THE GREAT MIGRATION

on the other side of the ridge, and was now only hidden from their view by the rise of the ground. If not frozen over, as  
the guide conjectured, there was likely to be a bear roaming around its edge; and therefore they resolved to observe  
caution in approaching it. The sledges were to be taken no further. Our hunters had learnt how manage both dog  
sledges and dogs. Their experience in finland, as well as in the countries of the hudson’s bay territory, had taught them  
that and made them skilful in the handling of these animals else they would have made but poor work in travelling as  
they did now. In fact, they could not have managed at all; since it requires a great deal of training to be able to drive a  
dog sledge. This, however, they had received both the boys and pouchskin and fortunate it had been so; for very shortly  
after they were placed in a predicament, in which their lives depended on their skill as sledge drivers. The dogs were left  
under cover of the ridge, near the bottom of the little slope; a sign was given to them to keep their places which these  
well trained creatures perfectly comprehended; and the hunters the kurilski with the rest holding their guns in readiness,  
ascended towards the summit of the slope. There was no cover, except what was afforded by the inequality of the  
ground. There were no trees in the valley only stunted bushes, not half the height of a man’s body, and these nearly  
buried to their tops in the snow. A few, however, appeared growing along the crest of the ridge. The hunters crawled up  
to these on all fours, and peeped cautiously through their branches. It was the impatient ivan that looked first; and what  
he saw so surprised him, as almost to deprive him of the power of speech indeed, he was not able to explain what he saw  
till the other had got forward, and became equally eye witnesses of the spectacle that had astonished him. As the guide  
had conjectured, the lake was not frozen. There was some loose snow floating over its surface; but most of the water was  
open; and the stream that flowed slowly in on the opposite side was quite clear of either ice or snow. The guide had also  
predicted hypothetically that they might see a bear perhaps it had not occurred to this man of moderate pretensions that   
they might see and yet no less than bears were in sight yes, bears they were as easily counted as oxen were around the  
shores of this secluded lake, and on the banks of the little stream that ran into it all within hundred yards of each other.  
Indeed, It would have been easy to have mistaken them for a herd of brown heifers or oxen; had it not been for the  
various attitudes in which they were seen; some upon all fours some standing erect, like human beings, or squatted on  
their hams like gigantic squirrels others in the water, their bodies half submerged others swimming about, their backs and   
heads only visible above the surface; and still others, prowling leisurely along the banks, or over the strip of level  
meadow land that bordered the lake. Such a sight our bear hunters had never witnessed before, and might never witness  
again, in any other country, save kamschatka itself. There it is by no means uncommon; and bears instead of have been  
often seen in a single drove at that season when they descend from their mountain retreats to their favourite fishing  
grounds upon the lakes and streams. Our hunters were perplexed by so unexpected a sight; and for some moments  
unresolved as to how they should act. Fortunately, the bushes already mentioned served to conceal them from the bears;  
and the wind was blowing towards the hunters otherwise the bears, who are keen of scent, would soon have discovered  
their presence. As it was, not one of them though several were close to the ridge seemed to have any suspicion that an  
enemy was so near. The huge quadrupeds appeared to be too busy about their own affairs endeavouring to capture the  
fish some of them greedily devouring those they had already taken. And others wandering restlessly about, or eagerly  
observing the movements of the fish in the water. One and all of them looked fierce and famished, their bodies showing  
gaunt and flaky, and their enormous limbs having a lank angular appearance, that gave them a still greater resemblance to   
heifers only heifers that had been half starved a sledge chase. I have said that our hunters were for some time irresolute  
about how to act. The kurilski was inclined to withdraw from the spot and leave the bears alone; and this of course was  
his advice to the others. He said there might be danger in disturbing them so many clustered together, and in such a   
mood as they appeared to be. He had known them to attack a large party of men under such circumstances, and give  
chase to them. They might do the same now our hunters, however, did not give full credit to this story of their guide  
thinking it might have its origin in the fears of the kurilski, whom they knew to be of a timid race; and therefore they  
determined not to back out. The chance was too tempting to be surrendered for so slight a reason, and without a  
struggle. There were several bears within easy shot of the ground where they were kneeling it would never do to let  
such an opportunity pass. They might not meet with so good a chance again; or, at all events, they might be delayed a   
good long time before another would turn up; and a residence in petropaulouski even in the isba of the governor who

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