

RUSSIA

CHAPTER I

TRAVELLING IN RUSSIA

OF course, travelling in Russia is no longer what it was. During the last half-century a vast network of railways has been constructed, and one can now travel in a comfortable first-class carriage from Berlin to St. Petersburg or Moscow, and thence to Odessa, Sebastopol, the Lower Volga, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Eastern Siberia, Vladivostock, or Port Arthur. Two or three times a week there are direct trains from St. Petersburg or Moscow to Vladivostock, and Port Arthur and Pekin have thereby been brought within about ten days of London. And it must be admitted that on the main lines the passengers have not much to complain of. The carriages are decidedly better than in England, and in winter they are kept warm by small iron stoves, assisted by double windows and double doors—a very necessary precaution in a land where the thermometer often descends to 30° below zero. The trains never attain, it is true, a high rate of speed—so at least English and Americans think—but then we must remember that Russians are rarely in a hurry, and like to have frequent opportunities of eating and drinking. In Russia time is *not* money; if it were, nearly all the subjects of the Tsar would always have a large stock of ready money on hand, and would often have great difficulty in spending it. In reality, be it parenthetically remarked, a Russian with a superabundance of ready money is a phenomenon rarely met with in real life.

In conveying passengers at the rate of from fifteen to forty miles an hour, the railway companies do at least all that they promise; but in one very important respect they do not always strictly fulfil their engagements. The traveller takes a ticket for a certain town, and on arriving at what

he imagines to be his destination, he may find merely a railway station surrounded by fields. On making inquiries, he may discover, to his disappointment, that the station is by no means identical with the town bearing the same name, and that the railway has fallen several miles short of fulfilling the bargain, as he understood the terms of the contract. Indeed, it might almost be said that as a general rule railways in Russia, like camel drivers in certain Eastern countries, studiously avoid the towns. This seems at first a strange fact. We can readily understand that, as travellers in Arabia tell us, towns are shunned by the wild Bedouin, enamoured of tent life and nomadic habits, and afraid of falling a prey to extortionate officials; but surely civil engineers and railway contractors in Russia have no such dread of brick and mortar. The true reason, I suspect, is that land within or immediately beyond the municipal barrier is relatively dear, and that the railways, being completely beyond the invigorating influence of healthy competition, can afford to look upon the comfort and convenience of passengers as a secondary consideration. Gradually, it is true, this state of things is being improved by private initiative. As the railways refuse to come to the towns, the towns are extending towards the railways, and already some prophets are found bold enough to predict that in the course of time those long, new, straggling streets, without an inhabited *hinterland*, which at present try so severely the springs of the rickety droshkis, will be properly paved and kept in decent repair. For my own part, I confess I am a little sceptical with regard to this prediction, and I can only use a favourite expression of the Russian peasants—*dai Bog!* God grant it may be so!

It is but fair to state that in one celebrated instance neither engineers nor railway contractors were directly to blame. From St. Petersburg to Moscow the locomotive runs for a distance of 400 miles, almost as “the crow” is supposed to fly, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left. For twelve weary hours the passenger in the express train looks out on forest and morass, and rarely catches sight of human habitation. Only once he perceives in the distance what may be called a town; it is Tver which has been thus

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favoured, not because it is a place of importance, but simply because it happened to be near the bee-line. And why was the railway constructed in this extraordinary fashion? For the best of all reasons—because the Tsar so ordered it. When the preliminary survey was being made, Nicholas I. learned that the officers entrusted with the task—and the Minister of Ways and Roads in the number—were being influenced more by personal than technical considerations, and he determined to cut the Gordian knot in true Imperial style. When the Minister laid before him the map with the intention of explaining the proposed route, he took a ruler, drew a straight line from the one terminus to the other, and remarked in a tone that precluded all discussion, “You will construct the line so!” And the line was so constructed—remaining to all future ages, like St. Petersburg and the Pyramids, a magnificent monument of autocratic power.

Formerly this well-known incident was often cited in whispered philippics to illustrate the evils of the autocratic form of government. Imperial whims, it was said, override grave economic considerations. In recent years, however, a change seems to have taken place in public opinion, and some people now assert that this so-called Imperial whim was an act of far-seeing policy. As by far the greater part of the goods and passengers are carried the whole length of the line, it is well that the line should be as short as possible, and that branch lines should be constructed to the towns lying to the right and left. Evidently there is a good deal to be said in favour of this view.

