

A Monastery North of the Arctic Circle



TWO days' voyage beyond the North Cape, in arctic regions where in summer there is darkness and no light in winter, lies the entrance to the White Sea. Enclosed by land, except for the narrow straits, and deprived of the influence of the Gulf Stream, which on the more exposed northwestern shores of Norway renders the fjords navigable throughout the whole winter, this inland sea presents at least one of the characteristics of Central and Northern Russia—the extreme of heat and cold. In winter its entire surface is frozen, but during the long summer days the sun burns fiercely and calls into sudden life the coarse herbage and the soft green leaves of the silver birch and ash trees that clothe its shores. Pleasant indeed is the vision of this verdure, and of the forests of pine, after the barren rocky coast, flecked with snow, which extends from the North Cape to the White Sea. Owing to its remote situation, to the shortness of the season during which its waters are open to navigation, and to the difficulties which the voyage presents, the travelers who visit the inhospitable region of the White Sea are few and far between; and even at Archangel itself, the capital of the province that forms its eastern shore, which has lately been connected by railway with Central Russia, the tourist is unknown. To M. Olivier, director of the Revue Generale des Sciences de Paris, is due the credit of the idea and its successful accomplishment, of visiting this almost unknown land on one of his well-organized cruises of the Ile-de-France; and it was the desire to see once more this northern waterway, which I visited many years ago, that induced me to join the cruise.

A perfect calm, a sky without a cloud, and a rise in the thermometer from a few degrees above freezing yesterday out in the Arctic Ocean to nearly 70 degrees today—and not a sign of fog! We have been already some 14 hours steaming southward in the White Sea. Before us lies a long, low island, covered with a dense vegetation of pine and silver birch, and indented with little bays, their surface dotted with a sprinkling of rocks. As we approach still nearer to the land the reflection of the pines stretches almost as far as our ship across the mirror of still water, broken only here and there where the head of some inquisitive seal, with scared eyes, appears for a moment; to dive again and leave no trace beyond a series of little moving circles.

As we turn to the south-east corner of the island there come into view, rising above the dark foreground of pines, the high white towers, crowned in domes and cupolas of emerald green, of the great monastery of Solovetsky, one of the richest and most celebrated in all Russia, a mass of strange, incongruous Oriental buildings. Viewed from the sea, the monastery is like a fairy palace transplanted by magic from some Indian or Persian city and set down in the forest of pines of this island of the frozen north. One would scarcely be surprised on revisiting the spot to find that the sorcerer's curse had been removed and that the monastery, with its churches and its towers, with its belltowers, its domes, and its cupolas, had disappeared. One sad, solitary being alone should remain, forgotten and left behind, to tell how the great pile of buildings had floated away in the night, and how the greasy monks and unkempt novices had become once more the princes and retainers of the fairy tale.

We disembark at a stone quay in the little port that faces the main entrance to the monastery. It is Asia that lies before us; we seem to have left Europe a thousand miles away. The crowd of strangely dressed monks and novices, the moujiks even, with their narrow eyes and tangled heads and beards, and the buildings themselves, from the gilded summits of their towers to the great wall of undressed boulders, worn by ice and water into curious smooth round shapes long before they were laboriously lifted into their present position, all speak of Asia. Above this great enclosing wall, and extending the entire circumference of the monastery, run ramparts, pierced for defence and covered with a roof painted crimson. At the corners are towers, of the same height and character as the walls themselves, except that above them the roofs rise to a great height in the form of immense red extinguishers. Over this encircling line of red appear the high white walls of the buildings within the vast enclosure, tier above tier, until, crowning all, rise the towers, with their green domes and cupolas, of the churches and belltowers.

A great porch, Chinese in form and in its crude coloring, supported by stunted fantastic pillars, overhangs the entrance of the dark archway that pierces the immense thickness of the outer walls. We go past iron-bound doors, hung with uncouth padlocks and bolts that would seem to require the strength of giants to manoeuvre; past walls formed of blocks of undressed stone Cyclopean in their size; through deep arches where the almost perpetual sunshine of the summer never penetrates to illumine the half-seen saints on the frescoed walls. Here is the twinkle of a little lamp burning before some sacred ikon, or the speck of light given forth by a taper offered to

some holy shrine half concealed in the thickness of the wall; there, a beggar, recalling the frozen North and exposing to the pity of the passer-by his footless frost-bitten legs—and suddenly one emerges into the great court within.

