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Our Little Russian Cousin



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Mary Hazelton Wade

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Preface

A large country, called Russia, lies in the eastern part of Europe. It stretches from the icy shores of the Arctic Ocean, on the north, to the warm waters of the Black Sea, on the south.

Many of the children of this great country have fair skins and blue eyes. They belong to the same race as their English and American cousins, although they speak a different language.

Some of them live in palaces, and have everything that heart could desire; but a vast number of them are very poor, and their parents are obliged to work hard to keep the grim wolf, hunger, away from the door.

Russia, as a nation, is very young, as compared with many others. She is still in her childhood. Perhaps it is because of this that her people do not enjoy as much freedom as ourselves.

A few years ago the Emperor of Russia spoke some words to which the people of the western world listened with surprise and delight. He said, "I wish there were peace between all countries, and that we could settle our differences with each other without fighting." These wise words did a great deal of good. The emperor, without doubt, meant what he said. He did wish heartily that wars should be at an end. He has not felt able, however, to carry out his ideas of peace, for at this very moment he is at war with the people of Japan.

Let us hope that this war will soon be over, and that the nation to which our Russian Cousin belongs will become as truly free and wise as she is now large and powerful.

Malden, Mass., *May 1904.*

Our Little Russian Cousin

Petrovna is a dainty little floweret of the cold lands far away. She is your little Russian cousin. Her home is in the largest country of this great round ball, the Earth. How fair are her cheeks, how blue her eyes, and what long, beautiful, yellow hair she has! Her hands are so white and soft and plump, I know you would like to squeeze them.

She is very gentle and ladylike. Her mamma has taught her that is the right way to behave. Yet she is full of fun, and laughs at every joke that her brother Ivan makes. They have great sport together, these two children. Petrovna is ten, and Ivan eight years old.

Sometimes they play they are grown up, just as you do. Then Petrovna puts on her mother's gown with a long train, and Ivan dresses himself up like a soldier. Petrovna "makes believe" that she is a princess at the court of the Emperor. She powders her hair, and puffs it on the top of her head, and places feathers in it. Ivan cuts shining ornaments out of a sheet of tin and fastens them on his coat. He pretends that these were given him for bravery in battle.

These little children live in a fine city near the sea. Its name is St. Petersburg. The streets look very much like those of Chicago and New York. There are many grand palaces, however, and the churches are quite different from ours.

Perhaps you would like to know why St. Petersburg was built. A long time ago Peter the Great was the ruler of Russia. There was no large city in the country near the sea at that time. Peter said, "If my country is to be powerful, I must have a city that is near the coast and that looks toward the rest of Europe."

Peter went to the shores of the river Neva, near the Baltic Sea. The land was low and marshy. That did not matter to him. He sent out an order for workmen. Great numbers of men came to the spot he had chosen, to prepare it for streets and houses. Thousands of piles must first be driven into the marshy soil. Millions of stones must be brought to fill it up before streets could be laid. It was such unhealthful work that, before the city was finished, hundreds of the poor workmen died of fever. But the work was done, and Peter the Great went to live there.

He brought all his court with him. He made the place his capital. It is now the most important city of Russia, and one of the largest in the world. It is often called the "Czar's Window," because he is said to look out over Europe from this place. (I forgot to tell you that the Emperor of Russia is called the Czar.)

Let us come back to Petrovna and Ivan, who are just going out on the river to skate. Their home is almost a palace, it is so big and grand. Their father is a merchant. He buys tea from the East and sells it to the people of his own country. He has grown so rich that he owns a fine house in the city, in which the family live during the long, cold winter. They go to another home on an island of the river Neva in the summer-time.

Let us look into the big drawing-room, where papa and mamma entertain their friends in the evening. How high the walls are! At one side of the room is an immense porcelain stove. It looks somewhat like a tomb. It is big enough for a play-house for Petrovna and Ivan. A big wood fire is built in the stove on cold winter mornings. When it has burnt down to glowing coals, the chimney is closed up, and port-holes from the stove are opened. Then the heat rushes out into the room. How close the air becomes! You do not wonder at it when you look around and notice that there are three sets of windows at each casing. There is only one pane in the whole room which can be opened to let in the outside air. The Russians are afraid of having the cold enter their houses. They have enough of it out-of-doors during at least six months of the year.

