

Théophile Gautier

Travels in Russia (Voyage en Russie, 1858-59, 1861)

Published with contemporaneous engravings



View of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow
Mikhail Markianovich Germachev (Russian, 1868-1930)
Artvee

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Translator's Introduction

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was born in Tarbes, in the Hautes-Pyrénées region of south-west France, his family moving to Paris in 1814. He was a friend, at school, of the poet Gérard de Nerval, who introduced him to Victor Hugo. Gautier contributed to various journals, including *La Presse*, throughout his life, which offered opportunities for travel in Spain, Algeria, Italy, Russia, and Egypt. He was a devotee of the ballet, writing a number of scenarios including that of *Giselle*. At the time of the 1848 Revolution, he expressed strong support for the ideals of the second Republic, a support which he maintained for the rest of his life.

A successor to the first wave of Romantic writers, including Chateaubriand and Lamartine, he directed the *Revue de Paris* from 1851 to 1856, worked as a journalist for *La Presse* and *Le Moniteur universel*, and in 1856 became editor of *L'Artiste*, in which he published numerous editorials asserting his doctrine of 'Art for art's sake'. Saint-Beuve secured him critical acclaim; he became chairman of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in 1862, and in 1868 was granted the sinecure of librarian to Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, a cousin of Napoleon III, having been introduced to her salon.

Gautier remained in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and the aftermath of the 1871 Commune, dying of heart disease at the age of sixty-one in 1872.

Though ostensibly a Romantic poet, Gautier may be seen as a forerunner to, or point of reference for, a number of divergent poetic movements including Symbolism and Modernism.

His travels in Russia, in 1858-59, including visits to Saint Petersburg and Moscow, reveal further aspects of the wide influence achieved by French culture evidenced in all Gautier's travel writing, and confirm, once more, his passionate interest in all things artistic. He left for Russia in September 1858, and was there until March 1859, the aim being to publish a work on the *Art Treasures of Ancient and Modern Russia*, illustrated with two hundred heliogravure plates taken from photographs; his companion, the photographer Pierre-Ambroise Richebourg, was to be responsible for these, as instructed by Gautier, who would write the accompanying text. Tsar Alexander II was the patron, and the trip was fully funded by a businessman, Carolus van Raay. Gautier was in St. Petersburg by mid-October 1858, and visited Moscow briefly in early February 1859 before returning to St. Petersburg, and then Paris in late March. Gautier had also agreed, in exchange for six months' leave, to provide the *Moniteur Universel* with a series of articles giving his travel impressions, which provided the basis for *Voyage en Russie*.

He was in Russia again in August and September 1861, with his eldest son Charles-Marie Théophile, known as Toto, and a family friend Olivier Gourjault, a trip which included further visits to St. Petersburg and Moscow, and his visit to Nizhny Novgorod via Tver and the River Volga.

This enhanced translation has been designed to offer maximum compatibility with current search engines. Among other modifications, the proper names of people and places, and the titles given to works of art, have been fully researched, modernised, and expanded; comments in parentheses have been added here and there to provide a reference, or clarify meaning; and minor typographic or factual errors, for example incorrect attributions and dates, in the original text, have been eliminated from this new translation.

Travels in Russia

Part I: Berlin, Hamburg, Schleswig

Chapter 1: Berlin

We have barely left, yet here we are, far from France. I shall say naught of the intermediate space traversed by the nocturnal flight of our Hippogriff. Accept that we are in Deutz on the far side of the Rhine, at the end of the boat-bridge, gazing at the silhouette of Cologne, which the bottles of fragrance (*Eau de Cologne*) produced by Johan-Maria Farina have made familiar to all the world, outlined against the evening splendour. The bell of the Rhine railway sounds, we enter the carriage, and the train slides away, in a cloud of steam.

Tomorrow, at six, I will be in Berlin; yesterday I was still in Paris, at the moment when the street-lights were illuminated. This surprises no one, in this marvellous nineteenth-century of ours, except myself.

The convoy speeds across a vast cultivated plain which the setting sun gilds; soon night comes, and with it sleep. At the widely-separated halts, German voices shout German names that the accent disguises, and prevents me from finding in the guide-book; magnificent stations, monumental buildings, take shape in the shadows, the gaslight glows and disappears.

We have passed Hanover, and Minden; the train rolls on and dawn is breaking.

To the right and left stretch peat-lands, amidst which the morning mists produce most singular mirage-like effects. It seems to us as if the railway-tracks are crossing an immense lake whose waves die, in transparent ripples, at the edge of the embankment. Here and there a few clumps of trees, or a cottage, emerge like islands, and complete the illusion, which it is; a cloud of bluish fog, floating some few feet above the ground and ruffled by the first rays of the sun, produces this aquatic phantasmagoria similar to the Fata Morgana of Sicily (*as seen in the Strait of Messina*).

Our disorientated sense of geography protests in vain against this inland sea which no map of Prussia indicates. Our eyes refuse to admit they were in error, and later, as the sun, mounting higher, dries up the imaginary waters, the presence of a boat is needed to make them admit the reality of a watercourse.

Suddenly, on the left of the road, the trees of a large park gather; Tritons and Nereids appear, wading through a pond; a dome set on a circle of columns arches over vast buildings: it is Potsdam.

Despite the speed of the train, we are allowed to glimpse a sentimental couple, who tread, this morning, a deserted path through the gardens. The lover has here the opportunity to compare his mistress to the dawn, and no doubt he recites to her some sonnet, written on the theme of 'the fair Aurora'.

Not long after we are in Berlin, and a local cab has carried us to the *Hôtel de Russie*.

One of the traveller's greatest pleasures is the first brief journey through an unknown city, which destroys, or realises, the picture of it one has formed in one's mind. Differences in shape, characteristic features, and vagaries of architecture, one's perception of which is never sharper, catch one's eye still innocent of acquired habit.

My idea of Berlin was largely drawn from Ernst Hoffmann's fantastic tales. I had constructed, despite myself, deep in my brain, amidst a cloud of tobacco, a strange and bizarre Berlin, populated by Court Councillors, the Sand Man, the composer Kreisler (*Hoffman's alter ego*), the archivist Lindhurst, and the student Anselme; yet I had before me a city regular in form, grandiose in appearance, with wide streets, vast walks, pompous buildings, half-English half-German in style, marked by the stamp of utmost modernity.

As I passed, I glimpsed the depths of cellars with steps so polished, so slippery, so well-scoured, that the gaze slid into them as it might into an antlion's nest, expecting to discover Hoffmann himself there, with a barrel for a seat, feet crossed on the bowl of his gigantic pipe, in the middle of a chimerical scribble, as depicted in the vignette in the edition of his *Tales* translated by Francois Adolphe Loève-Veimars; but, in truth, those underground shops which the owners were starting to throw open, bore no similarity to those of my imagination.

The local cats, of benign appearance, failed to roll phosphoric eyes like the tomcat *Murr*, and seemed incapable of writing their memoirs, or deciphering a score by Richard Wagner, with their claws.

Nothing is less fantastic than Berlin, and it took all the delirious poetic fancy of the storyteller to house ghosts in a city so defined, so upright, so correct, where the bats of one's hallucinations would find not a single dark corner in which to cling by their claws.

The beautiful monumental houses, which one might readily take for palaces on viewing their columns, pediments, and architraves, are built of brick for the most part, since stone seems rare in Berlin; but brick coated with cement or whitewashed plaster, so as to simulate cut stone; misleading joint-lines indicate fictitious foundations, and the illusion would be complete if, in places, the winter frosts, which have detached the plaster, have not added a reddish tone which makes it appear like baked clay. The need to paint the facades all over, so as to hide the nature of the underlying material, gives them the appearance of large stage-sets depicting architecture, but seen in broad daylight. The protruding parts, the mouldings, cornices, entablatures, and consoles, are of wood, cast-iron or sheet-metal, to which the appropriate form has been given; if one does not look too closely, the effect is satisfactory. All that this splendour lacks, is authenticity.

The palaces that line Regent's Park in London also offer these porticos and columns, these brick cores overlaid with plaster, and a single layer of paint attempting to imitate stone or marble. Why not build openly in brick, whose warm tones, and ingeniously-contrasted patterns,

provide so varied a resource? I have seen, even in Berlin itself, charming houses in this style, possessing the advantage, where the eye is concerned, of being *genuine*. Feigned material always inspires a degree of concern.

The *Hôtel de Russie* is very well-located, and I shall describe the view revealed from its entrance, which will give a fairly good idea of the general character of Berlin.

In the foreground is a quay bordering the River Spree — a few boats with slender masts are slumbering on its dark water — boats on a canal or a river, within the confines of a city, always produce a charming effect.

On the opposite quay, a line of houses extends, some of which have retained the stamp of time; the king's palace occupies the corner. A dome capping an octagonal tower shows, above the roofs its monumental outline, the curved sides granting grace to the rounded cap.

A bridge spans the river, which, due to the sets of white marble statues that adorn it, recalls the Ponte Sant'Angelo in Rome. These groupings, eight in number, if my memory does not deceive me, each consist of two figures, one allegorical and winged representing the homeland or glory, the other realistic and representing a young man guided through several trials to triumph or immortality. These pairings, of a taste entirely classic, in the style of Charles-Antoine Bridan or Pierre Cartellier, do not lack merit, and present excellent nude studies; their bases are decorated with medallions on which the Prussian eagle is happily displayed, half-realistically, half-heraldically; these medallions are a little too rich in decoration, in my opinion, given the simplicity of the bridge, whose central section opens to grant the boats passage.

Further away, through the trees of a promenade or a public garden, the old museum appears, a large building in the Greek style with Doric order columns, highlighted against a painted background. At its corners, horses of bronze held by squires, are silhouetted, on high, against the sky.

Behind, taking a sidelong view, one can see the triangular pediment of the new museum.

A church modelled on Agrippa's Pantheon fills the space to the right; all this offers a somewhat grandiose prospect worthy of a capital city.

On crossing the bridge, one encounters the blackened façade of the castle, fronted by a terrace with balustrades; the sculptures over the main doorway are done in the old, exaggerated German rococo taste, with flowery, luxuriant, and bizarre ornamentation surrounding them, like valances round a coat of arms, which I have previously admired when viewing the palace at Dresden; this kind of wildness of manner has its charms, and entertains eyes like mine satiated with masterpieces. There is invention here, caprice, originality, and though I may pass for a man with questionable taste, I prefer such exuberance to the coldness of Greek pastiche which offers more erudition than pleasure where modern buildings are concerned.

On each side of the door, large bronze horses, in the style of those of the Fountain of Monte Cavallo in Rome, their bridles gripped by naked squires, are pawing the ground.

I visited the castle apartments, which are beautiful and rich, but offer little of artistic interest except their old ceilings, carved, over-decorated, covered with cherubs, chicory-flowers, and

rocailles, in the most curious style. In the concert chamber there is a musicians' platform, wildly sculptured, all silvered to charming effect. No lack of wealth was employed in its decorations, relying on classic gold lending itself to other colour combinations. The chapel, whose dome projects above the palace roofs, would please a Protestant. It is bright, well-organised, comfortable, and rationally decorated; but on one who has visited the Catholic churches of Spain, Italy, France and Belgium, it failed to produce much of an impression: one thing surprised me, which was seeing portraits of Philip Melanchthon and Théodore de Bèze, painted on a gold background; nothing is more natural, however.

Let us cross the square and view the museum. Let us admire, in passing, an immense basin of porphyry set on cubic blocks of the same material, in front of the staircase which leads to the portico, painted by various hands, under the direction of the famous Peter von Cornelius.

The paintings form a wide frieze, each of the ends of which extends round a side wall of the portico, and which is interrupted in the centre to grant access to the museum.

The left-hand section displays a whole epic poem of mythological cosmogony, treated with the philosophy and science that the Germans bring to these kinds of composition. The right part, purely anthropological, represents the birth, development, and further evolution of humanity.

If I were to describe in detail these two immense frescoes, you would certainly be charmed by the ingenious invention, profound knowledge, and critical sagacity shown by the artists involved; such a work might be worthy of the symbolism of the scholar Georg Friedrich Creuzer. The mysteries of our ancient origins are penetrated there and science proclaims its latest word. If again I showed them to you in one of those beautiful German engravings, the main features highlighted with delicate shadows, with a clean and precise line like that of Albrecht Durer, and with a pale harmony pleasing to the eye, you would admire the order of a composition so artfully balanced, its groupings happily linked to one another, the ingenious episodes, the reasoned choice of attributes, the significance of all; you might even find a certain grandeur of style, masterful poses, beautiful folds of drapery, proud attitudes, characteristic types, daring Michelangelo-style musculature, and a certain noble Germanic wildness well-worth savouring. You would be struck by the penchant for grandeur, the broad concepts, the development of ideas which our French painters generally lack, and might almost, as regards Cornelius, share the German opinion of his status; yet in front of the work itself one's impression is completely different.

We know that the art of fresco, even when practised by the Italian masters, so skilful in their technique, lacks the seduction of oil-painting. One's eyes need to grow accustomed to the abrupt, matte tones, so as to untangle the beauties of fresco-work. Many people, who fail to articulate this, since nothing is rarer these days than having the courage of one's feelings or opinions, find the frescoes of the Vatican and the Sistine unappealing; the mighty names of Michelangelo and Raphael impose on them only silence, and they murmur a few vague expressions of enthusiasm, while they are in genuine ecstasy, at another time, in front of a *Madeleine* by Guido Reni, or a *Virgin* by Carlo Dolci. We must therefore make large allowances for the unsatisfying appearance of fresco-work in what I describe, but here the execution is really too repellent: if the mind is satisfied by it, the eye suffers. Painting, all the

plastic arts, can only achieve their aim through shape and colour. It is not enough to think, one has to execute. The most beautiful intent needs to be translated by a skilful brush, and if, in large undertakings of this kind, we may readily admit the simplification of detail; the absence of trompe-l'oeil; neutral, abstract and, so to speak, historic colouring; we would still wish to be spared harsh, sour tones, screamingly loud and painful discordances, clumsiness, gracelessness, and a heaviness of touch. Whatever respect we owe to the idea, the primary attribute of a painting is to be painterly, while so mundane an execution as this, is truly a veil between the artist's concept and the viewer.

The only representative in France of this philosophical art, is Paul Chenavard, the creator of the cartoons intended for the decoration of the Pantheon; a gigantic labour that the restoration of the church as a place of worship has rendered useless, and for which we should find a suitable space, since the study of those beautiful compositions would be profitable for our artists, who have the opposite defect to the Germans, in not generally sinning through an excess of ideas. But Chenavard, being a prudent fellow, never quits the charcoal for the brush. He 'writes' his thoughts, and chooses not to paint them. However, if some day one wished to execute them on the walls of a building, one would not lack for expert practitioners capable of colouring them in a fitting manner.

I have no intention of compiling here an inventory of the Berlin Museum, which is rich in paintings and statues; that would take me well beyond the scope of a mere paragraph or two. One encounters there, more or less well-represented, all the great masters that could honour a royal gallery. But what is most remarkable is the extensive and comprehensive collection of the primitive painters of all countries and all schools, from the Byzantines to the artists who preceded the Renaissance; the old German school, so unknown in France, and yet in many respects so interesting, can be studied there more readily than anywhere else.

A rotunda, there, contains tapestries after drawings by Raphaël, the cartoons of which are in England, at Hampton Court (*'The Acts of the Apostles'; the cartoons are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the tapestries themselves are not extant*).

The staircase of the new museum is decorated with those remarkable frescoes by Wilhelm von Kaulbach, that the art of engraving and the Universal Exhibition introduced to France. I recall the cartoon of *The Tower of Babel*, and we all went to view, at Goupil's gallery, his poetic *Battle of the Huns*, where the struggle begun between corporeal bodies is continued between their souls, above a battlefield covered in corpses. *The Destruction of Jerusalem* is also well-composed though in too theatrical a style. It looks like a tableau from the end of the fifth act of a play, more so than is appropriate for the seriousness of fresco. *Homer* is the central character of a panel that surveys Hellenic civilization; that composition seems to us the least happy of all. Other unfinished paintings represent significant eras of humanity, the last being well-nigh contemporary, because when a German starts to paint, universal history has to be represented; the great Italian masters needed far less to create masterpieces. But every civilisation has its particular tendencies, and this encyclopaedic style of art is one of the characteristics of our time. It seems that before departing on some new path of destiny, the world feels the need to record a synthesis of its past.

These compositions are separated by arabesques, emblems, allegorical figures relating to the subject, and are surmounted by a frieze, in grisaille, full of ingenious and charming patterns.

Kaulbach searches for the correct tone, and if he fails to find it on every occasion, he at least avoids too unpleasant a dissonance; he employs reflections, transparencies, luminous highlights, flickering touches, and his fresco-work sometimes resembles paintings by Francesco Hayez or Théophile Fragonard. He knits together tones where one broad local tint would suffice; he pierces, with untimely vigour, the wall that he should simply cover; because fresco is a kind of tapestry, and should not disturb the architectural line through depth of perspective — all in all, Kaulbach is more concerned with the execution of his art than the pure thinkers, and his painting, though it concerns humanity, still remains human.

The staircase, of colossal size, is decorated with casts taken from the most beautiful of ancient statues; on the walls are displayed the metopes of the Parthenon, the friezes of the Temple of Theseus and, on one of the landings, the Pandroseion with its Caryatids, strong and tranquil in their beauty. All this has a rather grandiose effect.

And what of the inhabitants, you will say? You have only talked about buildings, paintings and statues; Berlin is not a city empty of people. No, doubtless, but I only halted for a day there, and was unable, especially since I was ignorant of the German language, to conduct any profound ethnographic study. Today there is no longer much visible difference between one group of people and another. All have donned the uniform dress of civilisation; no particular colouring, no special fashion in clothing tells you that you are other than at home. Berliners encountered in the street, or on the promenade, are not unique in their description, and the strollers on Unter den Linden exactly resemble those on the Boulevard des Italiens.

The former promenade, lined with magnificent hotels, is planted, as its name suggests, with European lime trees; trees ‘whose leaf has the shape of a heart,’ according to an observation by Heinrich Heine, a feature which has made it a favourite place for lovers, and a focal point for rendezvous.

At its entrance stands that equestrian statue of Frederick the Great, a scale model of which appeared at the Universal Exhibition.

Like the Champs-Élysées in Paris, the promenade leads to a triumphal arch surmounted by a chariot drawn by a bronze quadriga. When one has passed the triumphal arch, one emerges into a park that adequately corresponds to our Bois de Boulogne.



The Tiergarten in Berlin - Daniel Nikolaus Chodowiecki, 1772
Rijksmuseum

At the edge of this park, shaded by large trees, which possess the intense verdancy of Northern vegetation, and are refreshed by a river's meanders, lie gardens full of flowers, in the depths of which one sees lodges and summer-houses. These are neither chalets, cottages, nor villas, but Pompeian houses, with their four-columned porticos and their antique red panels. Greek taste is in great favour in Berlin — on the other hand, the Renaissance style, if fashionable in Paris, seems much disdained there, since I saw few buildings in that style.

Night was falling, and after hastily visiting a zoological garden, whose inhabitants were lying down, with the exception of a dozen macaws and cockatoos squawking on their perches, waddling about, and flourishing their crests, I returned to the hotel to pack my trunk and wait, at the station for the train to Hamburg, which was leaving at ten o'clock; this thwarted my design of attending the Opera to hear *Les Deux Journées*, the opera by Luigi Cherubini, and see Louise Taglioni dance the *Sevillana*.

What! But a single day in Berlin! — In travelling, there are only two ways of proceeding, by means of an instant trial or a long study. I was short of time. Deign to settle, then, for a simple fleeting impression.

Chapter 2: Hamburg

To describe a night journey by rail is no easy thing; one speeds along like an arrow whistling through the clouds; there is no more abstract way of travelling. I traversed provinces, and kingdoms, unaware. From time to time, through the carriage window, a comet appeared which seemed to rush towards the earth, with head lowered and hair outspread; a sudden glow of gaslights dazzled our eyes, filled with the golden dust of slumber; the light of a bluish moon gave a magical aspect to a landscape doubtless quite dull during the daytime. In all conscience, I have little to add, and it would scarcely amuse you were I to transcribe here, from the timetable, the names of the localities past which the train from Berlin to Hamburg carried us.

It is seven in the morning, and here we are in this good Hanseatic city of Hamburg: the city is not yet awake, or at least is rubbing its eyes while stretching its arms — while they prepare my breakfast, I set out at random, as is my habit, without guide or cicerone, chasing the unknown.

The *Hôtel de l'Europe* where I stayed is located on the quay by the River Alster, a basin at least as large as Lac d'Enghien (*north of Paris*), and, like it, populated by tame swans.



View from the Alster Arcade of the City Hall, in Hamburg - Anonymous, 1843
Rijksmuseum

The Alster basin is bordered, on three sides, by magnificent hotels and houses, in the modern style. A dam, topped by trees, and dominated by the silhouette of a windmill, occupies the fourth side; beyond extends a vast lagoon.

On the busiest embankment, a café, painted green and built on stilts, juts out into the water like that café on the Golden Horn in Constantinople where I smoked so many chibouks while watching the sea-birds fly overhead.

At the sight of this quay, this basin, these houses, I experienced an indefinable sensation. I seemed to have known them already. A vague memory emerged from the depths of my memory; had I visited Hamburg without knowing it? Certainly, none of these things seemed

new to me, and yet I was surely seeing them for the first time. Had my mind retained the imprint of some painting, or photograph? Not at all.

While I was searching for a philosophical reason for this reminiscence of the unknown, a recollection of Heinrich Heine's face suddenly presented itself to me, and I understood. Often the great poet had spoken of Hamburg in those eloquent words of which he possesses the secret, and which evoke the reality. In his collection of travel writings, *Reisebilder*, he describes that café, the pond, and the swans, and also the bourgeoisie of Hamburg traversing the path; what a portrait he makes of them! He invokes it all again in his poem *Deutschland*, and all this in so lively a manner, so delicately etched in relief, so evocatively, that direct perception conveys nothing more.

I took a turn around the pool, accompanied, graciously, by a swan as white as snow, and so beautiful as to make one believe that Jupiter, aiming to seduce some innocent Leda from Hamburg, was feigning, the better to disguise himself, to sample the traveller's breadcrumbs.

At the end of the pool, to the right, is a sort of garden or public promenade dominated by an artificial mound like the labyrinth of the Jardin des Plantes. The garden visited I retraced my steps.

In every city there is a beautiful neighbourhood, a new neighbourhood, a wealthy district, a fashionable district, of which the inhabitants are proud, and where servants carry themselves with pride. The streets are wide, drawn with a rule, and intersecting at right angles; pavements of granite, brick, or bitumen border the streets; gas-lamps are everywhere. The houses look like hotels or mansions; their architecture is classically modern, their impeccable whitewash, their varnished doors with gleaming brass fittings, fill the city councillors, and lovers of progress, with joy. All is clean, correct, healthy, full of air and light, and reminiscent of Paris or London — here stands the Stock Exchange! It is superb! As fine as the Bourse in Paris! I liked it well, and what's more, I could smoke there; quite an advantage. Further on are the Palais de Justice, the Bank, etc., etc., built in the familiar style that philistines of every country adore. But hardly what the artist seeks.

Doubtless this mansion must have been expensive to construct, it provides all possible luxury and comfort. One feels that the mollusc within such a shell must be a millionaire; but permit me to prefer that old house with projecting stories, a roof of disordered tiles, and small but characteristic details revealing the existence of previous generations. To be interesting, a city must seem to have been lived in, and human beings to have granted it a soul, so to speak. What makes these magnificent streets so cold and boring is that they have not, as of yet, been imbued with human vitality.

Leaving the new district, I plunged deeper into the maze of older streets, and soon had before me the picturesque and characteristic Hamburg, a real and ancient city, with a medieval charm capable of appealing to a Richard Parkes Bonington, a Eugène Isabey, or a William Wyld.

I walked slowly, pausing at every street corner so as not to lose any of the details, and a walk has rarely amused me more. The houses, with denticulated or scrolled gables jutting out from their overhanging stories, exhibited a row of windows, or rather a single window, with

glass panes separated by carved timbers. At the foot of each house, cellars and basements yawned, with steps that the entrance gates spanned like drawbridges. Wood, brick, half-timbering, stone, slate, sufficiently varied as to satisfy the colourist, covered the scant spaces left free by the windows of the facades. All this was covered by steeply sloping roofs, clad in red or purple tiles, or coated planking, and decorated with dormer windows. These steep roofs function well in northern weather; the rain trickles down them, the snow slides away; they harmonise with the climate, and there is no need to clear them in winter.

It was a Saturday. Hamburg was recovering from the week. Maids, perched on high, were cleaning the windows, and the frames, which opened outwards, projected on either side of the street; soft vapours, gilded by the sun's rays, misted the perspective, and a warm light traversed the tiles above the facades of the houses thus profiled. You could scarcely imagine the rich tones, precious, and strange, that the panes of glass acquired, set as they were one behind the other, amidst the rays of sunlight darting obliquely from the end of the street. The windows of green bubble-glass open on mysterious interiors, akin to those in which Rembrandt liked to house his alchemists, which offer nothing warmer, more transparent, more splendid to the eye beneath the dark glaze of his paintings.

Naturally, when the windows are closed, these unusual effects vanish; but there are still signs and notice-boards, whose lettering and symbols command the attention of the passerby, projecting from walls, and invading the public highway. Strict design would undoubtedly prohibit such unaligned adornments; but all these additions break the lines, entertain the eye, and vary the view with their unexpected angles. Now, it is a sign made of coloured glass, which the sunlight infuses with rubies, topazes and emeralds, advertising an optician's shop or a confectioner's; now, hanging from a locksmith's signature writ large, a lion, holding in one set of claws a compass, and in another a mallet, the emblem of some coopers' guild; elsewhere it is a copper basin above a barber's shop, shiny enough to play the role of the famous helmet of Mambrino (*see Cervantes' 'Don Quixote, XXI'*), or a board on which are painted oysters, crayfish, herrings, soles, and other seafood designating a fishmonger, and so on.

Some houses have ornate doors, with rustic columns, and vermiculated bosses, notched pediments, chubby caryatids, small angels, little cherubs, large chicory-flowers, and rocailles, all coated with a coloured wash probably renewed every year.

There are tobacco-sellers beyond count in Hamburg. Every two or three steps, one sees the figure of a black African slave, naked to the waist, cultivating the precious leaf, or that of a great lord, costumed like a Carnival Turk, smoking a colossal pipe. Cigar boxes form the ornamental motif of the storefront, with their stickers and their more or less misleading inscriptions, arranged in a certain symmetry. A very small quantity of tobacco must remain in Havana, if one believes these displays so rich in noble provenance.

As I mentioned, it was early. Servants, kneeling on the porch steps, or hanging from window-sills, were carrying out the Saturday cleaning. Despite the lively breeze, the sturdy arms they displayed were bare to the shoulder, tanned, reddened, and whipped to that vermilion hue which often surprises in paintings by Rubens and is explained by the bite of the air joined to the action of water on pale flesh; young girls of the petty bourgeoisie, hair loose, décolleté, and with arms exposed, exited to purchase provisions; I shivered in my overcoat on seeing

them so lightly dressed. A strange thing: northern women wear low-cut dresses, and go about with their heads and arms bare, while southern women cover themselves in jackets, wraps, pelisses, and warm clothing.

To heighten my pleasure, the mode of dress which the traveller is obliged to search for today, often without success, appeared openly to my gaze in the streets of Hamburg in the apparel of its milkmaids, somewhat akin to the Tyrolean water-carriers in Venice. The costume consists of a skirt riding the hips, and pleated with very small pleats, held by transverse threads so as not to flare above the waist, and a cloth jacket in green, black, or blue, buttoned at the cuffs. Sometimes the skirt is striped lengthwise, sometimes it bears crosswise a wide strip of plain fabric or velvet. Blue stockings, which a fairly short petticoat reveals, and clogs with wooden soles, complete their attire, which is not lacking in character; while the headgear, is quite singular: over the hair, gathered at the nape of the neck, with a ribbon tied in a bow resembling a big black butterfly, is placed a straw hat in the shape of an inverted hollow plate, cut and shaped to allow for balancing a jug or some other burden there.

Most of these milkmaids are young, and their costume renders almost all of them pretty. They carry their milk pails in a rather original way. From a sort of yoke, splayed about the neck, and hollowed out beneath to fit the shoulders like a mould, which is painted bright red, hang two buckets of the same colour acting as a counterweight on each side of the bearer, who strides along, upright and alert, carrying her double burden. There is no better orthopaedic method that could be employed than this manner of transporting heavy things; these milkmaids have an admirable air of ease, balance, and aplomb.

Continuing my random perambulations, I reached the maritime district of the city, where canals replace streets. The tide was out, and boats lay stranded on the mud, revealing their hulls, and lying at angles to delight the watercolourist.

Soon the water began to rise, and everything began to move — I recommend Hamburg to those artists who seek to walk in the footsteps of Canaletto, Francesco Guardi, and Jules Romain Joyant; they will encounter, at every step, motifs as picturesque and far fresher than those which they look to find in Venice.

The forest of salmon-coloured masts, with its thousand ropes, and tanned sails drying in the sun, the tarred sterns with apple-green trim, the yards and spars blinding the windows, the pulley-systems covered with a roof of planks, shaped like that of a pagoda, the cranes lifting loads from the boats and delivering them to the storehouses, the bridges which open to give passage to ships, the tufts of trees, the gables overlooked here and there by spires or church domes, all bathed in smoke, traversed by the sun's rays, pierced by glittering light, bluish with fleeting vapours dispersing amidst the vigorous foreground, displays a host of novel effects, piquant and various. A bell-tower, clad in sheets of copper, springing from this jumble of houses and objects, reminded me, with its strange green tint, of the Galata Tower in Constantinople.

Allow me to note some random details: carts, consisting of a board and two flared drop-sides, are led along, in the style of those 'Duke of Aumont' carriages, harnessed to two horses. The leather-booted driver rides one of his beasts, instead of walking beside it, as in France.

When the cart is drawn by a single horse, the driver stands upright in the American style; the narrowness of the streets, and the necessity of waiting for some bridge, open for the passage of boats, to be lowered, cause numerous delays and obstructions, which the phlegmatism of both bipeds and quadrupeds saves from proving hazardous. The postmen, dressed in crimson greatcoats of antique shape, attract the traveller's gaze by their eccentric appearance. It is so rare to see the colour red amidst our modern civilisation, that friend of neutral shades, the idea of which appears to be that of rendering the painter's profession untenable!

In the market I passed through, green vegetables and green fruit predominated. As has been said, cooking apples are the only fruit that ripens well in cold countries. On the other hand, flowers abounded; there were hosts of wheelbarrows filled with baskets, all fresh, bright, and fragrant. Amongst the country-folk who sold these various foodstuffs, I noticed a few dressed in rounded jackets and short trousers. They are natives, as are the milkmaids, of one of those islands in the Elbe where the old traditions are maintained, and whose inhabitants only marry among themselves.



View of the Großneumarkt in Hamburg - Thomas Higham, 1828
Rijksmuseum

Near the market, I saw a flesh-coloured omnibus, scheduled to ply between central Hamburg and Altona (*the westernmost suburb*). Its construction differed from that of our omnibuses. The front part was a sort of coupé, adorned with a glass mantle which folded down, thus, protecting travellers from the wind and rain, without obscuring their view of the route; the body of the vehicle, pierced with windows, was occupied by two side benches, and, at the rear, an extension of the sides and the imperial above sheltered the driver and allowed one to

ascend or descend under cover. These are pleasant little observations, you may say. Tell us instead how many barrels the port handles; in what year Hamburg was founded; and how many souls it contains. I know absolutely naught of such matters, while the first traveller's guide you consult will provide the answers; but, without my comments, you would never have known that flesh-coloured omnibuses existed in that good Hanseatic city.

Since we are addressing the singular features of Hamburg, let me not forget to note that on the façade of certain stores one sees the following inscription: *Magasin de Galanterie. Grand assortiment de delicatesses (Haberdashery Store. Wide Assortment of Delicacies)*. 'What!' I said to myself, most intrigued, 'so gallantry is a commodity, now, in Hamburg, and delicacies are sold over the counter! Is that by weight or length; in boxes or bottles? One must possess a truly mercantile spirit to sell such articles!' — a closer more-detailed inspection led me to realise that the 'gallantry' boutiques, within, merely stocked novelties and attractions, to fill the shelves, while it was the delicatessen shops, there, that sold things to eat.

While wandering the streets, an idea occupied my thoughts. Rabelais often speaks of *bottarga (the salted and dried roe sacs of the grey mullet)* and smoked-beef from Hamburg, which he praises as wonderfully designed to raise a thirst, and I thought to find mountains of these products piled up in the storefronts of the delicatessen shops, but they no more sell smoked beef from Hamburg in Hamburg, than they do Brussels sprouts in Brussels, Parmesan cheese in Parma, or Ostend oysters in Ostend. Perhaps one could find some at *Wilkens Keller*, the *Restaurant Véry (in Paris, owned by Jean-François Véry)* of the place, where you can ask for salangane-swifts' bird-nest soup, or mock-turtle in which no calf's-head is involved (*presumably the original green-turtle soup*), Indian-style curry, elephant's feet with chicken, haunch of bear, buffalo hump, sterlets from the Volga, ginger from China, rose-conserves, and other cosmopolitan delights. Seaports possess this feature, that nothing, there, surprises; they are the places in which eccentrics should stay, if they wish not to be noticed.

As the hour advanced, the crowd became more numerous, and women were in the majority. In Hamburg they seem to enjoy a great deal of freedom. Very young girls go to and fro alone without a thought and, remarkably, the children take themselves to school, satchel under one arm, and slate in hand; free to do as they wished, back home, they would be playing boules, hopscotch, or tag.

Dogs are muzzled in Hamburg all week, except on Sunday, when they can bite at will. They are licensed and seem to be cherished; but the cats there seem sad and misunderstood. Recognising me as a friend, they cast looks full of melancholy towards me, and said, in their feline language, to which familiarity has long granted me the key: 'These philistines, occupied in making money, look down on us, yet we have pupils yellow as gold coins. Like fools, they think us only good for catching rats, we the wise, the dreamers, the independent spirits, who spin our mysterious spinning-wheels, while slumbering on a prophet's arm. Pass, we allow you, your hand over our backs shedding sparks of electricity, and tell Charles Baudelaire that his sonnet is beautiful in which he deplores our sorrows.' (*See Baudelaire's poems 'Le Chat' and 'Les Chats', first published in 'Les Fleurs du Mal', in 1857.*)

Chapter 3: Schleswig

The suburb of Altona to which the flesh-coloured omnibus I have described runs, begins in an immense street with wide side-alleys lined with little theatres and fairground booths, akin to the Boulevard du Temple, in Paris, a strange memory to invoke on the border with a State owing to Hamlet, Prince of Denmark! It is true that Hamlet loved actors and offered them advice and criticism, much like a newspaper columnist.

At the end of the district of Altona is the railway station; the track connects it with Schleswig where I had business.

Business, in Schleswig! — Yes — What is so surprising? I promised, if ever I passed through Denmark (*Schleswig-Holstein was a part of Denmark, until annexed by Prussia and Austria in 1869*), to visit a beautiful chatelaine of my friend's (*the chatelaine was Joséphine von Ahlberg, née Bloch, the Parisian ex-artist's model known as 'Marix'. She had married Carl Hermann von Ahlberg, who had died in 1855*), and needed to gain the necessary information in Schleswig as to how to reach Ludwigsburg, which is not far from it (*twenty miles or so, near Loose, Schleswig-Holstein*), only two or three hours by carriage.

So here I am, entering the post-chaise, somewhat fortunately, having had great difficulty in making the people at the ticket-office comprehend where I wished to go, since in Schleswig the German dialect is complicated by an admixture of Danish. Fortunately, our companions on the road, very distinguished young people, came to our aid by means of a Teutonic form of French quite similar to the language Balzac deploys in *La Comédie Humaine* to render the speeches of *Wilhelm Schmucke* and the *Baron de Nucingen*, but which sounded with no less delightful a musicality in our ears. They wished to serve me as guides. When one is in a foreign country, reduced to a state of deafness and muteness, one cannot help but curse whoever possessed the idea of raising the tower of Babel and bringing about, through pride, the multiplicity of languages. Seriously, now that the human species circulates like a generous flow of blood through the arterial, venous, and capillary railway networks of all regions of the globe, a congress of people should come together and decide the adoption of a common idiom — French or English — which like the Latin of the Middle Ages would act as a common, universal and, so to speak, human, language; one would automatically be taught it in schools and colleges; though every nation, be it understood, would still retain its native and individual language.

But let us leave this dream, which will be realised, of itself, in the near future, by one of these means that necessity alone knows how to invent, and, while waiting for it to be accomplished, let us congratulate ourselves on whatever of the noble language of our homeland is either spoken, or at least stuttered, in whatever place we find ourselves, by anyone who prides himself on being well-bred, educated and intelligent.

Night falls quickly, at the end of those short autumn days even briefer there than in France, and the landscape, otherwise quite flat, soon disappeared in the vague half-light which changes the shape and character of objects. I might as well have slept, but I am a conscientious traveller and, from time to time, I stuck my head out of the carriage-window, to try and disentangle

some view or other, here and there, in the grey glow of the rising moon. — Fatal imprudence! I had not secured the chin-strap of my cap, and the fairly cool wind, increased by the speed of the train travelling at full pace, snatched it from me with a dexterity worthy of the magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, or of Macaluso, the Sicilian conjurer. For a moment I saw its black disk spinning like a star torn from its orbit; at the end of a few seconds, it had dwindled to a point in space, and I remained, dishevelled, and somewhat pitiful in appearance.

A young man, seated before me, began gently laughing, then, regaining seriousness, opened his night-case and took out a small student's cap, which he handed to me, begging me to accept it. It was not a moment to quibble as to its appropriateness, since I could not halt the train to seek other headgear, and besides the route seemed somewhat lacking in hatters.

Having thanked the obliging traveller as best I could I set it on my head, taking good care, this time, to secure the chin-strap, the narrow cap, which gave me the air of a senior (*a 'bemoostes Haus' or 'maison mossue'*) from Heidelberg, or Jena, of thirty years of age or more. This incident, with its air of pathetic buffoonery, was the only one which marked our journey, and augured well as regards the hospitality of the country.

At Schleswig, the railway line extends a little beyond the station, and ends in the middle of a field, like the last line of an abruptly-interrupted letter, all to singular effect.

An omnibus took me aboard, with my luggage, and in the hope that it would inevitably lead us somewhere I allowed myself at least the appearance of confidence. The intelligent vehicle dropped me in front of the best of the city's hotels, and there, as the journals of circumnavigatory voyages have it: 'We had speech with the natives.' Among them was a lad who spoke French sufficiently clearly that one could glimpse his meaning, and who, a much rarer thing, sometimes even understood what I said to him.

My name, written in the passenger register, provided a ray of light! Our hostess had been forewarned of my arrival, and someone was supposed to come and collect me, as soon as notice of my appearance was given; but as it was late, I had to wait until next day. I was served a hot and cold dinner of partridges, without candied sugar or confiture, and slept on the sofa, expecting to sleep not a wink between the two quilts that make up German and Danish beds.

The messenger sent forth the day before, did not return until quite late in the day, the distance between Schleswig and Ludwigsburg being twenty miles or so, which made forty for the round trip. He reported rather confusing news: the mistress of the castle was then at Kiel, or Eckernförde, or else she was in Hamburg, if not in England. It seemed sad to visit Denmark only to leave a dog-eared card saying: 'I shall not be back this way'.

A telegram was sent in triplicate to three places, and, while waiting for an answer, I wandered around Schleswig, which has a very particular physiognomy. The city is spread widely, on each side of the main street to which other alleys attach themselves, akin to the basals and radials attached to the dorsal bone of a fish. There, are found fine modern houses; as always, they possess not the slightest character, while the more modest homes have a genuinely local character; the latter consist of a very low ground floor, about seven or eight feet high, over which a large roof of fluted red tiles hangs. Wide windows occupy the entire front; behind these windows, in porcelain, earthenware, or varnished pots, all kinds of flowers

flourish without exception: geraniums, verbenas, fuchsias, and succulents. The humblest house is full of flowers like the others. In the shelter of this sort of scented *jalousie*, the women work at their knitting or sewing, while gazing from the corner of their eye into a carefully-placed mirror in which is reflected the rare passer-by whose boots echo on the paving stones. Cultivating flowers is one of the passions of northern lands; in the countries where they grow naturally no one pays them any attention.

The church in Schleswig had a surprise in store for me. Protestant churches are generally of little interest from an artistic point of view, unless the Reformed mode of worship takes place in a Catholic sanctuary diverted from its original purpose. Usually one encounters only whitewashed naves, whitewashed walls, unpainted limewood, without bas-reliefs, and rows of shiny, well-polished oak benches. All is clean, and comfortable, but scarcely beautiful. The church at Schleswig contains a masterpiece by a great but little-known artist; a triptych altarpiece in carved wood representing, in a series of bas-reliefs separated by finely-worked borders, the various dramatic scenes of the Passion.



View of Plön, Schleswig-Holstein - Georg Michael Kurz, 1847
Rijksmuseum

This artist, worthy of being placed among sculptors like Michel Colombe, the Vischers (*Peter Vischer the Elder and his five sons Hermann, Peter, Hans, Jakob and Paul*), Juan Martínez Montañés, Pedro Duque y Cornejo, the Berruguetes (*Alonso and Inocencio*), and the

Verbruggens (*Peter I, Hendrik his son, and the former's brother, Peter II*) and other wood-carvers, was named Hans Brüggemann – a name little pronounced but worthy of being so.

In this regard, you may have noted how many sculptors, of equal and often superior talent, are less known than the painters. The weighty products of their art, linked to buildings and monuments, are not easily removed, are not commercial objects, and their severe beauty, devoid of seductive colour, fails to attract the attention of the crowd.

Around the church there are sepulchral chapels, of a noble funerary fancy, producing a fine decorative effect.

A vaulted room contains the tombs of the former Dukes of Schleswig, massive slabs emblazoned with coats of arms, and historiated with inscriptions not lacking in character.

Near Schleswig there are a number of vast saline ponds communicating with the sea. I walked the roadway, noting the play of light, and the patterns embossed by the wind, on those grey-tinted waters; sometimes I extended my walk as far as the castle, transformed to a barracks, and the public garden, a sort of miniature Saint-Cloud, with a stepped cascade adorned with dolphins and sea-monsters spouting nothing.

What a sinecure that Triton holds, in his Louis XIV basin! One could ask for nothing more. Tired of waiting for an answer that failed to arrive, and having exhausted the delights of Schleswig, I had a post-carriage harnessed and here I am, on the way to Ludwigsburg.

We drove for a long time, viewing to right and left sheets of water, extensive lagoons, on a road lined with rowan trees whose glistening red berries pleased the eye, their fiery tones brightened by the rays of the declining sun. Nothing was prettier than that avenue of trees with their crimson clusters; like an avenue of coral leading to the madrepore castle of an Undine.

The rowans were succeeded by birch, ash-trees, and pine, and we reached the post-house where there was no need to change the horses, but merely give them a feed of oats, while I myself enjoyed a mug of beer and smoked a cigar in a room with a low ceiling and transverse windows, in which serving-maids stood about talking with the postilions who puffed away at their porcelain pipes; their poses and the play of light being sufficient to inspire an Adriaen von Ostade or an Ernest Meissonier.

Meanwhile twilight descended, then the night, if bright moonlight can be called night; the journey, longer than I had thought at first, was lengthened, moreover, by my impatience to arrive, as the horses continued their peaceful trotting, accompanied by friendly caresses on the rump from a phlegmatic postilion.

At each cluster of houses, whose lights shone like eyes through gaps in the foliage, I leaned out to see if I had reached my goal, since I possessed a visiting-card, engraved in intaglio, adorned with a vignette of the castle to which I had been invited for a few days, long ago; but the end of our journey seemed to recede, and the postilion, who no longer appeared very sure of his route, exchanged two or three words with the country-folk he encountered, or whom the noise of the wheels attracted to their doors.

The road, however, was magnificent, sometimes shaded by large trees still full of leaf, sometimes surrounded by bright hedgerows, which the moon riddled with her thousand silver

arrows, and the shadows of which drew the strangest silhouettes on the ground. When the foliage, parting, rendered the sky visible, I could see Donati's Comet, flamboyant and dishevelled, stars mingling with the golden hairs of its tail.

I had seen the comet in the sky above Paris a few days before, its light weak, vague, and uncertain! In a week, it had grown in such a fashion as would have terrified an era more superstitious than our own. (*Donati's comet was visible with the naked eye from mid-August to late October 1858, brightening in September, and closest to Earth on the tenth of October. Gautier had left Paris on the fifteenth of September. The moon was full on the twenty-third.*)

In the vague blue glow, transected by deep pools of shadow which the horses entered shivering, everything took on a strange and fantastic aspect. The road, following the undulations of terrain, climbed and descended; hedges or trees hid our view of the horizon, and I felt completely disoriented. At one moment, I thought we had reached the end of our journey. A dwelling of beautiful appearance, silvered by a shaft of moonlight, stood out against a background of dark greenery, its reflection glittering in a nearby sheet of water; it sufficiently resembled the description of Ludwigsburg, but the postilion paid it little attention. Soon the carriage entered an avenue of centuries-old trees which lined the avenue to the mansion-house. On the left, water shimmered, and buildings in considerable numbers emerged through the branches, but as yet I could discern nothing. Suddenly the post-chaise made a turn, and the wheels echoed on a bridge crossing a wide moat. At the end of this bridge a low arch opened into a sort of bastion, which lacked only the portcullis; the entrance crossed, we found ourselves in a circular courtyard akin to the interior of a dungeon, and a second arch swallowed the carriage, in darkness.

All this, glimpsed in moonlight, and bathed in shadow, had a feudal and medieval air, a fortress-like appearance that worried me a little. Had the postilion, by chance, made a mistake? Had he led us to the castle of Harald Hårfagri, Norway's first king, or of Björn Eriksson of the glittering eye? All became legend and fantasy.

Finally, we emerged into an immense area bordered at the far end by large buildings, forming an elongated semicircle, the nature of which the night prevented us from comprehending, but which took on a rather formidable appearance in the darkness.

The string to this bow, which seemed to represent the interior of a rounded fortification, was formed by the manor itself, whose imposing and wholly isolated mass emerged from a sort of lake to display its canted roof, and high facade which the moon glazed with its bluish light, causing windows to gleam here and there like the scales of a fish.

Though it was not yet late, all seemed asleep in the château. One might have thought it a fairy-tale palace, beneath a burden of enchantment, awaiting the prince charged with breaking the spell.

The postilion tethered his horses in front of a bridge, which must once have been a drawbridge, and lights then appeared in the windows; the door opened a little way, servants approached the post-chaise, spoke a few words in German, and took my luggage while gazing at me with surprise mixed with a degree of distrust. It was impossible for me to question them, and I was unsure as to whether we really were at Ludwigsburg.

The bridge crossed a second moat, filled with water etched with a few touches of silver, and led to a portico flanked by two granite columns which granted access to a large vestibule, paved in black and white marble, and covered with oak panelling whose pilasters were topped with gilded capitals. Pictures of stag-hunting hung on the walls, and two small cannons of polished copper pointed their mouths at me. This seemed rather inhospitable — cannons in the vestibule in the nineteenth century! I was led to a living room furnished with all the accoutrements of modern elegance.

Among the paintings which adorned it was a portrait, the work of a famous painter, representing the mistress of the house in oriental costume, which I recognised immediately. I was not deceived. A young governess, who descended to receive us, spoke to me in a language I did not know, seemingly quite alarmed at our nocturnal invasion. I indicated the portrait while repeating the name of its subject, and handed her the visiting-card. All mistrust then vanished, and a charming little girl of about ten years of age (*Marie von Ahlefeldt*), who had held back until then, considering me with the deep dark gaze of childhood, stepped forward and said: 'Moi, je comprends le français' ('*Myself, I understand French*'). I was saved. The mistress of the house, absent for two days, was to return next day, and had given orders accordingly.

I was served supper, and then escorted to my room via a monumental staircase which could have swallowed a Parisian house with ease. The servant placed two candlesticks, decorated with those German candles as long as tapers, on the table and withdrew.

The room, part of an apartment of three or four rooms, looked like a chamber out of some fantasy; on the fireplace, imp-like cherubs, lit by a reddish glow, heated themselves on the surfaces of a brazier with pretensions of allegorically depicting winter; through the windows, despite the candles, the moon cast a pale shaft of light which stretched mysteriously across the floor.

Moved by a sentiment akin to that which makes Ann Radcliffe's heroines wander the corridors of ghost-ridden castles lamp in hand, I performed before going to bed, a reconnaissance of the place in which I found myself.

At the rear of the apartment a kind of small living-room, adorned with a mirror, and furnished with a sofa and armchairs, failed to offer any nooks suitable for accommodating ghosts. Mezzotint engravings of Esmeralda and her goat (see *Victor Hugo's novel 'Notre-Dame de Paris' for Esmeralda, and her goat Djali; Marix had posed for Charles Steuben's paintings on the subject in 1839, and 1841, the latter engraved by Jean Jazet*) reassured me as to its modernity.

The room preceding my bedroom was more concerning. Old darkened canvases lined the walls. They depicted hounds, as formidable as those in the portraits of dogs by Louis Godefroy Jadin, with their names written beside them, and restrained by leashes held by black African servants. Those creatures, in the flickering candle-light, seemed to flourish their crescent-shaped tails, opening and closing ivory-fanged mouths while silently barking, and to tug at their collars ready to assault me. The Africans rolled the whites of their eyes, and one of the dogs, named Raghul, looked at me with a dark gaze.

The three rooms were bordered by a corridor, folding back on itself, of which one wall, forming a gallery, was hidden beneath portraits of ancestors and historical figures.

There were men with fierce faces, in folio wigs of the time of Louis XIV, with steel breastplates studded with gold nails and traversed by large sashes, their right hands resting on commander's batons like the Commendatore's statue in Mozart's *Don Juan*, their helmet set next to them, on a cushion; and high and powerful ladies, in costumes of various reigns, making coquettish advances from beyond the grave, and rendering graceful, outdated gestures from the depths of their frames. There were imposing but reluctant dowagers, and powdered young women, in large court dresses, with corsets à échelle (*with a ladder of descending bows*) and vast cages bearing ample damask skirts, in pink or salmon colours and brocaded with silver, who indicated with a careless hand, coronets of precious stones on tables with velvet coverings.

These noble characters, pale, discoloured by time, took on a spectral and alarming appearance; some of the portraits' tones had withstood the years better than others, and this uneven deterioration had produced the weirdest effects: a young countess, otherwise graceful, had retained, amidst her bloodless pallor, lively carmine lips and blue pupils of an unaltered azure; the mouth and the gleaming eyes made a phantasmagoric contrast with that deadly whiteness which was less than reassuring. *Someone* seemed to be gazing at one from behind the canvas as if from behind a mask.

Portraits, as numerous as those shown by *Ruy Gomez de Silva* to *King Carlos*, in *Hernani* (see *Victor Hugo's play of that name*) extended to the corner of the corridor.

Arriving there, not without having experienced the slight thrill that summons up, even in the bravest, in a dark, unknown, and silent place, visions of those who were once alive, and whose forms thus represented have long since fallen to dust, I hesitated, on seeing that the corridor continued indefinitely, filled with mystery and darkness. The glow of my candle did not reach its depths, but projected onto the wall my grim silhouette which accompanied me like a shadowy servant parodying my movements with an air of lugubrious buffoonery.

Not wishing to confess to cowardice, I continued my perambulation. Arriving at about the centre of the corridor, at a place where a projection of the wall seemed to indicate the passage of a chimney, a vent with a grille caught my attention. Raising my candle to the opening, I distinguished the angle of a staircase which rose from the depths of the building, and ascended to God knows where. The colour of the plaster around the grille denoted that the opening had been created after the construction of the staircase, doubtless to reveal its secrets.

Clearly the château of Ludwigsburg was built like a stage-set for *Angelo, Tyrant of Padua* (see *Victor Hugo's prose drama of that name*), and at night one might hear, as he did, 'footsteps in the walls.' (see *Scene I*)

The corridor ended in a securely locked door, more recent than the rest, and if I had known the legend attached to the room thus condemned, I would, certainly, have had bad dreams. Fortunately, I did not; however, it was with no slight feeling of pleasure that I saw pure daylight filtering through the window-blinds, at dawn.

The nocturnal phantasmagoria having vanished, the feudal manor revealed itself in the form of an old but modernised château. It was the spectre of the ancient house, returning to haunt

the moonlight, that I had glimpsed the previous evening, and the effect I had felt had not been entirely an illusion. In this once-fortified arena, the peaceful life of our time had taken up its quarters without destroying its main outline, and so in the darkness my error was allowable. The tall buildings arranged in a semi-circle, and worthy of a princely residence, before serving as stables and outhouses, must have been part of the emplacements; the entrance, with its two low arches, its drawbridge changed into a fixed bridge, and its wide moat, seemed adequate to resist an assault still. Above the first doorway, a bas-relief eroded by time suggested a Christ on the Cross accompanied by female saints, watching over two rows of encrusted coats-of-arms, in stone, set into the solid brick surface.

The manor house, surrounded by water on all sides, its thick vermilion walls built on foundations of bluish granite was adorned with a roof of purple tiles, and pierced by well-proportioned windows.

On the rear facade, in line with the primary entrance, a second bridge spanned the first moat, and a little further on, when one had crossed the intervening ground, another bridge spanned the second moat, which encircled the house like a belt.

Beyond that lay the garden. Tall trees in a vigorous old age, still retaining all their leaves despite the autumn, and artfully grouped, formed the backcloth to this magnificent stage-set. A vast grassy area, green as an English lawn, interspersed with clumps of geraniums, fuchsias, dahlias, verbenas, chrysanthemums, Bengal roses, and other late-flowering plants, extended, like a flooring of velvet, to a bower from which a long avenue of lime trees opened, leading to a leap which formed a boundary with the lush pastureland dotted with cattle.

A globe of burnished metal, set on a truncated column, completed the view, by adding a greenish colour of fresh-cut hay. It was in the German style, of which the chatelaine should not stand accused. There is a similar globe in the courtyard of Heidelberg Castle.

On the right, a rustic pavilion, festooned with clematis and birthwort (*aristolochia*), offered its sofas and armchairs made of knotty or curiously misshapen branches, and a series of glasshouses lifted their panes to the lukewarm rays from the south. These greenhouses, at different temperatures, were linked to each other. In one, orange-trees, lemon-trees, and limes, loaded with fruit at varying degrees of maturity, gave the pretence of flourishing in their native land, not of regretting, like the shivering *Mignon*, 'the land where the lemon-trees grow' (*see Goethe's poem, from 'Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre'; note that Marix was the model for paintings by Ary Scheffer, depicting Mignon, exhibited in 1836, and 1839*). In the next glasshouse, large cacti bristled with thorns, banana-trees spread their large silky leaves, orchids hung their frail overflowing garlands from lamp bases of pink clay. A third contained arborescent camellias the metallic foliage of which, studded with buds, shone; another room was reserved for rare or delicate flowers, layered in the sun, on tiers of planks; painted or gilded cages, adorned with glasswork, hanging from the ceilings, were populated by birds who, deceived by the heat, sang and chirped as if it were Spring. The final room, decorated with artificial trellises, served as a gymnasium for the château's young children.

In front of the greenhouses, a small artificial rock, covered with wall-plants, simulated a sort of fountain whose basin was formed by the valve of a monstrous shell. What a size the

mollusc, the primitive inhabitant of this conch, must have been, one capable of bearing Aphrodite over the azure sea!

Further on, some reddening peaches with velvety cheeks hung from the branches of their espalier, and pale Chasselas grapes, whose vine-stems only were exposed to the open air, finished ripening behind glass cases attached to the wall.

A fir-wood spread dark greenery along the garden-side, which led to a slender footbridge spanning a deep channel half-filled with water. I committed all to chance. We know that the lower branches of fir-trees lose their colour as the trees grow, lifting their verdant spires towards the sky. The whole floor of the wood looked like a preparation for a bitumen landscape to which the artist, interrupted in his work, had only had time to add a few touches of green. The sun, amidst the warm red shade, cast handfuls of gold, here and there, which bounced from branch to branch and scattered themselves over the brown earth, devoid, as always in fir-woods, of any moss, and bare of all grass. A sweet, aromatic fragrance, drifted from the trees, stirred by a weak breeze, and the forest gave forth a vague murmur, like a sigh from a human chest. The path brought me to the edge of the woods, where the ditch separated the gardens from the plain, over which cows and free-ranging horses roamed. I retraced my steps and returned to the château.

Sometime later, the little girl who spoke French came running to tell me that her mother had arrived; I told the lovely chatelaine of my nocturnal wanderings through her mansion and expressed my regret at not possessing a dwarf, to sound the ivory horn at the foot of the keep to greet her; she asked me if I had slept well, despite the fearful location of my room, and whether the ghost of '*the lady who died of starvation*' had appeared to me in dream or reality.

'Every castle has its legend,' she said, 'especially if it is old. You probably noticed the mysterious staircase one might have supposed to be a chimney; it leads to a bedroom which cannot be seen from the outside and descends to the cellars. In this room, a lord of Ludwigsburg kept a charming, and devoted, mistress hidden from all eyes, especially those of his wife. His mistress had accepted a life of absolute seclusion, in order to live under the same roof as the one she loved. Every evening, this lord of Ludwigsburg himself prepared a nocturnal meal that he bore, from the kitchens below, to the captive. One day, called away on some expedition or other, he lost his life, and the prisoner, no longer receiving her food, died of starvation – many years afterwards, during the work of repairing and remodelling the house, workmen unmasked the secret door, and found the skeleton of the lovely creature, crouched, at the foot of the stairs in a desperate pose, amidst scraps of rich fabric, and on ascending found her sumptuously furnished retreat, rendered, for the unfortunate woman, a tower more sinister than that of Ugolino, who at least had his four sons to eat (*see Dante's 'Inferno: Canto XXXIII'*). Sometimes her ghost walks by night through the corridors, and if she meets a stranger, she seems to beg for food with frantic gestures. I'll assign you a less gloomy room this evening.'

Guided by the chatelaine, I visited the reception-rooms, decorated in the style of the last century; in the dining room, old massive silverware, and porcelain services in '*Vieux Saxe*', gleamed behind the panes of curiously carved dressers. The huge living room, with five windows facing, displayed, on its gold and white woodwork, royal portraits, and from its ceiling descended rock-crystal chandeliers with transparent branches, and pierced leaves. Next

door, a smaller, living room clad in green damask, offered nothing in particular, to the eye, except a portrait of an armoured lord, with fluttering sash, wearing round his neck the decorations of the Order of the Elephant, and the Order of Dannebrog (*Danish orders of chivalry*), and smiling graciously upon his own little Versailles. Inadvertently, the artist had posed him with his back turned away from his counterpart, a young well-powdered lady, in a full taffeta court-dress of apple green glazed with silver, which fact seemed to have annoyed him greatly, because he was half-turning his head over his shoulder. The young lady would have been very pretty if it were not for her nose, which possessed too aristocratic a curvature, descending towards her mouth and making her look like a parrot about to eat a cherry. Her soft and sad eyes seemed to deplore this caricature of a Bourbon nose, which spoiled her charming face, regardless of any effort the artist might have made to attenuate it.

As we were gazing attentively at her singular physiognomy, both charming and ridiculous despite her noble air, the lady of the house said: 'There is also a legend regarding this painting; but rest assured, there is nothing terrible involved. If you sneeze in passing before the countess with the long nose she responds to you with a nod or a 'God bless you' like the portraits in an inn-room in fairy tales. Take care to avoid coryzas (*the common cold*), and the picture will give not a sign of life.'

The bedrooms contained large tapestry or damask canopy-beds, the bedheads resting against the wall so as to form an alleyway at each side. In accord with the antique fashion, the hangings of one of these consisted of large hand-painted designs in tempera, done on canvas and forming part of the panels, representing shepherds, in which the German artist had tried to imitate Boucher's gallantry, a pretension which had produced awkward poses and strange effects of colour. — 'Would you prefer this room?' I was asked. 'The rococo style is most reassuring, and will counter nocturnal terrors.' I refused. I dislike seeing, around me, in silence, solitude, and the feeble light of a lamp or a candle, figures which seem to wish to detach themselves from the hangings and request the soul that the painter had neglected to grant them. My choice fell upon a pretty room, with a Persian canopy over a small modern bed, located at the corner of the castle and pierced by two high windows, which possessed, to its rear, no dark corridor or spiral staircase, and whose walls, when struck with the hand, seemed solid — the only drawback was that to reach it, one had of necessity to pass before the lady with the parrot's beak, and I admit, without shame, that too polished a portrait is not to my taste; but I was not suffering from a cold, and the young countess could rest in peace, in her armorial frame.

What was most interesting, was a sixteenth century room of the mansion, which had been preserved intact, and made me regret that the owners of the castle thought it necessary, at the beginning of the last century, to renew the decoration of their apartments in the style of Versailles. One cannot imagine how despotically this style reigned throughout a fairly long period of time. The room was panelled with oak, the frames, of equal size, having been enhanced with a few delicate arabesques of faded gold, in harmony with the wood tones. Each panel contained an emblematic oil painting, accompanied by a motto in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, German or French, matching the subject represented. There were moral, gallant, or chivalrous ones; those of Christians or philosophers; proud ones, or resigned ones; complaining, spiritual, or obscure ones. *Concetti* (*conceits*) competed with *agudezas*

(*witticisms*). Puns were pricked out pointedly; Latin, frowning with enigmatic concision, adopted a Sphinx-like air and looked askance at the clearer expressions of Greek. Petrarchan Platonism, the amorous subtleties of François Scalion de Virbluneau (*the late sixteenth century poet, author of 'Loyalles et Pudiques Amours'*) confused one, with their explications of complicated and scarcely intelligible subjects. Historiated thus, from plinth to cornice, the room could have provided mottos for coats of arms in the lists, for garters from Tembleque, knives from Albacete, the stamps in an engraver's boutique, the wrappers in a confectionery shop, or the kazoos (*mirlitons*) of the Saint-Cloud fair; but amidst a lot of nonsense, childishness, and convoluted expressions, some haughty phrase suddenly gleamed with deep and unexpected meaning, worthy of being inscribed on the bezel of a signet-ring or the blade of a sword.

I am not aware of a similar example of decoration. Certainly, one encounters legends and ciphers entwined with ornamentation, but nowhere are emblems and mottos adopted as a unique decorative theme.

Now that the castle is known to you, let us tour the surrounding area. Two ponies as black as ebony, harnessed to a light phaeton, shake their dishevelled manes and stamp impatiently at the end of the bridge. The chatelaine takes the reins in her beautiful hands, and off we go. We cross, away from any road and at full speed, immense pastures where three hundred cows or more graze and ruminate, posed in a manner to rejoice the painters of such subjects, Paulus Potter and Constant Troyon. The bulls, more placid than those of Spain, leave us free to pass, without any more than a glance, and begin to graze again. Horses, excited by the speed of the ponies, accompany us for a while, then abandon us to our own affairs. The fields extend around us, rippling in low undulations, delimited by earth embankments crowned with hedges — two posts linked by a crosspiece serve as a gate to each field, and one has to leap from the phaeton to raise the barrier lest the fiery little creatures jump it dragging the carriage behind them.

In less than twenty minutes we have arrived at a wood, massed on a height to most picturesque effect: elms, oaks, and ash-trees, with powerful trunks and bushy foliage, grow there in various attitudes, with the odd projections and vigorous contortions that the slope of the land produces. The wood is full of deer, and badgers excavate their setts there, almost certain of not being disturbed by human beings. Here and there pines, reminding us that we are in the North, stretch out their arms, and dart forth their sprays of sombre green.

The freshness of the vegetation, only a stone's throw from the sea, whose salty breath usually scorches the leaves, amazed me; but the trees, in moist soil, produce abundant sap, and resist the offshore winds, unharmed. At the end of the woods, I viewed the gulf, leading towards the open sea, the North Sea still, the other extremity of which touches on the polar ice-cap, and which, in winter, beats on ice floes burdened with polar bears!

At that moment there was nothing northern about it. A clear sky, dappled with a few clouds, reflected therein, coloured the grey water an azure tint, paler, however, than that of our French skies — on the shore, a weak backwash rippled some of those strips of seaweed whose pulp has the consistency of leather; tumbled a few fragments of shell, and left a long fringe of foam on the sand.

On the following days, we took a calèche and made longer excursions; large white Mecklenburgers, less fierce in mood, had replaced the little black ponies. A coachman who displayed a martial and phlegmatic air, commanded them.

We visited a house surrounded like Ludwigsburg by a double moat. There I admired a room the ceiling of which was decorated with sculpted rounded bosses, the sculptures representing muses, winged spirits, and musical instruments; an organ set on a rich console made me hesitate as to the room's purpose. Was it a concert hall or a chapel? The artists of the eighteenth century did not distinguish the two quite so clearly; they readily confused angels and cherubs, the glories of the Opéra and the glories of Paradise. An old lady, mistress of the house, received us in a living room cluttered with flowers, its interesting ceiling ornamented with coats of arms and rocailles, and brought us a plate of peaches, pears and grapes, in accord with the hospitable custom of the country, whereby one always offers visitors refreshments. Near the house a garden or rather a park unfolded, intersected by avenues of lime trees of prodigious height. On a pool completely covered with duckweed, a swan, paddled about, its neck folded down, tearing at the glaucous carpet which immediately formed again behind it. The sight of this swan stirred the reflection in my mind that there were no swans at Ludwigsburg, although the visiting card had indicated such. They had been eaten the previous winter by foxes who sought them out on the shores of frozen ponds. Less melodious than their brothers from the Meander, no song rose from their long necks at the supreme moment, and none of their remains were found, just a few wing-feathers.

Sometimes our carriage crossed paths with a humbler, and somewhat grotesque vehicle; a burly fellow, cap over one eye, pipe in mouth, booted like a horseman, squatting in a child's cart, was being lazily dragged along, not by Molossians, Dogues, or Mâtins, such as the Belgian artist Joseph Stevens paints in his canvases, but by three pug-dogs, veritable *toutous*, to employ a word borrowed from a child's dictionary, so disproportionate to the weight they were pulling that laughter rose to my lips. The poor creatures were living 'a dog's life' in the saddest sense of that expression. Since we are on the subject of dogs, note that, in Denmark, there is not a single Danish farm-dog (*Scanian Terrier*), that is to say the breed with a white coat, usually with black patches, which often exhibits the oddity of one blue eye and one brown eye. The dogs there are generally mongrels, of no specific breed, lacking in character, crossed at random, bastardised, and no longer evidencing any specific type, akin to dogs one sees roaming the streets, but which nonetheless labour conscientiously at their trade: namely escorting carriages, while barking, at the entrance to, and exit from, every village.

The villages or rather hamlets are clean, and welcoming, in a way difficult to imagine without having seen them. The houses, built of bricks on a regular plan, most often roofed with tiles, occasionally thatched, their windows possessing very clear panes, behind which flourish rare flowers in porcelain pots, look more like cottages than common huts. Our pavilions and villas of the suburbs, rented out so dearly to Parisians, cannot compare with these pretty vermilion-coloured houses, against their backdrop of greenery, at the edge of the pond they almost always border.

The appearance of the inhabitants does not diminish the effect of this picture. The modes of dress are neither ragged nor miserable; the menfolk sport peaked Prussian caps, high boots

enclosing the lower part of their trouser-legs, a short-waistcoat, and a frock-coat somewhat long in cut. The women wear short-sleeved dresses, prettily shaped at the neck, and are most often bareheaded. It made me shiver to see them, at a season which was already turning chilly, in 'light robes' though not completely white in colour, since the fabric was Indian cotton with a myriad of stripes, in lilac, pink or blue. Their crimson arms, blood-red as in some painting by Jacob Jordaëns, possessed that resilience which portions of the body exposed to the air acquire, but nevertheless the overly vermilion tones testified that they were not insensitive to the effects of the atmosphere. However, this fashion is adopted only by lower-class women, and servants. Danish ladies dress in the French style, as ladies do everywhere.

Another excursion we undertook was to Eckernförde, a small town a few miles from Ludwigsburg. The road ran between hedges dotted with berries of all hues, blackberries, mountain-ash, sloes, barberries, not counting those bright coral rose-hips that succeed the flowers on the sweet-briars, which we commonly refer to in France by a name as indecent as it is ridiculous (*gratte-culs*, *arse-scratchers*). The route was charming. At other times we passed between tall trees, through small villages, or by fields harrowed by teams of superb horses, turning in wide circles, as if they wished to *moiré* the ground. At last, we arrived at the sea's edge, on a causeway bordered on the one side, the other being bathed by the waves, by elegant houses half-buried in flowers, which are rented to bathers for the season, since Eckernförde is a sea-side retreat like Trouville or Dieppe, despite its somewhat northerly latitude. Carts and cabins, scattered over the beach, testified that intrepid folk, men and women, were not afraid of exposing themselves to the attacks of the icy waters. A few commercial brigs were floating in the harbour, and along their sides, contracting and expanding, swam a large number of those viscous, pearl-coloured mushrooms that are truly living creatures, jellyfish, even though they appear not to be, which I noted once in the Gulf of Lepanto when returning from Corinth, a place which '*not everyone is able to visit*', according to the proverb quoted by Horace ('*non licet omnibus adire Corinthum*' see his '*Epistles* 1.17.36').

Eckernförde, except for the effect on the town's appearance of ships' masts mingling with the trees and chimneys, differs little from Schleswig as to architecture. There are the same brick-built churches, the same houses with large transverse windows revealing, behind flower pots, *décolleté* women plying their needles. An unusual degree of animation invigorated the customarily quieter streets of Eckernförde; heavy carts bore soldiers on leave or license, organised according to their respective companies. Although packed tight, and perched there rather awkwardly, they seemed intoxicated with joy, and perhaps also strong beer.

My days at the château passed away, varied by walking, fishing, reading, talking, and smoking cigars, while the nights were un-haunted by unpleasant ghosts; '*the woman who had died of starvation*' did not appear to me, seeking her meals; '*the princess with the parrot's beak*' lacked the opportunity to cry 'God bless you.' — Only once, a tempest of rain, driven on a terrible wind, scoured the panes of my windows, to the accompaniment of sinister sounds like the beating of an owl's wings. The window-frames trembled, the woodwork made odd noises, the reeds in the moat rustled loudly, and its waves lapped at the foot of the wall. From time to time the gust dealt great blows to the door like someone who wished to enter, but lacked a key — yet no one entered; and little by little the sighs, the murmurs, the moans, all the

inexplicable noises of night and the storm died away in a decrescendo that Beethoven could not have wrought better.

The weather, next day, was glorious, and the sky, swept of cloud, shone brightly. I would have wished to stay longer; but if it is well-proven that all roads lead to Rome, it is less certain that they terminate at St. Petersburg, and I had somewhat forgotten the purpose of my journey amidst the delights of the enchanted castle; the calèche bore me to Kiel, where I needed to connect with the railway-line to Hamburg, and travel from there to Lübeck, so as to embark on the packet-boat, *Neva*.

Part II: Lübeck, The Baltic Crossing, St. Petersburg

Chapter 4: Lübeck

It was necessary to travel to Kiel to take the train. I made the journey by calèche without accident, other than a halt midway at the post-house to let the horses breathe. While partaking of a *zabaglione* (a drink or dessert with egg yolks, and sugar) made with beer, in the hotel, I noticed the Spanish name, Saturnina Gomez, engraved on the window with a diamond, which immediately set imaginary castanets playing in my mind. Doubtless, the woman who had written it must have been young and beautiful, and with that my brain began to devise the outline of a novella with which mingled memories of Prosper Mérimée's *Les Espagnols en Dannark* (a satirical piece written in 1823-24).

In Kiel, the rain began to fall, light at first, then in torrents, which did not prevent me wandering, umbrella in hand, along its fine promenade by the sea, while waiting for the departure of the Hamburg train.

It was good to see the city of Hamburg again, and I amused myself by making another tour of its streets, so lively, vibrant, and of such picturesque appearance. As I wandered, I noticed a few small details that had previously escaped me: for example, iron-bound and padlocked wooden chests at the corner of the bridges, adorned with a painting in which, to excite the pity of the passer-by, were united, in a naïve manner, every imaginable accident at sea, with storms, lightning-bolts, fires, vast waves, sharp reefs, and an overturned vessel to the topmost spars of which sailors clung, representing amidst the foam the classic phrase from Virgil...*Rari nantes in gurgite vasto* ('lone swimmers in the sea's vastness', see 'Aeneid, I, 118').

Often a sailor tanned by the suns of every ocean searched his tarred pocket and threw a *schilling* coin into the slot in one of these trunks, a little girl raising herself on tiptoe to watch his piece of small change drop into the opening — doubtless it added to an aid fund distributed to the families of shipwrecked mariners. This trunk, whose purpose was to collect alms for the victims of the sea, two paces from departing vessels about to run the dangers of the waves, had about it something religious and poetic. Human solidarity relinquished none of its members, and the sailor calmly departed.

Let me mention 'beer tunnels,' a species of underground tavern of a local nature. Drinkers descend a steep flight of steps, like barrels vanishing into a cellar, and sit in a fog of tobacco, where gas jets flicker at the rear of a small room with a low ceiling. The beer I drank there was excellent, since Hamburg is a city that thrives by consuming. The numerous delicatessens, whose displays exhibit edibles from all over the world, prove this by their abundance. There are many confectioners too. The Germans, especially the German women, have a childlike taste for sweets. These shops are highly frequented. One goes there to eat candy, drink syrups, and swallow ice cream as in cafés at home. At every step one sees shops-signs on which gleaming

gold letters spell the word *Konditorei*; I doubt I exaggerate by assessing the number of Hamburg confectioners at three times that of their like in Paris.

Since the boat for Lübeck would not leave till next day, I went to dine at Wilkens' Keller which I have mentioned previously. Wilkens, who is Hamburg's equivalent to Collot (*Étienne Auguste Collot* owned '*Les Trois Frères Provençaux*', a famous Parisian restaurant) runs a basement restaurant, with very low ceilings divided into decorative panels, with luxury rather than taste in evidence. Oysters, turtle soup, a fillet steak with truffles, and a bottle of Champagne supplied by the Widow Clicquot (*Veuve Clicquot*), composed the simple menu for my meal. The display board, following the custom of Hamburg, was burdened with more or less rare comestibles, and with early or late vegetables and fruits which did not yet exist, and have long not existed, for the masses. In the kitchen, we were shown large sea-turtles, in immense vats, who raised their scaly heads above the water, and seemed like snakes trapped between two plates. Their little horny eyes looked with concern at the light that shone on them, and their legs, similar to oars on the side of a drifting galley, made vague swimming motions, beneath the rims of their shells as if seeking to achieve an impossible escape. I hoped the same ones were not always shown to the curious, and that the creatures exhibited were sometimes replaced.

The next day I lunched at an English restaurant, in a glass pavilion from which one had a splendidly panoramic view. The river flowed majestically through a forest of ships with slender masts, of every size and tonnage. Steam-driven tugboats pounded the water, trailing behind them sailing-ships that the wind had failed to dispatch from the shore. Others, free to move, manoeuvred amongst obstacles with that precision which makes a steamboat seem an intelligent being endowed with a firm will and conscious of its own power. From this high viewpoint, the Elbe could be seen to widen, like any large river as it approaches the sea. Its waters, sure to arrive, were no longer in haste, and moved insensibly, in a placid manner like those in a lake; the far shore, quite low-lying, appeared green, and was dotted with little pink houses, half blurred by the vapour from the funnels. The golden shaft of a ray of sunlight traversed the plain; it was bright, broad, and superb.

In the evening the train brought me to Lübeck, through magnificent farmland, and summer-houses bathing their feet in dark water over which willows leaned. Hamburg's Venice possesses its own equivalent to the Brenta canal, including villas, which though not designed by Michele Sanmichele or Andrea Palladio, made no less pleasant a sight, against the background of fresh greenery.



Lübeck - anonymous, 1860
Picryl

At the railway station, a special omnibus collected me, and bore myself and my luggage to Duffckes Hotel (*in the Breite Strasse*). Viewed in the darkness, by the vague glow of the lanterns, the city seemed picturesque, and in the morning, on opening the window of my room, I saw at once that I had not been mistaken. The house which faced me had an unmistakably German physiognomy. An extremely tall gable, denticulated in the ancient fashion, capped its facade. It had no less than seven floors, but the windows decreased in number towards the tip of the gable. The last floor displayed only a single dormer window. At each level, cross-braces, flourishing their ironwork, maintained the building and served for both support and ornamentation: a solid architectural principle that we greatly neglect these days. It is not by concealing but, on the contrary, by accentuating parts of the construction that we grant a building character.

This house was not the only one of its kind, as I was able to convince myself by taking a few paces along the street. The Lübeck of today is still, at least to the eye, the Lübeck of the Middle Ages, a town which, of old, headed the Hanseatic League: modern life is played out amidst its ancient decor; no one has altered the flats in the theatre-wings, or re-painted the background scenery. What a pleasure to walk amongst the forms of the past, and to contemplate the dwellings, still intact, that vanished generations inhabited! — Without doubt, the living own the right to remodel their surroundings according to their habits, taste, and manners; but a new city is much less interesting than an old one.

When I was a child, I was sometimes given, at New Year, one of these Nuremberg boxes containing a miniature German town. I would arrange, in a hundred different ways, those tiny houses of carved and painted wood, around the little church with its pointed bell-tower and pink walls, the joints between the bricks marked by fine white lines. I would plant the two-dozen curly, painted trees, and admire what a delightfully strange and joyfully magical air they acquired, set on the carpet, those apple-green, pink, lilac, and reddish-white houses, with their neat little window-panes, their gables, stepped or scrolled, and their pointed roofs varnished a shiny-red; I thought such places could not exist in reality, and that the good fays made them for good little boys: the wonderful magnifying powers of childhood soon filled the colourful little city with mighty events, and I walked through the line of streets, with the same care that Gulliver took in Lilliput (*see Jonathan Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels'*). Lübeck recreated, for me, that childhood feeling, long forgotten. It seemed as if I was walking amidst a town in some fantasy, one taken from a gigantic toy box — after all, I deserved some compensation for all the ‘tasteful’ architecture I had been forced to view in my life as a traveller!

At the entrance to the hotel, a frieze built into a wall caught my eye, ever in search of curiosities. Sculpture is quite rare in countries where brick abounds: this one represented a fairly crudely-worked group of Nereids or Sirens, but of an ornamental and chimerical character which gave me pleasure. They accompanied large coats of arms in the German style: an excellent theme for ornamentation if one knows how to employ it as the Middle Ages did.

A cloister, or at least an arcade, the remains of an ancient monastery, presented itself to me. This portico runs along one side of a square at the bottom of which rises the Marienkirche, a fourteenth century brick-built church. Continuing one's walk, one soon finds oneself in the market square, where one of those sights awaits one which reward the traveller for his many troubles: a building of a new, unexpected, and original aspect, the old Town Hall (*Rathaus*) where the Hall of the Hanse once stood, suddenly rises before one. It occupies two sides of the square at right angles. Imagine, if you will, in front of the Marienkirche whose spires and oxidized-copper roof protrude above it, a high brick facade, blackened by time, topped by three bristling pinnacles with pointed roofs in verdigris, pierced by two large open rose-windows without interior ribs, and emblazoned with crests, inscribed in the trefoils of its arches, displaying a black double-headed eagle on a shield of silver and red (*the Lübeck coat of arms: 'or, a double-headed eagle sable, overall an escutcheon party per fess argent and gules'*), arranged alternately, and rendered in the proudest heraldic style.

To this facade is joined a Renaissance *palazzino*, fronting it, in stone and in a radically different style, whose greyish-white tones stand out wonderfully from the dark-red background of old brick. This palace, with its three scrolled gables; its fluted ionic columns; its Caryatids or rather Atlases (since they are male); its semi-circular windows; its rounded shell-topped niches; its gallery pierced by pedimented triangular bays, the arches decorated with figures, its base faceted in low relief; produces a most unexpected and charming architectural dissonance. Only a very few buildings of this style and period are met with in the North. The Reformation could scarcely accommodate such a return to pagan ideas and classical forms, modified by a graceful fancy.

In the facade at right angles to the first, the old German style regains its rights; brick arches set on short granite columns supports a gallery with ogival windows, with, above them, a row of coats-of-arms, each inclined to the right, their coloured enamel highlighted against the blackish tint of the wall. One cannot imagine how much character and richness this simple ornamentation possesses.

This gallery is joined to a taller building of which it might be said that a fanciful theatre-designer, looking for a suitable backdrop depicting the Middle Ages, for some opera, could scarcely invent one more singular or picturesque. Five turrets, topped with candle-snuffer spires, crown, with their sharp points, the line of the façade, fenestrated by round windows set above high pointed ones, some open, the majority unfortunately blanked-out, doubtless due to whatever interior alterations have been made. Eight large roundels, each with a gold background, four displaying radiated suns, two showing double-headed eagles, and two the silver and gules of the coat of arms of Lübeck, magnificently adorn this bizarre architecture. Lower, a line of square windows, with rows of small glass panes fills the width of the façade. At the base, arches, on squat pillars, reveal dark open mouths, from the depths of which the clocks and watches of goldsmiths' shops vaguely sparkle.

Turning towards the square, one sees, above the houses, the green spires of another church and, above the heads of the tradespeople selling their fish and vegetables, the silhouette of a small building with brick pillars, which must have, in its time, been a pillory. It adds a last touch to the utterly Gothic physiognomy of the square, which is free of any modern buildings.

The bright idea came to me that this splendid Town Hall ought to possess another facade, and, in fact, passing under an arch I found myself in a main street, and there my admiration was again aroused. Five pinnacles, half-engaged in the wall, and separated by long ogival partially-obstructed windows, repeated, with variations, the facade I have just described. Rosettes of bricks displayed curious designs, in squares, like pieces of tapestry. At the foot of the dark building, a pretty Renaissance cubicle, of later date, served as an entrance to an exterior staircase, rising along the wall in a diagonal line to a sort of *mirador*, or overhanging balcony, in delightful taste. Charming statues of Faith and Justice, gallantly draped and accompanied by their attributes, decorated the portico.

The staircase, carried on arches whose openings grew larger as it rose, was adorned with Caryatids and Mascarons (*grotesque heads*). The *mirador*, set above the ogival door leading to the Market Square, was crowned by a pediment with indented ornamentation and volutes, and in a niche the figure of Themis, goddess of Justice, holding a pair of scales in one hand, and in the other a sword, though without neglecting to display her draperies in a coquettish manner. A bizarre architectural order formed of fluted pilasters, fashioned like herms, and supporting busts, framed the windows of this aerial cage. Chimerical consoles, adorned with stone masks completed the elegant ornamentation over which Time had passed its thumb just sufficiently to give the sculptures that blurred surface that nothing can reproduce.

The building continued, simpler in architecture, and decorated with a stone frieze depicting masks, figurines and foliage, though eaten-away, blackened, and dirtied, even the largest features, beyond recognition. Under a porch supported by Gothic columns of bluish granite, before the doorway, I noticed two benches whose exterior armrests were formed of two thick

bronze panels, the one representing an emperor with a crown, globe, and raised hand of justice; the other a savage creature, hairy as a wild beast, armed with a club and a shield displaying the coat of arms of Lübeck, all of ancient workmanship.

The Marienkirche, which is located, as I have said, behind the Town Hall, is worth a visit. Its two main bell-towers are four hundred and ten feet high; and another elaborate bell-tower rises from the crest of the roof, at the point of intersection of the transept. The bell-towers of Lübeck offer this peculiarity that they seem out of balance and to tilt to right and left in a subtle manner, without however disquieting the eye as does the Asinelli tower in Bologna, or the Leaning Tower of Pisa. When I was a little distant from the city, the bell-towers, inebriated and tottering, with their pointed caps which seemed to salute the horizon, offered a strange and delightful silhouette.

On entering the church, the first curious thing one encounters is an old copy (by *Bernt Notke*) of the *Totentanz*, or *Dance of the Dead*, from the Basel cemetery. There is no need to describe it in detail. The Middle Ages embroidered countless variations on that macabre theme. The main variants are brought together in this mournful painting covering all the walls of a chapel. From the Pope and the Emperor to even the child in the cradle, each human being takes their turn dancing with the inevitable scarecrow. But Death is not represented by a white skeleton, polished, cleaned, and articulated with joints of copper, like the skeleton in an anatomical display; that would be too pretty a look for old Mob (*a female personification of Death; see Edgar Quinet's prose-poem 'Ahasuerus', 1834, in which he appears to coin the name, perhaps prompted by Shelley's poem 'Queen Mab' in which Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew also appears, though Mab, the Queen of Faerie, is not there associated specifically with death*) who appears as a corpse in a more or less advanced state of decomposition; remnants of hair bristle on the skull, blackish soil fills the half-empty eyes, the skin of the chest hangs like tattered cloth; the flat stomach clings hideously to the vertebrae of the spinal column, and the tendons, bared, hang about the shins like broken strings from the neck of a violin; not one of the awful secrets stolen from the privacy of the tomb has been passed over in silence.

— The Greeks respected Death in modest style, presenting 'him' simply in the form of a lovely sleeping youth; but the Middle Ages, of a less delicate temperament, tore off the shroud and showed Death's nakedness, in all its horror and wretchedness, with the pious intention of edifying the living. In this mural painting, Death has so little shaken off the black humus of the pit that an inattentive eye might take him for a black and bony African.

