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THE THREE CAPITALS.

LONDON—PARIS—AND ST. PETERSBURG.

London—Paris—St. Petersburgh, *par excellence* the three capitals of Europe! To St. Petersburg, as the capital of the North, let us commend ourselves. To the eye of the stranger sailing up the Neva, it rises like a scene of enchantment, as fresh, and artificial, and glittering, as though it had just risen from the hand of the architect. Every house appears to the uninitiated newly erected. St. Petersburg, in truth, must, from the very nature of the materials employed in its architecture, ever remain a new city. An old building would be an anomaly. Formed of brick, and covered with stones, it is doomed to eternal reproduction. No weather-stains can ever soil the surface of its palaces. No crannies of "olden times" can break their shining corners. The wrongs of winter are repaired in each successive spring. As each tenement begins to show symptoms of decay, it is pulled down, but only to make room for another, as closely resembling its predecessor as "peas in a trencher." The same bricks (not that production of ancient times which in the walls and gardens of Babylon bade defiance to all assaults) rise a second time; the same plaster, like a meretricious cosmetic, imparts to them the same look of unfading youth; the same dwarfish pilasters of wood and stucco mount guard over the same floridly ornamented doorways; and the son, as he occupies the chamber of his father, sees no soberer tint in the interior or exterior of the edifice than that which it wore without change or intermission in his infancy. Wooden houses are now as great a rarity in Petersburg as in London, and are only to be found in the suburbs, where they remain unoccupied during the winter, and are re-opened when the cuckoo, in the woods of the Kamennoy Ostroff or Krestossky, warn the Russian, who has been muffled in furs for six months, to retire for a season from the smoke and dust of the city; but the flimsy structures which we see on every side, promise to the future as little of a historical past, as though still more perishable materials had been used. Like the power of Russia herself, her capital is but the creation of yesterday. A hundred years ago the Neva glided on through a circle of uncultivated and almost uninhabited marshes—not a single street of the immense mass of architecture, which now catches the eye in every direction on either side of that beautiful river, had arisen—not a single dome had sprung up among those numerous churches, within which the services of the Greek communion are now celebrated with a dignity which would do no dishonour to the august ceremonial of papal Rome. The spot on which St. Petersburg stands was but a barren waste, and the Gulf of Finland a long fiord, unconscious of the grand commercial purposes to which, within so brief a period, they were destined to become subservient. The original capital, during the lifetime of its founder, occupied an extremely limited space when compared with its present extent. From the period of his death, to the present hour, it has been growing rapidly on every side—nor is the work yet completed. The ground on which it stands is already so extensive, that it promises, within a century, to rival even the largest capitals of Europe, unless the destinies of the Muscovite race, pointing southwards to the seven hills of Constantinople, a fitter site for the metropolis of an advancing dominion, should be found on the shores of the Bosphorus than on the banks of the Neva, and the gardens of the Sultan should afford a more agreeable spot for the diplomatic conferences of Nicholas, than the palaces of Peterhoff or Zarskoe—and then, St. Petersburg, built in a day, will disappear before a returning sunset, and eyes that have been familiar with the glories of St. Sophia will turn willingly from the ephemeral majesty of the Cazan. How different from London and Paris is St. Petersburg, in every thing which can impart a national tone of feeling, and create a reciprocal action between the popular heart and the objects around it—the Notre Dames, and Westminster Abbeys, and St. Pauls, and Sorbonnes, from the towers or in the aisles of which we look upon a tract of many centuries! The inhabitant of St. Petersburg is not possessed of any thing on this hand or on that, which can link his hopes and remembrances to his native city, on any higher grounds than those of convenience or necessity. In walking along its streets, but for the bearded Mujiks who occasionally cross our path, we might without difficulty imagine that we had not passed beyond the precincts of either of the great cities already mentioned. Here it is French—there German—in scarcely any thing exclusively Russian. French names mark the Confiseurs, where you may ruminate over chocolate that would do no dishonour to Very or Tortoni. In the hotels the attendants accost you in a dialect that carries you back to the Palais Royal—here an artiste de modes offers you the fashions of the Rue Richelieu—and there a perruquier, on whose lips the honeyed diction of the Badauds still lingers uncontaminated by a foreign idiom, calls your attention to the last importation from the Rue St. Honoré; while, in the salons of the theatres and places of public amusement, guttural German alternates with vociferous Russ, both of which are broken at intervals by a stray Englishman or talkative Swede. St. Petersburg is, in truth, a riffacciamento of the representatives of different nations, and presents a cramnamboli of all languages—a motley assemblage of every variety of manner—a smirking confederacy of Gallic politeness with German brusquerie and English reserve. It is rather a temporary encampment than a permanent capital of the mighty empire of which it is nominally the centre. A name—an arrangement for a commercial purpose—a court denationalized, and moving under an atmosphere of foreign tastes—do not constitute, beyond the surface of our conceptions, the metropolis of a country. To fulfil, in its catholic and comprehensive relations, this idea, the spot on which it stands must have been the scene of great events. The good cause and the bad must have had their rights proclaimed, and their struggle concluded within its walls. Its cathedrals must have beheld before their altars the fair and the noble of long past generations, and have sent forth through "dim centuries agone" their stern congratulations over victories achieved, and justice triumphant. The strongholds of other ages, only valued from the associations which they call forth, must be guardian and tutelary over the more recent erections clustered around their gates. On such conditions as these must the influence of a capital rest, if it is destined to attach its citizens to it by any stronger tie than the interests of an existence evolved amid the scenes of toil and traffic can institute. Under them, as he recalls the hour when within that porch, which is now surrounded by the palpable evidences of an ambitious commerce, "trumpets were blown for the right;" or on that parapet, now overlooking a market-place or manufactory, some apostle of human freedom, came forth to crown, by a last sacrifice, his attachment to the interests of his race; the creature of funds and falsehood becomes for an hour sublimed by the warmth of picturesque associations, and is compelled to feel that his native land has other claims on his affections than those which spring from its subservience to his purposes of successful accumulation. The past flushes with an unusual colour his habitual thoughts, and gladdens with its purple lights the sober and limiting horizon of his prospects.

