

# EXPLORING RUSSIA\*

BY ABRAHAM YARMOLINSKY

## MISINTERPRETING A NATION

DOSTOYEVSKY opens one of his curious political essays by declaring that to the outsider Russia is far less known than the moon, and that sooner will the West discover the elixir of life than gain a true insight into the nature of the Russian idea and the Russian character. He accounts for this appalling lack of knowledge and understanding partly by the puzzling fact that the people that invented powder and numbered the stars turn into hopeless numbskulls as soon as they are confronted by Russia and her problems.

The essay was written in the early sixties of the last century, presumably about the time when in England, according to Gilbert K. Chesterton's testimony, tallow candles were commonly held to be a favourite article of the Russian diet. It would be futile to deny that for the last fifty years, in the course of which the West discovered Russian art, mat-

ters have considerably changed, and that the stupendous Russian enigma is fast losing its cryptic character, especially since, in our own days, the Russian multitudes have broken their immemorial silence. Nevertheless, one cannot help recalling Dostoyevsky's words as one watches some of the recent attempts to solve the riddle of the Russian Sphinx for the benefit of the Anglo-Saxon world.

Here is, for instance, Stephen Graham, the most notorious of these *Cedipuses*. A writer of no mean abilities and apparently a man of wide culture, Mr. Graham has had ample opportunities to study Russia; he resided in the country and is familiar with the language of the people; he has enough sympathy with the Russian character and to spare. In fact, his writings actually overflow with love—the ecstatic and verbose variety of it—for Russia. Nevertheless, Mr. Graham's books, while not devoid of

\* *The Way of Martha and the Way of Mary*. By Stephen Graham. New York: The Macmillan Company.

*Russia in 1916*. By Stephen Graham. New York: The Macmillan Company.

*The Russians: An Interpretation*. By Richardson Wright. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company.

*Russian Court Memoirs, 1914-1916*. With some accounts of court, social and political life in Petrograd before and since the war. By a Russian. With thirty-two illustrations. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

*Russian Memoirs*. By Madame Olga Novikoff, "O. L." With an introduction by Stephen Graham and fifteen illustrations. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

*Russia of Yesterday and To-morrow*. By Baroness Souiny. Illustrated with photographs. New York: The Century Company.

*The Russian Revolution*. By Isaak Don Levine. With portraits. New York and London: Harner and Brothers.

*The Rebirth of Russia*. By Isaac F. Marcossou. New York: John Lane and Company.

*The Shield*. Edited by Maxim Gorky, Leonid Andreyev and Fyodor Sologub. With a foreword by William English Walling. Translated from the Russian by A. Yarmolinsky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

*The Romance of the Romanoffs*. By Joseph McCabe. With sixteen full-page illustrations. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

*Plays*, by Alexander Ostrovsky. A translation from the Russian, edited by George Rapall Noyes. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

*Who Can Be Happy and Free in Russia?* By Nicholas Nekrassov. Translated by Juliet M. Soskice. With an introduction by Dr. David Soskice. Oxford University Press.

*Russian Poets and Poems*, "Classics" and "Moderns." With an introduction on Russian versification. By Mme. N. Jarintzov. With a preface by Jane Harrison. Vol. I, "Classics." New York: Longmans, Green and Company.

*A Family of Noblemen* (The Gentlemen Golovliov). By Mikhail Y. Saltykov (N. Shchedrin). Translated by A. Yarmolinsky. New York: Boni and Liveright, Inc.

some charm and interest, utterly fail to give that true and careful interpretation of Russia for which there is now such an urgent and vital need. Mr. Graham's Russia, as portrayed chiefly in his book *The Way of Martha and the Way of Mary*, is the land of Mary's good part, the visionary nation sitting at the feet of Christ deep in mystic ecstasies, the country whose vital principle is Christianity as it was moulded by the cenobites of the Thebaid and the Byzantine monks. Whether or not we relish this left-over Slavophile dish, we can hardly fail to realise that it is largely a product of Mr. Graham's imagination prompted by mystical velleities and by a rather puerile distaste for modern civilisation. Russia of to-day and of to-morrow has but little in common with Stephen Graham's Utopia. Her path lies elsewhere, and her admirable faith is too broad to fit a Byzantine altar. At no other time was it more apparent that she is, in the words of Georg Brandes, "the womb of new realities and new mysticism."

