



Strange Siberia Along the Trans-Siberian Railway

Marcus Lorenzo Taft

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This travel volume is from 1911 and is a journey from the Great Wall of China to the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

Excerpts from the Introduction:

If Henry van Dyke's analysis of The Spirit of America as stated in his lectures before the cultured audiences at the Sorbonne, Paris, is correct, then travel in a foreign country, or observing foreigners in other lands, does not necessarily give an outsider a true insight into the real genius of a people. A person must have lived long enough in a foreign land, and so mingled with its inhabitants as to know their hopes and fears, their life and ideals, before he is able to form a just estimate of the genius of a nation. Now, our trio were simply passing travelers. These are nothing more than imperfect sketches of travel roughly drawn, to keep fresh some salient sights on our unique trip.

It certainly was unique in one respect at least, for not until Marion and her mother stopped over at Irkutsk had any other representative of the fair sex, other than Russian, ever visited that thriving Siberian city. This such as we in vain searched for, and of which we would gladly have availed ourselves before undertaking this overland journey.

Throughout our journeyings in the Tsar's dominions, we were entirely free from any dread of being shadowed by a Russian spy. During our sojourn at Tomsk, the capital of Siberia, we were not even asked to show our passport. Who can say but that our exemption from all such espionage, of which travelers in Russia so generally complain, was due to the fact that a playful child was unconsciously acting as mascot for our Taft party?

Travelers sometimes complain of incivility on the part of Russian officials. Such was not our experience. Now and here I desire to record our high appreciation of their unfailing courtesy. This was especially noticeable from officials along the railway lines and in public buildings. In the descriptions of Irkutsk and Tomsk, later on, more detailed accounts will be found.

At Saint Petersburg there were two objects, which we particularly desired to examine, the Codex Sinaiticus, and the Vase of Nikopol. One Brooklynite had lately written to a New York periodical, how his party had been hurried through the Imperial Library, without seeing this celebrated manuscript, discovered by Tischendorf in the Convent of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. He, however, determined to see it. So he relates how he stubbornly refused to leave the building, after all the rest of his party had gone out, until he succeeded in gaining his point. Without let or hindrance it was shown to us, passing travelers. Provided with a card from our old friend, United States Consul

Eagsdale, formerly of Tientsin, China, we were escorted by a polite custodian to the stand, where this sacred treasure was carefully wrapped in a faded yellowish cloth. This he removed, allowing us leisurely to gaze at this famous parchment and to examine the handwriting of Professor Tischendorf attesting the genuineness of this ancient New Testament, so marvelously preserved to our day.

A new cycle marks the East, both far and near. Tremendous changes have already taken place. The commingled strains of Eastern and Western life in Constantinople and Tokyo are weaving a far more beautiful fabric than Joseph's coat of many colors. Shanghai and Cairo in their weird, ever-changing color effects, and their incessant, startling contrasts, present par excellence the most fascinating "living pictures" in the world. Unter den Linden, Champs Elyse'es, Rotten Row, and Riverside Drive, with all their gorgeous display, are tame in comparison.

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