The first impression is one of sunlight and seagulls. The high buildings which surround the monastery square are painted white, and the reflection of the sunlight upon the vast expanse of wall is dazzling indeed. The seagulls are there in hundreds, on the ground, on the walls and roofs, and even perching on the trees; seagulls of every age, fluffy brown fledglings and mature birds, harmonious in grey and white, one and all crying, screaming, to be fed, and struggling over one another to reach the proffered bread. A few stunted trees and some high, rank grass, enclosed in white wooden palings, tell of an attempt, apparently abandoned, to form a garden in a climate where little or nothing will grow.

It is the Archimandrite himself who receives us in the stuffy saloons of his official residence, hung with inferior oil paintings of past Tsars and a large oleograph of the present Sovereign; and a few minutes later we start under his guidance to visit the two principal churches, which stand across the sunlit court.

We pass under an archway, and a wide stone stairway leads on up to a vast corridor, extending both to right and left. The walls, painted in terrifying frescoes representing the horrors of the infernal regions, and scarcely more attractive ones portraying the joys of heaven, form a curious background to the groups of priests and peasants and all sorts and conditions of men who move slowly about or stand in little groups gazing in silent wonder at these crude representations of a future life. Everywhere can be seen the black-robed and black-capped monks, their long, unkempt flaxen hair falling low over the shoulders of their faded, greasy robes. Whatever riches may be hidden in the treasures of Solovetsky—and its wealth is undeniable and undeniable—the class of pilgrim most in evidence can bring but small offerings, though it is said that the monks can squeeze blood from a stone, and that few of the thousands of superstitious peasants who visit the monastery are allowed to leave it with many copecks in their pockets. In return for the scant hospitality the monastery provides they are expected, and almost forced, to give their little all.

Apparent on the faces of one and all is a look of stolid, unedifying devotion and reverence, the devotion of the absolutely ignorant, the reverence of the perpetually oppressed. They show little signs of intellect, these pilgrims of the far North, and it is not difficult to understand to how low a state of degradation they have fallen under the hardships of life in a land where for eight or nine months of the year they are in the clutches of rigorous winter. Devoid of all education, with few or none to relieve their wants and alleviate their sufferings, their lot is indeed a hard one, but happily there is already springing up a little hope that the time is not far distant when the peasant population of Russia will be considered as something more than breeders of soldiers for the army and beasts of burden for the official classes.

Never before can the great corridors of Solovetsky have presented the scene they did on that afternoon of July, for amongst the crowds of priests and peasants, monks and novices, moved the hundred passengers of the Ile-de-France. After three centuries and more of seclusion the monastery was invaded by the tourist, though it is only fair to remark that the tourists of the Revue des Sciences consist largely of men of science and others whose interest in all they see and do is marked by the greatest consideration for the beliefs and customs of others. Nor was a touch of brightness absent, for amongst the passengers were no small number of ladies who added an atmosphere of color to a scene otherwise sombre and gloomy. I could not help remarking that the stolidity of the peasants almost merged into a look of wonder as their eyes fell upon the charming figure of a fascinating French lady in a white serge dress and scarlet jacket, in whose enormous but very becoming hat a blue and yellow macaw parrot from the Amazons was apparently plucking alive an Argus pheasant that seemed to be attempting to escape its evil fate by concealing itself in a display of fireworks.

The two principal churches, dedicated to St. Herman and St. Sabas, open into this corridor, which occupies practically the whole length of one side of the great square of the monastery. As we pass through the iron gates that give access into the church, a vision of gorgeousness meets the eye—gilded wood-carving reaching from the floor to the vaulted and domed roof; frescoes of gaudy saints of gigantic proportions; columns of gold that turn and twist, festooned with gilded flowers, to end in ill-proportioned Corinthian capitals of gilt; glimpses of half-revealed sanctuaries, just visible between the heavy carvings of pierced golden doors; an altar, a blaze of light; little tapers burning before the pictures, and at the shrines, of saints; above, suspended from the ceilings, great candelabra of silver, through the intertwining branches of which

one can barely discern the dusky figures of unreal apathetic saints frescoed upon the gloomy domes and vaulted roofs above.

