

SIBERIA AND THE EXILE SYSTEM

CHAPTER I

FROM ST. PETERSBURG TO PERM

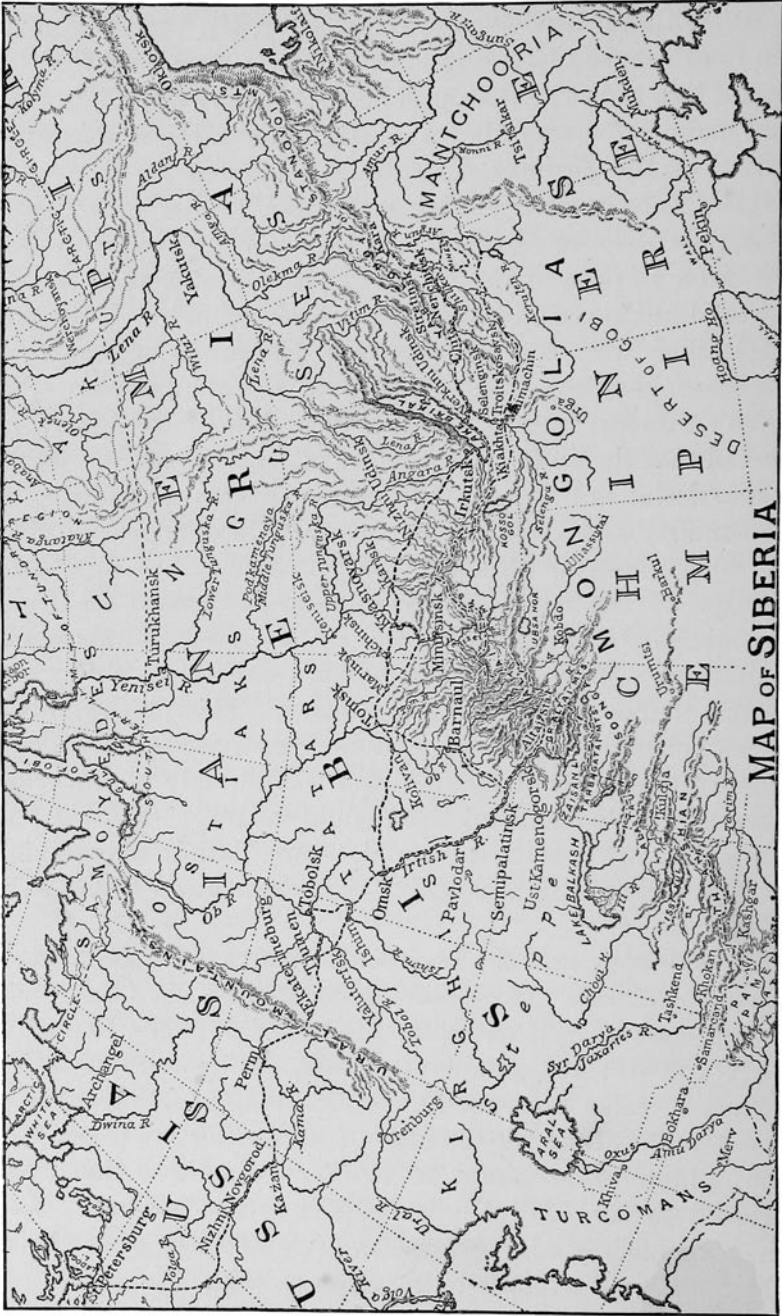
THE Siberian expedition of *The Century Magazine* sailed from New York for Liverpool on the second day of May, 1885. It consisted of Mr. George A. Frost, an artist of Boston, and the author of this book. We both spoke Russian, both had been in Siberia before, and I was making to the empire my fourth journey. Previous association in the service of the Russian-American Telegraph Company had acquainted us with each other, and long experience in sub-arctic Asia had familiarized us with the hardships and privations of Siberian travel. Our plan of operations had been approved by *The Century*; we had the amplest discretionary power in the matter of ways and means; and although fully aware of the serious nature of the work in hand, we were hopeful, if not sanguine, of success. We arrived in London on Sunday, May 10, and on Wednesday, the 13th, proceeded to St. Petersburg by rail, via Dover, Ostend, Cologne, Hanover, Berlin, and Eydkuhnen. As the season was already advanced, and as it was important that we should reach Siberia in time to make the most of the summer weather and the good roads, I decided to remain in the Russian capital only five days; but we were unfortunate enough to arrive there just at the beginning of a

long series of church holidays, and were able to utilize in the transaction of business only four days out of ten.

