

RUSSIANS ABROAD

BY N. C. TEFFI

[The author of these sketches, Mlle. N. A. Teffi, is a well-known Russian humorist, famous for her political satire. She is a refugee from Soviet Russia, and now lives in Paris. The first of these sketches, taken from the Paris 'Svobodnyaya Mysl', depicts with bitter irony the fact that under the Imperial régime exiles from Russia strove to return to their native land, while under the Soviet régime refugees from Russia flee their land. The second sketch, taken from the Paris 'Posledniya Novosti,' is a biting satire on the life of some of these refugee groups.]

I

WHAT a strange, what a peculiar lot of people the Russians are! Don't you think so?

What ails them? An utter lack of understanding, or an epidemic of madness?

A marvelously organized country, headed by an all-wise Government, that thinks ceaselessly of the well-being of its subjects, and such peculiar behavior on the part of these subjects!

In former times, when Russia groaned under the oppression of autocracy, it was considered a fearful punishment to be exiled abroad without the right to return to the native land. Such emigrants were considered martyrs. They were spoken of as men and women robbed of their motherland. Their names were uttered in worshipful whispers. Legends were told of their life in strange countries.

And very often, unable to stand any longer the punishment meted out to them, they would disguise themselves, obtain counterfeited passports, and attempt in secret to make their way back to their native land, running the risk of being caught, arrested and again sent into exile. It was hard to get back to Russia. All along the border were stern gendarmes, the 'satraps of the Tsar,' as they were usually termed. They examined the counterfeited passports with utmost care and those whose

deceit was discovered were not permitted to return to Russia.

'We don't want such as you,' the exiles would be told. 'Those we have will be enough for us.'

The better-to-do people would go abroad in the spring to take some cure. While in Germany, they would purchase brochures in which they would be told how much of a fool the Tsar was, and they would read these brochures in their hotel rooms in Berlin, after carefully locking every door. Then, after their cure or their journey was over, they would return to their native land. On the border, at the station of Verzhbolovo, they would gaze with the peculiar joy of homecoming at the ruddy nose of the railroad gendarme, and, stuffing in the lining of their coats the piquant brochures about the 'fool of a Tsar,' together with their contraband cigars, they would hasten back to their old life, however 'evil, unjust, oppressive' it was; however 'crushing to the human personality,' however 'shaming the name of man and citizen.'

I recall one of Herzen's articles, in which he tells of a liberally minded man who was arrested for his liberalism. His wife, when she learned of this, was so grieved that she could not continue to wean her child, and the baby fell ill. Herzen ends his description of these events with the following exclamation:

'May it be cursed, the reign of Nicholas! May it be cursed!'

I do not know why, but, no matter in what frame of mind I may find myself, every time I recall this story, particularly the author's outcry of indignation, I cannot restrain a smile.

Dear Hertzen! You should have lived to see Lenin! He would have shown you things!

So they endured that frightful oppression, flew into fits of indignation, suffered and cursed, and still did not want to leave the country.

And everybody outside of Russia knew that the Russian régime was unbearable and that the Russian people were martyrs.

And now a strange thing happens. Foreign observers go to Russia and on their return say that, although things are not quite — etc., nevertheless everything is arranged very nicely. They have seen well-fed people at Maxim Gorky's parties. They have even found it possible to have polite discussions and arguments with ex-hangmen. In short, things are not nearly as bad as the enemies of Communism try to picture them. Life is possible; not for everybody, of course, but surely for the Russians.

And yet — is it not strange? — the Russians do not want to stay.

In vain does the kindly Soviet Government plug up every exit. The refugees crawl out, like cockroaches out of holes and cracks, — hundreds of them, thousands. They give away their last rubles to bribe the guards, run away at night, in snow and rain, over treacherous ice. They flee with their wives and children, starving, freezing, wandering from their road, constantly risking death. And still they flee, and flee, and flee, across every border, over seas, fields, mountains, through marshes and forests — wherever man can walk, swim, or crawl. They flee and flee.

I think that if the Soviet Govern-

ment allowed freedom of emigration from Russia, the very next day, half of Russia would begin to crawl toward or over the borders.

Strange people, are they not?

