CHAPTER II

THE ABSORPTION OF SIBERIA


In the year 1558 Ivan the Terrible granted to one Gregory Strogonof a tract of land on the bank of the Kama river, which traverses the European base of the Urals. Strogonof came of a hardy and a fearless stock, and with other members of his family devoted his energies to the exploration and development of the estate he had thus easily acquired. Without loss of time he surveyed the spurs of the mountains, and eventually crossed the range, and stood on Asiatic soil. His visit proved unwelcome, and at first he got a rough reception from the Mohammedan inhabitants, but he succeeded in learning sufficient of the country and its resources to cause him to conjure up visions of conquest which pleased his fancy.

Strogonof realised that to enter Asia to any purpose would need support, and he accordingly obtained an audience with the Tsar, who gave him authority to take the offensive if necessary against the Tartars.

Among the inhabitants of the Ural district were a number of Don Cossacks, who had migrated thither when their territories were annexed. These men, reckless and
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none too honest, had repeatedly got themselves into trouble by raids on more peaceable people, and despite official threats had become little better than a band of highwaymen. Strogonof, who knew these men, and appears to have obtained some influence over them, approached their leader, one Yermak Timofeivitch, and obtained for him the pardon of the Tsar on condition that he agreed to take service under him in his forthcoming campaign. Accordingly the ex-robber gathered round him some eight hundred men—the rabble of the district—Russians, Cossacks, Germans, Poles and escaped prisoners; and with them crossed the Urals in 1579. The approaching natives were easily frightened off by the marauder's firearms, which were an entire novelty to the Tartars. And so Yermak and his men advanced without resistance through the virgin forests which fringed the Tobol, until brought up by the appearance of Kutchum Khan, who had come out from his capital of Sibir on the Irtish in order to slay the invaders. But the chief of the Nomads was no match for the Cossack. He was badly defeated. Sibir was captured and Mametkul, his cousin and right-hand man, taken prisoner.

On his return to Russia, Yermak was received with high honour, and was handsomely rewarded. He returned to Siberia to pursue his conquest, and speedily subdued the banks of the Irtish and the Obi. The news of his prowess was received with acclamations in Russia, and the Tsar sent priests to the new country of Siberia in order that the people might become converted to the rites of the Greek Church.

It is the custom in Russia to regard Yermak as a great leader. He is reckoned a hero by historians and honoured as a saint by the Church. But I question much whether he was anything more than a swashbuckling highwayman, who found it to his interest to loot in his country's cause rather than his own. That he was not the discoverer of Siberia is proved by the fact that maps of the Obi country were in existence before he took service under Strogonof. Yet Reclus appears to be the only writer