As soon as I could obtain an interview with Mr. Vlangáli, the assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, I presented my letters of introduction and told him frankly and candidly what we desired to do. I said that in my judgment Siberia and the exile system had been greatly misrepresented by prejudiced writers; that a truthful description of the country, the prisons and the mines would, I thought, be advantageous rather than detrimental to the interests of the Russian Government; and that, inasmuch as I had already committed myself publicly to a defense of that Government, I could hardly be suspected of an intention to seek in Siberia for facts with which to undermine my own position. This statement, in which there was not the least diplomacy or insincerity, seemed to impress Mr. Vlangáli favorably; and after twenty minutes' conversation he informed me that we should undoubtedly be permitted to go to Siberia, and that he would aid us as far as possible by giving us an open letter to the governors of the Siberian provinces, and by procuring for us a similar letter from the Minister of the Interior. Upon being asked whether these letters would admit us to Siberian prisons, Mr. Vlangáli replied that they would not; that permission to inspect prisons must in all cases be obtained from provincial governors. As to the further question whether such permission would probably be granted, he declined to express an opinion. This, of course, was equivalent to saying that the Government would not give us *carte-blanche*, but would follow us with friendly observation, and grant or refuse permission to visit prisons as might, from time to time, seem expedient. I foresaw that this would greatly increase our difficulties, but I did not deem it prudent to urge any further concession; and after expressing my thanks for the courtesy and kindness with which we had been received I withdrew.

At another interview, a few days later, Mr. Vlangálli gave me the promised letters and, at the same time, said that he would like to have me stop in Moscow on my way to Siberia and make the acquaintance of Mr. Katkóff, the well-known editor of the *Moscow Gazette*. He handed me a sealed note of introduction to Baron Búhler, keeper of the imperial archives in Moscow, and said that he had requested the latter to present me to Mr. Katkóff, and that he hoped I would not leave Moscow without seeing him. I was not unfamiliar with the character and the career of the great Russian champion of autocracy, and was glad, of course, to have an opportunity of meeting him; but I more than suspected that the underlying motive of Mr. Vlangálli's request was a desire to bring me into contact with a man of strong personality and great ability, who would impress me with his own views of Russian policy, confirm my favorable opinion of the Russian Government, and guard me from the danger of being led astray by the specious misrepresentations of exiled nihilists, whom I might possibly meet in the course of my Siberian journey. This precaution — if precaution it was — seemed to me wholly unnecessary, since my opinion of the nihilists was already as unfavorable as the Government itself could desire. I assured Mr. Vlangálli, however, that I would see Mr. Katkóff if possible; and after thanking him again for his assistance I bade him good-by.

In reviewing now the representations that I made to high Russian officials before leaving St. Petersburg I have not to reproach myself with a single act of duplicity or insincerity. I did not obtain permission to go to Siberia by means of false pretenses, nor did I at any time assume a deceptive attitude for the sake of furthering my plans. If the opinions that I now hold differ from those that I expressed to Mr. Vlangálli in 1885, it is not because I was then insincere, but because my views have since been changed by an overwhelming mass of evidence.



On the afternoon of May 31, having selected and purchased photographic apparatus, obtained all necessary books and maps, and provided ourselves with about fifty letters of introduction to teachers, mining engineers, and Government officials in all parts of Siberia, we left St. Petersburg by rail for Moscow. The distance from the Russian capital to the Siberian frontier is about 1600 miles; and the route usually taken by travelers, and always by exiles, is that which passes through the cities of Moscow, Nízхни Nówgorod, Kazán, Perm, and Ekaterínburg. The eastern terminus of the Russian railway system is at Nízхни Nówgorod, but, in summer, steamers ply constantly between that city and Perm on the rivers Vólga and Káma; and Perm is connected with Ekaterínburg by an isolated piece of railroad about 180 miles in length, which crosses the mountain chain of the Urál, and is intended to unite the navigable waters of the Vólga with those of the Ob.¹