Compare with the city of the North the capitals of France and England. In the former, walk from the antagonist and transversal points, from the Nevskoy Monastery to the Wassily Ostroff, and from the Smolnoy to the Calomnia, and you fail in calling up a single thought which points to a period anterior to your own. But approach the environs of London—sail up its majestic river—listen, while you are yet afar off from your place of debarkation, to the pulsing of the mighty heart—"the breathings not loud but deep,"—watch the dim intimations, which reach eye and ear, of the vicinity of the capital of a country whose rise has been the laborious efforts of many ages,

> "Pillar on pillar raised, and arch on stately arch—"

contemplate that immortal dome swelling in the distance, which for centuries has been in its august and unapproachable grandeur, a fitting guardian of the vast metropolis, which seems to cling for watch and protection to its feet—observe on every side that forest of masts blackening with their long spars the orange light of the sunset, and an occasional leviathan—its thunders muffled, its purposes concealed—the instrument of war or commerce, dropping slowly down the stream on its mission of gain or vengeance—perambulate these streets (of ancient London) amid historic edifices, which, as you pass under their shadows, compel into submission to their own influences, all meaner or feeble associations, and say, if it ought to be an object of wonder that the popular heart of England should throb with so strong a pulse, and its triumphant memories be so often quickened into high and enduring exertion. The Englishman whose soul is engrossed by the occupations and ambition of the passing hour, who is "of imagination compact," lives at intervals almost as much with the past as with the present. No vulgar influences environ him on all hands—no common lessons are read to him on every side. Ages *now* astir with