What happened when Crimea was being evacuated? Men jumped into the water to swim after the boats that were steaming away. Cripples crawled down to the shore, groaning for aid to get to the boats that remained. Those who were left behind shot themselves, jumped into the water to drown, killed their own relatives. They preferred death to living with the Bolsheviks.

Is it not a very strange phenomenon?

And all these are people who know what Bolshevism is from very intimate experience; not from afar or through a twelve-day journey with Bolshevik interpreters. And the better they know what Bolshevism is, and the longer they remain in contact with it, the more powerful and irresistible their desire to flee wherever possible, — the farther, the better.

What is the reason for all this?

How do the kind friends of new Russia chance to overlook so strange a phenomenon? Why do they make no attempt to learn its causes?

Strange, is it not?

II

I have been told the following story:

A Russian general who lives in exile in Paris came out one day on the Place de la Concorde, looked about in all directions, glanced at the sky, at the square, at the houses, at the stores, at the gay crowd, scratched his nose, and said with profound feeling:

'All this is very good, of course. Very, very good. But what to do? What are we going to do?'

The general's dictum is just by way of introduction. The tale itself is coming. It really hangs therefrom.

Here are we, Russians, living a pecu-

liar life, that does not seem like anything else in the world. We are held together not by a force of mutual attraction, as a planetary system, for example, but, on the contrary, by a force of mutual repulsion.

Every one of us hates all the rest, just as much as all the rest hate him.

'This state of mind has come about as a result of a unique change in the structure of the Russian language. For example, it has become customary to use the word 'thief' with the name of every Russian. We now say:

'Thief-Akimenko, thief-Petrov, thief-Saveliev.'

This word has long since lost its original connotation. It now has the character either of an article, or else of a distinguishing title, similar to the Spanish 'Don.'

Nowadays you can hear conversation like this:

'Last night there was a party at thief-Velsky's. There were several people present: thief-Ivanov, thief-Gusev, thief-Popov. They played bridge and had a very pleasant time.'

Business men converse among themselves in the following manner:

'I advise you to engage thief-Parchenko. He would be most useful to you.'

'But — would n't he abuse my confidence?'

'He? Why, he is as honest a man as ever lived.'

'Perhaps it would be better to take thief-Kusachenko?'

'Oh, no, he will not do at all.'

A newcomer finds this custom very strange.

'But why is he a thief? Who has proved it? Where did he steal anything?'

And he is still more disconcerted by the indifferent answer which he gets to these questions:

'Who knows why and where? They

say that he is a thief, and we let it go at that.'

'But suppose it is not true?'

'Oh, well. Why should n't he be a thief?'

And really, why should n't he?

Thus united by the force of mutual repulsion, the Russians are divided into two classes: those who sell Russia and those who save her.

Those who sell live in great comfort. They go to theatres, dance fox-trots, have Russian cooks, and entertain those who save Russia. And in the midst of all these affairs, they pay rather little attention to their real occupation: if you ask them for how much and on what terms Russia can be bought, they will scarcely be able to give you an intelligent answer.

Those who save are different. They rush about all day long, get caught in the nets of political intrigue, and constantly expose each other.

They are rather kindly inclined toward those who sell, and get money from them for the work of saving. But among themselves, they hate each other bitterly.

'Have you heard what a scoundrel thief-Ovechkin has proven to be? He is selling Tambov.'

'You don't mean it? To whom?'

'Why, to Chile, of course.'

'What?'

'To Chile, I say.'

'But what does Chile want with Tambov?'

'What a question? They must have a base in Russia.'

'But Tambov does not belong to Ovechkin. How can he sell it?'

'I am telling you that Ovechkin is a scoundrel. But he has done something even worse than that. Just think of it, he and thief-Havkin have enticed away our typist with her typewriter, right at the time when we had to support the Ust-Syssolsky Government.'

'Is there such a Government?'

'Well, there was. A Lieutenant-Colonel (I've forgotten his name) declared himself the Government. He held out for a day and a half. If we had supported him in time, the thing would have been done. But what can you do without a typewriter? So the cause of Russia was lost. And all because of that thief-Ovechkin. And have you heard about thief-Korobkin? He has announced himself as the ambassador to Japan.'

