

# THE TWELVE

BY ALEXANDER BLOK

(*Specially translated from the Russian for the LIVING AGE*)

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This poem by Blok is considered the most brilliant piece of literary writing produced during the present Russian crisis. Blok himself is one of the greatest living Russian poets. What his present views are is not known. But the poem represents Blok's view of what took place in Russia during the early stages of the Bolshevik régime, when the poem was written.

Blok's poem is a literary expression of the idea that whatever the present situation in Russia, whatever the cruelty and the horror of the passing moment, there is a mighty force back of it all. This idea is the result of the mysticism, in which for some time past individuals and groups in Russia sought refuge and justification. To them the masses are right, no matter what their action. It is a kind of religious mysticism that was by no means general, but was a very characteristic manifestation of the manifold and many-sided Russian soul. It is doubtful whether there is anything left of this mysticism to-day: the Bolshevik reality could not but have dispelled it.

In the poem, Blok gives a series of poetic figures which present a striking picture of the coming of the Bolshevik régime and the period immediately preceding it. There is a curious reflection of these conditions in the very rhythm of the poem. The ragged, uneven metre of the first stanzas is used, consciously or unconsciously, to exemplify the unsettled condition of the first period of the revolution. Dominated by the idea of the Constituent Assembly and the slogan, 'All power to the Constituent Assembly,' this first period of general chaos and disorganization is full of fear and suspicion. And over all this sweeps a mighty tempest, rising to greater and greater fury.

Then the Bolshevik upheaval comes — represented by the twelve men, graphically described in these lines:

'Their caps are crushed. Each cigarette glares.  
The badge of criminals ought to be theirs!'

'Holy Russia' is represented as Katya (or Katka — the form which denotes contempt), the girl, also graphically described as follows:

'Chocolates but the best would suit you,  
When in thin, gray spats you stalked?  
Only officers would suit you?  
Now with soldiers you have walked!'

The masses have arisen, and their march begins. Even though they are represented by the twelve criminals, their march is now more regular, reflected in the regular, beating rhythm that runs through the later stanzas. The twelve march on through Russia, shooting, and robbing, and destroying.

There is an element of regret for some of the things of the past which they are destroying so ruthlessly, in the psychology of the twelve. And there are also gnawing doubts and fears, and attempts to assure themselves, both through words and through needless and often aimless cruelty, that success is bound to come:

'Come, surrender now to me!  
I shall get you, get you surely,  
Comrade, come, before I fire! . . .'

The sinister twelve of the poem are the destructive power of the Bolshevik revolution. The ugly, hungry hound, trudging along at their heels, is the old world, doomed to perdition. The twelve march forward, bent upon their determined aim:

'For the bourgeois woe and sorrow  
We shall start a world-wide fire,  
And with blood that fire we'll blend. . . .'

In the process of enkindling this 'world-wide fire,' they shoot down 'Holy Russia,' leaving her lying low, 'all like a carcass in the snow.'

But what is back of all this? What is the guiding force that directs this sweeping movement? Is it all chaos, or is there something, mightier than even the elemental fury of the movement? Blok answers these questions in the last lines of his poem:

'With that sovereign step they're walking . . .  
While in front, the red flag bearing,  
In a wreath of roses white,  
Jesus Christ — the guiding light.'

Here we have the apotheosis of the religious note. Christ, in Blok's conception, leads the Russian people who had just risen in an unrestrained rage and fury of destruction. Russian mysticism was responsible for much of the fervor that attached itself to Bolshevism at the beginning of its career in Russia. And Blok in his poem succeeded in catching some of this fervor. But the lights of this fervor did not burn long. They were long ago extinguished with crushing cruelty by the sombre actuality of the Soviet régime.]

## I

BLACK the evening.  
White the light.  
And the wind, the piercing wind!  
On your feet you cannot stand.  
Ah, the wind, the wind,  
Through the whole wide world!  
Growls the wind.  
The white snow falls.  
And beneath the snow, the ice.  
It is slippery all around.  
Everyone who passes by  
Slips — poor fellow.

