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The situation in Russia seems to be growing acute. Famine is raging, and in the stricken districts the starving population shows a disposition to revolt. The empire has long been in a deplorable condition financially, and there is general surprise that its Government has been able to bear the strain which the increasing expense modern armament imposes without breaking down. If it be true that the grain accumulated for military purposes is being diverted for the relief of the famine-stricken districts, and that the visitation is likely in one form and another to cost the empire more than a hundred millions sterling, we may assuredly look for the development of further events from the present disturbed situation in Russia. In the main Russia is the guardian of the possible violator of the peace of Europe, and indirectly of the peace of the world. England also has her say in the matter, but she is less mistress of the situation than the Colossus of the North. Her sword may be invaluable for turning the scale in the event of a great contest, but her influence does not operate like that of Russia to retard or hasten the precipitation of the catastrophe which everyone dreads.

Does misfortune embarrass or hold the hand of Russia as in the present case, then is the opportunity of Germany. Germany is nervously apprehensive of the growing wealth and military strength of France, and only seeks an opportunity of catching her alone and trying to crush her for ever. France, on the other hand, is only waiting the favourable moment when the domestic unrest or ambition of Russia shall embroil her with Austria and Germany to endeavour to wrest back the provinces riven from her by Germany in the war of twenty years ago. If Russia moves against Constantinople she will immediately come to loggerheads with Austria, and by virtue of the Triple Alliance Germany is bound to support her neighbour, Francis Joseph, against aggression. If England sees that there is any danger of Russia getting the Dardanelles she will at once take possession of Constantinople, probably on the invitation of the Sultan. The situation is most momentous and precarious, and no reiteration on the part of those who persist in prophesying peace while the combustibles for a frightful cataclysm are yearly being piled up higher, should blind us to the impending danger.

The internal condition of Russia is as menacing an indication of the political drift of affairs as any. A troubled community nearly always ends by becoming disagreeable to her neighbours, and this tendency is even greater in a pure despotism like that of the Czar than in a country more constitutionally governed. The domestic history of Russia for the last thirty years has been most interesting to those who love to watch the evolution of the senses of liberty and national self-respect in a hugely growing but primitive social organism. The late Emperor Alexander the Second, perceiving that serfdom was an anachronism, with a stroke of his pen gave freedom to the Russian peasantry in 1861. From this moment Russia, from being a sort of Frankenstein—a soulless moving monster—began to develop a dawning of national consciousness and political intelligence.

The emancipation of the lowest stratum of the population sent a pulsation of enthusiasm through the more refined classes above, and young men and young women of godd birth and education began to attempt the elevation of the masses by voluntarily descending and associating with them, often in midst of surroundings of the most sordid and dreary kind. Noble and delicately-reared young girls would bury themselves as school-teachers or nurses in lonely villages, and there seek to impart to mothers a knowledge

of nursing and cooking, and to their children a slight acquaintance with letters. At the universities, too, a rapid development of ideas caught from the most advanced writers of Western Europe on science and politics took place, including the doctrine of women's rights, and young Russian women might be found studying medicine by themselves in Geneva or Paris at a time when an English girl graduate was regarded as a curiosity in her own land. Among the provincial deliberative bodies, also, a desire was evinced to secure a certain measure of popular representation in the councils of the nation, which was, however, rudely checked by the rulers.

The Government took alarm at all this and for twenty years have been endeavouring to repress the rising aspirations of the people with ever increasing severity. The Russian Government consists of a close corporation of officials headed by the Czar, and the overwhelming business of the enormous Empire is practically managed, or rather mismanaged by them. In every department incompetency, procrastination, and venality are rife, and however desirous the Czar may be of seeing his people happy, his best efforts are frustrated and his orders headed wherever his personal influence does not directly operate to secure their execution. In distant towns and villages abuses flourish and officials tyrannize without there being the slightest possibility of redress. The local press is gagged, no editor being allowed to publish any complaint in his paper of which the local authorities disapprove; no person is allowed the right of directly preferring a petition to the Czar; and inasmuch as there is no Russian parliament to petition, or local representative to ventilate the complaints of his constituency before the elect of the nations, the Russian people lie dumb at the mercy of the body of officials which chance or favouritism have for the time being combined to put over them.

As may be expected of all bodies of persons who fatten upon the privileges and pickings of office, this official class is ferociously conservative as compared with even the bureaucrats of any other continental power, for it is the only one which is not subjected to parliamentary control of any sort. Its sole object is to use the autocratic authority of the Czar to perpetuate its domination, and to prevent any alteration of the existing situation by the institution of parliamentary government. While nominally the Czar is absolute master of his dominions, in reality he is only allowed to know as much as his ministers choose, and any reforms which he may generously direct, if they do not absolutely vanish in the mire of official obstructiveness, take but very partial shape after their long journey through the various offices of the circumlocutory system. As for the monies appropriated for specific objects of government, never does a large percentage fail to stick to the official palm by the way, so that even in the all important matter of the war department glaring inefficiency is the rule.

