirely taken up by an immense grotto, in its mouth a lake of crystal clear water reflecting all the arches of the grotto and the blue sky. At one side, like the entrance of a huge railway tunnel, yawned a great, black, gaping opening into the mountain—a very entrance into the infernal regions.

The extent of the cavern, the immensity of the grottoes and precipices and the quantity and extravagant forms of its stalactites, far exceeded my anticipations. The air was clean and dry. We walked at one Moment through spacious halls, at another crawled on our knees through narrow passages where a man could scarcely pass, or at the edge of bottomless abysses.

At one place where we were climbing over a projecting wall of rock to reach an arch that was tempting us in a gallery high up near the roof, the surface of the rock was wet and slippery, and as it sloped down to the edge of a deep precipice, it was a risky job, especially on the return journey. We followed the guide’s example and lay down flat on our stomachs, clinging with our whole bodies, gripping every little excrescence with our finger-tips, digging them in, and managed to get safely across. We had to throw our torches down, and our way was lit only by a single flickering candle held by the guide. The cavern had been explored by two mining engineers in the middle of the last

century. They made bridges and ladders over the more dangerous places, but by the time of our visit these were all rotted away.

At the end of our exploration we came upon a subterranean river which stopped our road. It seemed to be very deep, and over the surface we could see that the cave extended much farther.

After supper I listened to Kinjabulat's fantastic stories about the cave. Of course, all caves on Mahommedan territory go all the way to Mecca, but the Shulgan cavern, according to Kinjabulat, goes even farther; it leads, in fact, right through to the other world.

"You are a tyuryd," he said — that is the Bashkir equivalent of the tawir of the Kirghiz, a sahib, in fact — ''and of course you do not believe, but it is quite true. When I was a boy, a Bashkir from our village, who had heard that there was a great treasure concealed there, went in to explore for it for several days; he went right through and came out into the Other World, but was so terrified that he dashed back and got home safely. He told us many wonderful things about it."

"And what did he tell you about that Other World?" I asked.

"He took a supply of food with him, candles and a rope, and resolved not to leave one nook or cranny unexplored. He swam across the river and wandered a long time on the far side; he went down very deep into the earth and at last saw a long and narrow passage. He walked along it ever so long, and at last saw a light at the far end, like a fog. When he came nearer he found that the light came in through an opening like a window. He looked through and saw the Other World. It was like ours, yet the light wag different, not like sunlight or moonlight. He climbed out and saw trees, grass, mountains, everything still and quiet, but in the woods he could hear the whistle of the hazel hen. He was so interested that he went farther still, and came out into an open country, Here to his horror he saw tracks of nomads and even the ashes of their camp fires. He was terrified, afraid that jinns, who certainly live there, would come and catch him, so he hurried back, climbed in through the window again, hurriedly blocked it up with stones and came home safe and sound. Allah saved him from Sheitan and the jinns, for he was a good Mussulman and never forgot his namaza after his visit to the Other World."

"He must have come out of some opening at night or in the early

morning, and was frightened all about nothing," I explained; but of course 80 natural an explanation of his fellow-villager's adventure by no means satisfied Kinjabulat, nor my Kirghiz and Tartar, who much preferred the more interesting and mythical explanation of the 'True Believer'.

As a matter of fact all this limestone mass is cavernous. The exploration of these caverns took several days, as Bashkirs arrived who told us of more and more in the mountains.

We went to examine some remarkable funnel-shaped or conical depressions in the ground going down to a very considerable depth, often with notable caverns in the walls, according to the Bashkirs. Some ten miles from camp we came into another raspberry thicket. As we rode up to it, there suddenly arose at the other end a tall, brown, shaggy figure that stared fixedly at us.

"Oy, Perim! Ayu! By the Saints, a bear!" cried my men behind me.

Bruin turned sharply, nimbly leaping and jumping over the fallen trunks with agility astonishing in so unwieldy and clumsy-looking a creature. At the same moment my Kirghiz and Tartar dashed after it like madmen. The sudden cries and this crazy dash of the two plainsmen, one of whom carried my rifle and the other my gun, spoilt a splendid chance. The bear was only about sixty paces off, and if my companions had kept quiet I could have dismounted, taken the rifle and had a good shot. After that experience I decided always to keep my rifle near me.

One day when strolling in the forest watching birds I chanced on some strange ruins. They were remains of old brick buildings covered with earth, lofty pines growing out of them; there were also mounds with big trees on top, and in some places were bits of slag protruding from the heaps.

Evidently old copper-smelting works. Kinjabulat could tell me nothing about them, so I sent him to the nearest village, about twenty miles off, to make inquiries.

