

THE VANISHED POMPS OF YESTERDAY

BEING

Some Random Reminiscences of a British Diplomat

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

MCMXIX

CHAPTER IV

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THE Winter Palace drags its lengthy, uninteresting façade for some five hundred feet along the quays of the Neva. It presents a mere wearisome iteration of the same architectural features repeated again and again, and any effect it might produce is marred by the hideous shade of that crude red, called by the Russians “raspberry colour,” with which it is daubed, and for which they have so misplaced an affection.

The interior of the Winter Palace was burned out in 1837, and only a few of the original State rooms survive. These surviving rooms are the only ones of any artistic interest, as the other innumerable and stupendous halls were all reconstructed during the “period of bad taste,” and

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vicarious yet untiring benefactor of a whole countryside.

On one of our shooting expeditions a curious incident occurred. Lord Dufferin had taken a long shot at a bear, and had wounded without killing him. For some reason, the animal stopped, and climbed to the top of a high fir tree. Lord Dufferin approached, fired again, and the bear dropped dead to the ground. It is but seldom that one sees a dead bear fall from the top of a tree. I witnessed an equally strange sporting incident once in India. It was just over the borders of Assam, and we were returning to camp on elephants, after a day's big game shooting. As we approached a hollow clothed with thick jungle, the elephants all commenced trumpeting. Knowing how wonderfully keen the elephant's sense of smell is, that told us that some beast lay concealed in the hollow. Thinking it would prove to be a bear, I took up my favourite smooth-bore charged with leaden bullets, when with a great crashing and rending of boughs the jungle parted, and a galloping rhinoceros charged out, his head well down, making straight for the elephant that was carrying a nephew of mine. My nephew had just time to snatch up a heavy 4-bore elephant rifle. He fired, and by an extraordinary piece of luck succeeded in hitting the huge beast in his one vulnerable spot, just behind the shoulder. The rhinoceros rolled right over like a shot rabbit and lay stone dead. It was a thousand to one

SOME RANDOM REMINISCENCES

chance, and if I live to a hundred I shall never see anything of the sort again. It was also very fortunate, for had he missed his shot, nothing on earth could have saved my nephew's life.

We found that the most acceptable presents in the villages were packets of sugar and tins of sardines. Sugar is costly and difficult to procure in Russian villages. The usual way of employing it, when friends are gathered round the table of some "isba" with the samovar in the middle and steaming glasses of tea before each guest, is for No. 1 to take a piece of sugar, place it between his teeth, and then suck his tea through it. No. 1 quickly passes the piece of sugar to his neighbour, who uses it in the same way, and transfers it to the next person, and so on, till the sugar is all dissolved. This method of using sugar, though doubtless economical, always struck me as being of dubious cleanliness. A gift of a pound of lump sugar was always welcomed with grateful thanks. Sardines were even more acceptable, as they could be eaten in Lent. The grown-ups devoured the fish, lifting them out of the tin with their fingers ; and the children were given the oil to smear on their bread, in place of forbidden butter.

After days in the keen fresh air, and in the limitless expanse of forest and snow, life in Petrograd seemed terribly artificial. I used to marvel that my cultured, omniscient, polyglot friends were fellow-countrymen of the bearded,