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978-1-108-04821-7 - On Sledge and Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers

Kate Marsden

Excerpt

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ON SLEDGE AND HORSEBACK
TO THE
OUTCAST SIBERIAN LEPERS.



CHAPTER I.

CLEARING THE WAY.

The writer's object—Kindness of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Russia—The herb, reputed to arrest the progress of leprosy—A life-mission—Christ's lepers—"No remedy"—Efforts to relieve the sufferings of lepers—"Shoot them!"—The claims of religion and humanity—Lepers in the East—What people think—Arrival in Moscow—The "Golden-Headed City"—Prince Dolgoroukow—Journeys to St. Petersburg, and the gift of the Empress—Work in Moscow—Noble-minded Russians—Newspaper exaggerations—Kindness from high and low—Misunderstood—Taken for a spy—Fast friends—Clouds clear away—"A pleasure trip"—My outfit—Mounting the sledge—Off.

It is with devout thankfulness to Almighty God that, after more than twelve months' travel, and almost constant exposure to perils of many kinds during that period, I am at length permitted to send forth this book. I seek not sympathy for hardship and pain,

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voluntarily undergone, or praise for any work partly accomplished. It is my earnest desire that all sympathy aroused may be directed to the suffering lepers, and not to me, and all praise to Him who has enabled a feeble woman to set her hand to a work which was waiting to be done. Had I consulted merely my own feelings, these pages would have contained only a simple record of the condition and wants of the lepers, and what is now being attempted to alleviate their misery. But I knew the particulars of the inconveniences, dangers, and exciting incidents, which have been, as it were, the inseparable companions of my travels, would add largely to the general interest of the book, and would therefore increase its sale. Let every purchaser remember that he is doing something, though only a trifle, to help the least cared-for members of the human race.

I desire, also, to acknowledge my great indebtedness to Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Russia, without whose most prompt, valuable, and kind assistance it would have been utterly impossible either to carry on or to initiate this mission to the lepers of Siberia. Her Majesty's letter instructed all Government officials in the places I proposed to visit to give me every possible assistance. No royal lady could have entered with more readiness and sympathy into the philanthropic proposals submitted to Her Majesty.

The Empress confirmed the report which I had heard

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both in Constantinople and Tiflis of the existence of a herb which was said to alleviate the sufferings caused by leprosy, and, in some cases, to remove the disease. I was also told that the herb was to be found in the far-off Yakutsk province of Siberia, where there were many lepers; but, being so jealously kept a secret by the natives, no one who wished to make experiments with it from mercenary motives could hope to obtain any information. But would the natives disclose the secret to one who wished only to benefit lepers throughout the Russian Empire, and wherever they existed in various parts of the world? Could they be persuaded to reveal all they knew to a woman who came to them for the sake of humanity, and on behalf of Christ? Some doctors, so I understood, had not cared to risk health and life, and others had neither the time nor the money to spend months and perhaps years in investigating the matter, visiting the lepers in isolated regions, and testing the properties of the herb in a systematic way.

My first acquaintance with the ravages of the frightful disease arose during the Russo-Turkish war. Since then, except during the period when I took many backward steps and turned away from Christ—a memory ever fraught with the keenest regret—the main subject of my thoughts has been the wants of the lepers and how to relieve them. The emotions aroused by the sight of two poor, mutilated, and

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helpless Bulgarians cannot be fully described. Before this time the conviction had taken hold upon me that my mission in life was to minister to those who received the smallest attention and care of all God's creatures. I had seen and heard of disease and suffering enough amongst the poor of my own country and amongst the victims of war. But they were within close reach, at least, of abundant Christian and philanthropic efforts. But the lepers in the far-off uncivilised regions of the world—who cared for them? What medical attention did they receive? what tender ministrations from the gentle hand of woman soothed their sufferings? Cut off from their fellow-creatures, avoided, despised, and doomed to a living death—surely these, of all afflicted people, ought to become the object of my mission. Debarred from intercourse with others, except with those who suffered in a similar way, deprived of the comforts of civilisation, left without proper nourishment, and outcasts from the consolation of religion, the lepers seemed to me to demand, in a special and unique manner, human aid. They were emphatically Christ's lepers, since so few of Christ's servants, in proportion to the needs of lepers, had, as yet, been able to devote themselves to their relief.

“No remedy—no relief!” A thousand times have those mournful words racked my thoughts and pained my heart. Whilst science, philanthropy and religion were busily engaged in devising means for relieving

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“Shoot Them !”

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pain, curing disease, and consoling the sufferer, could nothing be done for Christ's lepers? Often and often the wish was uppermost in my heart, Would to God that the Healer and Saviour of men were amongst the lepers of to-day, to give the loving command, "I will, be thou clean."

Before long I learned, with much satisfaction, that, in many parts of the world, hospitals were erected, and medical and nursing aid provided for the relief of lepers. But I learned, at the same time, that in other parts they were shamefully neglected, and abandoned by the rest of the community in which they had dwelt. With many conflicting testimonies before me, I determined to see for myself the true state of matters, taking no report at second-hand.

My desire to set out on this investigation was intensified on hearing from some pessimistic and inhuman quarters that the best remedy for such an incurable and loathsome malady was—*murder*. "Shoot them—poison them—anything to put them out of their misery!" My blood recoiled at such a "method," as, indeed, would be the case with anyone possessing the true love of humanity; and I firmly resolved to use every means in my power, with Divine assistance, to discover a remedy, and, if such efforts failed, to devise efficient methods for alleviating the miseries which accompanied the disease, and for bringing all lepers under the humane as well as the

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religious influence of the servants of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before proceeding to Siberia to discover the herb, and endeavour to bring its remedial qualities within the reach of all lepers throughout the world, I proposed to visit the East, and acquaint myself with the condition of the lepers in that quarter.