Very rich and ornate tombs, attached to the walls or suspended on massive pillars, with allegorical statues and their attributes; coats of arms; and lengthy epitaphs; formed a sepulchral chapel, as in the Dei Frari church in Venice (*the Basilica di Santa Maria Glorioso dei Frari*), granting the Marienkirche an interior worthy of Johan Peter Neef, the artist whose paintings depict many a cathedral.

The Marienkirche contains two paintings by Johan Friedrich Overbeck, *The Descent from the Cross* and *The Entry into Jerusalem*, which are much admired in Germany. One finds therein the pure religious feeling, the sweetness and unction of a master, which its affectation of archaism and deliberate naivety spoils as far as I am concerned. Otherwise, the delicacy of execution shows that Overbeck studied the charming primitive painters of the Umbrian school;

in his talent as in his painting *Italia und Germania*, in the Pinakothek in Munich, blonde Germany seeks from dark-haired Italy the secrets of her art.

There are also various paintings of the older German school, among others a triptych by Jan Mostaert, my examination of which had to be abandoned so that I might, at the urging of a beadle desiring a contribution, plant myself at the foot of one of these extremely complicated mechanical clocks which show the course of the moon, the sun, the date in the year, the day of the month and even the hour, so that I might view a parade of seven gilded and painted wooden figurines, representing the Seven Electors, in front of a statuette of Jesus Christ in His Glory. On the stroke of noon, a door opens, and the Electors advance, on a semi-circular track, each in turn nodding his head with so sudden and energetic a movement that, despite the holiness of the place, it is hard to refrain from smiling. The performance complete, each figurine jerks its head and disappears through a second door.

The cathedral, also called the Dom, is quite remarkable inside. In the centre of the nave, filling the entire arch, is a colossal Christ, in Gothic style, nailed to an openwork cross adorned with arabesques; the foot of the cross rests on a transverse beam stretching from one pillar to the other, and burdened with holy women and pious characters in attitudes of adoration and pain; on each side, Adam and Eve are dressed, as decently as possible, in costumes of the earthly paradise; the base of the cross is a most ornate and foliate pendant or keystone, serving as the support for an angel with extended wings.

This suspended construction, despite its volume appearing quite light to the eye, is made of wood and carved with much art and taste. I cannot better define it than by terming it a portcullis of sculptures half-lowered in front of the choir. It is the first example I have seen of such a work.

Behind it, rises the rood screen pierced by three arches, with its gallery of statuettes, and a mechanical clock where the hours are struck by a skeleton and an angel bearing the Cross. The baptismal font is small, but formed like a building elaborately adorned with rows of Corinthian columns, whose interstices reveal a group of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. The cover is formed by the dome of this building, which is raised by a cord suspended from the vault. I will say nothing as regards the tombs, funeral chapels, and organs; but I will say a few words about two old fresco or tempera paintings accompanied by a long inscription in Latin pentameter verse, in which one sees a miraculous deer released by Charlemagne, with a necklace bearing the date of his release, slain four or five hundred years later by a hunter (*Henry the Lion, third Duke of Saxony*) who began to build the church which stands today at that very place.

The Holstentor Gate, a stone's throw from the embarkation point, is one of the more curious and picturesque specimens of German architecture of the Middle Ages. Two enormous brick round-towers are connected by a central building in which a curved arch opens, such is the rough plan. But it is harder to appreciate the effect produced by the tall summit features of the central facade, the conical roofs of the towers, the fanciful dormer windows (*lucarnes*), and the dark-red and purplish tones of the crumbling brick. It would offer a completely new program for painters of architectural studies who should be dispatched to Lübeck by the next convoy. I also recommend five or six old houses in crimson brick, to them, positioned quite near to the Holstentor, beside the bridge, on the left bank of the Trave; they stand shoulder to shoulder as

if to support themselves, bellying outwards and out of true, perforated with six or seven windowed floors, and with denticulated gables, trailing reddish reflections in the water like red aprons being washed by a serving-maid. What a painting Jan Van den Heyden would have created, with these as his subject!

Following the quay, which runs alongside a rail line along which freight-wagons roll, one enjoys the most entertaining and varied views. On the far bank of the Trave, amidst houses and clumps of trees, ships and boats can be seen at different stages of construction. Here one glimpses a carcass with wooden ribs, like to the skeleton of a stranded sperm-whale; there a hull covered with its planking, near to which smokes a cauldron of caulking tar, releasing pale clouds of vapour. Everywhere is the joyous turmoil of human activity. Carpenters hammer in nails, porters roll barrels along, sailors swab the decks of various vessels, or half-raise the sails to dry them in the sun. A boat on arrival lines up alongside the quay, moving the flotilla apart somewhat for a moment to allow itself passage. Steamboats raise or emit steam, and when one turns towards the city, above the ships' rigging, one sees the bell-towers of the many churches gracefully rising like the masts of clippers.

The *Neva*, which was to transport me to St. Petersburg, was quietly being loaded with various crates and bundles, and seemed in no way prepared to leave on the day indicated. In fact, she was not ready to sail until two days later, a delay which would have been irritating if I had been in a less charming city and which I took advantage of by attending a performance of Mozart's *Don Juan*, sung in German by a German troupe. The town's theatre is brand-new and very pretty; the windows of the facade are supported by Muses arranged as Caryatids. I was less happy with the way Mozart's masterpiece was executed so near to his homeland. The singers were mediocre, and they allowed themselves strange acts of license, for example, replacing many instances of recitative with lively and animated dialogue, probably because the music seemed to them detrimental to the story. *Leporello* indulged in various pieces of stage-business which were in very bad taste, and displayed beneath the weeping *Elvire's* nose an endless strip of paper on which were pasted silhouette portraits of the 'thousand and three' victims of his master, the portraits, all similar, depicting a woman with the 'giraffe' hairstyle fashionable in 1828! (Note Nicolas Hüet's 'Study of the Giraffe Given to Charles X by the Viceroy of Egypt, 1827'. The first giraffe seen in France, a female, she caused a sensation, and led to a whole range of fashions based on her appearance). It was not a particularly imaginative performance!

Chapter 5: The Baltic Crossing

The *Neva* left at the appointed time, moderating its speed to follow the windings of the Trave, whose banks are populated with pretty country-houses, the retreats of the richer inhabitants of Lübeck. As it approaches the sea, the river widens, the banks are lower, and buoys mark the channel ahead. I liked the flat landscape: it is more picturesque than one might think. A tree, a house, a bell-tower, a boat's sail, take on extreme importance, and suffice with their vague and fleeting background as a motif for the painter's art.

On the thin line of horizon, between the pale blue of the sky and the pearly grey of the water, rose the silhouette of a city, or a large town, probably Travemünde, then the banks spread further and further apart, diminished, and disappeared. Ahead of us, the water took on greener hues; the undulations, weak at first, gradually swelling, became waves; the crests of these were like sheep shaking their wool made of foam. The horizon was sealed in a sharp blue line like some signature-flourish of the Ocean. We were at sea.

Painters of seascapes seem intent on depicting *transparency*, and when they succeed, the term *transparent* is applied to their work as a laudatory epithet. The sea, however, is distinguished by its heavy, dense appearance, almost solid, and particularly opaque. It is impossible for an attentive eye to confuse its deep and powerful waters with fresh water. Certainly, when a ray of light strikes a wave, partial transparency may be revealed, but the general tone is nevertheless dull; the sea's local power is such that the neighbouring areas of sky appear darker. By the depth of colour, the intensity of hue, one perceives a formidable element, of irresistible energy, of prodigious mass.

When you set out to sea, it creates a certain solemn impression, even among the most frivolous, the most courageous and those most accustomed to the experience; you leave the shore where doubtless death can surprise you, but where at least the ground does not open beneath your feet, so as to criss-cross an immense salt plain, the epidermis of the abyss, which hides so many lost vessels. You are separated from the bubbling chasm only by thin planks, or weak plates of sheet-metal, that a wave, or a reef can tear open. A sudden breeze, a shift in the wind, is enough to capsize you, and then your ability to swim serves only to prolong your agony.

The indefinable effects of seasickness soon add to your serious thoughts; it seems that the affronted element wishes to reject you like some impure thing, and cast you among the algae on its shores. Your willpower vanishes, your muscles loosen, your temples tighten, a migraine possesses you, and the air you breathe acquires a nauseating bitterness. Your livid, green face has lost all composure: your lips turn violet in hue, and the colour leaves your cheeks to take refuge in the tip of your nose. You resort to your small pharmacopoeia; this person crunches candy from Malta; that one bites on a lemon; a third resorts to English smelling-salts; others beg for a mug of tea that a roll or pitch of the vessel makes them spill down their front; the bravest stagger about chewing on the butt of a cigar they neglect to light; almost all unite in leaning on the rail; happy are those who have sufficient presence of mind to face the leeward side.

However, the deck continues to rise and fall, with increasingly substantial movements. If your eye juxtaposes the horizon line and the masts and chimney of the steamboat as it climbs and falls, you perceive a difference in level of several meters, and your discomfort grows. Around you, the waves pursue one another, swell and burst, and spring forth in foam; the rising water leaps amidst a dizzying tumult; wave-packets sweep the deck, where they turn to a salty rain, which flows through the scuppers, having dealt the passengers an unexpected shower. The breeze freshens, the ropes through the pulleys make a sharp whistling sound like the cry of a seabird. The captain declares that the weather is favourable, to the great astonishment of naive travellers, and orders the hoisting of the jib-sail, since the wind that had stalled is now blowing

freely and in a useful direction. Steadied by its jib-sail, the ship pitches and rolls to a lesser degree and picks up speed. From time to time, other boats, and brigs, pass more or less closely, under jib, their topsails furled, and with a reef in the lower sails, plunging their noses into the foam, performing a Pyrrhic dance which leads you to believe that the sea is perhaps not as benign as is claimed.

Tearing you away from your contemplation, a cabin-boy arrives to notify you that dinner is served. It is not an easy thing to descend to the captain's cabin by a staircase the steps of which shift under your feet like the rungs of the mysterious ladder in the trials Freemasonry demands, and whose walls strike you as racquets do a shuttlecock. At last, you take your place among a few intrepid people. The rest lie on deck wrapped in their coats. One eats, searching with one's lips, and risking blinding an eye on the prongs of one's fork, as the ship dances ever more vigorously. When you try to drink, in itself a balancing act, your beverage performs, of itself, that comedy by Léon Gozlan: *A Storm in a Glass of Water* (first performed in Paris in 1849).

This difficult exercise complete, one returns to the poop-deck somewhat on all fours, and the cool breeze grants you fresh heart. You risk a cigar; it doesn't taste too foul, you are safe. The sullen sea gods will no longer demand your libations!

As you walk the deck, legs straddled, swinging your arms, the sun descends into a bank of grey clouds whose vapours redden, and which the wind soon sweeps away. The horizon is empty, except for the silhouettes of ships. Beneath the pale violet sky, the sea darkens and takes on sinister tones; later, the purple turns to a steely blue. The water is utterly black, and the crests of foam, there, glisten like the silver 'tears' on a funeral drape. Myriads of greenish-gold stars punctuate the immensity, and the comet, trailing its huge mass of hair, seems to wish to plunge its head in the sea. For a moment its tail is severed by a narrow line of transversely-interposed cloud.

The limpid serenity of the sky did not prevent the breeze blowing hard, and a chill gripped me. My clothes were being penetrated by a bitter drizzle raised by the wind from the crest of the waves. The very thought of returning to my cabin and breathing its hot mephitic air raised my spirits, and I went and sat by the steamboat's funnel, pressing my back against its hot sheet-metal, sufficiently sheltered by the paddle-boxes. It was not till deep in the night that I regained my cabin to doze, my sleep troubled, and traversed by extravagant dreams.

In the morning, the sun opened a dull eye, like someone who had slept badly, pushing aside with much difficulty the curtain of fog. Pale yellow rays pierced the vapour, and traversed the clouds, like the golden rays of glory in some religious painting. The breeze was freshening, and the vessels that showed, from time to time, elsewhere on the horizon, described strange parabolas. Seeing me stagger across the deck like a drunken man, the captain felt obliged to say: 'Fine weather!' doubtless to reassure me. His strong German accent nevertheless granted his sentence an ironic meaning.

I descended to lunch. The plates were held in place by little strips of wood, the carafes and bottles securely moored; without which the place-setting would have cleared itself away of its own accord. To serve the dishes, the cabin-boys indulged in strange gymnastics; they looked

like acrobats balancing chairs on the tips of their noses. Perhaps the weather was not quite as fine as the captain had claimed.

Towards evening, the sky clouded over, and rain fell, lightly at first, then more heavily and, in accord with the proverb: 'A little rain conquers a great storm,' the bitter chill produced by the breeze was greatly diminished. From time to time, the red or white beam, glaring or in eclipse, of a lighthouse shone in the gloom, indicating the coast to be avoided. We had entered the Gulf of Finland.

When day dawned, low flat land, forming an almost imperceptible line between the sky and water, which with the naked eye might have been taken for morning fog or spray from the waves, appeared on our right. Sometimes the shore itself, due to the slope of the waves, was invisible; rows of half-faded trees seemed to rise from the water. The same effect was apparent as regards the houses, and lighthouses whose white towers I often confused with sails. On the left, I could see an islet rocky and barren, or at least so it appeared from a distance. A fairly large congregation of boats animated its shores, and, before having recourse to a telescope, I at first mistook their sails oriented to the rising sun, and set against the purplish depths of its bays, for the facades of buildings; but, with a clearer view, I could see the isle was deserted and contained no more than a lookout-cabin erected on a slope.

The sea had calmed somewhat, and at dinner, from the depths of their cabins, the figures of unknown passengers, of whose existence I had been unaware, emerged like ghosts from their tombs. Pale, starving, tottering, they dragged themselves to the table; but despite that not all dined: the soup was still too stormy, the roast too tempestuous. After the first mouthfuls, most of them rose and staggered towards the stairs to the hatch.

A third night extended its sway over the waters; it was the last I would spend aboard, since on the next day, at eleven, if nothing hindered the ship's progress, we would have sight of Kronstadt. I stayed late on the poop-deck, gazing into a darkness dotted here and there with the red gleams of lighthouses, devoured by feverish curiosity. After two or three hours of sleep, I returned to the deck, anticipating the dawn's arrival, a dawn still lazing in bed that day, at least to my mind.

Who has not experienced the discomfort of that hour preceding dawn? One is wet, icy, shivering with cold.

The robust feel a vague anxiety, those still suffering feel faint, the sense of fatigue seems heavier; the phantoms of the dark, the nocturnal terrors seem, as they flee, to brush you with their chilly batlike wings. One thinks of those who are no more, of those who are absent; melancholic thoughts stir, one misses one's home though voluntarily abandoned; but, with the first ray of light, all that is forgotten.

A steamboat, trailing after it a long low plume of smoke, passed to our right; it was heading westwards, and came from Kronstadt.

The gulf narrowed more and more; reefs at the water's edge were revealed, sometimes bare, sometimes covered with dark vegetation; lookout towers started to emerge; ships and boats were sailing to and fro, following a channel marked by buoys and poles. The sea, shallower,

was of a different hue in the vicinity of land, and seagulls were glimpsed performing graceful evolutions in flight.

Through the telescope, I could see before me two pink blotches punctuated with black, a gleam of gold, a gleam of green, a few tenuous threads like spider threads, a few spirals of white smoke rising through the still air of a perfect purity: it was Kronstadt.

In Paris, during the war, I saw many more or less fanciful plans of Kronstadt, with the crossfire from cannons represented by multiple lines, like rays from a star, and made great efforts to imagine the true appearance of the city, but without success. The most detailed plan gives not the slightest idea of the town's actual silhouette.

The blades of the paddle-wheels stirring calm, well-nigh dormant water, drove us on swiftly, and I could already clearly distinguish a rounded four-story fort with embrasures on the left, and on the right a square bastion commanding the entrance-channel. Low batteries could be seen at the water's edge. The yellowish gleam transformed itself to a golden dome of magical brilliance and clarity. All the light was focused on the salient part while the shaded areas took on amber tones of incredible subtlety; the greenish gleam was a dome painted a colour that might have been taken for oxidised copper. A golden dome, a green dome: Russia, at first sight, showed itself to me in characteristic hues.

On a bastion stood one of those large masts for signal flags which are so effective in naval manoeuvres, and behind a granite mole ships-of-war were massed being readied for overwintering. Many vessels, flying the colours of all nations, cluttered the port and formed, with their masts and rigging, a forest of denuded pine-trees.

A machine for raising and lowering masts, with its beams and pulleys, stood at the corner of a quay covered in piles of squared timber, and a little way behind it, I could see the houses of the town painted in various shades, some with green roofs, in a low horizontal line, above which only the domes of the churches accompanied by their small domes protruded. Fortified cities offer the slightest possible presence to the sight, and to naval cannon; the sublimest of that genre would be that which one can scarcely see at all: such will no doubt be achieved.

The customs-men or naval police, set off in oared boats from a building with a Greek pediment, towards our steamer, which had dropped anchor, and was at rest. The scene reminded me of the visits by the sanitary inspectors in harbours of the Levant, where a host of officials more plague-ridden than us, breathing *four-thieves vinegar* (a blend of vinegar, herbs, spices, and garlic once thought a protection against plague. A French folk tale tells of a group of thieves who employed it to escape the Black Death, in the 17th century), came to examine our papers using long tweezers. Everyone was on deck, and in a boat which appeared to be awaiting, once the formalities were completed, some traveller disembarking for Kronstadt, I saw my first *moujik* (or 'muzhik', a peasant, a dismissive diminutive of 'mouj', a man). He was a fellow of twenty-eight or thirty years old, his long hair separated by a middle parting, with a blond beard, curled somewhat, in the manner in which painters paint Jesus Christ; with well-set limbs, he handled his double oar easily. He wore a pink shirt, tight at the belt, whose tails, hanging over his trousers, formed a sort of tunic or rather graceful jacket. The legs of his trousers of blue fabric, ample, and with abundant folds, were tucked in his boots; his headdress

consisted of a cap or rather a small flat hat, narrow in the middle, flared above and with a circular rim. This first specimen had already witnessed to the truth of those designs by Adolphe Yvon.

Borne towards us in their boats, the employees of the police and customs, dressed in long overcoats and wearing Russian caps with visors, and for the most part adorned with medals, climbed on deck and fulfilled their office with great politeness. We were asked to descend to the lounge cabin to retrieve our passports which had been deposited in the captain's hands when we left port. The passengers were English, German, French, Greek, Italian and folk of other nations; to our great surprise, the police superintendent, quite a young man indeed, employed a different language with every interlocutor, responding to the English in English, the Germans in German and so on, without being mistaken as to nationality. Like Cardinal Angelo Mai he seemed to be fluent in every possible idiom.

When my turn came, he returned me my passport, while saying to me, in the purest Parisian accent: 'You have long been awaited in St. Petersburg.' In truth, I had taken the path schoolboys take, who spend a morning traversing a road they could tread in an hour. To my passport was attached a trilingual paper indicating the formalities to be completed upon arriving in the City of the Tsars.

The steamboat started up again, and, standing on the bow, I gazed with eager eyes at the extraordinary spectacle that unfolded before me. We had entered the arm of sea into which the Neva flows. The appearance was rather that of a lake than a gulf. As we held to the middle of the channel, the banks on each side were barely discernible. The waters, spreading widely, seemed higher in elevation than the land, which was thin as a brush-stroke in a flat-toned watercolour. The weather was magnificent. A sparkling, though cold, light fell from a clear sky; it was a boreal, azure, polar light so to speak, with nuances of milk, opal, and steel, of which our skies give little idea; a pure, white, sidereal clarity, seemingly not shed by the sun, such as we imagine when in dream we are transported to another planet.

Beneath this milky vault, the immense surface of the gulf was dyed with indescribable colours, into which the ordinary tones of water failed, wholly, to enter. Sometimes the tones were of the pearly whiteness one sees in the valves of certain shells, sometimes they were pearl-greys of incredible subtlety; further away, there were matte shades or the surface was streaked with the blue of Damascene blades, or iridescent with reflections, as in the film which coats molten tin; an area of a polished ice was followed by a wide embossed strip in antique moiré; but all this with a certain lightness, blurred and vague in nature, but limpid and bright, to the point of being unreplicable by the artist's palette, or the writer's vocabulary.

The freshest tone of the painter's brush would have seemed like a muddy stain on this ideal translucency, and the words I employ to describe this marvellous glow seem to me mere inkblots falling from a spitting pen onto the vellum's surpassingly beautiful azure.

If a boat passed close by with its solid tones, its salmon-coloured masts, and its clearly delineated details, it looked, in the midst of this Elysian blue, like a balloon floating in air; one could not dream of anything more magical than that luminous infinity!

At the end of this tract of water slowly emerging, between the milky water and the pearly sky, surrounded by its crown of crenelated and turreted walls, rose the magnificent silhouette of St. Petersburg whose amethyst tones separated like a line of demarcation those two pale immensities. Gold sparkled from the domes and spires forming its diadem; the richest, the most beautiful the brow of a city has ever borne.

Soon Saint Isaac's Cathedral displayed, between four pinnacles, its golden dome like a tiara; the Admiralty Building raised its gleaming spire; the Church of the Archangel Michael (*in Saint Michael's Castle, the Mikhailovsky*) revealed its bulging Muscovite dome, that of the Horse Guards (*the Cathedral of the Annunciation, not extant*) showed its sharp pyramidions each surmounted by a cross, and a crowd of more distant bell-towers shimmered with metallic flashes of fire.

Nothing could be more splendid than this city of gold on this silver horizon, where evening owns to the whiteness of dawn.

Chapter 6: St. Petersburg

The Neva is a beautiful river, about as wide as the Thames at London Bridge; its course is not very long: it flows from Lake Ladoga, close by, and discharges into the Gulf of Finland. A few turns of the wheel brought us alongside a granite quay near which was moored a flotilla of small steamboats, sailing-ships, schooners, and other boats.

On the far side of the river, that is to say on the right, ascending, rose the roofs of huge hangars containing construction docks; on the left, large buildings with palatial facades, which I was told were the Corps of Mines and the Naval Cadet School, revealed their monumental lines.



View of the Saint Petersburg Stock Exchange from the Bolshaya Neva
 From *Voyage pittoresque en Russie* by Charles de Saint-Julien, 1853
Internet Archive

It is not an easy task to unship the luggage, trunks, bags, boxes, and parcels of all kinds which clutter the deck of a steamboat when one disembarks, and to recognise one's own belongings among all the accumulated pile. A swarm of moujiks soon removed the whole, carrying each individual load to the visitors' office on the quay, followed by its worried owner.

Most of these moujiks wore a pink shirt over their trousers, in lieu of a jacket, wide trousers and mid-length boots; others, although the weather was unusually mild, were already decked out in *tulups*, long sheepskin coats. The *tulup* is sewn with the wool inside, and when new, the tanned skin is a fairly pale salmon colour pleasing to the eye; a few stitches do for decoration, and the whole is not lacking in character, while the moujik is as loyal to his tulup as the Arab is to his burnous; once endorsed, he never abandons it: it is his tent and his bed; he wears it night and day, sleeps in it at every corner, on every bench and stove-top. Soon the garment becomes greasy, shiny, and, glazed with frost, takes on those bitumen tones that Spanish artists affect in their picaresque paintings; but, unlike the models who sat for Jusepe de Ribera and Bartolomé Murillo, the moujik is clean under this filthy garb, because he visits the steam-baths once a week. These men, with their long hair and full beards, dressed in animal skins, on a magnificent quay from which you can see, on every side, golden domes and spires, ensure that the foreigner's imagination is seized by the contrast. However, there is nothing wild or

alarming in the sight; these moujiks reveal gentle and intelligent countenances, and their polite manners would put to shame the crudeness of our porters.

The inspection of my luggage took place without further incident than the prompt discovery of *Les Parents*

Pauvres ('*The Poor Family*'), by Balzac, and *Les Ailes d'Icare* ('*The Wings of Icarus*'), by Charles de Bernard, on top of my linen, both of which the officials removed, telling me to ask for them at the Censor's Office where they would doubtless be returned to me.

The formalities complete, we were free to roam the city. A multitude of *droshkys* (*four-wheeled open carriages*) and small carts to transport the luggage were waiting in front of the visitors' office, careful not to miss the opportunity. I knew the name in French of the street I needed, but it had to be rendered in Russian by the coachman. One of the local domestics, who no longer speak any idiom, and end up composing a kind of Frankish language akin to the jargon used by the stage-Turks in that ceremony in Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, saw my embarrassment, and soon understood that I wanted to go to the *Hotel de Russie*, run by Monsieur Klée, stacked my packages on a *rospousky*, climbed up beside me, and we were on our way. The *rospousky* is a long low cart of the most primitive nature: a pair of rough-hewn logs, set on four small wheels; it is no more complicated than that! When you leave behind the majestic solitude of the sea for the whirlwind of human activity, and tumult of a great capital city, it dazes you somewhat; you pass, as in a dream, amidst unknown objects, wishing to see everything, and thereby seeing nothing; it seems to you that the waves are still rocking you, especially when a vehicle with as little suspension as a *rospousky* causes you to sway and bump about over uneven paving, and produces the illusion of seasickness, on solid land: but, although harshly treated, I saw all, and my gaze devoured each fresh sight that presented itself.

We soon arrived at a bridge, which we later knew to be the Annunciation Bridge (*the Blagoveshchensky Most*) or, more commonly, the Nicolas Bridge (*the Nikolaevsky*); it consists of two swing-sections at the northern end, which are opened for the passage of boats, and then returned to their positions, so that the bridge temporarily appears as a Y with shortened arms above the river; at the junction of these arms stands a small and extremely ornate chapel, of whose mosaics and gilding I could catch no more than a glimpse in passing.

At the end of the bridge, whose piers are made of granite, and arches of iron, the cart made a turn and followed the English quay lined throughout with pedimented and columned palaces, and private mansions no less splendid, painted in cheerful colours, and with canopied balconies extending over the pavement. Most houses in St. Petersburg, like those of London and Berlin, are in brick coated with plaster in various hues, in such a way as to highlight the architectural lines and produce a fine decorative effect. In passing them, I admired, behind the lower windows, banana trees, and tropical plants blooming in those warm apartments as in a greenhouse.

The English quay opens onto the corner of a large square where Étienne Falconet's statue of Peter the Great on his rearing steed extends its arm towards the Neva, from the top of the rock which serves as its base. I recognised it instantly, agreeing as it did with Diderot's description, and drawings I had seen. At the bottom of the square stood the gigantic silhouette

of Saint Isaac' Cathedral with its golden dome, columnar tiara, four pinnacles and octostyle (*eight-pillared*) pediment. At the entrance to a street behind the English quay, winged Victories in bronze, on porphyry columns, held palm fronds. All this, glimpsed confusedly, due to the speed of the vehicle, and the astonishment caused by novel sights, formed a magnificent and Babylonian ensemble.



The Bronze Horseman (Peter the Great) Senate Square, Saint Petersburg
From *Voyage pittoresque en Russie* by Charles de Saint-Julien, 1853
Internet Archive

Continuing in the same direction, the immense Admiralty Palace soon became visible! A square tower in the shape of a temple, decorated with columns set on its roof, raised its thin gold spire with a ship atop for a weather-vane, which can be seen from afar and which had drawn my gaze in the Gulf of Finland; the avenues of trees that extend around the building had not yet lost their foliage, though the autumn was already advanced (it was the tenth of October).

Further on, in the midst of a final square, the Alexandrine Column soared from its bronze base, a prodigious monolith of pink granite surmounted by an angel carrying a cross. I only caught a glimpse of it, since the cart turned and entered Nevsky Prospekt, which is to St. Petersburg what the Rue de Rivoli is to Paris, Regent's Street to London, the Calle d'Alcalá to

Madrid, and the Via Toledo to Naples, the main artery of the city, that is, the busiest place and the one which is most alive.

What struck me especially was the immense amount of traffic – for a Parisian is seldom surprised in this manner – the throng of carriages filling the wide street, and especially the extreme liveliness of the horses. *Droshkys* are, as we know, a species of small, low, very light phaetons, which only contain two people at most; they go like the wind, driven by coachmen as bold as they are skilful. They overtook our *rospousky* with the speed of swallows, crossed and interwove, passing from wood-block paving to granite without ever touching one another; seemingly inextricable embarrassments were resolved as if by magic, and everyone, after flying by, sped off on their own, finding space for the wheels where a wheelbarrow could not pass.

Nevsky Prospekt is both the mercantile street and the finest street in St. Petersburg; the shop-rents there are as high as on the Boulevard des Italiens, in Paris: there is a mix of stores, palaces, and wholly original churches; on the signs in lines of gold shine the beautiful characters of the Russian alphabet, which retains a few Greek letters, whose lapidary forms lend themselves to inscriptions.

All this passed before my eyes like a dream, because the *rospousky* was travelling so quickly and, before I realised it, we were in front of the steps of the Hôtel de Russie, whose owner scolded, most harshly, the servant who had installed his lordship in such a wretched vehicle. The Hôtel de Russie, located on the corner of Michael Square, near Nevsky Prospekt, is scarcely less grand than the Hôtel du Louvre in Paris; its corridors are longer than many streets, and weary one. The lower floor is occupied by vast lounges where you dine and which are adorned with hothouse plants. In the main salon, on a kind of bar, caviar, herrings, sandwiches made with white and brown bread, cheese of several kinds, bottles of beer, kummel, and brandy, serve, in the Russian manner, to whet the appetite of their consumers.

Appetizers here are eaten before the meal, and I travelled far before encountering this strange custom. Each country has its habits: in Sweden do they not serve soup for dessert? At the entrance to this salon, there was a coat-rack surrounded by a partition, where everyone hung their overcoat, muffler, and plaid, and stood their galoshes. However, it was not at all cold, and the thermometer in the open air, showed seven or eight degrees Centigrade. These careful precautions, given so mild a temperature, surprised me, and I looked outside to see if snow was not already whitening the roofs, but only the faint pink glow of evening coloured them.

However, double windows were already installed everywhere; enormous piles of logs cluttered the streets, and all were preparing to welcome winter in style — my room also owned to that hermetic seal; between one frame and the other sand was spread in which small cones filled with salt were planted, designed to absorb moisture and prevent warping due to the silvery patterns of frost, which, without this precaution, coat the windows; copper heating-vents, similar to the mouths of letter-boxes, stood ready to blow their gusts of warm air, but winter was late to arrive; and the double windows served to keep the apartment pleasantly warm. The furnishings owned to no particular local character, other than one of those immense sofas covered in padded leather that one encounters everywhere in Russia, and which, with their numerous cushions, are more comfortable than the beds, which are wretched, indeed, for the most part.

After dinner I sallied forth without a guide, according to my usual habit, and trusted to my instinctive sense of direction to find my lodgings again. A watchmaker's dial over one corner, a watchtower at another, served as points of reference. This first outing, taken at random, through an unknown and long dreamed-of city is one of the most vivid delights of the traveller and repays one for the wear and tear, and the fatigue, of the journey — is it mere embellishment to say that night, with its mingling of light and shadow, its mystery and fanciful magnifications, adds a great deal to this pleasure? The eye glimpses, the imagination refines. Reality does not present itself with too harsh a line, and its various aspects emerge in solid masses, as in a painting that the artist intends to complete later.

So, there I was, treading the pavement with slow steps, following the Prospekt in the direction of the Admiralty. Now I looked at the passers-by, now at the brightly lit shops, into whose basements, which reminded me of the 'caves' of Berlin and the 'tunnels' of Hamburg, I plunged my eyes. At every step, I encountered artistically grouped displays of fruit behind elegant windows: pineapples, grapes from Portugal, lemons, pomegranates, pears, apples, plums, watermelons — the taste for fruit is as widespread in Russia as the taste for sweets in Germany; it costs a lot, which makes it even more desirable. On the pavements, moujiks offered passers-by apples, acid-green to the eye, which nevertheless found buyers. They were stationed at every corner.

A first reconnaissance completed, I returned to the hotel. If children need to be lulled to sleep, adults prefer motionless slumber; and for three nights the waves had tossed me about sufficiently in the steam-boat to make me desire a more stable bed; though amidst my dreams the ripple of the waves could still be felt. I experienced this weird effect several times — the sacrosanct solid-ground, so appreciated by Panurge (*see 'Gargantua and Pantagruel', Book IV*), is not as swift a remedy as one might think for the anxieties caused by the shifting surface of the liquid plain.

Next day, I issued forth early, to revisit the sights divined the previous evening in the vague twilight and the descending night. As Nevsky Prospekt somehow sums up all St. Petersburg, allow me to give a somewhat long and detailed description which will grant you an immediate intimacy with the city. Forgive me in advance for a few puerile and seemingly trivial remarks. It is those little things which are neglected as far too humble and easily observed that constitute the difference between one place and another, and warn you that you are not in the Rue Vivienne or Piccadilly.

It is from Admiralty Square that Nevsky Prospekt extends, for an immense distance, to the monastery of Saint Alexander Nevsky, where it terminates after a slight bend. The street is wide like all those in St. Petersburg, the middle of the road is surfaced with fairly rough stone chippings whose two slopes when meeting form the bed of the roadway. On either side, a wooden border edges the band of small granite fragments; large slabs cover the pavements.



Admiralty Square, St Petersburg - Louis-Julien Jacottet, 1840 - 1865
Rijksmuseum

The Admiralty spire, which resembles the golden mast of a vessel planted on the roof of a Greek temple, at the end of the Prospekt, represents a landmark happily achieved. With the slightest ray of sunlight, it gleams, and entertains the eye however far away one might be. Two other neighbouring streets also enjoy this advantage and due to their adroitly arranged layout, allow one to catch sight of that same golden needle; but for the moment let us turn our backs on the Admiralty, and walk up Nevsky Prospekt to the Anichkov Bridge (*over the Fontanka*), that is to say along the liveliest and most frequented stretch. The houses that line it are tall and vast, with the appearance of palaces or hotels. Some, the oldest, recall the old French style, a little Italianised, and present a majestic mix of the architectural styles of François Mansart, and Gian Lorenzo Bernini; Corinthian pilasters, cornices, windows with pediments, consoles, bull's-eyes with scrolls, doorways with grotesque carvings, ground floors with simulated joints and rustic quoins usually raised on a pink plaster background. Others offer fantasies of ornamentation in the Louis XV style, rocaille, chicory-leaves, napkins, vases of flame, while the Greek taste of the Empire further displays itself in columns and triangular pediments highlighted with white on a yellow background. The wholly modern houses are of an Anglo-German genre, and seem to have taken as models those magnificent hotels in seaside towns, lithographs of which seduce the traveller. This collection, whose details cannot be too closely studied, since the use of stone alone gives value to the execution of the ornamentation while retaining the direct imprint of the artist; this whole, I say, forms an admirable and eye-catching

view for which the name Prospekt, that the street bears, like many another thoroughfare in St. Petersburg seems to me wondrously just and meaningful. Everything is laid out for the eye, and the city, created in one fell swoop by an act of will which brooked no obstacle, emerges complete from the swamp it superseded, like a theatre-set at the sound of the stage manager's whistle.

If Nevsky Prospekt is beautiful, let me hasten to say that it profits from its beauty. Fashionable and mercantile, its palaces and stores alternate; nowhere, except in Berne, do the signs imply a like luxury. Here one almost has to concede that a modern architectural order has been added to Giacomo da Vignola's five (*see his 'Regola delli Cinque Ordini d'Architettura; Canon of the five orders of architecture', 1562*). Golden lettering traces its curves and strokes across azure fields and red or black panels, is stamped in ironwork, applied to storefront windows, repeated at every door, profits from street-corners, surrounds arches, extends along cornices, takes advantage of the protrusion of the *padiezdas* (awnings), descends basement steps, and seeks every means of attracting the eye of the passer-by. But perchance you know no Russian, and the shape of these characters means nothing more to you than a decorative design or a pattern of embroidery? Next to it is a translation in French or German. You still don't understand? The indulgent sign forgives you for knowing none of the three languages, it even assumes that you may be completely illiterate, and therefore presents the actual items sold in the store it advertises. Golden grapes, sculpted or painted, indicate a wine merchant; further on there are glazed hams, sausages, tongues of beef, cans of caviar designating a food-store; boots, ankle-boots, and naively-carved clogs address feet unable to read: 'Enter, and you will be shod'; a necklace of gloves speaks an idiom intelligible to all. There are also mantles and women's dresses topped with a hat or a cap, to which the artist has not judged it necessary to add the human form; pianos invite you to try their painted keyboards. All this entertains the stroller and has a character of its own.

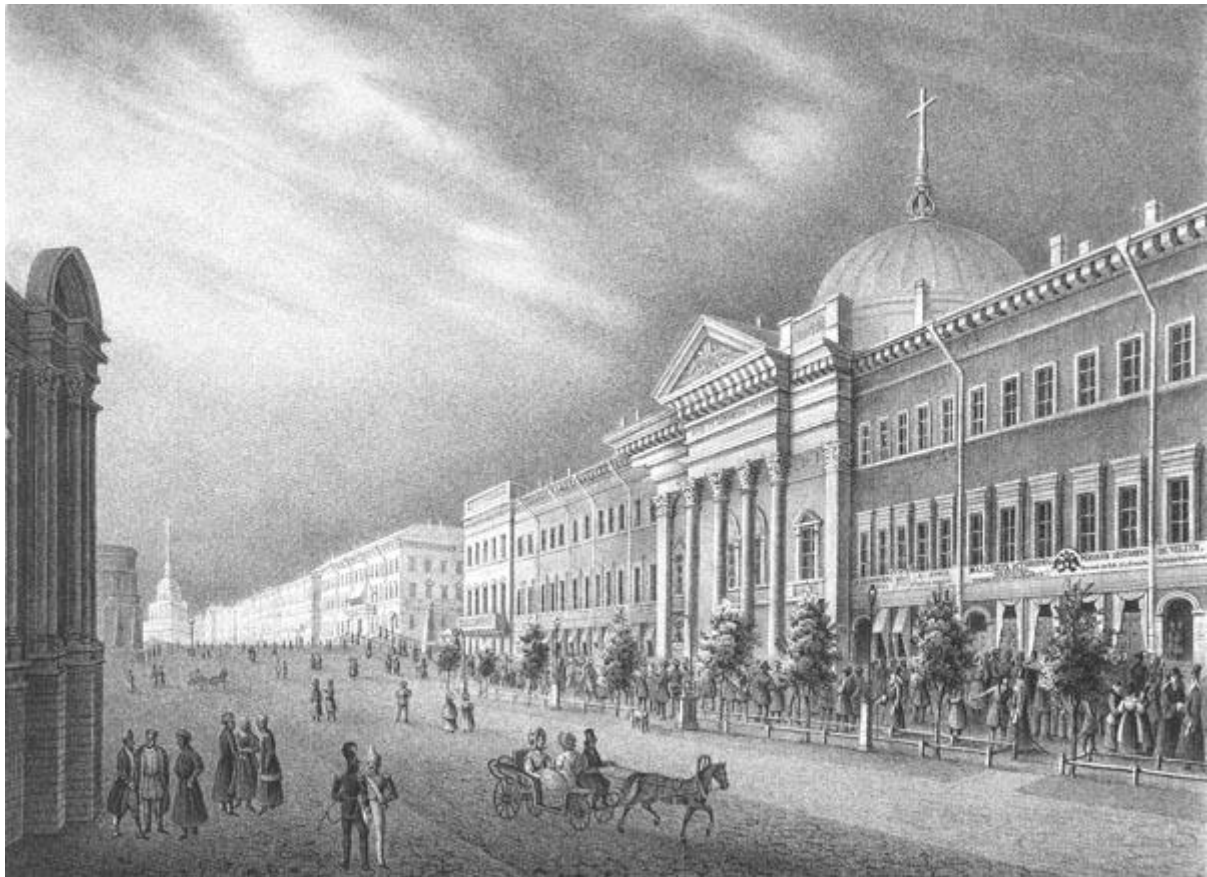
The first thing that attracts the attention of the Parisian strolling along Nevsky Prospekt is the name of the print-dealer Giuseppe Daziario (*known in Russia as Iosif Datsiario, his store was at No.1*) whose sign, in Russian, he has undoubtedly noticed on the Boulevard des Italiens; continuing on the right he will stop at the gallery, owned by Beggrov (*the painter Karl Beggrov, or one of his family, at No.4*), the Deforge (*Armand-Auguste Deforge the prominent art-dealer*) of St. Petersburg, which sells artists' pigments and always displays some watercolor or painting in its window.

Numerous canals crisscross the city, which is built on twelve islets like a northern Venice. Three of these canals cross transversely beneath Nevsky Prospekt, that of the Moyka, the Catherine Canal (*the Griboyedov*), and further on that of the Liga and Fontanka. The Moyka is crossed by the Police Bridge (*also known as the Green Bridge*) whose salient curvature forms a sloping arc, and slows for a moment the rapid pace of the *droshkys*. The Kazan and Anichkov bridges span the other two channels. When one crosses these bridges before the winter season, one's gaze is pleasurably drawn to the gaps opened amidst the houses by these constricted waters, bordered by granite quays, and crisscrossed with boats.

Gotthold Lessing, the author of *Nathan the Wise*, would have liked the Nevsky Prospekt, since his ideas regarding religious tolerance are put into practice there in the most liberal

fashion; there is scarcely any communion that lacks its church or temple on this wide street, exercising its worship there in complete freedom.

Here, on the left, in the direction I am walking, is the Dutch church, the Lutheran Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, the Catholic church of Saint Catherine, an Armenian church, not to mention, in the adjacent streets, the Finnish chapel and temples of other reformed sects; on the right, the Russian Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan, another Greek church, and a chapel for dissenters, adherents of the old rite, who are known as Starovertzi or Raskolniki. All these houses of God, except Our Lady of Kazan whose elegant semicircular portico, interrupting the architectural lines, and facing a vast square, is imitated from the colonnade of Saint Peter's in Rome, mix familiarly with the houses of mankind; their facades are only isolated by being slightly set back; they offer themselves without mystery to the piety of the passer-by, recognisable by their particular style of architecture. Each church is surrounded by vast grounds granted by the Tsars, lands covered with substantial buildings rented out as manufactories.



The Dutch church, in St Petersburg - Charles Schütz, 1820 - 1899
Rijksmuseum

Continuing on our way, we arrive at the tower of the City Duma, a sort of lookout-station for the fire service, like the Seraskier Tower (*Beyazit Tower*) in Constantinople; on its attic storey a signal apparatus is placed, whose red or black globes indicate the street where a fire is raging. Nearby, on the same side, rises the Gostiny Dvor, a large trapezoid-shaped building, with galleries on two floors, which reminds me a little of our Palais-Royal, and contains shops

of all kinds, with luxurious displays. Next comes the Imperial Library, with its rounded corner facade, and Ionian columns, then the Anichkov Palace, which gave its name to the neighbouring bridge decorated with four bronze horses, rearing from granite pedestals and restrained by squires.

Such is the Nevsky Prospect, roughly sketched; but you will say: there are no human beings in your picture; no more than in those the Turkish daubers paint. Wait a moment, since I am about to animate the scene and populate it with figures. The writer, less fortunate than the painter, can only present objects in succession.

I have promised to add characters to my Nevsky Prospekt. Let me attempt to sketch them myself, not having, as the draughtsmen do, the resources to employ a pencil more skilled than mine, and write at the foot of the result: 'Figures by Duruy or Bayot (*Antoine Duruy, Adolphe Bayot*).

From one o'clock to three is when the crowd is largest; besides the passers-by who go about their business and walk quickly, there are strollers whose only goal is to see, to be seen, and to take their exercise; their coupés or their droshkys await them at some place agreed, or even parallel their steps, on the road, in case the fancy takes them to remount their carriage.

Firstly, one may distinguish the officers of the guard, in grey greatcoats, with a tab on the shoulder marking their rank; they almost always push out their chests decorated with stars, and are adorned with a helmet or cap; then come the *chinovniks* (*officials*), in long frock-coats pleated, and gathered by a belt, at the back; they wear, instead of a hat, a cap dark in colour, with a cockade; youths who are neither military nor employed, display overcoats trimmed with fur of a value to astonish foreigners and from which our dandies would recoil. These fine cloth overcoats are lined with marten's or musk-ox fur and have beaver collars costing from one to three hundred rubles, depending on the extent to which the hair is fuller, softer and darker in colour, and whether the white hairs extending beyond the surface of the fur have been retained — the price of a thousand-rubles for an overcoat is not seen as exorbitant, there are some that are worth more; they represent a Russian luxury unknown to us: in St. Petersburg the proverb: 'Tell me who you're seen with, and I'll tell you who you are,' might be altered to a northern variant: : 'Tell me what furs you wear, and I'll tell you what you're worth.' One is judged according to one's coat.

What! Are you thinking, given this description, of furs already! At the start of October, in a period of exceptionally mild weather, that to a northerner is as warm as Spring! Why, yes, — the Russians are not as foolish as people seem to think — we all imagine that, seasoned by their climate, they rejoice like polar bears at snow and ice; nothing is false; on the contrary, they are very cautious, and so as to protect themselves from the slightest bad weather take precautions that foreigners, on a first visit, neglect, even if they adopt them later.... after they have fallen ill. If you see a man passing by, lightly dressed, with an olive complexion, and a prolixity of beard, and with dark sideburns, you will recognise him as an Italian, a southerner, whose blood has not yet cooled — don your wadded overcoat, put on your galoshes, tie a muffler round your collar, I tell you — yet the thermometer reads five or six degrees above zero — no matter, there is here, as in Madrid, a little wind which would not extinguish a candle yet bothers a man. Having donned an overcoat in Madrid at eight degrees Centigrade, there

was no reason to neglect a winter coat in autumn, in St. Petersburg — one should always attend to national wisdom — a coat lined with light fur is worn mid-season; at the first snowfall, one adopts a long fur overcoat (*pelisse*), and retains it till the month of May.

If Venetian women only go around by gondola, women from St. Petersburg only do so by carriage; and rarely descend except to take a few paces on Nevsky Prospekt. They adhere to Parisian hats and fashions. Blue seems to be their favourite colour; it suits their pale complexions and blonde hair. Of their elegance and height, one cannot judge, in the street at least, since ample pelisses of black satin, or sometimes of Scottish tartan in broad check envelop them from neck to heel. Coquetry gives way here to considerations of climate, and the prettiest feet plunge without regret into large shoes: Andalusians would prefer to die; but, in St. Petersburg, the phrase ‘to avoid a cold’ answers all. These pelisses are of sable, Siberian blue fox, or other furs, the extravagant prices of which the rest of us westerners, would hardly surmise; unheard-of luxury obtains in this regard; and if the rigour of the climate only allows women the one shapeless sack, rest assured, that sack will cost as much as the most splendid of gowns.

After about fifty paces, these indolent beauties regain their coupé or carriage, and go on visits, or return home.

What I am describing here relates to society women, that is to say the nobility; the others, even if they are as rich, adopt a humbler appearance, but of equal beauty: quality above all. Here are German women, merchants’ wives, recognisable by their Germanic type, their sweet and dreamy air, and their neat clothes, though clad in simpler fabrics; they wear talmas (*short cloaks*), basquines, or coats of cloth with a thick pile. Here are French women in bright garb, velvet overcoats, hats covering the entire top of the head, which makes one think of the Jardin Mabille and the Folies-Nouvelles in Paris, on the pavements of the Nevsky Prospekt.

Strictly speaking, until now you might believe yourself on the Rue Vivienne or any boulevard; a little patience, and you will observe the Russian type. Regard this man, in a blue kaftan buttoned at the corner of his chest like a Chinese robe, which is gathered at the hips in symmetrical pleats and of exquisite propriety, he is an *artelshchik* or merchant’s servant; a flat disc-shaped hat with a visor, set on the forehead, completes his garb; his hair and beard are parted as in depictions of Christ; his physiognomy is honest and intelligent. He is tasked with errands, requests, and commissions that require probity.

The moment you lament the absence of the picturesque, a nursemaid in traditional, national dress passes by; her headdress is a *povoïnik*, a kind of hat shaped like a tiara, in red or blue velvet, decorated with gold embroidery. The *povoïnik* is hollow or closed on top; open, it designates a young girl; closed, a woman; that of the nursemaid has a lower fringe, and the hair falls from under this hat in two braids which hang down the back. Virgins, gather their hair in a single braid. The padded damask dress, its waist gathered under the arms and with a very short skirt, looks like a tunic, and reveals a second skirt of a less rich fabric. The tunic is red or blue like the *povoïnik* and is edged with gold braid. This fundamentally Russian costume, worn by a beautiful woman, possesses style and nobility. The grand gala dress at court festivities is tailored to this pattern, and streaming with gold, studded with diamonds, it contributes no little to a woman’s splendour.

In Spain, it is regarded as elegant for nursemaids to wear the *pasiega* costume in public; and I admired the lovely countrywomen on the Prado and the Calle d'Alcala, with their black velvet jackets and scarlet skirts with gold bands. It seems that civilisation, sensing that the national character is fading everywhere, seeks to imprint the memory of it on its children, by bringing from the depths of the countryside a woman in traditional costume, who provides an image of the motherland.

Speaking of nursemaids, allows me to mention the children; the transition is wholly natural. Russian babies are very neat in their little blue kaftans, hair flattened beneath a hat akin to a *sombrero calañés* (the Andalusian hat from Calañas in Huelva province) with the decorative knob on its top adorned with a peacock feather.

There are always a few *dvorniks* or doormen on the pavement, busily sweeping it in summer, or clearing the ice in winter. They rarely remain in their lodges, if lodge they have, in the sense in which we use the word, rather keeping watch all night, not moving from their place, and hastening to open in person at the first summons, since it is asserted, and strange it is, that a doorman is there to open the door at three in the morning, as much as at three in the afternoon. They sleep here and there, and never undress. They wear a blue shirt hanging over their trousers, moderately broad trousers, and high boots, a costume that they exchange at the first sign of cold for a double- sheepskin.

From time to time a lad, draped in an apron akin to a loincloth tied at the waist by a string, leaves some craftsman's workshop and crosses the street quickly to enter a house or shop a little further away, he is a *malchik* or apprentice (strictly, 'a youngster') whom his master sends on an errand.

The picture would be incomplete if we failed to add a few dozen moujiks in tulups, shiny with dirt and grease, selling apples or cakes, carrying provisions in *korzinas* (baskets woven of strips of fir-wood), mending and trimming the wooden paving-blocks with axes, or, in groups of four or six, bearing with measured tread, a piano, a table, or a sofa on their shoulders.

One scarcely sees female moujiks, they either remain in the countryside on their master's estate, or they occupy themselves at home in domestic work. Those that one encounters, here and there, have no particular characteristics dress-wise. A kerchief tied beneath the chin covers and frames the head; a padded overcoat in plain fabric, neutral in colour and of questionable cleanliness, descends to mid-leg, and reveals a skirt of Indian cotton with thick felt stockings and wooden clogs. They are not very pretty, and have a sad and gentle air about them; not a flicker of envy lights their pale eyes at the sight of a well-dressed and beautiful lady, and coquetry seems to be unknown to them. They accept their inferiority, which no woman among us does, however lowly placed she may be.

Overall, I was struck by the proportionately small number of women in the streets of St. Petersburg. As in the Orient, men alone seem to have the privilege of travelling about, there. It is the opposite in Germany, where the female population are always outside the home.

I have only populated the pavement with figures so far; the roadway itself presents no less animated and lively a spectacle. There a perpetual torrent of carriages flows by, and crossing the Nevsky Prospekt is an operation no less dangerous than crossing the boulevard between the

Rue Drouot and the Rue Richelieu. One seldom walks in Saint Petersburg; one takes a droshky for a journey of only a few paces. A carriage is considered here not as an object of luxury, but one of prime necessity. Small merchants and poorly paid employees deprive themselves of many things, and almost embarrass themselves, in order to own a *kareta* (carriage), droshky, or sled. Going about on foot is seen as a mark of dishonour. A Russian without a carriage is akin to an Arab without a horse. His nobility might be doubted; he might be taken for a *mekanin* (workman), or a serf.

The droshky is the national carriage par excellence, it has no analogue in any other country and deserves specific description. Here is an example, waiting, lined up alongside the pavement, its master visiting some house nearby, which seems posed expressly for our purpose. It is a fashionable droshky, belonging to a young gentleman careful as to appearances. The droshky is a small open carriage, low slung, and with four wheels; the ones behind are no bigger than the front wheels of our American carriages, or victorias; those in front than that of a wheelbarrow. Four curved springs support the box which supports two seats, one for the coachman, the other for the master. The latter seat is rounded, and, in the elegant droshkys called *egotistics*, only holds one person; in the others there are two places, but so narrow that one is obliged to pass one's arm around one's neighbour.

On each side, two patent leather mudguards arc above the wheels and, joining at the sides of the carriage, which has no doors, form a descending step a few inches from the ground. Beneath the coachman's feet is the swan's-neck (*attaching the carriage body to the front wheels by means of curved suspension pieces*); there are no patented hoods to the wheels, for a reason I shall explain when describing the method of harnessing.

The colour of the droshky varies little. It is a raven's-eye black, trimmed with light blue or Russian-green bands with apple-green strips but, whatever shade is chosen, dark in hue. The seats are upholstered in padded Morocco leather or dark-toned cloth. A Persian rug or carpet stretches underfoot. There are no lanterns to the droshky, which threads the night without headlamps. It is up to the passer-by to be on guard, and the coachman to shout 'Beware!' Nothing is prettier or neater than this frail equipage that seems light enough to carry under one arm.

It appears to have come from Queen Mab's workshop (*Queen Mab, 'the Fairies' midwife', see Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' Act I Scene IV, Mercutio speaking*).

Harnessed to this hazelnut shell, with which he would leap the barrier, pawing on the spot, impatient and nervous, is a magnificent horse who may have cost six thousand rubles, a horse of the famous Orlov breed (*developed by Count Alexei Orlov in the late eighteenth century*) beneath an iron-grey caparison, with rounded curves, a full mane, and a tail, silvery, as if powdered with shiny mica. He stamps his feet, arches his neck, and scrapes the pavement with his hoof, restrained, with great difficulty by a sturdy coachman. He is uncovered between the shafts and no entangling harness prevents one from admiring his beauty. A few light fastenings, leather cords no more than a centimetre wide, linked by small silver or golden ornaments, play around him without bothering him, without hiding him, without stealing anything from his perfection of form. The headstall straps are lined with small metallic rings, and lack those heavy blinkers, black shutters which blind the loveliest features of the animal, its dilated pupils, full

of fire. Two silver chains are crossed gracefully on the decorative chamfer: the bit is lined with leather, lest the cold iron offends the sensitive interdental gaps, since a simple bit is enough to direct the noble beast. The collar, which is very light and flexible, is the only part of the harness that attaches the horse to the carriage, because the Russian method of hitching does not employ traces. The shafts are directly connected to the collar, fastened with straps rolled and turned several times on themselves, without buckles, rings or metal clips. At the junction point of the collar and the shafts, by means of the same straps, the strings of a flexible wooden bow are attached, which arches above the horse's withers, like the handle of basket whose ends could be made to meet. This bow, called a *douga*, leaning backwards somewhat, serves to maintain the spacing of the collar and the shafts, so they do the animal no injury, restraining straps being attached to hooks on the *douga*.

The shafts are not attached to the drosky's undercarriage, but to the axle of the front wheels, which extends beyond the hubs, through thin rounds of wood, each held by an external key. For greater strength, traces on the outer sides may be connected to the collar-straps. This method of coupling allows the front axle to turn with ease, traction operating on the ends of the axle like a lever.

This is doubtless a most minute description, but vague description achieves little; and perhaps the sporting types of Paris or London will not be sorry to know how the droshky of one in St. Petersburg is fashioned and harnessed.

Fine! I have not yet spoken of the coachman. Is there a more characteristic personage full of native colour than a Russian coachman! Wearing a low balloon-shaped hat that smothers his head, its brim raised in wings on either side, and curved over the forehead and the back of the neck; dressed in a long blue or green kaftan, fastened under the left arm with five staples or five silver buttons, which is pleated around the hips and tightened at the waist by a Circassian belt in gold-weave; displaying his muscular neck encircled by a cravat, his full beard spreading over his chest, and his outstretched arms gripping a rein in each hand, he possesses, it must be admitted, a triumphant and superb appearance; he is indeed the coachman par excellence! The bigger he is, the more he costs; if he is thin on entering service, he demands a rise in pay if he grows fatter.

As both hands are used for the reins, the use of the whip is unknown. The horses are urged on or restrained by the sound of the voice alone. Like Spanish mule drivers, Russian coachmen shower compliments or words of invective on their animals; sometimes, these are diminutives, of a charming tenderness; sometimes, dreadful but picturesque insults that contemporary modesty prevents me from translating. *Président de Brosses (Charles de Brosses; his eighteenth-century 'Letters from Italy', published posthumously in 1836, were notably forthright)* would have lacked for nothing here. If the animal slows or errs, a little flick of the reins on the rump is enough to quicken its speed or straighten its course. The coachmen warn you to step aside by shouting '*Berech'sya! ...Berech'sya! (Beware!)*'. If you fail to obey their injunction swiftly enough, they repeat, with forceful emphasis, '*Berech'... sy...a!*' It is a matter of self-esteem, though, for the coachmen of upper-class houses never to raise their voices.

Now, the young lord returns to his carriage. The horse sets off at a fast trot, stepping so high as to touch his nostrils with his knees; he looks as if he is dancing, but his coquettish air detracts not at all from his speed.

Sometimes a second horse is harnessed to the droshky, called a *pristiajka*, which could be translated as trace-horse; it is guided by a single outer rein and prances as its companion trots. The difficulty is in keeping the two dissimilar gaits in balance. The second horse, which seems to be scampering along beside the carriage, accompanying its comrade for pleasure, presents a cheerfulness, freedom, and grace for which I can nowhere find an analogue.

The public droshkys are of the same description, except in elegance of design, degree of care, and freshness of paint; they are driven by a coachman, in a blue, more or less clean kaftan, whose number is stamped on a copper plate suspended from a cord of leather, usually slung at his back, so that the badge, during one's journey, presents itself before your eyes, so as to be remembered. The harness is the same, and the little Ukrainian steed, though not of such noble breed, is no worse at its task. There is also a 'long' droshky, the oldest and most traditional. This is just a bench covered in cloth and set on four wheels, which you have to straddle, unless you choose to sit side-saddle as ladies do on a horse.

The droshkys wander here and there or park at the corners of streets and squares, in front of wooden troughs, each supported by a fretwork foot, which contain oats or hay. At any time of day or night, anywhere in St. Petersburg, one merely has to shout *Isvochtchik!* (*Cabby!*) two or three times, to have a small carriage appear at the gallop from who knows where.

The coupés, the sedans, the carriages perpetually ascending and descending the Prospekt are in no way uncommon. They seem, in general, to be of English or Viennese manufacture. They are often harnessed to superb horses and travel at full speed. The coachmen wear the kaftan, and sometimes next to them sit military men, of a kind, wearing copper helmets whose tip ends in a ball, instead of being topped by an imitation oval flame like the crest of the true military. These men wear a grey coat whose collar bears red or blue bands designating the rank of their officer, general, or colonel. The privilege of having a chasseur (*a uniformed attendant*) belongs only to embassy carriages. That four-horse equipage, whose carrier bears a squire in traditional livery holding a large straight crop in his hand, is that of the Metropolitan bishop, and as he passes, the people and passers-by greet him.

Into this whirlwind of elegant carriages quite primitive carts insert themselves; the wildest rusticity rubs shoulders with the most civilised extremes. This contrast is common in Russia. *Rospouskys* (*carts, though more commonly sleds*) composed of two beams set on a pair of axles, and whose wheels are retained by pieces of wood which press against the hubs, and buttress the sides of the crude vehicle, brush against speeding carriages, gleaming with varnish. The method of attachment is the same as that of the droshky, except that a wider arch, oddly coloured, replaces the light bow with its delicate curvature; ropes are substituted for the thin strips of leather; and a moujik in a tulup or *sayon* (*sleeveless jacket*) is squatting among the packages and bales. As for the horse, with a bristling coat that has never known the curry comb, he shakes, as he walks, a dishevelled mane that hangs almost to the ground. This sort of cart is used for house-moves. The cart is floored with boards, and pieces of furniture, held fast by ropes, travel with their legs in the air. Further away, a pile of hay seems to journey

unaccompanied, drawn by a nag, that it almost buries. A vat full of water progresses, slowly, in a similar manner. A *telega* (*wain*) passes at speed without worrying about the jolts it delivers to the officer that it bears seated on a board devoid of springs: how far is it going? five or six hundred versts (*about four hundred miles*) — further perhaps, to the last confines of the empire, to the Caucasus, to Tibet. No matter! But be sure of one thing, that the light carriage, we cannot give it any other name, will always be driven flat out. Provided that the front wheels and the folding seat arrive, that is enough.

Look at this cart, with its base and side boards giving the appearance of a large trough on casters; it trails a pole behind, separating, like a rail, two horses it tows behind attached to it, and who thus do not need to be kept in hand by grooms. Nothing is more convenient and simpler.

In St. Petersburg, one never sees those heavy carts that five or six elephantine horses can barely shift, lashed by a brutal driver's whip. They load their vehicles lightly, there, and require greater agility from the horses, which are swift rather than strong. All heavy burdens that can be divided are distributed over several vehicles instead of being piled onto a single one as at home; they move in convoy, and on meeting form caravans which recall, in the midst of the city, the practice of desert travellers. Riders are rare, unless they are horse-guards or Cossacks travelling in orderly lines.

Every civilized city must have its omnibuses: some of these circulate on Nevsky Prospekt, and travel to distant neighbourhoods; they are harnessed to three horses. I generally prefer a droshky, whose price is not much higher, and which takes you where you wish to go. The 'long' droshky costs fifteen kopecks per trip, the 'round' droshky, twenty, which is something like fifteen to sixteen sous — it's not dear; one needs be very miserly or very poor to walk.

But twilight descends, passers-by hasten their steps towards dinner, the carriages disperse, and the luminous globe on the watchtower rises, signalling the lighting of the gas-lamps — let us return.

Part III: Winter, and The Neva

Chapter 7: Winter – The Neva

For several days the weather had been noticeably cooler; every night saw a white frost, and a north-east wind swept the last of the reddened leaves across Admiralty Square. Winter, though late for that latitude, had set out from the polar regions, and amidst Nature's frissons, I felt it approaching. Nervous people experienced the vague uneasiness that a whiff of snow in the air causes those of delicate constitution, and the *isvochtchiks* (*cabbies*) who wholly lack nerves, it is true, yet, on the other hand possess an infallible instinct for atmospheric conditions akin to that of wild creatures, raised their noses towards the sky, blurred by an immense grey-yellow cloud, and joyfully readied their sleighs.

However, the snow failed to fall, and we assailed each other with critical observations regarding the drop in temperature, but of a completely different kind from those in which the philistines of other countries frame their meteorological commonplaces. In St. Petersburg people complain that the weather is not severe enough, and checking the thermometer they say: 'Well, it's still only minus two or three degrees! Definitely the climate is changing.' And older people will tell you about those beautiful winters, in which they enjoyed a temperature of twenty-five or thirty degrees below, from October till May.

One morning, however, on raising my window blind, I saw, through its double panes wet with nocturnal mist, a roof of a sparkling whiteness standing out against a light-blue sky, in which the rising sun gilded a few pink clouds and a few plumes of pale smoke; the architectural projections of the palace which faced the hotel were enhanced by silvery lines, like those drawings on coloured paper which are highlighted with white touches of gouache, and a thick layer of virgin snow lay on the ground, like a cotton-wool mantle, on which were still visible starred imprints from the feet of the pigeons, as numerous in St. Petersburg as in Constantinople and Venice. The whole flock, staining this background of immaculate whiteness with grey-blue, leapt about, flapped their wings, and seemed to await, with a more than usual impatience, in front of the food merchant's underground store, the scattering of seed that he granted them every morning with a Brahminical charity. Indeed, though the snow was akin to a white tablecloth, the birds failed to find their covers set, and those pigeons were hungry. So, imagine the joy when the merchant opened his door! The winged band swept familiarly upon him, and he vanished for a moment or two amidst a feathered cloud. A few handfuls of grain thrown to some distance gave him a little freedom, and he smiled, as he stood on the threshold, to see his little friends eating with joyful greed, making snow fly to right and left. As you might expect, a few uninvited sparrows were enjoying the windfall, those shameless parasites, and left not a crumb from the feast on the ground; everyone must live.

The city was waking. Moujiks on their way with provisions, their *korzinas* made of fir-strips on their heads, dug the soles of their big boots into the untrodden snow, leaving footprints like elephant-tracks; a few women, handkerchiefs tied under their chins, wrapped in overcoats stitched like quilts, crossed the street with a lighter step, embroidering with silver flakes the hems of their skirts. Gentlemen in long coats, collars raised above their ears, passed blithely, on their way to their offices, and suddenly the first sleigh appeared driven by Winter himself, in the guise of an *isvochtchik* wearing a square cap in red velvet with a border of fur, dressed in a blue kaftan lined with sheepskin, his knees covered by an old bearskin. Waiting for trade, he lounged on the back seat of his sleigh, and guided, the reins spanning the folding seat in front, his hands in large mittens with only the thumbs separated, a little Kazan horse whose long mane almost swept the snow. Not since my arrival in St. Petersburg, had I felt the reality of Russia so keenly; it was like a sudden revelation, and I understood, instantly, a host of things which, until then, had seemed obscure to me.

On seeing the snow, I had dressed in haste; at the sight of the sleigh, I donned my long coat (*pelisse*), put on my galoshes, and a moment later was in the street shouting the customary: '*Isvochtchik! Isvochtchik!*'

The sleigh drew up close to the pavement, the *isvochtchik* clambered over into his seat, and I inserted myself into the body, stuffed with hay, of the vehicle, while drawing the sides of my sheepskin *pelisse* tight, and covering myself well from the cold. The structure of these sleighs is very simple. Picture two bars, or polished iron runners, whose front-ends curve at the tip like Chinese shoes. Onto these two bars a light iron frame is fixed, supporting the coachman's seat, and the box in which the passenger sits; this box is usually painted a mahogany colour.

A sort of apron, rounded and curving backward like a swan's breast, graces the sled and protects the *isvochtchik* from the flecks of snow that fly up, like silver foam, in front of the swift and frail equipage. The stretchers are attached to the horse's collar, in the same manner as the *droshky* with wheels, and apply traction to the runners. The whole affair weighs little or nothing, and goes like the wind, especially when frost has hardened the snow, and the surface is firm.

We set out for the Anichkov Bridge, at the end of Nevsky Prospekt. This declared goal only came to mind because the street was a goodly length, because I was not required to speak, so early in the day, to the four bronze horses which adorn the bridge's corners, and was more than happy to view the Prospekt, powdered with snow, in its full winter dress.

I could scarcely believe how much it had gained by the weather: an immense strip of silver, it stretched into the distance between the double line of palaces, hotels, and churches, themselves enhanced with touches of white, producing a truly magical effect. The colours of the buildings, pink, yellow, and buff-grey, which can seem odd at times, had taken on a most harmonious tone, transformed thus with sparkling nets and glittering patches. The Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan, which we passed, had metamorphosed to its advantage; it had covered its Italian dome in a cap of Russian snow, traced out its cornices and Corinthian capitals in purest white, and placed on the terrace of its semi-circular colonnade a balustrade of solid silver similar to that which adorns its iconostasis within; the steps which lead to its portal were

covered with a fine, soft ermine carpet, splendid enough for the golden shoe of a Tsarina to set foot upon it.

The statues of Barclay de Tolly (*Mikhail Bogdanovich, who commanded the right-wing and centre at Borodino, in 1812*) and Mikhail Kutuzov (*commander-in-chief in the war against Napoleon*) seemed to rejoice on their pedestals, heroes whom the sculptor Boris Orlovsky, knowing the climate, should not have costumed in the Roman style, but, on the contrary, should have gratified with thick bronze overcoats. Unfortunately, the artist failed to grant them hats, and the snow had dusted their skulls with its chill martial powder.

Near Our Lady of Kazan, the Catherine (*Griboedov*) canal passes beneath the Prospekt, spanned by a bridge, which was completely covered, snow piling up at the edges of the quay, and on the steps of the stairway; a single night had proved sufficient to freeze everything. The ice-floes which the Neva had been carrying for several days had been brought to a halt, surrounding with a transparent sheet the hulls of boats at their moorings.

In front of doorways, the *dvorniks*, armed with large shovels, cleared the pavement and tossed the piles of snow onto the road, like heaps of stones onto tarmac. From all sides the sleds, appeared, and, strangely enough, in one night, the wheeled droshkys, so numerous the day before, had totally vanished. One would have found not a single instance of such on the whole street; it seemed that from one day to another Russia, reverting to the most primitive stage of civilisation, had not yet invented the use of the wheel. The *rospouskys* (*carts*), the *telegas* (*wains*), all the instruments of transport were sliding by on skates; the *moujiks*, harnessed by a rope, pulled their *korzinas* (*baskets*) on minute sleds. Small flared hats had disappeared to make way for velvet bonnets.

When the road is well made, and ice has consolidated the snow, one cannot imagine the immense economy of effort in dragging a load along: the horse moves, without difficulty and at twice the speed, triple the weight which it could move in normal conditions. In Russia, the snow acts, for six months of the year, as a universal railway whose white tracks extend in all directions and allow one to go wherever one wishes. This silvery railway has the advantage of costing nothing at all per verst or kilometre, a very economical cost which the most skilful engineers can never achieve; perhaps that is the reason why iron railway tracks have only ploughed two or three furrows across Russia's immense territory.

I returned home quite satisfied with my trip. After eating lunch, and transforming a cigar to ashes, a delicious sensation in St. Petersburg where smoking is prohibited in the street, under penalty of a fine of one rouble, I went for a walk along the banks of the Neva, to enjoy the change of scene.



The Neva River - Karl Petrovich Beggrov, 1799 - 1875
Rijksmuseum

The great river which, the day before had been seen to extend in a vast tablecloth, wrinkled by perpetual fluctuations, shimmering with ever-new plays of light, criss-crossed by the restless motions of ships, steamboats, sailing boats, and canoes as it streamed towards the Gulf of Finland, the river itself being vast as a gulf, had completely changed in appearance; to the liveliest animation had succeeded the immobility of death. The snow lay thick on the welded ice-floes and, between the granite docks, as far as the eye could see, stretched a white sunken plain from which black mastheads rose, here and there, above half buried boats — stakes and fir branches marked holes made in the ice from which to draw water, and indicated the risk-free course to follow from one bank to the other, since pedestrians were already crossing the ice, and people were preparing ramps for sleds and carriages, though barriers still blocked them, the ice not yet being sufficiently thick.

To better appreciate the view, I took up position on the Annunciation Bridge (*Blagoveshchensky Most*, later the *Nikolaevsky*, and later still the *Lieutenant Schmidt*), more commonly referred to as the Nicolai Bridge, which I have already mentioned on my arrival in St. Petersburg. On this fresh occasion, I had the leisure to examine, in detail, the charming chapel (*not extant, due to the remodelling of the bridge*) built, in honour of Saint Nicholas the Thaumaturge (*The Miracle-Worker*), at the point where the two mobile sections of the bridge meet. It is a small but delightful building in the Muscovite-Byzantine style which so well suits Greek Orthodox worship, and which I would like to see adopted more widely in Russia. It consists of a sort of pavilion in bluish granite, flanked at each corner by a column with a

composite-style capital, circled in the middle by a band and streaked with grooves, not straight, but broken at the top and bottom. The base is double-height, supporting the pillars of an arch on each face, and is faceted in low-relief. There are hollow bays beneath the arches on three sides of the monument, bays whose background walls gleam with mosaics of precious stones depicting the chapel's patron saint, draped in a dalmatic, a golden nimbus behind his head and an open book in his hand, surrounded by celestial figures in attitudes of adoration. Elaborate ironwork railings enclose the two side-arches; that on the front facade borders a staircase giving access to the chapel. The cornice is decorated with inscriptions in Slavonic characters, punctuated with stars, and has as acroteria (*roof decorations*) a series of ornaments in the shape of hearts with their points in the air, alternating with saw-toothed features. The roof, a four-sided pyramidion, is covered with gilded scales. It has one of those little Muscovite bell-towers with a bulge on top that one might best compare to a tulip bulb, all starred in gold, and ending with a Greek cross its foot set on a crescent supported by a globe. I particularly like these golden roofs, especially when the snow sprinkles them with its silver filings and gives them the look of old vermeil whose layer of gold occupies half the visible surface, granting them subtle and incredibly rare tones, effects absolutely unknown elsewhere. A lamp burns night and day in front of the icon.

Passing the chapel, the *isvochtchiks* gather the reins together in one hand, raise their caps, and make the sign of the cross. The *moujiks* prostrate themselves on the snow. Soldiers and officers say a prayer with an ecstatic air, motionless, bareheaded, a meritorious devotion in twelve or thirteen degrees of cold; women ascend the steps and kiss the feet of the icon after many genuflections. These are not all, as you might believe, common folk, for well-dressed people do the same; no one crosses the bridge without showing a like sign of respect, a salute at least to the saint who protects them, and the kopeks rain into the two chests, placed one each side of the chapel; but let us return to the Neva.

On the right, looking from the bridge towards the city with one's back to the sea, one sees, a little beyond the English Embankment the five, pointed bell-towers of the Church of the Horse-Guards (*the Cathedral of the Annunciation, not extant*), their gold lightly glazed with white; further away, the dome of Saint Isaac's Cathedral, like the mitre, studded with diamonds, of some mage, the gleaming needle of the Admiralty, and a corner of the Winter Palace; in the background, and more to the left, rising from an island in the river, the bold and slender spire of the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, whose golden angel (*the Archangel Gabriel*) glitters in a turquoise sky veined in pink, above the low walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress.

On the left (with one's back always to the sea), the shore fails to offer the horizon a like golden richness; there are fewer churches on that side and they are more remote, being sited within the island of Vasilyevsky Ostrov — the name for that district of the city. However, the palaces and hotels that border the long stretch of its embankment present monumental lines, happily accentuated by the snow. Before the Exchange Bridge (*Birzhevoy Most*), the Academy, a grand palace classical in its architecture, containing a round courtyard within its square enclosure, descends to the river by means of a colossal staircase decorated with two great Egyptian sphinxes with human heads, surprised and shivering at bearing on their pink granite rumps caparisons of frost; the Rumyantsev Obelisk rises from the centre of the square.

If, by crossing the Exchange bridge, you return to the other bank and, passing the Winter Palace and the Hermitage, walk upriver to the Marble Palace, a little before the Troitsky bridge, and then turn around, you discover a fresh view that is worth contemplating: the river divides into two arms which form the Great and Little Neva, either side of a point (*the Strelka*) opposite the flow of water — when the water is flowing — which is decorated architecturally in grandiose manner.

At each corner of the Esplanade in which Vasilyevsky Ostrov island terminates on this side, stands a sort of lighthouse or rather a rostral column in pink granite, with bronze ship's bows and anchors, surmounted by a tripod or brass lantern, rising from a base on which seated statues lean. Between these two columns placed to beautiful effect one sees the Stock Exchange which is, like the Paris Bourse, a rectangle surrounded by columns, in vague imitation of the Parthenon. Only here they are Doric instead of Corinthian, and the body of the building exceeds the attic of the colonnade which frames it, presenting a triangular gable like a Greek pediment, where a large arched bay is half-obstructed by a sculptural group set on the cornice of the portico. To right and left, in symmetry, are the University and Customs buildings, regular and simple in their architecture. The two rostral columns, with their gigantic monumental lines, suitably relieve the somewhat cold and classical lines of the buildings.

In the arm of the Little Neva, are massed, for over-wintering, ships and boats whose unrigged masts break the uniformity of background with their slender lines. Now, to this summarised sketch on pearl-grey paper, add a few bright white highlights, and you will have a pretty drawing to paste in your album.

Today, I will advance no further; it is far from warm on these quays and bridges, where the wind blows straight from the pole. Everyone walks at a faster pace here. Each of the two bronze lions placed on the landing stage (*Dvortsovaya Pier*) of the Imperial Palace (*The Winter Palace*) seems numbed, and barely keeps a grasp on the globe beneath its paw.

Next day, on the English Embankment and the Prospekt, there is a veritable Longchamp of gentleman's sleighs and open carriages. It seems strange in a city where nineteen or twenty degrees below is not rare, that closed vehicles are so little employed. It is only at the last extremity that Russians ride in a *carreta* (*covered carriage*), however chilled they are. But the fur coat is a defence against the cold, one which they know how to manage so well that they laugh at weather cold enough to freeze the mercury. They only fill one sleeve moreover, and hold the coat tightly closed by inserting their hand in the small pocket at the front. There is an art to wearing the pelisse, and one cannot master it immediately; a Russian, with an imperceptible movement, gives it some play, crosses it over the body, and folds it and wraps it around himself like a child's jersey, or a mummy's bindings. The fur retains, for a few hours at least, the temperature of the antechamber where it was hanging, and isolates you completely from the outside air; in such a coat you are as warm outdoors as in, and if, renouncing the idle elegance of a hat, you don a wool or beaver-pelt cap, you are no longer prevented by an unwelcome brim from raising your coat-collar so that the cloth or fur is then inside. Your neck, your occiput, your ears are protected. Your nose alone, pointing outwards between the two cloth or furred flaps, is exposed to the season's intemperance; but if it turns white, I advise you, in all charity, to rub it with a handful of snow, upon which it will quickly return to its natural

red. Such minor accidents only occur in exceptionally rigorous winters. Old dandies, rigid observers of London and Paris fashions, not being able to resign themselves to a cap, have hats made without a brim at the back but only a simple flap, since it is unthinkable to go about with one's collar down. The breeze would make your exposed nape feel the edge of its icy blade, as unpleasant as the steel's contact with a patient's neck.

The most delicate of women do not fear to ride in a carriage, and for an hour breathe the air, icy but healthy and invigorating, which refreshes lungs oppressed by the hothouse temperature of the houses. I could see no more than their faces turned rosy by the cold; the rest of them is no more than a pile of pelisses and muffs, among which it would be difficult to discover a human form; over their knees stretches a large black or white bearskin patterned in scarlet. The carriage resembles a kind of boat full of furs from which a few smiling faces emerge.

Confusing the Dutch sleds with the Russian sort, I had imagined other than the reality. It is over the frozen canals of Holland that those sleds slide, wrought in the fanciful forms of a swan, a dragon, or a conch-shell, elaborately-shaped, gilded, and painted in the manner of Melchior d'Hondekoeter or Joost Cornelisz Droochsloot, of whom we have carefully preserved panels, sleds harnessed to horses with pompoms, plumes and bells, but more often pushed by hand by a skater.

The Russian sled is not a toy, an object of luxury and fun, enjoyed for a few weeks, but a tool for daily use and primary employment. Nothing has been changed as to its essential form, and the gentleman's sleigh is similar at all points, in its structural principles, to the sled of the *isvochtchik*. Only the iron runners are more highly polished and display a more graceful curve; the body is made of mahogany or cane latticework, the seat adorned with padded Morocco; the apron is patent leather; a footmuff replaces the hay: a precious fur the old worn moth-eaten body-covering; the details are more carefully-done and more refined, that is all; luxury is displayed via the coachman's outfit, the beauty of the horse, and the fleetness of its gait. As with the *droshky*, a second trace-horse is often harnessed to the sled. But the sublime example of the genre is the *troika*, a vehicle eminently Russian, full of local colour and most picturesque. The *troika* is a large sleigh which can hold two pairs of passengers, facing each other not the coachman; it is harnessed to three horses.

The horse in the middle to whose collar the shafts are fastened, also displays the rounded wooden arch (*douga*) above the collar itself; each of the other two horses is only hitched to the sled by an external trace; a loose strap attaches them to the shaft-horse's collar. Four guide reins are enough to guide the three, because the two outer horses are only guided by a single one; nothing is more charming than to see a *troika* pass, on the Prospekt or Admiralty Square, at walking pace.

The shaft-horse trots, stepping straight, the two other horses prance and pull ahead in a fan shape. One should look fierce, passionate, indomitable, borne on the wind, leaping sideways and kicking: he is the *furious* one. The other should shake his mane, bow his head to his chest, looking so arched as to almost touch his mouth to his knees, dance on the spot, throw himself to right and left, according to his whims and caprices: he is the *flirtatious* one. These three noble steeds, in headpieces with metal chains, their harnesses light as threads, on which delicate

golden trimmings shine here and there, recall those ancient teams on triumphal arches, drawing bronze chariots to which they seem barely attached. Troika horses appear to play and frolic in front of the sleigh, according to their impulses and whims. The lead horse alone looks a little serious, like a wiser friend between two playful companions.

You will credit, without being told, that it is not at all easy to maintain a high speed amidst this apparent disorder, with each horse pulling in a different manner. Sometimes moreover the *furious* one plays his role all too well, and the *coquettish* one rolls in the snow. To drive a troika, it is necessary for the coachman to possess consummate skill. What a fine sport! I'm surprised no equestrian gentleman of London or Paris has the imagination to imitate it. Though it's true the snow fails to last long enough in England and France.



Russian Sled

From *Voyage pittoresque en Russie* by Charles de Saint-Julien, 1853

Internet Archive

After a few days, as the conditions continued, coupés, sedans, and horse-drawn carriages on runners appeared. These carriages, with their wheels removed, possess a strange appearance. They look like the bodies of incomplete vehicles set on trestles; the sleigh possesses infinitely more grace and cachet.

Seeing the fur-coats, the sleds, the troikas, the carriages on skates, and finding the thermometer lower every morning by one or two degrees, I thought winter definitively established; but old prudent heads, accustomed to the climate, nodded sceptically, and said: 'No, it's not winter yet.' — And, in truth, it was not winter, real winter, a Russian winter, an Arctic winter, as I later discovered!

Chapter 8: The City in Winter

Indeed, the winter this year was not the traditional Russian one, and was capricious like a Parisian winter. Sometimes the polar wind blew with frozen nose and cheeks the colour of wax, sometimes a southwesterly melted the coating of ice, and dripped rain; to sparkling snow succeeded grey snow; to the road like powdery marble under the screeching sled-runners a muddy mush worse than the tarmac boulevards; or else, in the night, the vein of mercury in the thermometer at the crossroads fell ten or twelve degrees, a fresh white cloth covered the roofs, and the droshkys became troikas again.

Between fifteen and twenty degrees below, winter acquires character and poetry; and is richer in effects than the most splendid of summers. But as yet the painters and poets have failed to convey this.

We have just had for a few days of real Russian cold and I shall note a few of its aspects, because, at this temperature, the cold is visible, and one sees it perfectly, without yet feeling it, from the double windows of a well-heated bedroom.

The sky becomes clear and of a blue that is unconnected to the southern azure, a steely blue, an icy blue of a rare and charming tone that no palette, even that of Ivan Aivazovsky, has yet reproduced. The light gleams without warmth, and the frosty sun makes the cheeks of a few little pink clouds blush. The diamantine snow sparkles, borrows the mica from Paros marble and, hardened by the frost, redoubles its whiteness; the crystallised coating of the trees makes them resemble immense ramifications of quicksilver, or metallic blooms in a fay's garden.

Don your pelisse, raise the collar, pull your fur-lined cap down to your eyebrows and hail the first *isvochtchik* who passes: he will race towards you and park his sled by the pavement. However young he may be, he'll be sure to have a white beard. His breath, condensed to icicles around his purple mask of cold, lends him a patriarch's beard. Its stiffened hairs scourge his cheekbones like frozen snakes, and the pelt stretched across your knees is strewn with a million little white pearls.

Away you go; the lively, penetrating, icy but healthy air, whips your face; the horse, heated by the speed he creates, blows jets of smoke like a dragon from some fable, and his sweating flanks release a fog which accompanies him as he goes. As you pass by you see the horses of other *isvochtchiks* standing in front of their mangers; the perspiration has frozen on their bodies: they are all glazed, as if coated in a crust of ice similar to glass-paste. When they move again, the coating breaks, detaches, and melts to form again whenever they stop. This alternation, which would kill an English horse in a week, in no way compromises the health of

these little horses, inured to the elements — despite the rigours of the season, only valuable horses are caparisoned; instead of those leather coverings, emblazoned at the corners, with which purebred animals are blanketed in France and England, onto the steaming rump of such horses a carpet from Persia or Smyrna in dazzling colours is thrown.

The *carrettas* mounted on runners display windows tinted with an opaque layer of ice, a quicksilver blind lowered by winter, preventing one seeing, not only from being seen. If Amor did not shiver in such temperatures, he would find as much mystery in the *carrettas* of Saint Petersburg as in the gondolas of Venice.

One crosses the Neva by carriage; the ice, two or three feet thick despite some temporary melting sufficient to liquefy snow, will only break up in spring, at the great thaw; it is strong enough to withstand heavy carts, even artillery. Pine poles designate the routes to follow and the places to avoid. In certain areas the ice is deliberately pierced so that it is easy to draw water from the river which continues to flow beneath the crystalline floor. The water, warmer than the outside air, steams through these openings like a fired-up boiler, but everything is only relative, and one should place no trust in it lukewarm offering.

You witness a curious spectacle as you pass on the English Embankment, or travel on foot over the Neva's frozen surface, viewing the fish the fishmongers take for the city's consumption. When they are scooped from the bottom of the boxes and thrown, palpitating, on the deck of the boat, they twist and cavort two or three times, but as soon they stop doing so, they stiffen, as if imprisoned in a transparent case: the water which wets them suddenly freezes round their bodies.