*The Way of Martha and the Way of Mary* consists of various heterogeneous elements, descriptive and narrative, hanging loosely around the central theme which is "the Russian Idea." The author cannot be denied an eye for colours and a sense for the flavour of Old Russia. But, unfortunately, his ambitions are not confined to the realm of the picturesque and the glamorous. Hence all that maudlin talk about the religion of suffering and the *podvig* and all those amazing generalisations erected with the aplomb of pseudo-knowledge and the magnificent contempt for His Majesty Fact.

Equally inane from the standpoint of factual information is Mr. Graham's latest book, *Russia in 1916*. It is intended to be "a report on the conditions prevailing in the land of our ally." The reader of *Russia in 1916* is initiated into the private affairs of Countess X, is given an account of the visions of a certain Father Yevgeny and is allowed to catch glimpses of gay life at the fash-

ionable resort of Kislovodsk. The volume contains also some material of a more relevant nature, such as chapters on the new Archangel, the cost of living, money, recent publications, and the prospects of peace, the latter being a rather ineffectual attempt at "political elucidation." But the vision of the country on the eve of the great upheaval does not spring from all this medley of notes and impressions. There is neither insight nor foresight in this "little book of the hour."

#### THE LAST MOHICAN

*The Russians: An Interpretation*, by Richardson Wright, is another recent attempt at reading Russia's mind. The work was completed on the very eve of the revolution. Though this writer, too, seems to be after spiritual values and psychological *imponderabilia*, upon the whole he manages to remain well within the field of tangible facts. Unfortunately, Mr. Wright's facts are not always reliable. His work is a fine sample of journalistic omniscience. Those interested in Russian trade possibilities will read, not without profit, the chapters on "The Russian as a Business Man" and on Siberia, "The Russian Land of Promise." There is also a discussion of "The Moujik's Religion" and of the inevitable Dostoyevsky, as well as studies on Russian painting and music. In all these various attempts the author's personal experience plays the rather futile rôle of *la folle du logis*. The book contains also a plea for a Russian-American entente and a discussion of "Russia's manifest destinies" as a world power. It is hardly necessary to add that while expatiating with an air of authority on the remote destinies of Russia, Mr. Wright overlooks the stupendous powers of revolt and reconstruction which were ripening before his very eyes in the vast Slavic cauldron.

Mr. Wright is too much of an American to be earnestly in sympathy with the autocratic régime. On the contrary, *Russian Court Memoirs, 1914-1916*, by a Russian, is the work of a professed monarchist. The anonymous author

undertakes to interpret Russia for the benefit of the British people, by presenting an account of the social and official life in Petrograd during the war. But apart from an historical digression on the "Shadows of the Past" and a lucubration on the Russian national character distinguished, according to the author, by two sacred sentiments—"adoration of God and veneration for the Czar"—the book is little more than a collection of "society notes" bearing upon the private affairs and amusements of "our beloved Emperor" and his *entourage*, intermingled with a good deal of gossip on various political matters. The whole, seasoned with sundry anecdotes of an aggressive insipidity, is conceived in that conventionally mawkish and jejune style, which is one of the earmarks of official literature.