'But who has appointed him?'

'Nobody knows. He says that it was the Tiraspol-Sortorensky Government. It is true that the Government existed only about fifteen or twenty minutes, through a misunderstanding. Then it became ashamed of itself and ceased to exist of its own accord. But Korobkin happened to be by at the right moment, and fixed it all in those fifteen minutes.'

'But has he been recognized by anybody?'

'He does n't care. All he wanted was to get the visé. That was why he got himself appointed. Frightful, is n't it? And have you heard the latest news? They say that Bakhmach has been captured.'

'By whom?'

'Nobody knows.'

'And from whom?'

'That is n't known, either. Frightful, is n't it?'

'How do you know all this?'

'From the radio. We have two radio services, the "Sovradio" for Soviet Russia, and the "Ukradio" for Ukraine. Then we have our own service, the "Perevradio" for Europe.'

'And how does Paris regard this?'

'Oh, what does Paris care?'

'But tell me, does anybody understand anything?'

'Hardly. You know even Tiutchev said, "You cannot understand Russia with your brain." And since a human being has no other organ for understanding, you have to give it up. They say that a statesman around here began to understand things with his stomach, but they removed him quickly.'

'So . . .'

Yes. The general looked around on the Place de la Concorde, and said with profound feeling:

'All this is very good, of course. Very, very good. But what to do? What are we going to do?'

And really, what *are* we going to do?

¹ Play on words. *Sovradio* sounds like the Russian word 'to lie'; *ukradio* sounds like the word 'to steal'; *perevradio* sounds like the word meaning to get things mixed up. — TRANSLATOR.

ON 'REYNARD THE FOX'

BY JOHN MASEFIELD

[Mr. Masefield, formerly a member of the staff of the 'Manchester Guardian,' contributes this explanatory criticism upon his most recent long poem, to the centenary edition (May 5) of that newspaper.]

As a man grows older life becomes more interesting but less easy to know, for late in life even the strongest yields to the habit of his compartment. When he cannot range through all society, from the Court to the gutter, a man must go where all society meets, as at the pilgrimage, the festival, or the game. Here in England the game is both a festival and an occasion of pilgrimage. A man wanting to set down a picture of the society of England will find his models at the games.

What are the English games? The man's game is Association football; the woman's game, perhaps, hockey or lacrosse. Golf I regard more as a symptom of a happy marriage than a game. Cricket, which was once widely popular among both sexes, has lost its hold, except among the young. The worst of all these games is that few can play them at a time.

But in the English country, during the autumn, winter, and early spring of each year, the main sport is fox-hunting, which is not, like cricket or football, a game for a few and a spectacle for many, but something in which all who come may take a part, whether rich or poor, mounted or on foot. It is a sport loved and followed by both sexes, all ages, and all classes. At a fox-hunt, and nowhere else in England, except perhaps at a funeral, can you see the whole of the land's society brought together, focussed for the observer, as the Canterbury pilgrims were for Chaucer.

This fact made the subject attractive. The fox-hunt gave an opportunity for a picture or pictures of the members of an English community.

Then to all Englishmen who have lived in a hunting country, hunting is in the blood and the mind is full of it. It is the most beautiful and the most stirring sight to be seen in England. In the ports, as at Falmouth, there are ships, under sail, under way, coming or going, beautiful unspeakably. In the country, especially on the great fields on the lower slopes of the downland, the teams of the ploughmen may be seen bowing forward on a skyline, and this sight can never fail to move one by its majesty of beauty. But in neither of these sights of beauty is there the bright color and swift excitement of the hunt nor the thrill of the horn and the cry of the hounds ringing into the elements of the soul. Something in the hunt wakens memories hidden in the marrow: racial memories, of when one hunted for the tribe; animal memories, perhaps of when one hunted with the pack or was hunted.

Hunting has always been popular here in England. In ancient times it was necessary. Wolves, wild boar, foxes, and deer had to be kept down. To hunt was then the social duty of the mounted man, when he was not engaged in war. It was also the opportunity of all other members of the community to have a good time in the open, with a feast or a new fur at the end to crown the pleasure.