In such bitter cold, liquids freeze with surprising speed. Place a bottle of champagne between the double windows of your room, and it will shatter in a few minutes more readily than if it were struck by a heavy boot. Allow me a little personal anecdote; I will try not to abuse the opportunity. Following my old Parisian habit, at the moment of exiting the hotel, I had lit an excellent Havana cigar. On the threshold, the prohibition against smoking on the streets of St. Petersburg, and the penalty of a ruble fine incurred by delinquents, came to mind; to throw away an exquisite cigar of which one has only taken a few puffs is a serious thing for a smoker; as I was only going a few steps, I hid mine in the palm of my hand. Carrying a cigar is not in itself a violation of the law. When, beneath the *padiezda* (awning) of the house I was visiting, I retrieved it, the chewed end, a little damp, had become a piece of ice, but at the other end the generous *puro* (a cigar where the wrapper, binder, and tobacco come from a single country) was still burning.

However, more than seventeen or eighteen degrees of cold currently apply, and not the true cold, the great chill that usually commences at Epiphany. The Russians complain about the mild weather, and say that conditions are awry. As of yet, they have not deigned to light the braziers set up beneath the tinplate roofs near the Grand Imperial Theatre and the Winter Palace, where the coachmen warm themselves while waiting for their masters — the weather is far too clement! — Yet a chilly Parisian cannot help but experience a certain arctic, polar feeling, when, on leaving the opera or ballet, he sees, by the moonlight of a sparkling coldness, on the great square white with snow, the line of carriages whose coachmen are powdered with frost, their horses fringed with silver, the pale lights flickering from their frozen lanterns; and

be full of the fear of being stranded en route as he directs the driver of his sled. But his coat retains the heat, and preserves around him a beneficial atmosphere. If he is lodging on Malaya Morskaya Street or Nevsky Prospekt, and must travel in a direction that obliges him to pass near Saint Isaac's Cathedral, let him not forget to take a look at that church. Pure white lines highlight the various aspects of its grandiose architecture, and on the dome, half-obsured by shadow, a single bright patch shines, gleaming from the height of the convex surface that faces the moon, who seems to gaze at herself in that golden mirror. The patch of light is so intensely bright one would think it a glittering lamp. All the brilliance of the shadowy dome is concentrated in the one place. It creates a truly magical effect. Nothing is as beautiful as that great golden temple of gold, bronze and granite, placed on an untouched ermine carpet, beneath the blue rays of a winter moon!

Are they building, as in the famous winter of 1740, a palace of ice (*commissioned in 1740 by the Empress Anna Ivanovna*), given those long lines of sleds transporting huge blocks of frozen water cut like stone, and of diamantine transparency, suitable for forming the diaphanous walls of a temple dedicated to the mysterious spirit of the polar regions? Not at all; these are for storage; the need for adequate summer supplies requires that they cut from the Neva, at the most favorable moment, these immense glassy slabs, with tints of sapphire, each cart bearing a single one. The drivers are seated on the blocks, or lean against them as if they were cushions, and when the line halts, delayed by some mishap, the horses bite, with northern greed, at the ice cube set before them.

Despite all this wintry weather, if someone suggest a trip to the islands, accept it without fear of losing your nose or ears — if you are so weak as to wish to hold on to those cartilages, is there not your fur coat which answers for everything?

A troika, or a larger five-seater sleigh, with three horses, is there in front of the door. Hasten to descend. Feet in a bearskin footwarmer, wrapped to the chin in a satin pelisse lined with sable, clasping a wadded muff to her breast, her veil down and coated already with a thousand brilliant diamantine points, someone is only waiting for you to appear, before fastening the fur cover to the four tholes of the sleigh, and setting forth. You will not be cold: two beautiful eyes will raise the most glacial of temperatures.

In summer, the islands are the Bois de Boulogne, the Auteuil, the Folie-Saint-James (*the garden and park at Neuilly-sur-Seine*) of Petersburg; in winter, they less deserve the name of islands. Frost solidifies the channels which the snow covers, thereby connecting the isles to the mainland. In the cold months, only one element remains, that of ice.

You cross the Neva, and relinquish a last view of Vasilyevsky Island. The character of the buildings changes; the houses, with fewer storeys, are more widely spaced, and separated by gardens with plank fences set transversely as in Holland; everywhere wood replaces stone or rather brick; the streets become roads, and you travel over a sheet of immaculate, and perfectly level, snow; it is a canal. At the edge of the road, the small bollards intended to prevent carriages losing their way amidst this universal whiteness, appear, from a distance, like *kobolds* or gnomes wearing tall white felt caps, and dressed in tight brown *simarres* (*short fur-lined jackets*). Some culverts with wooden sides, vaguely outlined beneath the snow piled up by the wind, alone indicate that we are crossing completely frozen and covered waterways.

Soon a large fir wood succeeds, at the edge of which stand a few *tratkins* (*taverns*) and tea-houses, since people visit the islands for entertainment, and often at night, in temperatures that send the mercury falling to the bottom of the thermometer. Nothing is as beautiful as these immense white alleys between curtains of black fir where the sled's track, barely perceptible, seems like a diamond-cut line on frosted glass. The wind has shaken the snow, that fell several days ago, from the branches and there are only a few gleaming traces left here on the dark greenery like highlights set there by a skilful painter. The trunks of the fir trees rise like columnar barrels and justify the title of 'cathedrals of nature' granted to forests by the Romantics.

In one or two feet of snow the pedestrian is impossibly hampered and, in the long avenue, there are only a few male or female moujiks bundled up in their tulups stamping with their leather or felt boots in the thick white powder. A number of more or less black dogs, or at least appearing so by contrast with the snow, run in circles like Faust's poodle, or approach each other with those signs of canine Freemasonry which are the same throughout the world. I note this detail, puerile no doubt, which demonstrates the rarity of dogs in Saint Petersburg, since they are noticed when present.

Here I am on the island of Krestovsky, which contains a charming village of chalets or small country-houses, inhabited during the warm season by a colony of mostly German families. Russians excel in creating constructions of wood and cut-timber, displaying at least as much skill as the Tyroleans or Swiss. They make fretwork, tracery, crosiers, flower-shaped decorations, all kinds of inspired ornaments executed with axe or saw. The cottages of Krestovsky, worked in this Swiss-Muscovite style, must be delightful summer dwellings. A large balcony, or rather a lower terrace forming something like an open room, occupies the entire facade on the ground floor. That is where one dwells during the endless days of June and July, in the midst of flowers and shrubs. There one arranges a piano, tables, sofas, so as to enjoy the good life in the open air after eight months of seclusion in a warm glasshouse. In the first sunny days after the break-up of the Neva's ice, the move is generally made. Long caravans of wagons, carrying furniture from St. Petersburg, appear at the island's villas. As soon as the days grow shorter and the evenings colder, one returns to the city, and the cottages are shuttered until the following year, though they remain no less picturesque beneath the snow which covers their wooden latticework with silver filigree.

Continuing on my way, I soon find myself in a large clearing, where are sited those entertainments which in France are called *Montagnes Russes* (*roller-coasters*), and in Russia *Ice-Mountains*. *Montagnes Russes* were all the rage in Paris at the start of the Restoration period. There were some in Belleville and in other public gardens; but the difference in climate necessitated differences in construction: wheeled-carts rolled down a steeply sloping grooved track, and rose again to a platform lower than the point of departure, driven by the force of gravity.

Accidents were not uncommon, because the carts were sometimes derailed; which is what led to the abandonment of this dangerous form of amusement. The *Ice-Mountains* of St. Petersburg consist of a lightweight pavilion ending in a platform. One ascends by means of wooden stairs. The descent is fashioned from planks bordered by a barrier, and supported by

posts, falling in a steep arc at first, the slope decreasing later, on which water is poured in several stages, which freezes to produce the slide of polished ice. The corresponding platform starts one on a separate track, thereby preventing any dangerous encounter. Three or four people descend together on a sled, with a skater as guide holding the sled from behind, or one person is dropped, alone, onto a small seat that he or she directs with their foot, hand, or the end of a stick.

A few intrepid people descend head first, lying on their stomach, or in some other position that may look dangerous but entails little true risk. Russians are very skilled at this amusement, of an eminently national nature, which they practice from childhood; therein they find the pleasure of extreme speed in a sharp frost; a completely northern sensation, which the foreigner from warmer regions can scarcely comprehend at first, but soon understands.

Often, on leaving a theatre, or a soirée, when the snow gleams like crushed marble and the moon is shining cold or clear, or when, in the absence of the moon, the stars possess those lively scintillations that the frosty air produces, instead of choosing to return to their bright, warm residences, a group of men and women, well wrapped in their furs, will form a party and travel to the islands for dinner: one climbs into a troika, and the swift carriage, with its trio of horses fanned out, departs amidst a ringing of bells while raising a spray of silver. The sleeping inn is woken, the lamps are lit, the samovar is heated, the Veuve Clicquot champagne is opened, the plates of caviar, ham, herring fillets, jellied grouse, and little cakes, are arranged on the table. One eats a little, one wets one's lips with many a glass, there is conversation, laughter, one smokes a cigar, and for dessert one slides from the summits of the Ice-Mountains, illuminated by moujiks holding lanterns; then one returns to town around two or three in the morning, savouring, as one hurtles along midst a whirlwind, in the crisp, raw, but healthy night air, the pleasure of the cold.

How Joseph Méry's teeth would chatter as he donned an extra overcoat, he who will not allow one to say 'a beautiful frost,' claiming that frost is always ugly, on reading this text that bristles with frost! Yes, the cold air is a pleasure, a fresh intoxication, a vertigo of whiteness that I, most sensitive to cold, have begun to appreciate like a true Northerner.

If your fingertips are not frostbitten after this description of the Russian winter, and you have yet the courage to brave the rigours of the ice, come with me after a large glass of hot tea and take a walk on the Neva, and visit the Samoyeds' encampment, established in the centre of the river, as if this is the only place cool enough for them. They are like polar bears, these people. A temperature of four or five degrees above zero is like Spring to them, and sees them panting from the heat. Their migrations are irregular, following some unknown logic or mere caprice. They had failed to appear for several years running, and I judge it one of the happiest events of my travels that they arrived before I had left the city of the Tsars.

Let us descend to the river by the Admiralty slope, over the beaten path through slippery snow, but not without casting a glance at Étienne Falconet's equestrian statue of Peter the Great, whom the frost has granted a white wig, and whose bronze steed would need sharp hooves to keep his balance on the block of Finnish granite that serves as his pedestal. The inquisitive group that has gathered round the tent of the Samoyeds (*nomadic herders*) forms a black circle on the white of the snow-covered Neva. I slide between a moujik in a tulup and a

soldier in a grey greatcoat and gaze, over a woman's shoulder, at a tent made of pelts stretched on stakes driven into the ice, like a large paper cone placed with its tip in the air. A low opening through which one can only enter by crawling on all fours, allows one to glimpse, vaguely, in the shadows, parcels of fur which perhaps are men or women, one can't really tell which... outside, pelts are hanging from ropes, skates litter the ice, and a Samoyed standing near a sled seems to be lending himself, willingly, to ethnographic investigation by the crowd. He is dressed in a fur sack, the hairy side within, to which a hood is attached with a hole for the face akin to those knitted hats that we call *passe-montagnes* (*balaclavas*), or a helmet without a visor. Large gloves with only the thumb separate cover the ends of the sleeves so as to deny the air passage, and thick white felt boots tightened with straps complete this doubtless not over-elegant costume, but one that is hermetically closed against the cold, and moreover not lacking in character; the colour is that of the leather itself, weathered and softened by primitive processes — the face framed by this hood, tanned by the sunlight and reddened by the air, reveals high cheekbones, a flat nose, wide mouth, and steel-grey eyes with blond eyelashes, but is far from ugly, offering a sad, intelligent, and gentle expression.

The industry these Samoyeds indulge in consists of paid rides costing a few kopeks, on the Neva, in sleighs drawn by reindeer. These exceedingly light sleds, have only a single seat trimmed with a flap of fur, on which the traveller sits. The Samoyed, standing alongside on one of the wooden skids, guides it by means of a pole with which he touches the reindeer to slow their pace, or when he wishes to change direction. Each team consists of three reindeer abreast or four in two pairs. It seems strange and curious to see these beasts so lean and frail in appearance, with thin legs and pointed antlers, running along, obediently, dragging a burden. The reindeer travel quickly, or rather they seem to do so, because their movements are of an extreme rapidity and alacrity; but they are small, and I think a horse of the Orloff breed would easily overtake them, especially if the course was a lengthy one.

Nothing is more graceful than these lightweight teams describing large circles on the Neva, then breaking off and returning to their point of departure, having barely marked the surface of the river. Connoisseurs said that the reindeer were by no means enjoying the task, because the weather was too warm for them (nine or ten degrees below zero). Indeed, one of the wretched animals that had been unhitched seemed to be suffocating, and snow was piled on top of her, to revive her.

These sleighs and reindeer drew my thoughts towards their icy homeland, in a mood of whimsical nostalgic longing. I whose life has been spent seeking the sun, felt overcome by a strange love of the cold. The vertigo of the North exerted its magical influence, and if important labours had not kept me in St. Petersburg, I would have left with the Samoyeds. What a pleasure it would have been to fly full speed, mounting towards the pole crowned with the aurora borealis, at first through fir woods laden with frost, then through half-buried birch woods, then over an immaculate white immensity of sparkling snow, a strange landscape which might make one believe, by its silver tint, that one was journeying across the moon, though through a sharp, and piercing atmosphere, icy as steel, beneath which nothing rots, not even the dead! I would have liked to spend a few days beneath the frost-varnished cave, half buried in the snow, that the reindeer scrape out with their hooves to find some scarce and meagre patch of moss.

Fortunately for me, the Samoyeds left one fine day at dawn, and on visiting the Neva to view them once more, I only found a greyish circle marking the place where their tent had been. My obsession departed with them.

Since I am speaking of the Neva, let me note the singular appearance granted to it by the blocks of ice, cut from the thick frozen crust which covers the river, that are thrown here and there like lumps of stone waiting to be carted away. The Neva is akin to a crystalline or diamantine quarry. The transparent cubes, take on strange prismatic hues according to how the light falls on them, displaying all the colours of the solar spectrum; in some places where they are crowded together one might think them the ruins of a collapsed faery palace, especially in the evening when the sun sets beneath a green-gold sky, painting bands of carmine across the horizon; these are effects that astonish the eye, effects which artists dare not attempt to render, for fear of their work being deemed implausible or deceitful. Imagine a long vale of snow formed by the bed of the river, with pink highlights and blue shadows, dotted with huge diamonds glittering like candelabra, and bordered like a giant culvert to divert some boat, off-course and embedded in ice, some pedestrian, or some sleigh crossing from one embankment to another.

When night falls, if you turn with your back to the Peter and Paul Fortress, you see two parallel streaks of light illuminating the river: they are gas-lamps mounted on the ice, to the height of the Troitsky boat bridge, which are borrowed from the streets in winter, since the Neva, as soon as it is solid, becomes St. Petersburg's second Nevsky Prospect; it is then a main artery of the city. We people of temperate regions, among which, in the harshest seasons the rivers scarcely bear one's weight, find it difficult not to feel a slight apprehension when we cross an immense river whose deep water flows silently beneath a crystalline floor that could shatter and close over you like a *trappe Anglaise* (a form of stage trapdoor devised in England). But soon the perfectly tranquil air of the Russians reassures you; it would need, moreover, an enormous weight to make the two-or-three feet thick layer of ice give way, while the snow which covers it grants it the appearance of a flat plain. Nothing distinguishes the river from solid land, except, here and there, beside the quays like walls, some boats that winter surprised with its cold. The Neva is one of the powers that be, in St. Petersburg; the Russians honour it, and bless its waters with a great fanfare. This ceremony, named the Baptism of the Neva, takes place on the sixth of January (*according to the old style, O.S., Julian calendar or, in 1858, the eighteenth of January according to the new style, N.S., Gregorian calendar*). I witnessed it from a window of the Winter Palace, to which I had graciously been permitted access. Though the weather that day was very mild for the season which is usually one of extreme cold, it would have been painful for me, still not being thoroughly acclimatised, to stand for an hour or two, bareheaded, on the icy quay where the wind always blows with bitter force. The vast rooms of the palace were filled with an elite crowd: high dignitaries, ministers, the diplomatic corps, generals embroidered with gold, all of them decorated with stars and medals, came and went between rows of soldiers in full uniform, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Divine Mass was first celebrated in the palace chapel. Hidden at the back of the platform, I followed, with respectful curiosity, the rites of this cult, new to me and imbued with the mysterious majesty of the East. From time to time, at prescribed moments, the priest, a venerable old man with a long beard and long hair, in a mitre like a mage, dressed in a stiff dalmatic of silver and gold,

supported by two acolytes, came from the sanctuary as its doors opened, and recited the sacred formulae in a senile but still clearly-accentuated voice. While he chanted his psalmody, I glimpsed, amidst the scintillating gilding and candlelight of the sanctuary, the Emperor and the Imperial Family; then the doors closed and the service continued behind the sparkling veil of the iconostasis.

The chapel choir, in full orange-red velvet habits laced with gold, accompanied and supported the anthems, with the marvellous precision of Russian choirs, anthems in which may be found more than one ancient theme from the lost music of Greece.

After the Mass, the procession paraded through the halls of the palace to further the baptism or rather the blessing of the Neva; the Emperor and the Grand Dukes, in uniform, the clergy with their gold and silver brocaded copes, their priestly costumes in the Byzantine style, the colourful crowd of generals and senior officers traversing the compact mass of troops lined up in the rooms, formed a spectacle as magnificent as it was imposing.

On the Neva, opposite the Winter Palace, near the quay, to which ran a carpeted ramp, a pavilion had been raised or rather a chapel on slender columns supporting a trellised dome, painted green and from which hung an icon of the Holy Spirit surrounded by rays.

In the centre of the platform beneath the dome, the mouth of a well opened, surrounded by a railing and communicating with the waters of the Neva, the ice having been broken at that place. A line of widely-spaced soldiers maintained an open space on the river, out to a fairly large distance from the chapel; they remained there bareheaded, their helmets placed next to them, their feet in the snow, so perfectly still that one might have taken them for signposts.

Under the very windows of the palace, the horses of the Circassians, the Lezgins and Karachai, and the Cossacks, restrained by their riders who constitute the Imperial escort, were pawing the ground: it is a strange sensation to see, in the midst of civilisation, and elsewhere than at the Hippodrome or the Opéra, warriors clad like those of the Middle Ages, in helmets and chain-mail, and armed with bows and arrows, or dressed in the Oriental style, with Persian carpets for saddles, a curved Damascene blade as a sabre decorated with verses from the Koran, as if ready to ride in the cavalcade of some Emir or Caliph.

What proud martial faces, what savage purity of type, what slim, supple, nervous bodies, what elegance of posture beneath those uniforms, so characteristic in style, of so happy a colour, and so well-calculated to highlight human beauty. It is truly singular that the so-called *barbarous* nations alone know how to dress. The civilised ones have completely lost all sense of costume.

The procession left the palace, and from my window, through the double panes of glass I saw the emperor (*Alexander II*), the Grand Dukes, and the priests enter the pavilion, which was soon so full as to barely accommodate the gestures of the officiants around the well's rim. The cannons ranged along the far side of the river, on the Strelka, fired in succession at the supreme moment. A big ball of bluish smoke, interspersed with flame, rose between the river's carpet of snow, and the pale-grey sky; then the sound of their detonation made the window-panes tremble. The peals of the cannons followed one another with perfect regularity, supporting one another. Cannon-fire has something solemn and dreadful about it, yet at the same time a

measure of exhilaration like everything that is powerful; its voice, roaring in battle, suits ceremony equally: it adds a kind of jubilation unknown to the ancients, who had neither bell-towers nor artillery... A sound that, alone, can speak amidst great multitudes and to be heard in the midst of immensities.

The ceremony was over; the troops departed, and the spectators withdrew peacefully, without embarrassment, without tumult, according to the custom of Russian crowds, the quietest of all.

Chapter 9: Racing on the Neva

— What now! Shall we return to our lodgings already? It is truly conscientious of me to stand outside for so long in such weather! Are you determined to freeze my nose and ears so? — I promised you ‘a winter in Russia’ and will hold to that same — indeed, the thermometer scarcely reads more than seven or eight degrees of cold today, an almost Spring-like temperature, and the Samoyeds who camped on the icy river were forced to leave, because it was so warm — so worry not, and follow me, bravely. The troika’s horses are pawing the ground before the door, and seem impatient.

— There is racing on the Neva today, so let us not neglect the opportunity to learn more of this northern sport, which has its own elegance, rules, and oddities, and arouses passions as lively as those created by English or French sport. Nevsky Prospekt and the streets leading to Palace Square, on which the Alexandrine Column stands, that gigantic monolith of pink granite which exceeds the Egyptian enormities in height, present a spectacle of extraordinary animation, almost like our Avenue de Champs-Élysées, when some steeple-chase at La Marche (*between Ville d’Avray and Marnes-la-Coquette, held from 1851*) makes the whole fashionable world set forth.

The troikas pass with a frisson of bells, drawn by their three horses spread like a fan and each of a different appearance; the sleighs glide on their steel runners, harnessed to magnificent high-stepping creatures that their coachmen wearing their four-sided velvet caps, and dressed in their blue or green kaftans, have difficulty mastering. Other four-seater sleds drawn by a pair, berlines and calèches their wheels removed and resting on iron runners curved upwards at the ends, head in the same direction, forming an increasingly crowded host of carriages. Sometimes a sleigh of the old Russian type, with a leather snow-guard stretched like a bowsprit, and a little horse with straggling mane galloping alongside, slips through the inextricable maze, twisting rapidly, splashing its neighbours with lumps of snow.

Such a concourse in Paris would produce a mighty noise, a prodigious din; but in St. Petersburg the picture is only noisy on the eye, if I can express it so. The snow, which interposes its mat of cottonwool between the pavement and the vehicles, muffles the sound. On these well-padded tracks in winter, the sound of the steel runners barely rises to the level of a diamond scratching a tile. The little whips of the moujiks fail to crack; their masters, wrapped in their furs, neglect to speak, since if they did, their words would soon freeze like those barbarous words that *Panurge* encountered near the pole (*see Rabelais’ ‘Gargantua and Pantagruel,*

Book 4, Chapter 56'), and all move with silent activity amidst a muted whirlwind — though nothing resembles it less, it has the same effect on one that Venice does.

Pedestrians are rare, because no one in Russia walks, except the moujiks whose felt boots allow them to keep their footing on pavements cleared of snow but often gleaming with ice, which are especially dangerous when wearing the essential pair of galoshes.

Between the Admiralty and the Winter Palace, one encounters the wooden ramp that descends from the quay to the Neva; at this place the sleighs and carriages progressing in several lines are forced to slow their pace, and even halt altogether, awaiting their turn to descend.

Let us profit from the moment's delay to examine our neighbours whom chance has brought together. The men are in fur coats, with military caps or fur caps with a beaver lining; hats are scarce. Apart from the fact that it is not in itself warming, the edges of a hat would prevent one raising the collar of one's overcoat, and the base of one's skull would thus remain exposed to icy gusts of wind. Yet the women are less warmly dressed. They appear to feel the cold less than the men do. A black satin pelisse lined with sable, or Siberian blue-fox fur, a muff of the same, is all that they add to their city dress, in every way similar to that of the most elegant Parisians. Their pale necks, which the cold fails to redden, rise bare and unencumbered from their shoulders, and their heads are protected only by some pretty French hat the rim of which reveals the hair, and the flap of which barely covers the nape of the neck. I thought with concern of the colds, neuralgia, and rheumatism these intrepid beauties risked, for the pleasure of being fashionable and showing their expensive headgear, in a country and at a temperature where a mere greeting is sometimes a perilous action; animated by the heat of their coquetry, they seem scarcely to suffer from the chill.

Russia, within its immense extent, houses many diverse peoples, and the type of feminine beauty varies greatly. However, I consider the characteristic Russian features to be an extremely pale skin, grey-blue eyes, blonde or brown hair, and an excess of weight due to the lack of exercise and the seclusion that seven or eight months of winter imposes. I would term the Russian beauties, on viewing them, odalisques, whom the Spirit of the North keeps imprisoned in a hothouse. They have a complexion with tints of cold-cream and snow, with shades of camellia at the cleavage, like those women of the seraglio, always veiled, whose skin has never been touched by the sun.

Into the whiteness of their faces, their delicate features part-merge, like the markings on the face of the moon, and those faint lines form physiognomies of hyperborean gentleness and polar grace.

As if to contradict my description, a lady in the sleigh halted near to my troika radiates a southern beauty, her eyebrows velvety black, possessing an oval, aquiline nose, a long, tanned face, lips red as pomegranate; she is of the pure Caucasian type, a Circassian, perhaps until yesterday still a Muslim. Here and there, a few eyes slightly slanted, rising towards the external angle of the temples, recall the fact that, on its eastern border, Russia touches on China — charming Finnish girls, with turquoise eyes, pale golden hair, and a pink and white complexion, display a northern variation which contrasts with a few beautiful Greek women from Odessa,

recognisable by the straight line of their noses, and large black eyes, like those of Byzantine Madonnas — all this forms a delightful whole, as these pretty heads emerge, like winter flowers, from piles of furs covered, themselves, by black or white bear-skins thrown over the sleighs and carriages.

We descend to the Neva via the wide wooden ramp, which is quite similar to those which, in the past linked the theatre to the arena in the Circus of ancient Olympia, and between the quay's bronze lions whose pedestals mark the landing stage when the river, free of ice, is ploughed by a host of boats.

Today the sky lacks the bright azure that it displays when the cold reaches nineteen or twenty degrees below. An immense canopy of pearl-grey mist, very soft and fine, holding snow in suspense, rests on the city and seems supported by its bell-towers and spires as if on pillars of gold. The calm and neutral shade gives their true value to the buildings with their bright nuances of colour highlighted by silver threads. Before me, on the far side of the river, whose appearance is that of a valley half-filled by an avalanche, I can see the rostral columns of pink granite which rise near the classical edifice of the Stock Exchange. Opposite the tip of the Strelka, where the Neva parts in two, the needle of the Peter and Paul Fortress raises its bold golden pinnacle on high, rendered more vivid by the grey tone of the sky.

The racetrack, with its wooden stands, its track demarcated by ropes attached to stakes planted in the ice, and its artificial hedges of fir-branches, extends across the river. The influx of carriages and people is vast. The privileged folk occupy the stands, if it be a privilege to stand motionless in the cold in an open gallery. Around the race-track crowd two or more lines of sleighs, troikas, carriages and even simple *telegas* and other more or less primitive vehicles, because no restrictions appear to hinder this popular pleasure; the river-bed belongs to all. Men and women, displacing their coachmen, climb onto his seat, and the folding seats to see better. Closer to the barriers stand the moujiks in sheepskin tulups and felt boots, soldiers in grey greatcoats, and the other folk who can find no better a place. All these people form a dark seething mass on the icy floor of the Neva, disturbing, at least to me, since no one seems to consider the fact that a deep river, as great as the Thames at London Bridge (*the new London Bridge was opened in 1831*), flows under this frozen crust, two or three feet thick at most, burdened at this one point by thousands of spectators and a considerable number of horses, not counting the vehicles of all kinds. But the Russian winter is faithful, and plays no tricks on the crowd of opening trapdoors beneath them and swallowing them whole.

Beyond the racecourse, the jockeys restrain the runners who have not yet competed, or walk the noble animals that had proved themselves, to cool them down, gradually, beneath their Persian caparisons.

The track forms a kind of elongated ellipse; the sleighs are not started abreast: they are placed at equal intervals, which the greater or lesser of speed of the runners decreases. So, two sleds are parked in front of the stands; two others at the ends of the ellipse, awaiting the starting signal. Sometimes a man on horseback gallops alongside a runner to excite it, and make it exert itself to the full, in emulation. The runner should only trot, but sometimes its pace is so fast that the attendant horse has difficulty matching its speed, and, once launched, abandons it to its own devices. Many coachmen, wholly sure of their charges, disdain to use this resource and

race alone. Any runner which gets carried away and takes more than six strides at the gallop is retired from the race.

It is wondrous to see these magnificent creatures, often costing mad sums, speed by on the smooth ice which, cleared of snow, appears like a strip of black glass. Steam issues in lengthy jets from their scarlet nostrils; a mist bathes their sides, and their tails seem powdered with diamantine dust. The nails of their shoes bite into the smooth and slippery surface, and they devour space with the same proud security as if they were trotting down the most well-trodden alley of some park. The coachmen, leaning backwards, hold the reins in tight fists, since horses as strong as these, pulling an insignificant weight, and not allowed to gallop, have more need of being restrained than urged on. They also find in the tension a means of support which allows them to let themselves go to the fullest extent. What prodigious strides these runners make, seeming to touch their heads to their knees!

No specific age or weight requirements seem to be imposed on the competitors: they are only required to achieve a set speed in a given time measured on a chronometer: at least so it seemed to me. Often troikas compete against one-horse or two-horse sleds. Each driver chooses the vehicle or team which he considers most suitable. Sometimes he even takes a spectator into his sleigh who fancies taking a turn, and the latter enters the race.

At the event I speak of a rather picturesque incident occurred. A moujik, who came, it was said from Vladimir (*the town, east of Moscow*), bringing a load of wood or frozen food to the city, looked at the course, from the seat of his rustic troika, as he manoeuvred amidst the crowd. He was dressed in a tulup shiny with grease, wore an old frayed fur cap, and was shod in crumpled white felt boots; a dirty untrimmed and curling beard graced his chin.

His team consisted of three small horses dishevelled, haggard, hairy as bears, dreadfully dirty, and bristling with icicles beneath their bellies, lowering their heads to bite the snow piled in heaps on the ice. A *douga* (*harness-bow*) as tall as a Gothic arch, variegated with bright colours in stripes and zigzags, was the finest part of the equipage, doubtless fashioned with strokes of his axe by the moujik himself.

This savage and primitive sled presented the strangest of contrasts alongside the luxurious sleighs, the triumphant troikas, and the elegant teams pacing around the racecourse. More than one ironic look mocked the humble vehicle — to tell the truth, he produced, on this rich field, the effect of a grease stain on an ermine coat.

However, the little horses, hair stiff with frozen sweat, glanced covertly, through the stiff locks of their manes, at the purebred creatures, who seemed to shun them in disdain, since animals, too, scorn poverty. Fiery gleams shone in their dark eyes, and they struck the ice with their small hooves, attached to slender stringy legs barbed like eagle feathers.

The moujik, standing on his seat, contemplated the race without appearing surprised by the runners' feats. Sometimes a smile was seen to form vaguely beneath the icicles on his moustache, and his grey eyes, sparkling with mischief, seemed to be saying: 'We could do as well.'

Making a sudden decision, he entered the competition and ventured his team. The three little badly-groomed bears shook their heads with pride as if they understood that they were

required to maintain the honour of the humble horses of the steppes, and, without being urged, they trotted so swiftly that the other competitors were alarmed; on their little legs they flew like the wind, and surpassed the thoroughbreds, the English stock, the Barbary horses, the Orloff breed, by a minute and some few seconds. The moujik had not presumed too much in entering his rustic team.

And he was awarded the prize— a magnificent piece, cast and chased by Jean-Baptiste Vaillant, the silversmith then in vogue in St. Petersburg — this triumph excited among the crowd, ordinarily silent and calm, a noisy bout of enthusiasm.

At the end of the lists, the onlookers surrounded the winner, and sought to buy his three horses; he was offered up to three thousand rubles apiece, an enormous sum for the animals, and to the man. To the moujik's honour, it must be said, he stubbornly refused. Wrapping his silverware trophy in a fragment of old cloth, he remounted his troika, and returned to Vladimir as he had come, not wanting to part, at any price, with the charming creatures which had made him the lion of St. Petersburg, for a while.

The racing was done, and the carriages left the river-bed to return to their various city districts; their ascent of the wooden ramps which united the Neva to the quay would provide a painter of horses, Nikolai Sverchkov for example, with the subject of an interesting and characteristic composition. To climb the steep slope, the noble creatures bowed their necks, gripped the boards slippery from their hooves and sat back nervously on their hocks; it was a scene of confusion full of picturesque effects, and which might have proved dangerous without the skills exercised by the Russian coachmen. The sleds mounted, four or five abreast, in irregular lines, and more than once we felt the hot breath of an impatient horse on our necks, who would have gladly stomped on our heads if he had not been vigorously restrained; often a flake of foam, fallen from a silver bit, froze on the hat of some frightened woman who uttered a little cry. The carriages looked like an army of chariots assaulting the granite quays of the Neva, like the parapets of a fortress. Despite the tumult, there was not a single accident — the absence of wheels makes it more difficult to be caught up with one — and the vehicles scattered in all directions, at a speed that would alarm the cautious Parisian.

It is a great pleasure indeed, after two or three hours spent in the open air exposed to a wind blowing from the polar snowfields, to return to one's lodgings, remove one's coat and galoshes, wipe one's moustache from which icicles melt, and light a cigar, since one is not permitted to smoke outside, in St. Petersburg. The warm atmosphere before the stove envelops one's numbed body like a caress, and restores flexibility to one's limbs. A glass of hot tea — in Russia one does not take tea in cups — renders one 'quite comfortable', as the English say. One's circulation, suspended by one's previous immobility, is re-established, and you savour a pleasure in being inside that the South, all exterior, knows not — but already daylight is fading, for night descends swiftly on St. Petersburg, and from three in the afternoon the lamps must be lit — the rooftop chimneys send up smoke, disgorging culinary fumes; everywhere the stoves are blazing, since one dines earlier in the city of the Tsars than in Paris. Six o'clock is the latest time when one eats, even among those Russians who have travelled abroad and adopted English or French habits — in fact, I am invited to dine in town; one has to tidy oneself,

don a dinner-jacket, and fur overcoat, and plunge one's thin little boots again into heavy fur-lined galoshes.

Night falls, the temperature drops; a wholly arctic wind blows snow like smoke over the pavements. The roadway screeches beneath the sled runners. Deep in the sky, swept of its mist, large pale stars shine brightly and, through the darkness, from the golden dome of Saint Isaac's, gleams a similar luminous spangle, like a sanctuary lamp that is never extinguished.

I raise the collar of my overcoat, wrap my knees in the bear-skin sleigh-cover, and, scarcely suffering from the thirty-degrees difference between the heat of my apartment and the cold of the street, soon find myself, thanks to the sacramental cries of *Na prava! Na leva! (To the right! To the left!)*, before the peristyle of the house at which I am expected. From the bottom of the stairs onwards, the hothouse atmosphere seizes and melts the frost on my beard, and, in the anteroom, the servant, an old retired soldier who has retained his military uniform, rids me of my furs which he hangs among those of the guests who have already arrived — for punctuality is a Russian quality — in Russia, Louis XIV would not have needed to say: 'I was almost obliged to wait!'

Part IV: Life Indoors, A Ball, The Theatres

Chapter 10: Life Indoors

The antechambers, in Russia, have a very singular appearance. The overcoats hanging on racks, with their loose sleeves and straight folds, are vaguely like human bodies dangling there; the galoshes placed below simulate feet, and the effect of these furs, beneath the meagre light from the small lamp hanging from the ceiling, is quite fantastic.

Achim von Arnim with his visionary eye, would see there the cast-off garment of some visiting *Bearskin* (see *The Brothers Grimm*, 'tale 101, *Der Bärenhäuter*'. Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim's folk-poetry collection '*Des Knaben Wunderhorn*' influenced the brothers to collect their tales). Ernst Hoffmann would house the strange ghosts of archivists or courtly advisors within their mysterious folds. I, being French, and limited to Charles Perrault's stories, see Bluebeard's seven wives in the darkened cupboard. Thus, suspended near the stove, the furs are impregnated with a warmth that they will retain outside for an hour or more. The servants are marvellously skilled at memorising which garments belong to whom; even when the number of guests makes the anteroom look like those of Michel's or Zimmermann's stores, they never make a mistake, and clothe each person's shoulders with the coat that belongs to them.

A comfortable Russian apartment brings together all the refinements of English and French civilisation; at first glance, one might believe oneself in the West End or on the Faubourg Saint-Honoré; but soon local character betrays itself in a host of interesting details. First, a Byzantine Madonna and Child, the faces and brown hands revealed amidst silverplate or vermeil tracteries representing draperies, shimmers in the light of a perpetual lamp, and warns you that you are neither in Paris nor London, but in Orthodox Russia, holy Russia. Sometimes an image of the Saviour replaces that of the Virgin — one finds saints depicted too, usually patronymic saints of the master or mistress of the house, clothed in silverwork carapaces, haloed with golden haloes. And then the climate makes demands that cannot be evaded. Everywhere, the windows have double frames, and the space left free between the two is covered with a layer of fine sand intended to prevent misting, and to stop the frost from decorating the panes with its quicksilver tracteries. Cones of salt are set there, and sometimes the sand is hidden by a border of moss. Because of the double-glazing, windows, in Russia, have no shutters, panels or blinds; one cannot open or close them, since the frames are fixed for the whole winter, and carefully sealed. A narrow skylight serves to refresh the air, a disagreeable and even dangerous measure due to the sharp contrast between the external and internal temperature. Thick curtains of rich fabric further suppress the traces that frost produces on glass, which is much more permeable than we think.

The rooms are larger and taller than those in Paris. Our architects, so ingenious in modelling cells for human bees, would carve out entire apartments, and often on two floors, from a St. Petersburg salon. Since all the rooms are hermetically sealed and the doors open onto a heated staircase, the temperature is fifteen or sixteen degrees at least, which allows the women to dress in muslins with arms and shoulders bare. The copper mouths of water-heaters emit warm air without interruption, night and day; the hot casings of stoves of monumental proportions, fashioned of beautiful white or painted earthenware, rise to the ceiling, and spread their warmth where the water-heaters cannot. Chimneys are rare; they are only useful, when present, in Spring and Autumn. In winter they would lose heat and cool the room. They are closed off and filled with flowers. Flowers are truly a Russian luxury! The houses are filled with them! Flowers receive you at the door and ascend the staircase with you; Irish ivy festoons the balustrades; planters on the landings front the wall-seating. In the window corners, banana trees spread their large silken leaves; talipot-palms, magnolias, and arborescent camellias mingle their flowers with the gilded cornices' volutes; orchids flutter in the air around lamp bases of curiously-worked crystal, porcelain, or terracotta. Sprays of exotic flowers spring from Japanese cones or Bohemian glass-vases, placed in the centre of tables, or on the corner of sideboards. They live there as if in a hothouse, and, in truth, every Russian apartment is a hothouse. In the street one is at the North Pole, indoors one can imagine oneself in the tropics.

It is as if, through this profusion of greenery, the eye seeks to console itself for the implacable whiteness of winter: the desire to see something which is anything but white is a nostalgic longing in this country where snow covers the ground for more than six months of the year. One even lacks the satisfaction of gazing at green-painted roofs, since they only change their white covering in spring. If the apartments were not transformed to gardens, one would think the colour green had disappeared forever from Nature.

As for the furniture, it is the same as ours, but bigger, ampler, as needed to suit the rooms' dimensions; but what is truly Russian, is the panelled booth, of frail and precious wood carved like the blades of a fan, which occupies a corner of the living-room and which is festooned with the rarest of climbing plants, a sort of confessional for intimate conversation, adorned within with couches, in which the mistress of the house, isolating herself from the gathering while remaining nearby, can accommodate three or four guests of distinction. Sometimes this cabinet is resplendent with ornate mirrors, decorated with engravings traced by hydrofluoric acid and mounted in gilded copper panels. It is also not uncommon to see, amidst cushioned footstools, back-to-back seats, armchairs, and capitonné-stitched sofas, some gigantic stuffed white bear padded in similar style, offering visitors a completely Polar seat; sometimes little black bear-cubs serve as stools, reminding one, amidst all the elegance of modern life, of ice floes in the North Sea, immense steppes covered with snow, and deep fir-forests: the real Russia that one is tempted to forget about in St. Petersburg!

The bedrooms generally lack the luxury and inventiveness that we bring to them in France. Behind a screen or one of those openwork partitions that I spoke of earlier, resides a small low bed, similar to a camp-bed or a couch — the Russians are of Eastern origin, and even the upper classes care little for the comfort of a good bed; they sleep where they find themselves, almost anywhere, like the Turks, often in their overcoats, on those large green leather sofas one sees

in every corner. The idea of making the bedroom a sort of sanctuary does not appeal to them; the old habits of tent life seem to have followed them into the heart of civilisation, though they are acquainted with all its traits of elegance and decadence.

Rich hangings line the walls, and if the master of the house prides himself on being a connoisseur, then doubtless red damask from the Indies, or dark embroidered brocatelle will appear, illuminated by powerful reflectors, framing, with the richest of borders, a painting by Horace Vernet, Théodore Gudin, Alexandre Calame, or Barend Koekkoek, or a work by Jan Leys, Jean-Baptiste Madou, or Herman ten Kate, or, if he wishes to display his patriotism, by Karl Bryullov or Ivan Aivazovsky — those are the painters most in fashion: our modern schools have not yet reached there. However, I encountered a few by Ernest Meissonier and a similar number by Constant Troyon. Our artists' style does not seem finished enough to the Russians. The interior I describe is not that of some palace, but that of a house, not a bourgeois house — that word has little meaning in Russia — but of a fashionable home. St. Petersburg is full of mansions and immense palaces some of which we will make known to the reader.

Now that I have given a rough description of the decor, it is time to dine. Before seating oneself at the table the guest approaches an oval table on which are placed caviar (sturgeon's eggs), marinated herring-fillets, anchovies, cheese, olives, slices of sausage, smoked beef from Hamburg, and other hors-d'oeuvres eaten with bread rolls to whet the appetite. These appetisers are eaten while standing, and washed down with vermouth, madeira, Danzig brandy, Cognac, and Kummel, a kind of anisette which recalls the raki of Constantinople and the Greek isles. Imprudent or timid travellers who cannot resist the pressure of polite insistence, end by tasting everything, not realising that this is only the prologue to the whole affair, and they sit down, replete, to face the actual dinner.

In all the fashionable houses, one eats in the French manner; however, the national style is present in a few characteristic details. Thus, alongside the white they serve a slice of very dark rye-bread, which Russian guests nibble at with visible sensuality. They also appear to enjoy a very tasty species of cucumber marinated in salt water, called *ogurtsy*, which, from the first taste, seemed to us none other than delicious. During the dinner, after having drunk *grands crus* of Bordeaux and Veuve Clicquot Champagne, only to be found in Russia, one partakes of porter, ale, and especially *kvass*, a type of local beer made from fermented rye-bread, an acquired taste, which seems to foreigners unworthy of the magnificent Bohemian glasses and embossed silverware in which its brown liquor foams. However, after a stay of a few months, I ended by taking a liking to *ogurtsy*, *kvass*, and *shchi*, the Russian national soup.

Shchi is a kind of stew made with mutton, fennel, onions, carrots, cabbage, soaked barley and prunes! These ingredients, strangely enough, when brought together, have an original flavour to which you become quickly accustomed, especially when experience of travel has rendered you cosmopolitan as regards cuisine and has prepared your taste buds for everything new. Another widely-made soup contains *kenepfles* (*dumplings*): it is a consommé into which, at the end, one drops dough mixed with eggs and spices, piece by piece, which on meeting the hot liquid forms small round or oval balls, somewhat like poached eggs in our Parisian consommés. With *shchi* one serves pastry dumplings.

All who have read Alexandre Dumas' *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* remember the dinner at which that former prisoner of the Château d'If performs his faery magic as if with a golden wand and serves a Volga sterlet, a gastronomic phenomenon unknown to the most sought-after tables outside of Russia. Indeed, the sterlet deserves its reputation: it is an exquisite fish, with fine white flesh, a little fatty perhaps, which in taste is half-way between smelt and lamprey. It can grow to large dimensions, but those of medium size are the best. Without disdaining the kitchen, I am no Grimod de la Reynière, nor a Baron de Cussy or Brillat-Savarin, and thus am unable to speak of sterlet in a sufficiently lyrical manner, and that I regret, because it is a dish worthy of the most precious of gourmets. For a diner of refined taste, Volga sterlet is worth the journey.

Grouse, whose flesh, perfumed by the juniper berries on which they feed, emits an odour of terebinth which initially surprises, appear frequently on Russian tables. They also serve enormous capercaillie. Their fabled bear ham sometimes replaces our classic York ham, and elk-fillets our commonplace roast beef. These are dishes that cannot be found on any Western menu.

Every nation, even when invaded by civilisation's uniformity, retains its particular tastes, and preserves some local dishes whose flavour foreigners have difficulty in appreciating. Thus, cold soup in which, among lumps of fish, ice crystals swim in a flavoured broth both sweet and vinegary at the same time, surprises exotic palates in the same way as Andalusian gazpacho does. This soup, however, is only served in summer; it is, they say, most refreshing and the Russians love it.

As most vegetables are grown in hothouses, they are always in season, and the early crop no longer features or rather is ever-present: in St. Petersburg one can eat fresh petit-pois in any month of the year. Asparagus knows no winter, there — the shoots are large, tender, moist and completely white; one never sees the green tips that we prize, and one can attack them, equally, from either end. In England one devours salmon steaks, in Russia chicken croquettes (*Pozharsky cutlets*) — the dish became fashionable there after the emperor, Nicholas I, tasted it in a small inn near Torzhok (*the town, north-west of Moscow, near Tver, a nineteenth-century waystation on the route from St. Petersburg to Moscow,*) and found them good. The recipe had been given to the hostess (*Daria Pozharskya, the late innkeeper's daughter*) by an unfortunate Frenchman, who had no other means of paying his bill, and thus made the woman's fortune. I share the emperor's taste — croquettes made of minced chicken breasts are truly delicious! Allow me to mention cutlets à la Preobrazhensky also, which deserve to appear on the menu in all the finest restaurants.

I have only noted the particularities and dissimilarities; because in the great houses the cuisine is entirely French, and produced by French cooks. France supplies the world with chefs!

The greatest problem in Saint Petersburg is to find fresh oysters; since they come from afar, the summer heat spoils them; and the winter cold freezes them; one sometimes pays a ruble for a single one. Oysters priced so highly are rarely good. It is even said that a moujik who had become rich, received his freedom, for which he had offered enormous sums in vain — fifty or a hundred thousand rubles — for a barrel of fresh oysters gifted to his lord at a time when

they were nowhere to be found. I cannot guarantee the authenticity of the story, but, if an invention, it at least demonstrates the rarity of oysters in St. Petersburg, at certain times.

For the same reason, there is always a basket of fruit for dessert; oranges, pineapples, grapes, pears, and apples are grouped in elegant pyramids; the grapes, usually come from Portugal; but sometimes their pale amber ovals have ripened in the warmth emitted by heaters, in the soil of a hothouse half-buried in snow. In January, in St. Petersburg, I ate strawberries matured among green leaves in a miniature pot of earth. Fruit is one of the passions of Northerners; they obtain them at great expense from abroad, or force the rebellious nature of their climate to give them the appearance at least of ripeness, if taste and scent are lacking. Stoves, however hot they may be, are always an imperfect substitute for the sun.

I hope to be forgiven these gastronomic details — it is always interesting to learn how a nation dines: ‘Tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you who you are.’ The proverb, thus modified, is no less true. While imitating French cuisine, Russians retain the taste of certain national dishes, and those are the ones that, deep down, please them the most. The same is true of their characters; although they conform to the latest refinements of Western civilisation, they nonetheless retain certain primitive instincts, and it would not take much for even the most elegant, to go and dwell in the steppe.

When you are seated at the table, a servant in black clothes, white tie, and gloves, as impeccably dressed as an English diplomat, stands behind you, imperturbably serious in his appearance, ready to satisfy your slightest whim — you might well think yourself in Paris; but if you chance to look attentively at this servant, you will notice that he has a yellow complexion with a hint of gold, small black slanted eyes sloping upwards towards the temples, high cheekbones, a turned-up nose, and thick lips — the host, who has noted your gaze, says nonchalantly, as if it is the most natural thing in the world — ‘He is a Mongolian Tartar from the borders of China.’

This Islamic, or perhaps idolatrous, Tartar accomplishes his function with an automated regularity, and the most meticulous butler in the world would find nothing to reproach him for. He achieves the effect of a true domestic; but I would prefer it if he wore the costume of his tribe, a tunic with a metal belt buckled at the waist, and a lambskin cap; that would be more picturesque, though less European, while the Russians always wish to avoid the Asian look.

The whole dinner-service, porcelain, glass, silverware, and tiered centre-piece, leaves nothing to be desired, though lacking in specific character, except for the charming little platinum spoon with golden niello with which one tastes the desserts, and stirs one’s coffee, or tea.

The bowls of fruit, on platforms are mounted alternately with baskets of flowers and often a cordon of bouquets of violets surrounds the nougats, bombes and petit fours. The hostess graciously distributes these bouquets to her guests. As for conversation, it always takes place in French, especially if the host is a foreigner. Russians of any distinction readily speak our language, littered with all the idiocies of the day and fashionable turns of phrase, as if they had learned the language on the Boulevard des Italiens. They even know the French employed by our playwright Felix-Auguste Duvert and Augustin de Lauzanne (*his son-in-law*), so

particularly and profoundly Parisian that many a provincial fails to understand it. The Russians speak without a trace of accent, but are recognised by a slight cantilena not lacking in grace which I ended by imitating myself; they also rely on certain formulaic phrases, national no doubt, familiar even in those who are well-nigh fluent in an idiom which is not their mother-tongue: thus, they apply the word *absolument* (*absolutely*) in a strange way. One asks, for example: — ‘Is so-and-so dead?’ — They reply with an ‘*absolument*’ possessing the sense of the French ‘*oui*’ and Italian ‘*si*’. The words *donc* (*so*) and *déjà* (*already*) are often used, out of place, with an interrogative meaning— for example, ‘Have you ‘*donc déjà*’ seen St. Petersburg, or Madame Angiolina Bosio (*the Italian opera-singer*)?’

Russian manners are polished, warm, and of a perfect urbanity — I was surprised to find them familiar with the smallest details of our literature; they read a great deal, and such and such author little known in France is better appreciated in St. Petersburg. Our backstage gossip, the scandalous chronicle of the demi-monde, reaches the banks of the Neva, and I learned many a spicy detail regarding Parisian matters of which I was ignorant.

The women also have well-cultivated minds; they speak and read several languages with the ease which characterises the Slavic nations. Many have devoured Byron, Goethe, and Heinrich Heine in the original, and if some writer is presented to them, they know, by a skilfully-introduced quote, how to reveal that they have read and recall the author. As for their mode of dress, it is of the last elegance — more fashionable than fashion itself. Crinolines are as vast in St. Petersburg as in Paris, balloons of magnificent fabric. Numerous diamonds sparkle on beautiful shoulders, above very low necklines, and the bracelets at their wrists, gold chains from Circassia or the Caucasus, alone bear witness, through their Eastern style, that one is in Russia.

After dinner, the guests disperse among the salons. On the tables sit albums, art books, keepsakes, and landscape-prints that serve to maintain appearances for those who are embarrassed or shy. Stereoscopes, when rotated, provide entertainment with their moving pictures; sometimes, a woman rises, having yielded to a guest’s request, seats herself at the piano and, accompanying her own singing, plays some Russian national air or gypsy melody, in whose unfamiliar accents the melancholy of the North mingles with the ardour of the South, and which resembles an Andalusian *cachucha* danced in the moonlight, in the snow.

Chapter 11: A Ball at the Winter Palace

I am about to tell you of a festive occasion which I attended without being present, from which my person was absent though I was invited to witness it — a ball at court! — Invisible, I saw everything, yet without wearing Gyges’ ring on my finger, or a Kobold’s green-felt hat on my head, or possessing a talisman.

On Palace Square, covered with its carpet of snow, many a carriage was stationed, in a cold that would have frozen Parisian drivers and horses, but which to the Russians seemed not sufficiently rigorous to merit the lighting of the braziers beneath the kiosks with sheet-metal

Chinese roofs neighbouring the Winter Palace. The trees in the Admiralty grounds, frosted with diamonds, looked like large white plumes planted in the earth, and the pink granite of the triumphal column was coated as if with a layer of icing-sugar; the moon, which rose clear and bright, poured its stark light on the nocturnal whiteness, turning the shadows blue, and gave a fantastical appearance to the immobile silhouettes of the carriages, whose frozen lanterns, like arctic fireflies, punctuated the immense expanse with yellowish dots. In the background, light blazed from every window of the colossal Winter Palace, which seemed like a mountain pierced by caverns, illuminated by an interior fire.



The Winter Palace, 1800 - 1900
Picryl

A perfect silence reigned in the square; the rigors of the climate kept the curious away, who among us would not fail to have gathered to the signs of a celebration, even one viewed from afar and from the outside; and though there was a crowd, the surroundings of the palace are so vast that the onlookers were scattered and lost in that enormous space that an army alone could fill.

A sleigh crossed, in a diagonal, the vast white tablecloth over which the shadow of the Alexander column stretched, to be lost in the dark street which separates the Winter Palace from the Hermitage, whose aerial bridge bears some resemblance to the one (*the Bridge of Sighs*) over the Rio de Palazzo in Venice.

A few minutes later, an eye, which we need not suppose joined to a body, fluttered along the cornice which was supported by the portico of a gallery of the palace; lines of candles attached to the mouldings of the entablature concealed it behind a barrier of flame and allowed no sight of its faint gleam from below. The light hid it more effectively than shadow would have done; it vanished into the brightness within.

Seen from there, the long deep gallery extended in polished columns, its shimmering parquet floor, reflecting the gilding and candles, shining, its paintings filling the intercolumns, foreshortening making it impossible to discern their subjects. Already glittering uniforms were walking there, full court dresses trailed their waves of fabric. Little by little the crowd swelled and filled, like some variegated and sparkling river, the bed of the gallery, which seemed too narrow despite its ample dimensions.

The eyes of the whole crowd were turned towards the door through which the emperor was to enter. The doors opened: the emperor, the empress, the grand dukes crossed the gallery between the two lines of guests which had suddenly formed, addressing as they went, a few words, with a gracious and noble familiarity, to the distinguished personages on either side. Then the whole imperial group disappeared, silently, through the door which faced the first, followed, at a respectful distance, by the great dignitaries of state, the diplomatic corps, the generals and courtiers.

The procession had barely entered the ballroom before the eye was installed there, this time equipped with a powerful lorgnette. The room was a veritable furnace of heat and light, a glow that might make one think it on fire. Lines of light ran along the cornices; between the windows, thousand-armed candelabras flared like burning bushes; hundreds of chandeliers descended from the ceiling in fiery constellations amidst a phosphorescent mist. And all these lights, their rays mingling, formed the most dazzling illumination *a giorno* (*bright as day*) that ever shone, like the sun itself, upon a festivity.

The initial sensation, especially at this height, caused by leaning into the abyss of light, was a feeling of vertigo; at first, amidst the effluvia, rays, irradiation, reflections, and the bluish glitter of the candles from the mirrors, gilding, diamonds, gems, and fabrics, nothing could be distinguished. The swarm of scintillations prevented the eye from grasping the least form; but soon the eye's pupil became accustomed to the dazzling light and chased away the black butterflies that fluttered before it as they do when one gazes at the sun; from one end to the other it scanned the gigantic dimensions of that room, all in marble and white stucco, whose polished walls shimmered, like the jaspers and porphyries of Babylonian architecture in those mezzotints by John Martin, vaguely reflecting the lights and the objects they illuminated.

The kaleidoscope, with its congregation of colourful pieces constantly recomposed, forming new designs; the chromatope, whose pattern, through the seeming expansions and contractions of its rotating discs, becomes a flower, then changes its petals for the points of a crown, and eventually a swirling sun, passing from ruby to emerald, from topaz to amethyst around a diamantine centre, enhanced millions of times, they alone can give some idea of that mobile sea of gold, precious stones, and flowers, renewing its sparkling arabesques in perpetual agitation.

On the entrance of the imperial family this mobile radiance stilled, and the eye could untangle physiognomies and forms amidst the muted scintillations.

In Russia, court balls open with what is termed a *polonaise*: not a dance, but a sort of parade, procession, or torchlit march, which possesses a great deal of character. The participants separate so as to leave free a sort of path, to which they form the borders, in the middle of the ballroom. When everyone is in place, the orchestra plays a tune, in a majestic and slow rhythm, and the parade begins; it is led by the emperor giving his hand to the princess or lady he wishes to honour.

That evening the emperor, Alexander II, wore an elegant military costume which displayed his tall, slender, form; open at the waist, it was a kind of white jacket or vest reaching to mid-thigh, with gold frogging trimmed with Siberian blue-fox fur on the collar, cuffs, and around the borders, and starred at the side by medals of the grand orders. His sky-blue trousers, worn tight to the legs, ended in thin ankle-boots. The emperor's hair was cut short and showed his smooth brow, full and well-formed. His features, of a perfect regularity, seemed perfect as models for some gold or bronze medallion; the blue of his eyes gave a particular quality to the brown tones of his face, darker than his brow through travel and outdoor exercise. The outlines of the mouth had a sharpness of outline completely Greek and sculptural in nature; the expression of the physiognomy was one of majestic but gentle firmness, illuminated, at times, by a gracious smile.

Following the imperial family came the high officers of the army and the palace, the great dignitaries each giving their hand to a lady. Here was a veritable host of uniforms adorned with gold, epaulettes starry with diamonds, rows of decorations, enamelled plaques, and precious stones forming a centre of light on each chest. Some, the highest in rank and favour, had round their necks, more in friendship than as an honour if such is possible, a portrait of the emperor surrounded by gems, rare and valuable in nature.

The procession marches on and gathers recruits in its passage: a nobleman breaks from the ranks and tenders his hand to the lady before him, and the new couple, added to the rest, take their place in the parade, spacing their steps, slowing and accelerating according to the speed of the van; it is no easy thing to progress like that, holding the tips of one's partner's fingers, beneath the glare of ironic mocking glances: the slightest awkwardness in composure, the slightest stumble of the feet, the most imperceptible error in distancing oneself, is noticed.

Military habit saves many a man, but how difficult it is for the women! Most perform admirably well, and of more than one it might have been said: *Et vera incessu patuit dea!* (*A goddess was truly revealed in her step! Virgil's Aeneid: Book I, 405*) They pass by lightly, beneath feathers, their flowers, their diamonds, modestly lowering their gaze or allowing it to wander with an air of perfect innocence, manoeuvring, with an inflection of body or with a little kick of the heel, their flowing silks and lace, cooling themselves with a flickering fan, as much at ease as if they were walking alone on some path in the park: stepping forth in a nobler, more graceful, and simpler manner, before the onlookers, than any great actress ever achieved!

What renders the Russian court original is that, from time to time, some young Circassian prince joined the procession, flaunting his wasp-waist and puffed-out chest in an elegant and

sumptuous oriental costume, a commander of the Lezghin guards, or a Mongolian officer whose soldiers' weapons are even now, the bow, the quiver, and the shield. Beneath the white glove of civilisation was hiding, while offering itself to the hand of a princess or a countess, a slender Asian hand accustomed to gripping the narrow handle of a *kindjal* (*the double-edged Caucasian dagger*) between its brown and agile fingers. This seemed to surprise no one, indeed, what could be more natural than a Mingrelian (*Western Georgian*) or Muslim prince, treading the polonaise with a great lady from St. Petersburg, of Greek Orthodox persuasion! Were they not both subjects of the emperor of all the Russias?

The men's uniforms or formal garments are so bright, so rich, so varied, so charged with gold, embroidery and decorations, that the women, with their modern elegance, in the light and graceful current fashions, find difficulty in competing with their massive brilliance; but though unable to display richer apparel, they prove more beautiful; their bared shoulders and chests worth all the gold breastplates present. To support this splendour, they are obliged, like Byzantine Madonnas, to wear dresses heavy with gold and silver, jewelled pectorals, and radiant diamond nimbuses; and then dance, with those gilded shrines on their bodies! Do not believe in this all too primitive affection of simplicity though! Those simple dresses are, in point of fact, from England, and the two or three tunics superimposed, are worth more than any dalmatic with its gold or silver brocade; those bouquets on that tarlatan (*muslin*) or gauze dress are attached with diamond knots; that velvet ribbon has for a buckle or fastening a gem that one might believe detached from a tsar's crown. What is simpler than a white dress, of taffeta, tulle, or moire, with some clusters of pearls and a matching headdress: the hair in two or three folds of netting! But the pearls are worth a hundred thousand rubles, and no fisherman will ever draw ones rounder in shape, or of purer lustre, from the depths of the Ocean! Besides, by affecting simplicity they pay court to the empress, who prefers elegance to pomp; yet be sure that Mammon loses nothing by the adoption of such a fashion. Only at first glance, in swift review, could one imagine that the Russian women dress less luxuriantly than the men: that would be an error. Like all women, they know how to make gauze seem more expensive than gold.

When the polonaise has traversed the salon and gallery, the ball begins. The dances are not especially characteristic of Russia: there are quadrilles, waltzes, *redowas* (*a dance from Bohemia akin to the waltz*), as in Paris, London, Madrid, and Vienna, as in every place in the sphere of high society: an exception however is the mazurka which is danced in Saint Petersburg with a perfection and elegance unknown elsewhere. Local colour tends to vanish everywhere, but deserts the upper classes of society first. To find it, one must depart the centres of civilisation and descend deep amongst the people!

The spectacle, however, was charming: the participants, as they danced, formed symmetrical patterns amidst the splendid crowd who lined up to make way for them; in the whirlwinds of the waltz, dresses flared like the skirts of whirling dervishes, and, in the rapidity of their progress, the diamond knots, the silver and gold adornments flickered, like lightning, in serpentine flashes; while the slender gloved hands, placed on the gleaming epaulettes of the waltzers, looked like white camellias in vessels of solid gold.

Amidst the gathering, the first secretary of the Austrian embassy was evident, dressed in his magnificent Hungarian nobleman's costume, as was the Greek ambassador wearing the Greek cap, jacket trimmed with soutache (*flat braiding*), fustanella (*kilt*), and knemides (*leggings*) of the *palikari*.

After enjoying a bird's-eye view during its hour or two of observation, the eye was transported, via mysterious and labyrinthine corridors where the distant sound of the orchestra and the festivities expired in vague murmurs, beneath the portal of another salon. A relative darkness reigned in this room, of vast dimensions: it was where supper was to be taken. Many a cathedral is less immense. In the depths, amidst the shadows, were lines of tables with white tablecloths; in the corners, gigantic blocks of confused gilding shimmered, throwing out sudden rays, returning, in lightning-flashes, reflections originating who knows where: they were the sideboards. A velvet-covered platform's steps led to a horseshoe-shaped table. Lackeys in full livery, butlers, and head-waiters, giving a final touch to the table-dressings, moved to and fro in silent activity. A few scattered lights flickered on this dark backcloth, like sparks on scorched paper.

However, the candelabras were charged with innumerable candles, which traced out the surrounds to the friezes and the outlines of the arches. They showed palely in their many-branched holders, like pistils from the calyxes of flowers, but not the smallest flame trembled at their tips. One might have thought them frozen stalactites.

The dull noise of the approaching crowd could now be heard, like the sound of overflowing water — the emperor appeared on the threshold: it was like a cry of *fiat lux* ('*let there be light!*'). A subtle flame ran from one candle to another, as swiftly as lightning: all was suddenly illuminated, and torrents of light suddenly filled the immense room set ablaze as if by magic. The abrupt passage from twilight to the most dazzling radiance was truly magical. In our prosaic century every miracle requires a scientific explanation: threads of flammable gun-cotton (*cotton soaked in nitric acid then dried*) connected the wicks of the candles to one another, and the flames, kindled in seven or eight different places, spread instantly. The same method is employed in lighting the great chandeliers of Saint Isaac's Cathedral, where a thread of gun-cotton is hung like the strand of a spider's web, above the heads of the faithful. A gas light, lowered, lit, and then raised, could perform a like task; but gas, as far as I know, is not employed in the Winter Palace. Real wax candles alone burn there. Only in Russia do bees still contribute to the lighting.

The empress, along with a few distinguished guests, took her place, on the platform where the horseshoe table stood. Behind her chair, there blossomed, like a gigantic vegetal artefact, an immense sheaf of pink and white camellias trellised against the marble wall. Twelve large black servants, chosen from among the most handsome specimens of the African people, and dressed in the Mameluke style, white turbans neatly twisted, green jackets with gilded corners, wide red trousers held in place by a cashmere belt, the whole stitched and embroidered at all the seams, ascended and descended the steps of the platform, returning plates to the lackeys, or receiving them in their hands with those movements full of grace and dignity, even when engaged in servile employment, particular to Orientals. These Orientals, forsaking *Desdemona*

(see *Shakespeare's 'Othello'*) were majestically doing their duty, and granted the wholly European celebration an Asian stamp, though refined in its nature.

Without places having been designated, the guests seated themselves as they chose at the tables arranged for them. Rich, gilded, or silver ornaments, representing groups of figures or flowers, mythological or decorative and fanciful, garnished the board; candelabras alternated with pyramids of fruit and tiered cakes. Contemplated from above, the symmetrical arrangements of sparkling crystals, porcelain, silverware and bouquets of flowers, was even more readily comprehended than from below. A double row of women's forms, sparkling with diamonds, set with lace, reigned along the tablecloths, betraying their charms to the invisible eye, whose glance could also follow the parting line of their blonde or dark hair, amidst the flowers, foliage, feathers and gems.

The emperor circulated among the tables, addressing a few words to those he wished to distinguish, and occasionally seated himself, dipped his lips in a glass of Champagne, then walked away to do the same thing further on. These attentions, of a few minutes' duration, are considered a great favour. After supper, the dancing resumed; but night was falling. It was time to depart; the spectacle could do no more than repeat itself and, for a witness only ocular in nature, it no longer offered the same degree of interest. The sleigh, which had crossed the square to halt at a small door, in the alley separating the Winter Palace from the Hermitage, reappeared alongside Saint Isaac's cathedral, bearing a pelisse and a fur cap which failed to reveal a face. As if the heavens wished to compete with the splendours of Earth, the polar fireworks of an aurora borealis lit the night with flames of silver, gold, purple and mother-of-pearl, extinguishing the stars with its phosphorescent rays.

Chapter 12: The Theatres

The theatres in St. Petersburg have an appearance both monumental and classic. In general, they remind one, by their architecture, of the Paris Odéon or the Grand Théâtre de Bordeaux. Isolated in the midst of wide spaces, they provide ready access and departure. For my part, I would prefer a more original style, and it seems to me that it would have been possible to create such, with forms specific to the country, from which new effects might be drawn. But this reproach is not particular to Russia. The results of a casual admiration for antiquity adorn all capital cities with more or less exact copies of the Parthenon and the Maison Carrée (*in Nîmes*), reinforced with rubble, bricks, and plaster. Yet, nowhere are those Greek architectural orders more sadly out-of-place and inappropriate than in Saint Petersburg: suited to azure skies and the sun, they shiver beneath the snow which covers their flat roofs during the lengthy winter. Indeed, the roofs have to be swept, thoroughly, after every new fall of snow, which is a most telling criticism of the style chosen. Icy stalactites on the acanthus leaves of a Corinthian capital! What can one say? There is now a movement, in reaction to such things, in favour of the more Romantic Byzantine architecture of Moscow, a movement which I wish every success. Every country, when its spirit is not violated in the name of so-called good taste, produces its buildings as it produces its people, animal species, and vegetation, according that

is to the demands of climate, religion, and history; and what Russia demands is the Greek architecture of Byzantium, not that of Athens.

Given that reservation, it remains only to praise what is there. The Grand Theatre, or Italian Opera-house (*the Imperial Bolshoi Kamenny Theatre, not extant*), is magnificent, of colossal size, competing in dimensions with La Scala (*Milan*) or the Teatro San Carlo (*Naples*): the carriages park in a vast square, gaining access without difficulty or disorder. A few vestibules with glass doors keep the chilly air outside from bursting into the room and allow a transition from ten to fifteen degrees of cold to twenty to twenty-five degrees of warmth — former soldiers in veterans' uniforms wait at the entrance to take your furs, overcoat, and galoshes; they return them to you later, without ever making a mistake: this ability to recall the ownership of each set of apparel seems to be a Russian speciality. As in Her Majesty's Theatre, in London, one attends the Italian Opera in St. Petersburg dressed in a black coat, white cravat, and straw or light-coloured gloves, unless one has donned the uniform of some rank or function, which is most often the case; the women, coiffured, are in evening wear, with low necklines and bared arms. This rule of etiquette, of which I approve, contributes a lot to the glamour of the spectacle.

The floor of the Grand Theatre is divided in two by a wide aisle. A semi-circular corridor surrounds it, bordering the row of ground-floor boxes, allowing one to converse during the intermission with people of one's acquaintance who occupy them. This convenient provision, employed in all the principal theatres of all the capital cities except Paris, should be imitated there when the Opéra is rebuilt in definitive fashion. One can thus leave and return to one's place without disturbing anyone.

What strikes one at first, on entry, is the Imperial box; it is not installed, as with us, between the proscenium columns, but in the centre, in front of the stage. Its height takes up two levels of boxes; huge gilded shafts, overloaded with sculpture, support the velvet curtains raised by ropes with golden tassels, and a gigantic blazon of the Russia coat of arms, of the proudest and most fanciful heraldic form. It offers a beautiful ornamental motif, a double-headed crowned eagle, with outstretched wings and fan-shaped tail, whose feathers occupy the centre ground between crest and fleuron, and which grips in its outstretched claws a globe and a sceptre, with an inescutcheon of Saint George, and, about the inner shield like a necklace of medals of the various orders, coats of arms of kingdoms, duchies and provinces. No Graeco-Pompeian decoration could produce so satisfactory and appropriate an effect.

Instead of curtains with wide folds and noble fringes, the proscenium arch frames a view of the Peterhof Palace with its arcades, porticos, and statues, and its roofs, painted green in the Russian fashion. The fronts of the boxes, in regular alignment, in the Italian fashion, are decorated with white medallions, with elaborate gold frames containing figures and emblems, in a light and delicate tone approaching pastel, standing proud of the pink background. There are no galleries or balconies; the prosceniums, instead of being flanked by columns, are bordered by the same kind of large ornate and gilded poles as provide support for oriental pavilions; this arrangement possesses both grace and novelty.

It is not easy to define the auditorium's style, unless one borrows the word *plateresco* from Spanish which, properly applied, means 'in the manner of a silversmith', and designates a kind of architecture where ornamentation without constraint or rules is executed in a thousand

whimsical ways, with an exuberant and disordered richness. Here one sees rocaille work, interlaced garlands, chicory leaves, and florets, on whose multiple gilded surfaces the reflection of the lights play in a thousand brilliant gleams; but the general effect is cheerful, splendid, and happy, and the luxury of the room frames that of the spectators most effectively. In a theatre, this ornamental madness pleases me better than a sombre and correct mode of architecture. In such cases, a little extravagance suits the scene better than mere pedantry — velvet, gold, light in abundance, what more does one need?

The first row of boxes above the ground-floor ones is deemed the *bel étage* (*the main row*), and, without there being a formal ruling on the matter, the *bel étage* is reserved for the aristocracy, and the great dignitaries of the court — no untitled woman, whatever her wealth or respectability, would dare to be seen there; her presence amidst these privileged ranks would surprise everyone, and above all herself — here millions are not enough to erase the boundary.

The first rows of the orchestra stalls are reserved, by custom, for people of distinction; on the row which faces the musicians one sees only ministers, high officials, ambassadors, first secretaries of the embassies, and other notable and noted people — a foreigner who is famous in any capacity may sit there — the next two rows are reserved for the aristocracy — the fourth row receives bankers, sundry foreigners, civil servants of a lower order, and artists; but a merchant would not dare venture closer than the fifth or sixth row. It is a sort of tacit convention that no one has to invoke and which everyone obeys.

The familiar custom whereby people of such high rank seat themselves in the orchestra stalls surprised me at first; I saw the leading personages of the empire there. Having one's own stall seat, does not prevent one, however, from also taking a box for the family, but it is the preferred place, and this custom undoubtedly gave rise to the sense of reserve which ensures the ordinary public sit a few rows further back — this separation of orders should not surprise one, apropos of a Russia in which the *tchin* (*the military system applied to the general administration of the empire*) divides society into fourteen very distinct categories, the first class of which often contains only two or three people.

Opera and ballet are not performed on the same evening in St. Petersburg's Italian Opera house. They are wholly separate attractions to each of which its own day is allocated. The ticket prices for the ballet are less expensive than those for the opera. As dance alone must sustain the whole performance, the ballets are more extensive than ours: they extend to four or five acts with many changes of scene and costume, or two ballets are performed on the same evening.

The most celebrated names of opera and ballet have appeared at the Grand Theatre. Each star has appeared in turn, and shone beneath that polar sky, with brilliance undiminished. The power of rubles and a warm reception, overcame in them the imaginary fear of losing their voice or suffering from rheumatism. No throat, not a single knee has suffered in this land of snow where one sees the cold without feeling it. The tenor Giovanni Rubini, the baritone Antonion Tamburini, the bass Luigi Lablache, the tenor 'Mario' (*Giovanni Matteo de Candia*), the dancers Carlotta Grisi, Marie Taglioni, Fanny Elssler, and Fanny Cerrito, have visited, in turn, and been admired and acknowledged; Rubini himself was even awarded a medal; such

august approval animates artistic spirits, and shows them that they are properly appreciated here, though they often choose to make the journey somewhat late in their respective careers.

This year, the tenors Enrico Tamberlik and Enrico Calzolari, the baritone Giorgio Ronconi, the sopranos Angiolina Bosio and Marcella Lotti, the mezzo-soprano Madame de Bernardi, and the soprano Sofia Dottini, played leading operatic roles; Amalia Ferraris, the most perfect ballerina of them all since Carlotta Grisi's retirement, performed a ballet composed for her by Jules-Joseph Perrot, a choreographer without rival (*and master of the Imperial ballet in St. Petersburg from 1850 to 1858*). To be applauded for a ballet move in St. Petersburg, is no easy thing to achieve. The Russians are very knowledgeable as regards dance, and the concentrated gleam of their lorgnettes is formidable. Whoever has endured it and proved victorious may be assured of his or her technique. Their Conservatoire produces remarkable students and a corps de ballet which is unequalled in ensemble work, precision, and rapidity of movement. It is a pleasure to see the straight lines, the clear groupings which never lapse except at the right moment so as to re-form in a further arrangement; all those little steps keeping measure, all those choreographed battalions never disconcerted or confused in their manoeuvring! Here there is no chatter, no snickering, no glancing at the audience or the orchestra. It is truly a world of pantomime, from which speech is absent; the action never exceeds its boundaries. The corps de ballet is carefully chosen from among the students of the Conservatoire: many are good-looking, all are young and well-formed, and take their roles seriously, or their art, if you prefer.

The stage sets, richly worked, numerous, and most carefully done, are painted by German scenery-artists. The compositions are often ingenious, poetic, and skilled in execution, but sometimes overloaded with unnecessary detail which distract the eye and spoils the effect. They are generally pale and cold in colour; the German school, as we know, are not colourists, and this defect is more noticeable when you arrive from Paris, where we take the magic of decorative scenery to its extremes. As for the stage effects, they are admirably contrived; flight, trapdoors, visual transformations, lighting, all the theatrical tricks that complex staging requires are promptly and surely achieved.

As I have said, the auditorium is brightly lit; the women's dresses are highlighted, delightfully, by the purple velvet background of the boxes, and for a foreigner, the interval is no less interesting than the performance; one can, without impropriety, with one's back turned to the stage, view for a few moments, through one's opera glasses, these feminine types so varied and so new; some accommodating neighbour, with knowledge of the aristocracy at their fingertips, grants the correct title of princess, countess, or baroness to those fair or dark heads that unite the dreaminess of the north to an Oriental placidity, mingling diamonds and flowers.

In the shadows of the ground-floor boxes, a few theatrical celebrities, two or three Moscow bohemians in bizarre clothing, and a certain number of *Baronesses d'Ange* (*courtesans, a reference to the character Baronne d'Ange created by Alexandre Dumas fils, in his five-act comedy 'Le Demi-Monde, 1855'*) imported from the Parisian underworld, of whom I need not name the more notorious, intermittently sparkled.

The Théâtre-Français, also called the Mikhailovsky is located on the square of this name (*Mikhailovskaya Square, later the Arts Square*). The interior is conveniently organised, but

rather poorly decorated; the front rows of the orchestra stalls as in the Grand Theatre are occupied by Russians and foreigners of distinction. The performances are very popular, and the composition of the troupe leaves nothing to be desired: it includes Volnys, Naptal-Arnaut, Théric, Mila, Berton, Deschamps, H. Varlet, Vernet, Leménil, Pechena, and Tetard, who perform comedy, vaudeville, and drama, displaying their many talents of which my French readers are well aware. The actors compete for new works for their paid performances, on a Saturday or Sunday, and the results determine the week's offerings. Such pieces achieve their first performance in St. Petersburg at almost the same time as in Paris.

I cannot forego a certain pride on finding, thirteen or fourteen hundred miles from Paris, and on the sixtieth parallel north as regards latitude, that our language is widespread enough to supply an audience for an exclusively French theatre. What is termed *la colonie* (*the French colony*) in St. Petersburg scarcely fills half the auditorium; the Mikhailovsky theatre was rebuilt not very long ago (*in 1833*), to a richer and vaster plan; the opening was inaugurated by a speech in very well-turned verses, by H. Varlet, which Berton (*the actor Charles François Montan Berton*) spoke with great art, feeling and verve.

During my stay in the city of the Tsars, the famous black, American-born, English actor Ira Aldridge visited; he gave performances at the Circus Theatre, not far from the Grand Theatre. He was lionised in St. Petersburg, and one needed to book several days in advance to obtain a seat in the stalls of any consequence at one of his performances. Above all he played *Othello*. His natural skin-colour exempted him from the need for any make-up, either with liquorice-juice or coffee grounds; he had no need to sleeve himself in dark-coloured vestments. The role was his, and he needed no effort to enter into it. Thus, his entrance onto the stage was magnificent: here was *Othello* himself as Shakespeare created him, with his eyes half-closed as if dazzled by the African sun, and a relaxed and unconstrained Oriental attitude no European can imitate. As there were no English actors in Saint Petersburg, only a German troupe, Aldridge recited Shakespeare's original text, and his interlocutors, *Iago*, *Cassio*, *Desdemona*, replied to him in the German of August Schlegel's translation. The two languages, both of Saxon origin, did not clash overmuch, especially as far as I was concerned, who understand little English or German. I spent my time observing the play of facial expression, and the pantomimic and plastic aspects of the role.

But this mixture of languages must have seemed very strange to those who knew both. I expected an energetic, and tempestuous manner, fiery and somewhat wildly barbaric in the style of Edmund Kean; but this great tragedian, of African descent, doubtless to appear every bit as civilised as an actor of paler skin, adopts a thoughtful, restrained, classical, and majestic approach, reminiscent of William Macready. In the final scene, his fury is not excessive; he suffocates Desdemona methodically, and rages appropriately. In sum, as much as one can judge an actor in such a role, he seemed to me to display talent rather than genius, science rather than inspiration. However, let me hasten to say that it produced an immense effect and elicited endless applause. A fiercer, more savage Othello might have proved less successful. After all, Othello had lived among Christians for a considerable time, and the lion of Saint Mark had tamed the lion of the desert.

The repertoire open to a black actor might seem to limit him to similar roles; but when one thinks about it, if a white actor can smear himself with brown pigment to play a black-skinned man, why should a black actor not coat himself with white-lead pigment to play a pale-skinned role? This indeed was the case, since Ira Aldridge played King Lear the following week, while producing the required effect in doing so. A flesh-coloured skull-cap, from which hung a few silvery strands of hair, covered his head down to the eyebrows like a helmet; added wax filled out the curve of his nose. Thick makeup coated his dark cheeks, and a large white beard enveloped the rest of his face, down to his chest. The transformation was complete; Cordelia would not have thought her father black; never was the art of makeup demonstrated to greater effect. By a sort of well-conceived coquetry, Ira Aldridge had not whitened his hands, and they appeared, at the end of his tunic sleeves, like brown paws. I found his performance in the role of the old king superior to his efforts as the Moor of Venice. In the former role he acted; in Othello he was merely himself. He made superb moves suggestive of indignation and anger, alongside displays of weakness, senile tremors, and a kind of somnolent repetitiveness, appropriate to a man who is almost a hundred years old, and who passes from folly to madness, under the weight of intolerable misfortune. An astonishing thing, and one which shows how controlled his performance was: for he is of robust and mature strength. Ira Aldridge did not allow himself a single youthful movement all evening: his voice, step, gesture, everything signified the octogenarian.

The success of the black tragedian spurred Vasily Samoylov, the great Russian actor to attempt to emulate his achievement; he too played Othello and King Lear, at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, with a verve and power wholly Shakespearean. Samoylov is an actor of genius, in the style of Frédérick Lemaître: his performances are uneven, imaginative, often sublime, displaying flashes of inspiration. He delivers performances which are, at one and the same time, both tragic and comedic; and if he plays heroes admirably, his drunkards are no less well executed. He is, moreover, a man of the world, with an excellent manner. An artist to his fingertips, he paints himself in costume, and sketches caricatures as spirited in style as in intention. His performances were well-attended, but not as fully as those of Aldridge—it appears that Samoylov, in all conscience, could not bring himself to imitate an authentically black actor in the role!

Part V: Schchukin Market-Yard, Mihály Zichy

Chapter 13: Shchukin Dvor (*Shchukin Market-Yard, later the Mariinsky Market*)

Every city has its mysterious depository, distant from the centre, which one may fail to come across even after a long stay, though your habits lead you among the same network of aristocratic streets; its ossuary that is, where the soiled, muddy, unrecognisable debris of luxury is heaped, though still capable of attracting customers at fifth or sixth hand. There, are piled the charming hats, delicate masterpieces made by fashionable hatters, now hunched, withered, greasy, and good only for crowning learned donkeys; the black tailcoats of expensive cloth, formerly decorated with medals and stars, which had the honour of appearing at splendid balls; evening dresses thrown one morning to the maid; yellowed fabrics, frayed lace, bald furs, and unusable furniture, the soiled stratum of civilisation. Paris has its Temple quarter, Madrid its El Rastro, Constantinople its flea-market, and St. Petersburg the Shchukin Dvor, a place for odds and ends, which provides a most interesting visit.

Take a sleigh up Nevsky Prospekt, past Gostiny Dvor, a sort of Palais-Royal its arcades lined with elegant boutiques; at that point, utter the sacramental *na leva (to the left)* to your *isvochtchik*, and, having traversed three or four blocks, you are at your destination.

Enter, if your olfactory nerves are not too delicate, via the market for shoes and animal hides; a strong smell of leather combining with a smell of sour cabbage to produce a very local perfume, more unpleasant to foreigners than Russians, and one to which it is difficult to become accustomed; but, if one wishes to see everything, one must not be too precious.

The booths of the Shchukin Dvor are made of planking; sordid nooks, with the immaculate white snow which silver their roofs this day granting them a hue dirtier yet, and more rancid.

Garlands of old greasy leather boots (and what boots!) with hardened uppers, recalling by their species of sinisterly caricatured silhouettes, the form of the animals their skin once clad, and ragged *tulups (sheepskin coats)* retaining a vaguely human imprint, constitute the composite adornments of the storefronts: all this, suspended in the air and enhanced with a few touches of snow, takes on, beneath a lowering yellowish-grey sky, a wretchedly gloomy appearance; the merchants are hardly cleaner than their merchandise: and yet, if Rembrandt had wished, he might, by scoring and hatching a varnished copper plate, have made, from these bearded men swaddled in sheepskins, some miraculous etching, and found, with his burin, character amidst ugliness. Art takes its spoils everywhere.

A large number of alleys intersect the booths of the Shchukin Dvor. Each area is dedicated to a particular type of business; several small chapels, whose interiors of which reveal, by the light of their lamps, the vermeil and silver plate of their miniature iconostases, gleam at the

corners of the intersections. Elsewhere in Shchukin Dvor, it is forbidden to strike a light; a spark would set fire to the piles of old planks and goods. Only the glorification of these icons merits the risk.

The ornate golden masses in this wretched, sombre place seem uniquely flamboyant. A multitude of customers and traders, passing in front of these chapels, cross themselves in the Greek manner. Some, the most fervent or least hurried, bow their foreheads to the snowy ground, murmur a prayer, and, rising once more, throw a kopek into the chest placed at the door. One of the most interesting streets in Shchukin Dvor is the one occupied by the icon painters — if one was not sure of the date, one might think oneself back in the Middle Ages, since the style of the paintings, the majority created but yesterday, is archaic. Here, Russia continues, in her imagery, the Byzantine tradition with absolute fidelity. Her illuminators appear to have served their apprenticeship on Mount Athos, at the monastery of Agia Lavra, painting according to the precepts penned by a monk there, a student of Manuel Panselinos, the Raphael of this unique art, wherein the over-precise imitation of Nature is seen as a species of idolatry.

The shops are covered with images from floor to roof. Here are Madonnas with brown faces, copied after the portrait of the Virgin painted by Saint Luke, on a gold or silver ground; depictions of Christ and the saints, appreciated the more by devotees the more primitive and barbarous they appear; paintings portraying scenes from the Old and New Testaments displaying a multitude of figures in symmetrical and stiff poses, deliberately dark in colour, and coated with yellow varnish like reed cases and Persian mirror-frames, to simulate the smoky deposit of centuries; bronze plaques hinged like Japanese screens or triptych panels, framing a series of pious bas-reliefs; oxidised silver crosses, of a charming Graeco-Byzantine form, on which a whole world of microscopic figures, crowded between inscriptions in Old Church Slavonic, play out the sacred drama of Golgotha; historical book covers, and a thousand other small devotional objects.