What is that strange-looking vessel on the side table? It is of shining copper. The maid polishes it very often, as it is used every evening by papa and mamma. They call it a "samovar," and no Russian home is complete without one. You probably can't guess the reason, so I will have to tell you.

You must understand that the people of this far-away land are great tea-drinkers. Tea in the morning, tea at noon, tea at night, and tea between-whiles. They like it fresh, too. Tea always tastes best and is least harmful when drunk as soon as it is made. So these good Russians must have something near them on which to heat the water. In the middle of the samovar is a cylinder in which hot coals are placed, and the water is heated around this cylinder.

The boiling water is taken out whenever it is wanted and poured on the tea in papa's tumbler or mamma's cup. No milk, if you please, to suit their taste, and no sugar *in* the tea. They prefer to take a lump of the very hardest sugar in their fingers and nibble it as they swallow the beverage they like so much.

A slice of lemon is often put in the tumbler with the tea. People in our own country have begun to copy this custom, and drink what we call "Russian tea." No doubt you have heard of it.

Let us turn to the wall and notice the large picture of the Madonna and the infant Jesus hanging there. A lamp is burning in front of it. If Petrovna comes into the room now, she will go to that picture at once and cross herself before it. Every devout Russian has at least one religious picture in his house, and will always pay it reverence when he enters.

If a thief should happen to come into Petrovna's house in the night, he would not dare to steal in the presence of such a picture, however brave he might be. He would first hang a cloth over the painting. Then he would go on with his wicked work without further thought.

There is a large organ in this grand drawing-room. It is played almost automatically. (A big word, isn't it?) Petrovna and Ivan have music boxes here, as the Russians are very fond of music. I fear they are rather lazy, though, for many of their musical instruments do not depend on the skill of those who play upon them. They make what we call mechanical music.

There are several little tables about the room, as Petrovna's mamma and papa are fond of playing cards with their friends. Indeed, you need not be surprised at seeing the rich merchant playing a game at his store any hour of the day. He smokes and drinks tea while he plays. And mamma does the same. Yes, my dears, the women of Russia, of your own white race, roll their dainty cigarettes and smoke them as commonly as the men do. Petrovna will doubtless do this very thing when she is older. When she comes to America she will probably be much surprised to see only men practising the habit.

Petrovna and Ivan go to bed much later than their cousins across the Atlantic, while their parents often sit up till three or four o'clock in the morning. Such a gay city as they live in! Balls and parties, theatres and sleigh-rides, night after night in the winter season. Of course people cannot rise early for breakfast if they are awake nearly all night. It is not often that Petrovna's papa goes to his store before ten or eleven o'clock in the morning. The whole city looks sleepy and dismal before that time. The sky is gray and dreary, and the fog is thick and damp. The stores are closed, and few people are to be seen.

But it is dinner-time. Here come the children with their skates on their arms, and with them are the nurse and their baby brother. He has been out for a ride in his little sleigh. He is wrapped up so tightly you can hardly see his fat cheeks and the dimple in his chin.

As nurse takes off her hood and cape, I want you to notice her dress. It is the national costume of Russia. She wears a loose white undergarment with full short sleeves. It is low in the neck. She has a dark skirt over this. The band is fastened around her body under the arms, while straps over the shoulders hold it in place. I must not forget to mention a large white apron, which is fastened by a belt around her waist. Nor would she think herself dressed without her ear-rings and bead necklace. The moment her hood is taken off she puts a high cap of bright-coloured muslin on her head. This is always worn in the house to show she is a married woman.

And here come papa and mamma. Papa is a fine-looking man with a long beard. Mamma looks good and kind, and has a sweet voice, but she could not be called pretty.

