

Where Lies Our Latest Letter

Written for The Western Home Monthly by N. Tournear

MANY are the strange lands into which the great war has now penetrated. But none of them are at all comparable with that where lies the allies latest front. Part of it is a terrible region, fit enough for the punishment of those who look upon war and all its miseries and horribleness as a trade bringing profit and renown.

Southern Siberia is a pleasant place. It has a spring, summer and autumn as comfortable as these of the north mid states of the United States, though winter is almost as severe as Manitoba's. It is a land of corn, vast herds and immense mineral wealth. Probably the notion that all Siberia is a frozen and deadly country has arisen in part from accounts of Russians formerly exiled to Northeast Siberia, where now are the most fanatic of the Bolsheviks outside Kronstadt.

It is likely then that the Allies troops upholding the resolution of the Entente governments to liberate Siberia from the grasp of Germany and misrule may find themselves at one period or another in the strangest part of the inhabited globe. Populated before the revolution but scantily by Russian settlers, and the descendants of Cossacks and exiles banished for life, and by native tribes, it is a land where the absence of everything making life decent is supreme. Here lies a region rightly described as "Nature's Grave," where all is silence and solitude, perpetually frozen soil, and incessant strife to maintain life. A vast graveyard, too, filled with bones of animals that have perished in comparatively recent times through cold.

All Europe could be dumped into it, and yet there would be thousands of miles to spare. In shape it is something like a rough triangle, the point of which is found at Behring Straits. The base is formed by the Lena river, flowing north

into the Arctic Ocean, the south side is shaped by the curve of the lofty Stanovoi Mountains, running many hundreds of miles, and shutting off Southern Siberia and Manchuria; and the north side is formed by the Arctic Ocean and the remarkable islands of ice and earth, that in age are the oldest known parts of the earth. Since the Glacial Period, tens of hundreds of thousands of years ago, they have undergone no change according to geological research of Russian scientists.

Here, too, is the coldest place on the globe, Verkhoyansk, on the Yana river. Even from May to September at Verkhoyansk, no matter whence the wind may blow it is always close on freezing. In winter the thermometer often falls to ninety degrees below zero Fahrenheit. It is almost impossible to realize the awful cold here in midwinter. The town itself is a collection of log houses standing on the high banks of a lifeless icy stream, and backed by a dark pine forest stretching on all sides save toward the Arctic for many hundreds of miles. So intense sometimes is the winter cold that the inhabitants breathe with difficulty in the open air. The reindeer seek the depths of the forest, and are often found frozen dead in herds. The trunks of the trees split open with sharp report like gun fire owing to the intensity of the frost. Your host in these regions of Northeast Siberia has to lift you out of your sledge, and help you to detach your frozen beard from your furs and mufflers when you arrive at his house. But everything in the "strangest land" is remote, unlikely, curious—and terrible.

Behind the Stanovoi Mountains stretches Southern Siberia. It is watered by rivers that do the work of railroads, has richly wooded mountains and valleys, with vast green plains, cultivated fields, soft meadows, cheerful towns, with all the usual vegetables in abundance, and an

endless stream of commerce. But north of the Stanovoi Range, where the land slopes gradually down to the Arctic, lie endless marshes, great arid stretches, huge forests and hills amidst which nestle innumerable lakes. By-and-by they cease altogether, and bogs, swamps, stony wastes and morasses stretch away for many hundreds of miles toward the Arctic Ocean.

These are the dread "tundras," either mossy or stony and barren, according to their part of the territory, with low swelling hills rising out of them here and there covered with bushwood and masses of brilliant flowers in summer time. It is then and during the autumn their solitude and loneliness is unparalleled, for none, not even the hardy natives, dare traverse them on account of the dense, deep clouds of gnats hovering over the stagnant wastes. It is only possible to cross these wildernesses in winter when they are frozen hard and covered with snow. Reindeer sledges are used in their southern parts; further north only dogs can be found to draw the sledges. Through Northeast Siberia the only living things that can boldly face the awful cold are the Siberian dog and the bear, the raven and the snow-owl, and man.

So great is the intensity of frost that through tens of thousands of square miles the ground is perpetually frozen, and toward the Arctic Ocean solid ice appears under the soil, and rises higher and higher as the sea is approached. In Yakutsk, the capital of the territory, where the Bolsheviks have committed horrible excesses, where, too, the troops of freedom may have to force their way, no wells can be dug, for the soil beneath the city never thaws. Towards the Arctic the snow does not melt till the middle of June, and many of the rivers are covered with ice again by the beginning of September.

Yet throughout this desolate region the Yakoutas, the Tchoutkhas and the Chukchees roam with their dogs and their reindeer, their tents and huts, and in the southern parts with herds of horses. In the forest parts, along the banks of the silent flowing rivers many Russian settlers,

convicts and others, have made their homes. So from the Anubra to Behring Straits, from the icy shores of the Arctic to Mount Aldana in the Stanovoi Range, and one of the sovereign mountains of the world, from the farthest town in the old world, Niji-Kolims, on the Frozen Sea, where is a day of fifty-two of our days and a night that lasts thirty-eight, goods are brought to Yakutsk for the great annual fair there. They consist mostly of furs and fish, seal skins and teeth and mammoth ivory. All these are sold to the traders who give in return corn and flour, tea, sugar and strong tobacco, Chinese silks and cottons and wadding for winter garments, iron copper utensils, glass, guns, powder and shot, and all variety of articles, including dried fruit and vegetables for the far-off settlers and the folk of Niji-Kolims.

And this most strange land does not lie so very far away. It is separated from the North American continent by not one hundred miles of sea across Behring Straits. So, if and when the American and Canadian troops may find themselves there, they are not so far from their home country after all.

Reasonable

A Boston street car has the front sign reading "Dorchester," and the side signs, "Ashmont and Milton."
"Does this car go to Dorchester?"
"Yes, lady; get right on."
"Are you sure it does?"
"Yes, lady; get right on."
"But it says 'Ashmont and Milton' on the side."
"We ain't going sideways, lady. Get right on."

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