



Fig. 27. On the Irtysh, May 26th

Several times a day we were able to observe how caviare is to be treated. One would put in at a little fishing-settlement. On hand-barrows or in wheel-barrows the fishermen brought their sturgeon on board, leaving them in the cook's pantry. There stood a big table round which four girls with rolled up arm-sleeves were ranged in readiness to receive the fish. The newly bought female sturgeons, often as much as a meter in length and swollen with roe, were now handled by the girls. One of them would cut up the fish, easing out great heaps of roe with a wooden knife. The roe was then distributed among the others, who cleaned it from membranes, connective tissue and blood-vessels till the corns were quite free. They were then spooned up into sieves with wooden spoons. The cook, a giant in a white apron and cap, took charge of the sieves and strewed a thin layer of salt over the roe. He took great pleasure in explaining the procedure to us. It is not often that one has an opportunity of eating such fresh caviare, only a couple of hours old.

From the right came the tributary Bukhtarma, which has a stronger current than the main river, so that little whirlpools and eddies were formed where the two streams met. The little town of Ust-kamenogorsk is beautifully situated in the mouth of a valley. Shortly afterwards the river leaves the mountain-region behind. The last hills disappeared in our wake, and on either side extended immense plains. The river became so broad that it resembled a long lake. Sometimes it was necessary for a sailor to take soundings with a pole, when the captain was uncertain as to the course of the main channel.

Over the plains rose the church-spires of Semipalatinsk, and the mighty railway bridge that was then under construction. We spent a couple of hours in this town and then went aboard a considerably bigger paddle-boat.