Some of these images, more carefully finished, more richly gilded or plated, command fairly elevated prices. They have no great artistic value; but all, even the crudest, are of an astonishing character. The primitive nature of their shapes, the rawness of their colours, the mixture of goldsmith's work and portraiture grant them a hieratic and solemn stamp more suited perhaps than skilful representation to the stimulation of piety. These images are identical to those the artists' ancestors revered. Immutable as dogma, they have been perpetuated from century to century; artistic fashion left them unaffected, since to correct them, despite their barbarity and naivety, would have seemed like sacrilege. The darker, smokier, and stiffer the Madonna, the more she inspires trust among the faithful on whom her great dark eyes, still as eternity, gaze.

It is true to say that the images of Schchukin Dvor, are like our wood-block engravings from Épinal (*in the department of Vosges, where prints were manufactured, depicting topical subjects in bright colours*): the primitive style finds refuge there among popular subjects. In Saint Isaac's Cathedral, and other modern churches or chapels, while maintaining the general appearance and sacred attitude, the artists were not afraid to grant their Madonnas all the ideal beauty they could — they also cleansed the savage bearded saints of their dark-brown varnish

to restore a human colouring. From the point of view of technique, the result is undoubtedly better, but the religious effect is perhaps diminished. The Russo-Byzantine style, with its gilded backgrounds, symmetrical shapes, and its applications of metal and gemstones, lends itself admirably to the adornment of churches, achieving a mysterious and supernatural air, totally in harmony with its location.

In one of these booths, I found a small copy of the *Virgin Adoring the Host* (in the *Musée d'Orsay*), by Ingres, depicting her as a Greek Madonna. Hands joined for prayer, fingertips delicately touching each other, it was quite well-done, despite the difficulty of the pose, while the head portrayed the character of the subject quite well. I had scarcely expected to encounter, in the Schchukin Dvor, the memory of that illustrious master. How and by what route had his masterpiece managed to serve as the source for a Russian image? — I bargained for it. It was sold to me for only ten rubles, because it was not plated or gilded. The picture-sellers are more neatly dressed than their neighbours the resellers of leather-goods. They generally wear the traditional Russian costume, a kaftan of blue or green cloth, fastened with a button near the shoulder and tightened at the waist with a narrow belt, and tall black leather boots; their hair, separated by a median line, is worn long at the sides and cut short at the nape of the neck, leaving the neck clear; their bushy curling beards, are blond or hazel in colour. Many have handsome, serious, intelligent, and gentle faces, and might pose for the depictions of Christ which they sell, if Byzantine art allowed the imitation of nature in sacred images. When they see you halt in front of their displays, they ask you to enter, politely, and though you might only buy a few trivial things, they have you review their whole store and, not without pride, draw your attention to the richest and finest pieces.

Nothing is more intriguing to the foreigner than these profoundly Russian booths. One can easily be deceived into buying a completely modern item thinking it antique; but in Russia the antique is dated to only yesterday, and the same forms, as regards religious representation, are invariably repeated. What connoisseurs, even experts, take to be the work of some Greek monk of the ninth or tenth century, often derives from the neighbouring workshop, and its yellow varnish is barely dry.

It is interesting to witness the naive and pious adoration displayed by the moujiks as they traverse this street, that one might term the Sacred Way of Schchukin Dvor. Despite the cold, they stand in ecstasy before the madonnas and saints, and dream of owning a similar painting to hang, illuminated by the light of a lamp, in a corner of their fir-wood cabin. In the end they walk on, regarding it as beyond their means. A few who are wealthier, enter, having felt the little book of paper rubles squeezed in their purse, to see if they have enough, and exit after much discussion, with their carefully-wrapped purchases. The bill is calculated in the Chinese manner, on an abacus frame with balls strung on iron wires and moved about depending on the numbers you wish to add.

Not everyone visiting Schchukin Dvor is a customer; one visits to stroll about the alleys, and those who make up the crowd vary greatly in nature: the moujik in his tulup, the soldier in his grey greatcoat elbows the man of the world in his fur coat and the antique dealer hoping for some increasingly rare find, since naivety has fled the place and, for fear of making a mistake, the traders there ask an extravagant amount for the least trinket. The regret of having once sold

for a low price some rare object of whose value they were unaware has made them more cautious than the Auvergnats on the Rue de Lappe (*thrifty scrap-merchants, and ultimately antique-dealers of the Temple district in Paris, see Balzac's character Remoncq in 'Le Cousin Pons'*). One can find everything amidst this bazaar; the books have their own area; French, English, German, the books of every country in the world, come to rest on this snowy shore among the Russian ones, all mismatched, wrinkled, stained, and worm-eaten. Sometimes patient investigators encounter some incunabulum among the jumble there, a first edition, a volume lost from circulation, arrived at Schchukin Dvor by a series of adventures which could provide the subject of a humorous Odyssey. Some of these booksellers have never learned to read, which does not prevent them from knowing their merchandise thoroughly.

There are also sellers of black and white, or coloured, prints and lithographs. One frequently comes across portraits of Alexander I, of the Emperor Nicolas, Grand Dukes and Grand Duchesses, high dignitaries and generals of previous reigns, drawn by hands more zealous than skilful, and which give a strange idea of their august models. One sees there *The Four Corners of the World, The Four Seasons, The Marriage Proposal, The Wedding, The Couch and Lever of the Bride*; every crude sketch and daub of our Rue Saint-Jacques (*in the Latin Quarter of Paris, and home to the Paris printshops*) is found there in many a copy.

Among the strollers and shoppers, women are in the minority; it is the opposite with us. Russian women seem to have retained the oriental habit of seclusion though nothing obliges them to do so; they rarely go out. Now and then, one sees a moujik far off with her kerchief tied under her chin, a coat of cloth or felt, like a man's frock coat, over her thick skirts, in her big boots of shiny leather, trampling the snow, where they leave prints that one would not think belonged to the more delicate half of the human race; the other women who shop the stalls are German or foreign — in the booths of Schchukin Dvor, as in the bazaars of Smyrna and Constantinople, the sellers are men. I don't recall seeing a Russian tradeswoman.

The second-hand furniture alley might provide the material for a domestic economics course, and grant more than one insight into Russian domestic life to one who could decipher, based on those more or less well-preserved remnants, the history of their previous owners: every style is there; fashions that have fallen into disuse form regular stratifications; each era superimposes on the rest those designs which are now deemed ridiculous. What dominates the whole are the large green leather sofas, a truly Russian item of furniture!

In another area, are the trunks, suitcases, korzinas (*baskets*) and other travel items, stacked to the middle of the path, and half buried under the snow; then come old cooking-pots, scrap-metal, dirty containers, split wooden bowls, worn utensils, and things which no longer possess a name in any language, cloths now merely lint and fit only for the ragpicker. If the temperature was not fourteen or fifteen degrees below, a walk through such a place would have its perils, but the swarms of insects have perished of cold.

Warmer weather would have increased still further the risk of my finding myself in the neighbourhood of the hand-organ player who would stubbornly follow me in hopes of gaining the few kopeks that the trouble of half-opening my coat would cause me to refuse him for some time. This barrel-organ player had a characteristically wan expression. A filthy, frayed rag circled his head like a derisory diadem; an old bearskin, once the apron of a droshky, covered

his shoulders and, cloaking the organ case, gave the poor devil a rump of the most singular shape which contrasted with his leanness. At first, I was at a loss to explain this hump which overlapped his kidneys, because only the crank of the instrument passed through the frayed fur, and the hand that turned it recalled the gesture of a monkey scratching itself greedily.

A kind of homespun sackcloth with a saw-toothed border, and felt boots, completed this costume worthy of Jacques Callot's burin.

The boots alone were a poem of misery and disrepair. Slumped, deformed, folded in pleats, they half rose from his feet, their toe-ends pointed like a Chinese roof, so that his legs appeared to bow under the weight of his torso and hand-organ as if they lacked shinbones. The wretched fellow seemed to be walking on two scythes.

As for his face, nature had been pleased to model it after the visage of Thomas Vireloque, that powerful creation by Paul Gavarni (*see the numerous prints extant*): a dodecahedron of a glowing nose, between two prominent cheekbones, above a broad grin, amidst a swarm of wrinkles, was the most perceptible feature, since the bushy hair and beard stiff with ice hid the contours of the face; however, beneath the straggling eyebrows sparkled steel-blue eyes expressing a kind of picaresque and philosophical mischief, while the Russian winter illuminated with northern rouge the flesh and rags of this copy of a Parisian lithograph; one might have termed him a tomato in oakum,

The hand-organ buried beneath the bearskin, as its master turned it with the crank, whined sadly, seeming to beg for mercy, giving forth asthmatic sighs, coughing and moaning like a dying man; it picked out, here and there, with the few teeth remaining on its barrel, two or three tunes from another century, quavering, ancient, obsolete in style, of a most comically dismal nature, with enough false notes to make dogs howl, but touching in their way, after all, like those refrains of the past whispered in a broken voice, and with wheezing breath, by a centenarian grandmother reverting to infancy — those phantoms of songs that, ultimately, scare us.

Certain of the efficacy of his instrument, and finding that he was dealing with a foreigner, for he would not have permitted himself his insistent manner where a Russian was concerned, the drole fellow, with the volubility of a macaque, turned the crank as if he had supported Pierre-Theodore Mengin, by *grinding out* those tunes which backed the eloquence of that famous seller of gold-coloured pencils. When he had rendered himself sufficiently intolerable, a large handful of small change silenced him; he received my kopeks smilingly, and, to show his gratitude, stopped the waltz, abruptly, that he had begun. The organ sounded a vast sigh of satisfaction.

I have described the picturesque side of Schchukin Dvor, which to me was the most entertaining — the market also contains covered arcades lined with shops selling foodstuffs of all kinds, smoked *sudaks* (*pikeperch, a ray-finned fish*) for the long Greek Orthodox Lent, olives, white butter from Odessa like that of Constantinople, green apples, and cranberries with which one fills pies; there are also vendors of new furniture, clothing, shoes, fabrics, and the usual vulgar goldsmith's trinkets: these places are still of interest, but no longer as singular as that Oriental bazaar scattered amidst the snow.

Chapter 14: Mihály Zichy (*The Hungarian Painter and Graphic Artist*)

If, in St. Petersburg, you walk on Nevsky Prospekt, which it is as hard to avoid doing as visiting Venice and not strolling about the Piazza San Marco, or in Naples ignoring the Rue de Toledo, or in Madrid the Puerta del Sol, or in Paris the Boulevard des Italiens, you will without any doubt note Beggrov's store. The pavement outside is always crowded with curious people contemplating the paintings, watercolours, engravings, photographs, statuettes, and even boxes of pigments, often in seven or eight degrees of frost. Above them their breath condenses in a cloud and forms something akin to a permanent fog; be sure to mingle your breath with theirs, and be ready to take the place of some spectator who remembers suddenly and fortuitously that he has business at the other end of the city beyond the Anichkov Bridge, in the Ligovka, or on the other side of the river at the far end of Wassili-Ostrow. But if you are not yet well-enough acclimatised, and the harshness of the cold bothers you, turn the door-knob boldly, and enter the sanctuary fearlessly. Beggrov is a young man with accomplished manners, a perfect gentleman, who though you may buy nothing, will receive you with exquisite politeness and show you its riches willingly. Artists, men of the world, men of letters, and connoisseurs enter his store as one enters Desforges' shop in Paris: they leaf through the albums looking at recently arrived engravings, they exercise their aesthetic taste, and learn the news of the world of art.

While I was there one day, looking at the heliographic prints, a large imperious watercolour set on an easel in a corner, attracted my gaze, by its warm and brilliant appearance, though the evening shadows dimmed its brightness; yet often paintings, especially when they are excellently done, possess, at that hour, a magical phosphorescence. One might say they retain for a moment, and concentrate, the departing light.

I approached and found myself face to face with a masterpiece which I was unable to attribute to any known master yet one to which all would have felt proud to add their signature. It was not by Richard Parkes Bonington, or Louis Boulanger, nor was it by Eugène Lami, George Cattermole, John Frederick Lewis, Eugène Delacroix, or Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, or any other of those who achieve in watercolour the force and richness of oil-painting; it was in a brand new style, a completely original work, a surprise, a discovery, an unclassifiable wine from the winery of art, but equal to the most famous cru, unusual but exquisite in its body, flavour, and bouquet.

It depicted a Florentine orgy, of the sixteenth century. Old noblemen, noted libertines, relics of ancient elegance, were supping with young courtesans. On the table gleamed pillaged and ravaged ewers, vases, drageoirs, and salt-cellars like that by Benvenuto Cellini, while the dregs of wine shed ruby and topaz hues among the bottles and glasses, and the various items of fruit, which had had rolled, amidst leaves, from the enamelled trays. In the background could be glimpsed, among transparent shadows which highlighted the group of figures, frescoes and faded tapestries, sideboards, dressers and carved cabinets, their form betrayed by some bluish ray or other. Ample brocade curtains fell powerfully in folds, displaying their warm, dull, rich tones, and the various ceiling partitions, obliged one rather to divine than inspect their gilded

and painted arabesques. The figures, by their ease of movement, the variety of their attitudes, their poses captured in flight, their bold foreshortening, and the free, pure flowing lines of the drawing, proclaimed an assured talent, nurtured by lengthy study, possessing a feeling for high art, and portraying the human body in all its aspects, even those his models lack, with that powerful ease which only belongs to the true master. The young women, in their loose, somewhat dishevelled dresses, laughed and cavorted, with the artificial glee of the courtesan, and only half-opposed the sallies they knew involved little risk to themselves; though, beneath the makeup and false laughter, fatigue, disgust and boredom were evident. One, a little apart, seemed to be dreaming of her young lover, or of her former innocence, the other seemed, in her ironic abandonment, desirous of tearing the wig from the ancient libertine kneeling painfully at her feet in his show of gallantry from another age; but the power of wealth tamed and quelled all such fantasies, and, in their complacent poses full of hidden deference, one perceived that women of this type never find rich men wholly ridiculous, even though they be old and ugly. Moreover, the noble lords, despite the marks of age and debauchery, rendered more evident perhaps by the efforts made to conceal them, still looked well in their clothes of an outrageous elegance, recalling the beautiful costumes in paintings by Vittore Carpaccio, yet whose youthful cut seemed to distort the heavy or bony limbs of their dilapidated bodies. Their wrinkled brows hinted at more than one deep thought worthy of Machiavelli and the wicked satisfaction of jaded old men, desecrating, at the cost of their gold coins, the delicate flowers of youth and beauty. Some seemed as happy as greenfly on roses; others declared, by their gloomy air, and the irreparable sadness displayed by an exhausted nature, their burden of vice; and all this with a use of colour, a spirit, a sureness of touch, a skill to marvel at; with a light trace of caricature arrested just in time, for painting is a serious thing and a motionless grimace soon becomes unbearable.

In one corner of this masterpiece was written a strange name, in Hungarian lettering, but possessing an Italianate resonance: Zichy.



Artist's Love - Mihály Zichy, 1861
Picryl

When I expressed my warm admiration for the work Beggrov simply replied: 'Yes, it's a Zichy,' finding it quite natural that Zichy had produced a magnificent watercolour, and opened a drawer which contained several works in sepia by the young (*thirty-year old*) master, of a character so varied, so contrasting, that one might easily have attributed them to different hands.

Then came a scene achieving a most pathetic and heartbreaking effect: a poor family lost in the steppe. At the foot of a block of ice, an unfortunate woman exhausted with fatigue, gripped by the cold, scourged by the wind, blinded by snow, had sought temporary and insufficient shelter. Seized by the intense cold, death has succeeded that irresistible desire for sleep, which is rather the effect of freezing than the onset of slumber; the nose is pinched, the eyelids distorted, the mouth frozen in its last breath, having yielding a final chilled sigh. Beside

the mother, lies a small child extended in death, half wrapped in rags, and drawn in foreshortened view, with incredible boldness and success. A more robust young lad of thirteen or fourteen years, whose lively young veins have better resisted the fatal torpor, bends over his mother; anxious, distraught, he is shaking her in wild terror, and calling to her with passionate tenderness, attempting to wake her from this stubborn slumber beyond comprehension. One feels that he has never before witnessed death, and yet from his inward fear, from his secret horror, one may guess that he has scented its presence. His beloved mother has suddenly scared him as a spectre might, a corpse has replaced her body, and a white shroud will soon have covered all.

Next is Doge Marino Faliero's wife, listening with dreamy interest to a young virtuoso playing the dulcimer before her, in a rich Venetian apartment opening onto a balcony with columns and trefoils in the Lombardic or Moorish style. Zichy, like Gustave Doré, has a lively feeling for the Middle Ages; he knows the architecture, furnishings, armour, costumes, and proportions, and reproduces them not by a painful and laborious imitation of the antique, but in a free and light way, as if the models were posed in front of his eyes, or as if he had lived in intimate familiarity with them. He does not emphasize, as Doré does, the grotesque and fantastic element, but renders all the more willingly the elegant aspects of his subject, while avoiding that genre involving troubadours and chivalry à la Louis de Marchangy.

A third design confused me utterly. The previous two recalled, one the sentimental pathos of Ary Scheffer and Octave Tassaert, the other Théodore Chassériau's etchings of *The Moor of Venice*, while neither resembled the large watercolour of the Florentine orgy. That which was before my eyes gave me the illusion of viewing one of the best, most lively and most spiritual sepias produced by Gavarni. Here was an officer of the Spahis or the Chasseurs d'Afrique at the moment of receiving with a most martial indifference, the farewell words of a tender beauty, who cried and sobbed on his shoulder in a dolorous pose guaranteed to move one; the Spahi, a Ulysses forever leaving, and well-accustomed to the complaints of Calypso abandoned on her garrisoned island, suffered the warm dew of tears, falling upon his arm like rain, with a bored, patient, dreary air, flicking with the nail of his little finger at the white ash formed at the end of his cigarette, his foot curved inward like a man who no longer has any regard for elegance. One cannot imagine the spirit, finesse, and sparkle of this light colour-wash, drawn from the end of the brush with an incredible sureness of hand, on the finest piece of textured watercolour-paper available.

From Gavarni we pass to Goya, that whimsical creator of *Los Capricos*, with *The Wedding Night*, another of Zichy's drawings. An old man has married a beautiful but poor young girl, and it is time for bed; the husband is unfastening piece by piece, not only his clothes, but several portions of his body. The wig, once removed, has revealed a bald and gleaming skull, such as Trappist monks polish beneath their fingers (*apocryphally*); a glass eye, placed in a glass of water, has left a black cavity like to that in which the graveyard worm makes its home; the imitation jaws of his false teeth, set on the night table, yawn hideously, and simulate Death's naked sneer. Nothing is more frightening than this ivory grimace, separated from its mouth, lipless and smiling all alone in its corner. It makes one think of that dreadful vision of Edgar Allan Poe's imagining: 'the teeth of Berenice' (see his short story 'Berenice').

The poor child, who had thought she was simply marrying an old man, and had overcome her virginal repugnance by thinking of her old mother who would be granted an easier life, and her younger sister saved from vice, recoils in terror at the sight of this spectre, a picture of lust and senility, bony and more than ready to join the host of the dead, extending trembling gouty hands towards her. She has leapt from the bed, and the reflection of the lamp betrays beneath the veil of her cambric nightgown the sweet, pure contours of her charming body, bathed in a modest shadow which nevertheless fails to hide her beauty. While, if executed by another hand, the subject of the 'marriage bed' might prove vulgar, any crudeness vanishes here in its sombre imaginative details, producing a powerful and original effect. If I have been forced to provide analogues, so as to grant Paris some idea of a painter unknown there, it is not a question of pastiche, copying, or imitation. Zichy is a spirited character who finds all within himself; he has never encountered, on the path of art, the masters whom he seems to resemble. He is unaware, even, of some of those names.

— 'How is it that Zichy failed to send anything to the Universal Exposition (*the first of the ten World Fairs held in Paris, that of 1855*)' I asked Beggrov, 'such that we have seen neither compositions engraved by him, nor encountered a single one of his paintings or drawings in any collection? Has jealous Russia kept the secret to herself and retained her monopoly on a talent so fine, new, and strange.'

— 'Yes', Beggrov replied, calmly, 'Zichy works mainly for the court and the city; none of his drawings remain long in my shop, and if today you have viewed a few gathered together, it is mere coincidence. The officials were not ready to receive them. *The Florentine Orgy* will be removed this evening, and your visit is most timely.'

I left the store, and like La Fontaine who, amazed by a recent reading of Baruch (*the Book of Baruch is part of the Biblical apocrypha, supposedly written by the prophet Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch ben Neriah*), stopped everyone he met crying; 'Have you read Baruch?' I began every conversation with the question: 'Do you know Zichy?'

— 'Certainly', my interlocutor always replied, and one day Monsieur Lvov, the director of the Conservatory of Drawing and Painting, said: 'If you wish to meet him, the thing is easily arranged.'

There is a sort of club in St. Petersburg called 'the Friday Society' composed of artists, which meets, as its name suggests, every Friday. Its location varies, each member receiving the rest in turn until the list of names is exhausted; then the honour of hosting the event passes to the next. Lamps with mantles are ranged on a long table, covered with vellum or canvas, cardboard, pencils, pastels, pots of watercolours, sepia, Indian ink, and, as Eugène Scribe might say in a stage-direction, 'all that is necessary for drawing.' Every member attending must execute a line-drawing, a plain or tinted sketch, or a watercolour during his visit, which remains with the Company and whose sale, directly or by lottery, augments an emergency fund for unfortunate or temporarily embarrassed artists; cigars and *papirosi*, as cigarettes are called in St. Petersburg, bristle, like arrows in their quivers, from holders made of carved wood or varnished earthenware, placed between the desks, so that each artist, without interrupting his labours, can obtain a Havana, or a *papirosa*, whose smoke soon blurs the landscape or figure being executed. Glasses of tea are passed around along with a few petit-fours; one swallows

the hot drink in small sips and rests for a while in conversation. Those who feel less than inspired rise and observe the work of others, and often return to their seat spurred on by emulation, and illuminated with a sudden glow.

At about one in the morning a light supper is served, at which the frankest cordiality reigns, inspiring discussions on art, travel stories, ingenious paradoxes, mad jests or one of those drawings, verbal caricatures truer than comedy, the secret of which the constant observation of nature grants to artists, and which provoke irresistible laughter, then each person departs, having produced a fine piece of work — sometimes a masterpiece — and having

been entertained, which is rarer still. I would like to see a similar society established in Paris, where artists, generally meet each other so infrequently and know each other only through their rivalry.

I was granted the honour of being admitted to the Friday Society, and it was at one of these meetings that I saw Zichy for the first time.

That evening, the Friday gathering, in Wassili-Ostroff, took place at the home of Andrei Lavezzari, a cosmopolitan painter, who had seen and drawn everything. Watercolours covered the walls, in which I recognised the Alhambra, the Parthenon, Venice, Constantinople, the pylons of Karnak, and the tombs of Lycia; walls often half-hidden by the gigantic leaves of tropical plants, with which the greenhouse temperatures reigning in Russian apartments allow the decoration of interiors.

A young man, aged thirty or so, with long blond hair, falling in disorderly waves; bluish-grey eyes, full of fire and spirit; a lightly curling beard, and pleasant and gentle features, was standing near a table, arranging his paper, his colouring brushes, and glass of water; he responded with a silvery laugh, a truly childish laugh, to a joke that one of his comrades had just addressed to him. It was Zichy.

We were introduced. I expressed to him, as best as I could, the deep admiration inspired in me by his *Florentine Orgy* and the other drawings of his I had seen at Beggrov's. He listened with a visible air of pleasure, unable to doubt my sincerity, combined with a modest surprise which was assuredly unfeigned, as if he were saying to himself: 'Am I indeed so great an artist as that?' Zichy is not unaware of his talent, but he fails to attach to it the importance that he should. He believes easy that which he achieves easily, and is a little surprised when one enthuses about something that only cost him three or four hours of work while smoking and chatting. A stroke of genius is swiftly dealt — when one possesses genius, and Zichy does.

He did me the honour of improvising a design on a subject taken from *Le Roi Candaule* (Gautier's short story published in 1844) not unprecedented for a tale that has already inspired a statue by James Pradier and a painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme. The moment selected was that in which Nyssia, unable to endure the fact of two living mortals knowing the secret of her charms, introduces Gyges to the bridal chamber, and directs his dagger towards the breast of the sleeping King Candaules. Beneath the swift and sure hand of the artist, a splendid Graeco-Asian interior was created as if by magic. The Heraclid monarch, muscular as an athlete, was shown as already collapsed on the cushions, while Nyssia, pale and slender, like a statuette carved from a column of Parian marble, let fall her last garment, in a voluptuous gesture,

rendered terrible by its meaning, being the agreed signal for murder; the doryphore (*knife-bearer*) Gyges is advancing as stealthily as a tiger, convulsively clutching the cold steel against his chest. The pencil moved unhesitatingly, as if it copied an invisible model.

Meanwhile, the other members of the Friday Club were also working with astonishing ardour and alacrity: Nikolai Sverchkov drew, in coloured crayon, a horse resting its head, amicably, against its companion's neck. Like Horace Vernet, Alfred de Dreux, and Achille Giroux, Sverchkov excels at delineating the patterns on the satiny rumps of thoroughbred horses; he has an admirable knowledge of the taut muscles of their hocks; he knows how to weave the veins on their hot necks, and make flame glow from their pupils and nostrils, but has a weakness for the little horses from the Ukraine, dishevelled, hairy, ungroomed, the little servants of the moujiks; he paints them harnessed to a *povoska* (*cart*), *telega* (*dray*) or sled, hauling it along, amidst snow and ice, through fir woods whose branches are bent by frost. One feels that he loves these brave animals, so sober, so patient, so courageous, so hard to weary; he is a Laurence Sterne to these good beasts, and the pages of *A Sentimental Journey* concerning the dead ass are no more touching than one of his sketches. I found there, delineating, in sepia, the foamy waters of a little waterfall bubbling over stones, an old friend of mine, Pharamond Blanchard, whom I had not encountered in Paris, but had passed many an hour with in Madrid, Smyrna, and Constantinople; it was necessary for me visit St. Petersburg in order to meet with him again, after six years apart.

Andrei Popov, the Russian Teniers, was sketching, with charming naivety, a scene of peasants drinking their tea; Andrei Lavezzari was attempting an *araba* (*carriage*), harnessed to oxen, navigating the narrow streets of an oriental city; while Adolf Charlemagne (*Sharleman*), the artist who created those just and true views of St. Petersburg which may be admired in Daziaro's shop-window, had added, on his own authority, an island to Lake Maggiore and was covering it with enchanting buildings, the construction of which would ruin the Borromeo princes, despite their wealth. A little further on, Lvov, the director of the Conservatory of Drawing and Painting, had illuminated, with a warm ray of sunlight, the public square of Tbilisi. Prince Maxintoff was portraying a squad of firefighters, in foreshortened aspect, from whom sped droshkys, hugging the walls with their wheels in haste. An Italian, Luigi Premazzi, who knew how, in his watercolours, so transparent and so warm, to transfer the level of interest provided by the traghetti (*landing-stage*) of the Piazzetta in Venice to St. Petersburg's equivalent in front of the Admiralty, was working on a sketch of the Fontanka Canal that Canaletto or Guardi would have been happy to sign; while, to render, in wholly oriental and magical hues, the Byzantine magnificence of the Kremlin and its colourful churches like to Hindu pagodas, Premazzi, had shown the elegant columns of a monastery's porch, highlighting its white facade against the blue background of a lake. Hans Hoch was completing the head of a woman, combining the pure Roman type, beloved by Louis-Léopold Robert, with a measure of Franz Xaver Winterhalter's grace. Ludwig Ruhl, with a lead pencil and a piece of cotton wool, was merging the vaporous seascapes of Théodore Gudin with those of Ivan Aivazovsky; Ruhl who, when supper is over, knows how to appear before his friends as, in turn, Macaluso (*the illusionist*) or Henry Monnier (*the caricaturist and actor*), if he is not running his agile fingers over the keyboard, playing a tune from the latest opera or improvising some other.

I, in turn, was obliged to draw something, since no non-artist is normally admitted to the society, with the exception of Monsieur Eugene I. Mussard (*secretary to Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna, and founder of an arts club*), who is exempted from having to do so, in recognition of his taste, spirit, and learning, and on the express condition that he will converse. A head in pencil, with a few flowers and strands of straw in the hair, was seen to pass for an *Ophelia* and indulgently admitted as an offering, and in that little Friday group I preferred not to be thought a philistine; at each meeting I attended, I had a place at the painter's table, and my scribbles became additions to the common portfolio.

However, Zichy was moistening his paper thoroughly and beginning to create those plays of light and shadow, that he contrasts so skilfully, when supper was announced. A macaroni dish of exquisite succulence and irreproachable local flavour appeared in the place of honour. A charming profile of an Italian lady, hanging on the wall, perhaps explained its classic perfection.

Next day I received a letter from Zichy in which he told me that having re-read *Le Roi Candaule* he had torn his drawing into a thousand pieces — the barbarian, the vandal! At the same time, he invited me to dinner at his house, in order to show me, while waiting for the soup, works more worthy of being seen, and capable of justifying somewhat the good opinion of him I had expressed. To the letter a little plan was attached, in his hand, intended to help me find his residence, a precaution which was in no way superfluous, given my perfect ignorance of the Russian language. Following the plan, and employing the four words which form the basis of any dialogue between the foreigner and the *isvochtchik*: *pryama* (*forward*), *leva* (*left*), *prava* (*right*), and *stoy* (*stop*) I arrived, successfully, at the Voznesensky Bridge, not far from Zichy's dwelling.

Despite the reserve that I have always imposed on myself during my travels, I will introduce the reader beside me to Zichy's house, without seeking to abuse the hospitality offered: if we halt at the threshold of the inner vestibule, we can, it seems, half-open the workshop door. Zichy will pardon us for bringing him visitors who have not been presented to him in the customary manner.

Every Russian apartment in Russia starts with a cloakroom of some kind, where each guest hands their overcoat to a servant who hangs it on a coat rack; then one takes off one's galoshes, as in the Orient one removes one's slippers at the entrance to a mosque or *selamlık* (*reception room*). The line of slippers in the foreground, which so surprised Parisians on first viewing Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting *Prayer in the House of the Arnaut Chief* (*shown at the Paris Salon of 1857*), may be found, in St. Petersburg, in every anteroom, where the master of the house is wealthy and powerful, famous, or simply kind; which tells you that there is always an abundant line of footwear in Zichy's cloakroom. However, that day not a single pair of galoshes, fur-lined boots, or felt-slippers was present beneath the rack of overcoats. Zichy had closed his door to others so that we might talk freely.

First of all, I crossed a fairly large living-room, in which a fine exhibit of hunting trophies occupied one of the walls. There were guns, rifles, knives, game-bags, and powder horns suspended from stag's heads, grouped alongside the pelts of lynxes, wolves, and foxes, Zichy's victims or models. One might have thought oneself in the home of a dedicated hunter, or at the

very least a sportsman, if a painting full of shadows à la Rembrandt and representing a prophet in his cave; a preliminary sketch of the *Hémicycle des Beaux-Arts* by Paul Delaroche, engraved by Louis Pierre Henriquel-Dupont; and a copy of *The Capture of the Smala* by Horace Vernet, in black and white, had not attested, along with some empty picture-frames awaiting their canvases, that one was in fact in the home of an artist.

Vases containing broad-leaved hot house plants were lined up against the window, undoubtedly to maintain the memory of green, a colour that vanishes from Russia for eight months of the year, which a painter, more than any other, has need of doing. In the middle of the room was a large work-table, ready for the Friday gatherings.

A second much smaller room followed. A double-sofa furnished its two sides, and towards the back of the room met, at a blunt angle, one of these elegant openwork partitions similar to a choir or parlour grille, a masterpiece of traditional carpentry, where wood, rather than wrought-iron, had been carved to form foliage, volutes, trellises, columns, clover-leaves, arabesques and caprices of all kinds; ivy and other climbing plants, whose bases were hidden in planters, trailed their natural foliage alongside the sculpted kind, to produce the most charming effect in the world.

By means of such pretty partitions, punched out with an implement, as is a fish-slice or paper-lace, one can semi-isolate oneself in the centre or corner of a living room; one can make of the space a bedroom, an office, a boudoir; a *retreat*, as the writers of Gothic novels say; one sets oneself apart without being secretive, and can immerse oneself in the general atmosphere of the apartment.

On the consoles formed by ornamental projections, stood copies of those two slender statuettes by Joseph- Michel-Ange Pollet, *Morning Star* and *Night*, moulded in stearin, and, behind the grille, we saw, attached to the wall, costumes characteristic of the Cherkessians, Lezgins, Circassians, and Cossacks from the Caucasian border, which composed, in the shadows, with their varied colours, a rich and warm background, against which the fine trellis-work of the partition was highlighted.

On the side walls, I noted *The Battle of the Huns* and *The Destruction of Jerusalem*, magnificent German engravings based on the Wilhelm von Kaulbach frescoes (*not extant*), that adorn the walls of the Neues Museum staircase, in Berlin, placed above a row of medallions in pastel, portraits of the members of the Friday Club, drawn

by Zichy and, opposite them, *The Assassination of the Duke de Guise*, depicted by Paul Delaroche, some studies, a few works in plaster and some other minor items.

In the room at the rear, where Zichy received us, my eye was first attracted by a suit of armour, made for a child of the sixteenth century, on the mantlepiece, where philistines would place a clock. The usual mirror had been advantageously replaced, to satisfy the same taste, by a cosmopolitan panoply of weapons: Toledan swords, Damascene blades, Kabylean *flissas*, Turkish *yatagans*, Javanese *kriss*, daggers, and rifles with long nielloed barrels and butts encrusted with turquoise and coral. A second exhibit, composed of quivers, bows, blunderbusses, pistols, Georgian helmets with chain-mail gorgets, steel *hookahs* from Khorasan, Persian support-forks for muskets, African assegais, and a host of other objects that

a love of the picturesque had brought together, covered an entire wall of the room — Zichy is a habitué of the Schchukin-Dvor market in St. Petersburg, and that in Moscow; in Constantinople, he could scarcely bear to quit the market for weaponry; he has a passion for such things, he seeks them out, some he buys some he barter for, exchanging them for one of his sketches; he obtains them, and as long as he unearths some barbaric, ferocious, and singular means of destruction he eventually makes his way home. By displaying all this bric-a-brac, Zichy proclaims like Rembrandt: ‘Behold my collection of antiquities.’

The other wall, at right angles to the first, is occupied by a polyglot library, testifying to the artist’s taste and learning; those of one who has read, in the original, almost all the masterpieces of European literature. The other two walls are pierced by windows, since the room occupies an angle of the house. They present, in the space between the windows, only minor objects unworthy of description.

Yet bored perhaps with this somewhat overlong description, you will doubtless say: ‘You promised to show us Zichy’s workshop, and up to now have only inventoried three more or less picturesquely furnished rooms.’ This is not for lack of good will on my part, but rather that Zichy has no studio, neither he nor any other St. Petersburg artist. The practice of painting was unforeseen in this city, which is nevertheless the Athens of the North; the house-builders failed to consider it; art must lodge where it can, and often seeks in vain, in some bourgeois apartment, the place to set up an easel, and a suitable patch of daylight; though neither the space nor means to construct a studio are lacking.

Zichy was working at a lectern, at the corner of a table near the window, hastily profiting from the pale remains of the day. He was finishing a large drawing in Indian ink, destined to be engraved. It portrays *Werther* (see Goethe’s epistolary novel ‘*The Sorrows of Young Werther*’) at the supreme moment of suicide. *Charlotte*’s virtuous lover having condemned his love as culpable and impossible of success, is preparing to carry out the sentence he has handed himself. On a table with a tapestry covering, a kind of tribunal before which *Werther* is seated, deliberating over his case, of which he himself is the judge, a half-exhausted lamp is burning, witness of this nocturnal debate. The artist has represented *Werther* upright, like a magistrate passing verdict, his mouth closed, his lines severe after having pronounced judgement, his delicate hand, that of a dreamer and idler, seeking among his papers for the butt of his pistol.

His face, illuminated from below by the glow of the lamp, has the disdainful serenity of expression of a man certain now of escaping moral torment, already looking at life as if from beyond it. We know how little the long, powdered, brushed-back hair, and fashions of seventeen eighty-nine, lend themselves to tragic expression. However, Zichy has found a way to make of his *Werther*, despite the vignettes of that age, and the celebrated blue tailcoat, an ideal, poetic and stylish creation. The vigorous effect is worthy of Rembrandt; the illumination from below, in striking the objects depicted, produces unexpected plays of light and shadow, imbuing everything with a truly magical air of fantasy; behind *Charlotte*’s lover a shadow, like that of a phantom, rises to the ceiling. The spectre seems to stand ready to replace the man about to vanish. One cannot imagine, apropos this drawing, the powerful depth of colour obtained with Indian ink, usually so cold in hue.

As we said, Zichy's genius is multi-faceted: you believe you know him, assign him a ranking, manner, genre; suddenly he sets before your eyes a new work that confounds you, and renders your appreciation of him incomplete. Who would have expected, after *Werther*, three large still lifes in watercolour, representing a fox, a wolf and a lynx, whose skins hang in his living room, and which he himself has slain? Neither Antoine-Louis Barye, nor Louis Jadin, nor Eugène Delacroix could do better. This skill alone would be enough to render him illustrious in Paris, and it is one of Zichy's lesser talents; here is a truth of tone, a scientific apprehension, a freedom of touch, a happiness of execution, an understanding of the nature of each subject, of which one had no idea. Each creature has, in death, retained its character. The fox, eyes blinking, the muzzle more tapered than usual, with a few fine wrinkles at the corners of its jaws, seems to be meditating on a supreme ruse which has failed. The wolf bares its fangs, the gums visible, as if it seeks, as a wild animal will, to bite at the bullet which has pierced it through. The lynx is sublime in its ferocity, aggression, and impotent rage: its horrible grimace, its convulsed rictus smile, reaches to the eyes where glazed pupils show, forming furrows in the flesh like those carved by sardonic laughter; it is like some heroic savage, treacherously slain by a white hunter wielding an unknown weapon, whose death throes express its contempt.

Each of these watercolours has occupied no more than a day's work. The rapid putrefaction of his models' carcasses demands this celerity of Zichy, which forces him, however, to sacrifice or relinquish nothing. His eye is so sure, his hand so certain, that every stroke of the brush counts.

If, on this showing, you thought to classify Zichy as a painter of animals, you would be strangely in error; he is just as much a painter of history: examine, instead, these magnificent compositions in pen, representing ancient Muscovite battles and the establishment of Christianity in Russia, works of his youth, where one feels, as yet, the German influence of his master, Ferdinand Waldmüller. If I were to claim that these drawings beautiful in style, heroic in manner, abundant in their inventiveness, were works of Kaulbach himself, it would not surprise you. I doubt that even Kaulbach could have displayed such vivid and ferocious barbarity in such a composition of Tartar warriors, where a lack of historical evidence allows the artist's imagination complete latitude. These drawings, most precise in their detail, would only need to be increased in size to act as excellent cartoons for the execution of frescoes on the walls of some palace or public building.

What say you to those severe compositions which, exhibited in Jean-Baptiste Goupil's window, engraved in the manner of Peter von Cornelius, or Fritz Overbeck, appearing as if they had originated from the serious Düsseldorf school, are followed by an airy fantasy, a dream of impossible love, flying through the sky, borne, by a chimera with curly black hair, from a pencil as delicate, as light as that of Vincent Vidal? A pink cloud, sculpted on the azure by the capricious breath of libertines? 'Fine!' you would exclaim, 'our young artist is a modern Watteau, a Boucher with an English elegance and the charm of the *Book of Beauty* (an annual edited by the Countess of Blessington); the burin of John Robinson or Edward Finden demands his presence.' That would certainly be a rash judgment because Zichy, laughing with that characteristic fresh childish laugh of his, would immediately take from his portfolio a dark

sepia toned sketch, improvised one evening, by lamplight, which equals in sinister force the most violent and dramatic of masters.

The scene is set in a cemetery; it is night. Faint moonlight shines through banks of cloud heavy with rain. Black wooden crosses; funeral monuments; pillars truncated or surmounted by an urn veiled by mourning crepe; spirits of the dead extinguishing the torch of life beneath their feet; all the dismal variations on sepulchral architecture are silhouetted darkly against a horizon full of mysterious terrors.

In the foreground, in a deserted patch of earth, two pickaxes are planted in the clay. A monstrous trio busy themselves in nameless work, like the witches in Macbeth. Grave-robbers, hyenas with human faces, who pillage tombs to steal from the dead their last treasures, a woman's gold ring, a child's silver rattle, a medallion of a lover or his beloved, a reliquary of the faithful, have unearthed a rich coffin, whose lid, lined with black velvet trimmed with silver braid, has revealed, on opening, a young woman, her head resting on a lace pillow. The shroud drawn aside shows her with chin on chest, lost in one of these eternal meditations which inhabit the grave's silence, an arm folded over a heart that has forever ceased beating and that the worm is dumbly invading. One of the thieves, with bestial mask, and a convict's form, wearing a filthy cap on his head, holds a candle-stub which he shelters with his hand against the night wind. Its flickering light falls, wan and livid, on the pallid corpse. Another robber, half buried in the pit, whose fierce features produce the effect of a bestial head among snouting swine, raises in his paws the slender hand pale as wax that the corpse surrenders to him with spectral indifference. He pulls from her finger, separated from the others and broken perhaps by this sacrilegious act, a precious ring, her wedding ring, no doubt!

A third scoundrel, aloft the mound of earth dug from a recent grave, listens, making an acoustic horn of his cap, to the distant bark of some dog disturbed by the gang's activity, or to the barely perceptible step of a guard making his rounds on the pavement. Ignoble fear grips his face darkened by shadows, while his trousers hanging in filthy folds, damp with dew, heavy with the soil of cemeteries, betray the limbs and joints of an ape. One can take the horrors imagined by Romanticism no further.

This drawing which I praise, all Paris shall see; it is done for myself: Zichy honours me with his masterpiece and a masterpiece it is (*the work is now in the Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest*). Contemplating it, I think of Rembrandt's *The Raising of Lazarus*, *The Suicide* by Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, *Hamlet and Horatio with the Gravediggers* by Eugène Delacroix; and the memories of those dreadful images harm him not at all. What magical effects of light, of chiaroscuro, how powerful a result obtained by such simple means! In the foreground a little red sepia, in the background some shading in Indian ink. The richest palette could not produce so fine a work.

To this frightening scene, which one might take at first sight for a banquet of ghouls, the artist opposes a Bacchante surprised by a satyr, in a style so pure, so like that of antiquity, that you wonder from what intaglio, what cameo, what Pompeiian fresco, what Greek vase once studied, this beautiful group is drawn.

From antiquity we return to the Middle Ages with a composition entitled *The Jewish Martyrs*. In this drawing, of major importance, Zichy has depicted in a manner as picturesque as it is profound the political and religious persecution which, on the pretext of avenging the death of a deity, was waged so fiercely against the unhappy people of Israel. In the depths of some cellar or subterranean storehouse, an inadequate refuge, a precarious hiding place, a Jewish family is gathered, forming a group expressive of desolation and terror. The solid doors of the vault, despite their bolts, bars and locks, have burst under external pressure, and the panels thrown from their hinges have fallen across the stairs. A flood of light has entered the mysterious retreat and betrays its secrets. Representatives of the spiritual and temporal powers appear at the top of the steps lit by this dazzling brilliance; the cross and the sword gleam in the sudden light, which has dazed the eyes of the wretched Jews, driven to their last hiding place. Advancing quietly, impassively, as implacably and fanatically as dogma, amidst a tumultuous squad of soldiers and a procession of monks, comes the justiciary, the lord, the feudal baron who has lent to the Church the material force at his disposal, and delivered the bodies; the Inquisition will deal with their souls. He is haughty and proud, in his doublet stiff as a breastplate, a striking personification of the Medieval. A monk, broad and square of face, displays, despite a girth like that of *Brother Jean des Entommeures* (in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*), a powerful and irresistible character, wearing his tonsure like a diadem: one feels that he represents something forceful indeed. Behind him the flat mask of a beadle, squashed by the fist of superficiality, bends forward, to look with an eye full of hatred and bestial curiosity upon the frail human brood surprised in its nest and trembling like doves beneath the gaze of a goshawk. This man, no less cruel than the others, will not fail to attend the auto-da-fé, and smile to see scorched flesh shrivel in the flames. But the truly frightening figure in the painting, on which the whole concept hangs, is a monastic spectre, shrouded in the folds of its robe, the hood engulfing, like the mouth of a Gothic *worm*, a wasted, emaciated head, livid in colour despite the shadow that bathes it, and as terrible as that of the monk, on the left, in Francisco Herrera the Elder's *Saint Basil* (in the Louvre). A brightness like the gleam of a hawk's beak reveals his thin, bony nose. A vague, dim phosphorescence lights the underpart of his hood, indicating the eyes, where the life of this dead face has taken refuge, of this living skull clothed with skin in which so many fierce passions coldly seethe, revealing for their part the unified idea which commands the whole.

The father of the family, a majestic Jew, whose large Oriental features recall the Biblical prophets, finding that all hope is lost, has risen to his full height; he refuses to stoop to useless lies, and his half-open simarre (*flowing robe*) allows a view of the pair of phylacteries over his heart, wherein are written in Hebrew lettering verses of the Old Testament and sentences from the Talmud. He will adhere to his faith, the ancient faith of Abraham and Jacob, and will die ignominiously, a martyr without a halo, for Jehovah, who is alike the God of his persecutors. His wife, once beautiful like Rachel, whom terror and sorrow have withered without defacing her noble features, bends backwards with arms clasped, her eyes closed, as if not to behold the dread reality; on her knees her grandson rests,

sleeping, amidst the tumult, the peaceful sleep of childhood, an infant as beautiful as the baby Jesus in the manger. The young mother, of celestial beauty, sinks against her father, hair dishevelled, head bowed upon her breast, arms inert, robbed of strength, thought, and will,

fainting with terror. Her pure Hebrew features realise all that one might have dreamed Rebecca in *Ivanhoe* to be (see *Walter Scott's novel of that name*).

In the foreground, in a daringly foreshortened pose, a thunderstruck young boy rolls about in fear. A little behind him on the right crawls his grandfather, in whom is concentrated the possessive instinct of his race; he seeks to defend, with aged trembling hands and arched body, the gold and silver vessels, that the Israelites did not neglect to take as they departed Egypt; at this supreme moment, he thinks only of one thing, to save what is his.

The execution of this drawing is broad yet finished; paper-stump and crayon are the means used. Bright, silvery whites are opposed to velvety blacks like those in the finest English engravings. *The Jewish Martyrs* would make a magnificent print, and that is what it is destined for, unless I am mistaken.

If Ernest Meissonier practised the art of watercolour, he would take after none other than Zichy. I saw a work by Zichy depicting a lansquenet (*a landsknecht, a German mercenary soldier*), dazed with drink, his long grey moustaches drooping over the table, on which he has set down his helmet, beside a jug of beer and a large empty glass; a work which could well adorn one of those snuff-boxes the lids of which depict Frederick the Great; but this is not the patiently worked finish of a miniaturist, everything is indicated by touches, by flat strokes, with a rare ease and firmness of application. The hand stroking the moustache is a masterpiece; the phalanges, the ossicles, the nails, the nerves, the veins, even a soldier's rough tanned skin, all are there. The cuirass creates a mirage of metallic reflections, while the friction of iron on its leather, abraded by long use, has left a bluish stain. In the soldier's eyes, the luminous points, the pupils, the irises, barely as big as the head of a pin, are easily discernible; no detail of his face illuminated by the sun, and reddened by wine, is omitted or sacrificed. His microscopic visage possesses the powerful contours of an oil painting of regular size, and gazing at it for a few minutes one knows the character of this man through and through. He is brutal but good-natured with a touch of cunning, a hearty drinker, and a great marauder. He has slain a few enemies no doubt, but he is an Achilles of the chicken-run, and how often has his rapier been used merely as a spit!

No artist's output looks less like Meissonier than that of Eugène Lami: Zichy reproduces the effects of both equally well, and what is singular is that he has never seen any of those two artists' works, artists who are so different from one another. His innate flexibility and the requirements of the subject alone lead him to these differing styles. His watercolour sketches depicting coronation scenes are marvels of spirit, grace and aristocratic elegance. Never has a painter of the *high life* rendered processions, ceremonies and gala performances with greater brilliance, richness

and pomp; the artist's brush is alive when expressing sparkling and joyful festive tumult; he is stylish when required to painting the interior of a Byzantine church with gold mosaics, and velvet curtains, against which august and sacred heads are highlighted, like icons. His sketch of the auditorium of the Bolshoi theatre in Moscow, during an official event, is one of the most difficult demonstrations of covert skilfulness, that can be seen; the lines of perspective extend from the balcony; the curves of the tiered galleries are full of women glittering with diamonds, and high dignitaries adorned with orders and crosses; points of white and yellow

gouache prick the flat areas of wash, and create a scintillating arc of gold and precious stones to dazzle the eye. A few precise facial details have captured the official and historical nature of the event, and all these beauties, all these magnificent personages bathe in a golden, diamantine, fiery atmosphere; an atmosphere illuminated by bright lighting, so difficult to render by means of mere paint.

Now, to complete my description, let me indicate Zichy's work in emulation of Francis Grant, Edwin Landseer, Louis-Godefroy Jadin, Alfred de Dreux and other illustrators of the hunt. For a magnificent book designed to record such outings, offered to the Emperor of Russia, the artist has produced decorative borders in the most exquisite taste. Each page provides space to enumerate the kills, arranged so as to leave an ample margin. In each of these margins the artist has drawn diverse hunting scenes, overcoming, in the most ingenious ways, the difficulties that the border's limitations presented. Here is a bear hunt, there that of lynx, elk, wolf, hare, blackcock, grouse, thrush, or snipe, all with the particular equipment required, and set in whatever landscape usually serves as its background: now there is a snow effect, now that of fog, a dawn or a dusk, a thicket or a heath, according to the retreats and habits of the animals involved. The wild creatures, beings of fur and feather, the thoroughbred horses, the purebred hounds, guns, knives, powder-horns, spears, nets, all the hunting gear, are delineated with finesse, truth, and incredible accuracy in a light tone that does not exceed the bounds of effective ornamentation, and harmonises with the silvery, red, or bluish landscape. Every hunt is conducted by a high official, by a nobleman, whose head no bigger than a fingernail is a delightful portrait in miniature. The album concludes with a measure of wit in the best taste. Among all these Nimrods, mighty hunters before God, Count A...who does not follow the chase, needed to appear. Zichy depicts him descending the palace steps, and advancing to meet the emperor, who is returning with the hunt. He thus appears in the hunting album without the artist departing from the truth.

I am obliged to halt there, without saying all I might; this hunting book alone, of twenty pages or so, requires a whole article, and yet I realise I have said nothing about the witches at the stake, or of Omphale, wearing a lion's skin in the pose of the Farnese Hercules, a charming symbol of grace mocking strength; but Zichy, like Gustave Doré, is a monstrous genius, a *portentum* (a *prodigy*), to use the Latin expression, an ever-erupting volcano of talent. My article is sadly incomplete; but I have written enough to make it clear that Zichy is one of the most astonishing individuals I have encountered since 1830, during a crucial period for art.

Part VI: Saint-Isaac's Cathedral

Chapter 15: Saint Isaac's Cathedral

When a voyager, having entered the Gulf of Finland, approaches Saint Petersburg, what first captures their gaze, is the dome of Saint-Isaac's Cathedral, rising above the city's silhouette like a golden mitre. If the sky is bright and a shaft of light descends, the effect is magical: this first impression is valid, and one to be embraced. The gleaming church of Saint-Isaac (*Isaakiyevskiy Sobor*) ranks first among the religious buildings which adorn this capital of all the Russias. Of modern construction, recently inaugurated, it may be considered the finest achievement of contemporary architecture. Few temples have seen less time elapse between the installation of their foundation stone and that of their capstone. The concept proposed by the architect, Auguste Ricard de Montferrand, a Frenchman, was realised in total, without any modifications or refinements to his plan except those implemented by himself during the execution of the work. He achieved the rare happiness of completing the building he had begun which, being as important as it is, might have been predicted to absorb more than one architect's life.



St. Isaac's Cathedral - St. Petersburg, 1889

Picryl

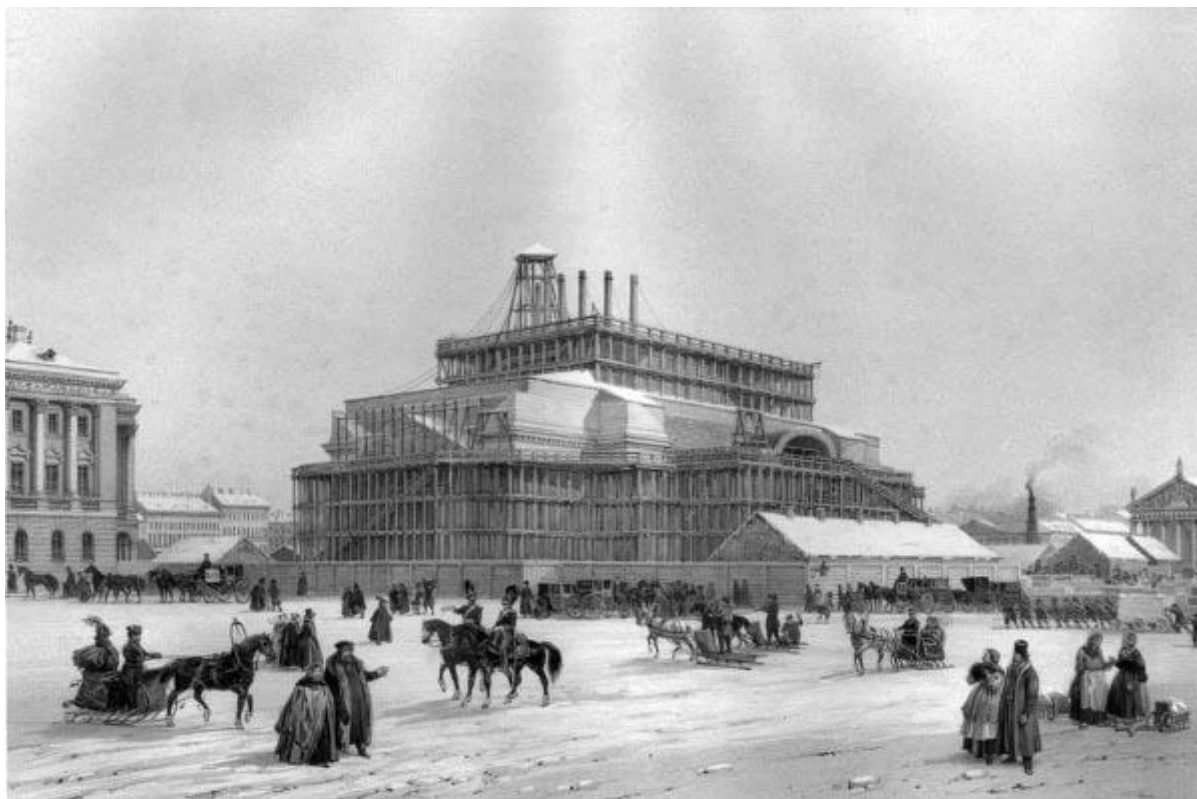
An omnipotent will, which nothing resisted, not even material obstacles, and which never shrank from sacrifice, operated on a large scale in undertaking this prodigious creation. Commenced in 1818, under Alexander I, continued under Nicholas I, and completed under Alexander II, in 1858, Saint-Isaac's is a temple complete, finished within and without, in a wholly unified style, to which can be attached specific dates and an architect's name. Unlike many another cathedral, it is not the slow product of time, a cavernous crystallisation of centuries, within which each era has, so to speak, secreted its stalactite, the tip of which the flow of faith, stopped or slowed in its passage, was unable to reach. The symbolic crane that towers against unfinished churches, for example Cologne's Dom (*Cologne Cathedral*) or Seville Cathedral, has never marred its pediment. Uninterrupted labour brought it, in a little less than forty years, to the point of perfection one beholds today.

In appearance Saint Isaac's seems a harmonious synthesis of Saint Peter's Basilica, Agrippa's Pantheon in Rome, Saint-Paul's in London, and the Dôme des Invalides and Sainte-Genevieve (*the Pantheon*) in Paris. In designing a domed church, Auguste de Montferrand must have studied buildings of that type, and taken advantage, of the knowledge gained by his predecessors, while nonetheless displaying his own originality. He selected for his dome a most elegant curvature yet one which, at the same time, offered the most resistance; he surrounded it with a diadem of columns, and set it between four pinnacles, borrowing an aspect of beauty from each previous achievement.

Given the regular simplicity of a plan which the eye and the mind grasps without hesitation, one would scarcely believe that Saint-Isaac's embraced in its seemingly homogeneous construction fragments of an earlier church which it was obliged to absorb and utilise, a church both dedicated to the same patron saint and venerated previously by Peter the Great, Catherine II, and Paul I, all of whom more or less contributed to its splendour, without however being able to achieve its definitive perfection.

The plans submitted to Emperor Alexander I by the architect were adopted, and the work begun; but soon doubts arose as to whether it was possible to bind the new sections to the old foundations in a solid enough fashion to avoid settling and disturbance, and so raise the dome, encircled by columns, to its great height. Petitions were even penned by other architects objecting to Auguste de Montferrand's plans. Activity slowed, though quarrying of the gigantic monoliths which were required to support the pediments and dome was continued, and on the accession of Emperor Nicholas I the plans, carefully revised, were deemed executable. Work was resumed, and its complete success showed the correctness of the calculations.

There is no need for me to pursue in detail the ingenious means used to seat this enormous mass, in an indestructible manner, on marshy ground, or to bring from a distance, and raise to their full height, its columns, each cut in a single piece, though the means employed, now half-forgotten, are no less interesting: the building, in its solidity, alone remains to our judgment.



Construction of St Isaac's Cathedral - Auguste de Montferrand, 1845
Picryl

The plan of the Cathedral of Saint Isaac of Dalmatia, a saint of the Greek liturgy unconnected to the patriarch of the Old Testament, is that of a cross with equal arms, differing in that respect from the Latin cross with its extended foot. The need to orient the new church towards the east while preserving the iconostasis already consecrated, combined with that of rendering the view of the Neva, and the statue of Peter the Great, from the main portico, visible from the rear also, would not allow of a main portal aligned with the sanctuary. Two entrances corresponding to two monumental porticos are thus set laterally in relation to the iconostasis, before which a third door opens onto a small octostyle portico, with a row of columns which are reproduced symmetrically on the opposite side. The Greek rite demanded this provision, which the architect was required to fulfil and yet reconcile with the building's appearance, given that it could not present its main nave to the river, from which it is separated by a vast square. It is for this reason that the arms of the gold crosses surmounting the dome and the bell towers are not parallel to the facades, but indeed to the iconostasis, so that the church has a dual orientation: on the one hand religious, on the other architectural; though the inevitable discord implied, given the site, is masked with such skill that its discovery requires close attention and long examination. It is impossible to divine from within, and only assiduous study of Saint Isaac's allowed me to see the fact clearly.

When you stand at the corner of Admiralty Prospekt (*Amiralteyskiy Prospekt*), Saint Isaac's appears to you in all its magnificence, and from that point you can assess the entire building. The main facade is visible to its full extent, as well as one of the side porticos; three of the four

pinnacles are visible, and the dome, with its rotunda of columns, its golden cap, and its bold lantern dominated by the sign of salvation, is highlighted against the sky.

At first glance, the effect is most satisfactory. The lines of the monument which might have appeared too severe, too sober, too Classical in a word, are happily enhanced by the richness and colour of the finest materials that human piety has ever employed in constructing a temple: gold, marble, bronze, and granite. Without descending to the tangle of colours displayed by systematically polychrome architecture, Saint Isaac's borrows from those splendid materials a harmonious variety of tones whose honesty augments its charm; nothing is painted, nothing is false, nothing of all this luxury is intended to deceive the Lord on high. Solid granite supports eternal bronze, indestructible marble covers the walls, and pure gold gleams from the crosses, the dome, and the bell towers, granting the building the Oriental and Byzantine character of the Greek Church itself.

Saint Isaac's rests on a granite base which should, I believe, have been more elevated in height; not that it is not closely related to the building, but, isolated in the middle of a square bordered by palaces and tall houses, the monument would have gained in perspective by being enhanced below, especially since a long horizontal line tends to appear bent in the middle, a truth that Greek art recognised by giving a slight slope from the central point to the architrave of the Parthenon. Likewise, a large public square, however flat it might appear elsewhere, always seems a little concave at its centre. The optical effect, which was not accounted for, makes Saint Isaac's appear too squat, despite the true harmony of its proportions. This disadvantage, which should not be over-exaggerated, could be remedied by giving a slight slope to the land, from the foot of the cathedral to the end of the square.

Access to each of the three porticos which act as portals, and correspond to an arm of the Greek cross which constitutes the building's plan, is offered by three colossal granite steps designed for a giant's legs, without pity or concern for those of ordinary human beings, though they are actually divided centrally into nine smaller steps opposite the entrances. The fourth portico precludes this arrangement: since the iconostasis abuts it internally, it lacks a door, and the three granite steps, worthy of the temples at Karnak, reign without interruption; except that, on either side, at the corner of the wall, each step, for a brief space, is divided in three, so one can gain access to the platform of the portico.

The entire base, of granite from Finland, reddish and speckled with grey, was assembled, dressed, and polished to an Egyptian perfection, and will bear, without strain, the temple that burdens it, for many a century.

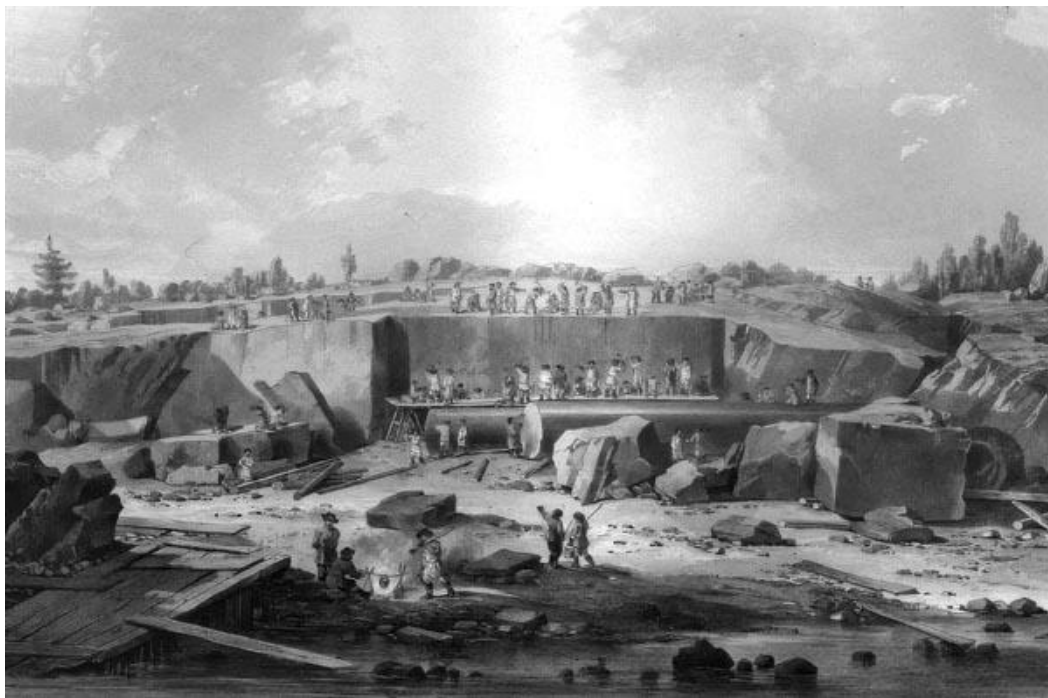
The main portico overlooking the Neva is, like all the others, an octostyle, that is to say composed of a row of eight columns of the Corinthian order, monoliths, with bases and capitals of bronze. Two groups of four similar columns, at the rear, support the ceiling partitions and the roof of the triangular pediment above, whose architrave rests on the first row; in all, sixteen columns which form a peristyle of richness and majesty. The portico of the opposite facade repeats this at every point. The other two facades, also octostyle, display only one row of columns of the same order and material. They were added during the execution of the building to the original plan, and they fulfil their purpose well, which was to adorn the somewhat bare sides of the edifice.

Bronze bas-reliefs, are embedded in the pediments of the tympanums which I will describe later when I consider the details of the building whose main lines I indicate here.

Once one has negotiated the nine steps cut into the three granite levels of the base, the last level serving as a stylobate for the columns, one is struck by the enormity of these pillars, less evident from afar due to the elegance of their proportions. These prodigious monoliths are no less than seven feet in diameter and fifty-six feet in height. Seen close to, they look like towers circled at the base by bronze, and capped with bronze vegetation. There are forty-eight of these in the four porticos, without counting those of the dome, which are actually only thirty feet in height. After Pompey's Pillar (*at Alexandria*), and that raised in memory of the Emperor Alexander I, these are the largest columns the hand of man has cut, turned, and polished. Depending on the weather, a shaft of blue light, like a flash of steel, runs shivering over a surface smoother than a mirror, and the purity of line, that no break interrupts, proves that integrity of each monstrous block which otherwise the mind might doubt.

One can scarcely believe the degree of strength, power and longevity that these gigantic columns, rising in a single thrust, bearing on their Atlas-like heads the comparatively slight weight of pediments and statues, express in their silent language. They have the durability of the bones of the earth, with which they alone seem worthy of perishing.

The one hundred and twelve monolithic columns used in the construction of Saint Isaac's Cathedral came from a quarry (*Pyterlahti in Virolahti*) located on a peninsula, in the Gulf of Finland, between Viborg and Hamina. We know that Finland is one of the richest countries on earth for deposits of granite. Some cosmic cataclysm, of a primeval nature, undoubtedly accumulated those enormous masses of beautiful material as indestructible as Nature herself.



Making the columns of St Isaac's Cathedral, Pyterlak quarry, Finland, 1911
Picryl

Allow me to continue my outline sketch. On each side of the projection formed by the portico, a monumental window pierces the marble wall, its cornice decorated with bronze, supported by two granite columns with bases and capitals of bronze, and a balcony with a balustrade supported by consoles; denticulated cornices, topped with attics, mark the major architectural divisions, and their projections cast favourable shadows. On each corner is a fluted Corinthian pillar above which stands an angel with folded wings.

Two quadrangular campaniles, emerging from the main line of the building, at their respective corners of the pediment, repeat the motifs of the monumental windows, namely granite columns, bronze capitals, balconies with balusters, and triangular pediments, allowing one to see, through their round-arched bays, their bells suspended without a frame, by means of a unique mechanism. A round, gilded cap, surmounted by a cross with its foot set on a crescent, caps these campaniles that the daylight traverses, and from which harmonious vibrations escape the bronze to seek the surrounding air.

Needless to say, these two bell towers are reproduced identically on the opposite facade. However, from where I stand, I can only see the dome of the third gleaming. The fourth is hidden by the mass of the dome.

On the two corners of the facade, kneel angels hanging garlands from lamp-holders of ancient form. On the parapets of the pediments are placed groups, and isolated figures, representing apostles. All this crowd of statues enlivens, happily, the building's silhouette, breaking its horizontal lines in an appropriate manner.

I have thus described, roughly, the main masses of what we might call the first floor of the monument. We now arrive at the dome which rises boldly towards the heavens from the square platform forming the roof of the church.

A round plinth, of three large receding mouldings, serves as the base of the tower and as a stylobate for the twenty-four granite monoliths of thirty feet in height, with bronze capitals and bases, which surround the core of the dome with a circle of columns, an aerial diadem, amidst which the light plays and gleams. In their interstices twelve windows are set, and on their capitals rests a circular cornice surmounted by a balustrade intersected by twenty-four pedestals on which stand, with beating wings, as many angels holding instruments of the Passion or attributes of the celestial hierarchy.

Above this angelic crown, placed on the front of the cathedral, the dome extends. Twenty-four windows appear between an equal number of pilasters, and, above their cornice rises the immense dome sparkling with gold and striated by ribs in relief curving down to the positions of the columns. An octagonal lantern, flanked by pillars and gilded overall, surmounts the dome, which terminates in a colossal cross, struck by the light, a cliché of heraldic language, victoriously established above a crescent.

There are in architecture, as in music, rhythmic notes of a harmonious symmetry which charm the eye as regards the former and the ear as regards the latter, without disturbing either. One's mind happily anticipates the return of a motif to a point designated in advance; Saint Isaac's Cathedral produces this very effect: it develops like some beautiful phrase of religious

music, supporting what its pure and classical theme promises, and not troubling the eye by any hint of dissonance. The pink columns form balanced choirs, singing the same melody on the four sides of the building. Corinthian acanthus-leaves flourish their green bronze on all the capitals. Bands of granite extend along the friezes like staves, the statues, through their similar or contrasting attitudes, recalling the necessary interweaving of a fugue, the great dome launching its supreme note towards the heavens amidst the four campaniles which serve as accompaniment.

No doubt the design is simple like all those drawn from Greek and Roman antiquity; but what splendid execution, what a symphony of marble, granite, gold and bronze! If the choice of this style of architecture may stir some regret in the minds of those who believe the Byzantine or Gothic style better suited to the poetry and needs of Christian worship, it should be remembered that it is eternal and universal, consecrated by the centuries, and by human admiration, and beyond the fashions of any one age!

The classical austerity of the plan adopted by the architect of Saint Isaac's precluded him from indulging in, as regards the exterior of this temple, with its severe and ancient lines, those fantasies wrought by a capricious chisel, those garlands, those scrolls, those cherubs and sprites interspersed with trophies, those attributes often little related to the building, which only serve to hide gaps in the architecture. With the exception of the acanthus-leaves and other sparsely used pieces of ornamentation required by its order of architecture, all the decoration of Saint Isaac's is borrowed from statuary: bas-reliefs, groups and isolated statues in bronze, that is all. Magnificent sobriety!

Foregoing my point of view, from the corner of Admiralty Prospekt, which I selected so as to swiftly sketch the general appearance of the monument, I will now describe the bas-reliefs and the statues as they present themselves from the square, as I circle the church.

The bas-relief of the northern pediment, that is to say the one which faces the Neva, represents *The Resurrection of Christ*; it is by Henri Lemaire, the creator of the pediment of the Madeleine, in Paris. The decoration is large, monumental, decorative, and adequately achieves its goal. The resurrected Christ springs from the tomb, standard in hand, in an upright pose, at the very centre of the triangle, which allowed the figure its full development.

On the left of this radiant apparition, a seated angel, with a thunderous gesture, pushes back the Roman soldiers assigned to guard the tomb, whose attitudes express surprise, fear, and the desire to oppose the preordained miracle; on the right, two angels, standing, welcome with reassuring kindness the holy women who have come to weep and sprinkle perfumes before Jesus' tomb. The Magdalene collapsed on her knees, lost in grief, has not yet seen the miraculous apparition; Martha and Mary, bearing vessels filled with cinnamon and nard, which they have brought so they might pay the honours due to the dead, witness that luminous figure, which the finger of one of the angels indicates to them, rising in glory. The fine pyramidal composition and the bowed poses are naturally explicable as due to the lack of space at the external corners of the pediment. The projections of the figures, according to their position, were calculated so as to produce firm shadows, and definite contours which avoid embarrassing the eye; a happy mixture of round and flat surfaces produces all the illusion of perspective that one can reasonably ask of bas-relief, without destroying the main architectural lines.

Below the pediment, on the granite entablature of the frieze interrupted by a tablet of marble, a legend in Slavonic characters is inscribed; in the liturgical script, that is, employed by the Greek Church. This inscription, in gilded bronze lettering, translates as: 'May the Lord answer you when you are in distress.'

On parapets, at the three corners of the pediment, statues of Saint John the Evangelist, and two of the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul are placed. The Evangelist, located at the summit, is seated and accompanied by his symbolic eagle; he holds a quill in his right hand and a roll of papyrus in his left. Saint Peter and Saint Paul are identified, the former by his keys, the latter by the large sword on which he leans.

Beneath the peristyle, above the main door, a large bronze bas-relief, rounded in the upper part like the arch which serves to frame it, represents *Christ on the Cross Between the Two Thieves*. At the foot of the tree of suffering the holy women are swooning in distress; in one corner, the Roman soldiers are playing dice for the tunic of this divinity in torment; in the other corner, woken by the last summons, the dead rise again, raising the shattered lids of their sepulchres. In the two side entrances, set in hemispheres, we see, on the left, *Christ Bearing the Cross*, on the right, the *Descent to the Tomb*. The crucifixion is by Ivan Vitali, the other two bas-reliefs are by Peter Clodt von Jürgensburg (*Pyotr Kalovich Klodt*).

The large monumental bronze door is decorated with bas-reliefs arranged as follows: on the lintel, *The Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*; on the leaf on the left, *Ecce Homo*; on the right *The Scourging of Christ*; below, in the oblong panels, two saints in priests' habits, Saint Nicholas and Saint Isaac, each occupy a niche with a shell-shaped arch; on the lower panels, two little angels kneeling, bear in the middle of a cartouche a radiant Greek cross, decorated with inscriptions. The drama of the Passion, in all its phases, takes place beneath the portico; the Apotheosis is gloriously resplendent on the pediment.

Let us now move on to the eastern portico, of which the large bas-relief is also by Henri Lemaire. It represents an event in the life of Saint Isaac of Dalmatia, the patron saint of the cathedral: the Emperor Valens was leaving Constantinople to go and fight the Goths; Saint Isaac, whose retreat was near the city, stopped him as he passed by, and predicted that he would not succeed in the affair, being in conflict with God because of his support for the Arian heretics. The emperor, angered, had the saint chained and imprisoned, promising him death if his prophecy was false, and freedom if it proved true. Valens was slain during the expedition, and Saint Isaac, once delivered, was honoured by the Emperor Theodosius. Valens is mounted on a horse which half-rears, frightened by the saint obstructing it in the centre of the road. It is not easy to achieve an equestrian statue in the round, and I know few that are entirely satisfactory; attempted in bas-relief the difficulty further increases, but Lemaire has happily conquered. His horse, its truth uncluttered by over-precise detail, as befits monumental statuary, bears its rider well, and the rider's figure thus enhanced produces an excellent effect, and dominates the groups around him without painfully-sought artifice. The saint has just delivered his prediction, and the emperor's orders have been executed. Soldiers burden the saint's outstretched arms with chains, as he pleads and warns. It would be difficult to reconcile the dual action of the subject more adroitly. Behind Valens, crowds of warriors are drawing their swords, seizing their shields, or donning their armour, to express the idea of an army

departing on an expedition. Behind Saint Isaac hides a more powerful army, in the heavens, of the poor and wretched, of women pressing their infants to their hearts. The composition has breadth, truth, and movement, and the lack of space imposed by the lower level of the triangle failed to harm the outer groups.

On the acroter of the pediment stand three statues; in the middle is Saint Luke the Evangelist, his winged calf next to him, painting the first portrait made of the Virgin, a model for subsequent Byzantine sacred images; on either side, Saint Simeon holds his saw, Saint James his book. The Slavonic inscription literally translated reads: 'In you, Lord, I have found refuge, let me never be put to shame.' As the iconostasis rests against the internal wall of this portico, there is no door, and therefore no bas-reliefs beneath the colonnade, which is only adorned with Corinthian pilasters.

The southern pediment was entrusted to Vitali. It represents *The Adoration of the Magi*, a subject that the great masters of painting have rendered redundant on canvas, but that modern statuary has rarely addressed due to the multiplicity of figures required, though that failed to deter the naive Gothic artists as regards their triptychs so patiently peopled. Here is a ceremonial composition, elegantly arranged, with an abundance of figures grouped a little too facilely perhaps, but easy on the eye. The Blessed Virgin, seated on the folds of her cloak which, by an ingenious idea of the sculptor, opens like the curtains of a tabernacle, offers to the wise men, bent or prostrate at her feet in oriental attitudes of respect, the little child, for their adoration, who will redeem the world, and whose divinity she already senses; this miraculous birth preceded by omens, these kings who have hastened from the depths of Asia guided by a star, to kneel before the manger with their gold vases and perfume boxes, all this troubles the heart of the ever-virginal Holy Mother; she is almost afraid of this child who is a god. As for Saint Joseph, leaning on a rock, he takes only a limited part in the scene, and takes these strange events on trust, without really understanding them.

Following the kings, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, sumptuously dressed characters abound, officers, gift-bearers, slaves, richly populating either end of the composition. The shepherds, loins clad in goatskin, slip in behind them, adoring the child from afar. Into the space between the groups, an ox with gleaming muzzle thrusts its head. But why fail to show the donkey? It too tugged its mouthful of straw from the manger, and warmed with its breath the future Saviour of the world who had been born not long since in that stable. Art does not have the right to be more precious than the Divine. Jesus did not despise the donkey, for it was on a donkey that he entered Jerusalem.

Three statues, pursuing the constant theme of the architectural decoration, appear on the acroter of this facade: at the top, Saint Matthew writing as the angel dictates; at either end, Saint Andrew with his saltire, and Saint Philip with his book and his pastoral cross. The inscription on the frieze reads: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer.'

Entering beneath the peristyle, we find the same arrangement as in the north portico. Above the main door, within the tympanum of the arch, is framed a large galvanoplastic (*electrotype*) bas-relief, similar to that of the crucifixion, representing the Adoration of the Shepherds. It is a repetition of the previous scene, already familiar to us. The central group is much the same, though the Virgin turns more sympathetically towards the shepherds, and with a freer

movement; the shepherds bear rustic offerings to the newborn, in contrast to the wise men who placed rich gifts at his feet. She is not enthroned, and is gentle with these poor, humble, and simple men who give of their best. She presents her child to them with complete assurance, opening the swaddling clothes to show them how firmly he is built; and the shepherds, bowing, or on one knee, admire and worship him, trusting in the word of the angel; a woman with a basket of fruit on the shoulder, and a child with a pair of doves, arrive in haste; and, high above, the angels flutter about the star which designates this stable in Bethlehem.

On the side doors, set within hemispheres, there are two bas-reliefs: the one on the left representing *The Angel Announcing the Birth of Christ to the Shepherds*, the other *The Massacre of the Innocents*. Both of these are by Alexander Loganovsky.

On the lintel of the large bronze door, we see a *Presentation in the Temple*: on the doors, *The Flight into Egypt*, and *Jesus as a Child among the Doctors*; below, in the conch-shell niches, a saint and an angelic warrior: Saint Alexander Nevsky and Saint Michael; further down, on the lower panels, little angels supporting crosses. This portico contains, in its decoration, all the poetry of the Nativity and childhood of Christ, as the other contained all the drama of the Passion.

On the east pediment, we saw Saint Isaac persecuted by the Emperor Valens; on the west, we witness his triumph, if such a phrase is in accord with saintly humility. The emperor, Theodosius the Great, returns victorious from his war against the barbarians, and near to the Golden Gate (*of Constantinople*), Saint Isaac, gloriously delivered from his prison, presents himself to him, in his poor hermit's gown girded with a rosary, holding in his left hand the dual cross, and raising his right hand above the head of the emperor whom he blesses. Theodosius bows piously. His arm about the Empress Flacilla, he links her to his obeisance, wishing to associate her with the saint's blessing. The intent is charming and executed with rare good-fortune. An august expression can be divined on the majestic faces of the emperor and the empress. At the feet of the laurel-crowned Theodosius are discernible the eagle and emblems of victory. To the right of the group, relative to the spectator, warriors whose attitudes exude the liveliest fervour bow, and set one knee to the ground, lowering the fasces and axes (*the Roman symbols of civil and military power*) before the Cross. In the background, a character, in a constrained pose, seems to move away, with a gesture full of spite and fury, leaving room for Saint Isaac, whose influence prevails: it is Demophilus, leader of the Arian sect, who had hoped to win Theodosius to their heresy. At the extremity is seen the woman from Edessa, with her child, she whose appearance suddenly caused the troops sent to persecute the Christians to retreat. On the left, a lady-in-waiting of the empress in rich clothes supports a poor paralytic woman, symbolising the charity reigning in this Christian court. A little child, playing, who possesses the supple grace of childhood, contrasts with the stiff immobility of the sufferer. At the corner of the bas-relief, with an anachronism that idealised statuary admits, the architect of the church is shown, draped in the antique style and displaying a miniature model of the cathedral which will arise later under the patronage of Saint Isaac. This fine composition, whose groupings are balanced and coordinated with happy symmetry, is by Vitali.

Beneath this portico, simpler than those of the north and south, there are no arched hemispherical bas-reliefs. It is pierced by a single door which opens before the iconostasis.

This bronze door is partitioned in a similar manner to those we have already described. The bas-relief of the lintel represents *The Sermon on the Mount*. In the upper panels are depictions of *The Resurrection of Lazarus* and *Jesus Healing a Paralytic*; Saint Peter and Saint Paul occupy the ribbed conch-shell bays; at the bottom, angels support the sign of redemption. The vine and ear of wheat, symbols of the Eucharist, serve as motifs for the ornamentation of this door and others.

Saint Mark, accompanied by the lion, a motif that Venice has taken for its coat-of-arms, writes his Gospel on the summit of the pediment, the extremities of which are occupied by Saint Thomas, bearing his set-square while sceptically extending the finger that he seeks to plunge into Christ's wound before he dare bring himself to believe in the resurrection, and Saint Bartholomew with the instruments of his martyrdom, the rack and the knife. On the frieze the following inscription may be read: 'To the King of Kings'.

With its archaic form, the Slavonic script lends itself to monumental legends. It is a means of ornamentation, like Kufic lettering. There are other inscriptions beneath the peristyles and above the doors. They express religious or mystical ideas. I have only translated those which are the most visible.

Vitali, with the help of Robert Salemann and an artist of the Boilly family, modelled the sculptures of all the doors; to him we also owe the evangelists and apostles on their acroters. These figures are no less than fifteen feet two inches tall. The angels kneeling beside lighting-columns are seventeen feet high, and the garlanded columns themselves, twenty-two. These angels, with large outstretched wings, are like mystical eagles fallen from the heights to perch on the four corners of the building.

As I have said, a swarm of angels are posed around the crown of the dome. The height at which they are placed makes it difficult to distinguish the details of their features, but the sculptor was able to give them elegant, slender profiles that are easy to appreciate from below.

Thus, on the cornice of the dome, on the parapets, attics and entablatures of the building, not to mention the characters half-embedded in the pediments, the bas-reliefs of the arches, and the hemicycles, and the figures of the doors, the fifty-two statues adorning Saint Isaac's, all three times as large as life, constitute an eternal population in bronze, varied in their poses, but subject, as if they comprised an architectural choir, to the cadences of a linear music.

Before entering the church, whose outline I have drawn as faithfully as the inadequacy of words permits, I should say that it must not be thought, despite its pure, noble, and severe lines, its sober and sparse ornamentation, and its austere ancient style, that the cathedral of Saint-Isaac's, in its perfect regularity, possesses that cold, monotonous, slightly tedious appearance of the architecture that we call Classical, for want of a more accurate expression. The gilding of its domes, the rich variety of materials employed, prevents it from being disadvantaged so, and in this climate the play of light and colour shades it with unexpected effects, which render it completely Russian, not Roman. The spirits of the North flutter about this grave monument and grant it a national character without detracting from its ancient and grandiose appearance.

Winter in Russia has a particular poetry; its rigours are compensated for by the beauty of many a picturesque effect or aspect. Snow and ice silver those golden domes, charge the

gleaming lines of the entablatures and pediments, add touches of white to the bronze acanthus-leaves, create luminous points on the statues' projections, and alter all the tonal relationships by magical transposition. Saint Isaac's, seen thus, takes on a completely local originality. It is superb of hue, or is highlighted, whitely enhanced, against a curtain of grey cloud, or is silhouetted against one of those 'skies', in turquoise and pink, that shine above St. Petersburg when it is cold and dry, and the snow crunches underfoot like powdered glass. Sometimes, after a thaw, an icy overnight breeze freezes the moisture coating the granite and marble body of the monument. A network of pearls, finer and rounder than the dew-drops on leaves, envelops the gigantic columns of the peristyle. The reddish granite turns the most tender pink, and is edged with the hue like a velvety peach, or like plum-blossom; it is transformed to an unknown material, similar to that precious stone of which celestial Jerusalems are built. Crystallised vapour covers the building with a diamantine powder that send forth sparks and flame when a ray of light touches it; it looks like a jewelled cathedral in the City of God.

At each hour of the day its appearance varies. View Saint-Isaac's in the morning, from the quay beside the Neva, and it appears the colour of amethyst and burnt topaz in the middle of a halo of milky and rose splendours. The pale mists that float at its base detach it from the earth so that it hovers above a vaporous archipelago. In the evening, seen from the corner of Little Morskaya Street (*Malaya Morskaya*), and given a certain incidence of light, its windows caught by the rays of the setting sun, it seems illuminated as if on fire within. The bays set in the dark walls glow brightly; sometimes, when it is misty, under a low sky, clouds descend on the dome, and crown it like vapour over the summit of a mountain. I have viewed the strange sight of the lantern and upper half of the dome rising above a bank of fog. The cloud, separating, with a layer of cotton the gilded hemisphere from its base, granted the cathedral a prodigious elevation, and the appearance of a Christian tower of Babel about to seek in the heavens, but not defy, that One without whom nothing can stand firm.