A couple of days later Kinjabulat came back bringing a dignified old gentleman with him, whom he introduced as a khorunzhi, or ensign in the Cossack and Bashkir cavalry. He told me the following story. The ruins were the remains of an old copper mine that was destroyed and sacked by Pugachev in his rebellion against the Empress Catherine in

1773 or 1774. Pugachev hanged all the members of the staff of the mine and flogged to death all the workmen who refused to recognize him as Emperor. He razed all the buildings and burnt the church.

Long before Pugachev's rising there lived here a man named Anton, who went off his head and lived many years as a hermit in the Shulgan cavern; afterwards he moved to a cave in the face of a high cliff over the river, accessible only by means of a rope from above, where he died.

I asked the old man if he knew the way to the cave.

"Of course, everybody here knows Anton's cave," broke in Kinjabulat, "only you can't get into it. They say there is a whole cask full of gold coins inside. Lots of people have tried to get in, but nobody has managed it."

"My grandfather told me," went on the old man, "that in his day, when men were bolder than they are nowadays, someone got in; but they didn't see anything but Anton's bones and a box full of books and old clothing. They did not touch anything, but left it all as it was."

The allusion to books made me prick up my ears, and I decided to have a try to get into the mysterious cave.

The cave certainly did look an absolutely inaccessible place, the cliff rising sheer out of the river. The lower part was covered with grass, from which the face reared itself vertically; at a height of about forty or fifty feet there were the mouths of a whole series of caves leading into the inside of the limestone mass, which must be positively honey-combed. The top was crowned by massive pines that from below looked like mere bushes. The upper part of the cliff sloped towards the river, and in the middle could be seen a small ledge; here, under a curtain of rock, was the big mouth of a cavern. Near the mouth there stood a slightly sloping log, probably of larch, which, as is well known, resists rot for centuries.

Through field-glasses I could clearly see that this log was man's handiwork, and that the cave led deep into the mountain. This was the home of the demented Anton, and that was the balk to which he attached his rope, his one link with the outside world. Only an acrobat could find his way into the cave by his means; it would be necessary to let himself down on a rope from the top of the cliff above, hanging high over the river, and then swing on the rope until he could seize his

chance to spring on to the shelf, without letting go of the rope, and make it fast. I was not gymnast enough for that and simply could not entertain the idea. I thought that perhaps it would be possible to find a way in from one of the other caves, and that there might well be subterranean communication, but it would involve a lot of work and cutting hundreds of steps. Kinjabulat undertook to make a ladder.

"Give me a good axe," he said, "and two men to help, and I'll make you a ladder all right."

“Are you really a carpenter?” asked I, with considerable doubt of his capacity.

“I can make you anything you like, if you'll give me the tools,” exclaimed the Bashkir boastfully.

We managed to fit him up with an axe, and the next day, with three Bashkirs to help him, he set to work to make the ladder.

When I arrived with my men a couple of days later I found Kinjabulat’s apparatus quite useless. The precious ladder was made of thin poles tied together with bast, and far too flimsy.

“There you are, Bari,” exclaimed Haibullah to me. “Do not be in a hurry to climb up that ladder. Kinjabulat made it, so he ought to go up it to test its strength.”

This was perfectly fair, but to everybody’s amusement the Bashkir declined to take the risk. At last he could not bear any longer the taunts and jeers of his comrades, and began, very slowly and very cautiously, to climb the ladder, testing the strength of every rung before putting his weight on it, and actually was half- way up when the obvious catastrophe occurred. Kinjabulat was a good weight, too much for his flimsy rungs, and one snapped. He dropped down at once to the one below, which also gave way, so he clung desperately to the sides with all his weight, when the whole thing began to subside, to the laughter of his audience. Dazed by his fall, Kinjabulat had hardly picked himself up when Haibullah gave him a box on the ear, which sent his fur skull-cap flying.

One of the Bashkirs then told me that in the *yailau* or summer quarters of Kizliar Bergan (“Take the girls away!”) there was a real carpenter who could make me a proper ladder. As I did not want to give up my idea, I sent Haibullah to the village to find the carpenter, and if he

seemed a capable man, to order it. He returned the next evening, bringing not only the carpenter but good news.

Every night a bear came and damaged the oat fields of Kizliar Bergan, and the Bashkir would be only too glad to build me a labaz free if only I would come and give a night to watch for the bear.

So the next day I pitched camp near the village, and from there we went down to the valley of the Biélaya where the oats were.

Watching for bear is not so easy as it sounds. There were no trees near the oats, and it was awkward to build a labaz in an open place, as it would at once arouse the suspicions of the bear, who would keep away.