Mme. Olga Novikoff, the author of *Russian Memoirs*, is a more intelligent adherent of "lost causes and impossible loyalties." That much-abused person who is commonly referred to as the future historian will probably consider this lady the last Mohican of Russian monarchism. According to Stephen Graham, who writes an introduction to the book, Mme. Novikoff is "one of the most interesting women in European diplomatic circles." Disraeli nicknamed her the "M. P. for Russia in England." Gladstone learned from her what Russia was, Carlyle was among her friends, and the late W. T. Stead worshipped at her shrine. Referring to her lifelong work for the cause of the Anglo-Russian entente, she writes: "For fifty years I have been wandering in the Wilderness, and now I have been permitted the happiness of entering the Promised Land. At last the gates have been opened. We are now brothers-in-arms." Mme. Novikoff's reminiscences bearing on a wide variety of subjects are not devoid of interest, but her general viewpoint makes the impression of an ideological fossil.

Curious odds and ends of current Russian history will be found in *Russia of Yesterday and To-morrow*, by Baron-

ess Souiny. The author has something interesting to say about the circumstances under which the war began, about the part of Izvolsky and Grand Duke Nicholas, and also about Rasputin, the man of lurid fame. Unfortunately, too much in this bulky volume is merely small talk on various Russian problems, of which the Baroness has but a confused notion. It is a leisurely, chatty, well-meaning but unreliable, woefully incoherent book, revelling in rapid ineptitudes and pompous platitudes. America's eagerness for information on Russia can alone account for its publication in these war times.

#### NEW RUSSIA

Baroness Souiny's book was apparently written in part after the March events. It contains a chapter on the fall of the Romanoff dynasty, as well as numerous rhapsodic references to "the five," that is, to the five leaders of the revolution who on one occasion are spoken of as "the living torch flaming in the ashes of old Russia's hope," but it deals with the great upheaval only incidentally. Of the books on New Russia proper, which have appeared so far, Isaak Don Levine's *The Russian Revolution* is substantially a study on the genesis of the present revolution and a rapid record of its initial steps. The bulk of this little book is devoted to a clear-cut and sober analysis of the socio-political forces which brought about the cataclysm, and of the events which led up to it. Mr. Don Levine perceives in true perspective the rôles the Duma and the Council played in the great drama, and he foresees the dangers which New Russia is facing at present. On the contrary, Mr. Marcossou's book, *The Rebirth of Russia*, is valuable chiefly as a story of the Russian Ides of March, written vividly and effectively on the hot heels of the events by an intelligent eye-witness. Neither book, however, conjures up the vast epic vision of the emancipation, nor does either of them bring out the deeper significance of this revolution, in which, according to Stepniak's forecast, "Russia

will have the greatest facility of showing herself original and of producing something new and purely Slavic." The Carlyle and Taine of the Russian Revolution are yet to come.

The original *Shield*, a symposium on the Jewish question in Russia, by Russian men-of-letters and scientists of non-Jewish birth, appeared quite some time before the fall of the autocracy, as a protest against the persecutions inflicted upon the Jewish people by the government during the first year of this war. The general aspects of the problem are discussed by Gorky, Andreyev and Sologub, while its more technical phases are taken up by men like Count Ivan Tolstoy, the noted economist Bernatzky, and the ex-minister Milyukov. This plea for the abrogation of the Jewish disabilities is a truly remarkable revelation of the spirit and purpose of the best elements of that New Russia which is now in the making. William English Walling writes in his foreword to the book: "If we wish to understand educated Russia, which has brought about the change, we cannot do better than to read and think over what this galaxy of Russian genius that has composed the present volume has written."

*The Romance of the Romanoffs*, by Joseph McCabe, has the advantage of being both timely and of lasting value. "This is not a history of Russia," we read in the preface, "but the history of its autocracy as an episode: of its real origin, its long-drawn brutality, its picturesque corruption, its sordid machinery of government, its selfish determination to keep Russia from the growing light, its terrible final struggle and defeat." Nevertheless, the book is more than the story of a dynasty: it is a vigorous and fairly accurate political history of Russia throughout the ages. Mr. McCabe's fundamental thesis might be formulated in the words which Mme. de Staël applied to the France of 1789, namely, that "liberty was ancient, and despotism new." He takes visible delight in exposing the vices and crimes of Russia's rulers and he revels in exploding time-

hallowed historical reputations, for instance, that of Peter the Great. The outcome is a work which is not exactly fit *ad usum Delphini*. Although this denunciatory and iconoclastic tendency has its drawbacks, particularly in a historical study, it should be welcomed as a wholesome reaction against the complacencies and shams of official Russian historiography.