Night, which in other climes casts its opaque veil over buildings, cannot entirely extinguish Saint Isaac's. Its dome, with its tones of pale gold, remains visible beneath the black canopy of the heavens, like an immense half-lit bubble. No darkness, even that of the most sinister of December nights, prevails against it. One still sees it, floating above the city and, though the homes of human beings fall into shadow, and slumber, God's dwelling house shines, seeming to watch over it from above. When the darkness is less dense, when the glitter of the stars and the vague glow of the galaxy leave only the ghosts of objects discernible, the vast mass of the cathedral rises majestically and takes on a mysterious solemnity. Its columns, as smooth as ice, are outlined by some unexpected gleam, and, on the attics, the statues, vaguely glimpsed, seem like celestial sentinels committed to guardianship of the sacred edifice. What remains of the diffuse light in the sky focuses on some point on the dome with such intensity that the nocturnal passerby might take this unique flake of gold for a lighted lamp. Sometimes, a still more magical effect occurs: luminous fiery touches blaze at the extremities of each of the raised ribs which divide the dome, surrounding it with a crown of stars, a sidereal diadem surrounding the golden tiara of the temple. An age of greater faith and less belief in science would have thought it a miracle, since this perfectly natural effect dazzles the eye in a seemingly inexplicable manner.

If the moon is full, and sails clear of the clouds towards midnight, Saint Isaac's is lit by her opal glow, in a symphony of tones: ashen, silvery, bluish, violet, all of an unimaginable delicacy; the hue of the granite fades to that of a pink hydrangea, the bronze draperies of the statues whiten to the shade of linen robes, the gilded caps of the pinnacles exhibit reflections and translucencies of an amber paleness, while threads of snow on the cornices emit straw-coloured flashes here and there. From the depths of the northern sky, blue and cold as steel, she seems to have come to gaze upon her silver face in the golden mirror of the dome; the rays which result are reminiscent of the electrum of the ancients formed of molten gold and silver.

From time to time, the enchanted lights, with which the North consoles itself for the length of its frozen nights, deploy their magnificence above the cathedral. The aurora borealis launches its immense polar fireworks behind the monument's dark silhouette. Its bouquet of rockets, effluvia, irradiations, and phosphorescent veils, spreads forth, in silver, mother-of-pearl, and opal, dimming the stars and making the dome, always so luminous, appear utterly black, except for the bright gleam of the golden sanctuary lamp that nothing eclipses.

I have sought to depict Saint Isaac during the days and nights of winter. Summer is no less rich in effects, as new as they are admirable.

During those long days, barely interrupted by an hour of diaphanous night which is at once both twilight and dawn, Saint Isaac's, flooded with light, gains the majestic clarity of a Classical monument. The vanishing vapours reveal its superb reality; and when transparent shadow envelopes the city, the sun continues to shine on the colossal dome. From the horizon, beneath which it plunges only to promptly re-appear, the sun's rays still reach the golden hemisphere. Though, in the mountains, the highest peak may still be illuminated by the flames of the setting sun long after the lower summits and the valleys have been bathed in evening mist, ultimately its glow quits that vermilion spire and seems to withdraw, regretfully, to the heavens, yet a gleam of light never abandons the dome. Even if all the stars in the firmament were lost, there would still be one glittering from Saint Isaac's!

Now that I have given you, to the extent I am able, an idea of the cathedral in its various external aspects, let us penetrate the interior, which is no less magnificent.

One usually enters Saint Isaac's by the south door, but let us seek the west door, which faces the iconostasis; this is the direction from which the building best presents itself. From the first, one is struck by amazement: the massive grandeur of the architecture, the profusion of rarest marble, the brilliance of the gilding, the fresco tints of the wall paintings, the shimmer of the polished paving stones in which objects are reflected, everything combines to dazzle your eyes, especially if your gaze falls, unavoidably, on the iconostasis. The iconostasis, a marvellous edifice, a temple within a temple, its facade of gold, malachite and lapis lazuli, its doors of solid silver, is nevertheless only the veil before the sanctuary! One's face inevitably turns towards it, whether the open leaves reveal, in all its sparkling translucency, the colossal Christ in stained glass, or, closed, display only their curved bay, the purple curtain of which seems dyed in the blood of the divinity.

The interior layout of the building is simple enough for the eye and the mind to grasp immediately; three naves lead to the three doors of the iconostasis, cut transversely by the nave

forming the arms of the cross which, terminate externally in the projecting porticos; at the point of intersection rises the dome; four domes set symmetrically at the corners emphasise the architectural composition.

On a marble floor, rest fluted columns and pilasters of the Corinthian order, with bases and capitals of gilded bronze and ormolu, adorning the building. This decorative order, applied to the walls and the massive pillars supporting the arched vaults and the roof, is topped by an attic divided by pilasters, presenting panels and frames for paintings. On this attic are set the archivolts, whose tympanums are decorated with religious subjects.

The walls, from base to cornice, between the columns and pilasters, are clad in white marble from which panels and compartments in various colours emerge; of Genoa-green, cherry-red, and Siena-yellow marble, various jaspers, and red porphyries from Finland, every stone that the veins of the richest quarries were able to deliver, by way of beauty. Recessed niches supported on consoles contain paintings, relieving the flatness of surface in an appropriate manner.

The rosettes and modillions (*brackets*) of the soffits (*undersides*) are in bronze, gilded by the galvanoplastic (*electrotyping*) method, and stand out from their marble coffers in vigorous projections. The ninety-six columns or pilasters are from the quarries of Tivdiya (*in Karelia, north-east of Lake Ladoga*), which provided a beautiful marble veined with grey and pink. The white marble came from the Seravezza quarries (*in Tuscany*). Michelangelo preferred it to that from Carrara, which says all, for what greater a connoisseur of marble was there than the architect of Saint Peter's and sculptor of the tomb of the Medicis!

The plan of the interior having been sketched in a few lines, we now arrive at the dome whose gulf yawns above the visitor's head, suspended with inescapable solidity in the air. Here, iron, bronze, brick, granite, and marble combine, according to the best mathematical calculation, in well-nigh eternal resilience. The dome's interior height, from the marble pavement to the lantern's vault, is two hundred and ninety-eight feet and eight inches, or forty-two *sazhens* and two *arshins* (*Russian measure: a sazhen equates to seven feet, an arshin is a third of a sazhen, or two feet four inches*). The interior length of the building is two hundred and seventy-seventy feet and eight inches, or thirty-nine *sazhens* and two *arshins*; its breadth within is one hundred and forty-nine feet four inches, or twenty-one *sazhens* and one *arshin*. I stress these measurements only because they enable one to appreciate the true grandeur of the building, and provide an overall scale, allowing one to assess the relative proportions of its details.

At the summit of the lantern, a colossal sculpted Holy Spirit spreads its white wings on high, amidst rays of light. Below it is a rounded half-dome with gold palmettes on an azure field; then comes the great spherical vault of the dome, bordered at its upper opening by a cornice, whose frieze is decorated with garlands, and gilded heads of angels, resting at its base on the entablature of twelve fluted pilasters of the Corinthian order between windows also twelve in number.

A false balustrade, providing a transition between the architectural and painted features, crowns this entablature, the large circular composition above representing *The Virgin in Glory*

beneath a bright sky. This painting, like all those of the dome, was entrusted to Karl Bryullov, known in Paris for his painting of *The Last Day of Pompeii* (now in the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) which was displayed at one of the exhibitions. Bryullov deserved the honour; but illness ending in premature death prevented him from executing this important work himself. He could only paint the partitions, and though his ideas and instructions were followed religiously, we must regret that the eye, hand, and indeed genius of the master could not complete these paintings, suited as they are however to their decorative purpose. He would doubtless have added all that they lack: the touch, colour, fire, everything that comes with the execution of wisely ordered work, which not even a like talent, following another's ideas, is able to emulate.

To grant some order to my description, let me face the iconostasis; we then have before us the group which is the centre and crux of this vast composition (*Bryullov's original design is described here.*)

The Holy Virgin, in the midst of glory, is enthroned on a seat of gold; eyes downcast, hands crossed modestly on her breast, she seems, even in heaven, to submit to rather than accept this triumph; but she is the humble servant of the Lord, *ancilla Domini*, and she resigns herself to apotheosis.

On either side of the throne stand Saint John the Baptist, the precursor, and the other Saint John, the beloved disciple of Christ, recognisable by his symbolic eagle. They both deserve this place of honour: one announced the coming of Christ; the other followed him to the Garden of Olives, assisted at the Passion, and it was to him that the dying divinity consigned his mother.

Below the throne, flutter little angels, clasping lilies, symbols of purity. Larger angels with outstretched wings, in daringly foreshortened poses, placed here and there, lift banks of clouds supporting other groups that I will describe, starting from the Virgin's left relative to the viewer and circling the dome until returning on her right, thus closing the cycle of composition. One of these angels is charged with a long sword, an attribute of Saint Paul whom we actually see kneeling above him, on a cloud near to Saint Peter, with his head turned towards the Virgin; cherubim open the Book of Epistles and toy with the golden keys of paradise.

On the cloud that floats above the balustrade and forms an aerial base for the groups, we note, beyond Saint Peter and Saint Paul, an old man with a white beard, in the habit of a Byzantine monk: it is Saint Isaac of Dalmatia, the cathedral's patron saint. Near him stands Saint Alexander Nevsky, wearing a breastplate and a purple mantle; behind him, angels brandish flags, and the image of Christ on a golden disc indicates the services rendered to religion by the holy warrior.

The next group consists of three saintly women kneeling: Anne, mother of the Virgin, Elizabeth, the mother of the Baptist, and a sumptuously dressed Saint Catherine, in an ermine robe and brocaded dress, with a crown on her head; not because she belonged to a royal or princely family, but because she bears the triple crown of virginity, martyrdom, and science, her original name being changed from Dorothea to Catherine, a name whose root, *Kether* in Hebrew, means 'the crown'. Thus, the ornament is wholly allegorical. The angel beneath the

cloud holds a fragment of a wheel with curved teeth, part of the instrument of torture applied to the saint.

Separated by a slight interval from the trio I have just described, a third cloud bears Saint Alexis, the man of God, dressed in a monk's robe, and the Emperor Constantine with a gold breastplate, draped in purple; an angel beside him bears the axes and fasces; a second angel, to the rear, holds the insignia of command, an ancient sword in its sheath.

The last figure, on the right of the Virgin's throne, is Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra and patron saint of Russia, dressed in a dalmatic and a green stole strewn with gold crosses, kneeling in adoration before the mother of God; he is surrounded by angels holding banners and sacred books.

Recognised here are the patron saints of Russia and of the imperial family. The mystical idea of this immense composition, which is no less than two hundred and twenty-eight feet in circumference, is the triumph of the Church symbolized by the Virgin.

The composition of this painting is somewhat reminiscent of that on the cupola of Saint Genevieve (*the Pantheon, in Paris*), by Antoine-Jean Gros. That is not a criticism of Bryullov; such similarities are inevitable in the depiction of religious subjects whose main outlines are determined in advance. Complying with the intentions of the architect, better than many another artist responsible for paintings elsewhere, Karl Bryullov, or those who executed the works to his designs, utilised plain matte areas, avoiding forceful colours and blacks always harmful where paintings are concerned, in that they conflict with the architectural concept, and grant their subjects a presence which disturbs one's view of the building's lines.

These paintings, and the others which adorn the cathedral, even when they are on a gilt background, never seek to reproduce the hieratic, immobile, unchanging attitudes of Byzantine art. Auguste de Montferrand very judiciously thought that since the church, of which he was the architect, borrowed its forms from the pure Greek and Roman styles, the artists responsible for the paintings should take their inspiration from the mighty Italian school, the most skilled and learned as regards the decoration of religious buildings in those styles. The paintings in Saint Isaac's are therefore in no way archaic, contrary to the habits of the Russian Church, which willingly conforms to models fixed during the earliest days of the Greek Orthodox Church and preserved, traditionally, by the artists of the monastery on Mount Athos.

Twelve large gilded angels, acting as caryatids, support consoles upon which the bases of the pilasters rest that form the interior order of the dome, and separate the windows. The angels measure no less than twenty-one feet in height, and were executed by the galvanoplastic (*electrotyping*) process in four pieces, then invisibly welded together. It was possible to grant them a degree of lightness which, despite their size, fails to burden the cupola. This crown of gilded angels, that the vivid light floods, causing them to glitter with metallic reflections, produces an extremely rich effect.

The figures are arranged in a certain manner appropriate to the architecture, but with sufficient variety of pose and movement to avoid the tedium that would result from too rigorous a uniformity. Various attributes, such as books, palms, crosses, scales, crowns, and trumpets,

generate slight inflections of attitude, while designating the celestial functions of these gleaming statues.

The empty spaces between the angels are filled with seated apostles and prophets, each accompanied by the traditional symbol rendering them recognisable. All the figures, voluminously draped and in excellent style, stand out against a palely lit background of approximately the same tonal value. The general appearance is bright, approaching as close as possible to that of fresco.

The four Evangelists, statues of colossal size, occupy the pendants. The artist has attempted in these figures to reproduce the fierce and violent attitudes loved by the painter of the Sistine Chapel. The pendants, due to their odd shape, obliged him to compress the composition to fit the spaces that contain them, and the difficulty created by their framing often inspired him. The statues possess a great deal of character.

Saint Mark is recognised by the winged lion; he holds his Gospel in one hand, raising the other to preach or bless. A circle of gold shines about his head, a large blue drape envelops his knees. Above him, angels bear a cross.

Saint John, dressed in a green tunic and red mantle, writes on a long strip of papyrus unrolled by two angels. Near him, the symbolic eagle flaps its wings, while from its eyes flashes the lightning of the Apocalypse.

Leaning on his ox, Saint Luke gazes at a portrait of the Virgin, the work of his brush, that angels present to him. Above his haloed head, floats a labarum (*standard*); a reddish-orange drape hangs about it in massive folds.

Saint Matthew's angel-companion, stands at his side. The saint, in a purple tunic and yellow mantle, holds a book in his hand. On the dark sky which serves as a background to him, as with the other figures, cherubim flutter and a star shines.

At the tips of the four pendants are recessed paintings represent scenes from the Passion of Christ. In one, Judas, preceding soldiers bearing lanterns and torches, gives his master the treacherous kiss which designates him among the other disciples. In another, Christ is flogged by two tormentors armed with knotted ropes. The third shows us the Righteous One, to whom the people preferred Barabbas, being taken from the courtroom to be delivered to the executioner, while Pontius Pilate, on his tribunal, washes his hands of the blood which eternally stains them.

The fourth painting represents what the Italians call 'spasimo', the swooning of the victim beneath the cross of torment, on the path to Calvary. The Virgin, the holy women, and Saint John, exhibiting attitudes of desolation, escort the condemned divinity.

In the attic of one arm of the cross of the transverse nave, one notices, on the right when facing the iconostasis, *The Sermon on the Mount*, by Pierre Bazin. On a high place, shaded by a few trees, Jesus, seated, preaches among the disciples; the crowd is hastening to hear him; paralytics hoist themselves on their crutches; the sick, eager for the divine word, are being dragged there, in the blankets from their beds; the blind grope their way there; women listen in

a heartfelt manner, while, in a corner, Pharisees argue and dispute; the composition is fine, and the well-distributed groups grant the figure of Christ, placed in the centre, its full importance.

The two lateral paintings have as their subjects *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Good Samaritan*. In one, Jesus walks amidst the fields with his disciples; he shows them the Sower distributing the grain and the birds fluttering in the sky above of his head. In the other, the Good Samaritan, having descended from his horse, is pouring oil over the wounds of the young man abandoned at the edge of the road, whose cries the Pharisee refused to hear. The first of these paintings is by Nikolai Nikitin; the second, by Vasily Sazonov.

On the vault, in a panel framed by rich ornamentation, cherubs support a book against a skiey background.

Opposite *The Sermon on the Mount*, at the other end of the nave, in the attic, is a vast painting by Eugène Pluchart, *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*. Jesus occupies the centre, while his disciples distribute loaves, constantly and miraculously renewed, to the hungry crowd; bread symbolic of the Eucharistic bread on which the generations and multitudes of earth feed.

The paintings on the two lateral walls represent *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and *The Workers in the Vineyard* whom the stewards wish to drive away but whom the master welcomes: the one is by Sazonov; the other, by Nikitin. Cherubim raising a ciborium are painted on the panel of the vault.

The central nave, from the transept to the door was decorated by Fyodor Bruni. In the depths of the tympanum, Jehovah, enthroned on a cloud, and surrounded by a swarm of archangels, angels and cherubim forming a circle, the symbol of eternity, seems content with His creation and blesses it. At the knotting of His brow, the infinite quivered in its intimate depths, and from nothing arose all things.

With its leafy trees, flowers, and animals, the terrestrial paradise flourishes on the attic. The first pair of human beings are living in peace among species whom, as a consequence of the former's actions, sin and death will later render hostile. The lion as yet leaves the gazelle unharmed, the tiger refrains from attacking the horse, the elephant seems unaware of its defensive powers, and all respect the likeness of God, stamped on the faces of His guests in Eden. On the vault, amazed angels contemplate the sun and moon, lights which only now illuminate the firmament.

The subject of the attic panel is *The Flood*. The waters, vomited in cataracts from the abyss and the sky, cover that early world so swiftly forfeited, which has already given God cause to regret His creation. Various peaks, which the rising waters will soon cover, still emerge alone from the shoreless ocean. The last remnants of the human race, condemned to perish, cling there desperately, their stiffened muscles contracting as they seek to climb to some narrowing plateau. In the distance, beneath the rain falling in torrents, floats Noah's ark, bearing in its hollow compass all of the ancient creation that will survive.

On the other wall, *The Sacrifice of Noah* forms a pendant to *The Flood*. Bluish smoke from the accepted sacrifice rises to heaven, through the serene air, from a primitive altar made from a lump of rock; the patriarch, standing, dominates with his great height which is that of

antediluvian Man, his sons and daughters-in-law prostrated around him, each pair of whom will be the source of an extensive human family.

In the background, against a curtain of dissipating cloud, the rainbow rounds its variegated curve, that symbol of alliance which, appearing at the close of the deluge, promises that the waters will no longer cover the Earth, now protected from cosmic catastrophe until the Last Judgment.

Further on, *The Vision of Ezekiel* covers a large vaulted space. Standing on a segment of rock, beneath a sky illuminated by crimson flames, amidst the Valley of Jehoshaphat whose population of the dead germinates, quiveringly, like wheat in the furrow, the prophet watches the dreadful spectacle taking place around him; to the ineluctable call of angels sounding their trumpets, ghosts rise in their shrouds; skeletons drag themselves about on their emaciated fingers, and recompose their scattered bones; corpses, rising from the tomb, reveal their decomposed faces into which life returns, accompanied by expressions of terror and remorse. These spirits, that were the people of the earth, seem to ask for grace and regret the grave's darkness, except for a few righteous people, full of hope in the divine goodness, who seem untroubled by the prophet's thunderous gesture.

A powerful imagination and masterful stylistic vigour are exhibited in this painting which is of considerable dimensions: a study of the Sistine frescoes is evident here. The colour is sober, strong and, in its historic tones, a noble garment for ideas, which the moderns too often abandon for the superficial effects and minor accuracies of detail which falsify monumental and decorative painting.

At the end of this same nave, on the vault above the iconostasis, Fyodor Bruni painted *The Last Judgment*, of which Ezekiel's vision was only a prophecy. A colossal Christ, its proportion double and even triple that of the figures which surround it, stands before a cloud-mounted throne; I greatly approve of this Byzantine manner of having the divine and principal character dominate visibly: it impresses itself on both naive and cultivated imaginations, the former in a material way, the latter in an ideal one. The centuries are complete, time is no more, all is eternal, both the reward and the punishment. Overthrown by the breath of angels, the ancient skeleton falls to dust, his scythe broken. Death, in turn, has died.

To the right of Christ, in an ascending motion, press swarms of blessed souls, with pure and slender forms, and long chaste draperies, their faces radiant with beauty, love and ecstasy, whom the angels welcome, fraternally. To his left, whirling, in the impetuosity of their fall, driven backwards by haughty and severe angels, with bladed wings and flaming swords, crowds of the damned, whom we recognise by their hideous forms, along with representations of those evil traits which lead humankind into the abyss: Envy, whose locks of hair scourge her narrow temples like knotted snakes; Avarice, sordid, angular, and hunched; Impiety, casting a gaze of impotent menace towards the heavens; all these culprits, weighed down by their sins, stumble into the abyss, where the grasping hands of demons, whose bodies are not shown, wait to tear them apart in eternal torture; their gnarled, clawed hands like to the iron combs employed by executioners, are highly poetic and evoke a most tragic dread. It is a composition worthy of Dante or Michelangelo. Those hands I have viewed in the cartoon, but sought in vain

in the painting; the projection of the cornice, the curve of the dark vault which constricts the corners, doubtless prevented me from discerning them.

One may divine, from this brief description, necessarily subordinate to that of the whole church, how important Fyodor Bruni's work is with regard to Saint-Isaac's. It would be desirable for the work of this remarkable artist to be engraved or photographed, since his paintings have not achieved the degree of fame they deserve. His compositions with numerous figures, two or three times larger than life, cover immense surfaces, and there are few modern painters who have been granted the opportunity of executing similar commissions. The artist's work is not confined to the above, since he executed several paintings in the sanctuary itself, paintings of which I will give an account later.

At both ends of the transverse nave, of which Fyodor Bruni's *Last Judgment* occupies the central portion, are paintings arranged as follows, which a paucity of light prevents one from appreciating in their entirety. On the attic, in the background, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, brother of Mary and Martha, by Zinoviev (*Ivan Ignatyevich Zinoviev*); above, on the tympanum, *Mary at Christ's feet*, again by Zinoviev; on the lateral wall, *Jesus Healing a Man Possessed*; *The Marriage at Cana*; and *Christ saving Saint Peter from the Waters*, are all by the same artist. On the other side, the main painting on the attic represents *Jesus Resurrecting the Son of the Widow of Nain*; that on the tympanum, *Jesus Christ Allowing the Little children to Approach Him*, both by Zinoviev; the side wall contains depictions of Christ's miracles: *Healing the Paralytic*; *The Repentant Woman*; and *Healing the Blind*, by Nikolai Alexeyev.

Another transverse nave, since the church, divided into three naves lengthwise offers five breadthwise, contains paintings from different artists. *Joseph Welcoming His Brothers to Egypt*, by Nikolai Maykov, is a vast composition which occupies the entire attic. *Jacob on His Deathbed Surrounded by His Sons Whom He Blesses*, is represented on the tympanum; this painting is due to Charles de Steuben. On the walls in three panels, following the architectural divisions, Eugène Pluchart has painted: *The Sacrifice of Aaron*; *The Arrival of Joshua at the Promised Land*; and *The Fleece Found by Gideon*.

The Passage of the Red Sea, by Alexeyev, occupies the attic, facing *Joseph Welcoming His Brothers to Egypt*. It is a tumultuous and disorderly composition, with too much violent movement perhaps for a mural painting. I found some difficulty in disentangling the subject, given the multiplicity of figures, especially with a background unfavourable to the process. Above, *The Exterminating Angel Strikes the Firstborn of Egypt*. This composition is also by Nikolai Alexeyev.

Moses Saved from the Waters; *The Burning Bush*; and *Moses and Aaron Before Pharaoh*, by Pluchart, decorate one of the walls; the other is adorned with panels depicting *Mary Celebrating the Praises of God*; *Jehovah Delivering the Tablets of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai*; and *Moses Dictating his Last Wishes*, by Fedor Zavyalov. At each end of the side naves, to the right and left of the door, is a rounded dome. On the vault of the first, Franz Riss has depicted Saint Fevronia, surrounded by angels bearing palm-fronds, instruments of torture, torches, brands for the pyre, and swords; in the pendants, on a gold background imitating mosaic, the prophets Hosea, Joel, Haggai, and Zechariah; and in the recesses of the arches, historical and religious subjects, among others the events involving Menin and Pozharsky,

names which make every patriotic heart in Russia throb. Allow me to devote a few lines to this painting, of which it is not enough, especially for readers who are not Russian, to merely state the subject, as one may in regard to some motif taken from Sacred History, known to all Christians, whatever the communion to which they belong.

Prince Dimitry Pozharsky and the mujik Kusma Menin resolved (*in 1612*) to save their homeland threatened by Polish invasion. They are here preparing to leave, advancing together at the head of their troops. The nobility and the people are united, in the persons of the two heroes, who, wishing their action to gain divine protection, have had the clergy bear before them the holy image of Our Lady of Kazan, on whom there falls a celestial ray of light as a sign of God's acquiescence. As the procession passes men and women, children, old folk, individuals of all ages and every class prostrate themselves in the snow. In the background one can see palisades, and the crenelated walls and towers of the Kremlin.

The other tympanum shows us Dimitri Donskoy kneeling at the threshold of a monastery and receiving the blessing of Saint Sergius of Radonezh, here accompanied by his monks, before Dimitri departs to gain his victory, at Kulikovo (*in 1380*), over the Tartars commanded by Mamai.

The third painting depicts Ivan III showing his plan for the Assumption Cathedral in Moscow to Saint Peter the Metropolitan. The saintly character seems to approve, and calls on Heaven to protect the pious founder. A council of the apostles, upon whom the Holy Spirit is descending, fills the fourth arch.

On the dome which is symmetrical to this, I note the following paintings, all by the hand of Franz Riss: on the ceiling, *The Apotheosis of Saint Isaac of Dalmatia*; on the pendants: Jonas, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephania. The recesses formed by the arches depict subjects relating to the introduction of Christianity to Russia: *The Proposal Made to Vladimir the Great of Embracing the Christian Faith*; *The Baptism of Vladimir*; *The Baptism of the Inhabitants of Kiev*; and *The Pronouncement of the Adoption of Christianity by Vladimir*. The order which adorns these domes is the Ionic.

These paintings, though skilfully composed, are rather too focused on their historical content. The artist, in love with the effects created, took insufficient note of the requirements of wall-painting. The scenes, framed by arches or architectural divisions needed quieting rather than dramatising, rendering them closer to polychrome bas-relief. When working in a church or a palace, the painter must be, above all, a decorator, and sacrifice individual self-esteem to the general effect of the monument. The work must be linked to it in such a way that it cannot be seen as detached from it. The great Italian masters in their frescoes, so different in execution from their paintings, understood, more deeply than artists of other nations, this particular aspect of their art.

This criticism is not specifically aimed at Franz Riss; it is deserved, in differing degrees, by most of the artists commissioned to paint the interior of Saint Isaac's, who did not always make the sacrifices regarding execution required by wall painting.

The solid walls to which the columns are applied, and the pilasters, as well as the walls, are decorated with subjects executed by different artists, and in the recesses, from niche to console,

with tablets adorned with inscriptions. In the niches, Carl Timoloen von Neff has painted: *The Ascension, Jesus Christ Sending His Image to King Abgar of Edessa, The Exaltation of the Cross, The Birth of the Virgin, The Presentation in the Temple, The Intercession of the Virgin, and The Descent of the Holy Spirit*. These paintings by Carl von Neff are full of colour and feeling; I would rank them among the most satisfying in the church.

Charles de Steuben has depicted: *Saint Joachim and Saint Anne, The Birth of Saint John the Baptist, The Entry into Jerusalem, The Crucifixion, Christ in the Tomb, The Resurrection, and The Assumption of the Virgin*. While Cesare Mussini has added: *The Annunciation, The Birth of Jesus, The Circumcision, Candlemas, The Baptism, and The Transfiguration*.

All these paintings in Saint Isaac's were done in oil, since fresco is unsuited to humid climates and its much-vaunted strength fails to resist the action of two or three centuries, as demonstrated, sadly, by the state of deterioration, more or less advanced, of most of the masterpieces which great artists thought would be preserved in an eternally fresh state. Encaustic painting is a possibility; but the handling of it is difficult, unfamiliar to most, and rarely practised. Also, the wax employed in the areas worked shimmers; furthermore, too little time has been spent testing this method, so that, as regards its life, we have nothing but theoretical predictions. It was therefore with good reason that Auguste de Montferrand chose oil for the paintings of Saint Isaac's (*nonetheless the oil paintings were affected by the cold and damp, and Montferrand gradually replaced them with mosaics, the work remaining unfinished.*)

We now arrive at the iconostasis, a wall of holy images enshrined in gold, which clothe the mysteries of the sanctuary. Those who have seen the gigantic altarpieces in Spanish churches have some idea of the adornment the Greek Orthodox religion grants to this part of its churches.

The architect raised his iconostasis to the height of the attic, such that it merges with the architecture of the building, and does not conflict in size with the colossal proportions of the monument whose entire background it occupies, stretching from one wall to the other. It forms the facade of a temple within a temple!

Three steps of red porphyry form the base. A white marble balustrade, with gilded balusters inlaid with precious marble, forms the line of demarcation between the priest and the faithful. The purest marble from Italian quarries serves as background to the iconostasis' wall. This background, which would seem rich anywhere else, almost disappears behind the splendid ornamentation.

Eight malachite columns, of the Corinthian order, fluted, with bases and capitals of gilded bronze, and two engaged pilasters, form the façade and support the attic. The colour of the malachite with its metallic sheen, its green coppery nuances, strange and charming to the eye, and its perfect polish, that of solid stone, surprises the eye with its beauty and magnificence. At first, it is hard to believe that such luxury is real, since malachite is used only for table-tops, vases, caskets, bracelets and jewellery, while these columns with their pilasters, are forty-two feet high. Cut from the block by circular saws designed for the purpose, the malachite plates fit, with a precision which makes them seem a single sheath, onto a copper drum, which supports an iron cylinder cast in a single operation, on which the foot of the attic stands.

The iconostasis is pierced by three doors: the central one gives access to the sanctuary, the others to the chapels of Saint Catherine and Saint Alexander Nevsky. The layout is as follows: a pilaster at the corner then a column, then a chapel door; then three columns, the main door, three more columns, a chapel door, a column and a pilaster.

These columns and pilasters dividing the wall-space form frames filled by paintings on a gold background imitating mosaic, models for real mosaics which are replacing them as they are completed. From the base to the cornice, there are two levels of frames separated by secondary cornices behind the columns, which rest on either side of the central door on two columns of lapis lazuli, and at the doors of chapels on pilasters of white statuary marble.

Above is an attic intersected by pilasters, inlaid with porphyry, jasper, agate, malachite and other indigenous precious materials, and decorated with gilded bronze ornaments of a richness and brilliance that no altarpiece in Italy or Spain exceeds. These pilasters above the columns border compartments also filled with paintings on a gold background.

A fourth stage, like a pediment, surmounts the line of the attic and is topped by a large group of gilded angels in adoration at the feet of the cross, by Ivan Vitali, while an angel kneeling in prayer adorns each side. In the central panel, a painting by Semen Zhivago represents Jesus Christ in the Garden of Olives accepting the bitter chalice during that funereal wake throughout which his dearest apostles slept.

Immediately below, two large sculpted angels, holding sacred vases, their wings silvery and palpitating, their robes swirling in the air, accompanied by smaller, less prominent angels, recessed into the wall, touch shoulders with a larger panel representing the Last Supper, half painted, half in bas-relief. The figures are painted; the background, gilded, shows the room where the Last Supper is in progress, the perspective is skilfully handled. This painting is also by Semen Zhivago.

Over the arch of the central door, decorated with a semicircular inscription in Slavonic characters, rises a group of figures arranged thus: in the middle, Christ, the eternal pontiff according to the 'order of Melchizedek' (*see Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews 7:17*), is enthroned on a richly decorated seat. His left hand holds the earthly globe, represented by a lapis lazuli sphere, while the right hand makes the gesture of consecration. A halo surrounds his head; his vestments are of gold. Behind his throne, angels crowd; at his feet lie the symbolic winged lion and ox. To his right the Blessed Virgin kneels; to his left Saint John the Baptist.

This group, which overlaps the cornice, offers a remarkable feature: the figures are in the round, with the exception of their heads and hands which are painted on sheets of silver or other metal shaped appropriately. This combination of Byzantine icon and solid sculpture produces an effect of extraordinary power, and it takes careful examination to see that the faces and bared hands are not themselves sculpted. The gilded reliefs were modelled by Peter Clodt; the flat areas, painted by Carl von Neff.

To this central subject are linked, by means of an imperceptible transition, patriarchs, apostles, kings, saints, martyrs, and righteous folk, a pious crowd who form the court and army of Christ, and whose figures fill the voids of the archivolt. These figures are painted, not sculpted, on a gold background.

The arches of the side doors are topped by the tables of the law, by way of ornamentation, and a radiant chalice in marble and gold accompanied by little painted angels. When the doors of the sacred portal, which occupies the centre of this immense facade of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, malachite, jasper, porphyry, and agate, acting as a prodigious showcase of all the riches that human magnificence can bring together when uninhibited by cost, are closed; those mysterious silver-gilt doors with guilloché enamelling, which are sculpted, and hollowed out, and which are no less than thirty-three feet high by fourteen feet wide; one can discern amidst the glow, and framed by the most marvellous metal foliage which has ever surrounded the work of a brush, paintings representing busts of the four Evangelists, and full length figures of the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary.

Yet when, during ceremonies of worship, the leaves of the sacred door are opened wide, a colossal Christ, in gold and purple, in the form of a stained-glass window at the far end of the sanctuary, is visible, raising his right hand to bless, in a pose wherein modern technique allies itself with the majesty of the Byzantine tradition. Nothing is more beautiful or more splendid than this image of the Saviour illuminated by gleaming rays as if from the depths of a sky now revealed to the eye via the arch of the iconostasis.

The darkness, full of mystery, which reigns in the church at certain hours further increases the glow and translucency of this magnificent stained-glass window, created in Munich.

Here I will trace the main partitions of the iconostasis: let me first describe the figures they contain, starting with the first pair located to the right of the visitor when facing the iconostasis.

First, there is Jesus Christ seated on a throne in the Byzantine style, he has a globe in his left hand and is blessing the onlooker with the other; to his right is Saint Isaac of Dalmatia unrolling a plan of the cathedral. These two figures were executed in mosaic, on backgrounds formed of small crystal cubes lined with pure gold, to warm and rich effect, like those mosaics we admire in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and at Saint Mark's in Venice. A picture in precious stones should be set on a field of gold.

Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra and patron saint of Russia, in a brocaded dalmatic, holding a book in his raised hand, occupies the third panel, on the right-hand side. Saint Peter, separated from Saint Nicholas by the door to the side chapel, ends the row. All these figures are due to Carl von Neff.

Working from this group of Jesus Christ in his glory, surrounded by his elect, the first figure that we encounter in the second row is that of Saint Michael fighting with the dragon; then in this same panel Saint Anne and Saint Elizabeth who are linked by miraculous motherhood. The last compartment contains Constantine the Great and the Empress Helen dressed in purple and gold. This row was painted by Karl Bryullov.

In the attic, in order, one sees, separated by marble pillars inlaid with solid stone, the prophet Isaiah, whose extended finger seems to pierce the mists of the future; Jeremiah with his scroll on which his lamentations are registered; David leaning on his harp; Noah designated by the rainbow; and, finally, Adam, the Father of Mankind. All were painted by Semen Zhivago.

To the left of the sacred door, and symmetrical with the figure of Christ on the other side, the Blessed Virgin, with the child Jesus on her knees, first presents herself. This panel is already executed in mosaic, as well as the neighbouring one representing Saint Alexander Nevsky in war gear, with his shield, and the standard of faith which displays an image of Christ. Near St. Alexander Nevsky is Saint Catherine, crown on forehead, palm in hand, beside the wheel which signifies her martyrdom; in the angle, beyond the arch of the chapel, Saint Paul leans on his sword. The whole of this row is the work of Carl von Neff.

The second row contains: Saint Nicholas, in a homespun frock; Mary Magdalene and Tsarina Maria Alexandrovna, in the same panel, the former, designated by her vase of perfumes, the latter, by the crown, sword and palm frond; and Saint Vladimir and Saint Olga, recognisable by their imperial garments; these are all by Karl Bryullov.

On the third row follow, in the order in which I name them: Daniel with a lion lying beside him; the prophet Elijah; King Solomon, bearing a model of the Temple; Melchizedek, King of Salem, presenting the bread of sacrifice; and finally, the patriarch Abraham; all by Semen Zhivago, adding to all the figures by him that I named before.

This rampart of images, separated by columns of malachite, compartments of precious marble, and richly decorated cornices, creates, in the mysterious darkness that bathes this part of the cathedral, a magnificent and imposing effect. Sometimes a ray of light makes its brown gilded depths gleam, and a partition is illuminated, highlighting, as if were a real person, the saint whom the ray has lit; or a thread of light slides across the grooved malachite, a flake clings to a golden capital, an illuminated garland protrudes. The painted heads of the gilded groups take on singular life and resemble those miraculous images in legend who gaze, speak or weep. The scintillations of candlelight raise unexpected glimmers from some detail that remained obscure and whose whole value now emerges. According to the time of day, the veil of the sanctuary is darkened and lit with warm shadows, or is splendidly bright.

To the left when facing the iconostasis, is the chapel placed under the invocation of Saint Catherine: you enter through an arch, which opens from the large iconostasis itself, next to the sacred door, and is topped by angels holding the ciborium.

The iconostasis of the Saint Catherine chapel, which can be seen from the very back of the church, framed by the side nave, offers this arrangement: a facade in white statuary marble, inlaid with malachite, and decorated with gilded bronze ornaments, bears on the summit of its pediment a gilded sculptural group, by Nikolai Pimenov, representing Our Lord, Jesus Christ, rising from the tomb, to the great fear of the guards. On the tympanum, cherubim unfold a cloth bearing a portrait of the Saviour, not painted by human hand but miraculously imprinted there. The burial of the divine corpse occupies the frieze. In the archivolt, above the door is a Last Supper. Four heads of Evangelists, the angel Gabriel, and the Virgin Mary, adorn the leaves of the door.

Christ presenting the open Gospel, occupies the first panel on the right; in the panel above, Saint Catherine is seen, with her customary attributes, the crown, palm-frond, and wheel.

The Holy Virgin of Vladimir is a counterpart to Christ on the left panel; above her, Saint Anastasia, tied to the stake, undergoes her martyrdom. On the right-hand door, in cutaway, is

the Emperor Constantine crowned, and dressed in a robe of gold brocade strewn with eagles; in the upper compartment, is Saint Mitrofan of Voronezh with his crozier. On the other door, the Empress Helen holds a cross, to remind the onlooker that she discovered the remnants of the True Cross; above, is Saint Sergius of Radonezh.

Within the iconostasis are painted Jesus Christ blessing an image of the Saviour on linen, the work of Eugène Pluchart, and a holy Virgin, by Pyotr Shamshin.

Opposite the window rises the side wall of the grand iconostasis, decorated with sculptures and paintings. Ionian pilasters, in white statuary marble, support the consoles, which in turn support the attic. Above the door angels worship the radiant Chalice raised on an ornate pedestal of three cherubic heads.

Over the doorway, the Archangel Michael, freely copied by Karl Bryullov from Raphael's *Saint Michael Vanquishing Satan* in the Louvre, strikes at the Devil. On either side, are Saint Alexis of Moscow and Saint Peter the Metropolitan, both dressed in rich priestly vestments. The second row, consisting of panels framed by rich mouldings, shows Saint Boris and Saint Gleb, Saint Barnabas, Saint John and Saint Timothy; then Saint Theodosius and Saint Anthony. All these figures are painted on a gold background in a somewhat archaic manner.

The ceiling of the dome presents an *Assumption of the Virgin*; the pendants contain Saint John Damascene, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, Saint Clement and Saint Ignatius.

In the recesses of the arches, Pierre Bazin, to whom we owe the wall paintings of this chapel, has depicted the martyrdoms of Saint Catherine, Saint Demetrius, and Saint George of Lydda, and Saint Barbara's renunciation of the world.

On the other side of the grand iconostasis, forming a pendant to the chapel of Saint Catherine, is the chapel of Saint Alexander Nevsky, whose iconostasis is arranged identically.

Jesus on Mount Tabor, a gilded group, by Nikolai Pimenov, crowns the pediment. Below, cherubim deploy a drapery inscribed with a legend in Slavonic letters. On the frieze is painted a *Christ Bearing the Cross*. Then, on the archivolt, a Holy Supper follows, and over the door the four Evangelists and the Annunciation involving the angel Gabriel and the Virgin.

To the right of the door, Christ calls the little children to him. The upper compartment is occupied by Saint Alexander Nevsky, in warrior costume. In the further section, on the same row, we see Tsarevich Dimitri, a young child whom angels support and bear to heaven. Below, Saint Vladimir, crowned, is dressed in a brocade robe and carrying a Greek cross.

On the left, a Blessed Virgin with the child Jesus, above Saint Spyridon; on the corner section, Saint Michael of Tver in armour, and Saint Olga in imperial dress, pressing a small cross to her breast. Nikolai Maykov painted the figures of this iconostasis; within which, there is a *Christ Giving a Blessing*, by Eugène Pluchart, and a *Nativity*, by Pyotr Shamshin.

The ceiling has as subject Jehovah in his glory, surrounded by a ring of angels and seraphim. In the pendants are painted Saint Nicodemus, Saint Joseph, husband of the Virgin, Saint James the Less, called the 'brother of Christ' in the Bible, and Joseph of Arimathea.

The tympanums of the arches are filled with scenes taken from the life of Saint Alexander Nevsky, to whom the chapel is dedicated. In one, he prays for the homeland; in another, he is winning a battle against the Swedes, his white horse rearing above the melee; in a third, lying on his deathbed, he makes an edifying and Christian ending amidst candles and priests reciting prayers; in the fourth, his remains, on a rich catafalque carried by a boat, are borne piously to their final resting place. These paintings, like the wall paintings in the chapel of Saint Catherine, are due to Pierre Bazin.

The side wall of the main iconostasis, which forms one side of this chapel of Saint Alexander Nevsky, offers the same divisions as the other, and the ornamentation is identical, except that above the doorway where the tablets of the law, carved in marble, replace the chalice.

On the door, Karl Bryullov has painted the Angel Gabriel. On the impost, Moses is depicted between the prophets Samuel and Elisha. The two neighbouring panels contain Saint Polycarp and Saint Teresa, and Saint Methodius and Saint Cyril, apostles of the Slavs. The panels bordering the door represent Saint Philip and Saint Jonas, Metropolitan of Moscow. All these figures, on a gold background in a modernised Byzantine style, are by Johann Dörner.

It only remains for me to describe the Holy of Holies, hidden from the eyes of the faithful by the gold, malachite, lapis lazuli, and agate veil of the iconostasis. This sacred and mysterious enclosure, where the secret rites of Greek Orthodox worship are celebrated, is rarely entered. It is a kind of chamber or choir, illuminated by the stained-glass window from which the gigantic Christ shines forth, that can be seen from the rear of the church when the doors of the sanctuary are opened. Two of its walls are formed by the interior faces of the side-chapel partitions, adorned with paintings, which I have just described.

To the south, on the reverse side of the doorway, Saint Laurent holding the grille, instrument of his martyrdom, Saint Basil the Great, and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus are painted in the lateral compartments. The attic, divided into three panels, shows, in the first, Saint Gregory Dialogus (*Pope Gregory the Great*) and Saint Ephrem the Syrian; in the second, above the door, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Samson of Dol, and Saint Eusebius; and in the third, Saint Cosme and Saint Damian. Johann Conrad Dörner, the Bavarian artist, painted the figures of the second row, and Konstantin Moldavsky those of the lower.

The north wall is exactly symmetrical in layout to that of the south wall: Saint Stephen is represented over the door; on either side are Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, by Konstantin Moldavsky. Their upper row, painted by Johann Dörner, contains Alexis, the man of God, and Saint John Climacus, Saint Tychon of Amathus, Saint Pantaleon, and Saint Methodius, and Saint Anthony and Saint Theodosius of Kiev.

Behind the iconostasis, I noted an image of Christ received by the linen sheet stretched out before Saint Veronica, this image painted by Carl von Neff, and above the buffet, a *Christ Blessing the Holy Offerings*, by Pyotr Shamshin. Fyodor Bruni has depicted, on the ceiling, *The Holy Spirit Surrounded by Angels*, and on the three faces of the attic, *The Washing of Christ's Feet*, *Christ Handing the Keys to Saint Peter*; and *Christ Appearing to the Apostles*, compositions full of style, and the purest religious sentiments.

The altar, in white statuary marble, is of the noblest simplicity. A model of the Church of Saint Isaac, in gilded silver and of considerable weight, forms the tabernacle. This model presents some details that are not found in the actual building. For example, the buttresses which support the campaniles are decorated with large groups in relief akin to those of the Arc de Triomphe, while the attic, plain and smooth, in the monument as executed, offers space for a run of bas-reliefs whose effect, it seems to me, would have proved excellent.

I have neglected to mention various medallions or compartments, here and there, in the interior of the church, recessed in the arches and soffits, which are poorly lit, hard to see, and possess only a purely decorative value, such as angels wearing sacred attributes, by Pyotr Shamshin; and Elijah, Enoch, Faith, Hope, Charity, Wisdom, and Love, by Nikolai Maykov. I note them here for the record, and so that my description is complete.

Now that I have described, with all the care for detail of which I am capable, both the exterior and interior of Saint Isaac's, let me sketch, with freer and clearer brushstrokes, some of the main effects of light and shadow within this immense vessel.

The light is a little lacking in Saint-Isaac, or at least is unevenly distributed. The dome sheds a flood of daylight over the centre of the cathedral, and four large windows provide sufficient light for the domes located in the four corners of the building. But other portions remain obscure, or are only illuminated during certain hours of the day, by the fleeting incidence of the sun's rays. This is a defect that must have been foreseen, since nothing would have been simpler than to pierce clear apertures in this monument, on all sides. Auguste de Montferrand sought that mysterious twilight, favourable to religious feeling and meditative prayer. But perhaps he forgot that this depth of shadow, which suits Romanesque, Byzantine and Gothic architecture, is less appropriate to a building in the Classical style, a style intended for daylight and, here, covered with precious marble, gilded ornamentation, and wall paintings which were designed to be seen, and which, one's devotions accomplished, demand to be seen. Several of these paintings were largely executed by lamplight, which is a condemnation of the locations that they occupy. It would have been easy, I feel, to satisfy all, and allow the necessary amount of light or shade in turn, by means of opaque window-blinds, shutters, or hangings. Religion would have lost nothing; art would have gained much. Though St. Petersburg has lengthy summer days, it also has long winter nights which encroach on the days, and during which only a miserly light filters from the sky.

However, it must be said of the alternating light and shadow that it results in striking effects. When one gazes towards the ends of the dark naves which terminate in the chapels of Saint Alexander Nevsky and Saint Catherine respectively, the iconostases of which, in white marble, decorated with gilded works in bronze, inlaid with malachite and agate, and covered with paintings on gold backgrounds, each receive the rays from a large side window, one is dazzled by the sheen that these facades acquire, framed by the dark arches which serve as their foil.

The great window representing Christ shines in the dark with a marvellous intensity of colour. The dim light fails to disadvantage isolated figures whose contours emerge silhouetted against a field of gold. The metallic gleam often highlights the form, but in compositions with multiple groupings, and natural backgrounds it is not always so. Many interesting details evade the eye, and even the eye-glass. Byzantine churches, or, to speak more precisely, those in the

Graeco-Russian style, in which the religious mystery reigns that Auguste de Montferrand wished to achieve in designing Saint Isaac's, do not contain paintings as such; the walls are covered with decorative works whose figures are depicted, without any search for effect or illusion, on a plain gold or coloured field in conventional poses, and with their traditional attributes, by simple outlines and flat tints, and adorn their building like a rich tapestry, whose general tone pleases the eye. I am well aware that Auguste de Montferrand recommended that the artists responsible for the paintings in Saint Isaac's should proceed by defining large masses with broad strokes and in a decorative way; advice which is easier to give than to follow given the style of architecture adopted. Each artist did their best, according to their nature, skill and talent accepting, without objection, the modern character of the church, except on the iconostases where the figures, isolated or set next to each other against gilded panels, stand out imperiously, and take on those clearly defined contours that painting should adopt when intended to adorn a building.

Fyodor Bruni's compositions, whose subjects and ordering I have indicated, as they presented themselves in describing the church, recommend themselves by a great feeling for style, and a truly *historical* manner formed by deep and thoughtful study of the Italian masters. We insist on this quality, because it is now absent in France as elsewhere. Monsieur Ingres and his school are its last custodians. A certain anecdotal piquancy, too assiduous an interest in curious effects or detail, and the fear that too great a seriousness precludes success, deny modern works that stamp of masterful gravity that was preserved, in past centuries, by even second-rate works. Fyodor Bruni, continuing the great tradition, is inspired by the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican, and adds, beyond his personal emotion, something of the profound and reflective manner specific to the German school to that inspiration. One can see that though he has contemplated Michelangelo and Raphael, Bruni has cast a sagacious glance at Johann Overbeck, Peter von Cornelius and Wilhelm von Kaulbach, whose works, too readily ignored in Paris, have weighed, more than is thought, in the scales of modern art. Bruni meditates on, arranges, balances, and analyses his compositions without experiencing that haste to arrive swiftly at the completed painting which we sense today with regard to many works, otherwise full of merit. For Bruni, the execution is only a means of expressing the idea and not a goal in itself; he knows that when the subject is rendered as a cartoon, with style, nobility and grandeur, the most important task of art has been accomplished. Perhaps he neglects the use of colour too much, and admits too large a proportion of sober, neutral shades, muted and abstract, so to speak, in selecting from his palette with care, only what evidences the idea. I dislike, in historical art, that which we call illusion; true, it is not necessary for too crude a view of reality, too material a view of life, to trouble those serene canvases, where the images of objects, and not the objects themselves, alone are reproduced; however, it is good to retain something, especially when the future is considered, of those matt and sombre localities recalled from one's study of old frescoes. The paintings executed by Fyodor Bruni in Saint Isaac's are the most monumental of those the church contains; they show character and mastery. Although he executes, admirably, figures which require energy, and knows enough anatomy to depict the muscular violence that some subjects demand, he also possesses the particular gift of an unction, grace and angelic suavity that approach Overbeck's manner; one finds in his figures

of angels, cherubim, and blessed souls, an elegance, a distinction, if I may employ a word more often used in a worldly way, and a charm, poetic in the extreme.

Carl von Neff understood the work entrusted to him, more as an artist working in a museum, than as a decorator of monuments, but I scarcely think badly of him for that. His paintings, placed much closer to the eye, at a supportive height, so to speak, in those niches of pilasters which act as a frame and grant a wall-painting the appearance of a picture, did not demand the sacrifice of effects and perspective required by the attics, vaults and domes. The artist employs warm, bright colours, and has a skilful and precise manner of execution which recalls that of Peter von Hess, whose work I saw in Munich. *Jesus Sending His Image to Abgar* and *Empress Helen Finding the True Cross*, are remarkable paintings which could be detached from the wall without losing their value. All the others painting by Carl von Neff, in the niches of the pilasters, bear the master's stamp, and reveal a most gifted artist, with a real feeling for colour and chiaroscuro. The isolated figures which he executed on the iconostases, the heads and fleshly surfaces painted by him as part of the large gilded group which surmounts the sacred portal, possess strength of tone, and stand out in remarkable relief. It would be difficult to combine painting and sculpture, the work of the brush and that of the chisel, more effectively.

Fyodor Bruni's paintings, for their composition and style; those of Carl von Neff, for their use of colour and their skilful execution, seem to me the most satisfactory in that genre.

Pierre Bazin in his numerous works, shows abundance of ideas, ease, and that decorative practice which distinguished the artists of the eighteenth century, to whom the esteem that Jacques-Louis David and his school unjustly stole has been restored. I would say today, in praise of the artist, that he resembles Pietro da Cortona, Carlo Maratta, or Tiepolo. Bazin covers large spaces with ease. He understands what we might term the *mechanics* of his art; his compositions create a tableau, a rarer talent than one might think, and one which is becoming less prevalent day by day.

The sober, pure and correct style of Cesare Mussini is well-known in Paris; he has painted, here, in the niches of the pilasters, several compositions which confirm the reputation he has acquired. Nikolai Maykov, Fedor Zavyalov, Eugène Pluchart, Vasily Sazonov, Karl Bryullov, Nicolai Nikitin, and Ivan Ignatyevich Zinoviev, also deserve praise for how they carried out the tasks assigned to them.

If I reserve final judgment on the painting of the dome by Karl Bryullov, which was completed by Pierre Bazin, that is because illness and death, as I mentioned when describing its composition, prevented Bryullov from executing it fully himself, and thus granting it the stamp of his personality, one of the most powerful and most remarkable that Russian national art has produced. In Bryullov there were the makings of a great painter, and, despite numerous flaws, that genius which redeems everything. His self-portraits, which he was pleased to execute several times, showing the increasing pallor and thinness of face produced by illness, shine with it. Beneath the unruly greying hair, behind the increasingly pale forehead, illuminated by eyes where life has taken refuge, there is indeed a depth of artistic and poetic thought.

Now, let me summarise, in a few lines, my lengthy description of this cathedral of Saint Isaac of Dalmatia. It is surely, whether one admires the style or no, the most considerable religious edifice executed this century. It does honour to Auguste de Montferrand, who brought it to fruition in so short a space of years, and could face death saying to himself, with more truth than many a proud poet: *Exegi monumentum aere perennius* (Horace, *Odes Book III, 30*: 'I have raised a monument more durable than bronze'), a satisfaction rarely granted to architects, whose plans often take so long to be realised, and who attend only as ghosts the inauguration of the temples begun by them.

However rapid the construction of Saint-Isaac, the time that elapsed between laying the first stone and the last has proved long enough for many a change in architectural style to have occurred elsewhere. At the time when the plans for the cathedral were accepted, the Classical style reigned unchallenged and without contradiction. That of the Greeks and Romans alone was considered the model of perfection. Everything that the genius of humankind had imagined, in order to realise the ideal of the new religion, was viewed as null and void. Romanesque, Byzantine, Gothic architecture, all seemed in bad taste, contrary to the rules, barbaric in a word. Historical value was to be found in such creations, but certainly no one would have thought to take them for models. The Renaissance artists alone were forgiven, because of their love of antiquity, to which they added many a delightful invention or charming whim condemned however by the more severe critics. At last, the Romantic school appeared, whose passionate study of the Middle Ages, and the nationalistic origins of art, highlighted, in comments full of enthusiasm, the beauty of those basilicas, cathedrals, and chapels disdained for so long as being merely the patient work of an unenlightened age of faith. A complete, logical, perfectly self-aware world of art was discovered, obeying certain rules, expressing a complex and mysterious symbolism, exemplified by buildings as astonishing in their size as in the exactitude of their tiniest details, which until then had been believed the haphazard work of stonecutters and ignorant masons.

A reaction occurred which soon became as unbalanced as any reaction. Merit was denied to modern buildings traced on the Classical pattern, and perhaps more than one Russian regretted that in this sumptuous temple, the architect had not imitated Hagia Sophia in Constantinople rather than the Pantheon in Rome. A like opinion might be entertained and supported, and might even prevail, today. I myself would not find anything unreasonable therein if the construction of Saint Isaac's were being undertaken now, but at the time when the plans were drawn up no architect would have acted in any other way than did Auguste de Montferrand; any attempt in another direction would have seemed madness.

For myself, unfettered by any system, the Classical style seems to me the most fitting for Saint Isaac's, this metropolis of Greek worship. The use of forms beyond passing fashion and consecrated by time, which can no longer, since they are eternal, become obsolete or barbaric, however long the building remains standing, was the wisest choice for a monument of this kind, on which they imprinted the stamp of universality. Known to all civilised people, such forms can only excite admiration, being beyond surprise or criticism, and though another style might have appeared more local, more picturesque, more innovative, it would also have offered the disadvantage of giving rise to diverse judgments, and perhaps, in seeming strange, an

impression contrary to the effect desired. Auguste de Montferrand did not seek the unusual, he sought beauty, and certainly Saint-Isaac is the most beautiful of modern churches. Its architecture admirably suits St. Petersburg, the youngest and newest of capitals.

Those who regret that Saint Isaac's is not Byzantine in style seem to me like those who regret that Saint Peter's in Rome is not Gothic in style. These great temples, centres of belief, should not embrace anything that is specific, temporary, or local; every age, and all the faithful, from whatever place they come, must be able to kneel, within them, amidst richness, splendour and beauty!

Part VII: Moscow

Chapter 16: Moscow

Though finding life most pleasant in Saint Petersburg, I was filled with the desire to see the true Russian capital, the great Muscovite city, an enterprise that the railway made easy enough.

I was sufficiently acclimatised not to fear a trip amidst twenty degrees of cold. The opportunity to visit Moscow in agreeable company presenting itself, I took full advantage, gripping winter's frost-white forelock tightly, and donning its costume: a mink overcoat, beaver-skin hat, and fur-lined boots rising to above the knee. A sled took my trunk, another received my person, carefully stowed, and here I am in the immense railway station, awaiting the time indicated for departure to the south; though the Russian railways do not pride themselves like ours on their chronometric punctuality. If some important personage is to travel on board the train, the locomotive tempers its ardour for a few minutes, a quarter of an hour if necessary, and grants them time to arrive. Travellers are seen off by their parents and friends; and their parting when the bell finally rings, is not accomplished without clasped hands, hugs, and tender words, often interspersed with tears. Sometimes they buy tickets, mount the carriage, and prolong the parting until the first station, only to return by the next train. I like this custom and find it touching; they wish to enjoy the company of the beloved person a little longer, and to delay as much as possible the painful moment of separation. A painter might have observed there, on the faces of the moujiks, finer expressions of simple pathos, than seen elsewhere. Women, mothers, whose son or husband would be absent for a long time, recalled in their naive and deep suffering those holy women with reddened eyes, mouths contracted, sobbing suppressed, whom the artists of the Middle Ages portrayed along the Way of the Cross. I have witnessed many a transit point in diverse countries, many a boarding pier, and departure platform; but nowhere have I seen such tender and desolate farewells as I saw in Russia.

Railway trains, in a country where the thermometer drops, more than once during the winter, to thirty degrees or more below zero on the Réaumur scale (*twenty-four degrees below zero Centigrade*) scarcely resemble those in a country which enjoys a temperate climate. The tin-plate containers filled with hot water employed at home would soon freeze under the feet of travellers left with a block of ice instead of a heater. The flow of air through the joints of the doors and windows would induce colds, bad chests, and rheumatism. Here, several carriages, linked together, and communicating through doors that open and close at the discretion of the traveller, form a species of apartment, preceded by an anteroom with a toilet and dressing room, in which small items of luggage are stored; this antechamber gives on to a platform surrounded by a rail, which one accesses by means of a stair, more convenient certainly than the steps of our carriages. Stoves filled with logs heat the compartment and maintain the temperature at fifteen to sixteen degrees. Along the window joints, felt pads prevent the entrance of cold air

and conserve the internal heat. Thus, you may see that a trip from St. Petersburg to Moscow, in January, in a climate whose enunciation alone would make Parisians shudder and their teeth chatter, has nothing arctically glacial about it. One would definitely suffer more in accomplishing the journey from Burgos to Valladolid at the same time of year.

Around the inside of the first carriage was a large sofa for the use of sleepers, and those afraid to seat themselves cross-legged on the floor in the oriental manner. I preferred the couch to the softer armchairs equipped with padded ear-mufflers in the second carriage, and made myself comfortable in a corner. I felt, thus placed, as if I were in a house on wheels, rather than enduring the discomfort of a carriage. I could get to my feet, walk about, and move from one room to another with the degree of freedom a passenger aboard ship enjoys, and which the unfortunate traveller is deprived of when embedded in a stagecoach, post-chaise, or cart, as still obtains in France.

Given that we were not yet about to depart, and with my place secured and marked by my overnight bag, I was walking beside the track, when the singular shape of the locomotive's stack caught my eye. It was topped with a vast funnel which gave it the appearance of those tall Venetian chimneys with flared tops that rise so picturesquely above pinkish walls in Canaletto's paintings.

Russian locomotives are not fired, like ours and those of other western countries, with coal, but with wood. Birch or fir logs are piled symmetrically on the tender, and renewed at stations adorned with wood piles. Which means to the older peasants that, at the rate things are moving in Holy Russia, it will soon be necessary to pluck out the timbers of their *izbas* (*traditional log-houses*) to fuel the boilers; but before the forests are all felled, at least those not too far from the rail tracks, the engineers' surveys will have discovered some bed of coal or anthracite. The virgin soil must surely hide inexhaustible riches.

Finally, we depart. We leave behind, to our right, on the old cross-country road, the Moscow Triumphal Gate of St. Petersburg, with its proud and grandiose silhouette, and catch a last fleeting glimpse of the urban dwellings, gradually growing sparser, their plank fences, and wooden walls painted in the old Russian fashion and their green roofs glazed with snow; for, as we move further from the city, the buildings which, in the finer neighbourhoods affect the styles of Berlin, London or Paris, take on a national character. St. Petersburg begins to disappear; but the golden dome of Saint Isaac's, the spire of the Admiralty, the pyramidions of the regimental church of the Horse-Guards (*the Cathedral of the Annunciation, not extant*), the starry azure domes, and the bulbous pewter-coloured bell-towers still gleam on the horizon, appearing like a Byzantine crown set on a cushion of silver brocade.

The houses of men seemed to sink towards the earth; the houses of God to soar towards the sky.

As I looked out, a light quicksilver-coloured arborescence formed on the window of the carriage door, due to the contrast between the temperature of the cold air from outside and the hot air within, an arborescence whose branches soon intersected and spread broad leaves, to form a magical forest and spread so widely over the pane that my view of the landscape was totally obscured. Surely, nothing is prettier than those patterns, arabesques, and filigree threads

of ice so delicately shaped by Winter's fingers. It is like a work of Northern poetry, and the imagination discovers Hyperborean images there.

However, having contemplated them for an hour or so, one grows impatient with the white embroidered veil which prevents you alike from seeing and being seen. One's curiosity is piqued by the feeling that behind the frosted glass a whole world of unknown scenery is passing by, that will never reveal itself again to one's eyes. In France, I would have unceremoniously lowered the window; but in Russia it would have been a possibly-fatal act of imprudence: the cold, which ever awaits its prey, would have laid its monstrous polar bear's paw on the carriage, and raked me with its claws. In the open air, you can fight it, as you would an enemy, fierce but, after all, faithful and generous in its harshness; but don't let it enter where you are: don't open the door or the window; for then it engages the heat in an all-out fight; it pierces it with its frozen arrows, and if it plants one in your side, you'll have a hard time recovering.

However, it was necessary for me to take action, for it would have been sad to be transported from St. Petersburg to Moscow in a box behind square panes of milky white, allowing nothing of the outside world to be divined. I do not possess, thank God, the temperament of that Englishman who was borne from London to Constantinople with his eyes blindfolded, the blindfold only being removed at the entrance to the Golden Horn, so he might enjoy that splendid panorama, unrivalled in all the world, all at once, and without weakening the effect of the transition. So, pulling my fur hat over my eyebrows, straightening the collar of my coat, and tightening it around me, drawing my boots to mid-thigh, and pushing my hands into gloves the thumb of which alone was articulated — a real Samoyed outfit — I headed, bravely, towards the small platform projecting from the carriage's antechamber. A veteran, in his military greatcoat, decorated with several medals, stood there monitoring the progress of the train, seemingly untroubled by the temperature. A small gratuity, consisting of a silver ruble, which he had not solicited but which he did not refuse either, rendered him so obliging as to turn towards another point of the horizon, while I lit an excellent cigar purchased in the Eliseyev Emporium (*on Nevsky Prospekt*) and taken from one of those glass-walled boxes which allow one to view the merchandise, without the need to break the band stamped by the tax authorities which encircles it.

I was soon forced to throw away this pure Havana from the *Vuelta Abajo* (*a region of western Cuba*), because though it burned at the one end, the other was freezing. A lump of ice welded it to my lips, a layer of which remained stuck to the tobacco-leaf whenever I took it from my mouth. Smoking outdoors, in twenty degrees of cold, is a thing that is well-nigh impossible, and it costs one little to comply with the *ukase* (*legal decree*) which prohibits, the smoking of pipes and cigars outside. The spectacle unfolding before my eyes was interesting enough to compensate me for that small deprivation.

As far as the view extended, snow covered the earth with its cold drapery, leaving one to guess the vague shapes of objects within its white folds, akin to a shroud which hides the corpse from view. There were no longer any roads, paths, rivers, or demarcation lines of any kind to be seen. Nothing but humps and depressions barely visible amidst the general whiteness. The beds of the frozen streams could not be distinguished except by valleys, of a kind, tracing their sinuosities through the snow and often filled by it. Further away, clumps of reddish, half-buried

birch trees, emerged to show their bare heads. A few log-cabins, coated with ice, launched their columns of smoke which stained the paleness of the dreary scene. Along the track, lines of bushes had been planted in rows, with the intention of halting in its course the icy white powder transported, with terrible impetuosity, by the snowy blast, the polar *khamsin*. You can scarcely imagine the strange, sad grandeur of that immense white landscape, appearing as the full moon does through a telescope. It seemed as if one was on a dead planet gripped forever by eternal cold. One's imagination refused to believe that this prodigious accumulation of snow would ever melt, evaporate, vanish to the sea amid the rivers' swollen waves, or that Spring would someday render that discoloured plain green and flowering once more. The low, overcast sky, of a uniform grey that seemed yellow contrasted with the whiteness of the earth below, added to the melancholy nature of the scene. A profound silence reigned in solitude over the countryside, disturbed only by the thrum of the engine on the rails, since the snow's ermine carpet muffled all other sounds. Not a living thing was visible in the empty expanse; not a creature. The human inhabitants were nestling amid the logs of their *izbas*, the wild creatures deep in their dens. Only, as we approached the stations, from some fold of snow, sleighs, and *kibitkas* (*covered sledges*) emerged, drawn at the gallop by little shaggy horses, speeding over the field ignoring the buried roads, hastening from some unseen village to meet the travellers. There was a group of young noblemen in my compartment who were on a hunting trip, and dressed for the occasion in fine brand-new *tulups* of a pale salmon hue, pricked out with stitching forming graceful arabesques. The *tulup* is a sort of sheepskin kaftan worn with the wool inwards, as is the fur of fur-coats in really cold countries. Fastened by a button at the shoulder, a leather belt with metal plating cinches it at the waist. Add to that an astrakhan cap, white felt boots, a hunting knife hanging from the belt, and you have a costume of Asian elegance; although it is the type of clothing worn by moujiks, *barins* (*gentlemen*) do not hesitate to don it in these circumstances, since there is nothing more convenient or better suited to the climate. Besides, the difference between this clean, supple, tulup, like a buffed-leather glove, and the soiled, greasy, shiny tulup worn by the moujik, is great enough for there to be no possible confusion. The birch-woods and fir-trees I could see on the horizon, where they traced brown lines, host wolves, bears, and sometimes, it is said, elk, the fierce wild game of the North, the hunting of which is not without danger, and which requires agile, robust, and courageous Nimrods.

A troika, drawn by three superb horses, awaited my young lords at one of the stations, and I saw them vanish into the interior with a speed the locomotive might envy, on a road hidden beneath the snow, but indicated at a distance by poles serving as milestones. Given the speed at which they were travelling, I soon lost sight of them. They were off to a castle whose name escapes me, to find their hunting companions, promising themselves a greater happiness than those simpletons in La Fontaine's fable (*see his Fables, Book V, 20: 'L'Ours et les Deux Compagnons'*) who sold the bear's skin before having slain him. They planned to kill the bear, and keep the pelt to make one of those scarlet-bordered rugs with a stuffed head, of which there is no shortage in the salons of St. Petersburg for the novice traveller to stumble over. Given the hunters quietly deliberate air, I had little doubt of their prowess.

I will not name, station by station, the places past which the railway runs: it offers the reader little to be told that the train stops at such and such a locality whose name arouses in them not

a single idea or memory, especially since these towns or villages are of little importance, as most of them are quite far from the tracks and only betrayed by the green and bulbous copper domes of their churches. Because the railway from St. Petersburg to Moscow follows an inflexibly straight line and fails to deviate on any pretext whatsoever, it even fails to honour Tver with a curve or bend, which is the largest city encountered on the journey, and the place from which the Volga steamboats depart; it passes proudly at a distance, and one gains Tver by means of a carriage or droshky, according to the season.

The stations, built to a uniform plan, are magnificent. Their architecture is pleasing to the eye, a mixture of the red tones of brick and the pale ones of stone. But whoever has seen one has seen them all; let me describe the one at which we halted for dinner. This station offered the peculiarity of being sited not at the side of the track but in the middle, like Marylebone church in the Strand. The railway surrounds it with iron, and it is at this point that the trains from Moscow and St. Petersburg meet, while avoiding each other. The two trains pour their travellers, who are about to sit at the same table, onto the platforms to left and right. The Moscow train brings people from Archangel, Tobolsk, Kyakhta, and Yakutsk, from the banks of the Amur River and the shores of the Caspian Sea, from Kazan, from Tbilisi, from the Caucasus and the Crimea, from the furthest depths of European and Asian Russia, who, in passing, shake hands with their Western acquaintances brought by the train from St. Petersburg. It is a cosmopolitan feast where folk talk in more languages than the Tower of Babel ever knew. Wide-arched bays with double windows facing each other illuminated the room in which the table was set, and a pleasant hothouse temperature reigned which allowed lataniers, tulip trees, and other plants of the tropical regions, to spread their broad silken leaves. Such luxurious profusions of rare plants, that one scarcely expects to encounter in such a harsh climate, are almost universally met with in Russia. They produce a festive air indoors, rest one's eyes from the sparkling glare of the snow, and preserve a memory of greenery. The table was splendidly equipped, covered with silverware and glass, and bristling with bottles of all shapes, and from all sources. Tall bottles of Rhine wine protruded above the heads of long-necked bottles of Bordeaux sealed with metal caps, and Champagne sealed with foil and paper; every grand cru was there, Châteaux d'Yquem, Haut Barsac, Château Lafitte, Gruaud-Larose, Veuve Clicquot, Roederer, Moët, and Sternberg-Cabinet, and all the famous brands of English beer as well; a complete assortment of illustrious drinks, adorned with gilded labels in bright colours with engaging designs and authentic coats of arms. It is in Russia that the fines of French wines are drunk; and the purest juice of our harvests, the mother-lode of our vintages, passes through these northern throats careless of the cost of what they swallow. Except for the soup, the *shchi*, the cuisine, needless to say was French, and I recall a certain *chaud-froid* grouse that would not have been disowned by Robert Vinot, that great dean of the palate, of whom Antonin Carême said: 'He is sublime at *chaud-froid*!' (*classic chaud-froid is a dish of cooked poultry, cooled, and coated with a jellied brown or white sauce*). Waiters in black, with white ties and white gloves, circulated around the table, and served us with quiet alacrity.

My appetite quenched, I inspected, as the various travellers emptied glasses of all shapes, the two lounges located at the ends of the room and reserved for illustrious people, the elegant little shops displaying bags, boots, and slippers, in morocco from Tula, and embroidered with gold and silver, Circassian carpets embroidered in silk on a scarlet background, belts braided

with gold thread, cases containing platinum cutlery nielloed in gold and tasteful in style, models of the Kremlin's cracked bell (*the Tsarsky Kolokol or Royal Bell, cracked after a fire and never rung*), Russian crosses in wood, carved with Chinese patience, and decorated with an infinite number of microscopic personages, and a thousand other amusing nothings designed to tempt the tourist and lighten his purse of a few rubles, if he lacks, as I do, the strength to resist the eyes' greed and be satisfied with simply looking. Nonetheless, it is difficult, on thinking of absent friends, not to burden oneself with these pretty trifles which mark at one's return that one has not forgotten them, and to which one always ends by succumbing.

The meal brought together in the one room, guests from the separate trains, and I noted that when travelling, as in the city, the women appeared less sensitive to cold than the men. Most were content with a satin coat lined with fur, their heads free of raised collars, and layers of clothes piled on top of one another. Doubtless, coquetry has something to do with it; what is the point of having a slender waist, a trim foot, if one looks like a parcel? A pretty Siberian attracted all eyes with her elegance, which the journey had in no way troubled. One would have thought her merely descending from a carriage to enter the Opéra. I was struck by the sight of a pair of Romani women, richly and strangely dressed, whose unfamiliar facial type rendered their semi-civilised adornment even more singular. They laughed at the gallant remarks of the young gentlemen, displaying the fierce white teeth embedded in brownish gums characteristic of Bohemian folk.

Emerging from this lukewarm bath, the cold, on the verge of night, seemed more piercing despite the overcoat I had donned once more. Indeed, the thermometer was lower by a few degrees. The snow had taken on a more intense whiteness, and crackled underfoot like powdered glass. Diamantine flakes floated in the air, before falling again to the ground. It would have been reckless to resume my post at the rail of the carriage. It might have compromised the future existence of my nose. Besides, the landscape continued ever the same. White plain followed white plain, since in Russia one must travel an immense distance before the horizon alters in appearance.

The veteran, whose chest was plastered with medals, filled the stove with logs and the temperature of the carriage, which had cooled, rose swiftly; a pleasurable warmth reigned, and without the swaying motion produced by the locomotive's progress one might have thought one was in one's room at home. The lower-class carriages, though less comfortable and luxurious, were heated in the same manner. In Russia, warmth is provided for everyone. Nobleman and peasant are equal before the thermometer. The palace and the cabin are heated to the same degree. It's a matter of life or death.

Lying on the couch, my head resting on my night-bag, and covered in my fur coat, I was soon asleep in perfect comfort, lulled by the constant rhythm of the train. When I woke, it was one in the morning and the fancy took me to spend a few moments contemplating the nocturnal state of northern nature. The winter nights are long and dark in these latitudes, but the darkness fails to completely dim the snow's whiteness. Under the blackest sky one can distinguish its livid pallor, as it lies like a mortuary sheet beneath a cavernous vault. It emits a vague glow, a bluish phosphorescence. It betrays the presence of hidden objects by the touches it adds to their forms and draws them as if with a white crayon on a black background of shadow. This pale

landscape, whose lines of perspective altered and folded swiftly behind the train, possessed the strangest appearance. At one moment, the moon, piercing the thick layer of cloud, shed her cold light over the icy plain, the illuminated areas of which took on a silvery lustre, while the rest turned bluish with deep blue shadows, proving the truth of Goethe's observations regarding shadows on snow, in his Theory of Colours (*see his treatise 'Zur Farbenlehre: 74 et al'*).

You can scarcely imagine the melancholy of this pale and immense horizon which seemed to reflect the moonlight it received. It formed and re-formed around the train, ever the same like the sea, even though the locomotive was running at full speed, launching flickering showers of red sparks from its funnel, seemingly concerned as to our ever leaving this white expanse. The cold, increased by the displacement of air, became intense and penetrated to the marrow of my bones, despite the dense softness of my furs; my breath crystallised on my moustache like an icy gag; my eyelashes stuck together and I felt, although I was upright, unconquerable sleep invading my eyes: it was time to retreat.

When there is no wind, the harshest cold is bearable, but the slightest breath sharpens its arrows and the edge of its steel axe. Ordinarily, at these low temperatures at which mercury congeals, there is not the slightest breeze and one could cross Siberia holding a lighted candle without the flame wavering: but at the slightest draught one freezes, even if bundled up in the pelts of the furriest inhabitants of the polar regions.

It was a most pleasant feeling to regain the benign atmosphere of the compartment and huddle in my corner, where I slept till dawn with that particular feeling of pleasure one experiences when sheltered from the rigours of the season, traced on the windows in icy lettering. The 'grey-eyed morn', as Shakespeare has it (*see 'Romeo and Juliet, act 3, line 1'*), since Homer's 'rosy-fingered Dawn' would have incurred frostbite at such a latitude, wrapped in her pelisse, began to tread the snow in her white felt boots. We were approaching Moscow whose jagged silhouette I could already discern from the platform of the carriage, in the first light of day.

Not so many years ago, Moscow had appeared, waveringly, to the eyes of the French, as the backcloth to a prodigious Russian retreat and beneath a kind of aurora borealis that filled the entire sky, by the light of the fires lit by Fyodor Rostopchin; her Byzantine diadem, bristling with turrets and strange bell-towers, against an outpouring of smoke and flame. It seemed a fabulous city, splendidly and chimerically distant, a jewelled tiara set on a snowy desert, of which the returnees of 1812 spoke with a sort of stupefied amazement, since, the city had changed before their eyes to a fiery volcano. Indeed, before the invention of steamboats and railways, it was no trivial undertaking to reach Moscow. It was more difficult even than travelling to Corinth, a visit, indeed, not open to all the world, if the proverb is to be believed (*the saying in Latin, 'Non licet omnibus adire Corinthum': in Greek, 'Οὐ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐς Κόρινθον ἐσθ' ὁ πλοῦς', is attributed to Horace*).

As a child, thoughts of Moscow filled my imagination and I often lingered on the Quai Voltaire, in ecstasy in front of the window of a dealer in engravings, in which large panoramic views of Moscow were exhibited, done in aquatint, coloured after the methods of Jean-Louis Demarne, or Philibert-Louis Debucourt, as many then were. Those onion-shaped bell-towers, these domes surmounted by chained crosses, those painted houses, the men with large beards

and flared hats, the women with *poivoniki* headdresses (*of cloth, stiffened, embroidered, and often decorated*) wearing short tunics tied under the arms, seemed to belong to a lunar world, and the idea of ever travelling there never presented itself to my mind; Besides, since Moscow had been burned to the ground, what interest could a heap of ashes offer? It was a while before I could accept that the city had been rebuilt, and that not all the older buildings had been lost to the flames. Well, in less than half an hour I would be able to judge if the aquatints of the Quai Voltaire were accurate or no!



View of Moscow, 1856
Rijksmuseum

At the station, a whole crowd of *isvochtchiks* had gathered, offering their sleighs to travellers, and seeking to gain their preference. We chose two. I mounted one with my companion (*the photographer Pierre Ambroise Richebourg*) and the other took care of our luggage. According to the custom of Russian coachmen who never wait to be told their destination, our drivers set their horses instantly to the gallop, and set out in a random direction. They never fail to act out this fantasy.

Snow had fallen more abundantly in Moscow than in St. Petersburg, and the sleigh runs, the borders of which had been carefully raised with a shovel, exceeded the level of the cleared sidewalks by more than a foot and a half. Over this dense layer, polished by the sleighs' runners, our frail equipage flew like the wind, while the horses' hooves threw icy lumps, thick as hail, against the leather of the snow-screen. The street we were following was lined with public baths, steam-baths, since bathing in water is rarely practised in Russia. If the people look dirty,

the uncleanness is only apparent, for the dirt clings merely to expensive winter clothes freshly-renewed; while there is never a little mistress in Paris massaged with cold cream, rice powder, and virginal milk, who is cleaner than a peasant lass fresh from the steam-room. The poorest go there at least once a week. These baths, taken together without distinction of sex, cost no more than a few kopecks. Be it understood, of course, that more luxurious establishments, in which all the knowledge of the art of bathing is united, exist for the rich.

After a few moments of senseless speed, our coachmen, judging further discretion was unneeded, turned round in their seats and asked where we were going. We indicated the Hotel Chevrier, on the Rue des Vieilles-Gazettes (*Gazetny Pereulok*). They resumed their race towards the newly-identified goal. On the way we gazed eagerly to left and right without seeing anything particularly characteristic. Moscow was built in concentric zones; the outer ones are the most modern and the least interesting. The Kremlin, which once comprised the whole city, represents its heart and marrow.

Above houses that differed little from those of St. Petersburg, rose the occasional azure dome starred with gold, or a bulbous bell-tower clad in tin-plate; a church with rococo architecture displayed a colourful bright-red façade strangely enhanced with snow on every projection; at other times the eye was surprised by a chapel painted Marie-Louise blue, which winter had frosted with silver here and there. The question of polychrome architecture, still so hotly debated in France, has long been settled in Russia; they gild, they silver there, they paint the buildings all colours without the least concern for sobriety or good taste, as pseudo-classicists comprehend such things, since it is certain that the Greeks applied various colours to their monuments and even their statues. Nothing is pleasanter than the application of this rich palette to works of architecture which in the West are condemned to pale greys, neutral yellows, and dull whites.

The store signs presented the beautiful letters of the Russian alphabet, of Greek character, like a form of golden ornamentation, which can be employed on decorative flags, like Kufic script. A translation was available, for illiterate folk or foreigners, in the form of naive representations of the goods the shops contained.

We soon arrived at the hotel, whose large, paved wooden courtyard displayed under shed-roofs the most varied carriages, troikas, *tarantasses* (*four-wheelers*), *droshkys*, *kibitkas* (*covered sledges*), post-chaises, berlins, landaus, and charabancs, carriages for summer and winter, for in Russia no one walks, and if one sends a servant to buy cigars he travels the hundred paces to the tobacconist's shop in style. We were given rooms adorned with mirrors, large-flowered wallpaper, and sumptuous furniture, just as in the grand hotels of Paris. Not the smallest vestige of local colour, yet, on the other hand, all the blessings of modern comfort. However romantic one may be, one readily resigns oneself to it, civilisation having wooed the most rebellious characters to its luxuries; there was nothing Russian about the rooms except the usual large green leather sofa on which it is so sweet to sleep rolled in one's coat.

Our heavy travelling-clothes having been hung in the closet, and our ablutions done, we thought it would be a good idea, before launching ourselves on the city, to partake of lunch, so that our admiration would be undistracted by the rumblings of our stomachs, forcing us to return to the hotel from the depths of some wildly remote neighbourhood. The meal was served

to us in the middle of a conservatory, arranged like a winter-garden and cluttered with exotic plants. To eat, in Moscow, a beef steak with a potato soufflé in a miniature virgin forest is a quite bizarre experience. The waiter, standing a few steps from the table, who took our order, though wearing a black coat and a white tie, had a yellowish complexion, protruding cheekbones, and a small flattened nose, which betrayed his Mongolian origin and proclaimed that he could not have been born far from the border with China, despite his looking like a waiter in an English restaurant.

Since one cannot observe the details of a city in comfort, when borne by a sleigh dashing about as swiftly as lightning, we resolved, at the risk of being taken for mediocre fellows and attracting the contempt of the mujiks, to make our first excursion on foot, wearing heavy fur-lined galoshes intended to separate the sole of our boots from the icy pavements, and soon arrived at Kitay-Gorod, the business district, next to Krasnaya Ploschad, which means Red Square, or rather the beautiful square, since in Russian the words red and beautiful are virtually synonymous.

One side of this square is occupied by the long facade of Gostiny-Dvor, an immense bazaar traversed by glassed-in lanes like our passages, and which contains no less than six thousand shops. The surrounding wall of the Kremlin, or Kreml, its towers with pointed tops pierced by portals, rises at the other side of the square, allowing a view, above its battlements, of the domes, bell-towers and church spires it contains. At the other corner, as strange as the architecture seen in dreams, stands the chimerically impossible church of *Vasiliya Blazhennogo*, St Basil's Cathedral, which casts doubt on the testimony of one's eyes. One sees a building which bears the appearance of reality, and wonder if it is not some fantastic mirage, a thing of clouds strangely coloured by the sun which some tremor of the air will distort or cause to fade. It is, without a shadow of doubt, the most original monument in the world, recalling nothing one has ever seen before, and of no known style: it looks like a gigantic coral cluster, a crystallised mass, a cavern full of upside-down stalactites. But no comparison can give an idea of something which has no forerunner or peer. Let me try instead to describe Saint Basil's, if I possess the vocabulary to describe what has no like.



St Basil's Cathedral

From *Voyage pittoresque en Russie* by Charles de Saint-Julien, 1853

Internet Archive

There is a legend about *Vasiliya Blazhennogo* which is probably untrue, but which no less expresses with force and poetry the feeling of amazed admiration it must have induced in the semi-barbarian age in which it arose, this building so singular, so outside all architectural tradition. Ivan the Terrible had the cathedral constructed in thanksgiving for the capture of Kazan, and when completed he found it so beautiful, surprising, and admirable he ordered that the architect be blinded – an Italian, it is said – so that the latter could not build a similar one elsewhere.

According to another version of the same legend, the Tsar asked the author of the church if he could not raise an even more beautiful one and, on his responding in the affirmative, had his head cut off so that *Vasiliya Blazhennogo* might remain a monument without rival. He could

imagine no more flattering cruelty in his jealousy, for this Ivan the Terrible was at heart a true artist, a passionate dilettante. Such ferocity, in matters of art, displeases me less than indifference. Whatever the truth, *Vasiliya Blazhennogo* was only printed in a single rendering.