To sit on the ground and wait was out of the question, as the animal would wind me at once. Besides, in those thick oats, even in the daytime, it would be possible to see to shoot a bear only if he stood up on his hind-legs, and at night he would not be visible at half a dozen paces. There were plenty of tracks among the oats, and it was clear that he not only fed on them, but rolled on them; what was worse, it was clear that he did not arrive always from the same direction, but every time came from a different side, sometimes from the forest, sometimes from the river. We had to make the best of a bad job and put up a labaz. By sundown it was ready and rather artfully masked with young pines stuck in the ground to give it a natural appearance.

I spent the livelong night sitting wrapped up in my *tulup* of sheepskins on that precious *labaz*. I could hear the breeze soughing in the oats, and at one time thought I could detect a vague dark figure at the other end of the field, like a bear standing up and sniffing the air, but it was over in a flash and a long way off. In the morning we found the tracks of a bear on that side, so evidently he had been shy and suspicious of that rapidly grown clump of trees.

I spent the next night on the labaz too. There was a cool and fairly strong breeze in the wrong direction. This night I neither saw nor heard a sign of anything, but very early, directly it was light, but before the sun had risen, and while a light mist floated over the river and the fields, I suddenly caught sight of an animal hurrying off towards the forest, at a distance of about three hundred paces. The long grass almost completely hid it, and my first thought was that it was a brown cow, till I suddenly realized that it was a bear that had

been spending the night in the field eating his fill of oats, and was now off to sleep for the day. With him went my last hope of a shot, as it was clear that he had decided to avoid the neighborhood of the suspicious labaz, where he suspected the presence of a man. I gave a prolonged whistle. The bear stopped. I whistled again. The brute reared up on his hind-legs and sniffed the air. It was an awkward shot. He was a long way off, in the half-light, and not stationary.

My first thought was not to fire, but then I remembered that I had promised the Bashkirs to rid their fields of the brute, and so I ought at least to give him a fright, which might deter him from coming back. So I took a quick aim. The report in that still misty morning air seemed terrific, as it echoed and reechoed in the hills around, and seemed more like the roar of a field-gun than the report of a Peabody-Martini "400. I had black powder, and for a long time the smoke hid everything; when it cleared there was no sign of the bear.

A few minutes later my men, who had bivouacked about a mile away, arrived with my horse, and we went to have a look at the spot where I had seen the bear. The first thing that struck me was the horrible smell and a mass of diarrhea, sure evidence that the animal had suffered a severe shock.

“Well,” said the men, “even if you have not hit him, he won’t survive this; he will die of fright. They often do when they have had a sudden shock, and that’s why that is known as bear’s disease,” pointing to the noisome mess on the ground.

We followed up the tracks, the men on foot and I on horseback. The Bashkirs came running, as their horses absolutely refused to approach the scent. About a hundred yards on, where the tracks entered the forest, I saw a red spot on the sandy soil, then another, and then a regular blood spoor.

The tracks turned back to the river and, to my great disappointment, led into the water. He was seeking safety on the far side of the river, which at this point was deep and broad. He would be carried down-stream, but where could we pick him up again?

I asked the Bashkir where we could ford.

“Only by your old camp,” was the disconcerting reply. There was nothing to do but accept the situation and return to the exploration of our caves.

This time the ladder was firm and strong, and the Bashkir carpenter volunteered to go up first to try it. It reached only to the steep slope at the edge of the shelf in front of the cave, so that from the top of the ladder we had to crawl over this boss to reach the mouth. There were enormous cavities inside the mountain. Below they were narrow, the bottom covered with stones and rocks fallen from the roof, but they widened out higher up and the roof was not visible. Even the light of a magnesium flare, much less of the torches, failed to reach it. It seemed as though the caves were open to a midnight sky. To climb up those smooth and vertical walls was out of the question. Even if these cavities joined up higher with Anton's cave, there was certainly no access from here. There were no traces of bones of extinct animals nor remains of primitive man. We spent three hours in the cavern and then tame out to climb down again, when gradually the horror of our position dawned upon us. From above the ladder was hidden by the swelling contour of the shelf.

We could hear cries from beneath, but it was impossible to distinguish the words. It seemed out of the question to crawl over that boss without seeing the top of the ladder. The edge broke away and dropped vertically. We made fast one end of our rope round a big boulder inside the cave, and very carefully groping with our feet for the top of the invisible ladder, let ourselves down by the rope until we could grip the ladder with our hands. I went down first. I told them to abandon the rope and not unloosen it. We all reached the bottom safely and at once brewed tea.

