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London
under the
Bolsheviks

A Londoner's Dream on
Returning from Petrograd

by

John Cournos

173, Fleet Street, E.C.4.

PRICE THREEPENCE.

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K. Cournos

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FOREWORD

This is not a fantasy, in spite of the title. It is a true and precise picture of Petrograd during the first few months of the Bolshevist Revolution. The author has placed the scenes in London merely to emphasise the realities of the Bolshevist nightmare, to bring it home to those who do not quite realise the nature of the Russian upheaval. If the result appears fantastic, let the reader beware of blaming it on the imagination of the author. The author would feel flattered, were it not that, unfortunately, he is too well aware of what his eyes have seen.

After all, the first few months were but a mild prelude to the orgies of horror which followed. Other witnesses, who have arrived more recently, are in a position to make the scenes set forth here appear heaven-like in comparison.

But there will always be doubting Thomases. It is to be hoped that the opportunity will never come for their eyes to be opened, for the sake of those millions who would be the inevitable sufferers.

London under the Bolsheviks

On returning from Russia lately, having endured the discomforts of life so long, both in Russia and on my journey, my first thought was to enjoy a few luxuries of civilised life. From a good hot bath I therefore proceeded to a good hot meal to the tune of four or five glasses of port—I kept no count—and from the meal to what appeared to me a luxurious bed. Perhaps I had eaten too much, perhaps I had had too much port—I don't know which it was—but I had a dream. A dream? Perhaps I had better call it a nightmare. I dreamt that London was under the Bolsheviks.

I dreamed that one sunny winter morning I was walking down the Strand. It was undoubtedly the Strand, for who having seen the Strand once can fail to recognise it again? And yet there was something about the street that made it seem strangely and utterly different. It wasn't altogether that the buildings appeared faded and shabby in the sunlight, looking as though they had not been scraped or painted for a long time, or that the street was sloppy and dirty, being filled with little mud banks of uncleared snow and little pools of dirty water which collected in the caved-in pavements. No, it wasn't that. Though, to be sure, the dirt was appalling.

It was perhaps the atmosphere of the place that was different—I am not referring to the stench, which was indeed horrible, but rather to the general character of the street, hard to describe. Instead of the usual steady outpouring, in both directions, of streams of people with bright, cheery faces, the sidewalks were filled with loafers standing about inert, hands in their pockets, and with shabbily dressed, hungry-looking men and women moving at a slothful pace in an aimless kind of way. At intervals I ran into small groups of people, mostly workmen and soldiers, discussing something, interrupting one another, and gesticulating in an alarming fashion, at times almost coming to blows.

All the faces were sullen, and not a few threatening. Some looked at me with curiosity, others with open hostility. For a long time I wondered why, until observing a pair of ferocious eyes glancing at my new, bright tan boots with particular fierceness and avidity, I suddenly realised that this general scrutiny of me by all passers-by was due to my being dressed better than the others, also to the fact that I wore a clean white shirt and a collar. Whereupon, desiring to attract less attention, I deliberately waded through one of the puddles, while a passing omnibus, coming along soeaking for lack of oil, covered the rest of me with its flying smirch. In trying to escape this foul shower I slipped and fell, and, turning my ankle, I gave a cry of pain and made a wry face. Just then an omnibus stopped to unload passengers, and everyone in it

looked at me and laughed, not in the usual good-natured way but maliciously. And no one came to give me a hand, no one seemed to care how long I lay in my helpless state. I had time to observe the omnibus. It had evidently once been red, but was now a dirty faded brown, streaked with rust. The passengers filled not only all the seats, both inside and out, but the gangways and platform as well, they also sat on the steps leading to the top, and every passenger wishing to get in or out had to fight his way. When it started away again, squeaking as before, four or five passengers were hanging on the platform step. A soldier running to catch it knocked over a woman, and did not stop to apologise. She filled the air with loud imprecations. The crowd laughed. That woman and I, lying there in the dirt, might have been no more than two poor mongrels.

At last I picked myself up and walked on, first having helped the woman up, much to her amazement. What struck me as strange was the number of kerb merchants—men, women and children—ranged along the whole way, selling newspapers, chocolate, cigarettes, matches, etc. Among these merchants were a number of well-dressed, refined-looking women, and Army officers wearing the Victoria Cross and other honours, but without their shoulder straps. I approached one of these on the pretext of buying a packet of cigarettes, but actually to discover the reason of their degradation.