Imagine, on a kind of platform isolated from the earth below, the most bizarre, the most incoherent, the most prodigious accumulation of pavilions, lodges, external staircases, arcaded galleries, recesses, unexpected projections, porches lacking symmetry, juxtaposed chapels, and windows pierced as if at random and indescribably shaped; an interior plan revealed in relief, as if the architect, seated at the centre of his work, had formed the building from within. From the roof of this church, which might be taken for a Hindu, Chinese, or Tibetan pagoda, springs a forest of bell-towers, in the strangest and fantastic style, to which nothing else comes near. The middle one, the highest and the most massive, consists of three or four floors to the base of its spire. First, there are columns and denticulated bands, then pilasters framing long mullioned windows, then a tier of superimposed decorated arches, then the ribs of the spire its every edge adorned with jagged protuberances, all topped by a lantern surmounted by an upside-down golden bulb, bearing the Russian cross at its tip. The other bell-towers, of smaller size and height, affect the forms of minarets, while their fancifully-worked turrets each terminate in the bizarre bulge of an onion-shaped dome. Some are hammered into facets, others ribbed; these cut in diamond shapes like pineapples, those arrayed in spiral stripes, others adorned with scales, lozenges, honeycombed bosses, and all dressed at the summit with a cross above a gilded globe.

What further adds to the fantastical effect of *Vasiliya Blazhennogo* is that it is coloured from top to bottom in the most disparate tones which however deliver a harmonious and charming whole to the eye. Red, blue, apple-green, and yellow decorate all the sections of its architecture. The columns, capitals, arches, and ornamentation are painted in various shades, in powerful relief. On the rare areas which are flat, there are simulated divisions, panels framing flower-pots, rosettes, interlaced forms, and chimerical faces. The manner of decoration has painted the pinnacles with patterns similar to those seen on Indian shawls, and, set thus on the roof of the church, they look like a sultan's kiosks. Jacques Ignace Hittorf, the apostle of polychrome architecture, would find here a dazzling confirmation of his theory.

So that nothing is lacking as regards this magical spectacle, patches of snow, retained by the projections of roofs, the friezes, and the ornamentation, sow with silver sequins the multi-coloured robe of Vassili Blagennoi and prick out in a thousand sparkling points its marvellous decor.

Postponing our visit to the Kremlin, we immediately entered the church, whose oddity roused our curiosity to its highest point, so as to discover whether its interior fulfilled the promise of its exterior. The same whimsical genius had presided over the interior layout and decoration. A first, low-ceilinged chapel, where a few lamps flickered, looked like a golden cave; sudden glows cast their rays there among tawny shadows, and highlighted the stiff images of ghostly Greek saints. The mosaics of Saint Mark in Venice may grant a rough idea of the astonishingly rich effect. Within, the iconostasis stood as a wall of gold and precious stones between the faithful and the arcana of the sanctuary, in a semi-darkness traversed by shafts of light. *Vasiliya Blazhennogo* does not, as other churches do, offer a single space composed of

several inter-communicating naves, intersecting at certain points according to the needs of the rite followed in that temple. It is formed of a cluster of juxtaposed churches or chapels, which are independent of one another. Each bell tower contains one within its shell. The vault is the sheath of the spire itself, or the bulb of the dome. It feels as if one is beneath the disproportionately-sized helmet of some giant Circassian or Tartar. These ceilings within, moreover, are wonderfully painted and gilded. The same is true of the walls covered with figures of hieratically-ordered barbarity, products of that art the secret of which the Greek monks of Mount Athos preserved from century to century, and which, in Russia, more than once deceive the inattentive observer as to a monument's age. It feels strange to find oneself in one of these mysterious sanctuaries where the identifiable figures of the Catholic cult mingle with the particular saints of the Greek calendar, seeming, in their archaic, constrained, Byzantine poses, to have been clumsily transformed to gold through the childish devotion of some primitive people. These images have the air of idols, that gaze at you from the vermilion niches of iconostases or symmetrically line their gilded walls, opening their large fixed eyes, raising their brown hands with fingers symbolically folded, and producing by their fierce, super-human, and immutably traditional appearance, a religious impression that would not be obtained by works of more advanced artistry. These figures, amidst the shimmer of gold, in the flickering lamplight, readily take on an air of fantastical life, capable of striking the naive imagination and inspiring, as the daylight fades, a certain sacred dread.

Narrow corridors, galleries with low arches, where one's elbows touch the walls, and which force you to lower your head, encircle these chapels and allow you to pass from one to the other. Nothing is more fanciful than these passageways; the architect seems to have taken pleasure in confusing their course. You ascend you descend, you depart the building entirely, you re-enter and follow a cornice about some round bell-tower, you walk a corridor in the thickness of the wall by a tortuous route, as if traversing the capillary tubes of a mass of coral, or the paths that bark-beetles (*scolytinae*) trace beneath the bark of a tree. After so many twists and turns your head spins, you feel dizzy, and you seem like a mollusc in an immense shell. Not to speak of the mysterious corners, unexplained passage, low doors leading who knows where, and dark stairs descending into the never-ending depths of this building's architecture where one seems to walk in a dream.

The winter days are of very short duration in Russia and already the twilight shadows were beginning to make the lamps burning before the images of the saints shine more brightly, as we left Vassili Blagennoi, which augured well, as a sample of the picturesque riches of Moscow. I had just experienced that rare sensation the search for which drives the traveller to explore the extremes of the world; that of seeing something which exists nowhere else. Though, I admit, the bronze group, a monument to Kuzma Minin and Dimitri Pozharsky, sited near Gostiny, facing the Kremlin, as a work of art produced a mediocre effect on me, despite the author of the statuary group, Ivan Martos, possessing no shortage of talent. But, beside the unbridled fantasy of *Vasiliya Blazhennogo*, his work seemed too cold, too correct, too studiously academic. Minin was a prosperous butcher in Nizhny Novgorod who raised an army to drive out the Poles who had become masters of Moscow following their usurpation of Boris Godunov, and handed over command to Prince Pozharsky. Between them, the man of the people and the grand duke delivered the holy city from the foreigners, and on the pedestal

decorated with bronze bas-reliefs once can read this inscription: 'Erected in memory of citizen Minin, and Grand Duke Pozharsky, by grateful Russians, in the year 1818.'

In travelling I obey a rule, when time does not drive me on too imperiously, of halting after receiving some vivid impression. There comes a moment when the eye, saturated with shapes and colours, refuses to absorb new sights. It can accept nothing more, like an overflowing jug. The previous image persists and refuses to be erased. In this state one looks, but no longer sees. One's retina has not had time to *re-sensitise* itself in order to accept a new image. This was my case on leaving Vassili Blagennoi, while to view the Kremlin required a fresh look, a virginal eye. However, I was about to summon a sleigh to return to our hotel, having taken one last glance at the extravagant bell-towers of the cathedral of Ivan the Terrible, when I was detained on Red Square by a singular noise which made me lift my face to the sky.

Ravens and crows, croaking loudly, were traversing the greyish sky, which they punctuated with their dark commas. They were returning to the Kremlin for the night, but as yet only the advance guard had appeared. Soon the denser battalions arrived. From all points of the horizon flew their bands, as if obeying the order of their leaders in some strategic retreat. The dark swarms did not all fly at the same height, but wheeled in descending layers, completely obscuring the heavens. Their number increased from moment to moment. Their cries and the sound of beating wings filled the ear, and always new phalanxes appeared above my head, flying to swell the prodigious congregation.

I would not have believed there were so many ravens and crows in all the world. Without exaggeration, they had to be counted by the hundred; even that figure seems modest, by the thousand might be more just. It was reminiscent of those flights of wild pigeons (*passenger pigeons*) that John James Audubon, the American ornithologist, spoke of (*see his 'Birds of America', plate 62*) covering the sun, and casting shadows on the earth like the clouds, bowing the forest branches on which they perch, and seemingly undiminished by the immense massacre committed by the hunters. Here, the innumerable army, having united, twisted and turned above Red Square, rising, descending, describing circles, and emitting a noise like the sounds of a storm. Eventually, the winged tornado seemed to join in a single resolution and each bird headed towards its nocturnal lodging. In an instant the bell-towers, domes, towers, roofs, and battlements were enveloped in black swirling clouds, to deafening cries. They fought for a place with great blows from their beaks. The slightest fissure, the narrowest crack that could provide them shelter was the object of fierce siege. Little by little the tumult subsided, they all settled down as best they could, and I no longer heard a single croak, nor saw a single crow and the sky, latterly riddled with black spots, resumed its twilight lividity.

One wonders what they live on, those myriads of sinister birds which could devour in a sitting all the corpses left behind by some rout, given that the ground is covered for six months by a thick shroud of snow? The rubbish, the dead animals, the carrion of the city cannot suffice. Perhaps they eat each other then, like rats in times of scarcity, but then their numbers would be less, and they would eventually disappear. Moreover, they seem full of vigour and animation, amid their joyful turbulence. Their means of dining remains no less of a mystery to us, and proves that animal instinct finds resources in Nature where human reason sees none.

My companion, who had like myself viewed this spectacle, but without astonishment, it not being the first time he had witnessed 'the crows returning to the Kremlin,' now declared: 'As we are in Red Square, all equipped, and a stone's throw from the most famous Russian restaurant in Moscow, let's not dine at the hotel, where we'll be served a pretentiously French meal. Your traveller's stomach trained to exotic dishes is happy enough to accept local colour in cooking, and considers that what feeds one man can readily feed another. So, let's enter here, and dine on shchi, caviar, suckling pig, sterlets from the Volga, with an accompaniment of *agoursi* (*ogorsi*, *cucumbers*) and horseradish sauce, all soaked with kvass (one needs to try everything) and cold Champagne. Does that menu suit?'

On my replying in the affirmative, my friend who was desirous of serving as guide led me to the restaurant, located at the far end of Gostiny Dvor, opposite the Kremlin. We went up a heated flight of stairs and entered a vestibule which looked like a fur store; in the blink of an eye the attendants rid us of our furs, which they hung beside the others on a coat-rack. Russian attendants are never at a loss when it comes to overcoats, and with only a glance, set yours on your shoulders, without needing a number assigned or any other mark of recognition.

In the first room there was a kind of bar loaded with bottles of kummel, vodka, cognac and other liqueurs, beside dishes of caviar, herring, anchovies, smoked beef, elk and reindeer tongues, cheese, and pickled preserves, every delicacy which serves to whet the appetite and can be eaten standing, before the meal. One of those Cremona organs that mimics sounding trumpets and a battery of drums, the sort that the Italians walk about the street with, it being set on a small cart drawn by a horse, was leaning against the wall, and its crank, turned by a moujik, had set it playing I know not what fashionable opera aria. Many rooms in a row, in which the bluish smoke from cigars and pipes floated near their ceilings, succeeded each other, to the extent that a second Cremona organ set at the far end was able to play a different tune to the organ in the first room, without creating a cacophony. One dined between Donizetti and Verdi.

What gave this restaurant a characteristic physiognomy is that the service, instead of being delivered by Tartars disguised as waiters at the Frères Provençaux (*Les Trois Frères Provençaux*, a famous restaurant in the Palais Royal, Paris) was quite naively entrusted to moujiks. At least, one had a sense of being in Russia. These moujiks, young and handsome, their hair separated by a middle parting, beards neatly combed, bare-necked, and wearing a pink or white summer tunic tight at the waist, their baggy blue pants tucked into their boots, in all the ease of the national costume, had a fine air, and a deal of natural elegance. Most of them had blond hair, that hazelnut blond hair which legend attributes to Jesus Christ, and the features of some were distinguished by that Greek regularity found more often in Russia among men than women. Thus costumed, in their respectful waiter's pose, they looked like slaves in antiquity at the threshold of a Roman *triclinium* (dining-room).

After dinner, I smoked a few pipes of extremely strong Russian tobacco, and drank my two or three glasses of excellent Caravan tea (in Russia tea is not taken in cups), while listening with an idle ear to the tunes played by the Cremona organs, which sounded above the vague murmur of conversation, feeling satisfied to have dined amidst local colour.

Chapter 17: The Kremlin

One would, doubtless, like to imagine the Kremlin as blackened by time, with that dark smoky hue which, in Europe, covers old monuments and contributes to their beauty by making them appear venerable. In France we take this idea to its extreme by granting a like patina to new buildings, using soot and water, so as to cloak the crude whiteness of the stone and harmonise them with those of older construction. One has to have arrived at a higher stage of civilisation to understand this feeling, and attach value to the traces that the centuries have left from their passage over the surfaces of temples, palaces, and fortresses. Like other nations still naive as yet, Russians love what is new or at least appears so, and believe that it demonstrates respect for a monument to renew its painted robes as soon as they are frayed or torn. They are the greatest whitewashers of buildings in the world. They go so far as to repaint old frescoes, in the Byzantine style, which adorn churches within and often without, when their colours appear tarnished, such that the paintings, so solemnly ancient and primitively barbaric in appearance, often seem as if created yesterday. It is no rare sight to see a painter perched on a frail scaffolding retouching, with the confidence of a monk from Mount Athos, some mother of God, and filling with fresh hues the austere outline which is in itself an immutable model. It is therefore necessary to exercise extreme caution in seeking to appreciate these paintings which *were* ancient, if I can express it so, yet which are *now* anything but, despite their stiffness and hieratic savagery.

This brief preamble has no other purpose than to prepare the reader for the colourful appearance of the monument rather than the dark, melancholic, and fierce aspect dreamed of in the West.

The Kremlin, ever considered the acropolis, the holy place, the palladium, the very heart of Russia, was once surrounded by a palisade of strong oak beams – the citadel of Athens had no other defence before the first Persian invasion. Dmitri Donskoy replaced the palisade (1366-68) with crenelated walls, which Ivan III rebuilt (1485-95) due to their state of disrepair and dilapidation. Ivan III's walls survive today, having frequently been restored, or in many places reconstructed. Thick layers of plaster also hide the wounds that time has dealt them, and the dark traces of the great fire of 1812, which, however, merely licked, with its tongues of flame, the exterior enclosure. The Kremlin shares some similarities with the Alhambra. Like that Moorish fortress, it occupies a plateau atop a hill which it envelops with a wall flanked by towers, and contains royal residences, churches, squares, and, among the old buildings, a modern palace, embedded as sadly within it as the palace of Charles V amidst the delicate Arabian architecture the latter crushes with its mass. The tower of Ivan Veliki (*dedicated to Ivan III, constructed, 1505-08, after his death*) is not without some resemblance to the Torre de la Vela; and from the Kremlin, like the Alhambra, one enjoys an admirable view, a panorama whose glare the eye retains in its surprise. But let me not urge a further comparison, for fear of straining it by taking it too far.

Oddly enough, the Kremlin seen from the outside is, to a degree, more oriental than the Alhambra itself, with massive reddish towers none of which betray the magnificence within. Above its wall with indented battlements, between the turrets with ornate roofs, a myriad of

domes, bulbous pinnacles with metallic reflections and unexpected gleams, seem to rise and fall like glittering golden bubbles. The wall, white as a silver basket, surrounds this bouquet of golden flowers, and one feels the sensation of having before one, in reality, one of those magically lavish towns such as were built in the imaginations of Arab storytellers, some architectural crystallisation of the Arabian Nights. And when winter sprinkles these strangely dreamlike buildings with its powdery mica, one might truly think oneself transported to another planet, nothing like it ever having struck one's eyes before.



View of the Kremlin
From *Voyage pittoresque en Russie* by Charles de Saint-Julien, 1853
Internet Archive

We entered the Kremlin via the Spasskaya Gate which opens onto Red Square. No entrance could be more romantic. It pierces an enormous square tower preceded by a sort of porch or antechamber. The tower has three levels, diminishing in bulk, and ends in a spire borne on recessed arches. A double-headed eagle, holding the globe of the world in its claws, surmounts the sharp tip of this spire, ribbed at its edges and gilded at its sides, the level beneath which is octagonal. Each face of the second level bears an enormous dial, so that the tower shows the time of day to each quarter of the horizon. Add, for effect, a few flakes of snow settled, as in a Christmas card, on its architectural protrusions, and you will have some slight idea of the appearance presented by this prominent tower climbing in three stages above the denticulated wall whose length it interrupts.

The Spasskaya Gate is the object, in Russia, of remarkable veneration because of some image (*in fact the icon of 'Spas Nerukotvorny' or 'The Saviour Not Rendered by Human Hands', placed above the gate on the inside wall in 1658*) or legendary miracle about which I was unable to obtain precise information, and no one may pass by with head covered, even if it were the autocrat himself. Any irreverence in this regard is treated as sacrilege and may be perilous for the offender. Foreigners are warned about the custom. It is not enough to simply acknowledge, at the entrance to the porch, the holy images before which perpetual lamps burn, but one's head must remain bare until one has left the place. Now is not a pleasant thing to hold your fur hat in your hand, in twenty-five degrees of cold, in a long corridor through which an icy wind rushes. But everywhere one must comply with the customs of the country: remove your hat beneath the Spasskaya Gate, and your boots on the thresholds of the Suleymaniye Mosque or Hagia Sophia (*both in Istanbul*). The true traveller never objects, even if he were to catch the most dreadful cold.

Emerging from this porch, one finds oneself on the Kremlin Esplanade, in the midst of the most splendid crowd of palaces, churches, and monasteries the imagination can devise. All these relate to no known style. The architecture is not Greek or Byzantine, Gothic, Arabian, or Chinese; it is Russian, it is Muscovite. Never did architecture realise its fantastical whims in a freer manner, or one more original, more unconcerned with rules, or, in a word, more Romantic. Sometimes its manifestations seem like chance products of crystallisation. However, the domes, the golden-bulbed bell-towers are characteristic of this style which seems to acknowledge no law, and they render it identifiable at first sight.

Below the esplanade, where the main buildings of the Kremlin are grouped and which forms the plateau of the hill, the double walkway of its rampart follows the contours of the ground, flanked by an infinite variety of towers, some round, others square, these as slender as minarets, those like massive bastions, with machicolated collars, recessed floors, roofs pierced at the sides, open galleries, lanterns, spires, scales, ribs, every imaginable feature of tower design. The tall denticulations of the battlements, lining the walls, carved at their summits with notches like the nock of an arrow, are alternately solid or pierced by a barbican. I am quite ignorant of the strategic value of these as a means of defence, but, from the point of view of poetry, they fully satisfy the imagination and convey the idea of a formidable citadel.

Between the rampart and the embankment bordered by a balustrade, lie gardens, at this moment sprinkled with snow, while a picturesque and small church with bulbous bell towers rises above them. Beyond, as far as the eye can see, extends an immense and prodigious panorama of Moscow, to which the denticulated crest of the wall forms an admirable foreground, framing views of the horizon in a manner that all the inventiveness of art could not better.

The River Moskva, as wide as the Seine and as sinuous, curves round all this side of the Kremlin, and from the esplanade I could see, in the depths, its icy surface resembling opaque glass, since the snow had been swept from the area I was gazing at, so as to trace a course for horses training for some sleigh race on the ice, next day.



View of the Kremlin from the River Moskva - Willem van Senus, 1838
Rijksmuseum

The quayside, bordered by hotels, and superb houses of modern design, formed a starting point for the lines of houses and roofs behind them, seemingly stretching to infinity, created by the height and perspective of my viewpoint.

A fine frost — a word that makes Joseph Méry shiver with horror, since that chilly poet claims that all frost is ugly — having chased from the sky the vast and uniform cloud of a yellowish-grey colour, drawn like a curtain the day before across the darkened horizon, a quite brightly-coloured azure occupied the panorama's circular canvas, and the resurgence of cold air, crystallising the snow, had revived its whiteness. A pale shaft of sunlight, such as gleams in the month of January in Moscow, in those short winter days which recall one's closeness to the polar regions, slid obliquely over the city, spreading like a fan over the Kremlin, and slanting across the snow-covered roofs making them glitter in places like mica. Above these white roofs, like flakes of foam in a freezing storm, the upper levels of public buildings, temples and monasteries rose up like reefs or ships. It is said that Moscow contains more than three hundred churches and convents; I know not if this figure is accurate or purely hyperbolic, but it seems quite likely when you view the city from the top of the Kremlin, which itself contains a large number of cathedrals, chapels, and religious buildings.

One could not dream of anything richer, more splendid, beautiful, or magical, than those domes topped with Greek crosses, those bulb-shaped pinnacles, those hexagonal or octagonal

spires, ribbed, hollowed, rounded, flared, pointed, in the light, above the motionless tumult of snowy roofs. The gilded domes acquire reflections of wonderful translucency while, at their highest point, the light is concentrated to form a star that shines like a lamp. The domes of silver or tinplate seem to crown churches on the moon; further off are azure helmets studded with gold, caps made of plates of beaten copper, nested like dragon scales, and inverted onions painted green and glazed by a covering of frost; in the distance, the details are lost, even when viewing the scene through a telescope, and one can only distinguish a glittering confusion of domes, spires, towers and campaniles of every imaginable shape, silhouetted in shadowy lines against the bluish hue of the horizon, their outlines highlighted by a gleam of gold, silver, copper, sapphire or emerald. To complete the painting, imagine, on the cold and bluish tones of the snow, a few faint streaks of purplish light, pale roses of the polar sunset sown on the ermine carpet of a Russian winter.

I remained there, unaffected by the cold, absorbed in silent contemplation, as if in a sort of stupor of admiration.

No other city gives this impression of absolute originality, not even Venice, for which Canaletto, Francesco Guardi, Richard Parkes Bonington, Jules-Romain Joyant, William Wyld, Félix Ziem, and a series of photographs have prepared one. Moscow has not, to date, been much visited by artists, and its stranger aspects have scarcely been reproduced. The harsh northern climate adds to the singularity of the scene, with snowy effects, bizarre sky colours, and a quality of light which differs from ours, granting Russian painters a singular palette whose rightness is difficult to accept from afar.

On the Kremlin esplanade, with the panorama of Moscow before you, you feel truly elsewhere, and even a Frenchman deeply in love with Paris no longer pines for the Rue du Bac's stream (*which flowed into the Seine, where a ferry once ran.*)

The Kremlin encloses within its walls a large number of churches, or cathedrals as the Russians term them. The Athens Acropolis, on its narrow plateau, likewise brought together a large number of temples. We will visit them one after the other, but let us halt first at the Tower of Ivan Veliki, an enormous octagonal bell-tower, on three levels diminishing in size, the last of which, from a band of ornamentation, rounds to a turret topped with a swollen dome, fierily gilded, as bright as a gold ducat, and surmounted by a Greek cross with its base on the vanquished crescent. On every level, arches pierced all around the tower each reveal the curve of a bronze bell. There are thirty-three of them, and among them are, they say, the famous bells of Novgorod, whose ringing called the people to tumultuous deliberations in the public square. One of them weighs no less than sixty thousand kilograms, and the drone bell (*the bell of lowest pitch*) of Notre-Dame of which Quasimodo was so proud would seem, next to this metallic monster, no more than a simple handbell at Mass.

It would seem that the Russians have a passion for colossal bells, for, close to the tower of Ivan Veliki, the astonished eye may view a bell (*the Tsar Bell*) on a granite base, a bell so enormous that it might be taken for a bronze tent, more so since a large crack in its side forms a kind of entrance through which a man could enter easily without lowering his head. It was cast by order of the Empress Anna Ivanovna, and two hundred tons or so of metal (*more than two hundred thousand kilograms*) were thrown into the furnace. Auguste de Montferrand, the

architect of Saint-Isaac's, had it raised (*in 1826*) from the ground where it was half-buried, either by the violence of a fall while it was being mounted, or following some fire or collapse. Has so beautiful a mass ever been hung before? Did its iron clapper ever bring forth a sounding storm from that monstrous shell? History and legend seem silent on this point. Perhaps, like some ancient peoples who left beds twelve cubits long in their abandoned camps to make it appear that they belonged to a race of giants, perhaps the Russians wished, by means of this bell disproportionately large as regards human use, to grant distant posterity an exaggerated idea of their size, if after many centuries the bell chanced to be found during some excavation.

Regardless of the facts, this bell possesses beauty, like all things of unusual dimensions. The grace of enormity, a monstrous and fierce grace, but a real one, offsets its defect. The sides flare in ample and powerful curves decorated by delicate ornamentation. A globe surmounted by a cross crowns it; it pleases the eye with the purity of its curvature and the patina of its metal, and its very breach opens like the mouth of a bronze cavern, mysterious and dark. At the foot of the base is placed, like a panel removed from a door, the fragment of metal that filled the gap caused by the break.

But enough talk of bells, for now; let us enter one of the oldest and most characteristic of the Kremlin's cathedrals, the first which was built in stone, the Cathedral of the Assumption (*the Cathedral of the Dormition, Uspenskiy sobor*). It is not, it is true, the original building commissioned by Ivan I Kalita we see before our eyes. That collapsed after a century and a half of existence, and it was Ivan III who had it rebuilt (1475-79). The current cathedral therefore only dates from the fifteenth century, despite its Byzantine style and archaic appearance. I was surprised to learn that it was the work of Ridolfo Fioravanti, a Bolognese architect, whom the Russians named 'Aristotele', perhaps because of his great knowledge. The idea that naturally presented itself was that it had been created by some Greek architect summoned from Constantinople, my head being still full of Hagia Sophia and the various styles of Graeco-Oriental architecture. The Assumption is almost square, and its straight walls rise boldly in a surprising show of pride. Four huge pillars, like tall towers, as powerful as the columns of the Palace of Karnak, support a central dome set on a flat roof, in Asiatic style, flanked by four smaller domes.

This simple arrangement produces a grandiose effect, and the massive pillars provide, without heaviness, a firm base for, and extraordinary stability to, the cathedral's nave.

The whole interior of the church is covered in paintings, in Byzantine style on gold backgrounds. The pillars themselves are decorated with personages, zoned in rows, like the columns of Egyptian temples and palaces. Nothing is stranger than this method of ornamentation, whereby thousands of figures envelop you, like a silent crowd, ascending and descending along the walls, walking in line in a Christian *Panathenaea* (*the ancient Athenian festival*), isolated in poses of hieratic stiffness, bowing from the pendants, arches, and domes, a motionless crowd adorning the temple with a human tapestry. Rare light, discreetly husbanded, further adds to the disquieting and mysterious effect. In the tawny glowing shadows these large fierce saints of the Greek calendar take on formidable life; they watch you with a fixed gaze and seem to threaten with those hands extended to bless.

The shining armour of militant archangels and saintly knights, with bold and elegant countenances, is juxtaposed with the dark robes of holy monks and anchorites. They possess that proudness of bearing, that memory of the ancient inclination of the head that distinguishes the figures of Manuel Panselinos, the Byzantine monk and master-painter of Agia Lavra, of whose designs Dominique Papety has made such beautiful copies. The interior of Saint Mark's in Venice, with its golden cave-like appearance, gives an idea of the Assumption Cathedral; only the interior of the Moscow church rises towards the sky, while the vault of Saint Mark's contracts mysteriously like a crypt.

The iconostasis, a high silver-gilt wall with five levels of figures, which looks like the facade of a golden palace, dazzles the eye with its fabulous magnificence. From the niches and panels of the metalwork, the mother of God, and the male and female saints, reveal their brown heads and their hands in shades of bistre. Their flat halos, catching the light, make the facets of precious stones, encrusted in their rays, gleam and blaze with true glory; to the icons, which are objects of special veneration, are applied gemmed pectorals, necklaces, and bracelets studded with diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, amethysts, pearls, and turquoises; the folly of religious luxuriousness can be taken no further.

What a beautiful decorative motif these iconostases make, veils of gold and precious stones stretched between the prayers of the faithful and the mysteries of the holy sacrifice! One must recognise that the Russians take pride in all this, and that, in terms of magnificence, the Greek religion is in no way inferior to the Catholic, even if it fails to equal it in the domain of pure art.

In the Cathedral of the Assumption, in a shrine of inestimable value, the tunic of Our Lord is preserved. Two other reliquaries glittering with jewels contain a fragment of the Virgin's robe and a nail from the True Cross.

The Virgin of Vladimir (*now in the Church of St. Nicholas in Tolmachi, part of the State Tretyakov Gallery*) painted, according to tradition, by the hand of Saint Luke, an image that the Russians regard as a *palladium* (*sacred protective image*), the exhibition of which made Timur's fierce hordes retreat, is adorned with a solitaire valued at more than a hundred thousand francs. The mass of goldsmith's work which frames it cost two or three times that amount. Without doubt this degree of luxury would seem a little barbaric to a sensitive taste more attuned to beauty than wealth, but there is no denying that the mass of gold, diamonds, and pearls produces a splendid religious effect. These virgins whose frames are better furnished than those of queens and empresses impress the naively pious. They take on in the shadows, by the vague light of the lamps, a supernatural radiance, their crowns of diamonds scintillating like crowns of stars.

From the centre of the vault hangs an immense solid forty-six branched silver chandelier of beautiful workmanship, circular in shape, which replaced an older chandelier of considerable weight removed during the French invasion. The coronations of the emperors take place in this Cathedral of the Assumption. The platform destined for them rises between the four supporting pillars of the dome, and faces the iconostasis.

The tombs of the Moscow Metropolitans occupy the side walls. They are oblong in shape, arranged against the wall, and resemble, in the darkness that clothes them, traveller's trunks furnished for the great voyage to eternity.

The Cathedral of the Archangel (*Arkhangel'skiy sobor*), whose façade turns obliquely towards the Church of the Assumption and is only a few steps away from it, offers no essential difference in layout. Here again is the same set of bulbous domes, massive pillars, iconostases sparkling with gold, and the Byzantine paintings covering the interior of the building like a sacred tapestry. Only this time the paintings lack the gilded backgrounds, and are more like frescoes than mosaics. They represent scenes from the Last Judgment, and haughty, forbidding portraits of the ancient Russian tsars.

It is here that the latter's tombs are located, covered with cashmere and rich fabrics like the turbans of the Sultans of Constantinople. All is sober, simple, and severe. Death is not embellished by the detailed flourishes of Gothic artistry, to which the tomb provided the finest of ornamental themes. No kneeling angels, no theological virtues, no emblematic weeping figures, no saints in niches delicately carved, no fanciful valances bordering the coats of arms, no knights in armour, their heads on cushions of marble, their feet on sleeping lions: nothing but the corpse in its funeral casket clothed in a shroud. Art undoubtedly loses, but religion gains.

On the wall of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, adjoining the palace of the tsars, I would point out to you a rare and curious painting, representing the Angel Gabriel appearing to the Blessed Virgin, to announce that the Son of God will be born of her womb. The encounter, like that of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, takes place near a well. According to a tradition of the Greek Church, later, after her humble acquiescence to the Lord's will, the Blessed Virgin was visited in her room by the Holy Spirit.

This dual scene, painted on the exterior wall of the church, is protected from bad weather by a sort of canopy. A single detail may suffice to indicate the interior richness of the church: the paving stones are made of agates brought from Greece.

On the New Palace (*The Grand Kremlin Palace*) side, and close to these churches, there is a strange building (*The Palace of the Facets, Granovitaya palata*) alien to all the known styles of architecture, with an Asian and Tartar appearance, which is, as a civil monument, akin to *Vasiliya Blazhennogo (Saint Basil's Cathedral)* as a religious one, a chimera that is, realised in all its exactness by a sumptuous, barbaric, and fanciful imagination. It was built in the reign of Ivan III by the architect Aloisio the New. From its roof, with a graceful and picturesque irregularity, soar the gold-capped turrets of the chapels and the oratories it contains. An external staircase, from the top of which the emperor shows himself to his people after his coronation, gives access to it, producing by its ornamented projection an original architectural effect. It is as well-known in Moscow as the Giant's Staircase in Venice. One of the curiosities of the Kremlin, it is called in Russian *Krasnoe Kryltso (The Red Staircase)*.

The interior of the New Palace, which includes the Terem Palace, a former residence of the tsars, almost defies description; it seems as if its rooms and its passages were excavated gradually, carved out, to no particular plan, from an enormous block of stone, so tangled are

they, changing level and orientation at the whim of some wild fantasy in a bizarre, confusing and complicated manner. I walked about, within, as in a dream, sometimes obstructed by a gate mysteriously opened; sometimes forced to follow a narrow dark corridor in which my shoulders almost touched the walls; at other times, finding no other path than the jagged edge of a cornice, from which I could view the copper plates of the roof and the rise and fall of the golden bulbs of the pinnacles, no longer knowing where I was, seeing, closer and closer, through golden latticework, the glow of a lamp shedding light on the gold of the iconostases, and which led, after all that internal journey, to a room of wild ornamentation and savage richness, in the depths of which I was surprised not to find the Grand Knyaz of Tartary sitting, legs crossed, on his black felt carpet.

Such for example, is the room called the Golden Room, which occupies the entire interior of the Palace of the Facets, the latter doubtless so named because of its eastern facade cut in diamond point and adjoining the old palace of the tsars. The golden vaults of this room are supported by a central pillar, by means of low arches, the thick gilded iron ribs of which, running from one arch to another, eliminate flat spaces. Various paintings here and there form sombre patches on the tawny splendour of the background. On the stringcourse below the arches is a run of inscriptions in Slavonic letters, a magnificent script which lends itself to the ornamentation of buildings as well as does the Arabian Kufic. I cannot imagine a decoration richer, more mysterious, more sombre, or more dazzling than that of the Golden Room. Shakespearean Romanticism might envisage it as the setting for the denouement of a drama of his.

Some vaulted rooms of the old palace are so low that a man whose height is a little below the average can barely stand upright. Here, in the overheated atmosphere beside the stove, the Imperial ladies, squatting in oriental style on piled carpets, passed the long hours of Russian winter watching, through the narrow windows, the snow sparkling on the gilded domes, and the crows describing their wide spirals around the bell-towers.

These apartments, colourfully adorned with paintings, whose palm-leaves, branches, and flowers recall designs for cashmere shawls, seem like those of an Asian harem transported to the polar frosts. The true Muscovite taste, later distorted by the unthinking imitation of Western art, appears here in all its primitive originality and with a harsh barbaric flavour. I have often noted that the progress of civilisation seems to rob nations of their feeling for architecture and ornamentation. The old buildings of the Kremlin prove once again the truth of that assertion, which may at first seem paradoxical. An inexhaustible fantasy governed the decoration of these mysterious rooms, in which golds, greens, blues, and reds mingle joyfully to produce charming effects. This architecture, without the slightest concern for symmetry, rises like a mass of soap bubbles, raised on a plate by blowing through a straw. Each bubble, added to its neighbours, alters the angles and facets of the whole, and everything gleams with the multi-coloured hues of iris flowers. This childish and seemingly odd comparison captures more accurately than any other the aggregate nature of these palaces, fantastic in appearance, but real nonetheless.

It is this style that I would have liked to have seen employed in the design of the New Palace (*the extant Grand Kremlin Palace, built 1837-1849*), an immense construction in the modern taste which would be fine anywhere else, but jars when seen amidst the old Kremlin.

Classical architecture, with its long cold lines, looks even more solemn and tedious among these strangely shaped palaces, in bright colours, and this host of churches in the oriental manner, sending towards the sky a golden forest of cupolas, domes, pyramidions and bulbous bell-towers. One might believe, gazing at this Muscovite architecture, that one was viewing some chimerical city in Asia, with cathedrals replacing the mosques and bell-towers their minarets, while the sober facade of the New Palace returns you instantly to the West and modern civilisation: a painful thing to the Romantic barbarians among us.

One enters the New Palace via a staircase of monumental extent, its upper level closed off by a magnificent wrought-iron gate which opens slightly to let the visitor pass. One then finds oneself beneath the high vault of a domed room where four sentries stand guard, and are never relieved from duty: mannequins dressed from head to toe in ancient and curious Slavonic armour. These knights have a very grand appearance; they might be mistaken for living men; one might think a heart was beating beneath each coat of mail. Such suits of armour from the Middle Ages, standing tall in this manner, always prompt in me a kind of involuntary shudder. They preserve so faithfully the external form of a being who has forever vanished.

From this rotunda one reaches two galleries containing inestimable riches. The treasure of Harun al-Rashid, the war-spoils of Kai Kusrau in Abu'l-Qasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the contents of the Green Vault of Dresden (*the Grünes Gewölbe, in the Residenzschloss*) united together would present no such accumulation of wonders, and here the historical adds to the material value. One sees, sparkling, shining, and sending forth prismatic lightning bolts and wild bluish gleams, hosts of diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, all the precious stones that jealous nature hides deep in its mines, lavished here as if they were little more than glass. They add stars to crowns, points of light to the tips of sceptres, flow like glittering rain over the insignias of empire, and form curves and arabesques that scarcely leave the gold that enshrines them visible! The eye is dazzled, and reason hardly dares to calculate the wealth represented by all this magnificence. To attempt to describe this prodigious scene would be madness. A whole book would not suffice. I must content myself by citing a few of the most remarkable pieces. One of the oldest crowns is that of Vladimir II Monomakh. It is said to have been a gift to him from the emperor Alexios I Komnenos, one brought from Constantinople to Kiev by a Greek embassy in 1116. In addition to the historical value attached to it, it is a work of exquisite taste. On a background of gold filigree, pearls and precious stones are arranged with an admirable understanding of ornamentation. The crowns of Kazan and Astrakhan, in oriental style, one strewn with turquoises, the other topped with an enormous raw emerald, are jewels to make modern gold-smiths despair of their art. The crown of Siberia is made of cloth of gold; like all the others it has a Greek cross at its summit, and, again, is starred with diamonds, sapphires and pearls. The golden sceptre of Vladimir Monomakh, almost a metre long, is adorned with no less than two hundred and sixty-eight diamonds, three hundred and sixty rubies, and fifteen emeralds. The enamelled sections, covering the space left free by the gems, represent religious subjects treated in the Byzantine style; it was also part of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos' gift, as well as a reliquary in the shape of a cross containing a fragment of stone from the tomb of Our Lord, and a piece of wood from the Cross. A crude gold casket made of precious stones contains this treasure. A curious item is the Golden Chain belonging to the first of the Romanovs (*Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich*), the rings of which are engraved with

prayers, the Tsar's titles, and a list of Russian lands, towns, and princedoms. There are eighty-nine of these rings. We cannot stop to admire the thrones, globes, sceptres, and crowns of the different kingdoms, but should note that, though the richness is always the same, the purity of taste and beauty of the objects diminishes as we approach the modern era.

A thing no less wonderful, but more open to description, is a room full of gold and silver vessels. Around the pillars circular shelving, in the form of tiered dressers, supports a whole universe of vases, pots, ewers, flagons, jars, jugs, and ladles, chalices, goblets, beakers, cannikins, mugs, tankards, and tumblers, cups and drinking-glasses, bottles, flasks, gourds, and amphoras, and everything related to drinking, or *Beuverie* as Master Rabelais has it, in his Pantagruelic language.

Behind these items, dishes made of gold and vermeil sparkle, as large as those on which Victor Hugo's *Burgraves* (see his play '*Les Burgraves*', 1843) served whole oxen. Every tankard is topped by such a nimbus. And what tankards they are! Not less than three or four feet tall in height and only to be raised in a Titan's fist. What a vast expenditure of imagination was involved in creating this mass of tableware! The whole range of vessels capable of containing wine, mead, beer, kvass, or brandy, seems to have been exhausted. And what a rich, fanciful, grotesque taste has been expressed in the ornamentation of these gold, silver, and vermeil containers! Sometimes a bacchanalia of chubby joyful figures dances around the belly of a pot, sometimes foliage intertwines with wild creatures and hunting scenes, elsewhere dragons coil around the handles, antique medals encrust the sides of a drinking-glass, a Roman triumph parades its *buccinas* (*trumpets*) and ensigns, Israelites in Dutch costume carry grapes from the Promised Land, or mythological nudity is contemplated by satyrs amid dense arabesques. At the whim of the artist, goblets take on bestial forms, rear like bears, stretch like storks, beat eagles' wings, strut like geese, or bear the antlers of a deer on their sides. Further on a spice-box shaped like a ship fills its sails, flies its flags, and takes aboard through its hatches the spices with which it is to be filled. All possible dreams of the goldsmith and silversmith are realised here on this prodigious dresser!

The armoury contains treasures to tire the pen of the most intrepid nomenclator. Circassian helmets, chain-mail inscribed with verses from the Koran, shields with filigreed bosses, scimitars, khanjars (*daggers*) with jade handles their sheaths decorated with precious stones, all those oriental weapons which are at the same time jewels, shine there among an arsenal of sober weapons from the West. Viewing all these heaped riches, one's head spins and one begs mercy of the over-complacent or over-exacting guide who wishes not to wrong you by neglecting a single item.

I liked the chapter houses dedicated to various orders of Russian chivalry. Those of St. George the Martyr, St. Alexander Nesky, St. Apostle Andrew the First, and St. Catherine, each occupy a vast gallery whose ornamental motifs borrow elements from their coats of arms. Heraldic art is eminently decorative, and its application to monuments always yields a fine effect.

One may imagine, without my detailed description, the sumptuous furnishings of the ceremonial salons. Everything that modern luxury has been able to achieve in the way of ostentation, has been gathered there, at great expense, while not a single thing expresses the

charms of Muscovite taste. The modern manner however was essential, so as to maintain consistency with that of the New Palace itself. But what surprised me greatly was to find myself, at the far end of the very last room, face to face with a pale phantom in white marble, posed in apotheosis, fixing large, motionless eyes on me, its mask of a Roman Caesar leaning forward in meditative gaze. Napoleon, in Moscow, in the Tsar's palace: an encounter I'd not expected!

Part VIII: Troitsa (*The Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius*), and Byzantine Art

Chapter 18: Troitsa (*The Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius*)

If, having viewed the main sights, one has a few days leisure in Moscow, an excursion offers itself that one should not fail to accept with alacrity. That is, to visit the monastery of Troitsa. The journey is well worth while, and few regret the undertaking.

It was therefore agreed that we would go to Troitsa, and a Russian friend, who had graciously assumed the responsibility of acting as our guide, took care of the preparations. He engaged a *kibitka* (*sleigh*) and sent a relay of horses to the half-way point; for the journey, if one takes to the road early, can be accomplished in half a day, and one can arrive early enough to gain a general idea of the buildings and their situation. We were warned to be ready to leave at three in the morning.

Habitual travelling grants one the ability to wake at a precise time, without persistent prompting from the tinkling chimes of an alarm clock. So I was on my feet, and already furnished with food and a glass of hot tea — the tea is excellent in Moscow — when the *kibitka* arrived at the front door of the inn. Trying to assess the state of the weather through the double panes of the window, I noted that the indoor thermometer showed fifteen degrees Réaumur (*nineteen degrees Centigrade*) and the outside minus thirty-one degrees (*minus thirty-eight degrees Centigrade*). A light wind cooled by the polar ice floes had blown during the night, and brought the glacial resurgence.

Thirty-one degrees of cold, when you think about it, makes even the least chilly nature shiver; fortunately, I had already suffered all the rigours of the Russian winter, and was accustomed to temperatures suited to reindeer and polar bears. However, as I would be exposed to the fresh air for a whole day, I had dressed accordingly: two shirts, two vests, and two pairs of trousers, enough to clothe a second person from head to toe. For the legs and feet woollen stockings, and white felt boots, inside a second pair of fur-lined boots reaching above the knee; for headgear a warm beaver-lined hat; for gloves, a pair of Samoyed mittens of which the thumbs alone were articulated, and, cloaking all, an enormous fur overcoat, its collar rising behind as high as the top of my head to protect my neck, and secured at the front to protect my face. In addition, I wound a long knitted woollen scarf five or six times round my torso, like string knotted round a parcel, so as to preclude any gap in my coat through which air could penetrate. Bundled up, in this manner, I looked like an ambulant sentry-box, and, in the warmth of the room, the layers of clothing seemed to weigh immensely, and overwhelm me; yet, once in the outside air, felt as light as cotton.

The kibitka was waiting, and the impatient horses, lowering their heads and shaking their long manes, chewed the snow. A few words of description apropos the vehicle. A kibitka is a kind of box, which is as much a cabin as a carriage, set on a sled's frame. It has a door, and a window which one would not dream of closing, since the steam from one's breath condensing on the window would change to ice, and one would thus find oneself deprived of air, and plunged into frosted darkness. We arranged ourselves as best we could in the depths of the kibitka, packed like sardines from Lorient; because, though there were only three of us, the quantity of clothes with which we were overloaded meant that we occupied the space of six; over our legs, as an additional precaution, travel blankets and a bearskin were thrown, and we departed.

It must have been about four in the morning. In the blue-black sky, the stars shone with vivid scintillations and the sharp clarity that indicates an intense degree of cold; the snow screeched, beneath the steel runners of the kibitka, like glass scratched with a diamond. As for the rest, there was not a breath of air, and one would have said that the wind itself has frozen stiff. One could have taken a walk lit by a candle in one's hand, without the flame wavering; the wind added markedly to the severe morning chill, changing an inert coldness to an active coldness, and cubes of ice into arrowheads. It was, in short, what towards the end of January is termed fine weather, for Moscow.

Russian coachmen like to travel swiftly, a taste that the horses share. It proves necessary to restrain rather than rouse them. Every departure takes place at full speed, and when one is unused to so dizzying a speed, one fears them having the bit between their teeth. Ours did not deviate from the rule, and galloped wildly amidst the solitude and silence of the Moscow streets, which were lit by a dim glow from the reverberating snow, rather than the fading light of their frozen lanterns. The houses, buildings, and churches sped by rapidly to right and left, their dark silhouettes strangely outlined and enhanced by gleams of white, because no darkness quite extinguishes the silvery sheen of snow. Sometimes the domes of chapels, quickly glimpsed, gave the effect of giant helmets rising above the ramparts of some fantastic fortress; the silence was disturbed only by the night-watch, walking at regulation pace, trailing their iron-shod sticks over the pavement slabs to demonstrate their vigilance.

At the speed we were going, though Moscow is vast, we had soon crossed the city boundary, and the street was replaced by a road. The houses vanished, and the countryside extended vaguely on both sides, whitish under the night sky. It offered a strange sensation, this coursing at great speed through a pale, indefinite landscape, enveloped in a monotonous whiteness, and resembling a flat plain on the moon, while man and beast slept, and without hearing any other noise than the trampling of horses and the sound of the sled runners in the snow. One might have thought one was on an uninhabited globe.

While we were galloping like this, a sequence of thoughts filled my mind, due to one of those internal transitions whose thread Edgar Allan Poe's *Auguste Dupin* knew so well how to follow, but which often arouse sudden questions in the reader ignorant of its secret – thoughts of what, of whom? I challenge you to guess – of *Robinson Crusoe*!

What circumstance could have given rise in my brain to the idea of *Robinson Crusoe*, on the road from Moscow to Troitsa, between five and six a.m., in thirty degrees of cold, a

temperature which scarcely reflected the climate of the island of Juan-Fernández, on which Daniel Defoe's hero spent many a long and lonely year. A peasant's hut, built of logs, which took shape for a moment at the edge of the road, had awakened, confusedly, in me the memory of the lodge built by Crusoe at the entrance to his cave; but this fleeting idea would have vanished, and remained unlinked to the present situation in any sensible way, if the snow, as I glanced at it with a distracted eye, had not imperiously recalled that character, close to disappearing into the fog of my vague musings. In the sequel to his adventures (*see Defoe's 'The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe', 1719*) after his deliverance and return to civilised life, Crusoe makes a long journey, with his little caravan, over the snow-covered plains of Siberia, and is attacked by packs of wolves which put his body as much at risk as when the cannibals had previously landed on his isle.

That is why the idea of Robinson Crusoe came to me, in accordance with that hidden logic readily deducible by an attentive mind. Passing beyond it, to the idea of wolves on the road ahead, was fatal. My thoughts had turned of themselves towards that rather troubling subject given the vast solitude of snow, marked here and there by reddish patches indicating the presence of pine and birch forest. I recalled the most dreadful stories of travellers attacked and devoured by packs of wolves. I put an end to such thoughts, by recalling a tale that Honoré de Balzac once related to me, with that enormous degree of seriousness he brought to all his pleasantries. It was the story of a Lithuanian lord and his wife, travelling from their castle to another at which a ball was taking place. On the path, at the corner of a wood, a pack of wolves lay in wait to ambush the carriage. The horses, urged on by the coachman, and by the dread that those formidable creatures aroused, galloped on frantically, followed by the whole pack whose eyes glowed like embers in the carriage's shadowy wake. The lord and his lady, more dead than alive, each cowering in their corner, frozen with fear, thought they heard behind them vague sighs, panting breath, and the grinding of jaws; at last, they arrived at the castle whose gate, on closing, sliced two or three wolves in half. The coachman halted by the porch, and when no one came to the door, they turned around, only to see the skeletons of their two lackeys, perfectly stripped of flesh, still clinging to the straps of the carriage in the classic position. 'Now there were well-trained and dutiful servants,' exclaimed Balzac, 'such as we no longer find in France!'

The humour of the story did not, however, prevent me imagining more than one wolf, ravenous as they are in the depths of winter, chasing behind us. We had no weapons, and our only hope of salvation would have lain in the speed of our horses, and the protection of some neighbouring dwelling. All this would have made for a far from cheerful scene; but the tale had proved amusing, and laughter had quenched our worries, and moreover day began to break, the dawn light that does away with chimeras and sends the wild creatures back to their dens. Needless to say, we saw not the slightest trace of even the tail of a wolf.

The night had been studded with stars; but towards morning a mist had risen on the horizon, and the Muscovite dawn arose pale, with weary eyelids, and pallid face. Her nose may have been red, but the epithet 'rosy-fingered' that Homer applied to his Greek Aurora was less than applicable here. However, the glow was enough to allow the landscape around us, though not lacking in grandeur, to be seen in all its dreary extent.

The reader may find my descriptions of it somewhat repetitive, but monotony is one of the characteristics of the Russian countryside, at least in the region we were travelling through. On those immense plains, only slightly undulating, one finds no higher hills than those on which the Kremlins of Moscow and Nizhny-Novgorod are built, neither of which exceed Montmartre in height. The snow, which covers these indefinite spaces for four or five months of the year, further adds to their uniformity of appearance, by filling the folds of the ground, and the beds of the watercourses and the valleys they carve. What one sees for hundreds of leagues, is an endless white tablecloth, raised a little, here and there, by the inequalities of the ground it covers and, depending on the obliquity of the sun, sometimes streaked with pink light and bluish shadow; though, when the sky has its ordinary hue, that is to say a leaden grey, the general colour is a matt white, or, to put it better, a dead white. In the more or less near distance, lines of reddish bushes, half emerging from the snow, mark the vast whiteness. Birch woods, and sparsely sown pine trees, show as dark spots here and there, and poles similar to telegraph posts reveal the presence of the road, cleared by the frequent activity of snow ploughs. Near the road, stand *izbas* made from logs, the cracks stuffed with moss, their roofs, the gables of which are crossed at the top in the form of an X, displaying their sharp lines in rows, and, at the edge of the horizon, villages reveal themselves in shallow silhouettes, each topped with a church's bulbous bell-towers. Nothing living is visible but flocks of ravens and crows, and sometimes a moujik, bearing wood or some other load to a dwelling in the interior, on his sleigh drawn by small long-haired horses.

Such is the landscape, reproduced till the eye is sated, which reforms around one as one advances, just as one's view of the sea endlessly renews, ever the same, beyond one's vessel. Although an accidentally picturesque feature is quite rare, one never wearies of gazing at those immense expanses which inspire in one an indefinable melancholy, as does everything that is vast, silent and lonely. Sometimes, despite the speed of the horses, one might think oneself at rest.

We arrived at the relay station, whose name I forget. It was a wooden house, with a courtyard cluttered with *telegas* (carts) and sleds of quite wretched appearance. In the lower room, moujiks, in tulups shiny with grease, with blond beards, and crimson faces lit by eyes of icy blue, were grouped around a copper urn drinking tea, while others were sleeping on benches near the stove. Some, even more cautious souls, lay on its top.

We were conducted to an upper room, its walls covered with planking, which looked like a firwood-box viewed from within. It was lit by a small double window, and had no other ornament than an image of the '*Mother of God*', whose halo and garments were of metal, and whose head and hands emerged to reveal that brown tint which the Russians employ in imitation of the Byzantine school, and which grants an age-old appearance to paintings which are quite recent. The *Child Jesus* was treated in the same manner. A lamp burned before this holy image. These mysteriously tanned faces, which one glimpses amidst a golden or silver carapace, are full of character, and command greater veneration than would paintings more preferable from the point of view of art. There is no cottage so poor that it lacks one of these images, in front of which one never passes without baring one's head, and which are the object of frequent worship.

A pleasant hothouse temperature reigned in this room, furnished with a table and a few chairs, rendering it comfortable. We removed the fur coats and heavy clothes that weighed us down, and lunched on the provisions brought from Moscow, a lunch washed down with Caravan tea (*a blend of black and oolong teas named from the camel caravans that carried it from China to Europe via Russia in the 18th century*) brewed in the inn's samovar. After which, resuming our heavy armour against the barbs of winter, we settled into our *kibitka* once more, ready to brave, with good cheer, the rigours of the cold.

As one approaches Troitsa the houses become more numerous, and one feels one has reached an important place. Troitsa is indeed the destination for lengthy pilgrimages. Worshippers arrive from all the provinces of the Empire, for Saint Sergius, the founder of this famous convent, is one of the most revered saints of the Greek calendar. The road that leads from Moscow to Troitsa, which we had followed, runs to Yaroslav, and in summer it presents, it is said, a most lively sight; it leads there by way of Ostankino, where a Tatar encampment is to be found, the village of Rostokino, and that of Alekseyevskoye, which still retained until a few years ago the ruins of Tsar Alexis' castle, and, when winter does not cover them with its coat of snow, one can see amidst the countryside graceful pleasure mansions. The pilgrims, dressed in their *armiaks* (*camel-hair kaftans*) and shod with lime bark shoes when they are not walking barefoot out of devotion, follow the sandy road in stages. Families follow, in *kibitkas*, carrying with them mattresses, pillows, kitchen utensils, and the essential samovar, like nomads on a journey; but at the time of our excursion the road was perfectly empty.

Before arriving at Troitsa, the ground drops a little, probably eroded by some watercourse frozen in winter and covered with snow. On the far side of the ravine, on a broad plateau, the monastery of Saint Sergius rises picturesquely, with the look of a fortress, a huge quadrilateral, surrounded by solid ramparts, their width supporting a covered gallery, pierced by barbicans that sheltered the defenders of the place: so, one might describe this convent, which was attacked on several occasions. Large towers, some square, others hexagonal, occupy the corners and surmount the walls far and near. Some of these towers at their top bear a strongly-projecting machicolated surround, on which oddly bulging roofs rest, topped with lanterns that end in needles.

There are others which carry a second tower, rising behind the first, amidst a ring of pinnacles. The door through which one enters the monastery is set in a square tower in front of which extends a vast square.

Above these ramparts stand, in graceful and picturesque irregularity, the ridges and domes of the buildings that the monastery encloses. The immense refectory, whose walls are squared, and painted with pointed diamond-shaped bosses, occupies the eye, its imposing mass lightened by the bell-tower of an elegant chapel. Nearby are the five bulbous domes of the Church of the Assumption, each topped with a Greek cross; a little further, dominating the skyline, the tall polychrome bell-tower of the Trinity displays its tiered turrets, and lifts to the heavens its cross adorned with chains. Other towers, pinnacles and roofs take shape, confusedly, within the area of the walls, but the eye cannot assign them an exact location, which would require a view from above. Nothing is more charming than the gilded domes and spires,

to which the snow adds a few touches of silver, rising from a group of buildings painted in bright colours. It gives one the illusion of gazing at an oriental city.

On the far side of the square is a large hotel more akin to a caravanserai than an inn, designed to receive pilgrims and travellers. That is where we left our carriage, and where, before visiting the monastery, we chose our rooms and ordered dinner. Our lodging-house was not the equal of the Grand Hôtel du Louvre (*on the Place du Palais-Royal, opened 1855*) or the Hotel Le Meurice (*on the Rue de Rivoli, opened 1835*) in Paris, but, despite that, the place was quite comfortable, the temperature was spring-like, and the pantry seemed sufficiently well-garnished. Tourists' laments concerning the dirt and vermin in Russian inns astound me.

Near the monastery door, stalls were established containing small goods and various little curiosities that tourists like to buy as souvenirs. There were children's toys of primitive simplicity, coloured with amusing barbarity, charming white felt shoes, bordered with pink or blue, that Andalusian feet would scarcely fit, fur-lined mittens, Circassian belts, Tula cutlery nielloed with platinum, models of the cracked bell in Moscow, rosaries, enamel medallions with the effigy of Saint Sergius, metal or wooden crosses adorned with a multitude of miniature figures in Byzantine style interspersed with legends in Slavonic characters, bread from the convent bakery bearing, stamped on the thin crust, scenes from the Old or New Testament, all without counting the piles of those green apples which the Russians seem to love. Some moujiks purple with cold kept these little shops; because here, the women, without being subjected to oriental seclusion, are barely seen outdoors; one rarely encounters them on the street; trade is handled by men, though the merchant as such is a type virtually unknown in Russia. This custom is a remnant of the ancient Asian concern for modesty. On the entrance tower several episodes of the life of Saint Sergius, the great local saint, are painted. Like Saint Roch and Saint Anthony, Saint Sergius has his favourite animal. Neither a dog nor a pig, but a bear in fact, a wild beast well-suited to appearing in the legend of a Russian saint.

While the venerable anchorite was living in solitude, a bear with obviously hostile intentions prowled around his hermitage. One morning, on opening his door, the saint encountered the bear, standing there and growling, its arms extended for a hug which had nothing fraternal about it. Sergius raised his hand and blessed the animal which dropped on all fours, licked his feet and began to follow him with the docility of the most submissive dog. The saint and the bear became the best of companions.

After taking a look at these paintings which if not old, had at least been executed in the ancient style and were of sufficiently Byzantine appearance, we entered the monastery enclosure, which resembles the interior of a fortress and which is indeed one, for Troitsa endured several sieges.



Troitsa - Sergiyeva Lavra, 1800 - 1802

Picryl

A few lines of historical details about Troitsa maybe necessary before moving on to a description of the monuments and treasures its ramparts contain. Saint Sergius lived in a hut in the middle of the vast surrounding forest of Radonezh, currently known as Gorodok (*now Radonezh once more*), indulging in prayer, fasting and all the austerities of eremitic existence. Near his cabin, he raised a church in honour of the Most Holy Trinity and thereby created a religious centre to which the faithful flocked. Disciples, full of fervour, wished to dwell near the master. To accommodate them, Sergius built a monastery which took the name Troitsa, 'Trinity' in Russian, after the name of the church, and he was elected its superior. This took place in 1337. Care for one's salvation and concern for heavenly things did not prevent Saint Sergius being interested in the events of his time. The love of God did not extinguish in him love for his native soil. He was a patriotic saint, and as such is still the object of great veneration amongst the Russians. It was he who, at the time of the great Mongol invasion, inspired Prince Dmitri Donskoy to take to the plains along the River Don against Manai's fierce Tartar horde. So that heroic exaltation might be joined with religious exaltation, two monks (*Peresvet and Oslyabya*), delegated by Sergius, accompanied the prince in battle. The enemy was repulsed (*on the Field of Kulikovo, in 1380*) and the grateful Dmitri endowed the monastery of Troitsa with great wealth, an example which was followed by all the princes and tsars, among others Ivan the Terrible, one of the convent's most generous protectors.

In 1393, the Tartars attacked Moscow and carried out razzias (*hostile raids*) in the Asian manner. Troitsa was already too rich a prey not to excite their greed. The monastery was

attacked pillaged, burned, and reduced to a heap of ruins, and when, the devastating storms having ceased, Saint Nikon (*Abbot of Radonezh*) visited the monastery (*in 1422*) to initiate its restoration, and recall the dispersed monks, the body of Saint Sergius, in a state of miraculous preservation, was found beneath the rubble.

Troitsa, in times of invasion and trouble, served as a sanctuary for patriotism and a citadel for nationality. The Russians defended themselves there for sixteen months, from 1608 to 1610, against the Poles led by hetman Jan Sapieha. After several fruitless assaults the enemy was forced to lift the siege. Later, (*in 1698*) the monastery sheltered the young Tsareviches, Ivan and Peter Alexeevitch, fleeing the Streltsy rebellion, or, to speak more correctly, the rebellious ‘Streltys’ of those regiments. Peter I, the Great, sought refuge there from these same Streltys, and its recognition by the illustrious but persecuted pair, who subsequently came to power, enriched Troitsa and rendered it a tabernacle of treasures. Since the sixteenth century, Troitsa has escaped being pillaged, though the convent would have offered splendid booty to the French army if it had advanced that far, and if the great fire of Moscow had not decreed its retreat.

Tsars, princes, and boyars, through pure magnanimity or a desire to obtain divine forgiveness, endowed Troitsa with incalculable riches which remain there still. The sceptical Prince Grigory Potemkin, who was none the less devoted to Saint Sergius, offered up sumptuous priestly vestments. Besides these heaps of treasure, Troitsa commanded a hundred thousand peasants, and held immense estates which Catherine II, the Great, secularised, compensating the monastery with rich gifts. Formerly Troitsa housed, in cells, around three hundred monks; today there are scarcely more than a hundred, who sparsely populate the vast solitude of the immense convent.

The Troitsa enclosure, which is almost a city in itself, contains nine churches, or nine cathedrals as the Russians say, the Tsar’s palace, the accommodation for the archimandrite, the chapter house, refectory, library, and treasury, the cells of the brethren, sepulchral chapels, and service buildings of all kinds, regarding which there was no attempt at symmetry, and which rose at the right time, in the right place, like plants growing on some favourable corner of land.

Its aspect is strange, new and, so to speak, disorienting. Nothing is less picturesque than Catholic convents. Melancholy Gothic art with its frail columns, angled arches, hollowed-out trefoils, and slender ascent towards the heavens, inspires a completely different set of ideas. Here, one notes extensive cloisters, bordering, with their arcades darkened by time, a solitary courtyard; and ancient and austere walls, green with moss and washed by the rain, which retain the lichens and soot of centuries. Architectural features of infinite caprice, varying the obligatory theme and creating surprise even within the expected. Greek Orthodox religion, though less picturesque, from the point of view of art, preserve the ancient Byzantine formulae, repeated fearlessly, with a greater concern for orthodoxy than taste. It achieves powerful effects of wealth and splendour, however, and its hieratic barbarity deeply impresses naive imaginations.

It is impossible for the most jaded tourist not to feel astonishment and admiration on seeing, at the end of an avenue of trees, glistening with frost, which offers itself to view as one emerges from the tower’s entrance porch, those varied churches painted in Marie-Louise blue, bright

red, and apple green, highlighted in white by the snow, their gold and silver domes rising strangely from amidst the polychrome buildings that support them.

Daylight was beginning to fade when we entered the Trinity Cathedral, in which the shrine of Saint Sergius is to be found. Mysterious shadows further added to the magnificence of the sanctuary. On the interior walls, long rows of saints made dark patches on the gilded panels and took on a kind of strange savage life. They seemed like a procession of sombre figures, silhouetted darkly on the summit of a hill by the rays of a setting sun. In other more obscure corners, the painted figures looked like ghosts gazing from the shadows on whatever was taking place in the church. Touched by some stray shaft of light, here and there, a halo shone like a star in the night sky or some bearded saint's head gave the appearance of John the Baptist's head on Herodias' plate. The iconostasis, a gigantic facade of gold and jewels, rose to the vault amidst amber gleams, and prismatic scintillations. Near the iconostasis, to the right, a brightly-lit structure caught the eye; a series of lamps illuminated this corner, a conflagration of gold, silver and vermeil. It was the shrine of Saint Sergius, the humble anchorite, who rests there in a monument richer than that of any emperor. The tomb is in gilded silver, the canopy in solid silver, supported by four columns of the same metal, a gift from the Tzarina Anna Ioannovna. Around this block of goldsmith's work over which light pours, moujiks, pilgrims, faithful folk of all kinds, in admiring ecstasy, were praying, making the sign of the cross, and surrendering to the practices of Russian devotion. It formed a scene worthy of Rembrandt. The gleaming tomb cast splashes of light on these kneeling peasants making a skull shine here, a beard glow there, highlighting some profile, while the body below remained bathed in shadow, lost beneath coarse layers of clothing. There were superb faces there, illuminated by fervour and belief.

After contemplating this spectacle so worthy of interest, we examined the iconostasis wherein is embedded the image of Saint Sergius, an image considered miraculous in its effects, and which Tsar Alexis took with him in his wars against Poland, and Peter the Great on his campaigns against Charles XII. One cannot conceive the sheer amount of wealth that faith, devotion, and hope born of remorse has accumulated, in seeking indulgence of the heavens over the centuries, on the wall of this iconostasis, a colossal setting for a true mine-full of gems. The halos of various icons are embossed with diamonds; while sapphires, rubies, emeralds, and topazes form mosaics on the gilded robes of the Madonnas, white and black pearls make patterns there, and where space is lacking, chains of solid gold sealed at the two corners like handles on a chest of drawers, are embedded with diamonds of enormous size. I dare not calculate the value, which certainly exceeds several million francs. Doubtless, a simple Madonna by Raphael is more beautiful than a Greek *'Mother of God'* thus adorned, but nevertheless this prodigious magnificence, Asian and Byzantine in nature, produces a singular effect.

The Assumption Cathedral, which neighbours that of the Trinity, is built on the same plan as the Kremlin's Dormition church, the exterior and interior arrangements of which it replicates. Paintings that one might believe created by student contemporaries of Manuel Panselinos, the great Byzantine artist of the eleventh century, cover the walls, and the enormous pillars which support the vault. One might say that the church is entirely clothed in tapestries, because no relief work interrupts its immense frescoes divided into zones and compartments.

Sculpture is in no way involved in the ornamentation of religious buildings dedicated to the Greek Orthodox worship: the Eastern Church, which employs so great a profusion of painted images, seems not to admit sculpted ones. It seems to fear the statue as representing a form of idol, although bas-relief is sometimes employed in the decoration of doors, crosses and other elements of worship. I know of no other three-dimensional statues than those which adorn St. Isaac's Cathedral. This absence of relief and sculpture gives Greek churches a strange and singular character which one fails to fully appreciate at first, but which one ends by comprehending.

In this church are the tombs of Boris Godunov, his wife and two children; these sepulchres resemble Islamic *turbas* (*mausoleums*) in style and shape. Religious scruples have banished the artistry that renders the Gothic tombs in western churches so admirable.

Saint Sergius, as founder and patron saint of the monastery, deserved a church of his own on the site where his hermitage once stood. So, there is, within the Troitsa enclosure a chapel of Saint Sergius as rich, as ornate, and as splendid as the sanctuaries of which I have just spoken. Here the miraculous image of the Virgin of Smolensk, called the *Hodegetria*, 'She who shows the way', was to be found. The walls were covered with frescoes from ceiling to floor, and the iconostasis, in niches embossed with gold, revealed the brown heads of Greek saints.

However, night had now completely descended, and whatever zeal one may possess, the profession of tourist cannot be practised in darkness. Hunger gripped us, and we returned to the inn where the pleasant temperature maintained in Russian interiors awaited us. The meal was passable. The sacred cabbage soup, accompanied by meatballs, a suckling pig, and sudak (*pikeperch*), a fish as peculiar to Russia as sterlet, composed the menu, brightened by a little Crimean white wine, a sort of 'epileptic coconut juice' (*foaming white; for the origin of the phrase see Henri Murger, Scènes de la Vie de Bohème, 1851*) which seeks to counterfeit Champagne, and is not too unpleasant a drink.

After dinner, a few glasses of tea, and a quantity of extremely strong Russian tobacco, smoked in small pipes like those the Chinese employ, occupied us till bedtime.

My sleep, I admit, was undisturbed by those nocturnal creatures whose impure attentions transform the traveller's bed to a blood-stained battlefield. I am thus deprived of the pleasure of uttering here a pathetic curse against insects, and must reserve for another occasion that quotation from Heinrich Heine: 'Yes, the worst thing on earth...is the duel with a bug' (*see Heine's 'Atta Troll' Canto XI, last verse*). To destroy them it suffices to leave the bedroom window open in thirty degrees or so of frost, and it was winter.

Early the following morning we recommenced our tour of the Troitsa monastery. We visited the churches we had not been able to see the day before, which it is useless to describe in detail, since their interiors are more or less repetitions of one another like a liturgical formula. In some of the exteriors the rococo style is joined, most oddly, to the Byzantine style. It is difficult also to assign their true age to these buildings; what seems old may have been painted the day before, while the traces of time vanish between layers of colour incessantly renewed.

I had a letter, from an influential person in Moscow, for the archimandrite, a handsome fellow with long beard and long hair, and a most majestic visage, whose features recalled those

of the Ninevite bulls with human faces. The archimandrite knew no French and, summoning a nun who understood the language, told her in Russian to accompany us on our visit to the treasures and other curiosities of the convent. The nun kissed the hand of the archimandrite, and stood in silence, waiting till the guard arrived with the keys. She was one of those figures which it is impossible to forget, and which emerge like a dream from the trivialities of life. She was wearing a kind of cylindrical headdress, similar to the diadem of certain Mithraic deities, and such as are worn by priests and monks. Long crepe beardlike strands descended in floating fragments; they fell on a loose black garment, of a fabric similar to that from which lawyer's robes are made. Her face, of an ascetic paleness, in which yellow waxy tones lay beneath the fineness of the skin, was of perfect regularity. Her eyes, surrounded by large dark marks, revealed, whenever she raised her eyelids, pupils of a strange blue tint, while her whole person, though engulfed by, and almost lost in, that floating bag of black cheesecloth, betrayed the rarest distinction. She dragged its folds through the long corridors of the monastery with the air of one manoeuvring the train of a dress at some court ceremony. The grace of a former worldly woman, which she tried to hide out of Christian humility, reappeared in spite of herself. On seeing her, the most prosaic imagination could not help but envisage her as a character in a novel. What suffering, what despair, what catastrophe in love could have brought her there? She reminded me of *Antoinette, Duchesse de Langeais*, in Balzac's *Histoire des Treize*, discovered by *Armand de Montriveau* hiding beneath a Carmelite habit, in the depths of an Andalusian convent.

We arrived at the treasury where we were shown, as a most precious item, a goblet carved from wood and some crude priestly vestments. The nun explained that this humble wooden vessel was the ciborium that Saint Sergius used in his holy offices, while wearing these chasubles of wretched cloth, which rendered them priceless relics. She spoke the purest French, without a trace of accent, as if it was her native language. With the most detached manner in the world, without scepticism and yet without naivety, she told us, with the air of a historian, some marvellous legend I no longer recall, relating to these objects, her lips parted in a faint smile which revealed teeth brighter than all the oriental pearls in the treasury, sparkingly white teeth leaving an imperishable impression on the memory, akin to *Berenice's* teeth in Edgar Allan Poe's short story of that name.

Those gleaming teeth, in a face bruised by sorrow and austerity, restored youthfulness to her. The nun, who at first sight had seemed to me to be about thirty-seven or thirty-eight years old, appeared now to be no more than twenty-five. But it was only a glimpse of youth, so to speak. Having appreciated, with feminine delicacy, our respectful, but lively admiration, she again took on the death-like air that suited her apparel.

All the cupboards were opened for us, and we were able to view bibles, gospels, and books of liturgy, with gemmed silver-gilt covers encrusted with onyx, sardonyx, agate, chrysoberyl, aquamarine, lapis lazuli, malachite, and turquoise, and with gold or silver clasps, ancient cameos embedded in their surfaces; gold ciboria encircled by diamonds; crosses adorned with emeralds and rubies; rings with sapphire settings; vessels and candlesticks of silver; brocade dalmatics embroidered with jewelled flowers and legends in Old Slavonic written in pearls; enamelled incense-burners; triptychs historiated with countless figures; images of Madonnas

and saints, and pieces of goldsmith's work studded with cabochons — like to the treasures of some Christianized Harun-al-Rashid.

As we were about to exit, dazed by wonders, our eyelids flickering, our eyes filled with crazed points of light, the nun pointed out to us a row of boxes, on one shelf of a cupboard which had hitherto escaped our attention, and seemed to offer nothing special. She plunged her thin, narrow patrician hand therein, saying: 'These are pearls. No one knew what to do with them, so they were left here. There are eight full measures in total.'

Chapter 19: Byzantine Art

Realising, from various comments of ours, that we were no strangers to art, the nun, having shown us the treasury, thought that a sight of the convent's workshops might interest us as much as these heaps of gold, diamonds and pearls, and led us, by wide corridors interspersed with stairways, to the rooms where the artist-monks and their students laboured.

Byzantine art is in every way unique, and bears little resemblance to the manner in which the phrase is understood by the people of Western Europe, or those who follow the Latin religion. It is a hieratic art, priestly, and immutable; nothing or almost nothing is left to the imagination or invention of the artist. Its formulae are as precise as dogma. There is thus in this school, neither progress, nor decadence, nor age, so to speak. A fresco or painting completed twenty years ago is indistinguishable from one hundreds of years old. As it was in the sixth, eighth, or tenth century, such is Byzantine art still; I use the term for lack of one more fitting, as one uses the word Gothic, which is understood by all, though not possessing an exact meaning.

It is obvious to any man accustomed to the art of painting that this style derives from some source other than the Latin style, that it owes nothing to the Italian school, that it endures as if the Renaissance never happened, and that Rome is not the metropolis in which its ideal resides. It exists alone, without borrowings, without development, since it has, from the very first, found its essential form, open to criticism from the artistic viewpoint, but wonderfully suited to the function it performs. Yet, where is the home of this tradition one wonders, a tradition so carefully preserved? Whence does this uniform style derive which has survived the ages and suffered little or no alteration however diverse the milieux? What masters did they obey, all those unknown artists whose brushes adorned the churches of the Greek Orthodox with such a multitude of figures that their enumeration, if it were possible, would exceed the sum of the most formidable army?

A curious and learned introduction by Adolphe Didron, to a Byzantine manuscript, *The Guide to Greek and Latin Christian Iconography (Manuel d'Iconographie Chrétienne Grecque et Latine, 1845)*, translated by Paul Durand, for the most part answers the questions we have just asked. The editor of this guide to painting is a certain Dionysius, a monk of Fournas in Agrafa, and a great admirer of the celebrated Manuel Panselinos of Thessaloniki, who is the Raphael of Byzantine art, some of whose frescoes can still be seen in the major

church (*the Protaton*) of Karyes, on Mount Athos. In a short preface, preceded by an invocation 'To Mary, Mother of God, ever virgin,' master Dionysius of Agrapha states the aim of his book thus. 'This art of painting, which, from childhood, cost me so great an effort to learn, in Thessaloniki, I wish to propagate for the benefit of those who also desire to practice it, and I explain, in this work, all the measurements, the characteristics of the figures, and the colours of the flesh and ornamentation with great accuracy. Furthermore, I wish to explain the natural dimensions, the details applicable to each subject, the various preparations of varnish, glue, plaster and gold, and the way to paint on walls with the utmost perfection. I also indicate the whole sequence of the Old and the New Testament; the manner of representing the natural facts and miracles of the Bible; and at the same time the Lord's parables, legends, and epigraphs appropriate to each prophet; also, the names and facial characteristics of the apostles and principal saints; their martyrdoms, and a number of their miracles, according to the order of the calendar. I say how churches are painted, and I provide other information necessary to the art of painting, as can be seen in the list of contents. I collected all this material with great trouble and care, assisted by my student, Master Cyril of Chios, who edited all this with careful attention. Pray for us then, all of you, so that the Lord delivers us from our fear of being condemned as poor servants.'

This manuscript, a true manual of Christian iconography and pictorial technique, dates, according to the monks of Mount Athos, to the tenth century. It is not so old as that, in fact, only dating from the fifteenth; but that matters little, since he is recording ancient formulae and archaic methods. It still serves as a guide today, and, as Adolphe Didron recounts in his trip to the Holy Mountain ('*Agion Oros*', *Mount Athos*), where he visits Father Macarios, the finest Hagiorite painter after Father Joasaph, 'this bible of his art was spread open in the middle of the workshop, and two of his youngest students were alternately reading it out loud as the rest were painting while listening to this reading.'

The traveller wished to buy this manuscript, which the artist refused to surrender at any price, since without the book he would not have been able to continue painting, but of which he allowed a copy to be made. The manuscript contained the secrets of Byzantine painting, and allowed the learned tourist, who had recently visited the churches of Athens, Salamis, Trikala, Kalabaka, and Larissa, and the monasteries of Meteora, Saint Varlaam, Hagia Sophia, Thessaloniki, Mystras (*Pantanassa*), and Argos, to comprehend why he found everywhere the same profusion of painted decoration, everywhere the same composition, costumes, ages, and attitudes of the sacred figures. 'It as if,' he exclaims, surprised at this uniformity, 'a single thought, animating a hundred brushes simultaneously, created all the paintings of Greece.'

A comment, which could be said every bit as justly when standing before the frescoes which decorate most Russian churches.

'The workshop where these paintings are prepared', the traveller continues, 'and where these Byzantine artists are trained, is Mount Athos; this is truly the Italy of the Eastern Church. Mount Athos, this province of monks, contains twenty large monasteries which are so many small towns, ten villages, two hundred and fifty isolated cells, and a hundred and fifty hermitages. The smallest of the monasteries contains six churches or chapels, and the largest thirty-three; in all, two hundred and eighty-eight. The villages or *sketes* (*monastic settlements*)

contain two hundred and twenty-five chapels and ten churches. Each cell has its chapel, and each hermitage its oratory. In Karyes, the capital of Mount Athos, one finds what might be called the cathedral of the whole mountain, which the Caloyers (*monks following the rule of St. Basil*) name the Protaton, the metropolis. From the summit of the eastern peak which terminates the peninsula, rises an isolated church dedicated to the Metamorphosis, or Transfiguration, of the Saviour. Thus, Mount Athos houses nine hundred and thirty-five churches, chapels or oratories.

Almost all of these are frescoed and filled with paintings on wood. Most of the refectories, in the great monasteries, are also covered with wall paintings.

Here is a rich museum of religious art indeed. The student-painter possesses no lack of subjects for study or examples to reproduce, for the merit of the artist of the Byzantine school does not lie, as in other schools, in invention, imagination, or originality, but in tracing the consecrated models in the most faithful manner. The contours, the proportions of the figures are fixed in advance. Nature is never consulted, tradition indicates the colour of the beard and the hair, whether long or short, the tint of the clothing, the number, direction, and thickness of the folds in garments. For the long-robed saints, the folds are invariably parted above and below the knee. In Greece,' writes Adolphe Didron, 'the artist is the slave of the theologian. His work, which his successors will copy, itself copies that of the painters who preceded him. The Greek artist is as enslaved by tradition as the creature by its instincts. He creates figures as the swallow does its nest or the bee its waxen cell. The execution alone is his; the invention and idea belong to the Fathers, to theologians, to the Orthodox Church. Time and place mean nothing to Greek art; the eighteenth-century painter in the Morea continues to imitate the Venetian painter of the tenth century, who in turn imitated some painter on Mount Athos of the fifth or sixth century. One finds in the Church of the Metamorphosis in Athens, in the Hecatompilos of Mystras, in the *Panagia* painted by Saint Luke, that *Saint John Chrysostom* of the Baptistery of St. Mark's, in Venice.'

Adolphe Didron had the pleasure of meeting, on Mount Athos, in the Monastery of Esphigmenou, the first one that he entered, a painter from Karyes, the monk Joasaph, who was painting murals on the porch, or narthex, which precedes the nave of the church. He was assisted in his work by his brother, two students, the first of whom was a deacon, and by two apprentices. The subject he was drawing on the fresh plaster applied to the wall was Christ assigning his apostles the task of evangelising and baptising the world, an important subject — involving twelve figures of almost natural size. He sketched the figures without halting, with a sure hand, with only his memory as his cartoon or model. While he was working in this way, the students filled with the designated pigments the contours of the figures and the draperies, and gilded the nimbuses around the heads on which they wrote the letters of the inscriptions which the master dictated to them while continuing with his work. The young apprentices were grinding and watering down the pigments. These frescoes, the traveller assures us, executed with such certainty and alacrity, were of greater value than the paintings of our second or third-rate painters, in the religious genre; and when he expressed surprise at Father Joasaph's talent and knowledge, he who had found inscriptions so appropriate for each character, implying vast

erudition, the monk replied, humbly, that it was not so difficult as one might assume, and that with the help of the *Guide* and a little practice, anyone might execute the same.

The much-to-be-regretted Dominique Papety exhibited at the Salon of 1847 a charming little painting of ‘*Caloyer Monks Decorating a Chapel, in the Monastery of Iviron (Karyes) on Mount Athos, with Frescoes.*’

Though I had not as yet made the trip to Russia; this neo-Byzantine art, of which I had been able to view some isolated fragments, already interested me, and Papety’s painting, besides its artistic merit, excited and satisfied my curiosity by presenting the living artists at work, artists whose paintings seemed to date back to the time of the Greek emperors. I said as much in my report on the exhibition: ‘There they both are (the Caloyer monks), standing before the areas of the curved wall of the half-dome that they are painting. The lineaments of the saints they seek to illuminate are outlined in red on the fresh area that awaits their attention. These outlines have an archaic stiffness that might make one think them created in some remote era. In between them, on a kind of pedestal table, lie the tools and colours of the artists. On the left, a trestle supports a trough containing lime-mortar and powdered marble, along with the trowel needed for their application.’

To his offering, the painter had added watercolours representing frescoes by Manuel Panselinos, of which he had made a copy in the church of the Monastery of Agia Lavra. They represented saints of the Greek calendar, grand and proud in appearance, saints of the warrior type.

I too, like Papety and Didron, was about to see the work of artist-monks like those of Mount Athos, religiously following the teachings of the *Guide*; a living school of Byzantines, the past at work through the hands of the present, a rare and curious thing, indeed.

Half a dozen monks of various ages were in the process of painting a large, well-lit room, with bare walls. The air of priestly gravity, and the pious care, with which one of them executed his work, a handsome man with a black beard and swarthy face, who was completing a ‘*Mother of God*’, was most striking. It made me think of that fine painting by Jules-Claude Ziegler: *Saint Luke painting the portrait of the Virgin*. A religious feeling obviously preoccupied him more than his art: he painted as one officiates. His ‘*Mother of God*’ could have been placed on the easel of that apostle, seeming so severely archaic, and confined within its rigid sacramental outline. One would have thought her a Byzantine empress, gazing on one with such serious majesty from the depths of her large, black, fixed eyes. The areas due to be covered by silver or gold plating, had been as carefully done as if they were still to remain visible.

Other more or less advanced paintings, representing Greek saints, and among others Saint Sergius, the patron saint of the monastery, were being completed beneath the labouring hands of the artist-monks. These paintings, intended to serve as icons in chapels or private residences, were on panels coated with gypsum, according to the processes recommended by Master Dionysius of Agrapha, and were a little darkened; nothing enabled one to distinguish them from like paintings of the fifteenth or even the twelfth century. Here were the same stiff, constrained poses, the same hieratic gestures, the same regular pattern of folds, the same fawn and bistre colour of the flesh, the exact doctrine of Mount Athos. The process used was egg-

water or tempera, applied then varnished. Halos and ornamentation intended to be gilded formed slight projections, to better catch the light. The ancient masters of Thessaloniki, if they had returned to the world, would have been satisfied with the students of Troitsa.

But no tradition today can be faithfully maintained. Among the stubborn cultists of the old formula, there appears from time to time, another follower less conscientiousness and constrained. A new spirit introduces itself into the old mould, through some fissure. The very artists, amidst our epoch, who desire to follow the way of the Athonite painters, and render the Byzantine style immutable, cannot help but experience our modern paintings where freedom of invention is combined with the study of nature. It is difficult to close one's eyes forever, and even in Troitsa, a new spirit had penetrated. In the metopes of the Parthenon we distinguish two styles, one archaic and the other modern. The majority of the monks complied with the rules; a few younger ones had abandoned egg-water for oils, and, while maintaining their figures in the prescribed attitude, and immemorial pattern, allowed themselves to give heads and hands more realistic tones, a less conventional colour, and model the planes and study the use of relief. They had created most human and attractive, and less theocratically fierce saints; they chose not to apply to the chin of the patriarchs and solitaries that junciform (*reed-like*) beard the *Guide* recommends. Their images approach painting, without, according to us, having merited it.

This more suave and likeable style has no shortage of supporters, and one can view examples in several modern Russian churches; but, for myself, I much prefer the old method, which is idealistic, religious, and decorative, and displays, to its credit, forms and colours beyond vulgar reality. That symbolic manner of presenting the idea by means of figures defined in advance, like some sacred writing whose characters it is not permitted to alter, seems to me wonderfully suited to the decoration of the sanctuary. In its rigidity even, it still leaves room for a great artist to affirm, by bold execution, the grandeur of the style, and its nobility of outline.

Moreover, I do not think the attempt to humanise Byzantine art succeeds. In Russia there is a school of Romantic writers, enamoured, like ours, of local colour, who defend, with scholarly theories and enlightened criticism, the old style of Mount Athos, because of its ancient and religious character, its deep sense of conviction, and its absolute and original uniqueness, amidst the products of Italian, Spanish, Flemish, and French art. One can gain a fair idea of these polemics by recalling the passionate defence of Gothic architecture, and the diatribes against Greek architecture being applied to religious buildings, involving comparisons between Notre-Dame de Paris and the church of La Madeleine, which were the delights of my youth from 1830 to 1833. There is in every country an era of false Classicism, a species of learned barbarism, in which its people fail to comprehend their native beauties any longer, misunderstand their own character, deny their own antiquities and costume, and seek to demolish, with a view to achieving an insipid ideal of regularity, their most wondrous national buildings. Our eighteenth century, otherwise so great, would have gladly razed the Gothic cathedrals as being monuments to bad taste. The baroque portal of Saint-Gervais, in Paris, by Salomon de Brosse, was genuinely preferred to the prodigious facades of the cathedrals of Strasbourg, Chartres and Reims.