From building to building  
A rope is stretched.  
And on that rope a placard:  
'All power to the Constituent Assembly.'  
An old woman looks, and weeps.  
She does not understand  
Why there is such a huge placard,  
Such a huge sheet of cloth.  
How many children can be clothed with that!  
And they are all bare-footed and naked. . . .  
The old woman, like a hen,  
Flutters over a snowbank.  
'Have pity on us, Almighty Mother!  
They'll drive me to my grave with this!'  
The wind is slashing.  
The cold relents not.  
A bourgeois on the crossing  
Hides his nose in his collar of fur.  
And who is this? His hair is long  
And he mutters in a low voice,  
'The traitors!  
Russia is lost!'

He must be a writer,  
 A poet . . .  
 And here is a clergyman,  
 Edging his way to a snowbank.  
 Why so unhappy,  
 Comrade priest?  
 Do you remember, you used to walk,  
 Your belly stuck forward,  
 And on it a cross to dazzle the crowd?  
 Here is a lady in a fur coat,  
 Talking, talking to another:  
 'So we wept, and cried.'  
 She slips . . .  
 And, oh, she's on the ground.  
 Hey! Hey!  
 Lift her up, and away!  
 But the wind is glad.  
 It flutters her skirts,  
 And mows down the passers-by,  
 And tears, and crushes, and shreds  
 The huge, huge placard:  
 'All power to the Constituent Assembly.'

## II

The wind is jolly. Glad flits the snow.  
 The twelve walk on, unhurried, slow.  
 The straps of their rifles are black as night,  
 And all around them, light upon light. . . .  
 Their caps are crushed. Each cigarette glares.  
 The badge of criminals ought to be theirs!  
 Liberty, liberty,  
 Without the cross!  
 Cold, comrades, cold!  
 'Katka and Vanka are there, in the tavern.  
 Katka has bills in her stocking.  
 And Vanka, too, is now rich.  
 He used to be ours, but now he's a soldier.  
 Vanka, Vanka, you, bourgeois son of a gun,  
 Just try to kiss my girl, the one  
 I love. . . .'  
 Liberty, liberty,  
 Without the cross!  
 'Katka and Vanka are busy.'  
 'With what? Busy with what?'  
 . . . All around, light upon light.  
 Upon their shoulders, straps, black as night.  
 . . . The revolutionary step beat clear,  
 The relentless foe is awake and near!

Comrade, hold your gun, have no fear,  
 Fire on our Russia, holy and dear!  
 Russia of huts,  
 And butts and ruts.  
 Ah, without the cross!

## III

Yes, our boys went into service  
 To be soldiers of Red Guards,  
 To be soldiers of Red Guards,  
 And their heads lose with their pards.  
 Oh, my sorrow, grief so bitter,  
 Fine the life they lead,  
 Wearing their old, tattered coats,  
 And the Austrian guns for arms.  
 For the bourgeois woe and sorrow  
 We shall start a world-wide fire,  
 And with blood that fire we'll blend,  
 Lord, thy blessing on us send!

## IV

Whirls the snow, the driver's gay,  
 Katka flies in Vanka's sleigh.  
 And a small electric lantern  
 Burns for them and lights their way —  
 In a soldier's coat he sits,  
 With a face so foolish, stupid,  
 And his black moustache he twists,  
 Curling it. He tells her jokes  
 And embraces Katka dearly,  
 And he talks and talks to her.  
 Back her head has thrown the girl  
 And each tooth shines like a pearl.  
 'Oh, my Katya, Katya, Katya,  
 Katya of the grubby face!'

## V

'On your neck, remember, Katya,  
 Still is fresh that open wound.  
 And below your breast, my Katya,  
 Still is fresh that other scratch.  
 Dance, now, dance,  
 Your legs are pretty.  
 All your garments were with lace?  
 Wear them now, eh? wear them now.  
 With the officers you dallied?  
 Dally now, dally now.

