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Jean-Baptiste-Barthélemy de Lesseps

Excerpt

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T R A V E L S

I N

K A M T S C H A T K A, &c.

AT length the 18 arrived, and I took leave of M. Kasloff. I shall pass over our adieux ; it will be supposed that they were equally affectionate and distressing. I departed from Poustaretk at eight o'clock in the morning, in an open sledge drawn by seven dogs, which I drove myself ; the soldier appointed to escort me had eight harnessed to his ; and we were preceded by a guide chosen from the inhabitants of this hamlet *, whose sledge, loaded with the remainder

* During my stay at Poustaretk, the governor had dismissed our Kamtschadale guides. Some of them belonged

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mainder of my effects, and our provisions, was drawn by a team of twelve. I was accompanied also by M. Schmaleff and the subaltern officers of his suite; but instead of travelling together, as had been agreed, as far as Ingiga, we separated a few days after.

Upon leaving Pouffaretk, we descended the gulf. We proceeded at first with tolerable ease; the ice was solid and even, and in a few hours we arrived at the mouth: there our progress was attended with more difficulty. Obligated to travel upon the sea without leaving the coast, we were every moment interrupted with piles of ice, that appeared like so many rocks, against which we were to be dashed to pieces. It was impossible to avoid them by turning and to the environs of Bolcheretk, and were four hundred leagues distant from their home. These poor creatures, almost all their dogs having died of fatigue and hunger, were obliged to return on foot.

winding;

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IN KAMTSCHATKA.

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winding ; an unequal chain of these little mountains extended all along the coast, and intercepted our passage ; we had no resource but to attempt to surmount them, at the risk of being overturned every step. More than once, in these falls, I had a narrow escape from being dangerously wounded. My musquet, which was fastened to my sledge, was bent to the shape of a bow ; many of my companions were severely bruised, and not an individual came off unhurt.

In the dusk of the evening we arrived at a hamlet situated upon the border of the sea, consisting of two yourts and three baglans, in a very wretched condition, and totally deserted. The only person who lived in the yourt which we entered, had fled upon our approach *. I was informed

* All the wandering Koriacs avoided us in the same manner, that they might not be obliged to assist us.

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that this man was a chaman or magician : feized with terror at the news that we were to arrive the next day, he flew immediately for refuge to the Oluterians*, where he would probably remain till M. Kasloff had passed.

The Coffac who gave me this information, had been sent forward the evening previous to our departure from Poustaretk, by M. Schmaleff, with orders to stop at this hamlet till we should arrive, and endeavour in the mean time to discover some concealed store of fish. This precaution was very serviceable to us. The Coffac, upon our arrival, conducted us to a cave which we found to be well stocked. I took a tolerable portion, having brought from

* These people are at the south of the Tchouktchis, upon the eastern coast.

Poustaretk,

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Poufaretfk only provision enough for two days.

The 19, early in the morning we pursued our route. This day's journey was still more fatiguing than the preceding one. The way was terrible. Twenty times I saw my sledge ready to be shattered to pieces, which would certainly have been the case, if I had not at last determined to proceed on foot. I was compelled to this, in order to guard myself against the danger of being overturned, and thus was I obliged to walk almost the whole day; but I only avoided one misfortune to fall into another.

In a few hours I felt myself so fatigued that I was going to remount my sledge, when a sudden jolt instantly turned it upon its side, and effectually cooled my desire. I had no resource but to drag myself on as

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well

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well as I could. My legs bent under me, I was in a profuse perspiration, and a burning thirst still added to my weariness. The snow was a poor relief, and I had nothing else with which to quench my thirst. Unfortunately I perceived a little river; absolute necessity conducted my steps to it, and, without reflecting upon the consequences of my imprudence, I instantly broke the ice, and put a piece into my mouth. This precipitation was purely mechanical, and I soon repented it. My thirst was relieved; but from the excessive heat of which I before complained, I passed to the contrary extreme; a universal chill seized me, and all my limbs trembled.

The sharpness of the night increased my agreeable feeling, and my weakness at last was so extreme, that I was unable to proceed a step farther. I entreated my companions to halt in the midst of this desert.

They

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They complied out of pure civility to me, for the difficulty of procuring wood was otherwise a sufficient reason to determine them to proceed. Scarcely could they collect enough to place under a kettle; it consisted of a few little shrubs, so green that it was almost impossible to make them burn. How happy were we to succeed so far as to be able to make tea!

After drinking a few cups, I retired to my tent*, where I lay down upon a small mattrass spread upon the snow, and covered myself up with a number of furs, in order to revive perspiration. It was in vain; I did not close my eyes during the whole night. To the anguish of a dry and burning fever, were added a continual oppression, and all the restlessness peculiar to the first symptoms of a disorder. I conceived myself, I

* This tent was made of linen; I had purchased it of M. Vorokoff before I left Poustaretsk.

acknowledge, to be dangerously ill, particularly when I found, upon getting up, that I could not articulate a single sound. I suffered infinitely both in my breast and throat; the fever was not abated; nevertheless the idea that a longer halt in this place would be of no benefit to me, and that I could only hope for succour by proceeding, determined me to conceal my extreme illness from M. Schmaleff. I was the first to propose going on, but in this I consulted my courage more than my strength.

I had advanced but a few wersts, when my sufferings became insupportable. I was obliged to drive myself, and consequently to be in continual motion; frequently also I was compelled from the badness of roads, either to run by the side of my sledge, or call to the dogs to make them proceed. My hoarseness prevented their hearing me; and

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and it was only by efforts that exhausted my strength, and tortured my lungs, that I at last succeeded. This exercise however, painful as it was, proved salutary to me; by degrees it created a perspiration; in the evening I could breathe more freely; the fever left me; I had no complaint but a violent cold, which was removed in a few days. Fatiguing exercise was the only remedy I used. I took particular care to continue the perspiration it occasioned, and to this I am persuaded I owe the rapidity of my cure. My breath however was so sore, that I felt the effects of it for a considerable time.

During this interval I had nothing to suffer from the rigour of tempests; the air was calm, and the weather clear. We were blessed with the finest days of winter, or I should perhaps never again have seen my native country. Heaven seemed to favour
my

my journey, that I might forget my sufferings.

The most lively joy soon succeeded to the sorrow that had depressed me. We met, in different detachments, three convoys sent by serjeant Kabechoff to M. Kaffoff. This unexpected success gave me the more pleasure, as the deplorable state in which I had left the governor, was continually recurring to my mind. What a sudden change in his situation! He was upon the point of receiving a supply of provisions, together with an hundred and fifty dogs well fed and well trained. He will be able, said I to myself, to proceed immediately on his journey; and if I cannot flatter myself that I shall see him again, I know at least that he will be extricated from his embarrassment. This certainty relieved the anxiety which I had felt on his account.

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