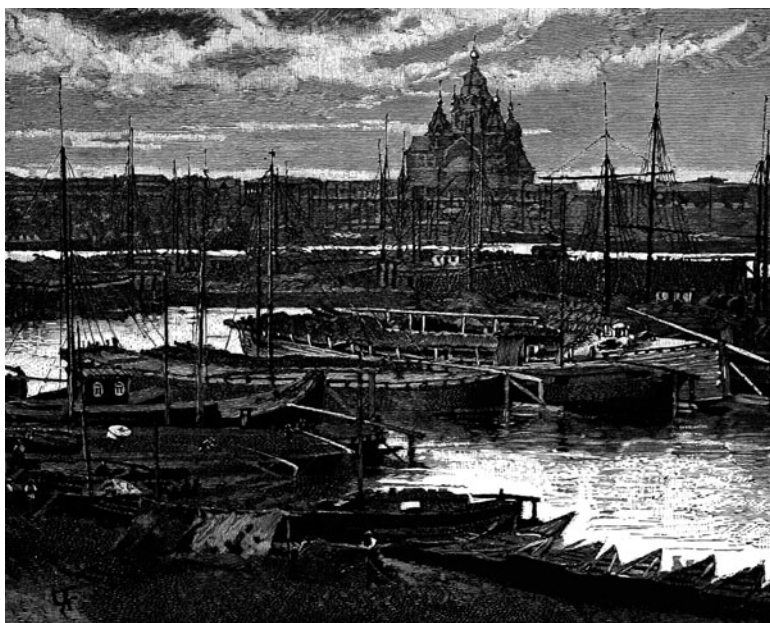
Upon our arrival in Moscow I presented my sealed note of introduction to Baron Búhler, and called with him at the office of the *Moscow Gazette* for the purpose of making the acquaintance of its editor. We were disappointed, however, to find that Mr. Katkóff had just left the city and probably would be absent for two or three weeks. As we could not await his return, and as there was no other business to detain us in Moscow, we proceeded by rail to Nízхни Nówgorod, reaching that city early on the morning of Thursday, June 4.

To a traveler visiting Nízхни Nówgorod for the first time there is something surprising, and almost startling, in the appearance of what he supposes to be the city, and in the scene presented to him as he emerges from the railway station and walks away from the low bank of the Óka River in the direction of the Vólga. The clean, well-paved

¹ During our stay in Siberia this railroad was extended to Tiúmén, on one of the tributaries of the Ob, so that St. Petersburg is now in communication, by rail or steamer, with points in Siberia as remote as Semipalátinsk and Tomsk, the former 2600 and the latter 2700 miles away.

streets; the long rows of substantial buildings; the spacious boulevard, shaded by leafy birches and poplars; the canal, spanned at intervals by graceful bridges; the picturesque tower of the water-works; the enormous cathedral of Alexander Névski; the Bourse; the theaters; the hotels; the market places — all seem to indicate a great populous center of life and commercial activity; but of living inhabitants there is not a sign. Grass and weeds are growing in the middle of the empty streets and in the chinks of the travel-worn sidewalks; birds are singing fearlessly in the trees that shade the lonely and deserted boulevard; the countless shops and warehouses are all closed, barred, and padlocked; the bells are silent in the gilded belfries of the churches; and the astonished stranger may perhaps wander for a mile between solid blocks of buildings without seeing an open door, a vehicle, or a single human being. The city appears to have been stricken by a pestilence and deserted. If the new-comer remembers for what Nízhni Nóvgorod is celebrated, he is not long, of course, in coming to the conclusion that he is on the site of the famous fair; but the first realization of the fact that the fair is in itself a separate and independent city, and a city that during nine months of every year stands empty and deserted, comes to him with the shock of a great surprise.

The fair-city of Nízhni Nóvgorod is situated on a low peninsula between the rivers Óka and Vólga, just above their junction, very much as New York City is situated on Manhattan Island between East River and the Hudson. In geographical position it bears the same relation to the old town of Nízhni Nóvgorod that New York would bear to Jersey City if the latter were elevated on a steep, terraced bluff four hundred feet above the level of the Hudson. The Russian fair-city, however, differs from New York City in that it is a mere temporary market — a huge commercial *caravansarái* where 500,000 traders assemble every year to buy and to sell commodities. In September it has fre-



THE FAIR-CITY OF NIZHNI NÓVGOROD.

quently a population of more than 100,000 souls, and contains merchandise valued at \$75,000,000; while in January, February, or March all of its inhabitants might be fed and sheltered in the smallest of its hotels, and all of its goods might be put into a single one of its innumerable shops. Its life, therefore, is a sort of intermittent commercial fever, in which an annual paroxysm of intense and unnatural activity is followed by a long interval of torpor and stagnation.

It seems almost incredible at first that a city of such magnitude — a city that contains churches, mosques, theaters, markets, banks, hotels, a merchants' exchange, and nearly seven thousand shops and inhabitable buildings, should have so ephemeral a life, and should be so completely abandoned every year after it has served the purpose for which it was created. When I saw this unique city for the first time, on a clear frosty night in January, 1868, it presented

an extraordinary picture of loneliness and desolation. The moonlight streamed down into its long empty streets where the unbroken snow lay two feet deep upon the sidewalks; it touched with silver the white walls and swelling domes of the old fair-cathedral, from whose towers there came no clangor of bells; it sparkled on great snowdrifts heaped up against the doors of the empty houses, and poured a flood of pale light over thousands of snow-covered roofs; but it did not reveal anywhere a sign of a human being. The city seemed to be not only uninhabited, but wholly abandoned to the arctic spirits of solitude and frost. When I saw it next, at the height of the annual fair in the autumn of 1870, it was so changed as to be almost unrecognizable. It was then surrounded by a great forest of shipping; its hot, dusty atmosphere thrilled with the incessant whistling of steamers; merchandise to the value of 125,000,000 rubles lay on its shores or was packed into its 6000 shops; every building within its limit was crowded; 60,000 people were crossing every day the pontoon bridge that connected it with the old town; a military band was playing airs from Offenbach's operas on the great boulevard in front of the governor's house; and through all the streets of the reanimated and reawakened city poured a great tumultuous flood of human life.