As we sat under a tree and drank our tea, I saw my Kirghiz, Uraz, go up to the horses coiling a rope.

"Yes, what else should we tie the horses up with? 'This was a good sound arkan," answered this bold son of the steppes who had not hesitated to climb down over that nasty bluff without the help of the line.

A few days after my excursion to the cavern, the Bashkirs brought me the skin of the bear I had shot. They had found him lying dead in the reeds in the water just alongside the bank of the river. Both meat and skin were spoilt; the hair came out in handfuls. All that I could take home as a memento were the claws. My bullet had passed through the

left side of the chest and smashed his shoulder when he was standing on his hind-legs.

One day a strange man paid me a visit in camp, a Russian, by name Mihailo Mamykin. He was a real woodman. Of medium height, very muscular, round shouldered, with long arms, and his face almost entirely covered with a dense crop of hair, Mamykin looked a typical 'wild man of the woods,' just like a hairy Ainu. He introduced himself as engaged in 'forest business,' saying that he had lived many years in a Bashkir village about forty versts away.

«What do you do all the time?» I asked him.

«In the winter I shoot a lot, black game, hazel hen, capercailzie and so on; I trap wolves and foxes, martens and otters; I shoot squirrel and reindeer. In the summer I collect and prepare bast and fibre and make various things to sell. I make shovels for the Bashkirs, and, in fact, I live on the forest. My father and my grandfather lived here too, in the same way."

«Do you ever hunt bear?» I asked him.

«I used to when I was a youngster», he answered. «I used to take's on the spear, but after I was mauled by one and laid up for three months, I gave up that branch of the business».

Mamykin had come to me with a request. He wanted a good long stout rope, a sharp axe and two or three men to help him. He said that he knew where there was an old hollow tree where wild bees had made their homes for over ten years. He calculated that there ought to be a good couple of hundred pounds of honey, but the tree was very thick and high, and one man could hardly get to the honey. Although I was rather skeptical about the two hundred pounds of honey, I gave him what he wanted and sent three Bashkirs with him. I told him on no account to clear the nest, but to leave enough honey for the bees for the winter, and to plug up the hole properly through which he was going to take it. I sent Haibullah with him to see that he did as I told him. Two days later they returned and brought with them no less than a hundred and eighty pounds of magnificent honey, pure, clear, white and hard, almost crystalline. They had not touched the upper portion of the nest where the combs were, contenting them- selves with the honey that had accumulated and thickened in the lower part of the hollow in the course of years. Mamykin told me this was a fairly

common occurrence; the honey accumulates in the lower part of hollow trees, and in the course of years gradually becomes ‘as hard as sugar.’

When we parted, Mamykin pressed me energetically to come in the winter bear-shooting. ‘‘About Christmas,” he said, ‘‘before the snow in the forest is too deep”; and promised to find several hibernating bears by that time; so then and there I decided to try my luck at bear that winter.

III.

In the beginning of December of the same year, I came on a visit to my uncle in the little town of Orsk, which lies exactly on the boundary between Europe and Asia, at the crossing of the roads into Turkestan, Siberia and the mining district of the upper Urals. I found a letter waiting for me from the chief of the post station at the village of Kananikolsk telling me that he had found three *berlogi*, or bear’s hibernating dens, had satisfied himself that the animals were at home and awaited my arrival. I was to pay him twenty-five roubles for each bear found, about two pounds ten, a very reasonable price when we remember that a good bear’s skin was worth in those days not less than a hundred roubles.

I lost no time in starting. Winters in that part of Russia are very severe, the temperature sometimes falling to the freezing-point of mercury. Fortunately for me, at this period the frosts were not very severe, not exceeding about 27 degrees — in fact, quite nice mild weather, as our people said when I drove out of Orsk.

It was a crisp morning and the snow crunched under the runners of the sleigh. The sky was covered with a faint smoky haze, through which the sun looked very big and brilliant, but cold. It was surrounded by two broad light rings. The frost nipped my nose and ears, and I tucked up the broad collar of my *doha*, or driving fur coat. Nowhere in the world are there such warm cloaks as these Siberian *doha.* Made of the skins of young reindeer or roe, lined with thick Arctic fox, a *doha* is at once warm and light, and, what is most important, is absolutely impermeable to the wind.

Our weapons had to be protected from the cold too. My heavy double-barreled hammerless rifle and -500 Express were kept in special fur covers. If a naked gun be taken into a hot room out of the frosty air, or

even one in an ordinary gun-box, it is immediately covered, inside as well as outside, with a layer of ice from the freezing of the moisture of the air in the room, which is condensed on contact with the cold metal. In a thick fur cover the metallic parts warm up gradually and the moisture of the air does not condense on them. Of course, all this difficulty may be avoided by leaving them outside, but in that case they as the distinction between *meum* and *tuum* has never been a characteristic of the Russian villagers.

