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Nelson Fell

Two Unpublished Documents

Friday, 9 February 1917 [Petrograd]

Got up and put on our dress suits. Drove to Tsarskoe Selo station and boarded 6 pm train. Arrived at T-S at 1.40. There we were met by footman in grey capecoat, black cocked-hat with gold and red trimmings. Very haughtily promenaded down the platform and outside was a carriage with a coachman in same uniform as footman on box, drawn by beautiful grey horses. Drove through the town and about a half mile out came to the gates. The sentry saluted but we were not stopped. We passed two or three other sentries, one of whom looked in as we drove by and about 100 yards came to the palace. A big building; facade about 200 feet long, Greek porches at each end. The palace is yellow, pale yellow plaster outside; windows, columns, etc. white. Standing among many trees, the front very close to the road (100 yds). The park stretches out behind. At the left hand porch is a semi-circular range of steps. At the other porch the carriage drive climbs a grade to the level of the first floor of the palace, and under a porch, between the two columns and the palace. Here we were handed out by an ordinary commissioner-looking man.

The doors were thrown open and for thirty seconds we were paralysed. A row of flunkies were there in gorgeous clothes; the head one in a paralysing costume. Gold, green trimmings, brown canvas leggings, a band round his head from which hung and drooped over his left shoulder a mass of green and orange and red ostrich plumes. They all said come in. We entered a big room, bare parquet floor, not very striking. Then we started on a pilgrimage, after arranging our ties and getting the Gift Book ready. We followed through the most gorgeous place I ever saw. The rooms were not enormous; in the whole length of the palace we passed through about seven rooms or eight. They all faced the great park behind; deep in snow and the sun poured in floods over the gilded furniture, and the lovely rugs and pictures fairly blazed. The walls were a shiny white plaster, like purest marble, with pillars square and flat of pale coloured marble at intervals. On the walls were very beautiful pictures and all about were marvellous *objects d'art*, books, etc. One room was a library, very wonderful. Another was obviously a play room.

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Finally, we were left in a corner room, sun blazing in. Furniture so heavily gilt it looked like gold plate, covered with reddish stuff. Marvellous rugs, vases, etc. On the walls [Edouard] Detaille's huge 'Return of the Cossacks', a wonderful Gobelin portrait of some queen in brilliant red, and a couple of children. Here we waited about fifteen minutes, nervous but not so very nervous. Then we were taken through a passage to a small greenish room and bowed our way in. We were left alone with the Empress and Olga and Tatiana. Lydig kissed their hands and presented Hamilton and I. Lydig made a little speech. Hamilton presented his book. Then there was a little general talk about the ambulances and their work, and in 15 minutes all was over.

Nothing could have been more delightful. Absolutely informal and very friendly. Just as simple and nice as they could be. The Empress in purple velvet, ropes of pearls; otherwise an ordinary simple dress. The daughters in nursing costume. Olga very beautiful, dark, warm colouring, and pure Slav. Tatiana pale and more refined and very handsome. Neither of them spoke very much, but they were simple shy girls and nothing else. They are brought up simply, they say. The Empress was very beautiful, thin, refined; high hooked nose, and sad, but very determined, and from the way she spoke about the ambulances, very capable and intelligent. We kissed their hands. Lydig slouched out but we luckily backed out and bowed at the door, which they were obviously waiting for. From the way the girls acted, perhaps, it occurred to us, we should not have kissed their hands.

Drove to the station and our dream was over. I never was so pleased in my life. The whole thing was just as delightfully informal and pleasant as it could be. Our summons to go out had come in two days. There was no sign of surveillance. The Gift Book was not examined; why, I have not the least idea.

Nelson Fell, Letter to His Mother, 13 April 1917 [Petrograd]

Every day brings a change.

When I was in Moscow I made a jolly little side trip to Kazan, one of the most beastly and yet most interesting things I have ever done. Kazan is only six hundred miles away - a twenty-four hour run in ordinary times. Now, only one train runs a day, and I hired a porter to stand seven hours in line to buy my ticket. He got a first class one and then went and sat two hours in my seat keeping it for me. I came down at 11 pm expecting a nice berth, into which I would crawl be-slipped and pyjamaed and have a jolly sleep. There was an enormous mob gathered about the train (this was before the revolution, things are worse now). I pushed through and climbed into a car. The crowd in the corridors let me by, but finally three men refused. I lowered my head and used my arms and they were too surprised to stop me. There were two first class cars. The train was overdue to leave. It was like a nightmare trying to find my luggage in that mass of humanity. Finally I did, gave him five rubles. He demanded ten, which is what they do now. (They fix their own tips.) I gave him 7.50 and threw him out.

I was in a four bunk compartment. On the two lower berths three people were sitting; on the two upper, two, making ten in all, including myself. Luckily I had a corner seat. The people included a wounded soldier, two officers, a Russian merchant, three Tatars, two women, one baby, and myself. On the floor was an indescribable litter of kettles, bundles, cigarette stubs, matches, filth of every description. The corridor luckily wasn't full, so you could stand in that. Imagine my feelings after arriving in plenty of time to catch the train. Hearing the three bells go while struggling madly to find my seat, then finally to arrive and find a situation like that, and I did not appear to my fellow passengers in a calm dignified way, as an apparition from a foreign and superior world, but very hot and dishevelled and gloomy, not at all imposing. We started an hour late and jogged on all night.

By morning we were eight hours late. Till evening it wasn't so bad. The aisle wasn't crowded, and though everything in the compartment was dirty and crowded, we could keep the door open and get second-hand air. By evening we were twelve hours late, and about 7 pm a huge crowd

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poured into the car. We shut the doors to keep them out and from that time till we arrived, twenty hours later, that door was never opened. The crowd outside was so densely jammed against the door we couldn't have opened it without having a flood of people in our compartment. All that night till 4 pm next day we sat. The men smoked interminably. The women chattered, the babies howled. The only relieving thing was that it all was so awful one knew it was doing one good! The double windows prevented any air coming in. The ventilators prevented any going out for they were broken. The door was shut tight. The steam heat rattled interminably in the pipes and the thermometer was over a hundred. Yet no one complained. All were resignedly cheerful. The worst part was one knew one had to do it again coming back. By immense bribery I got one of the six first class tickets sold. The car was again crowded, but not so badly, eight in the compartment and we could keep the door open.

Moscow is much more optimistic about the revolution than Petrograd. That is because Petrograd is such an utterly rotten and corrupt city, the rottenest city in the world. Nothing has ever been seen before or since to compare with the utter vileness of Petrograd. In Moscow the soldiers all salute and the workmen are going back to work, while in Petrograd there is utter anarchy and confusion. No one obeys anybody else. Luckily the soldiers at the front are beginning to send ultimatums to the workmen, saying they must get back to work or there will be a row. The enormous desertions from the front are stopping. The men heard the land was going to be divided and they all went home to get the spoil. There was utter confusion. Luckily now the men are going back. The melting snow gives them two or three weeks' breathing space before the German attack. Everyone expects it and the opinion is about evenly divided whether they are going to be before Petrograd or not this summer. At present there is nothing but an utterly disorganised and demoralized army to stop them. They want mostly the war to go on, but they want to elect all their own officers, and heaven knows what other folly. It's fine that we're in the war, but over here we've no idea of how people are taking it, and if people aren't going to see it through, it will be bad. Everyone fears Russia is definitely out of it and an utter dead weight to the Allies. We have alternate fits of hope for the country and utter despair.