

**TWO MONTHS IN
RUSSIA; JULY-
SEPTEMBER, 1914**

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Two months in Russia; July-September, 1914 by W. Mansell Merry

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W. MANSELL MERRY

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July—September, 1914

BY

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Oxford

B. H. BLACKWELL, BROAD STREET

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FOREWORD.

'NON cuivis contingit adire Corinthum'—so the old Roman poet. Had he lived in these modern days, he might have with equal truth insisted that it is not every one who gets the chance of going to Russia, especially with all expenses paid and the prospect of some five or six weeks' new and interesting holiday-work before him. Such, however, was the fortunate opportunity that befel myself in 1914 in the form of an invitation from the authorities of the English Church at Petrograd to undertake the duties of the Chaplaincy there during the months of July and August. As will appear from a perusal of the pages that follow, my sojourn in the land of the Tsar was destined to involve me in many experiences of a very different character to those I had any reason to anticipate. So far as I am aware, no account has yet been published of the scenes and incidents that marked in Petrograd the early days of the Great War; neither, again, I believe, has anyone written of the diversions and difficulties attendant on an Englishman's attempts to find a way home from Russia after the outbreak of hostilities. It is with the purpose, therefore, of filling this gap, and in the hopes that a plain tale of personal adventure in both these connexions may prove to have a certain interest of its own, that this little chronicle makes its somewhat belated appearance.

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The book consists of selections from a journal kept as carefully as circumstances would from time to time permit, and, as such, presents itself without apology in more or less its original form. Such selections seem to me to serve sufficiently my general object in putting these reminiscences into permanent shape, and, with that end in view, they have been divided into three sections:—

- (1). BEFORE THE WAR; life in Petrograd (July 11—July 22).
- (2). OUTBREAK OF HOSTILITIES; journey to Odessa and back (July 30th—August 22).
- (3). DURING THE WAR; home-coming (September 3—September 9).

I wish to tender my acknowledgments for incidental information to Baedeker's excellent Handbook on 'Russia.'

W. M. M.

OXFORD,

May, 1916.

PART I

Before the War; Life in Petrograd

(July 11—July 22)

TWO MONTHS IN RUSSIA

PART I

BEFORE THE WAR; LIFE IN PETROGRAD

Saturday, July 11th.

A sweltering hot day, but a mere triviality in the way of temperature to what is presently to be endured on the Continent. An early rise finds me at 8.30 at Charing Cross Station, with heavy luggage registered through to Petrograd, and a seat booked in the 9. a.m. boat-train for Dover, where two hours later, in fellowship with a large and miscellaneous Cockney excursion, I board the '*Princesse Clémentine*' en route for Ostend. At 11.25 we are off beneath a blazing sun and on a delightfully calm sea—the commencement of a journey, which, for one, at least, of the party, is to prove itself before its close two months later at Newcastle full of experiences no less interesting than eventful, anxious and trying. How little do I dream on landing at Ostend some three and a half hours later what strange and cruel vicissitudes are shortly to be the lot not only of the gay town itself, but also of that brave and hapless little kingdom of which it is the most famous and fashionable of sea-side resorts! A hurried and quite casual '*visite de douane*'; the services of an enormously fat and perspiring porter; the display to a drowsy uniformed official of much assorted literature in the shape of coupons and tickets and platz-karten—and I am settled in the tiny compartment of the Nord Express, of which by unusual

4 Before the War; Life in Petrograd.

good luck I am to hold solitary and undisputed possession right up to the Russian frontier. At 3.55 (English time) we roll lumberingly out of the huge station. Belgium is not a wildly exciting country to travel through from the picturesque point of view. At least, there is little enough that is scenically attractive in that flat, well-cultivated part of it through which the line runs *viâ* Bruges and Ghent to Brussels, unless one excepts the ancient cities themselves, with their great towers and belfries dominating like light-houses the sea of roofs and chimneys in the midst of which they rear their massive or graceful heads. Indeed, one may truly say that the entire run from the sea-coast through Germany to Wirballen—and after that with very little improvement—is about on the same dead level of tedious and exasperating dulness as that dismal stretch of country familiar to travellers from Calais to Paris. After Brussels and round Liège (of unhappy and heroic memory) it temporarily betters itself, but, once in the Fatherland, excepting at the rarest of intervals, like 'Private James' of the 'Bab Ballads,' 'no characteristic trait has it of any distinctive kind.' Perhaps it is because of this hopeless monotony of things external that one finds oneself so soon making friends on board the train. Before an hour has passed the restaurant-car has become a social centre. Everybody talks to everybody else, and extraordinarily interesting, and, sometimes, ultimately, invaluabley useful, are these chance acquaintances of the 'speise-wagen.' The man who shares my table at the first dinner served is a most charming Scotsman who speaks five languages fluently, and does the journey to Berlin ten times a year; another, who sits just opposite is an American who claims the privilege of playing host because he 'reckoned directly he set eyes on me that I

hailed from New England—and if I didn't, I ought-er!' Next to the solace of this spirit of genial camaraderie comes that of meals, admirable in quality, plentiful in quantity, and capable of indefinite prolongation over 'the walnuts and the wine,' or their more modern equivalent of dessert and cigars. How often in after-days of war-conditions in Russia did I bethink myself regretfully and longingly of this luxury of travel, when the only thing that lay between a hungry man and starvation was a furious dash down a long, soldier-crowded platform into a buffet filled to overflowing with a struggling, ravenous multitude, on the bare chance that while one was buying what food might be available the train would wait long enough to give one time to return safely to one's carriage! Woe betide the man who is still packed in that surging jam of people when the 'treti zvonók' or 'three strokes' clang out on the station gong to notify an instant departure!

Sunday, July 12th.

Another terrifically tropical day. Up at 6.30 a.m., after a night's rest considerably interfered with by the heat and noise and violent motion of the train. Berlin is reached just as an early breakfast is finished, at 7.30; the Friedrichstrasse Station teeming with folk all in their Sunday best, and all, apparently, bent on holiday-making in the country. In the darkness we have passed through Cologne, Düsseldorf and Hanover, so already about a third of our journey's length is covered. One is not allowed much of a sight of the Kaiser's Capital from the railway, but enough is visible to give a very good idea of its fine, imposing buildings and spacious, busy, tree-lined streets. Where are the soldiers? Considering how soon the war of 'frightfulness' is to begin,