I picked up a ten-cigarette packet, and seeing the price, one shilling, marked on the box, I took a half-crown out of my purse, and handing it to the vendor waited for my change. The man examined the coin with astonishment and said, "It's a treat to see real money again; all the same I must trouble you for another five bob."

It was my turn to be astonished. "What!" I exclaimed. "Seven-and-six for ten cigarettes! And the packet is marked only one shilling."

"That's the old price, but in these illegal days. . . . Besides, I stood in the queue for about four hours to get them. Ah, we are an unfortunate people, a benighted people. . . ."

Much puzzled by his words, I fumbled in my pocket, and at last drew out of my wallet a five-pound Bank of England note. "I am sorry, my dear man," said I, "but this is the smallest I have."

"Well, that's not much for these days," he remarked to my great astonishment. "That's just about enough to get one a couple of meals, without wine, mind you. Well, you know what money is—rubbish."

While he was talking he put his hand in his pocket and drew therefrom a little pile of green and yellow notes, each no larger than three by two inches. He picked out two of them and gave them to me, then plunged his hand into a bag at his side and drew out a handful of dirty, dilapidated notes and postage stamps of all denominations. Seeing me look mystified at the green notes in my hands, each of which I had time to learn was worth forty shillings, the man muttered apologetically. "I am

sorry to have to give you the Macdonalds, but it's the only kind I've got. The old notes are getting scarcer and scarcer."

Then he proceeded giving the rest of my change in sixpenny notes and in postage stamps, which I noted had no gum on the back, but bore instead an inscription to the effect that they were available as currency in place of the customary copper coins.

More and more astonished, I begged the soldier-merchant for an explanation. "What do you mean by calling these green notes the Macdonalds?"

Hardly less astonished was my informer at my question: "You must be a stranger in these parts. Just arrived, I suppose, from some happier country than this. Surely you've heard of our Revolution, how our royalty and the old Government were overthrown, and a Provisional Government appointed, with Ramsay Macdonald at its head. These are called Macdonalds because they were issued during his administration."

"You say 'were,' from which I may assume that he and his Government are no longer in power?"

"No—worse luck! They were bad enough, well-intentioned but weak. They dilly-dallied with everything, and made a mess of things generally. But they are nothing compared with the present Government. You see, when the second Revolution came Macdonald and his advisers were overthrown and MacLenin and Trotsman took their places. Macdonald fled to Scotland, and came back with an army under General Haig, but was defeated when he reached St. Albans. He has fled, and is hiding somewhere. MacLenin's crowd have so far arrested about five hundred men who resemble him."

"Tell me," I said, thunderstruck by these unexpected tidings. "I see that you have the Victoria Cross, the D.S.O., the Military Cross and the Legion of Honour; how is it you are not wearing your shoulder straps, and how have you come down to such a mean trade?"

"Well may you ask the question," came the sad response. "but I am not the only one. There are hundreds like me in the same boat. The 'comrades,' as they call themselves, have done that for me, and I've saved about fifty of the bounders myself when the Germans were upon us near Amiens, so help me God! You see, when MacLenin and Trotsman disorganised our fine army with their pernicious propaganda, they preached to them that all men were alike, that one man was not better than another, and that sort of thing; and so we officers, every man of us, had our stars taken from us by those 'comrade' fellows. I was a Captain, and I've come down to this. But we've come off easily, compared with some of the famous civilians. There's Viscount Grey, and Asquith, and Lloyd George, and —; every blessed one of them is kept in the Tower, they are called 'counter-revolutionaries,' and liable to be shot any day. And not only they, but all the cultured chaps are having a hard time of it. Well, I dare say you've heard of H. G. Wells—to think of a brainy man like that in

jail, counter-revolutionary—that's what he is called. It would be more easy to give you a list of those who are not in jail. Look at that nice girl over yonder selling papers. She spent all her time doing good among the poor. And see that chap over there in spats selling shoestrings, he invented——"

Suddenly the rapid staccato of machine-gun fire sounded through the air, drawing nearer. There was a commotion among the crowd, until now listless.

"Take cover," shouted my acquaintance, pulling me along by the arm down an Underground entrance. "It's those 'comrade' bounders coming."

In spite of expostulations I remained standing on the stairs and glanced furtively down the street, which had suddenly become deserted. An extraordinary sight met my eyes: a "tank" came rolling up, as it were, at full speed, firing its guns indiscriminately in all directions. Its occupants were invisible. I ducked quickly below.

"What is the meaning of all this?" I asked, turning to my acquaintance.

"Meaning of it? Nothing! It's just a couple of 'comrades' out to give the people a scare and to show them who's boss of the town." He pronounced the word "comrades" with contempt.