At the altar a priest drones the office in the musical nasal rhythm of constant repetition. Everywhere permeate the scent and the dimness of incense, half concealing the groups of peasants who stand here and there about the church, or pass silently and reverently from shrine to shrine and from picture to picture, with low obeisance, lighting a taper here and there and praying for a few moments at each favorite spot.

It is a scene as oppressive in its atmosphere as it is in its superfluity of gilded ornament. Taken in detail almost everything is deplorable in taste; yet altogether the whole is overpowering in its richness of color and in its oriental exaggeration of accumulated decoration. The priest has concluded his office and the choir of men and boys, hidden behind great screens, break into song. Primitive as is the chant, it is strangely appealing in its tones. The boys' voices, full of the freshness and purity of youth, blend with the deeper tones of the men in the simple harmonies that have echoed and re-echoed in the same spot for over three centuries and a half. The beauty of voice, the truth of note are there, but just as the singers lack all expression of countenance, so their voices seem wanting in devotion and expression. It is perhaps their absence—the apathy of soul of the singers—that renders the music so strange and remarkable. Slowly the chant progresses, unaccompanied by any instrument, rising and falling in the great church; now in the simplest and most beautiful of harmonies; now in unison—unimaginative, unromantic, and yet full of a fascination that holds one rooted to the spot. It is the voice of the North, the voice of souls chilled by the long frozen winters of darkness, worn out by the struggle for existence for generations in a land where nature strives to destroy rather than to produce, where trees never reach their full stature, where crops never ripen, where for the greater part of the year even the sea is frozen, and where from time immemorial the oppression of nature—and of man—has been paramount. Yet under these outward and visible signs of apathy there exists a deep-rooted faith, stubborn and unsympathetic, cold and undemonstrative, such as is found perhaps nowhere outside of Russia.

The Archimandrite, puffing and perspiring with his unwonted energy, led us next to the great vaulted refectory with its frescoes of saints and angels. Tables were laid ready for the monks' evening meal—great dishes of fish that emitted a perfume that spoke of considerable absence from the sea, and bowls of sour cabbage, evidently of a certain age. This, with loaves of black bread, seems to form the general fare. Then on to the kitchens, where the principal features were the dirtiness of everything, including the boy cooks, and the still more pervasive odors of bad food.

At the head of a wide stairway is the studio, a large, well-lighted room, in which a number of apathetic youths were engaged in painting still more apathetic saints in glaring colors upon gilded backgrounds. The principal work in hand seemed to be that of restoration, that is to say, the entire repainting of the old pictures. The method is simple in its barbarity. The old panels, dating from centuries back, enriched and mellowed by time, with their primitive saints that breathe the spirit of endeavor that inspired the painters so long dead, were being washed and scraped, and upon the seasoned panels were being displaced by the soulless monstrosities of Russian modern religious art—expressionless, pompous, insipid elderly gentlemen of dissenting aspect, robed in dressing gowns and quite evidently wanting in intellect.

Already the student perpetrators of these outrages have ruined much of the charm of Solovetsky, for not content with the wholesale destruction of the small pictures, they have also repainted most of the frescoes of the churches in colors and in style that would shame the drop scene of an itinerant theatre.

Beyond the buildings which form the residential quarters of the monks and novices are situated the hospital and dispensary, both boasting a modern, if not very extensive, equipment. Long tunnels, dark and vaulted, containing a number of the tombs of the Archimandrites and principal monks of the past, lead one from courtyard to courtyard. In one are the great cellars where the kvass—or rye beer—is made and stored, in another a little shop where souvenirs of the pilgrimage are sold; but, turn where one will, one never loses sight of the great high walls, surmounted by the domed towers. Everywhere the monks and novices, in black and grey respectively, are to be met. Many of the latter are engaged in the daily labors of the monastery, for all the manual work is performed by the inmates. Carts laden with building material, and drawn by sturdy little ponies, rattle over the big paving stones, driven for the most part by boy novices who have not yet lost the look of the outer world, or become degenerated, as must in time be the case, by the influence of the apathetic and unmanly surroundings into which they have been introduced. One can mark in all its stages the gradual change from the healthy, clean youth of these young



novices to the effeminate, expressionless, almost sexless appearance of the monks.