Our nun appeared to regard these Madonnas in fresh colours not with disdain exactly, since, after all, they represented a sacred image worthy of adoration, but with far less admiration and respect. She halted longer in front of the easels where the artists were employing the ancient method. Despite my preference for the style, I must confess that, in my opinion, some aficionados take their passion for old Byzantine paintings a little too far. By dint of seeking the naive, the primordial, the sacred, the mystical, they display enthusiasm for darkened and worm-eaten panels in which one vaguely discerns crude figures, of extravagant design and impossible colouring. Alongside these images, the most barbarous *Christ* of Giovanni Cimabue would seem as if painted by Carle van Loo or François Boucher. Some of these paintings date, it is claimed, to the fifth or even the fourth century. I can understand that one might seek them out as archaic curiosities, but I find it strange that they are admired from the point of view of art. I was shown some of them during my trip to Russia, but admit that I failed to discover in them the beauties which so charmed their owners. In a sanctuary, they may be venerated for providing an ancient testimony to the faith of their creators, but they have no place in a gallery, unless it is one within a museum.

Apart from this Byzantine art whose Rome is on Mount Athos, there has not as yet been any Russian art to speak of. The artists, few in number moreover, that Russia has produced do not constitute a school: they travel to complete their studies in Italy, and their paintings have nothing particularly national in flavour about them. The most famous of their artists, and the best known in the West, is Karl Bryullov, whose vast canvas entitled *The Last Day of Pompeii* produced a great effect at the Salon of 1824. Bryullov painted, on the ceiling of the dome of Saint-Isaac, a large *Apotheosis* in which he demonstrated a notable understanding of composition and perspective, in a style somewhat reminiscent of decorative painting as it was practised towards the end of the eighteenth century. The artist, who possessed a fine pale face, Romantic and Byronic, and flowing blond hair, took pleasure in self-portraiture, and France has several representations of his features, made at various times, less or more ravaged by time, but always handsome and of a fatal beauty. These portraits, made with verve, and free caprice, seem to us the best pieces by that artist. A very popular name in St. Petersburg is that of Alexandre Ivanov, who, employed for many years in the creation of a mysterious masterpiece (*The Appearance of Christ to the People*, 1837-57), has granted Russia the expectation and hope of a great painter. But that is a separate matter, which would lead me too far from my subject. Is this as much as to say that Russia will never find a place among the schools of painting? I believe that it will happen when her art frees itself from the imitation of foreign works, and her painters, instead of seeking to copy the Italian models, choose to look around them and draw inspiration from nature, and from the extremely varied and characteristic types within this immense empire, which begins at the borders of Prussia and ends at those of China. My encounter with the group of young artists who constitute the 'Friday' society permits me to believe in the imminent realisation of this goal.

Preceded, as before, by the nun, draped in her long black garments, we entered a perfectly equipped photographic laboratory, in which Félix Nadar would feel at home. To pass from Mount Athos to the Boulevard des Capucines (*Nadar's studio was at number 35*), was rather an abrupt transition! To leave behind those monks painting *Panagias* (*portraits of the Virgin*) on gold backgrounds, in order to visit others coating glass plates with collodion is one of these

tricks that civilisation plays on you, at a moment one least expects. The view of a cannon aimed at me would not have surprised me more than the yellow brass lens directed by chance towards me. The evidence was undeniable. The monks of Troitsa, the disciples of Saint Sergius, produced views of their monastery, images most successfully achieved. They possess the best equipment, know of the latest methods, and pursue their object in a chamber the window panes of which are dyed yellow, a colour which avoids over-exposure. I bought a view of the monastery, a view that I still possess, and which has not faded too badly.

During his trip to Russia, the Marquis de Custine complained of not being allowed to visit the library of Troitsa. I found no difficulty in being admitted and saw what a traveller can see of a library in half an hour, the spines of well-bound books, stored neatly on cabinet shelves. Besides works of theology, bibles, works of the Fathers of the Church, scholastic treatises, gospels, and liturgical books in Greek, Latin, and Slavonic, I noticed, during my swift inspection, many books in French of the last century, and the Great Century (*the seventeenth, when France became the dominant European power*). I also took a look at the immense refectory, terminating in a very delicately worked grille, allowing the gold background of an iconostasis to gleam through its arabesques of iron; for the refectory adjoins a chapel, so that the soul may acquire nourishment like the body. Our tour was over, and the nun led us to the archimandrite again, so we might take our leave of him.

Before entering the apartment, the habits of a worldly woman prevailing over the prescriptions of convent life, she turned to us and, in a small gesture of farewell, granted us, as a queen might have done from the steps of her throne, a weak, languishing, and graceful smile, amidst which shone like white lightning, her gleaming teeth preferable to all Troitsa's pearls. Then, in a sudden reversal as if resuming the veil, she reverted to her death-like face, her spectral physiognomy denoting her renunciation of the world and, with a ghostly movement, knelt before the archimandrite, whose hand she kissed politely, as if it were the communion dish, or a sacred relic. After which, she rose, and returned like a figure in dream to the mysterious depths of the convent, leaving me with an indelible memory of her brief appearance.

There was nothing left for us to view in Troitsa, and we returned to the inn to tell our driver to prepare our sled for departure. The horses once harnessed to the *kibitka* by a system of ropes, the coachman seated on a narrow folding-seat padded with a sheepskin, and ourselves warmly installed under our bearskin-cover, the bill paid, and tips added, there was nothing left but to execute the fantasia of departure at the gallop. A slight click of the moujik's tongue made each of our team adopt the look of that furious horse carrying Mazeppa bound on his back (*see Byron's poem, 'Mazeppa: IX'*), and it was not till the far side of the hill dominated by Troitsa, whose domes and towers could still be seen, that the brave little creatures resigned themselves to a reasonable pace. I need not describe the road from Troitsa to Moscow, having described its course from Moscow to Troitsa, the only difference being that the objects in view presented themselves from the opposite direction.

That same evening, we returned to Moscow, well enough disposed to attend a masked ball which was being held that night, and tickets to which we found at the hotel. In front of the door, despite the intense cold, sleighs and carriages were parked the lanterns of which shone like icy stars. A warm blaze of light burst from the windows of the building where the ball was taking

place, and made, with the bluish light of the moon, one of these contrasts that dioramas and stereoscopic views seek to incorporate. The vestibule crossed, we entered a vast room in the rectangular form of a playing card, framed by large columns borne on a wide stylobate (*platform*) which formed a terrace around the floor itself, to which one descended by a stairway. This arrangement seemed sensible to me, and it should be imitated in France where a room is intended for partying. It allows those not taking an active part in the pleasures of the ball to over-look the dancers, without obstructing them, and to enjoy, at their ease, the spectacle offered by the lively and teeming crowd. This raised floor staged and grouped the figures in a more picturesque, more luxurious, more theatrical way. Nothing is as unpleasant as a crowd all on the same level. This is what makes popular festivities so inferior to the effect of the Opéra balls, with their triple row of boxes filled with ‘masks’ forming garlands, and their troops of ‘stevedores’ (*in the costume created by the designer Paul Gavarni, mimicking that of dockers*), ‘apprentices’, Pierrettes, ‘babyish dolls’ and ‘savages’, ascending and descending the stairs. The decoration of the room was very simple, yet produced no less of an effect as regards gaiety, elegance and richness. Everything was white, the walls, ceiling, and columns all white and enhanced by a few sober gold threads on the mouldings. The columns, stuccoed and polished, could have been mistaken for marble, and the light flowed over them in long bright waves. On the cornices, candles in holders exposed the entablature of the portico, and maintained the overall brightness. Amidst all this whiteness, the lighting mimicked the vividness of the most brightly illuminated Italian day.

Movement and clarity are surely elements of joy; but for a party to attain its full *brio*, noise must be added to it; noise, the breath and song of life. The crowd, though quite dense, was silent. A faint whisper like a light frisson trembled about the groups, and added a low bass to the orchestra’s fanfares. Russians are silent in their pleasures, and when one has been deafened by the triumphant bacchanal of an Opéra night, one is surprised by their phlegmatism and taciturnity. No doubt, they were enjoying it all internally, without seeming to do so on the outside. There were dominoes, a few ‘masks’, military men in uniform, civilians in evening dress, a few Lezgins, Circassians, and Tartars, young officers with wasp waists, in costume, but none in traditional clothes which might be noted as belonging to the country. Russia has not yet produced its own characteristic mask. The women, as usual, were there in small numbers, and I had to search for them at the ball. As far as I was able to judge, what we call the *demi-monde* in France was only represented there by Frenchwomen imported from the Jardin Mabille in Paris, and by German and Swedish women, sometimes of a rare beauty. It may well be that a female Russian element is also involved, but it is not easy for the foreigner to identify it as such; I simply note the observation for what it is worth.

Despite some timid attempts at the cancan, again imported from Paris, the party languished a little and bursts of brassy music failed to add much warmth. They were waiting for the Gypsies to enter, for the ball was now interrupted by a concert. When the gypsy singers appeared on stage, a huge sigh of satisfaction rose from every breast. At last, some fun! The real show began! The Russians have a passion for Gypsies, and their nostalgically exotic songs which set one dreaming of a life of freedom amidst primeval Nature, far from all constraint and every divine or human law. That passion, I share, and indulge it to the point of delirium. So, I jostled in order to be near the platform on which the musicians stood.

There were five or six wild-looking haggard young girls, in that state of alarm bright light induces in furtive and vagrant nocturnal creatures. They looked like deer suddenly driven from some forest clearing into a living room. Their costume was nothing remarkable; to appear at the concert, they had been obliged to abandon their characteristic dress and make 'a fashionable toilette'. Thus, they possessed the air of badly-dressed chambermaids. But the odd flutter of the eyelashes, and a wild dark glance hovering vaguely over the audience, sufficed to display their innate character once more.

The music started. The songs were strange, full of melancholic sweetness or mad gaiety, embroidered with endless flourishes like those of a bird which listens to its own warbling and, self-intoxicated, sighs with regret for a previous bright existence, then resumes its carefree, joyful, mood of freedom, while mocking everything, even lost happiness, provided that it remains at liberty; the music, interspersed with stamping and wild cries, made to accompany those nocturnal dances that leave, what we call 'fairy circles' in the grassy glades, was akin to a savage version of some work by Weber, Chopin or Liszt. Sometimes the theme was borrowed from a vulgar melody dragged out on the piano, but so smothered in lengthened chords, trills, ornamentations, and caprices, that the originality of the variations made one forget the banality of the motif. The marvellous *Variations on the Carnival of Venice*, by Paganini (*Op. 10*) may give some idea of those delicate musical arabesques of silk, gold and pearls, embroidered on a background of coarse fabric. A male Gypsy, a sort of comic character with a fierce look, as swarthy as an Indian, and reminiscent of those bohemian types represented so characteristically by Théodore Valério in his ethnographic watercolours, accompanied the women's singing by sounding a large rebec placed between his legs, which he played in the manner of oriental musicians; another tall fellow exerted himself on stage, dancing, stamping his feet, plucking the strings of a guitar, marking the rhythm on the wood of the instrument with the palm of his hand, making strange grimaces, and from time to time yielding an unexpected cry. The whole troupe were graceful, comical, lively.

The enthusiasm of the audience, crowded around the platform was indescribable; they burst into applause, shouted, nodded their heads, and gave forth cries of admiration, while repeating the refrains. These songs, of a mysterious strangeness, have a true incantatory power; they induce dizziness and delirium, and bring about the most incomprehensible state of mind. Listening to them, you feel a fatal desire to abandon civilisation forever and run through the woods in the company of one of those witches with a complexion as darkly-tinted as a cigar, and eyes like blazing coals. Such songs, so enchantingly seductive, are indeed the very voice of nature, noted in solitude, and captured in flight. That is why they deeply trouble all on whom the complex mechanism of human society weighs so heavily.

Still spellbound by the melody, I wandered dreamily amidst the masked ball, my mind a thousand miles away. I was thinking of a *gitana* (a gypsy girl) from the Albaicín neighbourhood in Granada, who had sung *copias* (ballad verses) to me, to a tune that strongly resembled one of those I had just heard, the words of which I was seeking to retrieve from some remote corner of my brain, when I felt myself seized suddenly by the arm and heard in my ear, spoken in the shrill, false, bright tone of one of those dubious females who affect a domino mask wishing to start an intrigue, the sacramental words: 'I know you.' In Paris, nothing would have seemed

more natural. For a long time now, I have been visible at first performances, on the boulevards, and in art galleries, so that I am as well-known there as if I were famous. But in Moscow, this recognition at a masked ball seemed like an affront to my privacy.

The domino, asked to prove her assertion, whispered my name into the beard hanging from her mask, pronouncing it fairly accurately, and in a sweet little Russian accent which the attempt to disguise the voice did not prevent me from penetrating. A conversation commenced which confirmed that, even if this Moscow domino had never met me before this ball, she at least knew my works perfectly. It is difficult for an author who has a few verses from his poems, and a few lines of his prose, quoted at him so far from the Boulevard des Italians, not to be a little puffed up, on smelling that incense, the most delightful of all to a writer's nostrils. In order to save my self-esteem from her designs upon it, I was obliged to tell myself that Russians read a great deal, and the most minor of French authors meet with a wider hearing in Saint Petersburg and Moscow than in Paris itself. However, to return the compliment, I sought to behave gallantly, and respond to her quotations by paying her my attentions, a difficult thing as regards a domino hidden by a satin sack, a cap sloping over her forehead, and a beard as long as that of a hermit. The only thing visible was a small, rather slender hand, tightly-gloved in black. The mystery was too great, and it required too great an expense of imagination on my part for me to prove amiable. I also have a defect of character which restrains me from precipitating myself too ardently into adventures at masked balls. I readily assume that behind every disguise lies ugliness rather than beauty. That vile-looking piece of black silk, with a snub goatish profile, slant eyes, and a goatee beard, seemed to me a mould for the face it covered, and I was at pains to remove it. When masked, the very women whose assured youth and notorious beauty are known to us sometimes arouses suspicion. I am of course only speaking of the full mask. The little black velvet excrescence, our ancestors called a *touret de nez* (*nose-bridge*), which great ladies wore when out for a walk, allows the mouth and a pearly smile to be seen, along with the noble contours of chin and cheek, and highlights, with its intense blackness, the rosy freshness of the complexion. It allows one to judge of a woman's beauty without it being wholly revealed. It represents a modest flirtatiousness, and not a troubling mystery. The worst one risks is discovering a Roxelana nose (*an upturned nose, like that of Roxelana, the consort of Suleiman the Magnificent*) instead of the Greek nose of which one had dreamed. One can easily console oneself regarding such a misfortune. But the hermetically-sealed domino, when removed at the trysting hour, may bring a sinister discovery that leaves the enthusiastic lover with a most embarrassed countenance. That is why, after two or three turns around the ballroom floor, I returned the mysterious lady to the group she indicated. So ended my adventure at the Moscow masked ball.

— 'What! Is that all? my readers may say. 'You are hiding something out of modesty. The domino having left the ball will have directed you to a mysterious carriage and had you mount it, and seat yourself next to her. Then the lady will have tied her lace handkerchief about your face, saying that love must go blindfolded, and, taking you by the hand when the carriage halted, she will have made you follow her down lengthy corridors, such that when she returned you the use of your eyes, you found yourself in her splendidly lit boudoir. The lady will have doffed her mask and shed her domino, as a gleaming butterfly emerges from its darkened chrysalis; she will have smiled at you, seemingly enjoying your wonder. Come, tell us if she

was blonde or brunette, if she had a little mole at the corner of her mouth, so we might recognise her, if we encounter her in Paris, in society. We hope you maintained the honour of France abroad, and showed yourself to be tender, gallant, spirited, varied, and passionate, in sum worthy of the situation. — An adventure, at a masked ball in Moscow! — A fine tale, of which you fail to boast, you who are customarily so verbose when it comes to describing buildings, paintings and landscapes.’

Am I to be taken for some worn-out Don Juan, some retired Valmont (*see the epistolary novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos: ‘Les Liaisons Dangereux’*)? Nothing else occurred. The intrigue ended there, and after having taken a glass of tea with an infusion of Bordeaux wine, I returned to my sleigh, which returned me to the hotel on the Rue des Vieilles-Gazettes (*Gazetny Pereulok*) in a few minutes.

My day had been a full one: a morning at the monastery, an evening at the ball, the nun, the domino, Byzantine painting, and the Gypsies; my sleep was well-deserved.

When travelling one senses the value of time more deeply than usual. One is present for a few weeks, or a few months at most, in a country to which one may never return; a thousand curious things, which one will never see again, solicit the attention. There is not a moment to lose, and one’s eyes, like one’s teeth at the station buffet, fearing the departure whistle, fasten themselves on double-size portions. Every hour has its task. The absence of business, occupation, work, boredom, and visits to be made or received, plus isolation in an unknown environment, and perpetual use of a vehicle, significantly lengthens the days and, strangely enough, the trip never seems as brief as it truly is; three months of travel is equivalent in duration to a year at home. When one stays where one resides the days, indistinguishable one from another, vanish into the abyss of oblivion scarcely leaving a trace. When one experiences a new country for oneself, the memory of unusual objects, actions, and unforeseen events, form points of reference, and in marking out time, measure it, and make its extent felt.

Appelles said: ‘Nulla dies sine linea,’ (*‘Never a day without a line’*, according to Pliny the Elder, *‘Naturalis Historia XXXV, 84’*) — in default of the Greek, I quote the Latin, though it is not the language the artist who painted Campaspe (*the supposed mistress of Alexander the Great*) would himself have spoken. The tourist should apply the phrase to his own activity, and say: ‘Never a day without a full schedule.’

Following this precept, the day after our expedition to Troitsa, we visited the Kremlin, to view the Museum of Vehicles, and the Treasures of the Popes.

The former is an interesting exhibition of antique, and sumptuous, means of transport: coronation carriages, gala carriages, travel and campaign carriages, post-carriages, sleighs and other vehicles. Man proceeds like nature, always from the complicated to the simple, from the enormous to the modestly-proportioned, from the sumptuous to the elegant. The carriage-house, like the fauna of primitive times, had its mammoths and mastodons. One halts, in astonishment before these monstrous wheeled machines, with the tangled paraphernalia of their suspensions, their leaf-springs, levers, thick leather bands, massive spokes, tortuous swan’s necks, lofty seats like ship’s forecastles, their bodies bigger than an apartment today, their steps like stairs, their exterior folding-seats for the pages, their platforms for the lackeys, their gallery

of cutouts, full of imperial crowns, allegorical figures and plumes. They present a whole world, and one questions how such machines could ever have moved; eight enormous Mecklenburgers would be scarcely enough to pull them. But if these carriages seem barbaric as regards actual locomotion, from the point of view of art they are marvels. All is carved, ornamented, worked with exquisite taste. The gilded backgrounds are adorned with charming paintings, masterfully done, which, detached from their panels, might appear with honour in any art gallery. There are little cupids, groups of symbols, bouquets of flowers, garlands, coats of arms, whimsical fancies of every kind. The window panes are Venetian glass, the carpets are the softest and richest that Constantinople or Smyrna could furnish, the fabrics enough to make Lyon despair: brocade, velvet, damask, and brocatelle cover the splendid seats and interiors. The carriages of Catherine I and Catherine II contain gaming and dressing tables, and, in a characteristic detail, coloured and gilded porcelain stoves from Saxony. The parade carriages also present an ingenious oddity of form, a charming fantasia of ornamentation. But what is even more curious, is a collection of men's and women's saddles, and harnesses of all kinds. The majority are from the Orient and were given, as gifts to the Tsars and Tsarinas, by the emperors of Constantinople, the Grand Turks, and the Shahs of Persia. There one sees madly luxurious embroidery in gold and silver on brocade backgrounds, or velvet disappearing beneath jewelled stars and suns. The bits, chamfers, and curb-chains glitter with diamonds, and the leather bridles, densely stitched with gold thread or coloured silk, display embedded turquoises, cabochon rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Like the Asian barbarian I am worthy of being, I confess that this magnificent and extravagant saddlery seduced me more than its modern equivalent in the English style which is very fashionable no doubt, but so meagre in appearance, so impoverished in material, so ornamentally sober.

The sight of these immense and sumptuous carriages says more about ancient court life than any memoirs by Dangeau (see *'Memoirs of the Court of France, from the year 1684 to the year 1720' translated from the diary of Philippe de Courcillon, Marquis de Dangeau.*) or other palace chroniclers. It allows one to conceive of a lavish way of life, impossible to achieve today, even for those with absolute power, because the simplicity of manners that is now current invades even the homes of sovereigns. Gala dress, and grand ceremonial costumes, are no more than disguises that we hasten to shed after the party. Except on coronation day, the emperor never wears his crown. He wears a hat like everyone else, military officer or civilian; and if he rides abroad, it is not in a golden carriage, drawn by white horses crowned with nodding plumes. Formerly such magnificence was an everyday phenomenon. Monarchs were accustomed to live amidst magnificence and splendour. The great of this earth had nothing in common with the rest of humanity except death itself, and they passed through the dazzled world like beings from another race.

We were shown the Treasures of the Popes, also to be found in the Kremlin. They comprise the most prodigious heap of riches one could dream of. There, ranged in cupboards with partially-open doors, like the leaves of reliquaries, sit tiaras, mitres, the hats of metropolitans and archimandrites, mosaics of precious stones on brocade backgrounds, dalmatics, copes, stoles, robes in cloth of gold or silver, decorated all over with embroidery and inscriptions spelled out in pearls. In Troitsa one imagined there was no greater a wealth of pearls in all the world, for the treasury of that convent had gathered them in bushels. There were quite as many,

amongst the Treasures of the Popes. What masses of ciboria, in silver and vermeil, sculpted, nielloed, guilloché, in gold, surrounded by areas of enamel, and rimmed with precious stones; of crosses peopled with myriads of miniature figures, and rings, crosiers, ornaments of fabulous richness; of lamps and torches; and of books bound with gold plates studded with onyx, agate, lapis lazuli, and malachite, were present behind those glass panels, for us to contemplate, with pleasure but in such volume as to discourage the traveller who, with space only to write a few lines, feels that a monograph capable of occupying one's whole life is required!

In the evening, I attended the theatre. The Bolshoi is vast and magnificent, and recalls, in its principal outlines, the Odéon in Paris, and the Opéra National in Bordeaux. Such perfect architectural regularity moves me but little, and I prefer, for my part, the slightest errant and flowery architectural whim, in the style of Vasiliya Blazhennogo (*Saint Basil's Cathedral*) or the Palace of Facets, though that view would be regarded as less *civilised*, and treated as barbarous by people of good taste. However, it must be agreed that, given the accepted style, the Moscow theatre leaves nothing to be desired. It is grandiose, monumental, sumptuous. The decoration of the auditorium, in red and gold, flattering the eye with its grave opulence, favourable to evening dress and military costume, and the imperial box, facing the stage, with its gilded pillars, double-headed eagles, coats of arms and draped curtains, produce a majestic and splendid effect (*see Mihály Zichy's painting of 1856, described previously*); It occupies, being tall, two levels of boxes, and interrupts, pleasingly, the curved lines of the galleries. As at La Scala (*Milan*), the Teatro di San Carlo (*Naples*) and all the great Italian theatres, a corridor gives onto the stalls and facilitates access to the seating, rendered even simpler by a central gangway. The space is nowhere managed sparingly as in France. One can take and leave one's seat without disturbing others, and converse outside with women in the ground-floor boxes. One is admirably placed in the orchestra seats, the first rows of which, by tacit agreement, are reserved for titled people, those of higher rank, and people of importance. A merchant, however rich and honourable he might be, would never dare occupy a seat in any row nearer to the stage than the fifth or sixth. A similar hierarchy applies to the boxes; at least it was so at the time of my visit.



The Bolshoi Theatre Moscow - Auguste Cadolle (1782 - 1849)
Wikimedia Commons

But wherever one sits, be assured one will be comfortable there. The spectator is not sacrificed for the sake of the spectacle, as happens too often in the Paris theatres, nor is pleasure purchased here with torment. One has around one the space that Stendhal considered necessary to enjoy music fully, without being disturbed by the proximity of one's neighbours. Due to the skill in heating that the Russians exercise to the highest degree, it being for them a question of life or death, an even and gentle temperature is maintained throughout, and there is no risk, through leaving the door or window of one's box ajar, of feeling these draughts of cold air that descend so unpleasantly about the shoulders.

However, despite all this comfort, the Bolshoi was not too well-attended that evening. I noticed a large number of empty boxes, and entire rows of seats remained well-nigh unoccupied or presented only odd groups of spectators scattered here and there. It needs a vast crowd to fill these immense theatres. In Russia everything seems too large, and devised for a future, larger population. It was a day of ballet pieces, for ballet and opera alternate in the Russian theatres and are not combined in the one programme as in France. I cannot recall the plot of the ballet executed that day. It had all the disjointedness of an Italian libretto, and only served to link a sequence of steps capable of displaying the dancers' talents. Though I have devised ballets myself, and comprehend the language of mime quite well, it was impossible to follow the thread of the action by means of *pas de trois*, *pas de deux*, *pas de seul* and the actions of the

corps de ballet alone, though the latter ensemble manoeuvred with admirable precision. What struck me most was a kind of mazurka performed by a dancer named Alexandrov, with a degree of pride, elegance, and grace far removed from the unpleasant affectation displayed by commonplace performers.

A traveller's life is made up of contrasts: for next day, we visited the Romanov monastery (*Novospassky*), a few versts (*a verst is approximately a kilometre*) from Moscow. The convent is famous for the excellent religious music executed there. Like Troitsa, its external appearance is that of a fortress. Its vast enclosure contains a large number of chapels and other buildings, and a cemetery whose appearance in winter was particularly dismal. Nothing is sadder than crosses plastered with snow, and urns and funeral columns breaking through that white sheet spread over the dead like a second shroud. One is possessed with the idea that the poor deceased lying beneath this icy layer of ice must be cold indeed and feel themselves plunged even deeper into oblivion now the snow has erased their names and the pious inscriptions that accompany them, which commend their souls to the prayers of the living.

After casting a melancholy glance upon these half-covered graves, whose desolate character was further augmented by the dark foliage of the evergreen trees, we entered the church where the gilded iconostasis surprised me by its prodigious height, which exceeded that of the most gigantic Spanish altarpieces.

There was a service in progress, and I was initially surprised to hear sounds similar to those produced by the low-pitched stops of our church organs; I had thought that the Greek rite did not allow such instruments. I was soon disabused of error though, for as I approached the iconostasis I saw a group of singers with full beards, dressed in priestly black. Instead of singing sonorously as ours do, they seek out subtler effects and produce a kind of buzzing in the ears of a charm easier to appreciate than describe; one recalls the sound large night-moths make when fluttering about on summer evenings; a deep note, soft yet penetrating. There were about ten members of this group, I believe; one could distinguish the bass voices by the manner in which their throats filled and the sacred chant issued from their mouths without visible movement of the lips.

It was in the Imperial Chapel in St. Petersburg, and in the chapel of this Romanov monastery that I heard the finest compositions in the whole domain of religious music; doubtless, we possess works more learned and musically richer, but the way in which plainsong is executed in Russia adds to it a mysterious grandeur and inexpressible beauty. It was Saint John Damascene, I was told, who, in the eighth century, was a great reformer of this sacred music; it has altered little, and I was listening to the same chants as then, only arranged for four voices by modern composers. The Italian influence invaded this sacred music for a while, but achieved no lasting effect, and the Emperor, Alexander I, allows none but ancient chants to be performed in his chapel.

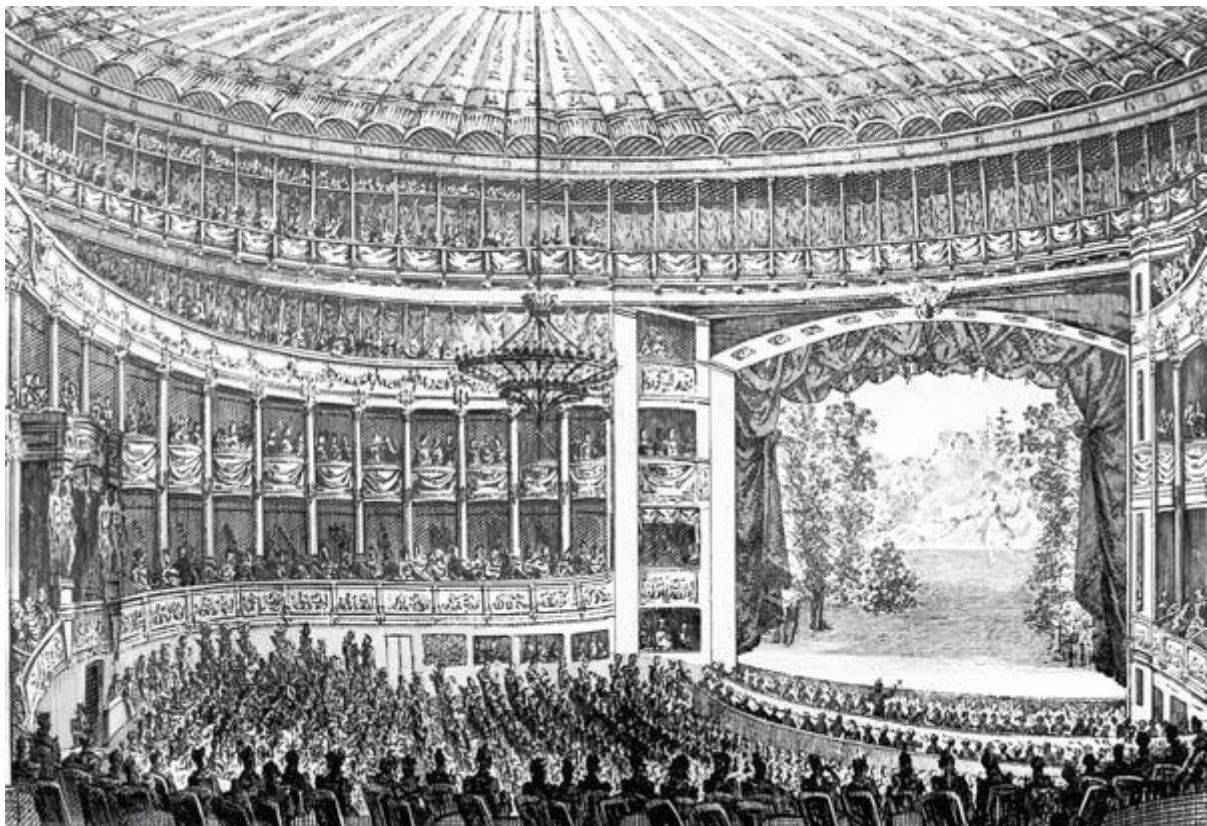
On returning to the hotel, still quivering with celestial harmonies, I found various letters summoning me back to St. Petersburg, and I left Moscow with great regret, Moscow, the most truly Russian city, crowned with its hundred-domed Kremlin.

Part IX: : A Ballet in St. Petersburg, and Return to France

Chapter 20: A Ballet in St. Petersburg

(‘Éoline’ or ‘The Dryad’, a ballet in four acts by Jules-Joseph Perrot, music by Cesare Pugni, with Amalia Ferraris, on her début at the Bolshoi Kamenny Theatre)

The curtain, rising, reveals to the eyes of the spectator a mysterious subterranean kingdom which for sky has a vault of rock, for stars lamps, for flowers strange metallic crystallisations, for lakes dark waters in which blind fish swim, and for inhabitants, mountain gnomes whom a gang of human beings have come to disturb in their deep retreat. Joyful activity reigns within the mine; pickaxes pursue veins of ore amidst their dull matrix; cables are wound on winches; baskets come and go, and hods pour into the stoves, whose red mouths blaze fire, the treasure extracted from the rock. Barely-cooled ingots are shaped beneath the rhythmic blows of the hammers. The scene displayed is wholly charming.



The Auditorium of the Bolshoi Theatre, 1820

Picryl

Such labour deserves its reward. By means of a frail staircase, whose summit is lost in the ceiling of the cave, and which allows the lower world to communicate with the upper, there descend, like the angels of Jacob's ladder (*see Genesis: 28*), the wives, daughters and fiancées of the miners, in coquettish and picturesque costume, bringing lunch to those workers. All those little feet, all those rounded or slender legs navigate the innumerable steps of the staircase with winged agility, beneath a military onslaught of opera-glasses, without a false step, without hesitation, without the aerial staircase trembling for even a moment; there is nothing bolder or more graceful than this parade of the whole *corps de ballet* in mid-air.

The provisions are removed from the baskets, and *Lisinka*, the prettiest of these pretty girls, with a show of affection, attends to her father, the head of the miners, who is as skilled at finding metallic ore hid in its earthy envelope as the Telchines of Samothrace or the gnomes of the Hartz mountains. To complete their joy, *Count Edgar*, owner of the mine, has sent his brave workers pitchers of wine and jugs of ale. The miners draw heavily on these, and the sober lunch ends in festive cheer. In the light of the lamps, eyes sparkle, cheeks blaze, smiling mouths display gleaming flashes of white teeth, hands search out hands, arms clasp bodices, feet stamp on the ground which glitters with flecks of gold, and a dance soon begins.

This joyful tumult awakens, in the depths of his underground palace, *Rübezahl*, king of the gnomes, the resident spirit of the mountain whose realm these audacious and greedy mortals have invaded; an immense block of lava once liquefied in the fires of primeval volcanoes suddenly bursts open, and forth springs this supernatural being, half god, half demon, a short white mantle over his shoulders, wearing a breastplate and knemides (*greaves*) giving off metallic gleams, undoubtedly forged by Vulcan, his mythological ancestor. *Rübezahl*, irritated at first by all this noise, soon brightens on seeing the dancers and descends from his stony perch to mingle amongst them. Invisible at will, and therefore as unseen by them as if he were wearing the ring of Gyges (*see Plato's 'Republic, Book II, 2:359a–2:360d'*) on his finger, he circulates between the groups of dancers, whom he flirts with and troubles. Thanks to him, the most modest of the lads there are punished for a license they themselves have not taken. Here, he touches a pale shoulder with his lips; there, he wraps his fingers around a wasp-like waist; and intercepting his kisses in flight he lets them arrive as mere breaths of air... on innocent cheeks. That is far from all: for by spilling the red wine profusely, as he passes the amphoras, so denying it to the thirsty drinkers, he causes their toast to *Count Edgar* to falter on dry lips, to the great satisfaction of the evil genius, who disappears laughing.

Count Edgar now visits the mine to congratulate the workers for the ardour shown by their efforts, which are enriching him and allowing him to marry *Éoline*, his fiancée, the adopted daughter of the powerful *Duke of Ratibor*.

Éoline, curious to visit this subterranean world, soon arrives with her father, strewing beneath these dark vaults, which only gold, silver and precious stones adorn, flowers of the field, all wet with dew, that she has culled on the way; the dancers surround her, admire her, acclaim her; she is so beautiful, kind, and full of charm! Behind her beauty one admires another which seems to glow beneath the first, like a flame in an alabaster globe. It appears, from sudden phosphorescent gleams that envelop her, that *Éoline* is only the envelope, the

transparent veil, of a superior being, a divinity condemned through some fatality to live among men. Edgar, intoxicated with love, hastens in the footsteps of his beautiful fiancée, trying to reach her and arrest her in flight. Have you seen a pair of butterflies with beating wings seeking and evading one another above the tips of the flowering stems, one passionately, the other coquettishly, forever keeping their distance till they meet in the same ray of light? Then, you have some idea of the delightful dance in which Amalia Ferraris — *Éoline*, I should say rather — appeared so young, so light, so airy, so voluptuously chaste and so modestly provocative. How lovely the movement with which she attracted and repelled the kiss hanging over her smiling lips like a gracious threat!

As *Éoline* continues to admire the mine's riches, partakes of the refreshments offered to her, joins in the dances, welcomes the eager young girls around her, and receives indiscreet confidences offered by the young worker in love with *Lisinka*, *Rübezahl*, the mountain spirit, has reappeared; in an attitude of ecstasy, hands outstretched, eyes dazzled, he follows all the movements of *Edgar's* fiancée. He is deeply intoxicated with her beauty. Never has a like marvel penetrated his dark kingdom; neither the undines of its interior, nor the salamanders of the plutonic regions who have sought to please him, possess that perfection of features and form, that virginal grace, that enchanting smile! *Rübezahl* is smitten with desire for *Éoline*; the arrow of love has pierced his heart through the dense layers of rock.

Suddenly he turns himself into a miner, and with an awkward and boorish air approaches the table, despite the sneers of the masters, whose jests he disdains. Beneath his humble clothes, he is more powerful than they; his eyes pierce obstacles which defy the gaze of men; he can see, most clearly, the veins of metal that run through their stony beds. He it is who holds the key to the mountain's treasures; indeed, with each pickaxe blow he deals, the threads of native gold shine in yellow nuggets; the gems sparkle and gleam madly; the cavern, thus illuminated, reveals the riches men seek with such pain; the metallic blooms display their exotic colours, while rubies, sapphires, and diamonds mingle their varied flames. What is the treasure of the Caliphs next to these wonders, this efflorescence? In the humble miner, who bears himself so proudly, *Rübezahl*, king of the gnomes is revealed; unconcerned by *Edgar's* wrath or by his sword, which only threatens the empty air, the spirit declares his love for *Éoline*. She shall be queen among the gnomes, and Earth will display all its treasures for her; so *Rübezahl* has decided, whom no obstacle will deny. Who can compete with a spirit, and especially one possessed of such wealth!

In vain *Éoline* protests, in vain *Edgar* seeks to chastise the insolent; *Rübezahl* is unmoved; he gestures, and the cave is bathed in purplish light, as if the wells that contain Earth's inner fires have overflowed. The spirit disappears in the midst of flames. All flee in terror, and the mine is once more a solitude.

Once the humans have gone, the gnomes re-possess their realm. From gaps in the rock emerge a multitude of little beings all dressed in grey, from the depths of whose hoods shine cunning eyes. They leap about in bizarre fashion, in rhythmic disorder, to entertain their master, who seems troubled; to the gnomes succeed pretty creatures whose dresses glitter with metallic scintillations, who seek, in vain, to distract the mountain king from his reverie. *Rübezahl* even fails to pay attention to the antics of *Trilby*, his page, his beloved elf. The thought that

preoccupies him is made visible behind the dark wall of the cavern; the compact rock becomes translucent, vaporises, turns a blue colour, and allows the audience to view, in magical perspective, the interior of a room of ogival architecture, by the soft light of a lamp, *Éoline* rests on a brocade coverlet, in the graceful abandon of sleep; a shaft of bluish light penetrates the chamber through the open stained-glass window. As the silvery glow touches *Éoline*, a metamorphosis transforms her; like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, the young girl quits her earthly form, leaving only a tangle of clothes on the bed. In the darkness of night, she becomes a *Dryad*, as her mother was before her; her companions surround her and guide her through her native forest towards the oak to which her life is joined. 'Mortal or goddess, what matter!' cries *Rübezahl*, I shall still win her love.' The vision fades; the curtain falls.

In the following act, the pink glow of dawn, contesting the sky with the bluish light of the moon, plays on the high roofs of a Gothic mansion, the base of which is bathed by a stream. All the rest of the scene is as yet still in shadow, and in the foreground, near a ruined tower, an old oak-tree, split by lightning, displays its dead branches. This is the day of *Edgar* and *Éoline*'s betrothal. The miners prepare a throne adorned with flowers and foliage for the ceremony. 'Let us fell this shattered tree, that stands in the way,' *Frantz*, the lover of *Lisinka*, signs to old *Hermann*, the leader of the miners. 'Be careful, my children,' *Hermann* signs in reply, 'a legend is attached to this oak: the chatelaine, *Éoline*'s mother, drawn to it as by a mysterious spell, loved to rest in its shade: one stormy day, lightning struck the tree, and, as if her life was linked to that of the oak, the young wife died.'

While the old miner is relating this tale, a crackling of sparks is heard, and *Rübezahl* rushes forth from the tower's ruins as if in pursuit of a vision. Indeed, a luminous figure, whose reflection extends on the water, hovers above the stream, like a bird skimming over a lake; it is the *Dryad*, returning to her earthly form with the dawn.

The rising sun illuminates the facade of the castle, making the waters of the river gleam, and gilding the green foliage of the trees in the parkland; the workers, parading banners and symbols, bear heavy ingots of silver and gold as offerings to their lord; the young village girls follow on behind. *Trilby*, *Rübezahl*'s elf, disguised as a page to assist in his master's affair, enjoys flirting with them, exciting the jealousy of their rustic lovers. The *Duke of Ratibor*, *Éoline*, *Edgar*, and the gentlemen who will witness the engagement soon appear; they take their seats and the event begins. A nobleman, exotically and magnificently dressed, steps boldly forward. His action excites a mixture of surprise of fear. He seems to possess a supernatural power, which subdues the will, shatters all resistance, fascinates like a serpent, and attracts one as does the abyss.

Entranced by his magnetic gaze, *Éoline* rises and begins to dance with him. Her movements are like those of a dove descending from branch to branch towards a snake motionless at the base of her tree, feathers ruffling, wings fluttering, distraught with horror, but spellbound. *Éoline* assuredly feels no love for *Rübezahl*, yet this magical dance stuns and intoxicates her; a perfidious languor pervades her actions, her head tilts, her eyes swim; their brightness increasingly moist, her lips opening smilingly, as she breathes more urgently. Half-overcome, she abandons herself to *Rübezahl*'s arms.

This dance sequence, which is a masterpiece, rendered the audience as ecstatic as those on stage. *Count Edgar* alone did not find it to his taste, and in truth was justified in feeling so. Furiously, dagger in hand, he rushed towards the pair; the king of the gnomes knocked him down with a flick of his arm, and returned to his cavernous realm via a trapdoor. The young girls received and supported the fainting *Éoline*.

The scene is now within the castle, a rich Gothic room, *Éoline's* chamber; the young girl is sleeping, but her sleep is troubled by strange and fearful visions. She shivers and sits on the edge of the bed, thinking she hears laughter, and sees shadows passing by. This is not wholly an illusion, for *Trilby*, sent to spy on her, enters the room, and his malignant features appear between the curtains; however, surrounded by her chambermaids who have responded to her cries, *Éoline* feels reassured that she was but the victim of a dream! To dispel the unfortunate impression it has made, she runs to look in her mirror — is that not where women can forget everything, even love? — She smiles on seeing that the nightmare has not dimmed her eyes or made pallid her cheeks. Her women try to adorn her; but suddenly, instead of her charming image, the passionate figure of *Rübezahl* appears in the mirror, kneeling, stretching out his arms to her as if to draw her to his heart. Terrified, she takes a step back; the vision fades, but the amorous spirit bears away *Éoline's* reflection with him. Unable to possess the body, he seizes the shadow; the faithless mirror no longer shows the young girl's features. The image, however accurate it may be, fails to satisfy *Rübezahl*, he desires the original, and soon returns more vigorous, passionate, and ardent than ever; *Éoline* defends herself like a woman whose heart is another's; however, her situation is perilous; *Trilby* dismisses her maids, and the spirit presses his attentions. The girl falls to her knees on a prie-dieu, in front of a sacred image, heaven alone can aid her. Midnight strikes; it is the hour of metamorphosis. A moonbeam traverses the room, and along this path of light the *Dryad* flies, leaving *Rübezahl* disconcerted and furious.

Warned that a bold fellow has entered *Éoline's* chamber, *Count Edgar* hastens there, sword in hand, but the king of the gnomes, in anticipation, has called on the mysteries of electricity. His blade, upon meeting that of *Edgar*, raises blue sparks, and stuns his opponent's arm; before the count can retrieve his useless weapon, the spirit vanishes.

It is a hard task, even for a king of the gnomes, that of pursuing a woman who exists in dual form, who escapes the moment he thinks he has her, and takes refuge in the trunk of a tree, at the heart of a vast forest. *Rübezahl*, despite his magic arts, is quite discomforted. Disguised as a woodcutter, he examines all the oak-trees, young and old. Beneath what protective bark is *Éoline* hiding? He knows not. An idea comes to him; he will interrogate every oak with his axe. As soon as the steel's edge bites into each trunk, a dryad appears seeking mercy on behalf of the tree to which her life is linked.

Rübezahl continues his task until he has found *Éoline's* oak. The unhappy *Dryad* resists for as long as she can; the axe sprinkles pink drops of blood from the sapwood over her delicate flesh before she is forced to emerge; the gnome threatens, if she continues to reject his love, to fell the tree completely which her being animates. *Éoline*, with suppliant grace, a modest display of coquetry, and submissive caresses, manages to disarm the wrath of this spirit. Her

companions surround her, serving to mask her flight. Edgar, who has been searching for her, leads her back to the château.

In the weapons room of this manor-house, adorned with equestrian accoutrements, the celebrations for the wedding of Edgar and Éoline are to take place. Organ-notes issue from the neighbouring chapel, and soon the couple reappear, united forever before heaven and earth. Various dances follow one another. *Éoline*, in a supreme routine, expresses the chaste intoxications, the heavenly joys of consecrated love. ‘And *Rübezahl*, what does he do?’, you will ask. He allows the one he loves to wed his rival; it scarcely matters to the king of the gnomes! Wait: see there, in the background, that red glow which empurples the forest; billows of smoke swirl towards the sky, flames rise, the fire spreads, and the oaks, inhabited by dryads, twist painfully in the blaze.

Éoline leans backwards, puts a hand to her heart, and with the other waves farewell to *Edgar*. The fire which devours her oak-tree finally consumes it; she dies, and *Rübezahl*, suddenly appears beside her, grinning with diabolical wickedness: at least she will belong to no other.

A sky lit by apothecic splendour, in the obligatory ending to ballets involving enchantment, now received the bodiless souls of the dryads. *Éoline* rose, sustained by her mother’s arms, and the curtain fell to the tumultuous sounds of a host of voices demanding Amalia Ferraris.

Her triumph was complete, and the Russians are strict judges where dancing is concerned; they have seen Marie Taglioni, Fanny Essler, Fanny Cerrito, and Carlotta Grisi, not to mention their own danseuses, that host of young performers who emerge from their Conservatory, one of the finest in the world, alert, flexible, wonderfully disciplined, talented and fully-trained, lacking only that on-stage experience which is readily acquired.

Amalia Ferraris is today without rival. She has grace, lightness, flow, the ability to float in the air and, beneath her charming exterior, incomparable strength and force. When she rises, a steel spring is released, when she descends, a dove’s feather falls. *En pointe*, the tips of her toes prick the stage like an arrowhead, and she turns, reverses, beats time obliquely, and performs sudden changes of pose with a perfect confidence, boldness, and abandon which might make one believe she was supported on invisible wings; each step is clear, exact, well-defined, and performed without stiffness or wavering, with classic perfection and a grace wholly new; moreover, those little feet, in the delirium of the dance, never forget the measure; they are finely attuned and maintain the rhythm to a marvel. Her rapid steps *en pointe* are as precise as the beats of Johann Maelzel’s metronome.

Charged with her dual role, Amalia Ferraris was able to reveal her talent, as if in two ballets played one after another, beneath two diverse physiognomies; as *Éoline*, she displays the gracious affability of a chatelaine with an air of innocent gaiety, and the naive coquetry of a young girl; as the *Dryad*, she appears idealised, detached, borne aloft, becoming yet lighter and more transparent, and flies through the oak-forest, over the tips of the grass-blades, without dislodging a single drop of dew from a violet-flower. In these sudden transformations from

woman to divinity, from divinity to woman, she never errs, always fully inhabiting each change of character.

Though this critique is already quite long, to do the performance justice I would need a great deal more space. So many blue eyes and blonde heads of hair, so many charming feet and slender gleaming legs, floating, leaping, rising and falling, in that whirlwind of gauze, glitter, flowers, smiling lips, and pink tights that we call *Éoline, or the Dryad!* — Consider that, as a foreigner who arrived but yesterday, listening in charmed surprise to all those feminine names as strange to my ear as the song of an unknown bird, so sweet yet so full of musical vowels that one might take them for Sanskrit names from some Indian drama unknown to William Jones or Friedrich Schlegel: Prikhounova, Muravieva, Amosova, Koupeva, Liadova, Snetkova, Manarova... it was if I were transcribing for the dancers of the Rue Le Peletier (*site of the Paris Opéra 1821-1873*), and from the text of *Sacountala* (*the ballet-pantomime of 1858, choreographed by Petipa, libretto by Gautier, music by Reyer, based on the classical Sanskrit play 'Shakuntala', by Kalidasa*), all those beautiful blossoming names as fragrant as Indian flowers whose sonority so alarms them; consider, all the more readily as you know all that delightful world better than I; that each of these names means beauty, talent, or at the very least youth and hope — as for Maria Petipa (*Mariia Sergeyevna Surovshchikova-Petipa, prima ballerina and wife of the choreographer Marius Petipa*), her French surname (*possibly derived from 'petit pas' or 'small step'*) should be a guide to her talent, although she is Russian, and I may say that she is especially fine, pretty, light-footed, and worthy of belonging to that family of distinguished choreographers (*Marius Petipa's father Jean-Antoine was also a renowned ballet-master*). Is it really necessary to praise Jules-Joseph Perrot or Cesare Pugni? Their names alone are eulogies.

Chapter 21. Return to France

For many days, weeks, months even, I had postponed my departure for France. St. Petersburg as regards my willingness to leave, had become a sort of frozen Capua (*Hannibal's temporary retreat in Italy, a byword for decadence*), where I luxuriated amidst the delights of a life of pleasure, and it pained me, I shamelessly admit, to contemplate returning to the journalist's yoke, which had weighed for so long on my shoulders. To the great attraction of fresh experiences, was joined that of even more pleasing relationships. I had been pampered, celebrated, spoiled; even, I am foolish enough to believe, loved; and all this could not be abandoned without feelings of regret. Suave, caressing, and flattering, Russian life had enveloped me, and I had difficulty shedding that soft fur pelisse. However, one cannot remain in St. Petersburg forever. Letters from France, each one more urgent, had arrived, and the great day was irrevocably fixed.

I have said I was a member of the 'Friday' club of young artists who gathered every week on that day, now at one house, now at another, and spent the evening drawing, painting in watercolours, or flooding with sepia their improvised compositions which Begrov sold, who is the Susse of St. Petersburg (*Michel Victor Susse and his brother Nicholas were art dealers in Paris, who also cast reproduction art bronzes, at the Susse Frères foundry*), the profits from

which aided whichever of their company was short of resources. Around midnight, a pleasant supper ended the evening's labour; the pencils, brushes, and pastels, were removed and we attacked a classic macaroni made by 'an Italian from Rome', or tackled a ragout of grouse, or some large fish caught in the Neva through a hole in the ice. Dinner was more or less sumptuous, depending on the financial state of the member who was hosting the supper that evening. But whether accompanied by a Bordeaux wine, Champagne, or merely English beer, or even kvass, it was no less cheerful, cordial, and fraternal. Ridiculous tales, artistic jibes, amusing follies, and unexpected paradoxes, leapt forth like fireworks. Then we returned in groups, wending our separate ways through the neighbourhood, while continuing our conversations amidst silent and deserted streets, white with snow, where not a sound could be heard but our bursts of laughter, the howl of some dog awoken as we passed, or a night-watchman's stick trailing along the pavement.

On the eve of my departure, which was a Friday, it was my turn to treat the assembled club, and the whole gathering arrived in force at my lodgings on Bolshaya Moskaya Street. Given the solemnity of the event, Imbert, a court-officer in charge of the imperial table, who was famous in St. Petersburg, wished to create the supper menu and, while supervising its execution, even deigned to involve himself in preparing a 'hot and cold' dish of partridge which I have tasted nowhere else. Imbert gifted me the recipe for a *risotto*, executed by myself in his presence, according to the purest Milanese recipe, after a conversation of ours about exotic cuisine; he declared it exquisite and no longer considered me a mere *bourgeois*; aside from my literary works, he also considered me an *artist*. No mark of approval ever flattered me more, and he had made this same dish for the palace, whose diners he considered capable of appreciating his merit.

As usual, the evening began with artistic toil; each sat at his desk, which had been prepared in advance, beneath the light of a lamp. But my efforts made little progress, I was preoccupied; conversation interrupted the strokes of the brush, and the bistre or the Indian ink sometimes dried in the tub between one touch and the next. For nearly seven months, I had lived a good companion of these spirited, amiable, young people, lovers of beauty and full of generous ideas. I was about to depart. When one leaves who knows if one will ever see one's friends again? Especially when, separated by a wide distance, life must resume its habitual course. A certain melancholy therefore hung over the Friday club, which the announcement that supper was ready came, most conveniently, to dispel. The toasts to my safe journey revived the cheerfulness which had been extinguished, and so many stirrup-cups were drunk that they determined to stay till daylight and accompany me *en masse* to the station.

The season was advancing; the great thawing of the Neva's ice had taken place, and only a few late ice floes were sailing downriver to melt in the warming gulf, now free for navigation. The roofs had lost their ermine cloaks, and in the streets, the snow, changed to black slush, had brought puddles and quagmires at every step. The ruins of winter, masked for a long time by a layer of white, were laid bare. The paving stones were out of kilter, the road surface broken, and our droshkys, bumping harshly from quagmire to quagmire, gave us terrible blows in the kidneys, and made us leap about like peas on a drum, for the poor road conditions in no way

prevented the *isvochtchiks* from flying along as if the devil were carrying them off: provided that the two little wheels follow on behind, they are happy and care little for the traveller.

We soon arrived at the railway station, and finding that our parting came too swiftly upon us, the whole group clambered aboard the carriage, desiring to accompany us to Pskov, where a branch line terminated. This custom of accompanying parents, or friends, part-way on their journey seems peculiar to Russia, and I found the habit touching. The bitterness of departure is ameliorated, and hugs and handshakes are not followed by sudden solitude.

At Pskov, however, there was an obligatory parting of the ways. The Friday club members reversed direction, and headed for St. Petersburg by the return train; it was a final farewell, and my real journey was about to begin.

I was not returning to France alone; I had, as travelling companion, the young man who had lodged in the same house as I did in St. Petersburg, and with whom I had quickly become friends. Though French, he knew, and this is rare, almost all the Northern languages: German, Swedish, Polish, and Russian which was his maternal language; he had made frequent trips to all parts of Russia, by every means of transport, and in all seasons. As a traveller, he was admirably calm, knew how to do without everything, and showed an astonishing resistance to fatigue, although he was delicate in appearance, and accustomed to life's many comforts. Without him, I would not have been able to accomplish my return journey at that time of year and by so difficult a route.

Our first task was to search Pskov for a carriage to rent or buy, and, after much toing and froing we found a single rather dilapidated droshky, the suspension of which inspired us with scant confidence. We purchased it, but on the condition that if it broke down before having gone forty versts the seller must repay its cost, while deducting a small amount for the damage. It was our prudent friend who added this clause, and well he did so, as we will see.

We strapped our luggage to the back of the frail vehicle, seated ourselves on the narrow folding-seat, and the driver set his team to the gallop. It was easily the worst time of year to travel; the road was merely a muddy causeway, only a little more compacted, relatively speaking, than the vast muddy swamp around. To right and left, and straight before us, the view consisted of a sky smeared with dirty grey, above a perspective of black and soggy terrain; with, here and there, a few reddish, half-submerged birch trees, gleaming puddles of water, and *izbas* (*log cabins*) their roofs still retaining a few patches of snow akin to shreds of badly-torn paper. Through the deceptive warmth, as evening approached, came the breath of a somewhat bitter breeze which made us shiver beneath our furs. The wind was not warmed by blowing over that mix of snow and ice; flocks of crows punctuated the sky with their black silhouettes, as they headed, croaking, towards their resting place for the night. The scene was scarcely cheerful, and, without the presence of my companion, who told me of one of his trips to Sweden, I would have fallen into a melancholy state.

Moujiks' carts, carrying stacks of wood, followed the road ahead, drawn by muddy little horses splashing a deluge of mud around them; but hearing the bells attached to our team, they lined up, respectfully, to let us pass. One of these moujiks was honest enough to run after us

and return one of our trunks which had come loose, the fall of which we had failed to hear above the noise of our wheels.

Night had almost fallen, and we were not far from the post-house; our horses galloped like the wind, excited by the nearness of the stables; the poor droshky was leaping about on its weakened springs, and was dragged along obliquely, its wheels not being able to turn quickly enough due to the thick mud. Encountering a large stone dealt it so violent a shock we were almost hurled into the midst of the quagmire. One of the springs had broken, the forepart was no longer attached. Our coachman dismounted, and mended the damaged vehicle with a piece of rope as best he could, so that we could hobble along to the relay station. The droshky had not lasted fifteen versts. It was unthinkable that we could continue the journey in such a tub. The post-house yard contained nothing better than a *telega* (cart), and we still had five hundred versts to travel, so as to reach the border.

To render all the horror of our situation clear, a brief description of the *telega* is necessary. This eminently primitive vehicle, consists of two planks placed lengthwise on twin axles each fitted with a pair of wheels. Narrow planks border the sides. A double rope, wrapped in sheepskin, attached to the sides, forms a sort of swing serving as a seat for the traveller. The postilion stands on a wooden crosspiece, or sits on a board. The luggage is piled up behind. Five little horses are attached to the thing, horses seemingly unfit to pull a carriage they look so pitiful standing there, yet which the swiftest racehorse would have difficulty keeping up with once they launch themselves. It is not a means of transport suited to sybarites, but the road was hellish, and the *telega* is the only vehicle that can withstand roads ruined by the thaw.

We held a council in the yard. My companion said: 'Wait here. I'll push on to the next relay, and return to collect you in a carriage.... if I can find one.'

— 'Why so?' I replied, surprised at his proposal.

— 'Because,' replied my friend, hiding a smile, 'I've undertaken many a journey in a *telega* with companions who seemed brave and robust. They took their seats, proudly, and, for the first hour, limited themselves to a few grimaces, a few contortions immediately repressed; but soon, with bruised sides, sore knees, churned intestines, brains rattling in their skulls like nuts in their shells, they began to grumble, moan, lament, and shower insults on me. Some even wept, begging to be set down, and left in a ditch, preferring to die of hunger or cold on the spot, or be eaten by wolves than endure such torture a moment longer. None lasted more than forty versts.'

— 'You've a poor opinion of me,' I replied, 'I'm no fragile traveller. The Cordoban *carro*, the floor of which is an esparto net; the Valencian *tartana*, akin to a box in which marbles are rolled to round them, never elicited a groan from me. I rode with the post in a cart, holding on hand and foot to the sides. There's nothing astonishing to me about a *telega*. If I complain, you may answer me as Guatimotzin (*the Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc: see the opera 'Guatimotzin' by Aniceto Ortega del Villarto*) did his companion, as they were being roasted: 'And mine, is mine a bed of roses?'

My proud reply seemed to convince him. The horses were harnessed to a *telega*, into which we piled our trunks, and away we went.

And dinner? Allow me to say that Friday's supper was now fully-digested, while the conscientious traveller still owes it to his readers to record the menu of the least meal eaten en route. We took no more than a glass of tea and a thin slice of brown bread; for when one is on one of these highly extravagant trips, one must not eat, no more than the postilions do who transport the post without leaving the saddle.

I would not wish to convey the idea that the telega is the most pleasant of vehicles. However, it seemed more so than I had expected, and I maintained myself without too much trouble on the horizontal rope, rendered a little more comfortable by its sheepskin wrapping.

With night, the wind had grown colder; the sky had cleansed itself of cloud, and the stars shone, bright and clear in the dark blue, as when the weather turns frosty.

Cold spells often occur during the thaw. The northern winter has scarcely retreated towards the pole before it returns to throw handfuls of snow in the face of Spring. Around midnight, the mud was already hardened, the puddles were frozen, and the telega threw up denser lumps of petrified mire than before. We arrived at the post-house, recognisable by its white facade and portico columns. All these relay stations are the same, built to the prescribed plan, from one end of the Empire to the other. We descended from our telega with our luggage, and clambered into another which immediately departed. We were travelling flat out, and the vague objects glimpsed in the shadows fled in disorder, on both sides side of the road, like a routed army. It was as if these phantoms were being pursued by an unseen enemy. Nocturnal hallucinations troubled my sleepy eyes, and dreams mingled, despite myself, with my thoughts. I had not slept the night before, and the urgent need to sleep made my head bob from one side to the other. My companion made me sit in the back of the cart, and I put my head between my knees to keep from splitting my skull against the sides. The most violent jolts of the telega, which, sometimes, on sandy or peaty stretches, ran over logs laid across the road, failed to wake me, but made my dreams go astray like a draughtsman's line if his elbow is jogged as he is working: the design that began as an angel's profile ends in a devil's mask. This slumber lasted some three quarters of an hour; I woke rested, and as cheerful as if I'd slept in my bed.

Speed is an intoxicating pleasure. What joy compares to that of passing like a whirlwind, amidst the din of bells and wheels, in the depths of a vast noiseless night, in which all are at rest, seen only by the stars that blink their glittering eyes and seem to show one the way! The feeling of action, progress, one's forward motion towards a goal, during hours usually lost to sleep, inspires one with an odd sense of pride: one is full of oneself, and looks down a little on philistines snoring beneath their blankets.

At the next relay, the same ceremony took place: a fantasy-filled entry to the courtyard and a swift transfer from one telega to another.

— 'Well!' said I to my companion, when we had left the post-house, the postillion having launched his horses at full speed down the road, 'I've not begged for mercy, yet, and the cart has shaken me about for quite a few versts. My arms are still attached to my shoulders, my legs are not out of joint, and my spine still supports my head.'

— 'I had no idea you were so seasoned to it. Now the worst is over, and I'll not be forced to drop you beside the road, with a scarf on a pole, for you to flag down some berlin or post-

chaise crossing the empty waste. But since you've slept, it's your turn to watch; I'll close my eyes for a while. Don't forget, to maintain our speed, by prodding the moujik in the back so he whips up the horses. And shout *durak* (fool) at him in a loud voice, too; it can't hurt.'

I carried out the task imposed on me, most conscientiously; but let me say, at once, so as to free me, in the eyes of philanthropists, from the reproach of barbarity, that the moujik was dressed in a thick sheepskin *tulup* whose fleece cushioned any external shock. My prods were as if aimed at a mattress.

When daylight dawned, I saw with surprise that during the night snow had fallen over the countryside we were about to travel through. Nothing was sadder than the sight of this snow, the thin layer only half-covering, like a shroud full of holes, the miserable, ugly ground soaked by the recent thaw. On the inclined slopes, narrow drifts rose and fell, vaguely resembling the columns of those Turkish tombs in the cemeteries of Istanbul, in Eyüp or Scutari (*Üsküdar*), which subsidence has caused to tumble or lean at strange angles.

After a while, the breeze began to whirl a kind of fine snow about, thin and pulverised like sleet, which stung my eyes, and riddled with a hundred thousand frozen needles the part of my face that the need to breathe had forced me to leave uncovered. It is hard to imagine anything more unpleasant than this relentless form of minor torment, which the speed of the telega further intensified in running against the wind. My moustache was soon studded with white pearls, and bristling with icicles, between which my breath rose, vaporous and bluish, like pipe smoke. I was frozen to the marrow of my bones, for a damp cold is more unpleasant than a dry one, and I felt that discomfort at dawn known many a traveller, and seeker of nocturnal adventure. However adaptable one may be, the telega, as regards restfulness is no match for a hammock, or even one of those green leather sofas one finds everywhere in Russia.

A glass of hot tea, and a cigar, smoked and consumed, at the relay while the horses were harnessed, and I returned to my perch, and continued valiantly on the way, bolstered by my companion's compliments, who declared he had never seen a Westerner endure a telega so heroically.

It is quite difficult to describe the country we were travelling through, such as it appeared at that time of year to the traveller obliged to cross it for a compelling reason. The gently undulating plains, of a blackish hue, were punctuated by poles intended to mark the road when winter snows erase the paths, and which in summer must look like supernumerary telegraph-posts. On the horizon one saw only birch-forests, sometimes half-burned, or a rare village lost in the landscape, betrayed by a church with a small bulbous dome painted apple-green. At this season, over the depth of mud that the night-frost had solidified, snow was spread, here and there, in long strips like those pieces of canvas that are rolled out in the meadows for the dew to whiten, or, if that comparison seems too cheerful, white braiding sewn onto the scorched blackness of a common funeral shroud. Pale daylight filtered through the immense bank of greyish cloud and covered the whole sky with its diffuse glow, but failed to illuminate objects or cast their shade; nothing was solid, every outline seemed filled with the same flat tone. In this doubtful clarity, all looked grey, soiled, pallid, and the colourist would have found no more material than the engraver, in that vague, indefinite, and drowned landscape, which seemed morose rather than melancholic. But what comforted me and relieved the monotony, despite

the regret for St. Petersburg that filled me, is that my face was turned towards France. Every bump in the road amidst that dreary countryside brought me closer to my homeland, where I would quickly discover, after seven months of absence, if my Parisian friends had forgotten me. Besides the achievement of a journey painfully endured, and the satisfaction of triumphing over obstacles, distracted from these minor details. When one has viewed a number of countries, one no longer expects to encounter ‘enchanted sites’ at every step; one is accustomed to these gaps in nature which is sometimes repetitive, and nods, like the greatest of poets (*Dryden’s ‘even Homer nods’ translating Horace: ‘Ars Poetica 359’*). More than once, I was tempted to say, like *Fantasio*, in Alfred de Musset’s comedy of that name (*see Act I Scene 1*): ‘How lacking is this sunset! Nature is pitiful this evening. Look for a moment at that valley over there, those four or five wicked clouds clinging to the mountainside! I drew landscapes like that when I was twelve years old, on the covers of my schoolbooks!’

We had long passed Ostrov, Rezhitza (*Rēzekne, Latvia*), and other towns or burghs of which, as one can imagine, I could make no close observation from the heights of my telega. I might have stayed longer and still been unable to do more than repeat descriptions already reported; for all these places are similar to one another: always plank fences, wooden houses with double windows through which one glimpses some exotic plant or other, roofs painted green, and a church, with five pinnacles and a narthex illuminated with some painting of Byzantine pattern.

In the midst of this stands the post-house, with its white facade in front of which are grouped a few moujiks in soiled tulups, and some fair-haired children. As for the women, one rarely encounters them.

As the daylight faded, it appeared we were not far from Dünaburg (*Daugavpils, Latvia*). We arrived there to the last gleams of a livid sunset, which gave to the town, populated largely by Polish Jews, a somewhat unpleasant aspect. It was one of those skies as conceived in paintings which depict times of plague, pale grey and full of morbid and greenish hues, like those of rotting flesh. Under this sky, the dark houses, soaked in rain or melting snow, dilapidated after the winter, looked like half-submerged piles of wood or flotsam in a sea of mud. The streets were veritable torrents of mud. Streams of meltwater flowed from all sides seeking an outlet, yellow, earthy, blackish, and carrying with them a thousand pieces of nameless debris. Excremental swamps spread over the ground marked here and there by a few islands of dirty snow still resistant to the westerly wind. Through this filthy mixture, which prompted one to sing a hymn in honour of tarmac, wheels churned, like the paddles of a steamboat in a silty river, splashing the walls and the rare passer-by booted like an oyster-fisherman. Ours sank up to the hubs. Fortunately, beneath the flood, the wooden paving-blocks survived and, though sunken in the wet, offered, at a certain depth, resistant ground which prevented our horses, carriage, and ourselves from disappearing as travellers do in the quicksands around Mont Saint-Michel.

Our fur coats had become, beneath the upthrown water, true celestial planispheres, exhibiting many a muddy constellation unknown to astronomers, and if it was possible to look filthy in Dünaburg, we were, as they say, not even fit to be picked up with a pair of tongs.

The passage of isolated travellers was a rare thing at that time. Few mortals possessed the courage to travel in a telega, and the only possible vehicle was the mail-coach. But one had to

register well in advance to book a seat, and I had departed abruptly, like a soldier who sees his hours of leave expiring and must at all costs rejoin his unit, under penalty of being branded a deserter.



Russian Telega used for haymaking, 1850

Picryl

My companion's rule was that one should eat as little as possible when travelling in this manner, and his sobriety exceeded that of the Spaniards or the Arabs. However, when I declared that I was close to dying of hunger, having not attended to the needs of 'the underside of one's nose', as Rabelais has it, since Friday night — it was now Sunday evening — he condescended to what he called my weakness, and, leaving the telega in charge of the relay-station, accompanied me in search of food. Dünaburg retires early, and the dark facades were only rarely illuminated — to walk through the cesspool was no easy thing, and it seemed to me that at every step an invisible hand grasped my shoe by the heel. At last, I saw a reddish glow emerging from a sort of den with the appearance of a tavern; rays of light extended over the liquid mud in red streams, like blood flowing from a wound. This was hardly wont to whet the appetite, but at a certain level of starvation one does not demur to eat. We entered without allowing ourselves to be deterred by the nauseating odour of the place, in which a smoky lamp crackled and burned with difficulty amidst the mephitic atmosphere.

The room was full of Jews of strange aspect, with long tight-chested Levitical garments like cassocks, which were sadly muddied, and of a colour which had once been black rather than purple, brown than olive, but which, at that moment, displayed a hue that I will designate as: 'deeply soiled' They wore exotic hats, with wide brims and tall circular crowns, but somewhat faded, battered, gleaming, and furred in places, bald in others, too worn even to be snatched from the corner of a mound by the hook of a bankrupt rag-picker. And the boots! The glorious Saint-Amand (*the playwright Jean-Armonde Lacoste*) himself would be needed to describe them! Worn-out, slumping, twisted in spirals, blanched by layers of half-dried stains, like to the feet of elephants that have waded for lengths of time in the jungles of India. Many among these Jews, especially the young, had their hair parted on the forehead, and hanging behind one ear a long, braided side-lock, a coquetry which contrasted with their general shabbiness. These were not the splendid Oriental Jews, heirs of the patriarchs, who retain its biblical nobility, but the wretched Jews of Poland, devoted, amidst the mud, to all kinds of vague activities and lowly industry. Yet, illuminated thus, their thin faces, their fine but anxious eyes, their beards forked at the ends like fish-tails, and their soiled clothing with the hue of a smoke-varnished cured herring, recalled Rembrandt's paintings and etchings.

The consumption of food was scarcely apparent in the establishment. In dark corners, I discerned a few individuals drinking, at a slow pace, a glass of tea or vodka; but of solid eatables, not a sign. Understanding and speaking both German and the Polish dialect spoken by the Jews, my companion asked the proprietor if there was a way to provide us with a meal.

This request seemed to surprise him. It was the day after the Sabbath, and the dishes prepared on the Friday for the weekend, on which it was not permitted to do anything, had been devoured to the last crumb. However, our look of starvation moved him. His larder was empty, his stove unlit: but perhaps bread could be found at his neighbour's house. He issued orders accordingly, and after a few minutes we saw a young girl, appear amidst this pile of ragged human beings, with an air of triumph, bearing a sort of flat cake, A Jewess of marvellous beauty, the *Rebecca* of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, the *Rachel* of Eugène Scribe's *La Juive*, a true sun radiating like the alchemist's macrocosm in the darkness of that sombre room. Eliezer at the edge of the well would have presented her with Isaac's engagement ring (*see Genesis:24*). She was the purest example of her people that one could dream of, a true biblical flower blooming, one scarcely knew how, on a midden. The Shulamite of the *Shir Hashirim* (*The biblical Song of Songs*) was no more orientally intoxicating. What gazelle-like eyes, what a delicately aquiline nose, what beautiful lips, of a hue like twice-dyed Tyrian purple, adorned the matt pallor of her face, a chastely elongated oval from temples to chin, made to be framed by the traditional headscarf!

She presented us with the bread, smiling, like those daughters of the desert who tilt their urn to the traveller's thirsty lips, while, wholly occupied with contemplating her, I hesitated to take it from her. A faint blush rose to her cheeks on seeing my admiration, and she set the bread down at the edge of the table.

I heaved an inner sigh, on thinking that, for me, the age of passionate antics had passed. My eyes dazzled by that radiant apparition, I began to nibble the bread, which was both unleavened and burnt, but which seemed just as fine to me as if it had come from the Viennese

bakery on the Rue de Richelieu (*August Zang's Boulangerie Viennoise, at no. 92, founded 1838/9.*)

Nothing further detained us there: the lovely Jewess had vanished, making the smoky hue of the room appear darker still by her disappearance. So, I returned to our telega with a sigh, telling myself that it is not the velvet case, always, that contains the most beautiful Oriental pearl.

We soon arrived on the banks of the Dvina (*the Western Dvina, the Daugava*) which we were to cross. The river-banks are high, and we descended by a wooden ramp with a fairly steep slope to it, like that of a roller-coaster. Happily, the postilion's sense of balance was wondrous, and the little Ukrainian horses sure-footed. We reached the bottom of the incline without incident, where we heard the waters bubbling and foaming in the shadows. Neither a boat-bridge nor ferry was used to travel from one bank to the other, but a system of plank-floored rafts abutting one another and linked by cables; they lend themselves better thus to the changing height of the water, rising and falling with it. The crossing, though without real danger, seemed quite sinister. The river, swollen by the melting snow, was running high, and drove against the obstacle presented by the rafts, stretching the cables. The river, the night, were easily rendered gloomy and fantastical. Streaks of light, issuing from who knows where, rippled like phosphorescent serpents, the foam glittering strangely and deepening the darkness; we seemed to be floating over an abyss, and it was with a feeling of relief that we found ourselves on the far side, drawn onwards by our horses, who climbed the ramp almost as rapidly as they had descended the opposite bank.

We coursed once more over the grey and black expanse, discerning mere shapes that faded swiftly from memory as soon as they had passed from sight, and which it is impossible to describe. Such obscure visions, that arise and vanish at speed, are not without charm: it seems as if one is crossing a landscape in dream, at the gallop. One would like to penetrate with one's gaze the vague darkness, cottony like a piece of wadding, from which every outline fades, and on which every object merely shows as a somewhat darker blot.

I was thinking of the lovely Jewess, whose physiognomy I had engraved on my brain, like an artist who repeats an outline for fear of it fading, and I tried to remember how she was dressed, but without success. Her beauty had dazzled me so much that I only recalled her face. All else was plunged in shadow. The light had been focussed upon it, and if she had been dressed in gold brocade strewn with pearls, I would have paid it no more attention than a scrap of Indian cotton.

At daybreak, the weather changed, and winter had decidedly returned. Snow began to fall, but this time in large flakes. The layers overlapped, and soon the countryside was whitened as far as the eye could see. At every moment we were obliged to shake ourselves, so as not to be covered with snow, but it scarcely lessened the depth; and after a few minutes, we were powdered with white again like tartlets that a pastry-chef dusts. The silvery flakes, mingled, blurred, and rose and fell, with each breath of wind. It was as if someone had emptied innumerable feather-beds all over the heavens and, in that whiteness, one could not see even four paces ahead. The little horses, shook their dishevelled manes, impatiently. The desire to

escape the turmoil gave them wings, and they galloped at full speed towards the relay station, despite the resistance offered to the play of the wheels by the freshly fallen snow.

I have an odd passion for snow, and nothing pleases me so much as that frozen rice-powder that whitens the brown face of the earth. That immaculate, virginal whiteness, in which particle glitter as in Parian marble, seems preferable to me than the richest of hues, and when one treads a road covered with snow, it is like walking on the silvery sands of the Milky Way. But on this occasion, I confess, my predilection was satisfied only too well, and my position on the telega was beginning to feel no longer tenable. My friend himself, impassive as he tended to be, and accustomed to the rigours of hyperborean travel, agreed that we would have been more comfortable by the corner of the stove, in a well-sealed room, and even in a simple post-chaise, if a berlin could travel in such weather.

The weather soon deteriorated, and we were amidst a snow-storm. Nothing could be stranger than a fluffy tempest of this nature. A level wind scours the earth, and sweeps the snow before it with irresistible violence. White smoke runs over the ground, swirling flakes freeze like vapour from some polar conflagration. When the drift meets a wall, it accumulates against it, soon tops it, and then cascades down the far side. In a moment, ditches and stream-beds are filled, the road disappears and is only re-discovered by virtue of the signposts. Were one to stop, one would be buried as if under an avalanche, in five or six minutes. Before the force of the wind, which transports this immense mass of snow, trees arch, poles bend, and creatures bow their heads. It is the *khamsin* of the steppe.

This time the danger was not great; it was daylight; the layer of snow that had fallen was not very dense, and we were granted the spectacle without the peril. But at night, a snowstorm can very well bear you away, and swallow you. Sometimes flights of rooks or crows driven by the wind, passed amidst this whiteness, like rags of black cloth, blown upside down and capsized as they flew. We also encountered a few carts led by moujiks seeking to return to their *izbas* and fleeing before the storm.

It was with great relief that, amidst the white-chalk cross-hatching all around us, I saw the post-house with its Greek portico looming at the edge of the road. No architecture ever appeared more sublime. To leap from the telega, shake the snow from our overcoats, and enter the room set aside for travellers, where a pleasant temperature reigned, was the matter of moments. At the relay-stations the samovar is in a constant state of boiling, and a few sips of tea, as hot as the palate could bear, soon restored the circulation of our blood, a little chilled by so many hours spent in the open.

‘I would undertake a journey of discovery with you to the Arctic pole,’ my friend said, ‘and I am sure you would make a fine winter companion. How charming it would be to live in an igloo, with a supply of pemmican and bear-meat!’

— ‘Your approval is touching,’ I answered, ‘since I know you’re no flatterer by nature; but now I’ve sufficiently proven my power to endure the bumps in the road and the cold, there’d be no cowardice, it seems to me, in seeking a more comfortable way of continuing our journey.’

— ‘Then, let’s go and see if there’s some vehicle in the courtyard less open to the rigour of elements. Needless heroism is simply a form of boasting.’

The courtyard, half-filled with snow, which we tried in vain to pile in the corners with brooms and shovels, presented an odd spectacle. Telegas (*wains*), tarantasses (*unsprung, long-based four-wheelers*), and droshkys, encumbered it, raising shafts like the spars and masts of half-submerged vessels. Behind all these primitive vehicles, we discovered, through a sea of white flakes that swirled in the breath of the storm, the leather hood of an old carriage much like the back of a whale stranded amidst the foam, which had an effect on us, despite its dilapidation, akin to encountering the ark of salvation. We stared at the carriage and, after towing it to the centre of the courtyard, could see that the wheels were in good condition, the springs quite intact, and if the windows failed to close completely, at least none were missing. To tell the truth, we would not have shone in the Bois de Boulogne in such an old jalopy; but since we were not required to circle the lake to excite the admiration of the ladies, we were most happy that the owner was prepared to rent it to us till we reached the Prussian border.

The installation of ourselves and our luggage in this clog only took a few minutes, and there we were, on our way once more, slowed a little, however, by the violence of the wind driving before it swirls of icy powder. Though we kept all the windows closed, there was soon a layer of snow on the seat we had chosen not to occupy. Nothing resists that impalpable, white dust crushed and kneaded by the storm: it enters through the slightest gap, like Saharan sand, and penetrates one's very watch-case. But as neither of us were Sybarites, whining for a bed of roses, we enjoyed the relative comfort with deeply-felt pleasure.

One could at least support one's back and head on the ancient green, padded interior, worn, it is true, but infinitely preferable to the side of a telega. Sleep no longer rendered one likely to fall and break one's skull.

We profited from the situation to sleep a little, each in our own corner, but without yielding to too long a slumber, which is often dangerous in such low temperatures, for the thermometer had dropped to twelve degrees or so below zero under the influence of the icy wind. But, little by little, the storm subsided, swirls of snow suspended in the air fell to the ground, and one could see the landscape, as far as the horizon, now completely white.

The temperature rose, until there was scarcely more than three or four degrees of frost, which is wholly springlike for Russia at that time of year. We crossed the Vilia (*Neris*), which flows into the Niemen (*Nemunas*) near Kovno (*Kaunas, Lithuania*), by means of a ferry, which adjoined the low river-bank, and reached the town, which had an attractive appearance beneath the fresh fall of snow with which it was sprinkled. The post-house was located in a square with a fine aspect, surrounded by buildings in a uniform style, and planted with trees which, for a quarter of an hour at least, looked like constellations of quicksilver. Bell towers, of onion or pineapple shape, appeared here and there above the houses; but I had neither the time nor inclination to visit the churches they marked.

After a light collation of sandwiches, and a glass of tea, horses were set to the carriage so we might cross the Niemen by day; and the day is not long in February at that latitude. Several vehicles, telegas and carriages, crossed the river at the same time as us and, mid-passage, the yellow, bubbling water well-nigh reached the planked sides of the boats, which yielded under the pressure then reverted to shape again as the teams worked their way towards the far bank. If a horse had taken fright, nothing would have been likelier than our tumbling into the current,

luggage and all; but Russian horses, though full of ardour, are very placid, and not alarmed by so small a matter.

A few minutes later, and we were galloping towards the Prussian border, which we thought to reach that night, despite the metallic moans and groans our poor carriage emitted which, though shaken about, nonetheless held together, refusing to yield like a coward on the way. Indeed, at about eleven o'clock, we reached the first Prussian post-station, where we relinquished the carriage to the relay we had employed.

'Now there are no more acrobatic exercises for us to perform in impossible carts,' said my friend, 'it would be good to take supper at our ease, and round out our features a little, so as not to appear like spectres on arrival in Paris.'

You may imagine I made scant objection to this brief but substantial speech, which so well reflected my intimate thoughts. When I was but a boy, I imagined the borders of countries as marked on the ground in blue, pink or green, as they are on geographical maps. It was a childish and chimerical idea. But though it was not drawn with a brush, the demarcation line was no less abrupt and precise. At a point indicated by a post diagonally-striped in white and black, Russia ended and Prussia began, in a sudden and complete manner. The neighbouring country merged not with her, nor her with her neighbour.

We entered a low room furnished with a large tiled stove which crackled harmoniously. The floor was dusted with yellow sand; a few framed engravings adorned the walls; the tables and seats had Germanic shapes, and the serving-women who came to set the table were tall and strong. It was a long time since we had seen women busy with domestic cares which seem the prerogative of their sex in the West: in Russia, as in the Orient, it is the men who do the waiting-on, at least in public.

The cuisine was no longer the same. *Shchi* (cabbage soup), caviar, *ogurcy* (cucumbers), grouse, and *sudak* (pike-perch) were replaced by beer-soup, veal with raisins, hare with redcurrant jelly, and sweet German pastries. Everything was different: the shape of the glasses, knives, and forks, a thousand little details that it would take too long to list, revealed, at every moment, that we had changed country. With this copious meal, we drank a Bordeaux wine, which was excellent, despite its sumptuous label printed in gleaming metallic ink, and a glass of Rudesheim (*Riesling*) poured into emerald-coloured *römers* (drinking-glasses with wide bowls and short stems).

While dining we urged each other to temper our voracity so as not to die of indigestion, like those castaways some vessel rescues from a raft, their having consumed their meagre provisions of dry biscuit, their shoe-leather, and even the rubber of their shoulder-straps. If we had been wiser, we would have dined on a cup of broth and a piece of marzipan soaked in Malaga wine, so as to gradually accustom ourselves to food once more. But since our supper was already in our stomachs, we let it remain there, hoping it would cause us no remorse!

The modes of dress had changed too; we had seen our last *tulups* (sheepskins) in Kovno (*Kaunas*); and the facial types were no different to the clothing. Instead of the vague, pensive, gentle air of the Russians, here was the stiff, methodical, and gluttonous air of the Prussians — a wholly other people — the men with small peaked caps, rounded at the front, short tunics,

trousers tight at the knee and wide in the leg, and a porcelain or meerschaum pipe in their mouth, or even an amber holder, bizarrely bent, in which a cigar was secured at right angles. Thus, the Prussians at the first post-house appeared to us: it was no surprise, since we knew them already.

The carriage we mounted resembled the little omnibuses that château-owners deploy to collect Parisians expected for dinner from the railway-station. It was suitably padded, well-sealed, and with a well-sprung suspension: at least it seemed so after the telega that we had left behind, which had well-nigh reproduced the torments of the strappado employed in the Middle Ages. What a difference too between the ardent pace of the little Russian horses, and the phlegmatic trotting of the large, heavy Mecklenburgers who seemed to be falling asleep as they went, and barely woke to a caress of the whip nonchalantly applied to their broad backs. These German horses doubtless knew the Italian proverb: *Chi va piano va sano* ('who goes wisely goes well'). They meditate on it, raising their great hooves and ignoring the second part of the saying: *Chi va sano va lontano* ('who goes well goes far'), since the Prussian post-stations are closer together than the Russian.

Nonetheless, one arrives, even if one does not travel quickly, and dawn found us not far from Königsberg (now *Kaliningrad, Russia*), on a road lined with tall trees which extended as far as the eye could see, and presented a truly magical scene. The snow had frozen to the branches and covered the thinnest ramifications with an extraordinarily-bright diamantine sheen. The alley looked like a long silver-filigree arcade leading to the enchanted castle of some Northern fey. We saw that the snow, knowing our love for her and given it was time to part from us, had lavished her magic upon us, and treated us to the most brilliant of spectacles. Winter had conducted us as far as he could, and had found it hard to leave us.

Königsberg is not an overly-cheerful town, at least at that time of year. The winters there are still rigorous, and the houses retain their double windows. We noticed several with stepped gables, their facades painted apple-green and supported by very elaborate S-shaped iron braces, as in Lubeck. It is Kant's native place, he who with his *Critique of Pure Reason*, returned philosophy to its true path. I seemed to see him, at every street corner, with his steel-grey coat, his tricorne hat, and his shoes adorned with buckles, and thought of how his meditations had been troubled by the growth of some slender poplar trees, that were felled in order that he could see the old tower of Löbenicht church, on which, for more than twenty years, he had been accustomed to fix his gaze during his profound metaphysical reveries.