We ventured up the stairs again.

"Look!" he said, pointing to the tank, now in the distance. It appeared to be going slowly now, in zig-zag fashion, still firing its broadsides. "They are probably drunk," he went on. "there has been a sacking of wine-cellars this past fortnight or so. They do what they like, and there's no one to stop them, for they've got all the weapons. And there's no police. Five thousand robberies a night, my friend. I'd advise you, old chap, not to go out at night in your best clothes. A good suit of clothes fetches as much as fifty pounds, and these 'comrade' chaps don't stop at undressing you in the street, and leaving you in your undershirt, be the night ever so cold. They shoot you afterwards if they don't like your face. They can get more bullets where the first came from. They have no respect for women either. I've known them to drag a woman out of a taxi for to get her 'glad rags,' as the Yanks would say. What can you expect when you have an ex-criminal for Chief of Police and a Conscientious Objector as General of the Red Army? That's a strange thing about some of these pacifists; they objected to killing Germans, but they don't mind killing Englishmen. Red Army is a good name for them. Only this morning I ran across a pool of blood in Trafalgar Square. The usual thing. People are so foolish to be walking in such a lonely spot at night."

A great fear began to gnaw its way into my heart. Much depressed, I left my companion, and made my way towards the Embankment.

For the first time I noticed that many buildings were decorated with flags, which, judging from their appearance, must have been at one time red, but which were now faded by

the rains to a dirty black, and were so tattered as to make their original shape almost unrecognisable. And, gazing upon these once-proud emblems of revolution, I reflected: "They must have been once as bright as the hopes of the people, and the people's hopes must be by now as faded and as tattered as these flags." Such, as I began more and more to discover, was indeed the case.

Upon reaching the Embankment, I barely had time to glance at the wonderful river, which had been made historic by English free men, and had hardly more than noted its now dismal, deadlike appearance, free of those lively picturesque processions of barges that I once used to know, when rude sounds of lashing as with a whip assailed my ears, sounds punctuated by loud, foul curses. I turned to look, and to my amazement witnessed a sight I had never witnessed in London before, to wit: a thin, quite emaciated horse, which had evidently slipped under its heavy burden on the ill-kept pavement, was lying with its legs bent under it, and, straining under the regular and well-laid-on full-swing lashes of the driver's whip, it was making desperate efforts to rise, without success; and this failure on the beast's part aroused those foul-mouthed imprecations already alluded to, impossible of repetition here. Incensed at the brutal treatment of the helpless beast, I wished to cry out, I wished to run and plant my fingers on the driver's throat, but as happens in dreams I remained 'rooted to the spot,' unable even to cry out. Presently I heard a voice, that of a bystander:

"The rotter! He wouldn't have dared to do that during the old régime. That's what comes of not having any police. Any old bouncer can do as he likes, and there's no one to stop him."

"The poor old beast has worn out his shoes, that's how he came to slip," said an old gentleman with a kindly face that belonged to gone-by days, "and new shoes cost a fortune. It's pretty rough on the horse, whichever way you look at it."

"What's become of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals?" asked a little old woman in an anxious voice.

"Disbanded, of course!" replied a man's gruff voice. "Counter-revolutionaries."

The crowd grew, and everybody talked, but the man kept on beating his horse. Sickened by the sight I moved on. Had I known that I was making for more gruesome sights I would have remained where I was.

The whole Embankment had an unfamiliar appearance. Some of the railings, which in the old days I often had leant upon to look at my beloved river, were broken down, the Embankment itself was badly in need of repairs; apart from this, at short intervals, the sidewalk was piled up with discarded tins and all sorts of refuse. The river too looked dirty, and large collections were floating with the tide. With horror I

noticed a dead human body floating peacefully along, seawards.

My reflections were again suddenly disturbed, this time by rifle-firing. I ran with the crowd towards Westminster Bridge. I paused for a moment with many other spectators near the railing, and what I saw chilled me to the marrow.

A man had just been thrown from the bridge. Striking the water, he disappeared, then came up again, and was swimming for the Surrey-side bank. Upon seeing the man swim, the men on the bridge began to throw sticks and stones at him. Eluding these, he swam on. Then one or two shots were fired which missed him. Presently he began to clamber up the muddy bank close to the new County Council Hall. Whereupon the men on the bridge, evidently not wishing to be robbed of their prey, ran down to the bank, and opened a fusillade on their struggling victim. Wounded, he nevertheless managed somehow to get on his knees and began to pray to his tormentors to spare his life. Unheeding, they continued firing, until they finished him off.