How the liberal-minded minority in Russia will succeed in breaking through this dead-weight of tyranny, it is impossible to predict. For twenty years the more enthusiastic and daring spirits at the centres of intellectual activity have been struggling to make their voices heard. The danger of even a slight expression of opinion in Russia is inconceivable to those bred in free democratic societies, for the Russian law lays down that even to harbour an intention of altering the existing Government is criminal, and all combinations to agitate, even peacefully, for reform are treasonable conspiracies, and the participants liable to condemnation to exile for life together with hard labour in the Siberian mines. In the endeavour to detect such disaffection the Russian Government violates the sanctity of its subjects' freedom, and of their correspondence with the most utter unscrupulousness, and will imprison and terrorize over women in the hope of forcing them to betray their brothers, their lovers, or their friends. No sort of tyrannical baseness is too great, as the writings of Kennan, Lanin, Krapotkin, and Stepniak testify.

The number of persons who are rotting in solitary confinement near St. Petersburg, or dying prematurely of hardship in the bitter winters of Siberia, for doing what is esteemed virtuous in other communities, can be counted by hundreds. As for the horrors of transport to Siberia, they are frequently such as cannot bear publication, and even when suffered by confirmed criminals sicken the mind to contemplate. Despite, however, the ruin and misery which loom up ahead of

the reformer in Russia, the impulse of modern free thought is irresistible, and is ever sending fresh and willing victims to perish in the breach. Some of their names are recorded, but the bulk of them will ever remain unknown. That these reformers or revolutionists die in a cause which is destined to ultimate success is undoubted, for the day of reckoning with officialism will arrive when the corn is ripe for the sickle. A war precipitated by Russia upon her neighbours will be terrible, but if the present abominable system of repression of opinion is continued by the Government, a revolution within Russia herself will be more terrible still, for the horrible wrongs committed there surpass any which begot the whirlwind of retribution which overtook and wrecked the domination of the French aristocracy a hundred years ago.

The Australian cantatrice, Madame Melba, is excelling herself, and she is at present, perhaps, the best advertised woman in the world. There seems to be no sort of measure to the way in which Australian prodigies emerge into prominence. For awhile they flame with an exceeding fierce light, and then disappear as rapidly as they rose. During the last fifteen years we have been treated to the spectacle of a dozen celebrities in the athletic field, who have certainly attracted considerable attention, but whose course has not been such as to indicate great staying power. Like the great sculler Beach, the renowned coronating *prima donna* had obtained pronounced maturity before she made her name. It remains to be seen whether her career will be more prolonged.

Madame Melba is probably the first great singer who has shot up with such triumphal rapidity from being a mere local amateur into the first flight of world-renowned artistes. It is not given unto many musicians with a growing family to achieve in four or five years the distinction of rivalling Adelina Patti, and of getting their name mixed up with that of a prince royal of the oldest blood in Europe. The cup of Madame Melba should be full to overflowing, because her price will reach its high water-mark within the next few months unless she can by some method or other succeed in getting her name associated with that of the Prince of Wales. These are the advertisements the uses of which are sweet as an advertisement adding immensely to a woman's market value, and from an artistic and worldly point of view Mrs Armstrong's public career has so far been wondrously successful. Still, judging by cable reports, Madame does not seem to appreciate this kind of distinction, and is preparing to defend her good name. What Mr Armstrong thinks of it all we can only divine. If in the early days of matrimony he apostrophised Mrs Armstrong as his own 'his guiding star,' he has probably changed his tune since he discovered how changed and altogether meteoric has become her course as Madame Melba.

MY SWEETHEART.

WHENEVER I play on the old guitar
The songs that my sweetheart taught me,
My thoughts go back to the summer time
When first in her toils she caught me;
And once again I can hear the sound
Of her gleeful voice blown over
The meadow, sweet with the scent of thyme,
And pink with the bloom of clover.

The faded ribbon is hanging still
Where her dimpled fingers tied it—
I used to envy it stealing round
Her neck, for she did not hide it;
And the inlaid pearl that her ringlets touched
As she leaned above it lightly
Glowed even now with a hint of gold
That it once reflected brightly.

Whether her eyes were as blue as the skies
On a noon-day in September,
Or brown like those of a startled fawn,
I can't for the world remember;
But when she lifted them up to mine
I know that my young heart tingled
In time to the tender tune she sang
And the airy chords she jingled.

Yet now, though I sweep the dusty strings
By her girlish spirit haunted,
Till out of the old guitar these trips
A melody, blithe, enchanted,
My pulses keep on their even way
And my heart has ceased its dancing,
For somebody else sits under the spell
Of the songs and the sidelong glances.

M. E. WARDWELL.

As everyone knows, a billion is a million millions. Allowing that so many as 200, which is an outside number, could be counted in a minute, it would, excluding the 366th day in leap years, take one person upwards of 9,512 years before the task of counting a billion would be completed.

Here is a characteristic story of the American girl abroad: Scene—Windsor Castle. Young woman seeing the sights asks a man whom she meets, 'Butler, is there any chance to see the Queen?' Gentleman addressed, with dignity: 'I am not the butler, I am the Prince of Wales.' 'How lucky! Is your mother in?'