In the development of the railway system there has been another disturbing cause, which is not likely to occur to the English mind. In England, individuals and companies habitually act according to their private interests, and the State interferes as little as possible; private initiative does as it pleases, unless the authorities can prove that important bad consequences will necessarily result. In Russia, the *onus probandi* lies on the other side; private initiative is allowed to do nothing until it gives guarantees against all possible bad consequences. When any great enterprise is projected, the first question is—“How will this new scheme

affect the interests of the State?" Thus, when the course of a new railway has to be determined, the military authorities are among the first to be consulted, and their opinion has a great influence on the ultimate decision. The natural consequence is that the railway map of Russia presents to the eye of the strategist much that is quite unintelligible to the ordinary observer—a fact that will become apparent even to the uninitiated as soon as a war breaks out in Eastern Europe. Russia is no longer what she was in the days of the Crimean campaign, when troops and stores had to be conveyed many hundreds of miles by the most primitive means of transport. At that time she had only 750 miles of railway; now she has more than 43,000 miles open, and new lines are being constructed.

The water communication has likewise in recent years been greatly improved. On the principal rivers there are now very good steamers. Unfortunately, the climate puts serious obstructions in the way of navigation. For nearly half of the year the rivers are covered with ice, and during a great part of the open season navigation is difficult. When the ice and snow melt, the rivers overflow their banks and lay a great part of the low-lying country under water, so that many villages can only be approached in boats; but very soon the flood subsides, and the water falls so rapidly that by midsummer the larger steamers have great difficulty in picking their way among the sandbanks. The Neva alone—that queen of northern rivers—has at all times a plentiful supply of water.

Besides the Neva, the river visited most frequently by the tourist is the Volga, which forms part of what may be called the Russian grand tour. Englishmen who wish to see something more than St. Petersburg and Moscow generally go by rail from the ancient capital to Nizhni-Novgorod, where they visit the great fair, and then get on board one of the Volga steamers. For those who have mastered the important fact that Russia is not a country of fine scenery, the voyage down the river is pleasant enough. The left bank is as flat as the banks of the Rhine below Cologne, but the right bank is high, occasionally well wooded, and not devoid of a certain tame picturesqueness. Early on the

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second day the steamer reaches Kazan, once the capital of an independent Tartar khanate, and still containing a considerable Tartar population. Several *metchets* (as the Mahometan houses of prayer are here termed) with their diminutive minarets in the lower part of the town show that Islamism still survives, though the khanate was annexed to Muscovy more than three centuries and a half ago; but the town, as a whole, has a European rather than an Asiatic character. If any one visits it in the hope of getting “a glimpse of the East,” he will be grievously disappointed, unless, indeed, he happen to be one of those imaginative tourists who always discover what they wish to see. And yet it must be admitted that, of all the towns on the route, Kazan is the most interesting. Though not Oriental, it has a peculiar character of its own, whilst all the others—Simbirsk, Samara, Sarátov—are as uninteresting as Russian provincial towns commonly are. The full force and solemnity of that expression will be explained in the sequel.

Probably about sunrise on the third day something like a range of mountains will appear on the horizon. It may be well to say at once, to prevent disappointment, that in reality nothing worthy of the name of mountain is to be found in that part of the country. The nearest mountain range in that direction is the Caucasus, which is hundreds of miles distant, and consequently cannot by any possibility be seen from the deck of a steamer. The elevations in question are simply a low range of hills, called the Zhigulin-skiya Gori. In Western Europe they would not attract much attention, but “in the kingdom of the blind,” as the French proverb has it, “the one-eyed man is king”; and in a flat region like Eastern Russia these hills form a prominent feature. Though they have nothing of Alpine grandeur, yet their well-wooded slopes, coming down to the water’s edge—especially when covered with the delicate tints of early spring, or the rich yellow and red of autumnal foliage—leave an impression on the memory not easily effaced.

