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SIBERIA.

THE Asiatic possessions of Russia, enclosed between the Ural Mountains, the North Pacific Ocean, the North Pole and Chinese Tartary, are generally called Siberia. The region is divided, for administrative purposes, into two parts—Western and Eastern Siberia—each with several counties or departments, under the control of a special Governor-General. Siberia is watered by some large rivers—the Irtysh, the Oby, the Gennisay, and the Lena—all issuing from the Altai Mountains, and debouching in the Polar Ocean. They are navigable nearly through the whole extent; but being frozen seven or eight months during the year, and traversing regions comparatively uninhabitable, no great use is derived from facilities which they would otherwise offer.

The population scattered over Siberia amounts to over 3,000,000, nearly six-sevenths of whom are Russian—the natives being of Mongolian, Finnish, and Kamschatkan descent, the latter called Yakouts by the Russians. Averse, almost all, to agriculture, they are nomadic hunters or fishermen. The conquest of Siberia was made in the sixteenth century, by a band of Cossacks of the Volga and their motley adjuvants, under the lead of a certain Yeromak, and these equestrian tribes became its first European and Russian Settlers. In the course of the seventeenth century, the Czars began to transport thither convicts and criminals. The first colonists of this character were the various dissenters from the Russian Orthodox Church. Whole villages or communities were thus transported, receiving in different pars of Siberia vast tracts of land. These colonists formed communities in the same way as they were organized in the mother country, having equal privileges of self-administration with the crown-peasants, on paying a small tribute to the Treasury. Their return to European Russia is strongly prohibited; but they enjoy liberty of worship, according to their doctrines and usages. When the riches of the Altai Mountains were first discovered, transportation thither to the mines took the place of capital punishment; this punishment having been abolished in 1740, under the Empress Elizabeth. Disgraced favorites, official defaulters, and, finally, political offenders were sent thither for life, or for the term of their punishment. Among the first in the eighteenth century were Menschikoff and Biron—both of whom had ruled the empire and the Field Marshal Munich, and several others.

At present, transportation to Siberia is a penalty administered for all kinds of crimes and offences. According to the Russian penal code, these condemnations are variously graduated. The punishment is hard labor for life, or for a certain number of years; after which the felon becomes a colonist, receiving land, a house and some cattle, and being attached to some rural community, and enjoying the rights of this class of inhabitants. Smaller offences are punished with transportation for a lesser number of years, with the privilege of returning to Russia. Serfs condemned for any offence whatever never return into bondage; and thus Siberia becomes, to them at least, a land of emancipation.

Political offenders are distributed over Siberia according to the decision of the sovereign, and of the courts-martial by which they are condemned. Such offenders are generally formed into battalions, forming the corps of the Siberian army. If the verdict does not define the exact number of years of their service, they remain in the army 20 or 25 years, and then resign to become colonists and members of some community. Such a convict very seldom, and that only through some extraordinary exception, can be promoted to the grade of a commissioned officer. Those not condemned to transportation for life, can, after their term is expired, return to their families. After the insurrection in St. Petersburg in 1825, and that in Poland in 1830, many were sent to Siberia for life. Their destination was principally to the Altai Mountains. But no hard labor was imposed upon them. They count or are inscribed as prisoners; most of them, however, being supported by their relatives at home, they look for means of gaining additional wealth to the cities. As a general rule transportation to Eastern Siberia is considered a somewhat more severe punishment than to Western Siberia.

Wives and children following the exiles, lose all their status and privileges enjoyed in Russia. The bulk of the Russian population in Siberia, by which the rudiments of civilization have been introduced, consists of merchants trading thither. They are established in boroughs and cities, or in agricultural districts, but perform military duties and those of internal police. There are also many Cossacks with some Mongolian tribes, who have immigrated from China, and who preserve their customs and manners—some becoming Christians, others not. These are called Buryats by the Russians. The dissenters and descendants of convicts form the rest of the population. The Russians, as we have said, are traders, merchants, mechanics, operatives, miners and agriculturists. But if natives intend to devote themselves to agriculture, they are allowed to select the best lands.

The distinction of the social organization of Siberia is, that no kind of serfdom exists, or can be introduced there. Otherwise, too, the inhabitants enjoy, comparatively, more liberty and independence than those of Russia proper. The requirements of the Government from the population are insignificant, and its pressure, therefore, is less heavy. Thus slowly, but uninterruptedly, cemented grain by grain, a State is growing on political and social foundations wholly different from the mother-country—not only unstained by serfdom, but even possessing a certain democratic equality. Almost the only distinction of classes is that of the Government officials. Nobility, with its privileges, is there unknown. The whole soil of Siberia belongs to the Crown; and it is already a fixed principle with the Emperors not to surrender any Crown lands to serfdom. As far as Siberia is concerned, the Czars are free-soilers. No nobleman can migrate thither with his servants; and, saving some body-servants of officials, serfs are unknown.

The Russians are the cultivators of the soil; the natives and nomads breed horses, cattle and sheep. But the principal wealth of Siberia lies in mining and gold-washing. The Altai Mountains, running along its southern frontier, are subdivided into various chains—as that of the Little Altai, the Slayanskoi, the Douriskoi the Jablonnoi, and the Great Altai—all of them containing various ores, considered by some geologists to be the richest on the globe. The sparseness of the population prevents the thorough working of these hidden treasures. Gold-washing is the principal, or, rather, the exclusive industry. All the principal rivers, with most of their confluents and tributaries, have their sources in the Altai, and carry gold. The business is conducted by Government prisoners, and by private persons, subject to a tax which is not excessive. The gold-product is carried to the City of Barnaoul, situated in the Government of Tomsk, in Western Siberia, in the centre of the Little Altai chain. There are the furnaces, the assays, and the central mining administration. The metals, and especially the gold brought by private individuals, are purchased by the Government for cash at equitable prices, and thence conveyed to St. Petersburg.

The valleys in the Altai are covered with gorgeous vegetation in summer, and various nutritious grasses, cover the plains of South Western Siberia. In some parts, wheat is cultivated; but, as long be-

(For conclusion see last page)