What? Your heart in fear now beats?  
 Surely, you recall that fellow,  
 Officer you used to know?  
 Well, my knife has ne'er known pity.  
 Is your memory weak and faded?  
 Or your thoughts of him all jaded?  
 Come, refresh them in your head,  
 Lead him, lead him to your bed.  
 Chocolates but the best would suit you,  
 When in thin gray spats you stalked?  
 Only officers would suit you?  
 Now with soldiers you have walked.  
 Come with me, and come to sin,  
 Let my happiness begin!'

## VI

The horses fast and faster fly,  
 The driver hurries, flying by.  
 'Stop, stop! Come, Andrew, help me here!  
 You, Pete, run back, and hold them clear.'  
 The guns spit fire with rattle and glow,  
 And to the sky whirls up the snow.  
 Vanka and the driver run away.  
 'Come shoot again, come fire this way!  
 Ah, now, my fellow, you will feel  
 How from another girl to steal.  
 He's gone, the rascal! Wait, now wait,  
 To-morrow, too, will not be late.  
 Where's Katka, though? She's dead, she's dead.  
 A bullet went straight through her head.  
 Ah, Katka, now you lie there low,  
 All like a carcass in the snow.'  
 . . . The revolutionary step beat clear,  
 The relentless foe is awake and near!

## VII

Again the twelve walk on and onward.  
 A gun is slung behind each back.  
 Only the murderer's face is hidden,  
 Only the murderer's face is black.  
 Faster, faster, ever faster,  
 On and on they tread their way,  
 Only one is sad and sadder,  
 Nothing seems to make him gay.  
 'Comrade, why so gloomy, dreary?  
 What has come to make you sad?  
 Pete, what makes you look so weary?  
 Are you sorry Katka's dead?'  
 'Yes, dear comrades, dearest brothers.

Yes, I loved her, loved her long,  
 Many nights so black, enticing,  
 I had spent, with her along.  
 For the light of thought vivacious  
 In her eyes that burned like fire,  
 For the spot which near her shoulder  
 Flamed to rouse in me desire,  
 I had killed her, all for nothing,  
 I had killed her, when the fire . . .'  
 'Shut your mouth, are you a woman?  
 Are you going to cry here, Pete?  
 Do you want our souls turned out,  
 Inside out to hear you weep?  
 Hold yourself together, comrade.  
 And control yourself now, Pete.  
 This is not the time to nurse you  
 We have harder work ahead,  
 And a bigger load to carry.  
 Come now, comrade, raise your head.'  
 And the fellow dims his fire, and more slowly now he walks,  
 And his head he raises higher.  
 And he smiles again in mirth. . . .  
 'T is no sin to have our fun.  
 Close the doors, and close the windows.  
 Thefts and burglaries will come!

## VIII

Above the sombre Neva towers  
 The stilly silence holds its sway.  
 'No more police, all things permitted.  
 Come, boys, be free and gay!'  
 A bourgeois upon the crossing  
 Into his collar hides his nose.  
 An ugly, skulking dog beside him  
 Against him rubs and presses close.  
 The bourgeois, like a hungry hound,  
 Stands, silent as a question mark.  
 Behind him stands the old, worn world,  
 A homeless hound, too weak to bark. . . .

## IX

So they walk, unnamed, unknown,  
 All those twelve, on, slow or fast;  
 And for all things ever ready,  
 Nothing rue they in the past.  
 With their rifles charged and loaded  
 For the foe as yet unseen,  
 Into alleyways they wander  
 Where the storm is like a screen.

On through snowbanks, deep, so deep,  
 You can hardly draw your feet.  
 And before their blinding eyes  
 The red flag still beats and flies.  
 And their even measured tread  
 Bears them on.  
 Any minute may awaken  
 He, the foe so dread,  
 While the snow-like dust is flying,  
 Day and night,  
 To blind their sight.  
 Onward, onward, onward, on!  
 Working people, onward, on!

