

SOCIETY
IN
ST. PETERSBURG



The Imperial Palace.

RUSSIA is a very different country, with entirely different customs, from most other parts of Europe, and therefore it is all the more interesting to the stranger, though perhaps there may be not a few drawbacks to the comforts of the inhabitants of that mighty Empire. It must be remembered that Russia was the last of the great European countries to become civilised; and in the days when Great Britain, France, Germany, and the other European powers were fairly civilised, Russia was still in an almost barbaric state, and had little or no intercourse with the other European countries.

Even now, at the end of the nineteenth century, there are many districts in Russia where the culture is not equal to that which was found in the rest of Europe four hundred years ago, and in some of the Asiatic portions of the Empire the inhabitants are complete barbarians.

One thing has been thoroughly well learnt by the Russians—namely, the love of luxury. They are the most luxurious people in the world; but this only applies to the great nobles, for the peasants are in a more miserable state than in any other country. In the houses of the members of the Imperial Family and of the nobles, a luxury is to be found such as is unknown in most other countries; and the comfort and

magnificence that are found in the homes of the nobility and the great palaces at St. Petersburg cannot be rivalled by anything seen in Paris, Vienna, or London.

It is a well-known saying, "Scratch the Russian, and you will find the Tartar." And this is very true; for the Russian, though outwardly the most civilised of the civilised, has experienced civilisation for too short a period to be totally tamed, and very slight causes are sufficient to bring out traits that are not known amongst the inhabitants of other countries. It is, however, both interesting and instructive to associate with



DUCHESS EUGENIE OF OLDENBURG.

Russians, and those of us who have spent a part of our lives in the Empire have found much that has pleased, and, what is still better, have found it possible to make real friendships with our Russian acquaintances—a rare thing in these days of hurry.

St. Petersburg is both an interesting and delightful town in which to spend a winter, for the houses are perfectly arranged, and, if you have the necessary introductions, it is possible to find in the Russian capital a society as delightful as it is intellectual and amusing. Introductions are an absolute necessity, as no one who is unknown can hope to obtain an entrance into the inner circle.

Most foreign ambassadors and their families like being in Russia, as great hospitality is shown them; but the manners and customs are in some respects very unlike those prevalent in other European countries, and even in the splendour of the life there is something barbaric that seems a remnant of the Middle Ages. There is one rule in Russia, as regards Court life, which cannot fail to strike a foreigner with surprise, as it is directed against the independent power of the nobility, and renders the greater number of the members of the old noble families absolutely without any influence in the affairs of the country, a fact that is thought to make the safety of the Emperor and his house more secure.

There is a strict rule that only those members of the nobility who have posts at Court or Government positions, or are, through their near relations, connected with the Court, can make their appearance before their sovereigns, or, what is still harder, have any acknowledged position in Society or in the Empire. It does not matter how high the rank may be, or how ancient the

family, no one is admitted to Court without the qualification of some post. This law, which is observed most strictly, naturally keeps a great number of loyal persons from going to St. Petersburg for the season; and in consequence those persons who have not the *entrée* at Court prefer to remain on their estates, or to spend their time in France or Germany, where their rank is acknowledged, and they are received with much more honour than in their own country.

There is a good and a bad side to this rule. To begin with, the fact that an *entrée* to Court practically means a post there

or under Government causes all those who wish for these privileges to strive for places at Court for themselves and the members of their families, and, in consequence, there is an immense amount of intriguing, for a good post means not only good fortune for the happy possessor, but also possible positions in the future for the members of his family, as well as the privilege of attending the Court festivities and being recognised by the Emperor and Empress and the members of the Imperial Family.

The Emperor is assured of any amount of

servants, but it is a question whether they are as loyal to him as could be wished; and as the posts often remain in one family, an inadequate person is often placed in a position that requires a man or woman of exceptional ability.

There are thousands of loyal Russians who have the means of spending a season at the capital, and who would be only too thankful to have the opportunity of seeing their Emperor if they could have personal intercourse with him, but who are prevented by the rigid Court etiquette from ever speaking to him or even seeing him. Personal intercourse with the Sovereign is



GRAND-DUCHESS ALEXANDRA JOSEPHINA.



THE EMPRESS OF RUSSIA, WITH TWO OF HER DAUGHTERS.

out of the question. Many of these nobles are the possessors of great wealth, and would undoubtedly be a great support to the throne were it possible for them to be more in touch with the Court; but as they are not considered worthy of being presented to the monarch, they remain on their estates, or go to Paris, the Riviera, and other European resorts, where they find all they want without the restrictions which render life in Russia often so difficult.