We went straight to the station, and each settled into a corner of the nearest carriage. It is not my intention to describe our journey by rail through Prussia; it contained little of interest, especially since the train does not halt at the towns, and we travelled straight to Cologne, where the snow finally left us. There, as our arrival and departure times failed to coincide, we were obliged to remain for a while, at which we took the opportunity to indulge in some essential cleansing and resume something of a human appearance, since we looked like true Samoyeds arriving on the Neva to market our reindeer.

The rapidity of our journey in the telega had caused a bizarre variety of damage to the contents of our trunk: the polish on our shoes had been rubbed away revealing the bare leather; a box of excellent cigars contained only *polvo sevillano* (a seasoning made from dried bitter-

orange peel), for the jolting had reduced them to a yellow dust; and the seals on the letters we had entrusted to our trunk had worn away, having been filed down and thinned by friction, we could no longer distinguish neither coat of arms nor numerals, nor any imprint. Several envelopes had fallen open. There was snow between our shirts! Order restored, we retired to bed after an excellent supper, and the next day, five days after our departure from St. Petersburg, we arrived in Paris at nine in the evening, in accord with our prior commitment. We were not five minutes late. A coupé awaited us at the station, and a quarter of an hour later we found ourselves amidst old friends, including many a lovely woman, before a table glowing with candles, on which a fine supper was being served, and our safe return was celebrated, joyfully, till morning.

Part X: The Volga - Tver to Nizhny Novgorod

Chapter 22: Summer in Russia – The Volga, from Tver to Nizhny Novgorod (1861)

(Gautier was in Russia, on a second trip, from the third of August to the twenty-eighth of September 1861, including a visit to Moscow and to Nizhny Novgorod from the twentieth of August to the second of September. He travelled with his eldest son, Charles-Marie Théophile, called Toto, whose mother was Eugénie Fort, and with Olivier Gourjault, a family friend. The journey was ostensibly to gather notes for Gautier's publication of 'Trésors d'art de la Russie ancienne et moderne'.)

After my long trip to Russia, I found some difficulty in returning to Parisian life. My thoughts often returned to the banks of the Neva and fluttered around the domes of *Vasiliya Blazhennogo* (*Saint-Isaac's Cathedral*). I had only viewed the empire of the Tsars during the winter months, and wished to traverse it in the summer in the light of those long days when the sun sets for no more than a few minutes. I now knew St. Petersburg and Moscow, but had ignored Nizhny Novgorod. And how can one live without having visited Nizhny Novgorod?

Where do the names of certain cities come from, names that ineradicably occupy the imagination and hum in one's ears for many a year, with a mysterious harmony like those musical phrases met with by chance which one cannot chase from one's mind? — Such names are a well-known and bizarre obsession that overtakes all those whom sudden decision apparently drives beyond the limits of their homeland, towards the strangest of places. The demon of travel lurks beside you and whispers incantatory syllables amidst your writing and reading, your pleasures and sorrows, until you obey. The wisest thing is to offer the least resistance possible to temptation, so as to be more swiftly delivered from it. Once you have agreed internally, your worries are over. Let the Spirit who suggested the thought to you do its work. Under its magical influence, obstacles are removed, knots are undone, permissions granted; the funds you could not obtain for the most honourable and legitimate of needs race towards you, joyfully, ready to serve you as a viaticum; your passport will visit, of itself, all the legations and embassies, so as to be officially stamped, your clothes will fold themselves away in the depths of your trunk, and it will appear that you have, quite correctly, acquired a dozen brand new shirts, a complete dress suit, and an overcoat with which to brave the most diverse weather conditions.

Nizhny Novgorod had long been exercising its ineluctable influence on me. No melody resonated more delightfully on my hearing than that vague, far-off name; I repeated it like a litany, almost unaware of doing so; I gazed at it on the map with a feeling of inexplicable pleasure; its very configuration pleased me like an arabesque in some curious drawing. The

uniting of the *i* and *z*, the alliteration produced by the final *y*, the point which topped the *i* like a note one needed to accentuate, charmed me in a manner both childish and cabalistic. The *v* and *g* of the second word also had their attraction, but the *od* had something compelling, decisive, and conclusive about it, which it was impossible to ignore — thus, after a few months of struggling with the matter, I felt obliged to depart.

A serious and well-justified motive, namely the necessity to visit and take notes for my large work about the art treasures of Russia, on which I had been working for the last two years, led me, without it seeming implausible in the eyes of rational people, to that original and singular city of Moscow I had seen before, crowned by winter with a silver diadem, its shoulders covered by an ermine cloak of snow. Three-quarters of the journey over, a few more wing-beats towards the east and I would reach my goal — the travel-demon had arranged things in the most natural way possible. So that nothing would restrain me, he had sent abroad, or to the deepest interior of the earth, the people I should have been with. Thus, no obstacle, no pretext, no remorse could prevent me from fulfilling my fantasy. I compiled notes, hastily; but, while revisiting the wonders of the Kremlin, the name Nizhny Novgorod, traced, temptingly, by the finger of fate, gleamed in capricious Slavonic characters, intertwined with flowers, on the sparkling backgrounds of the goldsmiths' work and the iconostases.

The simplest and shortest route was to travel by rail from Moscow to Vladimir and then by post-chaise to Nizhny; but the fear of being unable to obtain a relay of horses, for it was the time of the famous fair which draws three or four hundred thousand folk from every country to the place, led me to prefer the longer errant schoolboy's path so rarely chosen today. The Anglo-American maxim 'Time is money' is not mine, and I am not one of those tourists who hasten to arrive. The journey itself is what interests me most.

Contrary to received wisdom, I started by travelling north-west to Tver to join the Volga almost at its source, entrust myself to its placid course, and let it carry me indolently towards my goal. The reader may be surprised by this lack of eagerness in pursuing so lively a desire. Certain of reaching Nizhny Novgorod, I chose not to hurry the journey. That vague apprehension 'which makes one fear one's desire being fulfilled' (see Victor Hugo's '*À Mes Amis L. B. et S. B.*' poem XXVII in '*Les Feuilles d'Automne*') tormented me, no doubt, without my realising it, and tempered my impatience. Might not the city I had dreamed of vanish as I approach its reality, like those masses of cloud on the horizon that present their domes, towers, and necropolises, and that a wind deforms or sweeps away?

More than faithful to the railway's motto: *linea recta brevissima* (the shortest path is a straight line), the all-too-correct track from St. Petersburg to Moscow by-passes Tver, which we reached with the aid of one of those speedy-looking droshkys that, in Russia, never fail the traveller, and seem to spring from the ground, summoned by one's will.

The Post House Hotel, in which we stayed, had the dimensions of a palace — it could have served as the caravanserai for an entire migrating tribe. Attendants dressed in black with white ties received us and led us, with English gravity, to a huge room within which some Parisian architect might easily have set a complete apartment, by a corridor whose length reminded me of the monastic corridors of the Escorial Palace (in Madrid) — the dining room could have seated a thousand for dinner most hospitably. While eating dinner in a window-corner, I read

on the border of my napkin the hyperbolic and fabulous number ‘three thousand two hundred’! — despite this, without the laughter, loud voices, and scraping of sabres of a few young soldiers seated at a table in the neighbouring office, the hotel would have seemed absolutely deserted. Large dogs, as bored as those of Aix la-Chapelle (*Aachen*) of which Heinrich Heine speaks (*see his satirical poem ‘Deutschland Ein Wintermärchen III,3’*) padded about there, seemingly as melancholy as those in the street, begging for a bone, or a pat on the head. Arriving from some distant kitchen, the exhausted servants set down the half-cold dishes on the tablecloth with a sigh.

From the balcony, we could see Tver’s main square on which the radiating streets converged. In a corner, the sign for an acrobat’s booth was displayed, from which brassy music squealed, a sound that the onlookers, whichever country they came from, found almost irresistible. In the background, a church (*the Cathedral of the Ascension*) was silhouetted against the sky, with its bulbous dome, and pinnacles with chained gold crosses; the sides of the square were lined with the facades of fine houses, and the droshkys of the wealthy filed past, drawn by purebred horses, while public carriages stood in lines, and moujiks, already clad in their overcoats ready for sleep, adorned the lower steps.



Tver, 1838
Picryl

The season of long days had already passed, in which the sun vanishes only to re-appear a moment later, well-nigh combining sunset with dawn, but night did not fall fully before ten in the evening. It is difficult to give westerners an idea of the hues which tint the sky during this

long twilight; our painters' pallets have not foreseen them; Eugène Delacroix, Narcisse Diaz, and Félix Ziem would be surprised, ignorant of what daring mixture of pigments might reflect those colours; if they succeeded, their paintings would be treated as untrue to life. It seems as if one is on another planet, and the light reaching one refracted through the prism of an alien atmosphere. Shades of turquoise and apple-green fade into areas of pink which turn to pale-lilac, mother-of-pearl, and steely blue, in tints of inconceivable finesse; at other times, they are of a milky, opaline, iridescent whiteness as we imagine the immaterial daylight of Elysium which derives neither from the sun, moon, or stars but from the ether, luminous of itself, and yet veiled.

Across this enchanted sky, as if to highlight its ideal and tender hues, passed swarms of ravens and crows returning to their nests with regular wingbeats, and a strange ceremoniousness, accompanied by a croaking to which it is hard not to attribute some mysterious meaning. Those hoarse screams, interrupted by sudden silences intermingled with choral repetitions, seemed like an anthem or a prayer to Night. The pigeons, respected in Russia as symbols of the Holy Spirit, were already in bed and adorned all the ribs and ledges of the church — there were an incredible number of these birds, since the faithful scatter seeds, piously, for them.

We descended to the square, heading for the river, without a guide and lacking information but trusting to that instinct for the layout of major towns which rarely deceives seasoned travellers. Taking a street at right angles to the fine main street of Tver (*Ekaterininskaya, now Sovetskaya*), we soon arrived on the banks of the Volga. The main street attempted to resemble one in St. Petersburg, but less frequented and further from the centre possessed a truly Russian character. Wooden houses, pricked out in various colours, topped by green roofs, and with fences of made of painted planks, bordered it, revealing the crowns of trees adorned with fresh foliage. Through the panes of the low windows, one could glimpse hothouse plants intended to help the owners forget the bleakness of a six-month long winter. Bare-footed women were returning from the river with bundles of laundry on their heads; peasants standing on their telegas urged on their little dishevelled horses, returning with a few logs from the construction sites on the river-bank.

At the foot of the fairly steep embankment, which the droshkys and carts climbed with an impetuosity that would frighten Parisian drivers and the horses, the flotilla of the Samolett company displayed the funnels of its trim steamboats. The river, still shallow as yet, does not allow the passage of vessels with a deep draught in this part of its course. Our places booked, since the boat had to leaving early next morning, we continued our walk along the bank of the river, whose dark waters reflected the splendour of twilight like a black mirror, granting them a magical intensity and vigour. The opposite bank, bathed in shadow, projected like a long headland into an ocean of light where it was difficult to disentangle sky from water.

Two or three small boats, their oars moving like a drowning insect's articulated legs, scored, here and there, the clear but sombre mirror. They seemed to float on an indefinite fluid mass, and sometimes it seemed as if they were about to founder on the inverted reflection of a dome or a house.

Further away, a dark bar crossed the river at water level like a land-bridge, an isthmus which, in approaching, we found to be a long raft serving to communicate between the banks. A section of this raft, raised at will, gave passage to boats. It was a bridge reduced to the simplest expression. Frosts, floods, and thaws make it difficult to employ permanent bridges on Russian rivers. They are almost always carried away. On the edge of this raft, women were washing clothes. Not satisfied with using their hands to clean them, they trampled them in the Arab manner. This little detail made my mind leap to the Moorish bathhouses of Algiers, where I recalled having seen young *yaouleds* (*street urchins*) dancing around on bath towels amidst the soap suds. The quay, the view from which is very fine, serves as a promenade. Crinolines, worthy in their amplitude of the Boulevard des Italiens, are ostentatiously displayed there, while little girls walk three or four steps from their mothers, the width of the latter's skirts denying a closer approach, in short flared dresses, like the male ballet-costumes of the days of Louis XIV. When a moujik, in his sleeveless homespun jacket, with esparto-reed sandals on his feet, dressed almost like a peasant from the Danube standing before the Roman senate, passed these fashionable ladies, one could not help but be struck by the sharp contrast. Never did the highest civilisation and primitive barbarism conflict in a more clear-cut way.

It was time to return to the hotel and do as the crows do. The light was slowly fading. A transparent darkness enveloped the objects around us, removing the details of their forms without quite erasing them, as in Gustave Doré's wonderful illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, vignettes in which the artist renders the poetry of twilight so well.

Before retiring to bed, I went and leant on the balcony rail for a moment to light a cigar — in Russia, it is forbidden to smoke in the street — and gaze for a moment at the magnificent heavens whose intense scintillations reminded me of the skies of the Orient.

Never had the blue of night owned to such a host of stars: in its immeasurable depth, the abyss was riddled with them; it was like a dusting of suns. The Milky Way displayed its silver meanders, astounding in their clarity. The eye sought to distinguish, amidst this flow of cosmic matter, stellar birth-pangs and the emergence of new worlds; one could readily conceive the nebulae as struggling to resolve themselves and condense into starry masses.

Dazzled by this sublime spectacle, which I was perhaps alone in contemplating at that moment, since human beings only exercise in moderation the privilege which, according to Ovid, was given to them 'to look towards the skies, and, upright, raise their face to the stars,' (see Ovid's *Metamorphoses Book I: 85-86*), I let hours of darkness pass, forgetting that we had to depart at dawn. At last, I returned to my room.

Despite the luxury as regards linen which the formidable number marked on my serviette had seemed to portend, there was only one sheet, as big as a placemat, on my bed, and the agitation caused by the slightest dream had me sliding or flying about — I am not among those who sigh forth elegies on the shortcomings of hotels, so I merely wrapped myself, philosophically, in my overcoat, on one of those large leather sofas that are found everywhere in Russia, and which, by the degree of comfort they offer, explain and compensate for the inadequacy of the beds. This also saved me from having to dress with those somnambulistic gestures and half-awake stumbles which may be counted amongst the greatest inconveniences of travel.

As soon as we appeared at the hotel door, a droshky raced towards us at full speed, followed by several others trying to overtake it — the Russian coachmen barely miss an opportunity to perform this little display. Arriving almost at the same moment, they disputed the result, with amusing volubility yet without violence or brutality. The customer having made his choice, the rest galloped off again, dispersing in all directions.

A few minutes were enough to take us and our trunk to the banks of the Volga. A wooden ramp led to the landing-stage, beside which a little steamboat, the *Nixie* (*Water-Sprite*), fired up and emitting puffs of white smoke, seemed impatient to shake off its moorings. Latecomers, followed by their luggage and dragging their night-bags, hastily crossed the gangway which was about to be withdrawn. The bell rang for the last time, and the *Nixie*, her paddles rotating, gracefully embraced the current.

At Tver, the Volga is far from possessing as yet the vast dimensions which near its mouth on the Caspian Sea make it resemble the gigantic rivers of America. Certain of its future greatness, it begins its course modestly, without a swell or a wild hurling of foam, and flows on between two fairly low-lying banks — the colour of its waters surprises when you look closely, ignoring the bright mirrored reflections of sky and various objects; it is brown, like that of dark tea.

No doubt the Volga owes its hue to the nature of the sand it holds in suspension and stirs incessantly, changing its channel as constantly as does the Loire, which renders navigation, if not perilous, difficult at least, above all in that part of its course where the water level is low. The Rhine is green, the Rhône is blue, the Volga is bistre (*a dark greyish brown, with a yellowish cast*) — the former two seem the colour of the seas to which they flow — does that analogy hold true for the Volga? I pass, since I have not yet been granted sight of the Caspian Sea, that enormous pool of water left amidst the land by the retreat of the primitive ocean.

While the *Nixie* advances peacefully, its wake foaming like the head on a glass of beer, let me take a look at our travelling companions. Let me cross, without fear of impropriety, the boundary, which for that matter is little observed, which separates first class from second and third — fashionable folk are the same in every country, and while in their personal habits they offer nuances that can be grasped by the observer, they fail to present those clear-cut characteristics the tourist can swiftly sketch, with a stroke of a pencil, on a page of their notebook.

In Russia, until now, there has been no middle class. No doubt one will soon be formed, thanks to her new institutions; but these are still too recent for their effect to be visible: appearances remain much the same — the gentleman and the *chinovnik* (*minor government official*) are clearly distinguished from the common man by a tailcoat or uniform. The merchant retains his Asian kaftan, and large beard; the moujik his overflowing pink shirt, his broad trousers ending in boots, or, for fear the temperature might drop, his greasy tulup; for Russians, of whatever class, generally feel the cold, though in the West we imagine them braving the harshest weather without a qualm.

This part of the boat's bridge was cluttered with trunks and packages, and one could scarcely move without stepping over a sleeping form. Russians, like Orientals, lie down

wherever they are. A bench, a piece of board, a step on some staircase, a chest, a coil of rope, anything will do. They will even lean against a wall. Sleep overcomes them in the most inconvenient places.

The third-class accommodation, aboard the *Nixie*, recalled the deck of a steamship in some Levantine port when taking on Turkish passengers. Everyone stood in their own corner amidst their luggage and provisions – families were grouped together, because there were women and children present. It resembled a floating encampment.

Some men wore a long blue or green robe, fastened at the side with three buttons, clinched at the waist with a narrow belt: they were the most elegant or the wealthiest; others wore a red shirt, a brown felt suit, or a sheepskin tunic even though it was seventeen degrees or so in the shade — as for the women, their costume consisted of a printed cotton dress, a kind of fitted jacket or shirt descending to mid-thigh, and a coloured headscarf covering the head and tied under the chin. The youngest wore stockings and shoes, but the older women, proudly disdaining these concessions to Western fashion, immersed their feet in big boots coated with tallow.

To grant this sketch the right tone, it would have to be soiled, dirtied, glazed with bitumen, marked and scratched, because the costumes it seeks to depict were old, unclean, dilapidated, falling to rags. Their owners guard them night and day, and only quit them when they finally abandon them — their cost, which is relatively high, explains the level of constancy — however, these moujiks, so neglectful in their mode of dress, bathe once a week, and the contents are cleaner than the envelope. Moreover, it would be unwise to trust to appearances — often one of the dirtiest and most ragged was pointed out to me and, in my ears, I heard whispered: ‘You’d give him a kopeck if he held out his hand? Well, he’s worth more than a hundred thousand silver rubles,’ — though this was said to me with the most serious air in the world, and with the respectful admiration that the utterance of a large sum always inspires, I found it hard to believe in the wealth of these rag-tag Rothschilds, these Pereires in worn boots (*the Pereire brothers, Émile and Isaac, were competitors of the Rothschilds during the Second French Empire*).

There was nothing very characteristic about the facial types; but sometimes pale blond hair, a straw-coloured beard and steely-grey eyes clearly indicated a northerner. A summer tan had masked the flesh and lent it almost the same tone as the hair and beard. The women were not very pretty, but their gentle, resigned lack of beauty had nothing disagreeable about it. Their vague smiles gave a glimpse of beautiful teeth, and their eyes, although slightly slanted, displayed no lack of expression. The attitudes they took in arranging themselves on the benches still evidenced beneath their heavy clothing some vestige of feminine grace.

Meanwhile, the *Nixie* progressed at a cautious pace. The wheel, sited so that the pilot might look out over the far reaches of the river and foresee any obstacle, was bolted to the bridge between the arcs of the paddle-wheel drums, and communicated with the rudder at the stern by a system of chains which transmitted its movements. At the bow stood men armed with measuring poles who took soundings constantly, and announced the depth of water with a rhythmic cry. Buoys, painted red and white, and stakes and branches planted in the bed of the river, indicated the channel to be followed, and it really required extreme familiarity with the

river's course to guide one's vessel through its capricious meanders. In some places, the sandy shoals almost showed on the surface, and the *Nixie* more than once scraped its keel on the gravel; but a single stronger beat of the paddle-wheels refloated her, and she slid back into the current, without knowing the humiliation of resorting to those rescuers who, standing on a floating board and leaning on long grappling-poles, awaited boats at risk in the shallows — the greatest danger is an encounter with one of the large boulders lodged, here and there, in the Volga's mud, which are extracted and placed on the bank, whenever an accident betrays their presence. Sometimes the vessel splits open, and its load is submerged.

The banks, the gullied, liassic terrain of which attests to the river's flooding from snow-melt in the thaw, are not very picturesque, at least in the upper part. They present a series of undulations which follow one another without sudden changes in elevation, or incidental character. Sometimes a fir-wood's dark greenery breaks their long yellow lines, or else a village of log-houses interrupts their horizontal run with its angled roofs whose gables are carved into horns. A church with whitewashed walls and a green dome is attached to every village.

Every time the *Nixie* passed a building dedicated to worship, even if our backs were turned, we were warned by inclinations of the head, a swaying of the body, and signs of the cross performed by the moujiks, the women, and the crew — one of the moujiks even served as an early indicator of such places. Gifted with keen eyesight, he would discover, on the distant horizon, the well-nigh imperceptible tip of a bell-tower and cross himself with precision and the speed of an automaton. I would extend my telescope, ready to examine the church or monastery when it appeared in the lens. In the West even piety is sober in its demonstrations and religious feeling is concealed in the soul, while these external practices surprise the foreigner. However, what could be more natural than to salute the house of God!

The vessels navigating the Volga created a lively scene, and the interesting spectacle found me, for many an hour, leaning on the *Nixie*'s rail. Boats descended the river, their huge unfurled sails suspended from high masts to collect the slightest breath of air — others were returning, hauled by horses — these have neither the size nor the strength of our robust draught horses, but their numbers make up for their lack of power. The teams generally consisted of nine animals, and here and there relays, tethered on the sandy shore, were attached to encampments where Nikolai Sverchkov, the Russian Horace Vernet, might find happy motifs for his paintings — some barges of lower tonnage were advanced by hand-poling: hard work for their crews, marching ceaselessly the length of the waterway, pushing on a solid pole with all their strength, and exhausting all their wind-power — and these poor wretches have brief lives; it is rare, I was told, for their age to exceed forty (*see Ilya Repin's painting 'Barge-Haulers', 1870-73*).

Some of these barges are immense, though drawing little water. An apple-green stripe sometimes brightens the beautiful silver-grey of the wood used in their construction. At the bow, painted eyes are often displayed, beneath disproportionately large open eyelids, or a crudely-smear'd Russian eagle arches its double neck and spreads its black wings. Crenelations carved with an axe, with a precision unsurpassable by a chisel, ornament the stern-castle. Most of these boats were loaded with wheat worth some enormous amount.

Other steamboats owned by the Samolett company or a rival of theirs, crossed paths with ours, and the company flag was hoisted on both decks with scrupulous nautical politeness. I

also noted canoes, made from a single tree-trunk like those of the American Indians, from which, after approaching us and despite the rocking of the narrow vessels, letters, from the smaller towns at which the *Nixie* was not scheduled stop, were thrown, and which in turn caught the dispatches that were addressed to them.

Aboard the *Nixie*, there was a perpetual arrival and departure of passengers. At each landing stage, we left some behind, or took some on deck. The landing-stations were sometimes quite far apart. Wood was loaded there to fuel the boiler, since coal was not burnt, being either too rare or too expensive. The large piles of logs lined up on the bank doubtless inform the old backward-looking peasants that if the railway and steamboat companies carry on this way, they must die of cold in Holy Russia.

These landing-stages, all on the same model, consisted of a square pontoon supporting a two-roomed building, one room serving as an office, the other as a store or waiting-room, and the pair separated by a wide corridor intended for travellers and luggage. Since the height of the river varies, a bridge of planks, at a steeper or shallower angle, connects the landing stage to the shore. At the sides of this bridge, the small traders whom the passage of the steamboat attracts display their frail booths, grouped together in a picturesque way. Little girls offer you half a dozen sour green apples in a basket, or small cakes which are crudely stamped with amusing shapes, as are our slabs of butter, including chimerical lions which, if cast in bronze and covered by an archaic patina, might pass for specimens of primitive Ninevite art. Women, each equipped with a bucket and a glass, sell *kvass*, a type of fermented drink made from rye and aromatic herbs, with a very pleasant taste when one is accustomed to it. As the price is minimal, fashionable people disdain it, and only the common folk consume it. These women present a singularity of dress that is worth noting. French Empire fashions once placed the waist as high as the throat, but our eyes, accustomed to low waists, are surprised by this oddity when viewing the portraits of the time, even when rescued by the spiritedness of François Gérard, or the gracefulness of Pierre-Paul Prud'hon. The Russian peasant women tighten their skirts to above the breast, so that they appear as if buried in a sack up to the armpits. It is easy to imagine the less than graceful effects of that constant pressure, which ends by weighing-down the firmest of contours. The rest of their costume consists of a chemise with puffed-out sleeves, and a square handkerchief tied under the chin — there were also booths selling wheat-bread and rye-bread, the former very white the latter very brown; but the most active trade was that in *ogourets*, a variety of cucumber eaten fresh in summer and pickled in winter, without which it seems the Russians could not live. They are served at every meal, and form the obligatory accompaniment to all dishes; one nibbles a slice as one would a slice of orange, elsewhere. To me this treat seemed tasteless. It's true that the Russians, for some health reason which escapes me, avoid seasoning their cuisine; bland food pleases them.

Is there any real point in my noting the Samolet company's itinerary, and transcribing, difficult as they are to replicate in our language, the names of the little towns at which we touched? Their appearance was almost always the same: a gangway of logs, beams and planks descending to the shore; atop the embankment, a *gostiny-dvor* (*indoor market*), a government building, and the houses of the wealthier locals, their window-frames in olive or red trimmed with white; then a church, with four pinnacles bristling around its dome sometimes painted in

green, sometimes revealing leaves of hammered copper or pewter, the walls of its cloister's enclosure displaying colourful frescoes in the Byzantine style of Mount Athos; and further away the *izbas* made of logs notched at the corners. Add to this, to liven the picture, a few droshkys waiting for travellers, and groups of idlers whose interest in the arrival and departure of a steamboat never tires.

Kimry (*previously Kimra*), however, had a surprising air of celebration; the whole population, or well-nigh all, were ranged in tiers from the edge of the river to the top of the embankment. A rumour had spread that the Nixie was carrying the hereditary Grand Duke on his way to Nizhni-Novgorod; it was erroneous. The Grand Duke did pass by later, on another boat, but I enjoyed, unscrupulously, the excellent opportunity the announcement of his presence had granted of observing this gathering of representative types. Some elegant clothing in the French fashion, slightly out of date due to the distance between Paris and Kimry, stood out from the national backcloth of sack-shaped skirts and printed cottons of traditional design. Three young girls wearing little Andalusian hats, Zouave jackets, and bloated crinolines, were really charming, despite a minor affectation of western casualness. They laughed together, seemingly disdaining the luxury of boots which the other residents, men and women, wore. Kimry is famous for its boots as Ronda, in Spain, is for its leggings.

It was at Kimry, perhaps, that *Bastien* bought that fine pair of boots that the popular song attributes to him (*'Ah! Il a des bottes, il a des bottes Bastien', is a traditional folk song from Normandy. The refrain, on which Mozart based the Menuetto of his Flute Quartet in A Major, K.298, became immensely and irritatingly popular around 1859*).

The shallowness of the river, and the need to observe the buoys, prevent one risking nocturnal navigation. So, the Nixie, emitting steam and dropping anchor, moored as soon as the last embers of sunset, cooled by a somewhat chilly wind, died on the horizon. Evening tea was served to all passengers, and the samovars, heated to excess, poured constantly boiling water over the concentrated infusion. It was an interesting spectacle to see the lowest class of people, whose exteriors resembled that of our beggars, savour that delicate and fragrant drink which is still a novelty with us, and which white hands pour at social gatherings. The way in which they drink tea is to let it cool for a moment in the saucer, and then swallow it, while holding a small piece of sugar between the teeth which sufficiently sweetens the beverage for Russian taste, and in this manner approaches that of the Chinese.

When I awoke, on the cabin's narrow couch, the Nixie was under way again. The day was dawning, and we were skirting an embankment the crest of which was denticulated by the *izbas* of a village, reflected in the calm water of the river as in a mirror — it looked like that landscape by Charles-François Daubigny (*'The Banks of the Oise', 1859*) shown at the last but one Salon, but translated into Russian.

We stopped at Pokrovskoe, a sixteenth century monastery, crenelated like a fortress. Most of the passengers went ashore to pray in the church there, and have their journey blessed. Through the semi-daylight of a mysterious chapel all painted colourfully and dripping with gold, a priest or monk of oriental appearance and an acolyte chanted one of those beautiful melodies of the Greek rite whose effect is irresistible, even when one does not share the belief

that inspired them. He had a magnificent bass voice — powerful, deep, and sweet — which he employed wonderfully.

Uglich, which we passed towards the end of the day, is quite a considerable town. It has no less than thirteen thousand inhabitants, and the bell towers, domes and pinnacles of its thirty-six churches render its profile superb. The river, widened at this point, had the look of the Bosphorus, and it would not have taken a massive effort of imagination to transform Uglich and its bulbous spiers and minarets into a Turkish city — a small and ancient Russian style pavilion on the bank, was pointed out to me, where Dimitry (*the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible, and heir apparent to his brother Feodor*) aged ten years old, is said to have been slain by Boris Godunov.

On the sandy beaches at the confluence of the Mologa and the Volga, countless swarms of crows and rooks indulged in those bizarre frolics that precede their bedtime. Seagulls, which accompany great bodies of water, began appearing. Higher up, we had seen white-tailed eagles (*sea eagles*) fishing for their supper, and catching sterlets that Western gourmets would pay their weight in gold for.

Bluish moonlight, silvery and dreamlike, had replaced the fieriest of strange sunset hues by the time we arrived in Rybinsk — a flotilla of large vessels almost blocked the river. Amidst the black cross-hatching of their masts and rigging, a few lights glittered, and, the church bell-tower rose like a silvery rocket in the nocturnal azure.

Rybinsk has an air of importance. It is a city of commerce and pleasure. The Volga, widened and deepened by the tribute the waters of the Mologa bring, allows large vessels to ascend as far as its port and to descend the river again. Thus, the sedentary population is augmented in certain seasons by a considerable number of people travelling simply for their own amusement, who attain a fine and generous mood for their efforts. One of Russia's favourite forms of entertainment is to listen to Bohemian choirs singing Gypsy airs. You cannot imagine the passion with which the audience receives them, a passion only matched by the energy of their virtuosos. The enthusiasm shown by our dilettantes for Italian Opera gives only a feeble idea of their reception, and in this there is nothing which is merely conventional, nothing simulated, nothing false; fashion and fine manners are forgotten; it is the intimate fibres of primitive humanity that respond to these alien sounds.

This liking does not surprise me, I share it, and as it was said aboard that Rybinsk was hosting a celebrated troupe of Bohemians, I accepted the proposal of paying them a visit, suggested by a kind, spirited, and cordial nobleman who was a passenger on the *Nixie*, and with whom I would gladly have sailed to the ends of the earth.

The Count was first to go ashore, so as to make the arrangements, indicating to us the name of the hotel where the concert was to take place — I gained the quay at length, delighted by the spectacle of a wondrous night sky. Beneath the heavens whose stars paled before the brightness of the moon, the river extended, as vast as a lake or an arm of the sea and marked by a sombre line of boats. Luminous streaks of light and the dark reflections of masts spread over the water in ribbons of silver and velvety black, while tremors of the flowing current denoted the shore.

The houses on the banks, bathed in shadow, displayed only lines of bluish light on the ridges of their green roofs; but a few reddish spangles of light, pricked out here and there, indicated some occupant as yet not asleep. Set on a wide square, the main church (*the Transfiguration Cathedral*) shone like a block of silver, with intense and fabulous brightness; one would have thought it illuminated by Bengal lights (*Bengal lights were bright blue flares packed with nitre, sulphur, and the black sulphide of antimony*). Its dome, surrounded by a diadem of columns, sparkled like a tiara studded with diamonds; phosphorescent metallic reflections played over the tinsplate or copper of the pinnacles, and the bell-tower, whose style of architecture was reminiscent of the spire of Dresden Castle, seemed to have skewered two or three stars on its golden needle — it produced a magical, a supernatural effect, as in some enchanted apotheosis, whereby the azure perspective reveals, in opening, the palace of the Sylph or the happy temple of Hymen.

Illuminated in this manner, Rybinsk Cathedral seemed to have been carved from some fragment of the moon fallen to earth. It acquired, beneath her rays, a silvery and snowy light.

I had barely reached the quay formed of large stones that the Volga uproots and rolls along in its flood, when, above the vague music rising from the tea-houses, the lugubrious cry: ‘*Karaul!*’ (*‘Help!’*) tore at my ears, screamed, and then groaned forth, in the voice of one with a knife at their throat. I leapt forward: two or three shadows fled. A door opened and closed, the house-lights were extinguished, all returned to darkness. To that despairing wail succeeded the silence of the dead.

Twice or thrice, I passed before the door, but the house had become dark, mute and deaf, like *Saltabadil*’s tavern in act five of *Le Roi S’Amuse* (*see the play by Victor Hugo, 1856*). How to deal with this incident, alone, a stranger, unarmed, and ignorant of the language, in a country where no one will help in the event of an accident or murder for fear of the police and the witness statement involved? All was quiet however; whoever the human being was who had called so pitifully for help, they no longer needed it.

Our entry into Rybinsk was as you see, not lacking in dramatic colour, and I am only sorry I am unable to relate the tale of this assassination in detail, for the cry I heard was surely a cry of agony; but I know no more. The night had hidden all in shadow.

Still very moved, I entered a *traktir* (*tavern*) where portraits of Emperor Alexander II and of Empress Alexandrovna, in magnificent frames and painted like inn-signs, formed a counterpart to the holy images plastered with silver and gold leaf which a small hanging lamp illuminated with its flickering glow. Tea was served and, while I savoured the national beverage strengthened with a little cognac, a Cremona organ in the next room played an aria by Verdi.

Shortly, the Samolett company’s engineer, and the chief mechanic of the *Nixie* arrived and joined me, and we set off together to search Rybinsk for the inn where the Bohemians gathered, and where the Count had arranged to meet us.

This building, which belonged to a wealthy wheat-merchant whom I had met on the boat, was located at the far end of town. Further from the shore, the houses sprawled more, and were scattered over a larger space. Long garden fences separated them; the streets ended in vacant

lots, while boardwalks helped in navigating the quagmires. A few lean-looking dogs sat on their hind legs and barked at the moon and, once we had passed, started to follow us, either from mistrust, a feeling of sociability, or in hopes of being fed. Due to the moon's influence, slender white vapours rose from the ground and interposed their gaseous mists between my eyes and the surrounding objects, clothing them in a poetic light, of which dawn would surely rob them. At last, amidst the azure mist in which the shapes of the furthest houses were outlined in lilac-grey, I saw the red, illuminated embrasures of windows; we had arrived — the low strumming of a guitar, which had been buzzing in my ears for some time like the stubborn stridulating of a cricket, and whose notes sounded increasingly lively as they reached me, soon led us to the door.

A moujik conducted us through long corridors to the room where the Gypsy girls were. The audience was comprised of the Count, the wheat-merchant, and a young officer. On a table, amidst drinking glasses and bottles of Champagne, stood two long candle-like tapers in makeshift candlesticks. Yellow haloes surrounded their wicks, barely dissipating the dense smoke from cigars and cigarettes. We were handed full glasses on condition of emptying them immediately so they could be refilled. The Champagne was a Roederer of superior quality, such as one finds only in Russia. The libation having been offered, we sat down to wait in silence.

The Gypsy girls stood about, or leant against the walls, in indolent Oriental poses, without the slightest concern for the eyes gazing upon them — nothing could be more inert than their attitudes, or gloomier than their faces. They seemed weary or half-asleep. Savage natures, when passion does not agitate them, possess an indescribable animal calm — free of thoughts, those possessed of them dream like woodland creatures; no civilised person can attain that mysterious absence of expression, more annoying than all the grimaces of coquetry. Oh, to give birth to a blush of longing, on such dead faces: a fantasy which grips the coldest, the least of poets, and soon becomes a passion!

‘Were they at least beautiful, then, these Bohemian girls? Not in the usual sense of the word. Our Parisian ladies would certainly have thought them ugly, with the exception of one alone who was closer to the European type than her companions. Olive complexions, masses of black hair, seemingly slight bodies, and small brown hands, formed the main features of their appearance. There was nothing distinctive about their costumes. No amber or bead necklaces, no skirts studded with spangles and bordered with frills, no mantles striped in bizarre colours; merely a variation on the Paris fashions, including a few barbarisms justified by that city's remoteness; dresses with ruffles, taffeta mantles, crinoline, hairnets: they looked like badly-dressed housemaids.

Thus far, you may think, the experience offered nothing very extraordinary. But, like us, be patient, and despair not of Bohemia, though it has renounced, at least in the towns, its rags and picturesque trappings; judge not the thoroughbred in its stable, covered by a blanket; it is on the turf, the course, that action reveals its beauty.

One of the Gypsy girls, as if shaking off her weariness and torpor in response to the stubborn summons of the guitar strummed by a tall, droll fellow with the air of a bandit, chose at last to advance to the centre of the circle — she raised her long eyelids fringed by black

eyelashes, and the room seemed full of light. From her half-open mouth, in a vague smile, a flash of white teeth sparkled; an indistinct murmur like those voices we hear in dream escaped her lips. Posed thus, the Bohemian girl seemed like a sleepwalker unaware of her actions. She saw neither the room nor her companions. She seemed inwardly transfigured. Her features, ennobled, no longer bore any mark of the commonplace. Her stature had increased; her garments flowed like the draperies of antiquity.

Gradually, the sound intensified, a singing melody that was slow at first, then more rapid, and strangely intoxicating. The tune was like a captive bird whose cage has been opened. Still doubtful of freedom, the bird takes a few indecisive steps in front of her prison, then hops away, and when she is sure that no trap threatens, fluffs herself out, raises herself, emits a joyous cry and, wings beating, soars towards the forest where her former companions are now singing.

Such was the vision which filled my thoughts, listening to that tune, of which no other music could give the slightest idea. Another girl joined the first, and soon a whole flight of voices began to follow the winged theme, in rising scales like ascending rockets, trilling loudly, embroidering notes like an organ, sustaining modulations, while offering sudden turns, and unexpected repeats — the music chirped, whistled, murmured, chattered with a volubility full of ardour, in a friendly and joyful tumult, as if a savage tribe were celebrating their escape from the city. Then the choir fell silent, and a single voice continued to sing the joys of freedom and solitude, the refrain accentuating the last phrase with frenzied energy.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to render a musical effect in words, but one can at least describe the dreams it gives birth to. Gypsy songs have a singularly evocative power. They awaken primitive instincts obliterated by civilised life, memories of a previous existence that one thought eclipsed, feelings of independence and secret wanderings enclosed deep in the heart; they inspire in one a strange nostalgia for a country one can never have known and yet which seems one's true homeland. Some melodies ring in your ear like a distant summons, morbidly irresistible, such that you want to throw away your weapon, abandon your post, and swim to the far bank where one is subject to no discipline, needs obey no commands, or law, or moral code, but simply follows one's caprice. A thousand brilliant, confused scenes pass before your eyes: you see an encampment in a clearing, a bivouac fire over which pots suspended from a trio of stakes boil, colourful clothes dry on ropes, and further away, squatting on the ground, an old woman reads the future from her tarot cards, while a young Romani girl, with tawny complexion, and blue-black hair, dances, accompanying herself on the tambourine. This first picture fades, and in the troubled light of some past century, a distant and indistinct caravan descends from the uplands of Asia, some group undoubtedly expelled from their native country due to a spirit of revolt impatient of all restraint. White draperies fiercely streaked with red and orange float in the wind, copper rings and bracelets gleam against brown skin, and the rods of their *sistra* jingle with metallic tremors.

These are not, believe me, merely the daydreams of poets — Bohemian music acts violently on the most prosaic of human beings, and its summons is heard even by philistines drowned in their habitual somnolence.

The song is not, as one might think, musically crude. It is the product, on the contrary, of a highly complex art, though one different from our own, and those who execute it are true

virtuosos, though they know not the names of the notes, or how to transcribe on paper a single one of the tunes they sing so well — the frequent use of quarter-tones troubles the ear at first; but one soon grows accustomed to it, and finds an odd charm therein. Here is a whole new range of sounds, strange timbres, unfamiliar variations on the customary musical scales, employed in expressing feelings wholly outside the bounds of civilisation.

The Romani own to neither homeland nor a single religion, and are bound neither by the structure, nor morality, nor laws of our society. They accept no human yoke, and rub shoulders with civilisation without ever accepting it — they who brave or evade other laws, no longer submit to the pedantic restrictions of harmony or counterpoint: the free caprice of a free nature, the individual abandoning himself or herself to natural feeling without remorse for past actions, or anxiety for the future, the intoxication of liberty, the love of change and a like wild desire for independence, these are the general impressions that emerge from Romani songs — their melodies resemble birdsong, the rustling of leaves, the sighs of an Aeolian harp; their rhythms the far-off galloping of horses in the steppe. They beat out the measure, but in flight.

The prima donna of the troupe was undoubtedly Sascha (*a diminutive of Alexandra*), she who had initially broken the silence and inflamed her companions' slumbering ardour. Now the wild spirit of the music had been unleashed, it was no longer for us that the Bohemians sang, but, in truth, for themselves.

An imperceptible pink blush coloured Sascha's cheeks. Her eyes gleamed with intermittent flashes. Like the dancer La Petra Cámara (*a ballet and flamenco dancer, the prima ballerina of the Madrid Theatre, who performed 'La Gitana', 'The Gypsy', composed expressly for her; dancing in Paris, London, Brussels and other European cities*), she lowered and raised her eyelids as one, like a fan being opened and closed, producing, alternately, light and shade — the effect of their movement, natural or intended, was irresistibly seductive.

Sascha approached the table — she was offered a glass of Champagne — she refused; the Romani girls are a model of sobriety — but asked for tea for herself and her friends. The guitarist, apparently unafraid of spoiling his voice, swallowed glasses of brandy one after another to rouse his spirits, and, indeed, stamping his foot on the flooring, and slapping the palm of his hand against the belly of the guitar, he sang and danced, worked away like the Devil himself, and grimaced by way of grotesque interlude, with dazzling liveliness — he was, the *rom* (*Romani for 'husband'*) of the blonde Bohemian girl. Never did a couple conform less to the maxim: 'Spouses should agree'.

I have said Bohemian girls are a model of sobriety; if I add that they are also models of chastity, few will believe me; and yet it is the case. Their virtue is considered unassailable in Russia — no art of seduction can overcome it, and noblemen, young and old, spend fabulous sums on Gypsy girls without advancing one iota. Her virtue, however, had nothing fierce about it. She let her hand be taken and patted, and sometimes returned the kiss stealthily bestowed upon it. If there was no chair free, she sat, familiarly, on your knee, and when the singing began, you were permitted to place her cigarette between your lips so she might reclaim it later. Sure of herself, she attached not the slightest importance to the endowment of these small 'privileges', as our ancestors had it, which, from other women, would seem like favours or promises.

For more than two hours, song followed song, in dizzying and voluble succession. What capriciousness, verve, brilliance, what difficulties overcome while playing! Sascha performed flourishes a thousand times more difficult than Eduard Rhode's variations, while joining in the conversation, and demanding a silk dress in *moire antique*, the only two words of French she knew, from one of our young travelling companions. Finally, the rhythm became so captivating, so imperious, that the dance merged with the song, as in an ancient choir. All were involved, from the old woman, as weathered as a mummy, shaking her skeleton about, to the little girl of eight, ardent, febrile, and mature in an unhealthily precocious way, striving to flex her limbs so as not to lag behind the adults. The beanpole of a guitarist vanished in a whirling tornado from which arpeggios, and high-pitched screeches emerged.

For a moment, I admit, I feared lest the French can-can, spreading round the world, had entered Rybinsk, and the evening might end with a performance out of the Variétés or the Palais-Royal; nothing of the sort. The choreography embraced by the Bohemian girls resembles that of the Bayadères (*the temple-dancers of India*). Sascha, her arms waving, her torso undulating, her feet stamping the floor, recalled Amany (*a member of a group of Bayadères who toured Europe in 1838*), not 'Rigolboche' (*Amelia Marguerite Badel, credited with inventing the can-can*). It was as if she and her companions were performing Amany's dance *Malapou* (*the Dance of Delight*) on the banks of the Ganges, in front of the altar of Shiva, the blue-skinned deity. Never had the Asiatic origin of the Romani seemed to me more visible or more indisputable.

It was time to return to the boat; but the excitement of the virtuosos and their assistants was such that the concert continued in the street; the Bohemians, taking our arms when offered them, walked in such a way as to separate into groups spaced apart, and sang a choral piece with echoes and responses, and *decrescendos* notable for their dazzling repeats, to magical and supernatural effect; the horn of *Oberon*, even when it is Carl Maria von Weber (*cf. his opera 'Oberon, or the Elf-King's Oath', of 1825/6*) who blows the notes on that ivory trumpet, was never more suave, silvery, velvety or dreamlike.

After traversing the boat's gangway, we turned to view the shore; on the edge of the quay, in a shaft of moonlight, the Bohemians, grouped together, saluted us with a wave of the hand; a sparkling shower of notes, a last jet of silver rain from those musical fireworks, rose to an inaccessible height, spread its glitter against the dark and silent backcloth, and then faded away.

The *Nixie*, adequate for navigating the upper reaches of the Volga, was not of sufficient tonnage to descend the widened river with an addition of passengers and goods to its cargo — we therefore transferred to the *Provornii* ('*Swift*', or '*Speedy*'), a steamboat of the same Samolett company, with an engine capable of a hundred and fifty horse-power when under steam. Buckets each marked with a letter, composing her name in Russian characters, swung beside each other beneath the gangway, from which they were suspended — an exterior kiosk forming a cabin rose from the bridge, above the staircase leading to the passengers' salon, and provided a shelter for observing the river, in fine or poor weather — it was there I spent the greater part of each day.

Before the *Provornii* departed, I took a look at Rybinsk to view its appearance in broad daylight, though not without some apprehension, since the sun does not flatter as does the

moon; he cruelly reveals what the nocturnal orb veils behind her azure and silver gauze. Well! Rybinsk lost little to the light; its houses, pink, green, and yellow, made of bricks and timber, cheerfully crowned its quay built of large randomly-shaped stones, akin to a ruined Cyclopean wall, though the church, which in the moonlight had looked snowy-white, was in fact painted apple-green, and while polychromy pleases me as regards architecture, yet the play of colour surprised. The cathedral, moreover, was full of character, its dome flanked by pinnacles, and its four porticos oriented like those of Saint Isaac's. The bell-tower offered those odd bulges and hollows one finds in the bell-towers of Belgium and Germany, but its final needle rises to a great height, and if it failed to satisfy my taste, it entertained the eye, and its profile against the horizon aroused interest.

The boats at anchor in front of Rybinsk were mostly large, and of a particular form that I will have more than one opportunity to describe, since the river between that city and Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Saratov, Astrakhan and the other towns of the lower Volga, is a hive of activity at that time of year. Some were setting out to travel downriver, others were arriving or moored, and the spectacle was most interesting. The *Provornii* slipped skilfully through this flotilla, and took the current. Slightly higher banks, especially on the left, embraced the flow. The landscape had not changed appreciably in character. There were endless fir trees, in lines like colonnades, greyish shafts against a background of dark greenery; villages of log *izbas* scattered about their green-domed churches; sometimes a stately mansion turning its intriguing façade towards the river, or at the least presenting, at a corner of the park, a belvedere or a brightly painted summer-house; ramps of timber ascending the bank and leading to some dwelling; land ravished by the ebb and flow of floodwater; sandy beaches, trampled by flocks of geese, where herds of cows and oxen came to drink: a thousand variations on the same motifs which the pencil would better convey than the pen.

Soon, the Romanov monastery came in sight (*the Ipatiev monastery, at Kostroma, where in 1613 the Moscow boyars invited Mikhail Romanov to become the new ruler*). Crenelated and whitewashed walls granted its enclosure the air of a fortress, and had more than once defended it from assault, for in troubled times the treasures heaped in the monasteries aroused the greed of the plundering hordes. Above the walls rose tall cedars, extending robust horizontal branches covered with dark greenery. The cedars are cultivated with a care peculiar to the Romanovs, since it was under a cedar that the miraculous image, venerated there (*the Theodore icon of the mother of God, in the Assumption Cathedral*) was found.

At Yuryevets, the firewood for the boiler was delivered by women. Each load arrived on a stretcher supported by two poles; its pile of logs was spilled into the steamboat's hold by the two who bore it. The peasant women were alert, robust, and some were pretty. Their animated activity had coloured their complexions with a healthy blush, and the slight shortness of breath that parted their lips revealed teeth as white as peeled almonds. Sadly, the faces of some were pitted and scarred by smallpox, since vaccination is not universal in Russia, where doubtless popular prejudice resists its advent. Their costume was very simple. A skirt of Indian cotton, printed with old-fashioned designs like those still sometimes met with adorning bed curtains or quilt in old provincial inns; a heavy linen shirt; a scarf tied under the chin — nothing more. The absence of stockings and shoes allowed one to appreciate their fine and delicate extremities

— some of those bare feet were worthy of Cinderella's glass slipper. I saw with pleasure that the dreadful fashion of a tight garment held by a clasp above the breast was adopted only by the older and less pretty ones. On the younger, the waistline of their skirts was above the hip as anatomy, hygiene and, common sense, dictate.

It was somewhat contrary to my French idea of gallantry to see women carrying such heavy loads and performing the task of beasts of burden; but at least this work, which they accomplish with an alacrity which seems not to weary, pays them a few kopeks and increases their well-being, or that of their family.

Travelling downriver, we encountered a large number of boats similar to those we had seen moored in front of Rybinsk. These (*belyanas*) are of shallow draught, but their size is hardly inferior to that of a three-masted merchant ship. Their construction presents special characteristics not encountered elsewhere. Like Chinese junks, the bow and stern are upturned like the tip of a shoe — the pilot occupies a kind of platform adorned with ornate open balustrades, hand-carved with an axe — from the deck rise cabins with the appearance of log-houses, and painted and gilded towers with weathervanes and flags; but what is most singular is the windlass and its platform: the twin decks are supported by columns; the lower deck contains stabling for the horses; the upper level, the windlass itself. Through the fence of columns, one can see horses harnessed in threes or fours, winding or unwinding onto or from the barrel, the towing cable ending in an anchor which a boat, rowed by eight or ten oarsmen, drops and fixes in the riverbed upstream. The number of horses on board varies from a hundred to a hundred and fifty. They relieve each other, so to speak, after executing their shift. While some work, others rest, and the boat progresses, albeit slowly — the mast of each of these boats, of disproportionate height, is made of five or six fir trunks coupled together, and recalls the ribbed pillars in Gothic cathedrals; the rungs of the rope ladders suspended from it are linked together by ropes 'in saltire'. We have described in some detail these vast Volga boats and their unique layout because they are doomed to vanish. In a few years the horse power will be provided by a tugboat, and the living force by a mechanical one. This whole picturesque system will seem too complex, slow and expensive. It is ever the useful, durable form that prevails. The sailors who crew these boats, wear peculiar hats. The hats, tall and brimless, look like measuring cylinders or stovepipes; I was surprised smoke was not issuing from them.

These boats reminded us of the huge rafts of logs on the Rhine, that carry villages of huts, enough provisions to supply Gargantua's table, and even herds of oxen. The last pilot able to steer them died a few years ago, and steam navigation has overtaken that naïve and primitive form of inland transport.

Yaroslav, at which we had briefly touched, communicates with Moscow by a diligence which deserves description. The vehicle harnessed to a team of little horses awaits the traveller at the landing stage. It is what in Russia is known as a *tarantass*, that is to say a carriage body set on two long beams which connect the front and rear axles, and whose innate flexibility takes the place of springs. This arrangement has the advantage that, in the event of a breakdown, it is easily repairable, while it resists the bumpiness of the hardest of roads — the body, quite similar in form to an ancient litter, is lined with leather curtains, and the passengers sit side by side as in our omnibuses — after considering, with the respect it deserved, an example of this

antediluvian vehicle, we climbed the ramp and visited the city. The quay, planted with trees, forms a promenade, and, in some places, continues on arches which allows tunnels and outflows below to reach the river.

The view enjoyed from there is very beautiful. As we gazed, a young man approached, and offered, in adequate French, to serve as our guide to the city's sights; he seemed not to be Russian, and his clothes, threadbare but clean, exhibited the poverty of a well-born man whom his education elevates above manual work. His pale face, lean and sad, breathed intelligence. The steamboat was scheduled to leave in a quarter of an hour, and we could not risk an excursion around Yaroslav without running the risk of being left behind on shore. To our great regret, we had to refuse the services of the poor fellow who walked away with a resigned sigh, as if accustomed to such disappointments — a shameful feeling, which occasioned some remorse, prevented me from slipping a silver ruble into his hand; but he seemed so gentlemanly, I feared I might offend him.

Yaroslav has the character of the older Russian towns, if the world old can be assigned to anything in Russia, where whitewash and paint stubbornly cover all traces of obsolescence. The church porches reveal paintings in the archaic style of Mount Athos, but the designs alone are ancient; every time they fade, the colours of flesh and drapery are repainted — and their halos restored.

Kostroma, where we also halted, presented nothing of special note, at least to a traveller who had time only to glance at it swiftly. Small Russian towns are strikingly uniform in character. They are laid out according to certain rules and necessities, fatal to individuality, so to speak, against which imaginativeness can make no headway. The absence or scarcity of stone dictates the use of brick and timbering, and their architectural lines cannot, with such materials, achieve a clarity of definition that interests the artist. As for the churches, the Greek Orthodox religion imposes its hieratic forms, and they fail to present the variety of styles adopted for our Western churches. Any description would be doomed to repetition. Let me return then to the Volga, monotonous in itself but nevertheless varied within its extent, like any great natural spectacle.

A host of birds fluttered about the river, without counting the ravens and crows so common in Russia. At every moment, the passage of our steamboat raised a flock of wild ducks from the shore of some islet or sandbank in the shallows. Grebes and teal skimmed over the water. In the sky, seagulls with white undersides and pearl-grey backs performed their capricious antics; hawks, kestrels, and buzzards traced their arcs, on the watch for prey. Sometimes sea-eagles let themselves fall, with a vigorous beat of their wings, to land on the far bank.

Then the long twilight of those summer days again deployed its magic — shades of pale orange, lemon, and chrysoprase tinted the sunset. Against this splendid background, the banks of the river displayed, in black silhouette, the chance outlines of trees, hills, houses, and distant churches, like the forms on the gilded backgrounds of Byzantine icons; small shoals of blue-black cloud, combed by the wind, scattered in flakes over the wide expanse of sky; the sun, half submerged behind a wood which masked it, made a million scintillations glimmer among the leaves — the river reflected this admirable spectacle, dimmed a little by its brown waters. Rendered brighter by the deepening darkness, sparks rolled like serpents through the

steamboat's vapour, while in the shadows along the banks the lanterns of fishermen off to raise their traps shone like glow worms or shooting stars.

As the water was shallow, and as we dared not approach the shore, the darkness not allowing the buoys to be seen, we dropped anchor in the middle of the river, which was very wide at that point. One might have thought oneself at the centre of a vast lake, because the shoreline's curves, and the tips of its promontories, closed off the horizon on all sides.

The following day I spent in that state of occupied indolence which is one of the charms of travel. While smoking my cigar, I watched, endlessly, as the banks of the river, two or three times wider than the Thames at London Bridge, fled further and further apart. Boats with paddles or under sail brushed past us, descending or ascending the flow. The number of vessels increased, and foreshadowed the approach of an important town. But though the day was peaceful, the evening offered a highly dramatic incident.

Our steamboat had anchored for the night, before a village or small town whose Russian name escapes me, alongside a kind of pontoon-boat moored to the shore. Soon our attention was attracted by an outburst of voices, and the sound of a tumultuous argument. On the platform of this pontoon, two men were quarrelling, gesticulating like madmen. Their insults they deemed injuries. After a few punches, and blows to the face, had been exchanged, one of the combatants seized the other in his arms, and, with an action as rapid as thought, hurled him into the river. The fall of the vanquished splashed water almost over our heads, as he fell between the pontoon and the steamboat, where the gap was barely three feet or so wide. The whirlpool subsided, and nothing was to be seen. There was a moment of dreadful anxiety, all thinking that the unfortunate man was drowning, with no way to fish him out from under the keel of the boat, where the current undoubtedly had already driven him, when suddenly, in the moonlight, we saw the water bubbling near the shore, and a human form emerging and climbing the bank at pace.

The fellow, an excellent swimmer, had dived beneath the paddle-wheel whose drum was almost touching the neighbouring boat; he could boast of having made a narrow escape. However, his murderous opponent, instead of fleeing, having flailing his arms wildly while ranting away, came and sat on a bench by the cabin door, then rose and recommenced his gestures. Charles III of France claimed that behind every crime there is a woman, and, in judicial interrogations, always asked: 'Is she present?' The philosophical accuracy of this axiom was now demonstrated to us. A trapdoor rose and, from the depths of the pontoon-boat, a woman emerged, the probable cause of the quarrel. Was she young and pretty? The moon's feeble light moon prevented me judging from a distance, and the singular oscillations, moreover, which she indulged in, prevented my distinguishing her features. Summoning to her aid all the saints of the Greek Orthodox calendar, she prostrated herself and then rose, only to prostrate herself again, executing the sign of the cross repeatedly in the Russian manner at unparalleled speed, and muttering prayers interspersed with cries and sobs — nothing could be stranger. One might have thought her an *Aïssaoua* (*one of a Moroccan religious sect known for snake-charming, and dancing while in a trance*) in training. The police official, whom the victim had gone to find, arrived at last and, after lengthy discussion, two soldiers in grey greatcoats led the culprit away. For a while we were able follow with our eyes, passing along

the crest of the bank, in silhouette, the prisoner and the soldiers, who did not dare brutalise the recalcitrant, as he was a *chinovnik* (a minor government official).

We weighed anchor early in the morning. The *Provornii*'s paddles stirring the water with the assurance that dawn brings, it was not long before Nizhny Novgorod was in sight. It was one of those pearl-white, milky mornings in which it seems that objects appear through a silvery gauze; the sky colourless, but penetrated by a veiled sun, stretched above the greyish hills and the river's flow like molten tin — Richard Parkes Bonington's watercolours often feature like effects that one might believe beyond the resources of any painter, and which a born colourist alone could realise.



Nizhny-Novgorod
From *Voyage pittoresque en Russie* by Charles de Saint-Julien, 1853
Internet Archive

A vast flotilla of all kinds of boats covered the Volga, barely leaving room, in the centre of the river, for the passage of steamboats and other vessels. The host of tall masts was like a forest of debranched fir-trees, their straight lines scoring a background of all-embracing whiteness. The fresh dawn breeze set the brightly-striped ensigns at their summits flapping, accompanied by the squeaking of the gilded weather vanes at their tips. Some of these boats, bearing sacks of flour, were powdered white like millers. Others, on the contrary, displayed bows brightly painted in Veronese green, with salmon-coloured planking.

We arrived at the company landing-stage without accident and without sustaining damage accident, which seemed an astonishing thing, for though the river is almost as wide there as an arm of the sea, the river traffic is so great, and the numbers so large, that it seems impossible to navigate such chaos; but the rudders flick their tails, and the boats sail past each other with the alacrity of fish.

Nizhny Novgorod is aloft an eminence which, after the endless succession of plains we had just traversed, produced the effect on the eye of a serious mountain. The escarpment descends in a series of slopes to the quay brightened with vegetation, its steep zigzag bordered by brick ramparts showing a few remnants of plaster here and there, and similarly crenelated walls form the enclosure of the citadel, or *Kremlin*, to use the Russian word; a large square tower stands at the summit, while bulbous bell-towers, with gilded crosses protruding above the wall, witness to the presence of a church within the fortress.

Further down, wooden houses are scattered, and on the quay itself large red buildings with windows framed in white display their symmetrical lines. Their bright tone gives a cheerfulness and vigour to the foreground, and prevents the strictly regular architecture from seeming dull on the eye.

Near the landing stage was a riot of droshkys and telegas disputing their right to the passengers and their luggage. Ridding ourselves, not without some difficulty, of the *isvochtchiks* who surrounded us, we hoisted ourselves into a droshky, and set off in search of lodgings, which are not easy to obtain at the time of the fair. While following the quay, we passed improvised stalls from which tradesmen sell bread, *ogourets*, sausages, smoked-fish, cakes, watermelons, apples, and other such victuals to the populace. Soon our vehicle turned and began to climb a steep open track between two immense grassy embankments, for Nizhny Novgorod, much like Oran in the past before military genius filled its picturesque depths, is intersected by a deep ravine.

The Kremlin walls, and an avenue of trees serving as a promenade, crown the left ridge; a few houses line the slope, but soon weary of climbing this slope down which they seem to slide. After an ascent shortened by the impetuosity of the Russians horses, who can never keep to a moderate pace, we reached the summit of the plateau where a large square reveals a church at its centre, the green domes surmounted by gold crosses, and a cast-iron fountain in rather a poor style.

As we had asked to be taken to some hotel furthest from the field where the fair is held, in the hopes of finding lodgings more easily, our coachman halted in front of the hostelry at the corner of the square, on the side where the Kremlin stands. After a few moments wait, while a discussion took place, Smirnov, the owner, was kind enough to admit us, and a moujik came to collect our trunk.

My room was large, bright, and clean. It contained everything essential for the civilised traveller, except that the bed was furnished with a single sheet, and a mattress with the thickness of a slim pancake; but, in Russia, they profess an Asian indifference to where they sleep, an indifference which I share moreover, and the bed in Smirnov's hotel was equal all one meets with elsewhere in Russia.

While waiting for lunch, of which we were much in need, since the provisions aboard the steamboat were diminishing rapidly, I gazed vaguely at the square, and my eyes chose to focus on the fountain, not to admire its architecture, which is, as I have said, in the poorest possible taste, but because of the interesting scenes of which a public fountain is necessarily the centre.

Water carriers obtained their supply here, and achieved it by plunging a little barrel on a long stick into the basin, dipping the mouth therein, repeatedly, with singular speed, though not without spilling half the contents. There were also prisoners of war dressed in old grey overcoats, who came to fetch water, guarded by two soldiers carrying rifles with fixed bayonets; and moujiks filling wooden containers wide at the bottom, narrow at the top, to supply the houses. However, I saw no women. The German fountain had attracted a whole collection of Gretchens, Nannerls, and Lottes, gossiping at its rim. In Russia, women, even of the lowest class, rarely emerge from their houses, and it is the men who perform most of the domestic labour.

After a fortifying lunch, served by waiters, Muslims perhaps, in black dress and white tie, whose English mode of dress formed a perfect contrast with their characteristically Tartar physiognomies, we had nothing more urgent to do than visit the fair, located at the end of the town, on a kind of beach, at the confluence of the Oka and the Volga. We had no need of a guide, since all the passers-by were headed in the same direction, and one only needed to 'follow the crowd,' so to speak, as the barkers invite you to do from the tops of their trestles.

At the foot of the hill, a small chapel attracted my attention. On the porch steps, with a mechanical salute similar to that of those wooden birds whose neck a mechanism lowers and raises, wretched and squalid beggars bowed to us, real human rags that some funereal rag-picker had chosen not to catch with his hook and toss into his basket; and a few nuns wearing a high hood of black velvet, and encased in a narrow sheath of serge, who shake a container in front of you in which previous donations of kopeks jingle, and who are found wherever an influx of the public offers hopes of a good return. Five or six old women completed the picture, who would have made the *Sibyl of Panzoust* (see *Rabelais' 'Gargantua and Pantagruel: Book 3, Chapter XVII'*) appear young and pretty.

A large quantity of little candles blazed away within, like a mass of goldsmith's work, the vermeil plaques of the iconostasis being further lit by lamps — I entered, with some difficulty, the narrow enclosure which was obstructed by the faithful crossing themselves, arms swinging like dervishes — a stream of water, doubtless gifted with some miraculous property, filtering into a stone conch like a font leaning against the wall, seemed to be the particular attraction of the place.

The local droshkys and telegas, spun by, scoring the mud with deep ruts, and splashing the pedestrians at the side of the road. Sometimes a more elegant droshky held two women in showy attire, crinolines spread, painted and adorned like idols, smiling in order to display their teeth and sending right and left that errant gaze of the courtesan which resembles a net in which lust is caught — the Nizhny Novgorod fair attracts such birds of prey from their evil haunts in Russia, and even further afield. Boats brought cargo-loads; a special area was reserved for them. The ogre of lust desires its fleshy victims more or less fresh.

By one of those contrasts created by chance, that excellent former of antitheses, their speedy equipage often brushed against a peaceable chariot drawn by a little shaggy horse, bending its head beneath its colourful *douga* (*the decorative wooden arch attached to the harness*), and dragging about an entire patriarchal group, including the grandfather, the father, and the mother nursing an infant.

On that day, without counting all the others, the brandy-sellers made a fine profit. A number of 'sots', as the vulgar expression has it, festooned the boards of the sidewalk, or swayed about in the mud in the centre of the road. A few, even more inebriated, unable to walk unaided, staggered forward with a pair of friends for crutches. Some had livid, earthy faces, others were apoplectic, with bloodshot eyes, 'crimsoned in the cooking', as *Master Alcofribas Nasier* (*Francois Rabelais' anagram of his own name, and the pseudonym under which he published his first book, 'Pantagruel King of the Dipsodes'*) would say, according to their nature or their degree of intoxication — a young man, overcome by over-frequent libations of *vodka* (*a liquor made from grain*), had rolled from the sidewalk onto the embankment bank, among the piles of wood, bales, and heaps of rubbish; he fell and rose again, only to fall once more, laughing foolishly, and screaming inarticulately like an Indonesian Teriak or a Hashshashin in armed combat. Hands full of earth, face soiled with mud, clothes torn and stained, he crawled on all fours, sometimes regaining the crest of the embankment, sometimes tumbling down towards the river, into which he plunged halfway, without acknowledging the coldness of the water, or the risk of drowning — a death more unpleasant to a drunkard than any other! — There is a Russian saying with regard to glasses of vodka: 'The first enters like a stake, the second swoops like a hawk, the rest flutter about like little birds.' The fellow whose tumbles I describe must have contained a whole flight of them in his chest. However, it is not enjoyment the moujik demands of his drink, it is intoxication and forgetfulness — he swallows one glass after another until he falls as if struck by lightning, and nothing is more common than to encounter bodies stretched out on the pavements that one might take for corpses.

The dense crowd, ever more compacted, detained us for a while in front of a pretty church in which German rococo was joined, in the most bizarre manner, to the Byzantine style. From a red background, projected white ovals, volutes, chicory-leaves, capitals curled like cabbages, scrolled consoles, flower-vases, flambeaux, and other equally flamboyant fantasies, the whole surmounted by bulbous bell-towers of wholly Oriental appearance. It was as if the roof of a mosque had been added to a Jesuit church.

A few paces further on, tossed about amidst an unimaginable tumult of people and carriages, as if we were at an evening fireworks-display on the Champs-Élysées, we reached the head of the bridge which led to the fairground — committing to it held difficulties and perils. Happily, true travellers are like great captains — they pass everywhere, not with banner but with telescope in hand!

At the bridgehead, stood tall poles, like those Venetian standards we plant at our festivities, bearing every colour of flag, and emblazoned by extravagant fantasy. On some a well-intentioned brush had attempted a poorly executed representation of the Emperor and Empress; others were decorated with a double-headed eagle, Saint George brandishing his spear, Chinese dragons, leopards, unicorns, griffins and all the chimerical menagerie of the bestiaries. A slight

breeze made them flutter, distorting in odd ways, as their folds chanced to fall, the images that they represented.

The bridge over the Oka was a boat-bridge floored with planks, and edged with boards to form sidewalks. The crowd filled the latter completely, while in the centre the carriages sped by at that pace which, in Russia, is never lessened, yet which never leads to an accident, thanks to the extreme skill of the coachmen, aided by the docility of the pedestrians they pass. The sound produced was akin to that made by the chariot of Salmoneus on his brazen bridge (*Salmoneus, King of Elis, who aspired to be a god, drove his chariot over a brazen bridge so as to imitate Jupiter's thunder and was struck by a thunderbolt*).

On either side, the river was covered by an immense crowd of boats, and an inextricable jumble of gear. Perched on the high saddles of their little horses, the Cossacks in charge of policing the fair plodded gravely, announced from afar by their great spears, amidst the droshkys, telegas, carts of every kind, and passers-by of every gender. However, there was little or no human noise. Anywhere else, a vast murmur, a tumultuous thrumming like that of the sea, would have emerged from such a gathering; a veil of sound would have floated above that prodigious mass of individuals; but crowds composed of Russian elements are silent.

At the other end of the bridge were signs, painted in the wildest way, advertising acrobats, and pictures of natural phenomena; boa-constrictors, bearded women, giants, dwarves, strongmen, and triple-headed calves; to which their large inscriptions in Russian lettering granted a particularly exotic flavour.

Little booths selling crude trinkets, pieces of haberdashery, images of saints minimally priced, cakes and green apples, soured milk, beer, and kvass, rose to right and left of the boardwalks, presenting on their rear facade the ends of the beams which their builders had neglected to trim with the saw, and which made them resemble baskets whose ribs had not yet been fully added by the basket-maker.

A stall selling boots, felt slippers, and shoes struck me as an offering unique to the country. The latter were mostly neat women's shoes in white felt, trimmed with pink or blue decorations, quite similar to those shoes that we deem suitable for evening-wear, thin shoes which ladies attending a ball clothe in satin so as to reach the carriage waiting for them at the foot of the hotel steps — the slippers would have fitted Cinderella alone.

The Nizhny Novgorod fairground is a complete town in itself. Its long streets intersect at right angles and lead to squares each with a fountain at the centre. The wooden houses that border them consist of a ground floor, a shop-front and store, and an overhanging floor above, supported on columns, where the merchant and his clerks sleep. These upper floors, and the pillars on which they rest, form a continuous covered gallery, fronting the windows and displays. In the event of rain, this provides temporary shelter for the goods on sale, while passers-by, freed from their carriages, can meditate on their choices, or satisfy their curiosity without risk, other than that of being struck by some stray elbow.

These streets occasionally offer a view of the bordering plain, and nothing is more curious than to see, beyond the fairground, groups of unharnessed carriages, with their half-wild horses tethered to the sides, their drivers asleep on some piece of cloth or coarse fur. The latter's

clothes are, unfortunately, more worn-out than picturesque, though not lacking a certain fierce character — and are dull in colour, except that here and there one sees a pink shirt — to paint these second-hand clothes stores, Siena and Cassel earth pigments, ochre, and bitumen would suffice — however, one could take advantage of those sleeveless jackets, fur coats, cords laced around the legs, esparto shoes, yellow-bearded heads and skinny little horses whose intelligent eyes gaze at you through long strands of their dishevelled manes. Adolphe Yvon has proved this, in beautiful charcoal-drawings enhanced with a few flakes of gouache.

A camp of this sort was occupied by Siberian fur-traders. Animal pelts, which had only received a summary treatment essential to their conservation, were heaped there on mats, pell-mell, the hair inside, without the slightest attempt at display. To the layman, they looked like piles of rabbit-skins. The merchants looked little better than the merchandise, and yet some of their wares sold for immense sums. The beaver-skins from the Arctic Circle, the sables, and Siberian blue-fox pelts, reach staggering prices that exceed those of Western luxuries; a blue-fox fur coat cost ten thousand rubles (forty thousand francs); a beaver collar with white hairs flecking the brown fur, a thousand rubles. I own a little cap of this kind, for which one would not give fifteen francs in Paris, yet which earned me some esteem in Russia where people know something about fur; it cost seventy-five silver rubles. A thousand little details imperceptible to our eyes augment or decrease the value of a pelt. If the animal was killed during the chilly months, while clad in its winter coat, the price is greater; the pelt will be warmer, allowing one to endure the intense cold; and the closer the creature's origin to the Arctic latitudes the more sought after is its fur; the furs from temperate regions prove inadequate when the thermometer drops to more than ten degrees Réaumur below zero; they soon lose the warmth with which they were imbued in one's room.

A characteristic industry in Russia is that of the luggage-maker — imitation of the West yields wholly to Asian taste in the manufacture of travelling-trunks; there are many stores selling such goods in Nizhni Novgorod, and these were where I made my longest stays. Nothing is more charming than those chests of all sizes, painted in bright colours, with ornamentation in silver and gold veneer, plated in blue, green or red giving off metallic reflections, decorated symmetrically with gilded nails, crisscrossed with straps in white or fawn leather, reinforced with steel or copper corner-pieces, and closed by means of locks of naive complexity; such as we imagine the trunks borne behind some Emir or Sultana on their journey.

When travelling, these chests are wrapped in strong canvas covers from which they are stripped on arrival; they then serve as chests of drawers, no doubt to the great regret of their owners, who would prefer civilised mahogany to such charming yet barbarous luxury. I am filled with remorse for not having purchased a certain box coloured and varnished like the mirror of an Indian princess. But I would have been ashamed to put my miserable clothes in a case destined for cashmere and brocades.

Apart from this, the Nizhni-Novgorod fair above all displays what the trade calls 'articles from Paris'. This flatters our country, but is tedious from the point of view of the picturesque. One hopes to find, after travelling two thousand miles, something other than the offerings on the stalls of a Parisian market — such trivialities, in all their variety, are much admired, but that however is not the serious side of the fair; there, enormous trade deals are concluded,

involving a cargo of ten thousand bricks of tea, for example, or half a dozen shiploads of grain worth several million, or even a number of pelts, deliverable at such and such a rate, sight unseen. Thus, the major part of the commercial activity is invisible, so to speak. Tea houses, provided with a fount for Muslim ablutions, serve as a meeting place and trading exchange for the contracting parties. The samovar whistles as it emits its jets of steam; moujiks, dressed in red or white shirts, carry trays about loaded with glasses of tea; merchants with broad beards, in blue kaftans, seated opposite Asians wearing black Astrakhan lambskin hats, imbibe saucerfuls of the hot infusion, a small piece of sugar placed between their teeth, perfectly phlegmatically, as if, these seemingly casual utterances did not involve immense matters. Despite the diversity of origin and language of the interlocutors, Russian is the only language spoken when transacting business; and, above the vague whisper of conversation, float, perceptible even to the foreigner, the sacramental words: *roubli cerebrom!* (*silver rubles!*).

The varied types among the crowd excited my curiosity more than my viewing the stalls. Tartars abounded, with their high cheekbones, slanted eyes, broad concave noses shaped like a half-moon, thick lips, yellow complexions shading to green about their clean-shaven temples, small hand-stitched Indian-cotton skullcaps placed on the summits of their craniums, brown kaftans, and metal-plated belts.

The Persians were easily distinguishable by the elongated ovals of their faces, their large hooked noses, bright eyes, black bushy beards, and noble Oriental physiognomies. They would have been recognisable, even if their conical lambskin hats, striped silk robes, and cashmere belts had not caught my attention. Armenians, dressed in narrow tunics with hanging sleeves; Circassians, thin-waisted as wasps, and wearing sheepskin hats shaped like a baby bearskin, stood out against the backcloth of the crowd; but the folk my eyes eagerly sought, especially on arriving at the particular area where tea is sold, were the Chinese —my hopes revived on seeing shops with curved roofs and trellis-work carved in an almost-Greek pattern, whose acroteria bore smiling Oriental figures, and which led one to imagine one had been transported, by a wave of the wand, to a city of the Celestial Empire. But on the threshold of stores, behind the counters, I saw none but honest Russian faces. Not a single braided pigtail, not a single head with slanted eyes, and eyebrows shaped like circumflexes; not a single lid-like hat, not one blue or purple silk robe — not a Chinaman in sight! — I know not what had persuaded me of the idea, but I had counted on meeting a certain number of these exotic figures in Nizhny Novgorod, figures which exist for us only on silk screens or porcelain vases. Without reflecting on the enormous distance between Nizhny Novgorod and the Chinese border, I had believed, like a true foreigner, that merchants of the Middle Kingdom themselves brought tea to the fair. The well-known repugnance Chinese people feel towards leaving their country and mingling with the barbarians, should have kept me on guard against such a chimera; but it was so deeply embedded in my mind that, despite the testimony of my own eyes, I enquired about the absence of the Chinese on several occasions. For three years none had visited, and again that year only a single merchant had arrived, who, however, to escape unwelcome curiosity, had borrowed European clothing. One was expected at the next fair; but the matter was uncertain. These comments were kindly offered to me by a tradesman from whose stall I wished to buy some tea; but on learning that I was a French author, he forced me to accept some pekoe (*black tea, composed of leaf buds and the two youngest leaves*) into which he mixed a handful or two of

white-tipped flowers, and made me the gift, moreover, of a brick or tablet of tea bearing on one side a label in Chinese characters, and on the other the red wax stamp of the Kyakhta customs, the last Russian outpost before the border (*now the Mongolian border; the Treaty of Kyakhta, in 1727, confirmed the border and regulated trade between Russia and China*). This brick contained a huge quantity of leaves compressed and reduced to the smallest volume; it looked like a bronze or green porphyry plaque. This is the tea that the Manchus (*often then referred to as Tartars, though a distinct people*) drink during their journeys across the steppes, and of which they make a kind of soup with butter (*cf. Tibetan butter tea, 'bho ja' or 'po cha' traditionally made by churning black tea, water, salt, and yak-butter made from the milk of the female yak or 'dri'*) which Abbé Huc (*Évariste Régis Huc, author of 'Souvenirs d'un Voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet, et la Chine', 1850*) describes in his interesting account.

Not far from the Chinese quarter — as it is called in Nizhny Novgorod — are found the shops where Oriental goods are sold. One cannot imagine the elegance and the majesty of these *effendis* (*Turkish for a lord or master*) in silk kaftans, their cashmere belts bristling with daggers who, with the most phlegmatic disdain, sit enthroned on their couches in the middle of a spread of brocades, velvets, silks, flowered fabrics, gauzes laminated with gold or silver, Persian carpets, scarlet sheets doubtless embroidered by the fingers of captives now perished, pipe-stems, steel hookahs from Khorasan, amber rosaries, bottles of essence, seats inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and slippers decorated with gold, fit to send a colourist into transports of ecstasy.

I scarcely know how to lead into what I now have to say, and yet if this detail is omitted, the picture of the fair would be incomplete. For some time, I had been aware of, without being able to divine their use, whitewashed turrets, here and there, with a kind of *vent* closed by an open grille or grating. The open doors of each of these turrets revealed a spiral staircase descending into the earth. Were these guardhouses, underground-warehouses, passageways to shorten some route? It was impossible to guess. Finally, I ventured, without opposition, onto one of the staircases, and having descended the spiral to its end I saw an immense paved and vaulted corridor extending beyond my sight; along one of the walls was a row of doorless cells. In some, reserved for Muslim ablutions, gourds were suspended. Air and daylight came through the *vents* I mentioned. Each turret had a valve that when opened, flooded the underground space, and purified it, by a copious flow of water — this gigantic and unusual construction, perhaps without example elsewhere, has avoided more than one cholera and plague outbreak, on a site where every year, for six weeks, more than four hundred thousand people are encamped; it is due to a Spanish engineer, educated in Madrid and Paris, Augustín de Bethencourt.

We were beginning to tire of wandering these endless streets, lined with stalls and shops and, feeling in need of food, we yielded to the invitation addressed to us by the restaurant-signs of *Nikita*, *Le Collot*, and *Le Véfour de Nizhny* on the far side of the river.

Moujiks, standing on the wheel-axles which had served to transport long pieces of timber, crossed the bridge at full speed, trying to overtake each other. What confidence! What boldness! What grace! The speed of their vehicles made their shirts flutter like *chlamydes* (*the chlamys was a sleeveless cloak, in ancient Greece*); firmly rooted, arms outstretched, hair in

the wind, they had the air of Greek heroes — it looked like a chariot race in the games at Olympia.

Nikita's restaurant is a wooden house with large windows, behind which can be seen the broad leaves of hothouse plants, which every establishment in the least fashionable must display. The Russians love greenery.

Waiters in English dress served us sterlet soup, beef-steaks on a bed of horseradish, a ragout of grouse in a rich sauce (the presence of grouse on the menu was inevitable!), a chicken *chasseur* of which Modeste Magny (*owner of the Restaurant Magny in Paris, which hosted the 'Magny dinners' at which writers gathered*) would not have approved, a jelly set somewhat too firmly in isinglass, pine nuts with ice-cream, of exquisite delicacy, washed down with chilled seltzer water, and a Bordeaux wine much like a Lafite. But what gave me the greatest pleasure was being able to light a cigar, since it is expressly forbidden to smoke inside the grounds of the fair, and no one tolerates a flame other than those of the night lights burning in front of the sacred icons with which each shop is decorated.

Our dinner over, we returned to the fair, seeking some further novelty. Despite the heat, dust, and tedium, a feeling similar to that which obtains at an Opéra ball prevented us from returning to the hotel. After traversing a few streets, we arrived at a square with a church on one side a mosque on the other — the church was surmounted by a cross, the mosque by a crescent, and the two symbols glowed peacefully in the pure evening air, gilded by a ray of sunlight, with impartiality, or indifference which is perhaps the same thing. The two religions seem to maintain good and neighbourly relations, since religious tolerance is widespread in this Russia which counts even idolaters and fire-worshipping Parsees among its subjects.

The door of the Orthodox church was open, and evening prayers were being said; it was not easy to gain access; a compact crowd filled the interior as liquid fills a vase; however, with a few taps on the shoulder we managed to make our way through. The interior of the church looked like a furnace of gold; forests of candles and constellations of chandeliers made the gilding of the iconostases blaze, whose metallic reflections mingled with shafts of light, in sudden flashes, to create a dazzling phosphorescence. All these lights contributed to a dense red mist at the summit of the dome, to which mounted the chants of the Greek liturgy, uttered by the priests, and repeated in a low voice by their attendants. The inclinations of their heads required by the rite, caused the crowd of believers to bow and un-bow at the prescribed times, with a degree of unity similar to that displayed during a well-executed military manoeuvre.

After a few minutes we left, feeling sweat already beading our bodies as in a steam bath. I would have liked to visit the mosque as well, but it was not the hour of Allah. How to spend the rest of the evening? A droshky passed; we hailed the driver, we boarded, and, without asking our destination, he galloped on. It is ever the way with the *isvochtchiks*, who rarely seek to know where they should take the traveller. A *na leva*, or a *na prava* sets them straight if necessary. This fellow, after crossing the bridge which leads to *Nikita's* restaurant, began to speed over fields, along vague tracks indicated only by ruts filled with mud. We allowed him to do so, thinking they must eventually lead somewhere. Indeed, our intelligent coachman had decided for himself that noblemen of our sort, at that hour of the evening, would seek no other place than that reserved for tea-houses, music, and pleasure.

Night was beginning to fall. We were crossing, at frightening speed, a bumpy terrain, pitted with pools of water, in a twilight through which the skeletons of rudimentary wooden constructions displayed only their outlines. Finally, lights began to prick the darkness as reddish dots; brassy sounds reached our ears, betraying the presence of an orchestra or two: we had arrived — from houses with open doors, their windows alight, came the strumming of balalaikas interspersed with guttural screams; while strange silhouettes filled the windows. On the narrow, boarded pavements, drunken shapes staggered, or extravagant costumes alternately drowned in shadow or struck by light passed. If ancient Cythera (*the island of Venus-Aphrodite, modern Kythira*) was bathed by the azure waves of the Mediterranean, this Muscovite Cythera was girded with a belt of mud which we did not wish to give ourselves the trouble of untying.

At every crossroad, the waters, in the absence of drainage, flowed together and formed deep cesspools, into which carriage-wheels, stirring the foul miasma, sank to their hubs. Fearful of falling into such a quagmire amidst an embarrassment of half-submerged droshkys, we ordered our *isvochtchik* to turn around and drive us back to the Smirnov Hotel. From his astonished look, we understood that he considered us mediocre, and ridiculously cautious, companions. He obeyed, however, and we finished our evening strolling through the lanes surrounding the Kremlin. The moon had risen, and sometimes a silver ray betrayed amidst the shadows of the trees a furtive couple embracing, or walking slowly hand in hand — there, lust had revealed itself; here, love.

The next day, we devoted our day to visiting the upper levels of Nizhny Novgorod. From a belvedere, situated at the outer corner of the Kremlin, and overlooking a beautiful public garden, spreading across the back of the hill in masses of fresh vegetation bordering winding alleys of yellow sand, we discovered a prodigious view, a limitless panorama. Across gently undulating plains, taking on, in the distance, lilac, pearl-grey, and steel-blue tones, the Volga unfolded in broad curves, now dull, now bright, depending on whether it reflected the azure of the sky or was darkened by the shadow of a cloud. On the near bank of the river, I could scarcely distinguish the handful of houses, seeming to the eye as small as those of the toy villages manufactured and boxed in Nuremberg. The vessels at anchor beside the shore looked like the Lilliputian fleet. All was lost, erased, drowned in a serene, azure, yet somehow sad immensity, which made me think of the infinite ocean — it was a truly Russian view, from there to the far horizon.

There was nothing left for me to see, and I took the road to Moscow, free at last of the obsession which had forced me to undertake my lengthy peregrination. No longer would the demon of travel whisper in my ear: ‘Nizhny Novgorod!’

The End of Gautier’s ‘Travels in Russia’