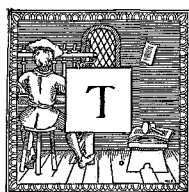




THE CZAR'S BIRTHDAY BOOKS

BY GARDNER TEALL



THE Czar is a lover of books. Somehow one is inclined to think of the autocrat of the north-land as anything but that, as a discourager, perhaps, of anything in print. Indeed we have more or less of a notion that books are taboo in Russia, an impression arising from the harassing tales that the press circulates of imperial censorship, which, if there is little freedom in some literary directions, does not mean that there is not a great deal in others. At any rate, because we have imagined Russian literature beyond its Tolstoys or its Turgenieffs *in limbo* we have hardly shown it enough interest to tempt the Russian bookseller to send his wares over here. Yet every visitor to St. Petersburg or to Moscow is struck with the aspect of the Russian bookshops, surprised with the typographical perfection of the works from the Russian

presses. Much of this *renaissance* (though *naissance* would be the better word here) is directly due to the encouragement the present Czar and the Czar Alexander III before him have given the graphic arts. The complacent excellence of modern German typography and of the best work in colour of the Frenchmen—Gerlach in Germany, Plon in Paris, for instance—may well be the despair of other makers of books, but the writer does not believe any contemporary printer or publisher has surpassed the excellence of some of the works of the Russians of to-day, notably the books that have suggested this article—the series of *skazki*, or folk-tales, illustrated by Ivan Jakowlewitsch Bilibin of Moscow and published in St. Petersburg—though European collectors have greedily gobbled them up, knowing, perhaps, something of their story.

When the Czarina Alexandra Feodorovna had presented six little grand-



Сестрица Алёнушка и Братецъ Иванушка.

Идутъ двое сиротокъ, сестрица Алёнушка съ братцемъ Иванушкой, по дальнему пути, по широкому полю, а жаръ-то, жаръ ихъ донимаетъ.

Шли-шли-шли... солнце высоко, захотѣлось Иванушкѣ пить: „Сестрица Алёнушка, я пить хочу“. — „Подожди, братецъ, дойдемъ до колодца“. Колодецъ далеко, а жаръ донимаетъ, потъ выступаетъ. Идутъ и видятъ прудъ, а около пруда пасется стадо коровъ. — „Я хочу пить“, говоритъ Иванушка. — „Не пей, братецъ! а то будешь теленочкомъ“, говоритъ Алёнушка. Онъ послушался, и пошли они дальше; шли-шли и видятъ рѣку, а около



THE WITCH OF THE FOREST

duchesses to an ungrateful nation the Czar had come to give up hoping for an heir to the throne. Contrary to popular belief an emperor may have a strong interest in his family even if it has not reached political perfection, therefore the Czar set about to find for little Olga, who was eight, little Tatiana, who was six, little Maria, who was four, and little Anastasia, who was two, a good old-fashioned nurse of the sort Maria Feodorovna, his Danish mother, had provided for the imperial régime of his own childhood. The Czar had never forgotten the delightful stories this old Russian woman used to tell, folk-tales that teemed with all the mystery of the north country. He and his brothers had keener ears for them than for the stupid history of their tutors. And there were many wordy combats between the nursery-mother (whose course was approved by Maria Feodorovna) and the gentlemen assigned to the more practical part of the education of the imperial children (gentlemen whose course was upheld by the Czar Alexander).

But even in Russia times change. There was the Russian nurse, but to please the Czarina she jumbled her Russian stories with those of the Brothers Grimm, and the French governess had only little songs like *Gentil Coq'licot* or something as terrifying like *Le Roi Dagobert* at her command, so at last the Czar declared that four little grand-duchesses should not be cheated out of the joys a czarovitch and the little grand-dukes had derived from the splendid imaginative fairy-tales the Russian people tell among themselves. So the Czar himself started in for story-telling, much to the delight of the little women who had disappointed the Russian Empire. There came, however, a time when affairs of state kept His Majesty away from the nursery, much to the distress of the little grand-duchesses. So the Czar hit upon another scheme. If the Russian palace-nurse would mix up the adventures of