Court etiquette in Russia is in many respects much more strict than in any other country, and it is impossible for even the members of the nobility who have the *entrée* to have any but the most formal intercourse with the members of the Imperial Family, whose movements and actions are governed by the

most rigid rules, which may never be transgressed.

It is contrary to etiquette for the Tzar or Tzaretza, or any of the Grand-Dukes or -Duchesses to pay a visit to any one who is not of Royal birth, and, in consequence, no visits are paid by them to the members of the nobility; and should they wish to see them, the message comes in the form of a command, when the gentleman or lady must go to the Emperor or Empress, or the Prince or Princess who has expressed a wish to see him or her. This rule is, however, relaxed on one occasion, when all those officials who have their dwellings in the huge Winter Palace receive occasional visits from their Emperor and Empress, as it is not supposed to be contrary to etiquette for their Majesties to visit those of their subjects who live under the same roof as they do themselves. Naturally, the



GRAND-DUCHESS PETER, WITH HER CHILDREN.



THE DOWAGER-EMPRESS OF RUSSIA.

residences in the Winter Palace, which is a town in itself, are always given to special favourites and the very highest Court and State officials, as they confer such privileges.

It was hoped by many people in Russia that the Tzaretza Alexandra-Feodorowna, with her partially English education, might have tried to set aside many of the obsolete forms which still obtain at the Russian Court; but so far Her Majesty's health has been such that she has appeared but little at any State festivities, and all her spare time has been spent with her husband and children, to whom she is devoted, and in endeavouring to promote every good work that is possible in the Empire, in consequence of which she has as yet had but little time to try to reform the etiquette of her Court.

Although these strict forms are undoubtedly irksome to Her Majesty, she is much too wise to try to effect a revolution too quickly, and she is much more interested in working for the good of the nation than in trying to make life more easy for herself. The consequence is that, for the present, everything remains as it was under the rule of the late Tzar and his consort, and the present Emperor and Empress lead the

quietest of lives, satisfied to try to do their duty in their own country and to the rest of the world.

The Empress appears very little in public; and owing to the mourning for the late Queen of Denmark and for the Hereditary Prince of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, there have been hardly any Court festivities this year, and the season at St. Petersburg, as regards the Court, has been unusually quiet.

The Dowager-Empress of Russia has very little in common with the present Empress. During her reign St. Petersburg was the gayest of all gay capitals, and she was the centre of the pleasantest set in her family life, liked by every one, and the idol of her husband.

The amusing story that the present Empress forbids the ladies of her Court to smoke is utterly without foundation. It is true that Her Majesty does not approve of ladies smoking; but she could not forbid it, as her own mother-in-law is an inveterate smoker, and it is the rule, and not the exception, for Russian ladies to have this habit. Naturally, no lady can smoke in the presence of her Sovereign, unless when with her in private and special permission is given to her; but otherwise there is no rule against smoking amongst the ladies of the Court or the present Empress of Russia.

One of the most popular members of the Russian Imperial Family is the Grand-Duchess Vladimir, *née* Duchess of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, who is one of the few princesses married to a Russian Grand-Duke who has refused to be converted to the orthodox faith. Her Imperial Highness had to endure considerable persecution in former years; but now, under the rule of the present Tzar, who is very liberal in his views, her position has become an easy one, and she is allowed to follow quietly the dictates of her conscience.

The Grand-Duchess Vladimir is as charming as she is clever, and, during the twenty-five years that she has lived in Russia, she has won many friends and admirers, and has become a great favourite with the people, as well as with the members of her husband's family. Their Imperial Highnesses take a great interest in the progress of Art in Russia, and are always ready to help in all charitable entertainments.

The Grand-Duchess Serge of Russia, who is the elder sister of the Tzaretza, has, until now, been only seen occasionally at the capital, as her husband's duties have kept her at Moscow; but now that he has received another post, she expects to be more in St. Petersburg, to her great delight and the still greater delight of her sister, who is devoted to her. Her Imperial Highness, since her conversion to the Greek Church, has had a much happier life, and the fact that her youngest sister is now the Empress has very much altered her position for the better.

In the intimate family Imperial circle at St. Petersburg we must also include the Tzar's eldest sister, the Grand-Duchess Xenia, who is married to the Grand-Duke Alexander-Michaelovitch, and whose amiable, charming character makes her loved by every one who has the honour of her acquaintance. She is not beautiful, but her influence for good is very great, and she is as wise as she is virtuous; she is able to do an immense amount of good amongst the members of her own family, and in Court Society her influence is always for good.