When we had driven some twenty miles from the town, we came out into an undulating desert. After spending the night in a small Bashkir village, we crossed the deep valley of the River Sakmara, uphill into the dense pine forest of the Ural. The frost hardened.

Towards evening, when it was particularly cold, we drove through a clearing and approached a village. About three hundred yards from the road a big grey dog stared at us without moving. I realized at once that it was a wolf, whispered to the driver not to stop, gradually slipped off my *dohé*, pulled the rifle out of its case and tried to load it. To my surprise, the lever worked freely, but the lock would not open. I forgot all about the wolf. There was nothing to do but drive on to our night's lodging, thaw the weapon, open it up and try to see what was the matter.

The rifle worked perfectly in a warm room. Evidently the Peabody-Martini system was not suitable for a severe climate. I then wondered if the same thing would happen with my shtutzer, a double-barrelled hammerless rifle of heavy bore. I unpacked the weapon and put it outside without its cover, exposing it to the cold all night. Early next morning, when it was hardly light, I wrapped my *dohé* round me and went out to see if the *shtutzer* would work. It was so cold that it was painful to touch it with the bare hand, but to my intense relief I found it would cock and uncock.

"Keep your rifle ready and loaded'', my Bashkir host advised me; "there are plenty of roe here, and you may very likely come across some on the road."

And so we did. In the afternoon, when we were driving through a long straight cutting through the forest, the driver suddenly pulled up.

"There's a stag coming towards us!" he said.

I looked ahead and saw, coming straight towards us, not a stag, but a

roe. I waited till he was a couple of hundred paces off, aimed carefully and steadily at his chest and pulled the trigger.
Click!
“That’s funny,” I thought; “bad luck, a misfire.”
The roe stopped and pricked his long ears at us, and I took aim a second time and again pulled the trigger.
Click!
This was maddening. Feverishly I opened the breech, pulled out the cartridges and pushed fresh ones in, the roe meanwhile slowly turning round and strolling off in the opposite direction. My hand was shaking a bit from irritation and haste, but I was in time to get another shot at him.
Click!
I sat down in despair. What a position!
Here was I, fully organized for a grand shoot in this splendid country, plenty of game an neither of my weapons any use at all!
As we were driving along I examined the cartridges that had missed, and noticed that there was a slight indentation on the cap. That was odd. It meant that the hammers were working, hut too feebly to fire the cap. What could be the reason? It could not be that the intense cold had lowered the elasticity of the springs. I was puzzling over it, when suddenly I thought of the cause. If spirit itself thickens into treacle syrup in these frosts, the most fluid oil must turn into a half-solid consistency that would impede the action of the springs.
The first thing I did on arrival at Kananikolsk was to thaw the *shtutzer* and take the mechanism to pieces. I wiped off the grease from the lock and washed it with spirit; then I left it out in the frost all night. Early next morning, which was a terribly cold one, a couple of dull reports gladdened my ears, for at these low temperatures the report does not sound very loud.
“Come back and see us again,” said the postmaster, “if you don’t get a bear; but if you do, for God’s sake don’t come near us or you'll frighten all our horses to death.”
“In that case, you come to my house; you'll be welcome there,” exclaimed a fine old fellow with a long white beard like Father Christmas, and he pointed to a new house just opposite.
I left my traveling sleigh in the village, as it was too broad and heavy

for the paths and cuttings through the forest, and took a couple of narrow, rather high one-horse sleighs.

There was no wind, and in the still air even that very keen frost was not felt. Only my moustache froze, and the collar of my *dohé* and the backs of the horses were at once covered with rime from the frozen breath and perspiration of the animals. The pines were thickly covered with feathery snow as though chiseled out of silver. Sometimes from the top of a pine a lump of snow would fall suddenly as a squirrel sprang from branch to branch, frightened by the approach of the sleighs. On the big birches I could see blackcock feeding on the seeds. Once or twice I caught a glimpse of a capercailzie perched on the tops of the pines, but they were a long way off the road and the snow was too deep to make it practicable to leave the trail, although I was very keen to try the *shtutzer* on one of these grand birds. Even on thin snow it would have been useless to attempt to walk within range; they are far too shy and artful.