I did not see the fair-city again until June, 1885, when I found it almost as completely deserted as on the occasion of my first visit, but in other ways greatly changed and improved. Substantial brick buildings had taken the place of the long rows of inflammable wooden shops and sheds; the streets in many parts of the city had been neatly paved; the number of stores and warehouses had largely increased; and the lower end of the peninsula had been improved and dignified by the erection of the great Alexánder Névski cathedral, which is shown in the center of the illustration on page 7, and which now forms the most prominent and striking architectural feature of the fair.

It was supposed that, with the gradual extension of the Russian railway system, and the facilities afforded by it for the distribution of merchandise throughout the empire in small quantities, the fair of Nízhi Nówgorod would lose most of its importance ; but no such result has yet become apparent. During the most active period of railway construction in Russia, from 1868 to 1881, the value of the merchandise brought annually to the fair rose steadily from 126,000,000 to 246,000,000 *rúbles*,² and the number of shops and stores in the fair-city increased from 5738 to 6298. At the present time the volume of business transacted during the two fair-months amounts to something like 225,000,000 *rúbles*, and the number of shops and stores in the fair exceeds 7000.

The station of the Moscow and Nízhi Nówgorod railway is situated within the limits of the fair-city, on the left bank of the river Óka, and communication between it and the old town on the other side is maintained in summer by means of a steam ferry, or a long floating bridge consisting of a roadway supported by pontoons. As the bridge, at the time of our arrival, had not been put in position for the season, we crossed the river on a low, flat barge in tow of a small steamer.

The view that one gets of the old fortified city of Nízhi Nówgorod while crossing the Óka from the fair is both striking and picturesque. The long steep bluff upon which it is situated rises abruptly almost from the water's edge to the height of four hundred feet, notched at intervals by deep V-shaped cuts through which run the ascending roads to the upper plateau, and broken here and there by narrow terraces upon which stand white-walled and golden-domed cathedrals and monasteries half buried in groves of trees. In the warm, bright sunshine of a June day the snowy walls of the Byzantine churches scattered along the crest of the bluff ; the countless domes of blue, green, silver, and gold

² The value of the Russian *rúble* is about half a dollar.

rising out of dark masses of foliage on the terraces; the smooth, grassy slopes which descend here and there almost to the water's edge; and the river front, lined with steamers and bright with flags—all make up a picture that is hardly surpassed in northern Russia. Fronting the Vólga, near what seems to be the eastern end of the ridge, stands the ancient *krémliu*,³ or stronghold of the city, whose high, crenelated walls descend the steep face of the bluff toward the river in a series of titanic steps, and whose arched gateways and massive round towers carry the imagination back to the Middle Ages. Three hundred and fifty years ago this great walled enclosure was regarded as an absolutely impregnable fortress, and for more than a century it served as a secure place of refuge for the people of the city when the fierce Tatárs of Kazán invaded the territories of the Grand Dukes. With the complete subjugation of the Tatár khanate, however, in the sixteenth century, it lost its importance as a defensive fortification, and soon began to fall into decay. Its thirteen towers, which were originally almost a hundred feet in height, are now half in ruins; and its walls, which have a circuit of about a mile and a quarter, would probably have fallen long ago had they not been extraordinarily thick, massive, and deeply founded. They make upon one an impression of even greater solidity and strength than do the walls of the famous *krémliu* in Moscow.

Upon landing from the ferry-boat in the old town of Nízhi Nówgorod, we drove to a hotel in the upper part of the city, and after securing rooms and sending our passports to the chief of police, we walked down past the *krémliu* to

³ A *krémliu*, or, to use the Russian form of the word, a *kremli*, is merely a walled enclosure with towers at the corners, situated in a commanding position near the center of a city, and intended to serve as a stronghold, or place of refuge, for the inhabitants in time of war. It differs from a castle or fortress in that it generally incloses a larger area, and contains a number of

buildings, such as churches, palaces, treasuries, etc., which are merely protected by it. It is popularly supposed that the only *krémliu* in Russia is that of Moscow; but this is a mistake. Nízhi Nówgorod, Kazán, and several other towns in the part of Russia that was subject to Tatár invasion, had strongholds of this kind.