

LENINGRAD, WHERE GRASS IS GROWING¹

BY RAFFAELE CALZINI

As you step from the station of the October Revolution into Revolution Square, the first thing you see is the heavy bronze steed modeled once by Prince Trubetzkoy, standing square and solemn, with Alexander III gloomy and resolute in the saddle. But in order to leave no doubt in the traveler's mind as to the identity of this monument, the following verse of Demian Bedny, the proletarian poet laureate, is engraved on the front of the pedestal: —

'My father and my son were executed, and my own destiny pursues me even after my death: here I stand like a harmless scarecrow amid a people who have thrown off forever the yoke of aristocracy.'

Here in this square in February 1917 even the archfaithful Cossacks mutinied and turned against the police; hence the change of name from Znamenskaia into Revolution Square. The whole of the dethroned capital has suffered similar changes of name, as well as of appearance. Plazas, streets, palaces, and gardens which formerly recalled only royal or otherwise conventionally illustrious personages have been renamed in honor of famous bygone terrorists and nihilists. The names of people who precipitated the Revolution on its course down the abyss appear chiefly in the triangle formed by the Winter Palace, the Admiralty, and the Fortress of Peter and Paul, where the history of the Ro-

manovs is written in mighty structures.

The city appears resigned to its destiny. During several years of resistance two million people perished or departed, and the one million or so who took their place have entered into possession of a devastated city, which has gradually acquired the placid rhythm of a provincial town where nothing ever happens to sweep the inhabitants off their feet and interrupt their dreamy existence. For a time Dictator Zinoviev erected here a sort of counter-sanctum opposed to the Moscow Kremlin; but Dictator Zinoviev lost his job, and the capital of Peter the Great, deprived of a powerful master, became exactly like a *grande dame* fallen on evil days, mending and remending her clothes, and occasionally displaying some inexpensive jewel which she has so far contrived to keep out of pawn.

The army of factory workers which, with the help of revolted regiments, brought off the Revolution of 1917 numbered some four hundred thousand. It has so much dispersed by this time that it includes hardly a hundred thousand, many of whom are unemployed. Behind the dry statistics that show the glaring difference in population between 1917 and to-day, the living phenomenon once called Petrograd and now Leningrad is achieving its destiny. Having survived two revolutions, famine, freezing, poverty, typhus, cholera, and civil war, the proud creation of Tsar Peter has now entered

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upon its final agony; the bells of Kazan Cathedral, of St. Isaac's, and of Smolny Cathedral are tolling its last hours.

Neva, the great river, is deserted. A somnolent noon hour unenlivened with whistles or sirens or the purring of motors colors with pale sunshine the uninhabited mansions and palaces on the banks. Its thousands of lifeless windows look like closed eyelids. The surface of the magnificent stream reflects the light as freely and clearly as a virgin river. Colossal bridges span its leisurely width, and unhampered it flows to the abandoned ports of the capital. Poets of the Third International! Your twentieth-century poetry, of smoking chimneys, singing fly-wheels, and buzz saws, is contradicted by this immense calm that suggests a general strike. Porcelain-white sea gulls float upon the wavelets; on the quays, unarrested bourgeois mingle with sailors whose muskets look revolutionary but whose white canvas uniforms are elegance itself; naked children, sunburned to a brick red, throw themselves into the water from the granite steps badly broken up by floods. Things and ideas condemned and dying seem to reflect themselves in the river.

Revolutionary delirium has ended in unemployment. Red banners are becoming less frequent, and those that appear have a stunted look; but the signs of misery are overpowering in the suburbs. In the secondhand shops, too, miniature paintings and fur coats, icons and kitchen utensils, are for sale, and entire estates of families dead or dispersed are sold at auction. Even on the Nevski Prospect — now the Twenty-fifth of October Prospect — there are abandoned and dilapidated buildings, though these are more frequent in outlying quarters, where uninterrupted rows of houses big and small are gradually crumbling to pieces,

either naturally or from the effects of fire, bombardment, or dynamite. Every winter adds heavily to the destruction, every late Northern spring sees new irreparable ravages.

