

Mr. Ransome's Description of Russia

(From the London "Common Sense," June 14.)

("Common Sense" is an organ of British Liberalism. Its editor is F. W. Hirst, late editor of the "Economist.")

THE attitude of most commonsense English people about Bolshevik Russia is one of suspended judgment. They feel they do not know. The atrocity stories poured upon them in the columns of the daily press have, constantly repeated throughout five years of war, first about Germans and since about Russians, lost their power to horrify because a doubt as to the truth of what appears in the newspapers has penetrated the simplest mind. Ordinary people are rendered sceptical when a whole nation is described to them as dominated by a group of inhuman monsters, or as being in the grip of a moral plague. No one can be quite so bad as the Bolsheviks are painted. But how is the ordinary newspaper reader to get at the facts?

It is now possible to put him in the way of knowing some of them. Mr. Arthur Ransome was the Daily News correspondent in Russia during the early years of the war; he saw the March, 1917, Revolution from the thrilling days of its inauguration and through the disappointments and disillusionments which followed on the failure of the Kerensky Government to secure peace and led to its supersession by the Lenin regime; he saw the Bolshevik Government set to work on the tremendous task of giving bread and peace to a starving and disorganized country. After some months' absence in Sweden Mr. Ransome returned to Russia in February and March of this year. He has just come back to England, fresh from this experience, and publishes an account of what he saw, based in the main on a diary he kept at the time. His book, simply entitled "Six Weeks in Russia," contains, we believe, more direct first-hand truth about Russia as it is today than has yet been available. Mr. Ransome holds no brief for any party. He writes as an observer, not as an advocate. There is no rhetoric, no flaming descriptions, no appeals, in his quiet and artless narrative. He has been there; he has seen; and he puts before us what he has seen without comment. We have called his narrative artless; but it is the artlessness of the artist whose trained eye perceives, and whose skilled hand can convey the atmosphere as well as the bare outline of what he perceives. But what he shows is what he has seen; not what he would like to see. Mr. Ransome has found that the Bolsheviks are human; that life under their regime goes on, despite the terrible pressure of grinding hunger (due in large measure to our blockade,) in human fashion. He explains how their institutions are working, the limitations to their pure theory which have been introduced in practice; the degree to which private enterprise still goes on and what life looks like to the ordinary individual. He does not tell us this; he shows it. And his pages will give the reader an idea of something actual, such as can not be obtained from the pages of the anonymous gentleman whose effusions were published by the Foreign Office. Take, for instance, his story of the man who before the war owned a leather-bag factory in connection with a big tannery, belonging to an uncle. The uncle, after the November Revolution, called together all workmen, and proposed that they should form an artel or co-operative society and take the factory into their hands, each man contributing a thousand roubles towards the capital with which to run it. Of course, the workmen had not got a thousand roubles apiece, "uncle offered to pay it in for them, on the understanding that they would eventually pay him back." This was illegal, but the little town was a long way from the centre of things, and it seemed a good way out of the difficulty. He did not expect to get it back, but he hoped in this way to keep control of the tannery, which he wished to deve-

lop having a paternal interest in it.

Things worked very well. They elected a committee of control. "Uncle was elected president, I was elected vice-president, and there were three workmen. We are working on those lines to this day. They give uncle 1500 roubles a month, me a thousand, and the book keeper a thousand. The only difficulty is that that the men will treat uncle as the owner, and this may mean trouble if things go wrong. Uncle is for ever telling them, 'It's your factory, don't call me Master,' and they reply, 'Yes, it's our factory all right, but you are still Master, and that must be.'"

Some people imagine that under the Bolsheviks all forms of art has disappeared. Mr. Ransome tells us of the wonderful futurist paintings, in vivid colorings, with which the hoardings are sometimes covered, and gives a description of a visit to the theatre and another to the opera. In Moscow, the theatre, opera, and ballet performances are crowded nightly: French, English and Russian classics are performed at a dozen theatres. At the opera, the whole audience was in everyday clothes. There were many soldiers, and men come straight from work. "There were a good many grey and brown and woollen jerseys about, and people were sitting in overcoats of all kinds and ages, for the theatre was very cold." "Looking from face to face that night, I thought there were very few people in the theatre who had had anything like a good dinner to digest. But as for their keenness, I can imagine few audiences to which, from the actor's point of view, it would be better worth while to play. Applause, like brains, had come down from the galleries."