On the whole—with all due deference to the opinions of my patriotic Russian friends—I must say that Volga scenery hardly repays the time, trouble and expense which a voyage

from Nizhni to Tsaritsin demands. There are some pretty bits here and there, but they are “few and far between.” A glass of the most exquisite wine diluted with a gallon of water makes a very insipid beverage. The deck of the steamer is generally much more interesting than the banks of the river. There one meets with curious travelling companions. The majority of the passengers are probably Russian peasants, who are always ready to chat freely without demanding a formal introduction, and to relate—with certain restrictions—to a new acquaintance the simple story of their lives. Often I have thus whiled away, when travelling up and down this great river, the weary hours both pleasantly and profitably, and have always been impressed with the peasant’s homely common sense, good-natured kindness, half-fatalistic resignation, and strong desire to learn something about foreign countries. This last peculiarity makes him question as well as communicate, and his questions, though sometimes apparently childish, are generally to the point.

Among the passengers are probably also some representatives of the various Finnish tribes inhabiting this part of the country; they may be interesting to the ethnologist who loves to study physiognomy, but they are far less sociable than the Russians. Nature seems to have made them silent and morose, whilst their conditions of life have made them shy and distrustful. The Tartar, on the other hand, is almost sure to be a lively and amusing companion. Most probably he is a pedlar or small trader of some kind. The bundle on which he reclines contains his stock-in-trade, composed, perhaps, of cotton printed goods and especially bright-coloured cotton handkerchiefs. He himself is enveloped in a capacious greasy *khalát*, or dressing-gown, and wears a fur cap, though the thermometer may be at 90° in the shade. The roguish twinkle in his small piercing eyes contrasts strongly with the sombre, stolid expression of the Finnish peasants sitting near him. He has much to relate about St. Petersburg, Moscow, and perhaps Astrakhan; but, like a genuine trader, he is very reticent regarding the mysteries of his own craft. Towards sunset he retires with his companions to some quiet spot on the deck to recite the

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evening prayers. Here all the good Mahometans on board assemble and stroke their beards, kneel on their little strips of carpet and prostrate themselves, all keeping time as if they were performing some new kind of drill under the eye of a severe drill-sergeant.

If the voyage is made about the end of September, when the traders are returning home from the fair at Nizhni-Novgorod, the ethnologist will have a still better opportunity of study. He will then find not only representatives of the Finnish and Tartar races, but also Armenians, Circassians, Persians, Bokhariots, and other Orientals—a motley and picturesque but decidedly unsavoury cargo.

However great the ethnographical variety on board may be, the traveller will probably find that four days on the Volga are quite enough for all practical and æsthetic purposes. In that case, instead of going on to Astrakhan, he will quit the steamer at Tsaritsin. Here he will find a railway connecting the Volga and the Don. I say advisedly a railway, and not a train, because trains on this line are not very frequent. When I first visited the locality, forty years ago, there were only two a week, so that if you inadvertently missed one train you had to wait at least three days for the next. Prudent, nervous people preferred travelling by the road, for on the railway the strange jolts and mysterious creakings were very alarming. On the other hand, the pace was so slow that running off the rails would have been merely an amusing episode, and even a collision could scarcely have been attended with serious consequences. Happily, things are improving, even in this outlying part of the country; trains are now more frequent and go at a less funereal pace.

From Kalatch, on the Don, a steamer starts for Rostoff, which is situated near the mouth of the river. The navigation of the Don is much more difficult than that of the Volga. The river is extremely shallow, and the sandbanks are continually shifting, so that many times in the course of the day the steamer runs aground. Sometimes she is got off by simply reversing the engines, but not unfrequently she sticks so fast that the engines have to be assisted. In the old times above referred to this was effected in a curious

way. The captain always gave a number of stalwart Cossacks a free passage on condition that they should give him the assistance he required; and as soon as the ship stuck fast, he ordered them to jump overboard with a stout hawser and haul her off! The task was not a pleasant one, especially as the poor fellows could not afterwards change their clothes; but the order was always obeyed with alacrity and without grumbling. Cossacks, it would seem, have no personal acquaintance with colds and rheumatism.

In the most approved manuals of geography the Don figures as one of the principal European rivers, and its length and breadth give it a right to be considered as such; but its depth in many parts is ludicrously out of proportion to its length and breadth. I remember one day seeing the captain of a large, flat-bottomed steamer slacken speed, to avoid running down a man on horseback who was attempting to cross his bows in the middle of the stream. Another day a not less characteristic incident happened. A Cossack passenger wished to be set down at a place where there was no pier, and on being informed that there was no means of landing him, coolly jumped overboard and walked ashore. This simple method of disembarking cannot, of course, be recommended to those who have no local knowledge regarding the exact position of sandbanks and deep pools.