The sea and the forest extend nearly up to the monastery walls on all sides, and the little port with its stone quays lies only a hundred yards or so from the main entrance. Alongside of the jetty lie a steamer or two, belonging to the monastery, and employed in the carriage of pilgrims and provisions from Archangel, which is some 15 hours' voyage away. A large hostelry, also the property of the monks, adjoins the quay. Although pretentious in size, it is of a most primitive character within, though all that is necessary, no doubt, for the class of pilgrims who visit Solovetsky.

On the inland side of the great block of buildings lies a fresh water lake of some acres in extent, situated above the level of the sea, and thus assuring a constant supply of fresh running water. Behind this lake, and forming almost a wall around the pasture land which has been cleared in the immediate vicinity of the monastery, rises the forest of pines. It is from an eminence above the port that the best view of Solovetsky is obtained and its astounding fantastic appearance is best realized; for criticize its architecture as one will, taken in conjunction with its position and its surroundings, its stupendous incongruity cannot be denied. This conglomeration of white buildings and towers, of crimson roofs and emerald domes and cupolas, should stand in the perpetual sunshine of some Far Eastern landscape. The dark forest of pines should be groves of waving palms, and in place of the dull black and grey of monk and novice should be seen the yellow robes of Buddhist priests. On that brilliant July afternoon it was difficult enough to realize that for the greater part of the year the monastery and forest lie covered in snow beside a frozen sea, in a land of almost perpetual night.

It is time to go on board. On the quay, gazing apathetically at our departure, stand a score or more of novices. Silent, stolid, uniform in the color and cut of their clothing—long grey coats strapped at the waist, tall black boots and high black caps—with their yellow or light brown hair hanging over their necks, all the show of interest that they could raise left them apparently cold and indifferent. Yet to them the advent of the first tourist steamer that had ever penetrated into the waters of the White Sea must have been an event of consequence. For the first time in their lives, probably, they gazed upon men and women from the further ends of Europe. But the great lone North had marked them for its own, and they seemed, even in the glorious sunshine of that July afternoon, to feel the touch of those dreary winter months of everlasting frozen night. Through the

narrow channel that leads from the port to the open sea we are towed back by the ship's launch. On either hand, on islets and on rocks, stand great wooden crosses, placed there to guide vessels into port, and souls to Paradise. As we steam away in the glow of the setting sun—though it wants but an hour of midnight—the great monastery appears to hang between an opal sky and an opal sea; and, as we turn the corner of the island, Solovetsky is hidden by the long line of the gloomy forest.—The Times.

TYRANNY OF PARENTS

First they bring us into the world without our volition—then they educate us after their own ideas, or according to their means. They enjoy our childhood, precipitate us into lifelong mistakes, and bewail our ingratitude if, when the period of adolescence is reached, we do not choose them for our friends.

It is not only in France that a child must marry to be free. The boy that leaves home to escape his father's dominion, the girl whose letters "must contain something very wrong if she doesn't want her own mother to read them," are common to the civilized world.

The child by right may expect his parents "to protect his youth"—his body, that he may not be handicapped in the coming struggle; his mind, that he may have power to find and fill his own niche; but it is the child's niche, not the parent's, that he should be permitted, nay, encouraged, to seek. He may by right expect such advice as a veteran soldier might offer to a drummer-boy; as though the parent said, "I have travelled a little further along the way. Trust me now, and perhaps, after a while you will teach me."

But the parent has no more excuse for forcing the growing child to be a pocket edition of himself than he would have to rob of his most cherished possessions the guest who sojourns beneath his roof for a time. Indeed, he has less right, for the guest is not helpless—his individuality cannot be invaded, shaped for ends to which it is not native, deprived of the chance of self-expression; for which cause we were created separate entities—no two of us alike. Each child should be regarded as a fresh beginning, and given a fresh start free of old blunders.

The parent who is his child's friend is in a class by himself—a class which holds too few, since the very atmosphere of friendship is freedom. But when the period of ignorance and blind submission is past and the child awakes, reasons, questions, and judges, the parent will reap whatever he has sown. "To him that hath shall be given."—Lippincott's Magazine.