X

With that sovereign step they're walking.  
 'Who is there? Come, bow your head!'  
 'T is the wind, with red flag stalking;  
 Flies before them, on, ahead.  
 Snowbanks rise so cold before them.  
 'Who's behind them? Where's the wind?'  
 Still that dog, a beggar hungry,  
 Stumbles on and on, behind.  
 Get away, or with my bayonet,  
 Tickling, I shall cut you through.  
 'Get away from me, old world,  
 Or I'll beat you black and blue.'  
 Shows his teeth the hungry hound.  
 Still he follows, cold and spare,  
 Still he follows, cold and hungry . . .  
 'Who is there? Who's walking there?  
 Who is waving flags so crimson,  
 Hiding behind house and tree?  
 Who walks on with step so hasty?  
 Come, surrender now to me.  
 I shall get you, get you surely.  
 Comrade, come, before I fire.'  
 Trakh-takh-takh! The echo after  
 Rolls through houses, rattling low,  
 And the storm with rumbling laughter  
 Rings and jingles in the snow.  
 . . . With that sovereign step they're walking  
 At their heels the hungry hound;  
 While in front, the red flag bearing,  
 In the snow storm undetected,  
 From the bullets free, protected,  
 Walks with soft and gentle measure  
 Through the snow's clear, pearly treasure,  
 In a wreath of roses white,  
 Jesus Christ — the guiding light.

[*The New Statesman*]

### WHAT IS 'PATRIOTISM'?

ALL through the nineteenth century there was a perfectly senseless and even ruinous conflict between the idea of patriotism and the idea of the unity of civilization. People who called themselves internationalists were more often than not people who regarded the love of one's country as a vice. They did not realize that in doing so they were dealing a disastrous blow to the cause the success of which they had at heart. If internationalism can be purchased only by the sacrifice of one's country, the average man will have none of it any more than if it could be purchased only by the sacrifice of his mother and his children. And the instinct of the average man in this matter is sound. If a man is indifferent to the fate of his own family or his own country, it is not likely that he will have a heart to spare for Europe or the world.

The truth is, internationalism as it was commonly preached in the nineteenth century had as little to do with the heart as has the binomial theorem. It was purely a paper doctrine which might be applicable enough to a bloodless world but which ignored human nature. It was preached by many amiable men who were disgusted by the crimes and follies of national and family egoism. The amiable men, however, were exceedingly foolish for, instead of attempting to moderate the egoism, they wished to abolish the nation and the family themselves. Others even wished to abolish religion, because bishops and the clergy in general have so often passed on the blessing of God to every sort of national and personal egoism. They thought of God as a mixture of Tamerlane and a nineteenth-century capitalist. They declared that belief in God

was a form of private property that could not be tolerated. Obviously, there is no future for either internationalism or Socialism which flies in this way in the face of human nature. It is merely a form of intellectual nonsense, and those who profess it might as well play dominoes for all the help they will be able to give in solving the great problems of human coöperation and freedom.

The Socialism that cannot build on the basis of love of country and love of family, on the basis, moreover, of personal freedom and private property, is merely a tea-table problem for enthusiasts. The Utopian, like the painter, must respect his materials, and the materials out of which the new world can be made are chiefly the affectionate and generous instincts and the actual needs of human beings. Many enthusiasts are of the opinion that enthusiasm is a sufficient substitute for personal affection. They prefer enthusiasm for the world at large to affection for England or Italy or France or Ireland. They even imagine that it is a nobler passion.

For ourselves, we believe that at its best it is a noble and a necessary passion, but at its worst it can become a form of mere excited self-righteousness. Enthusiasm in itself is neither a good nor a bad thing. It may mean simply drunkenness as a result of imbibing too much theory. In any case, among common men, any quarrel between the enthusiasm of theory and the enthusiasm of affection must always end in the victory of the latter. That is why internationalists all the world over rallied to the aid of their country at the beginning of the war. The theories broke down: the affections triumphed. It is possible to deplore this but not to deny it. Many earnest men do deplore it. But the fact, it seems to us, is so significant that it would be madness