But at last I had an opportunity. I saw a pair of capercailzies on the top of a lofty pine quite near the road. They suspected no danger in the two sleighs and three horses, and quietly went on nibbling the tips of the twigs, allowing us to come within about sixty paces. I told the driver to go on slowly, while I slipped quietly out of the sleigh, aimed at the bigger bird and fired. Simultaneously with the report it fell like a stone and disappeared. Falling from such a height, the great heavy bird was completely buried in the deep soft snow, and it was really hard work digging it out. It was an old cock; the bullet had gone right through it and smashed it badly, so it was fit only for soup; but for me it was an immense consolation, as it showed that the *shtutzer* was working all right.

As for the capercailzie, the meat of an old cock is hardly eatable, but an epicure of my acquaintance, whose advice I asked, gave me the following recipe for tough old birds of that sort:

“Draw and clean it, and rub the inside thoroughly all over with salt, pepper and mustard; stuff it with onion, sew it up and bury it in the ground for twenty-four hours. Then wash it well and let it soak in milk for twelve hours and for ten in vinegar. After that, skin it, lard it well and roast it over a slow fire for half an hour. Then steam it for three

hours, butter it well all over and give it to the dog, if he will eat it, for nobody else could."

In the evening we reached the village where Mamykin lived. The old man was delighted to see me and told me not to worry, as the bears had not been disturbed and were still sleeping in their hibernating dens, "sucking their paws," as he put it. It is a general belief that bears suck their paws when they are asleep, based on the fact that they cover up their tender and moist snout with them to protect it from the frost, and also on the common observation that young bears, when they are bored and have nothing to do, lick the soles of their fore-paws, grunting and purring as though they enjoyed it.

Mamykin's cabin was made of larch logs and consisted of two large rooms, separated by a passage. One was the kitchen, bed- and living-room, the other was the 'clean half,' the parlour, in fact, where he received his visitors, a rare enough phenomenon, though an occasional trader might come wandering that way.

After supper we worked out our plan of campaign. Early in the morning we would drive out to the nearest *berloga*, about twelve versts away. At the same time, Mamykin would send a couple of Bashkirs on ski to have a look at two which were near each other at a distance of about twenty versts, and report.

Next morning, after a good solid breakfast of eggs and pancakes cooked by Mamykin's old wife, we started in a couple of sleighs, taking three pairs of ski with us. In the Urals these are soled with reindeer skin to prevent slipping when going uphill.

We drove for some versts through the narrow cutting and then plunged into the deep forest of huge larches. The snow was up to the horses' knees, but soft and friable, freshly fallen, so we went at a walk without any great difficulty.

About a mile short of the lair I took off my *doha*, took the shtutzer, and we continued on ski. In spite of the intense cold, the exercise and excitement kept me warm. The air was still and the day cloudy, and we slid easily down the gently sloping ground. Lofty pines and larches became rare, though the space between them was filled with young shoots like the bristles on a brush. We came to a small hollow, on the far side of which was lying a huge uprooted tree.

"His den's under that tree," whispered the Bashkir. "Mamykin will

stop here with the dogs while we go and choose a stand for you. Keep your eyes open and have your gun ready; the bear might wake up suddenly and make a dash."

About a hundred and fifty paces from the bear's den I could see a dark spot about a foot in diameter bordered with yellow, the deposit left on the white snow by the bear's breath. About fifteen paces in front of the opening, in a little clearing among the young shoots of pines, I took off my ski, while the Bashkir trampled down the snow around. I never took my eyes off that hole. What did it hold? The Bashkir said that, judging by the tracks, it probably contained a single big male, but he might be mistaken.

When he had trodden down the snow all round, the Bashkir called out to Mamykin to let go the dogs. I carefully looked at the barrel of the rifle to see that no snow had found its way in and then opened the safety catch. The dogs dashed forward, their sterns waving cheerfully in the air. They were just the common Bashkir dog, covered with a thick coat, with curly tails and short sharp ears; the breed is called muynak, and is something like the Siberian.

When they reached us they sniffed the air and gave tongue in short staccato barks.

"*Vzy, Vzy*!" called the Bashkir, standing on my left and throwing lumps of snow into the hole.

A minute or two went by in silence. It seemed as though the lair was deserted, or else its inhabitants slept the sleep of the dead.

Suddenly from the depths of the hole there was heard a dull roar. The dogs sprang back, but began barking more savagely than ever. I held my breath. Again silence. Once more the dogs approached, right up to the opening. I was trying to judge how long we had been waiting when suddenly, with a resounding angry roar, the opening was obscured by a fall of snow from the roots of the tree, and in the middle there appeared a huge dark-brown mass in which sparkled two small black eyes.

"Now's the moment!" flashed through my head. I lifted the shtutzer to my shoulder, drew a bead between those two glistening eyes, firmly pressed the stock to my shoulder and pulled.