Of the actual performance I have little to say except that ragged clothes and empty stomachs seemed to make very little difference to the orchestra. Helzer, the ballerina, danced as well before this audience as ever before the bourgeoisie. As I turned up the collar of my coat I reflected that the actors deserved all the applause they got for their heroism in playing in such cold. Now and then during the even- of opera generally, perhaps because of the contrast in magnificence between the stage and the shabby, intelligent audience. Now and then, on the other hand, stage and audience seemed one and indivisible. For "Samson and Delilah" is itself a poem of revolution, and gained enormously by being played by people every one of whom had seen something of the sort in real life. Samson's stirring up of the Israelites reminded me of many scenes in Petrograd in 1917, and when, at last, he brings the temple down in ruins on his triumphant enemies, I was reminded of the words attributed to Trotsky:—"If we are, in the end, forced to go, we shall slam the door behind us in such a way that the echo shall be felt throughout the world."

Going home afterwards through the snow, I did not see a single armed man. A year ago the streets were deserted after ten in the evening except by those who, like myself, had work which took them to meetings and such things late at night. They used to be empty except for the military pickets round their log-fires. Now they were full of foot-passengers going home from the theatres, utterly forgetful of the fact that only twelve months before they had thought the streets of Moscow unsafe after dark. There could be no question about it. The revolution is settling down and people now think of other matters than the old question, Will it last one week or two?

Mr. Ransome had a series of talks with Lenin, which are extraordinarily interesting, and with the other commissaries, and from his pages one really gets some notion of how the whole thing

works. But what one mainly feels is that whatever one may think of the social system, the people who are living under it, who have accepted it, are human beings like ourselves, and that it is mere wickedness and criminal folly to go on treating them as wild beasts with whom we can not negotiate. Mr. Ransome's book will, we believe, do much to convince everyone who reads it that Mr. Churchill's Russian war is utterly indefensible. At any rate, we commend it heartily to everyone who wants to form an independent judgment, who values the opportunity of making up his own mind, and who can appreciate a candid, veracious, and well done piece of literary work.

"Six Weeks in Russia," By Arthur Ransome, Geo. Allen and Unwin, 2s. 6d. net.)

SOCIALIST WAR POINTS

(From the Glasgow "Forward")

I spent an idle hour glancing through Lord French's book, "1914," the other day, and for reward came across a passage which the Capitalist Press reviewers, with singular accord, have forgotten to notice:

"The governing classes in Russia were saturated with disloyalty and intrigue in the most corrupt form. But for their black treachery the war would have ended at the latest in the spring of 1917."

This is the gang now being subsidized with British money and assisted by British troops.

And what becomes of the lying wheeze that Trotsky and Lenin were German agents?

You remember when the Railwaymen were asking for an increase in wages, and the Government announced that the railways under Government control during the war had been run at a loss of from 90,000,000 pounds to 100,000,000 pounds!

It was a staggerer to the railwaymen and to the passengers, who thought that the war-time 50 per cent. increase in fares ought soon to be taken off.

It was a staggerer, but it was a LIE—a Government Capitalist LIE.

The bogus figures were secured by allowing nothing on the income side for Government traffic—stores, guns, munitions, soldiers' and sailors' transit. And as the bulk of railway transit during the war was on Government account, and by the simple trick of crediting the railways with nothing for all the Government traffic, there was secured a paper loss of from 90,000,000 to 100,000,000 pounds.

Listen to the Chairman of the Scottish Railway Stockholders' Protection Association (Mr. Andrew Macdonald) at the first annual meeting of the Association (Glasgow Herald, 26/6/19):

"The Transport Minister-elect, on the second reading of his Bill, quoted figures which seemed to show that the railways were being run at a loss to the public of between 90,000,000 and 100,000,000 pounds per annum. Since that statement was made a White Paper had been issued by the Board of Trade, which showed the net result of the whole situation to be that the Government under their control had made a profit out of the railways up to the end of 1918 of not less than 30,000,000."

At Christie's last Friday, in the Drummond collection of pictures, a drawing by Turner of Zurich, eleven by seventeen inches, was sold for 6200 guineas. This increased price represents the increased spending power of the rich.