

A Picture of Daily Life under the Czar

The Tragedy and Comedy of Revolution.

ONE crosses the line from the Kaiser's dominion into the Czar's, then:

"A great picture of the Virgin and Child hangs in the Custom-House at Virballen, with a little lamp flickering before it. The foreigner, who was a few minutes before on the German side of the frontier and stands on Russian soil for the first time, looks at the shrine with curiosity. Porters are hurrying in with luggage, and travellers are chattering in half a dozen languages. An official at a desk in the middle of the great hall is examining passports. A man is protesting that he did not know that playing cards were contraband. A woman is radiant, for the dirty linen she has sewn in a new Paris hat has deceived the inquisitors. Everybody is in a hurry to be through with the business and free to lunch in the adjoining restaurant before going on to St. Petersburg. It is a strange home for the majestic Virgin of the Byzantine picture.

"Here, at the threshold of the empire, Russia placards—St. Paul's vivid Greek gives me the word—her faith before the eyes of all comers. In the bustle of a Custom-House, charged with fretfulness and impatience and meanness, Russia sets forth her belief in a life beyond the grave and her conviction that the ideals presented by the picture are the noblest known to mankind."

And in these words Rothay Reynolds introduces the reader to his "My Russian Year" the most vivid and intimate account recently published of life and those who live it in Europe's great Eastern Empire.

"A foreigner might live a year in England," Mr. Reynolds continues, "and learn nothing of the religious life of the English people. In Russia religion forces itself on the attention. The icon is its chief medium of advertisement. The stiff figure of a saint, with hand raised in benediction, gleams in the angle of the walls of rooms in hotels and private houses. These holy pictures, reminiscent of the religious struggles of the Court of Leo the Isaurian or Leo the Armenian, are to be seen everywhere—in the streets, in railway stations, in restaurants, post offices, shops, public baths, prisons, Government offices."

The Saints Seem Near in Russia

"In Russia God and His Mother, saints and angels, seem near; men rejoice or stand ashamed beneath their gaze. The people of the land have made it a vast sanctuary, perfumed with prayer and filled with the memories of heroes of the faith. Saints and sinners, believers and infidels, are affected by its atmosphere; and so it has come about that Russia is the land of lofty ideals."

"The Russian is not a better man than his fellows of other lands, but he looks wistfully toward the heights the renunciation which the few are treading with bleeding feet. He may not have the courage to leave the pleasant valley, but he knows that at the top of the mountain the air is purer, the stars shine brighter, and the heavens are nearer."

"I was in a church in a country town at the beginning of evening service. At my side I found the rough captain of

the little river steamer which had brought me to the place. Near us stood a man with bare feet and long hair, in a shabby black frock coat and frayed trousers. He did not appear to notice the people round him, and the expression of his eyes made me think that he saw things which I had not the faculty to see. From time to time he knelt down and prostrated himself on the stones.

"Who is he?" I asked the captain when he left the church.

"He has given himself to God," he answered.

"The little student who used to teach me Russian had ideas of sanctity which differed in toto from those of the captain of the river steamer. One night he came to me with eyes shining, as though he had seen a vision of angels."

"Monsieur," he said, "the Grand Duke Serge is killed."

"Two days later he said he had received a letter from Moscow with news of Serge's assassin. He spoke of him with emotion, as of a hero. 'He has given his life,' he said. 'No man can do more. He knew he had no chance of escape. His mother has been to see him in prison; she does not share his opinions, but he spoke to her so beautifully and remained so calm in face of death that she was very deeply impressed, and we feel that she may become one of us.'"

In another phase: "Anna loves pretty dresses and serious flirtation, and I never thought of her as having a soul until she suddenly revealed its existence. She had told me about the French play she had seen the night before, informed me that she did not care a fiddlestick for her husband, and hinted at what she called an affaire de coeur. She maintained that nothing would be right in Russia until the entire imperial family had been assassinated, but admitted that she had not the courage to dabble in revolution like her sister, whom she had visited that morning in the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul."

"While waiting to see the prisoner she had talked, so she told me, with a lady whose son had been there for six months, waiting, with others, to be tried for conspiring to overthrow the existing order of the state. The lady had influence at Court and hoped to get the boy pardoned by the Emperor."

"But what would the others think of me if I escaped punishment and they had to suffer?" he had asked his mother.

"And she could not understand," said Anna. "I was sorry for her." And then I knew that Anna had a soul.

"An old man and a young man stood side by side in the dock charged with being members of the Social Revolutionary Party. The young man pleaded guilty and was sent to Siberia. The old man protested his innocence and successfully moved heaven and earth to escape punishment. The one returned from the court to a prison cell; the other went away to be entertained at a pleasant little supper in a restaurant. The young man is revered and the old man pitied."

"We hoped he would refuse to make a defence," remarked a mature, if academic, revolutionist to me. I did not contest the point. A sympathetic pagan would have been wanting in tact had he suggested to a primitive Christian that a preference for being gored by wild bulls to burning incense before Caesar's statue robbed the sect of useful evangelists."

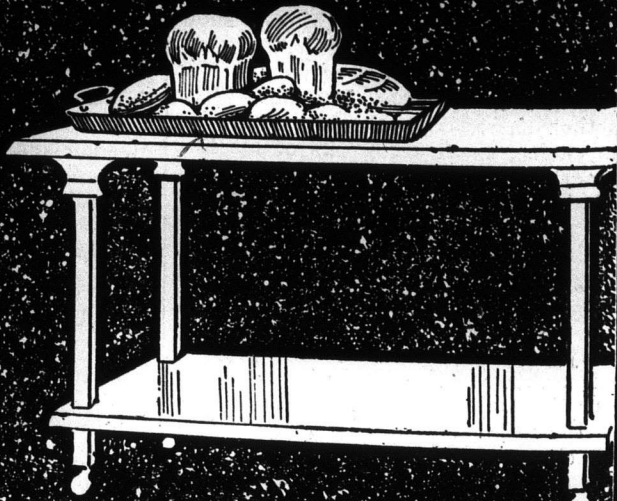
Our author has heard people say that Russia is a hundred years behind the times.

"This," he remarks, "is a surprisingly inaccurate generalization. Russia possesses the variety of ages. Men and women, with the thoughts of the fourth century, the fourteenth, or the eighteenth in their hearts, jostle others who are eager to cure the ills of mankind with the latest political and social nostrums of the twentieth. People of all periods rub shoulders, like the dancers in a masquerade."

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