At Jerusalem, although many of the lepers receive the best attention that medical skill and nursing aid can contrive, I saw enough misery to strengthen my resolution. At Constantinople the scene of horror appalled me, and I longed, with a fervency that cannot be described, for the swift help of Heaven and of men in my mission of relief. I may be called an enthusiast, or a woman who bids high for the world's applause. I care not what I am called, or what I am thought of, so long as the goal of my ambition be reached, or so long as I may see before I die that the work commenced, though faultily, is on its way to completion.

Travelling across the Black Sea and the Caucasus from Constantinople, I arrived at Moscow in November 1890. Any one who has been travelling through a strange country for two or three days and nights without stopping, and ignorant of the language of the natives, will easily understand my feelings of relief when I was at last told that the next station was Moscow, especially if my reader is tall, and has

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experienced that awkward position of being cramped for a long time in a railway carriage.

The train stopped ; and having collected my many wraps, I got out, and at once confronted a true Moscovite winter, which my English clothing, notwithstanding the above-mentioned rugs, was ill-fitted to face. Once in the sledge and on my way to the hotel, I almost forgot the intense cold in my eagerness to notice everything I passed. The number of churches especially attracted me as I drove through the quaint narrow streets, uphill and down. The sledge gliding along noiselessly over the snow, and the horses not having bells, the driver has to shout to warn the people to get out of the way. In a thickly-populated place like Moscow, it needs a great amount of care to avoid being run over, especially as most people have very high fur collars which reach far above their ears, so that they are almost deaf to everything.

Moscow is rightly called the "golden-headed city," owing to the number of golden domes ornamenting her churches, though some are painted blue and others green. Some of the domes, I was told, are covered with thin sheets of real gold, the rest of the church being painted white, picked out with lavender. All these different colours present a very brilliant and beautiful appearance, particularly when the sun shines upon them.

My first step was to go the Governor, Prince Dolgoroukow, who represents His Imperial Majesty the

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Czar. The etiquette at such audiences is to appear in full day dress. Happily, I had my nurse's uniform with me, which suits all occasions. So I brushed it up, and, with a clean pair of white strings to my somewhat worn bonnet, I concluded my toilette, and finally set out, not without a feeling of nervousness, which unfortunately I can seldom shake off.

Arriving at the palace, I was soon ushered into the presence of the Prince, who, by his kind manner and gentle voice, at once banished every uncomfortable feeling. "What can I do for you?" he asked. Then I told him about my mission, asking his permission to visit the hospitals of the city, and any lepers to be found in it. His kind face took a still kinder expression as he drew closer, and questioned me about my proposed work, seeming rather bewildered that any woman should attempt it. He then summoned the Inspector of Hospitals, and gave orders to show me every place I might wish to see. As I rose to depart he presented me with his beautifully-bound book on Moscow, a gift which I then took as a great favour, but now, since the kind Prince has passed away, I treasure as a loving remembrance of one who, though advanced in age, readily exerted himself on behalf of the poor, suffering lepers.

The next day I began to work in earnest, calling upon everyone I could think of who might help in the work. At first all went well; but, before long, difficulties

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began to crop up. Twice I went to St. Petersburg, a journey which takes twelve hours. The kindness and assistance so willingly bestowed by Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress, has been acknowledged; but I have not yet mentioned that Her Imperial Majesty sent me a thousand roubles (about £100) to help forward the mission. The Countess Alexandrine Tolstoi, whose warm and motherly reception I shall never forget, also did everything in her power to further my plans. There were many others, too, who seconded my efforts.

Let those who trust to exaggerated and unfavourable newspaper reports, and are under the delusion that little good can come out of Russia, bear in mind that there are numbers of noble men and women in the country always ready to stretch out the hand of fellowship to anyone coming in the Master's name to help His sick and suffering ones. Let such persons pause before judging a whole nation by mere hearsay accounts. When we think of the enormous extent of the Russian territory, of the different races inhabiting it, each having a separate language, and some of them not knowing Russian at all—a fact which in itself is a serious obstacle in the progress of civilisation—then the strong opinions formed concerning deficiencies, evils, and abuses must be modified by a spirit of forbearance and justice. During a personal experience of, altogether, two years I have had many opportunities of studying the Russian people, especially as I have mixed in almost all classes

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of society ; and I most gladly state that, with but very few exceptions, high and low have treated me with never-failing kindness and courtesy. Nay, more, some of the highest have opened a loving mother's arms to me when in trouble ; and my rough soldier's tender care all through my journey will be an ever-grateful and cherished memory.

My work in Moscow in arousing interest and collecting funds was beset with difficulties. I fully stated my plans—namely, to find the herb. But, in spite of my plainness of speech (unfortunately, I could not speak a word of the Russian tongue), my motives were misconstrued, and all kinds of rumours were set afloat. Because I stayed at an hotel, some people became suspicious, and looked at me askance. On arriving in Moscow, many of the English residents spontaneously opened their doors to me, and seemed to take a great interest in my work. But, one day, an article appeared in a London journal containing a reference to me, and written by a well-meaning but unwise friend ; and then, laughable as it may seem, I was suspected of being a political spy. It was no laughing matter, however, to me, for friends began to keep aloof, and I became uncomfortably conscious of being decidedly under a cloud. It was not pleasant either to drive about in a little open sledge in a temperature about 20° below zero (Fahrenheit), the wind and snow driving full in one's face, with clothes (except