A dull report, and again a shower of snow fell across the opening, covering the dark shapeless mass. I stood with my finger ready for the

second barrel, waiting for the brute to charge. But all was quiet. The dark mass lay there motionless. I could now see clearly enough that its head was covered with snow and that the eyes were no longer sparkling. The dogs stood still, as though frightened by the report. I slipped in a fresh cartridge.

"Is it really dead?" was my first thought; "is it possible, so quickly and so easily?"

Mamykin flung a big dead branch at the brown mass; it fell on its head; the mass never stirred.

"Slava Bogu, Thank Heaven!" I cried in my own language, while the Bashkirs thanked Allah in their own way.

I forgot all about the cold; I was flushed with excitement and felt hot all over; my forehead was damp with sweat under my warm Siberian cap.

The Bashkir went off for the sleigh, while Mamykin hacked down some dried pines and larches, and started an immense bonfire. We tied a rope round his forelegs and tugged. The combined strength of the four of us could hardly pull him out of the hole. He was a huge old male, covered with a dense shaggy coat of a splendid dark-brown color in first-class condition.

It was well on in the afternoon before we started back for the village. The bear was heavy and our progress was slow. The sun was low, when I saw a very odd phenomenon. Near the trail on a large birch stood about a dozen black game. How tempting, I thought, to have a shot, as they are not frightened by the sleighs and will let one approach within easy range and shoot several, one after another. I wished I had a small-bore rifle with me, when to my astonishment I noticed that they had begun to disappear. They did not fly away, but simply disappeared. Then I saw what had happened. They had dropped suddenly like stones into the soft, deep, friable snow, which covered them completely. I asked Mamykin about this. He told me that at the time of the great frosts, black game often spend the night buried in the snow like that, where they are snug and warm. I had heard of this before, but was very skeptical about it, and so was glad of the opportunity of putting it to the proof. I tied on my ski and went up to the tree, where there was not a bird left. I could just discern some vague holes in the snow. I stirred them up with a stick, when

they flew off with a clatter, scattering a whole fountain of soft powdery snow.

It was dark before we reached Mamykin's house. The Bashkir who had gone in the morning to inspect the other lairs was long since back, and reported that one was full all right, but the other seemed to be empty, though from the tracks it looked as if the owner had left it quite recently.

The next morning we set out at the break of dawn. It was intensely cold, but turned a little warmer later on as a fine snow fell. The road was better and smoother, the forest not too thick, but for the last couple of miles before reaching the *berloga* we had to drive on stony slopes and pick our way between rocks and trees. We then put on our ski and came to the den. The opening was between two huge rocks at the foot of a cliff covered with shrubs and bushes. It was impossible to approach nearer than twenty yards of the hole, and I had to take up a position below it, so that the hole, half-concealed by stones and shrubs, was about ten feet above me. We let go the dogs, and they barked long and savagely, but the dweller in the lair gave no sign of life. For quite-half an hour we stood there, tense and alert, till I began to think this *berloga* was deserted too, although the frenzied barking of the dogs pointed to the presence of the animal within.

Suddenly one of the dogs went flying downhill with a yell, all covered with snow from the bushes, and a grey monster sprang out on to the rocks and made off to my right down the cliff. I aimed forward, a little in front of the chest, and pulled. A second or two after the report the brute slowed down, and I drew another bead, this time at his Shoulder. After the second shot he stumbled, slowly collapsed and rolled over about seventy yards from where I was standing. Reloading, I began to walk slowly up to him, watching his last convulsive kicks. This time the dogs went for the carcass savagely, and began to worry and tear it so fiercely that the Bashkir had some difficulty in driving them off.

The dead beast turned out to be a female, smaller than yesterday's and of a more yellowish color, but with a splendid thick shaggy coat in perfect condition. While Mamykin went for the sleigh, the Bashkir and I examined the den to see if there were any cubs in it.

This time we returned home even later, and I could not leave for Kananikolsk the next day, as I had to arrange to hire another sleigh and pair of horses, my two being loaded up with the precious booty.

We arrived at Kananikolsk towards evening, and I drove straight to the house opposite the post station, where I had been invited. My host saw us coming, and ran out to give me an effusive welcome.

“Welcom, Pavel Stepanovich! Bravo! Well done! Good shooting! Congratulations! Come into the sitting room and I'll have the bears taken into the kitchen to thaw, and tomorrow we’ll skin them, cut off the hams and run down the fat; I’ve got just the man for that job here, Semeon! ”

While I was warming myself with a glass of tea, they brought in the bears, now frozen as hard as stone, and took them into the kitchen to thaw, so that we could skin them the next day. A crowd came to have a look at them, crowding round the doors of the kitchen, which opened directly on to the street.