Dinner is waiting, and all have fine appetites. As they enter the dining-room they do not sit down to the table at once. One by one they go up to a sideboard where all sorts of cold dishes are served. There are dried beef, smoked salmon, cheese, radishes, and other relishes of which Russians

are fond. Each one helps himself to some of these dainties. They take small portions, however, for this is what they call the *zakushka*, or appetiser. You need not try to pronounce it unless you wish. It is to make them hungrier for the solid meal, which comes afterward. How these people do eat! First there is cabbage soup, made of chopped cabbage which has been boiled with a piece of meat. Petrovna first dips her spoon into a dish of barley beside her plate, and then into the soup. She is very fond of this national dish. The richest and the poorest people, even the Czar himself, eat it continually and never tire of it. The only difference is that the poor peasant can seldom afford the meat which improves its flavour so much.

Next comes a pie made of fish and raisins. It seems rather queer to us to have these two things cooked together, but our Russian cousins think it is very good. And now a roast lamb is served with salted cucumbers, followed by buckwheat pudding, and ices, for dessert.

Last, but not least, the samovar is set on the table, and cup after cup of delicious tea is drunk by the family.

I forgot to tell you that sour cream was served with the soup, and papa and mamma drank some cordial while they ate of the *zakushka*. This was to encourage their appetites still more. But I certainly can't see what need there was. They ate and ate, and drank tea and still more tea, till it seemed as if they would be made ill.

It is said that Russians are among the largest eaters in the world. If this be so, I do not wonder that so many of them grow stout. This makes me think of a story I read the other day. Perhaps you would like to hear it. There was a certain soldier in Russia who ate so much that his friends used to lay wagers with strangers as to the quantity he could eat at a single time. His friends generally won, too. It happened one day that the colonel of the regiment made a large wager that the man could eat a whole sheep at one meal. The cook prepared the sheep in many ways, in order to encourage the man's appetite. Of one part he made a pie, of another a stew, of still another a hash, and so on.

The man swallowed one preparation after another until the sheep was almost eaten, when he looked up and said, "If you give me so much *zakushka*, I am afraid I will not be able to eat the sheep when it is brought in." You understand the joke, of course, when you remember that the *zakushka* is made of the side dishes one eats before the regular meal is begun. Of course the colonel won his bet.

Besides the cabbage soup, there are still others of which the Russians are very fond. One of these is made with cold beer with pieces of cucumber, meat, and red herrings floating about in it, as well as bits of ice. Still another is made of a fish called the *sterlet*, which is found only in the Volga, the principal river of Russia. Then there are trout soup, perch soup, and several other kinds of which you probably never heard.

But now let us leave the dinner-table and go out into Petrovna's yard. At one end of it there is a high platform. It is built at least twenty feet above the ground. Steps lead up to it on one side, while from the other a long slant reaches down to a frozen pond below. This slant looks as though it were solid shining ice. But underneath there are stout boards to keep it smooth and unbending. They are fastened to a very strong framework. Now guess, if you please, why this ice hill, as it is called, was made in Petrovna's back yard. To amuse her and her little brother, of course.

They are very fond of coasting. They like it even better than skating. So their thoughtful papa hired two workmen. They made the framework and laid great blocks of ice close together upon the slant. They then poured water over the ice to make it perfectly smooth. The cold winds blew upon it. It froze solid in a few minutes, and not a crack in the ice can be seen. It will last all winter, for in Russia the warm days, that we sometimes have in January, are scarcely known.

Petrovna and Ivan take their sleds every morning as soon as lessons are over, and away they run up the steps of their ice hill. Hurrah! Now hold your breath, for away they go, faster and faster, down the hill and over the pond below. How they shout with delight! They travel more quickly than any express train you ever saw.

I am afraid you will be a little envious of their fun and wish you had a private ice hill like theirs. The best part of it is that these little Russians don't have to wait for a good snow-storm to make coasting for them. It is always on hand and made to order.

Petrovna has a hill made of polished wood at her summer home on the island. It cost a good deal of money, but her papa thought, "What does that matter? The children like coasting better than any other sport, so coasting they shall have."

There are public ice-hills in several parts of the city. Both old and young people are very fond of coasting. The Emperor himself has a slide of beautiful mahogany in his palace. It has been polished until it shines like one of the finest pieces of furniture.

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