> "Soundless mirth and dreamy cavalcade,"

according as the fancy marshalls or arrays with her territory its shining and involved pictures; but *then* labouring with the birth of new periods, and glorified, by the light of advancing liberty and increasing knowledge, defile before him from arched doorways and sepulchral isles. Feudal power, chivalrous pomp, burgher triumph, like a hurried phantasy, move on and supplant each other by turns. The streets which he treads have not only been the witnesses of illustrious deeds, but have derived their very names from periods many centuries anterior to his own. The buildings which encompass him were once tenanted by wits and courtiers, whose lips for hundreds of years have been silent in the grave. The palaces within which his monarchs are lodged, have scarcely allowed the merriment of the courts of James and Charles to die within their walls. At every step he lights on a noble incident or stately reminiscence. The Strand, the Jewry, are passed, and lo, with its broad moat and drawbridge—the very cynosure of English history—intimately associated with its troubles for five hundred years—the Tower. In the compass of European history, no word occurs with a more thrilling effect in connexion with every vicissitude of fortune—with every triumph of good or evil—with the dethronement of monarchs—with the loyalty and sufferings of adherents—with the stormy cry of religious persecution. As a memento of despotic cruelty, the Bastile of Paris was, perhaps, calculated to excite as sombre reflections, and stifled in its stony recesses groans as deep and imprecations as bitter as ever broke from the lips of indignant humanity, but it now stands, fortunately for France and our common nature, on the list of "the things that were," with the dungeons of Ferrara and the black canals of Venice. The Tower, however, is still before us, half a fortress, and half a prison, venerable, sullen, forbidding, as when Raleigh came forth from its cells to die. With its name the annals of England are as intimately linked as the history of Athens is with the Acropolis, or the Forum and Colliseum with the fortunes of republican and imperial Rome. We may still occupy the same courts on which the royal, and noble, and priestly, at intervals, during the last lustrum of centuries have stood—with Charles, preparing, in the silence of his dungeon, to encounter his approaching doom—with Lady Jane Grey, the sweetest victim to the ambition of others that ever died by violent hands, a young and beautiful offering to the Minotaur of an imperious nobility and a turbulent democracy—with Strafford, haughty and patrician in power, and casting no stigma on his name by an unworthy depression in adversity—with Essex, the self-willed noble, the capricious favourite, the generous master, the friend and companion of Spenser—with Mary, when she closed on the scaffold a career that commenced under more than festal auspices (an eastern noon, with its soft lights and voluptuous odours, sinking in the clouds and storms of a tropical sunset)—with Sidney, and More, and Russell, the champions of a good cause in evil days, worthy disciples of the sages of old, who by solemn meditation or serene fortitude, endeavoured to advance the interest of their species, and, like them, under a colder sky than that of Attica, and amid a people of less sudden though deeper emotion than those who crowded the streets of Athens and overbore the decisions of her judges, experiencing an ungrateful return for their services, and falling at last before the effect of a more deadly and stedfast jealousy than that which dictated the ostracism of Aristides, and proffered the fatal cup to Socrates.

Such are the dramas of English history, revived by the objects around us—true altars—authentic temples to suffering innocence and avenged wrong. A story of grief or joy, of good men rewarded by a late success, or of guilt precipitated into a just catastrophe, is connected with every "buttress and coigne of vantage;" a legend hangs on every half-defaced carving and quaint archway. As we gaze, "bold songs," which have travelled through four centuries, ring around us, "such as an outlaw might have given breath to in the greenwood" devoted to the commemoration and illustration of other times—household gods, best accomplishing their purpose of guarding the hearths and homes of England by perpetuating the sentiments that long ago, in the midst of peril and difficulty, contributed to shield from outward wrong the one, and to fill with manly thoughts and gentle "humanities" the other. With such associations continually moving above and around us, who can doubt that our countrymen, as an equipoise between past and present, should catch a devout thoughtfulness of purpose, not always manifesting itself on the surface of events, but seated deeply nevertheless in the national heart, darkened by the images of action established in past cycles, and an attachment to the soil from which they sprung—to the dwellings within which they have evoked the large charities of a mild and comprehensive faith—to the monuments which recall bygone times, and colour the influences of those in which they live—which no code of legislative enactment—no measurement of districts, or distribution of boundaries—no mere grandeur of commercial enterprise—no amount of immediate prosperity could create.

Nothing of this kind do we find in St. Petersburg—this appeal from the eye to the imagination—from the palpable to the abstract—from the proximate to the remote. For the past of Russian history we must seek not on the shores of the Neva, but beside the mosque-like churches and barbaric Kremlin of Moscow. St. Petersburg is, in truth, destitute of every thing which might identify it as the capital of Russia.