Next morning I was not up till late. The day was bright and sunny, with a sharp frost. As I sat down to breakfast I heard the tinkle of bells, and there pulled up at the post station opposite a big sleigh drawn by a troika. A young man wearing a black sheep-skin coat and a military cap stepped out and went inside. Obviously some officer on his way to Verkhneuralsk by this little frequented track. A few minutes later he came out again and walked across to the house where I was stopping. He came into the room, said good morning and introduced himself as Captain G. He wags wearing the greatcoat of a General Staff officer, lined with white lamb’s wool, with high *valenki* or felt boots on his feet.

”Will you allow me to have a look at your game?” he asked with a friendly smile; “I hear they are very fine specimens, I am very keen on shooting myself, but have never had a shot at a bear yet.”

We went into the kitchen, where someone has already begun his task of skinning the female. Covered with a thick layer of white fat, the carcass had an uncanny resemblance to a human body.

“How odd it is, a skinned bear looks just like a man’s body,” remarked Captain G. thoughtfully. “What a very unpleasant impression it makes!”

“Yes,” I answered, ‘‘some of the Siberian tribes regard the bear as a

kind of relative of man, and when they kill one, always ask its pardon; the Kirghiz sometimes call it *yava adam* — that is, wild man."

"And the Russian peasants, too, honor him with the name Mihail Ivanovich Toptyshny, or Mishka for short," said the captain with a smile.

«Come and have a glass of tea,» I suggested, «the samovar is ready on the table.» As we sipped the steaming beverage, he told me that he had been traveling all night and was chilled through; he had just passed his examination at the General Staff Academy and was on his way to Verkhneuralsk to pay a visit to his mother, whom he had not seen for three years, to spend his Christmas leave with her.

«Is it a very dangerous sport, bear-shooting?» he asked me.

«I can hardly say», I answered. «This is my first time with them and I have been lucky; perhaps I shall not come off so well next time.»

«A man in our regiment,» he went on, «was killed by a she-bear which he had shot; he thought she was dead and went up to her, when she sprang up and went for him, threw him over and crushed him to death.»

«Ah,» I answered, «you must make sure that their power for mischief is really over.»

"Well, anyhow, the power for mischief of those bears of yours is over for good," he said with a smile.

"Absolutely," replied I innocently, little thinking what the next few minutes had in store.

We parted in a very friendly way; he wished me further success in my sporting career and I wished him safe arrival and a happy Christmas with his mother. Then I returned to my room and stood and looked out of the window on to the street. The warmth of the room and the steam of the samovar had thawed the ice on the glass, and everything taking place outside was clearly visible. I could see the troika standing there, the horses harnessed to the heavy sleigh, and the driver, as is the custom of his class, not sitting on the box but standing with the reins in his hands waiting for his passenger to take his place in the sleigh, when he would jump on to the box and start off instantly at a smart trot. The horses were standing quietly, every now and then tossing their heads and making the bells on the *duga* tinkle.

The young officer slowly came out, put on his black fur coat, sat

down in the sleigh and leant forward to arrange the heavy fur rug over his feet. It is hard to describe what happened next. It was all over in a flash.

I heard the door of the kitchen creak and open, and saw a great puff of white steam burst out into the frozen air, and at that the whole troika crashed into a gallop as though shot out of a gun. The driver was flung on to his back; an instant later the troika turned the corner of the street sharply; the sleigh capsized, hit the corner of a house, the contents were flung out all over the snow and the maddened horses dashed on.

I tore out and rushed up to the officer lying there on the snow, and started back in horror. The black fur coat was ripped open, and from the crushed remains of his head and face a flood of steaming blood stained the snow.

The keeper of the post station came running, pale and trembling, muttering incoherently. I gathered that he was excusing himself; the horses were always so quiet; it was not his fault. I understood. I knew what had happened and whose fault it was. Someone had gone into the kitchen without shutting the door behind him. The hot air had burst out into the road, carrying the reeking scent of the bears' carcasses into the very nostrils of the horses. That was enough to terrify the animals.

My unfortunate young acquaintance had been killed by the dead bears . . . their power for mischief was not over ever even in death. He had paid with his life for someone's stupidity and carelessness.

Thus all the pleasure and triumph of my first expedition after bear were turned into gloom and sadness.

Until, like everything else I had in the world, these splendid skins were stolen by the Soviet commissars as 'belonging to the people,' they adorned my study. Often, when my eyes turned upon them, I thought of that poor lady waiting and waiting for her son to come to spend Christmas with her.