Good serviceable fellows are those Cossacks who drag the steamer off the sandbanks, and they are often entertaining companions. Many of them can relate from their own experience, in plain, unvarnished style, stirring episodes of irregular warfare, and if they happen to be in a communicative mood they may divulge a few secrets regarding their simple, primitive commissariat system. Whether they are confidential or not, the traveller who knows the language will spend his time more profitably and pleasantly in chatting with them than in gazing listlessly at the uninteresting country through which he is passing.

Unfortunately, these Don steamers carry a large number of free passengers of another and more objectionable kind, who do not confine themselves to the deck, but unceremoniously find their way into the cabin and prevent thin-skinned travellers from sleeping. I know too little of natural

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history to decide whether these agile, bloodthirsty parasites are of the same species as those which in England assist unofficially the Sanitary Commissioners by punishing uncleanliness; but I may say that their function in the system of created things is essentially the same, and they fulfil it with a zeal and energy beyond all praise. Possessing for my own part a happy immunity from their indelicate attentions, and being perfectly innocent of entomological curiosity, I might, had I been alone, have overlooked their existence, but I was constantly reminded of their presence by less happily constituted mortals, and the complaints of the sufferers received a curious official confirmation. On arriving at the end of the journey, I asked permission to spend the night on board, and I noticed that the captain acceded to my request with more readiness and warmth than I expected. Next morning the fact was fully explained. When I began to express my thanks for having been allowed to pass the night in a comfortable cabin, my host interrupted me with a good-natured laugh, and assured me that, on the contrary, he was under obligations to me. "You see," he said, assuming an air of mock gravity, "I have always on board a large body of light cavalry, and when I have all this part of the ship to myself they make a combined attack on me; whereas, when someone is sleeping close by, they divide their forces!"

On certain steamers on the Sea of Azov the privacy of the sleeping cabin is disturbed by still more objectionable intruders; I mean rats. During a voyage which I made on board the *Kertch*, these disagreeable visitors became so importunate in the lower regions of the vessel that the ladies obtained permission to sleep in the deck saloon. After this arrangement had been made, we unfortunate male passengers received redoubled attention from our tormentors. Awakened early one morning by the sensation of something running over me as I lay in my berth, I conceived a method of retaliation. It seemed to me possible that, in the event of another visit, I might, by seizing the proper moment, kick the rat up to the ceiling with such force as to produce concussion of the brain and instant death. Very soon I had an opportunity of putting my plan into execution. A

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significant shaking of the little curtain at the foot of the berth showed that it was being used as a scaling ladder. I lay perfectly still, quite as much interested in the sport as if I had been waiting, rifle in hand, for big game. Soon the intruder peeped into my berth, looked cautiously around him, and then proceeded to walk stealthily across my feet. In an instant he was shot upwards. First was heard a sharp knock on the ceiling, and then a dull “thud” on the floor. The precise extent of the injuries inflicted I never discovered, for the victim had sufficient strength and presence of mind to effect his escape; and the gentleman at the other side of the cabin, who had been roused by the noise, protested against my repeating the experiment, on the ground that, though he was willing to take his own share of the intruders, he strongly objected to having other people’s rats kicked into his berth.

On such occasions it is of no use to complain to the authorities. When I met the captain on deck I related to him what had happened, and protested vigorously against passengers being exposed to such annoyances. After listening to me patiently, he coolly replied, entirely overlooking my protestations, “Ah! I did better than that this morning; I allowed my rat to get under the blanket, and then smothered him!”

Railways and steamboats, even when their arrangements leave much to be desired, invariably effect a salutary revolution in hotel accommodation; but this revolution is of necessity gradual. Foreign hotel keepers must immigrate and give the example; suitable houses must be built; servants must be properly trained; and, above all, the native travellers must learn the usages of civilised society. In Russia this revolution is in progress, but still far from being complete. The cities where foreigners most do congregate—St. Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa—already possess hotels that will bear comparison with those of Western Europe, and some of the more important provincial towns can offer very respectable accommodation; but there is still much to be done before the West-European can travel with comfort even on the principal routes. Cleanliness, the first and most essential element of comfort, as we understand the term, is