Baba Yaga with those of Gretel's witch, and if the French lady had only Parisian ditties at her tongue's end, at least both of them could read aloud. Therefore the Czar decided that some one must be found who could make a book of the old folk-tales just as he had heard them first. He would have each tale illuminated in beautiful legible characters of Russian text, and the illustrations should be in water-colour and should exactly fit the spirit of the stories. It happened that a young Russian illustrator, Bilibin, had chanced to do some things that had attracted the attention of the Russian art-critics, although they were unknown beyond St. Petersburg and Moscow. Even now Bilibin is but thirty-five, so the compliment of being chosen by the Czar to undertake the volumes for the library of the imperial nursery was no insignificant compliment. The stories chosen were "The Frog Prince" (which is quite different from the German tale of the same title), "The Beautiful Vassilissa," "The Flame Bird," "King Frost," "Sweet Dreams," "The Witch of the Forest" and "Ivan Czarovitch" (which latter title, by the way, his famous master, Ilja Repin, had illustrated years before in quite another manner).

These illustrations were not completed all at once, but the books were finally finished for birthday gifts to the little grand-duchesses. The Czar and the Czarina were so pleased with Bilibin's success that it was decided other children should be given an opportunity to share in their treasure.

Thus it happened that the Czar commanded one of the foremost Russian publishers to undertake the reproduction in printed form of Bilibin's work. The text was put into type forthwith, and when the publisher protested that the illustrations could not be produced except at a prohibitive cost the Czar opened his private purse and bore the publication expense himself.

NINE BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

COLONEL ROOSEVELT'S "GAME TRAILS"*

This is the best of the East African books, because it gives a coherent picture of the country and what goes on therein. That is what we like. There is nothing more interesting to the average wide-awake world-citizen of whatever nationality than to hear plainly how the other fellow does it. To hear plainly means that small details must be told in the language of the listener. The statement that the veldt is covered with kopjes from which dongas radiate in several directions is undoubtedly an excellent topographical description, but much of that sort of thing borders on the soporific. But if you tell me that a plain with a lot of little hills scattered around on it has dry washes cut out like the western banancas, then I am interested, for I have seen something of that kind at home. And if, further, you proceed to point out clearly that said plains are covered with herds of game like cattle; and that said hills are populated with rock antelope; and that the ravines with the patches of stuff like sage brush in them are quite apt to conceal lions instead of coyotes or jack rabbits, then you have me excited. If, lastly, you will only refrain from saying spring-bok and dricker and klip-springer and such until I have had time to get a trifle acquainted, then I will follow you to the end—and be sorry the end has arrived!

The ultra-sophisticated pose is here even less defensible than elsewhere. The writer of books—except he be a writer of technical books—must for his work's salvation get away from the idea that he is writing for his fellow-experts. This is especially true of shooting books. As a usual thing the sportsman is a modest fellow. When he tells how the enraged pogsnyffle bit off his left ear he abridges the thing to its dry elements for fear the other sportsmen who read his book will think him cocky and trying to show off. As a result, only sportsmen get any sense

of reality from the incident. The great public gather only the rather vague idea that you do not catch pogsnyffles with a butterfly net. This is not right. Were that sportsman playing fair he would justify the dollars *net* he demands for his book. In the first place, we want to know what is the pogsnyffle and where does he dwell; what are his habits, and does he enjoy dust; how is he hunted, and is he unkind by disposition or only by prodding; what in particular did he do on this occasion, and *exactly* how did the sportsman feel and act; what rifle was used, how far were the shots, and what effect did the bullets have; above all, what did the pogsnyffle do with the ear after he *did* bite it off?

That is exactly what we do not get from most African books; and what we do get from Mr. Roosevelt. The usual screed from that country consists mostly in fairly monotonous reiterations of exciting shooting. A friend of mine parodies it as follows:

After picking up his liver and replacing it in his abdominal cavity, the cowardly gun-bearer, instead of remaining to distract the rhinoceros's attention, climbed a tree and hung there, groaning. On the following day, by way of example, I had him stuck full of thorns dipped in acid.

From it all one gets only the impression of hot days, some dust, thorn trees, two distant mountains, and swarms of beasts. In other words, the writer, quite naturally, stopped short at the first and stupendous fact of the Game.*

But Mr. Roosevelt does get beyond it. He is too broad in his sympathies to be stricken blind even by so vivid a flash of the unusual as that. The physical lay of the country; the many tribes of negroes, as human beings, not "tribes" or "natives" merely; the little industrial activities; and above all the feeling for the picturesque little things that give his narrative

*I am, of course, omitting mention of such encyclopedic works as those of Sir Harry Johnston. But they are ethnological and administrative; and, like the others, they give no picture of the living country.

*African Game Trails. By Theodore Roosevelt. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.