The inertia of the people progresses in proportion with the deterioration of the buildings. A new Russia stands by and watches the old one crumble. It seems to say: 'We are experimenting. We are doing it for the good of the world. We want it thus. It does not matter to suffer, since we all suffer.' Or perhaps it repeats the words of Lenin: 'The dictatorship of the proletariat is a stubborn struggle; now shedding blood, now bloodless; now violent, now pacific; economic and military, pedagogic and administrative; a war against the old forces and traditions of society.'

Soldiers in barracks and students in Communist universities are being trained in this way of thinking. But while they level their arms against the bourgeois world, a wave of silence seems to rise from the depopulated city and float against them.

As I was going to sleep on that first day, and the impressions began to assume some kind of order in my mind, another sign of decay came clearly back to my memory. There is hardly a crack in a pavement of the city which has not been invaded by a slow-working enemy — grass. It disappears in one place only to show itself more vigorously in front of some closed-up monastery or half-ruined palace. It does not yet make the color of the city, but it is already quite conspicuously one of its colors; and it blends with the sounds that contribute to the general impression — old pianos out of tune, voices of children, crowing of roosters.

And whenever I want to describe the old capital in a single phrase, these are the words that come to my mind: Leningrad, where grass is growing.

LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

A. B. Walkley

DRAMATIC criticism in London, and indeed the world of polite essays beyond the limits of the British Isles, has suffered a loss in the death of A. B. Walkley. A month or more ago Mr. Walkley had recovered from a severe illness sufficiently to contribute two or three of his inimitable Wednesday articles to the *Times*. But he had reached the age of almost seventy-one, and therefore his death was not wholly unexpected by his acquaintances. It is interesting to review the work and some of the characteristics of this singular critic, to whose urbane paragraphs in the *Times* many readers of theatrical or literary leanings were wont to turn first of all. Mr. Walkley always showed a scorn for the theatre and an ironic wonder at the enthusiasm and concern displayed for it by the many persons whose business it seemed to be to talk or think of nothing else. Alike in his books and in his conversation he pretended to be above the fascination of the footlights, and professed an anxiety to be freed from his engagements as a critic. Yet when his illness prevented him from taking his usual place in the stalls he found himself restless and fretful to be at his job again, and longed impatiently for the time when he could take up his pen once more. It was useless for him to protest that he cared only for the cultivation of his garden. In spite of himself, he was a subject and a slave of the tyrannical spell of the stage.

Temperamentally, Mr. Walkley was a recluse. Other critics he scarcely

knew even by sight. In attending a performance he would go immediately to his stall and sit there throughout the play. He had not the proclivity for wandering about the theatre and gossiping between the acts which is characteristic of so many patrons of the drama, and it was very rarely indeed that his conscience allowed him to leave before the final curtain. One occasion is remembered in which he faithfully endured two acts of a grotesque performance only to leave shortly after the beginning of the third, when it became clear that no miraculous improvement was to occur in the standard of the play. The next day an acid notice appeared in the *Times*. But in his later days Walkley could not be accused of intolerance in his general attitude toward the plays which he reviewed. Perhaps his aloofness from other men bred a more good-natured feeling in him, or perhaps his disdain for enthusiasm had its counterpart in an equal disdain for vituperation. His superiority to enthusiasm was perhaps more put on than actual, for he had a warm sympathy for France and for things French. He never could resist talking and writing about Jane Austen with an admiration which her most devoted partisans could scarcely exceed. He once lectured to a learned society on this favorite novelist of his and informed his hearers of the many times she had mentioned shrubbery in the course of her works. He had counted all the references to shrubbery and found them legion, in contrast to a single lonely reference to a kiss. Besides his liking for Miss Austen, he