The Grand-Duke and -Duchess Constantin of Russia are perhaps the most sympathetic of the members of the Imperial Family to the present Empress. The Grand-Duchess, who was a German princess of the Ducal House of Saxe-Altenburg, is very charming, and finds her greatest happiness in her home life with her husband and children. The Grand-Duke, who is liberal in his views, is a poet and an author, and is one of the most talented princes of his time. He has a great influence with the Tzar, who thoroughly appreciates his upright, honourable character, and who has a great respect for his opinions. Their Imperial Highnesses spend a great part of their life in the country, and occupy their time in working for their people.

What probably strikes a stranger most is the fact that there are always card-tables to be found at dinners, balls, evening parties, and afternoon teas in Russia; and even after theatres and concerts gambling always ends the day, either at the clubs or in private houses. This passion for play has been the ruin of many a Russian, both men and women



GRAND-DUCHESS CONSTANTIN.

being infected with a thirst for gambling; and nothing seems capable of stopping their mad race for the excitement.

The taste for gambling in Russia is so well known that every one who entertains knows that it is necessary to have a room set apart for the card votaries; and the play is so high that in private houses many men and women have been ruined in a night.

Gambling is second nature to the Russian; and it is an unfortunate fact that the habit has been introduced by them to every part of the Continent, so that, instead of the more civilised nations teaching the Russians how wrong it is to gamble, the Russian has taught them how pleasant it is to rook one's neighbours; and the old vice, which had been partly quenched, has reappeared amongst us with double strength.

A Russian woman has almost always a perfect skin in early youth, and she is, as a young girl, most charming, and often very pretty. In middle age, however, she loses her beauty; but she is always good company, and in Society there is no woman who can be so charming and so companionable as a well-bred Russian lady: she is always a good linguist, has seen a great deal of the world, is as a rule witty, good-tempered—at least, outwardly—exquisitely gowned, and with great powers of fascination.

The houses in St. Petersburg are very

charming, and are so perfectly arranged that, though the winter is arctic, no cold is felt, and it is possible to feel the winter much less in St. Petersburg than in a country house in England. All the passages are warmed in a most thorough manner, and the buildings are so well constructed that the cold cannot penetrate the walls; and within the houses the atmosphere is equable, and always the same, night and day.

The separation of the classes in Russia is very strict, and there is not the slightest chance of the rules being upset for any one, so that no one can hope to obtain an entrance to the Court who has not the right to the *entrée*. The Winter Palace is like a town in itself, as it consists of endless buildings, and houses hundreds of people, as well as the Tzar and Tzaretza and their family and Court, when in the capital. There is very great luxury prevalent in St. Petersburg, so that it is quite impossible for the nobles attached to the Court to economise, a certain amount of state being indispensable to their position. It

is this that makes so many Russians of good family live for the greater part of the year abroad, and only go for a few months each year to their own country. As in England, the food is cheap; but everything else is expensive, and it is necessary to keep many more servants than is the case in Italy, France, or Germany, this alone adding very greatly to the expense of living in Russia. Germany is the El Dorado of the Russian aristocrat with moderate means, as here he can meet his compatriots, and economise so greatly that it is possible for him to

spend several months each year in Russia, where he keeps up a necessarily dignified appearance, and then returns to Germany for the rest of the year, where he can live quite as comfortably for a quarter of the money. This is, perhaps, a pleasant state of things for the individual; but for the Russian nation it is undoubtedly a great evil, as good, worthy people are taken out of the country, and those who ought to live on their estates and spend a portion of their time in the capital, draw their revenues from Russia and spend their money mostly in foreign countries, their tenants

being left under the charge of overseers; so that the same evil which has brought Ireland to the verge of ruin stares Russia in the face.

Of late years there has been more touch between the classes, and the gentle influence of the Empress is already telling on her *entourage*, so that we may hope in the coming generation to see many of the improvements which are so necessary for the happiness and prosperity of the nation.

Formerly the Em-

press was a null; and even now, by law, she is only the property of her husband, for until comparatively late years the wives of the Russians were kept like the Turkish ladies of to-day, and were allowed no liberty or intercourse with the outside world, being considered nothing more than the goods of their husbands.

The magnificence of the luxury in Russia is barbaric in its splendour, and the pomp and grandeur of a Court festivity cannot be equalled in the whole of Europe.



GRAND-DUCHESS VLADIMIR.