#### SALTYKOV AND OTHER NEWCOMERS

Until recently translators from the Russian exhibited the tendency to favour with an undue amount of attention the latter-day literary output and to neglect the wealth of literature of the classical period. Turning to the season's translations, one notes with gratification that a goodly portion of them come from the pens of the older masters, whose work has hitherto been eclipsed in the West by the splendours of the triad of Turgenyev, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Should the translators keep up their activities in this direction, the English-reading world will pretty soon be in a position to get a truer and more complete view of Russian literature than that which prevails at present.

*Plays*, by Alexander Ostrovsky, a collection of four dramas, edited by George Rapall Noyes, introduces the American reader to a great playwright whose art has been the delight of the Russian theatregoer for upward of sixty years now. Ostrovsky's vast work is the most national manifestation of the dramatic genius of his race. He created the Russian drama of manners, making it a vehicle for the realistic depiction of the small nobility and, chiefly, of the middle classes with their coarseness and homely virtues. Of his popularity we can judge by the fact that for the period of nineteen years (1853-72) the performance of his plays on the Imperial stage brought the state treasury an income of two million rubles. "Ostrovsky's strength," remarks Mr. Noyes, "lies in a sedate, rather commonplace realism," and it is probable that those whose taste runs to the theatrical productions of our sophisti-

cated and over-refined age will probably find these placid, wholesome dramas rather old-fashioned and somewhat insipid.

Another new Russian classic, now made partly accessible to the English reader, is the poet Nekrassov, born the same year as Dostoyevsky. *Who Is Happy in Russia?* translated by Juliet M. Soskice under the title *Who Can Be Happy and Free in Russia?* is Nekrassov's greatest work. On his deathbed the poet said that it summarised all the knowledge about the Russian people which he had accumulated by lifelong study and that he intended to make it a true and useful book, accessible to the masses. Unfortunately, the vast poem—it contains nearly five thousand verses—remained unfinished, like Gogol's *Dead Souls*, that other epic of Russian life. It is a veritable peasant Odyssey, a monumental work, poignant with the immeasurable woe of the people and strong with the blind strength of Russia herself. In spite of the fact that the English version of the poem does not preserve the peculiar musical and stylistic quality of the original, the translator has made every lover of good literature her debtor.

A fairly good biographical and critical essay on Nekrassov will be found in Mme. N. Jarintzov's *Russian Poets and Poems*, which is a collection of studies on the main Russian poets of the past century, including the folk-poet Koltzov, the pantheist Tyutchev and the quaint Alexey Tolstoy. The studies, judicious but lacking in personal appreciation, are accompanied by poems translated from the Russian, by way of illustration. Mme. Jarintzov is a translator with a "theory." She would keep "the Russian lilt and the atmosphere of phrasing" to the extent of doing violence to the English tongue and creating a new English prosody for the specific purpose of rendering Russian poetry. In spite of her theory, which we cannot take seriously, Mme. Jarintzov succeeds in producing some good translations. Nevertheless, her experiment in rendering Russian

poetry "along new lines" can hardly be considered successful. It appears that theories, however original and tempting, cannot fill the place of genuine taste and creative ability. One notes with surprise that, contrary to the translator's fundamental article of faith, the phrasing and meaning of the original is sometimes sacrificed without any apparent reason. "The Introduction on Russian Versification" contains a number of leisurely remarks on the translation of Russian poetry into English and a rather pedantic discussion of Russian verse technique, which is too elementary for the Russian student and altogether useless for him who is not initiated into the mysteries of Mme. Jarintzov's native tongue.

The most important of the recent newcomers, however, is not the playwright Ostrovsky or the poet Nekrassov, but the prose writer Saltykov, also known under the pseudonym of Shchedrin, whose novel, *A Family of Noblemen*, has just been issued. Saltykov's literary career coincides with the reign of Alexander II. He occupies a place of honour in the history of his country's letters and culture. One of the builders of Russian emancipation, he shaped, to some extent, the moral views of the *intelligentsia*. Like Tolstoy, he belonged to the race of moralists, but, unlike him, he immolated his literary gift on the altar of social service. He hated humanity with that glorious hatred, born of love and fed on pity, which consumes all true satirists, and few wielded the sword of satire with greater skill. At the same time, gifted with truly Balzacian powers of observation and characterisation, he was a faithful chronicler of his times, and his vast *œuvre* forms, in the words of a Russian sociologist, "a critical encyclopedia of Russian life." *A Family of Noblemen* stands out as one of Saltykov's most artistic works, although it is not free from serious defects of composition. The splendours of pure literature are but slightly dimmed in it by the ever-present moral and civic preoccupation. It is impossible to give here



an analysis of this remarkable book, although it well deserves a detailed examination. Suffice it to say that Russia has produced few books of a greater

psychological depth and a more intimate realism. Unless all signs fail, Saltykov has come to stay in English literature.

## PEAK AND VALLEY\*

BY H. W. BOYNTON

WHAT men live for is the great familiar theme not only of the moralist, but of every serious interpreter of human life, whether he be poet or essayist or prose story-teller. The author of *Secret Bread* chooses to lay emphasis upon a different matter: what, he asks, do men live by? What feeds and strengthens them for the long journey toward their goal, whatever that goal may be? It is from this point of view that he tells the life-story of his Cornishman. Ishmael Ruan is the son of an ancient line of Cornish squires whose last representative, Ishmael's father, has let slip the decencies and generosity of his inheritance, and lived like a yokel and a miser. The family estate of Cloom has become for him merely a property to be "exploited" in the meanest spirit; he does as little as possible for the land, and squeezes his

tenants to the last drop. For years before his death he has been living with a country mistress, by whom he has had four children, two girls and two boys. She is about to bear another child when the old man, on his death-bed, takes it into his head to marry her. He does this for the deliberate purpose of legitimising the expected son, and so virtually disinheriting the woman and the elder children, for Cloom will, of course, go to his only son born in wedlock. He orders that the child shall be called Ishmael, since every hand among his kin is sure to be against him; and so the grim jester dies. The mother, who is devoted to her elder children, especially her oldest son, Archelaus, has little affection for Ishmael from the beginning; and Archelaus hates him as an usurper. Ishmael has one efficient champion, however, in the good Parson Boase, who is determined that Cloom shall regain its honours under its new master. Through his insistence the boy is sent to a good school and has the rearing of a gentleman. The land is in his blood, and he returns to Cloom as to his home and the field of his life work. He does, indeed, make over the estate and the neighbourhood; but this is not the story. Ishmael is still at odds with the mother and the older brother. The former may be ignored as an active enemy; the latter has much of the savagery and the stubbornness of the old Squire. He nearly

\* *Secret Bread*. By F. Tennyson Jesse. New York: George H. Doran Company.

*The Three Black Pennys*. By Joseph Hergesheimer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

*The Twilight of the Souls*. By Louis Couperus. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

*Zella Sees Herself*. By E. M. Delafield. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

*Abington Abbey*. By Archibald Marshall. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

*The Tortoise*. By E. F. Benson. New York: George H. Doran Company.

*The Second Fiddle*. By Phyllis Bottome. New York: The Century Company.

*The Blue Aura*. By Elizabeth York Milner. New York: Edward A. Clode.