Astonished at the whole proceeding, I turned to a bystander and asked him why the poor man was so ill-treated.

"The usual thing—robbed somebody, I suppose," he replied. "What else are you to expect when there are no police and no courts of justice? We are under mob law, my friend. When it isn't the mob, it's the Red Guard; there's little to choose between them. Why, sometimes they are not even sure they've got the right man. Merely to suspect a man is enough. That's what they call summary justice. It's worse than in the Middle Ages. Just look how they have riddled the man with shot. Well, you know, in the Middle Ages, if a man was condemned to death and he had managed to save himself in some way or other, they looked upon it as an intervention of Providence, and let the man off, and even to-day there are places where if a man is condemned to be hanged and the rope breaks the man's let off. But you saw for yourself: they meant to drown the man, they chucked him into the river, he saved himself — but no, that wasn't enough, they had to shoot him. That's what we have come to in this twentieth century. Of course, the Bolshevik authorities pretend they don't look with favour upon these dealings, all the same they do their best to encourage them. . . ."

An interruption came in the man's speech, for rifle-shots rang out again. Most of the crowd scattered: I and the man who had been talking to me took refuge in a doorway just across the road, close to the Westminster Underground Station. We ventured to peep out from behind one of the pillars which supported the door arch. But for the whispered explanations of my companion, what I saw would have been a mystery to me.

A long procession of men and women, evidently of all conditions of life, quiet and grave in appearance, bearing large red banners, was moving with dignified slowness from the

direction of Victoria Street towards the Houses of Parliament. The banners bore such inscriptions as "Hail to the Popular Assembly," "The Popular Assembly will save England," "All Parties Unite Round the Popular Assembly," and the like. To my utter amazement, I saw several men, hardly more than a dozen in number, each wearing a red band on his arm—which, I was to learn, was the mark of the Red Guard—advancing, in a crouching position, gun in hand, towards the approaching procession and shooting into it. Apparently, the crowd that formed the procession was unarmed; at all events, no one offered any resistance; indeed, upon seeing some of its members fall, it scattered precipitately.

"What is the meaning of all this?" I inquired of my companion. "Why are these men shooting into the crowd, which seems harmless enough?"

"Surely you know," replied the man sadly, "that the Popular Assembly, elected by nearly all parties to save England, was to meet to-day in the old House of Commons, and these men and women, representing the best elements in England, were making a peaceful demonstration in honour of the event, but the Bolshevik Red Guards, representing a mere minority consisting mostly of the worst elements, have got orders from MacLenin and Trotsman to keep the Assembly from meeting at all costs. They have forbidden all demonstrations in favour of the Assembly."

"I don't understand," said I. "You say the majority in England has decided in favour of the Assembly. How is it possible then for a small minority to controvert the will of the people?"

"What are we to do?" he replied apologetically, as if his own honour were in question. "They've managed to get hold of the war machinery. They have got hold of all the arms. We can do nothing against force. Besides, they offer attractions to the criminals and rowdies, who terrorise the population. They are wolves in sheep's clothing, for on the pretence of taking care of the interests of the downtrodden poor they are filling their own pockets with booty. Their one object in life is to live without working. That's all very well, while there's still something left of accumulated wealth, but what will they do when that's gone? Look at my case. I was comparatively speaking a poor man before the Revolution. I had a printer's shop, and because I employed a printer's devil I was immediately dubbed an employer of labour, and, therefore, a 'boorjooy,' that is, a member of the *bourgeoisie*, hence entitled only to a quarter of a food ration. I have worked all my life hard like a nigger and have managed to get for my family a small house of five rooms, and what's all my effort come to? The new Bolshevik House Act means that I shall have to give up to these brigands and good-for-nothings three of my rooms. Yet there was a time when an Englishman's house was known to be his castle."

"That's hard lines, my friend," I remarked sympathetically. "Come and have a drink with me."

"I should like to oblige," replied my acquaintance, "but a drink is not to be had for love or money. To sell drink is illegal, though to be sure it's done; it is under the head of the Defence of the Revolution Acts, commonly known as 'Dora Number Two'; the first Dora, whom she has displaced, is an amateur compared with this new creature. There are only two ways of getting a drink; either by paying a small fortune by way of a back door, or by joining the rowdies who are sacking the wine-cellars. There, do you hear? Those shots must come from Piccadilly. They are sacking the wine-cellars there to-day. Come, let's see the fun. But you must keep a sharp eye and dodge a stray bullet. When you hear shots it means that they are drunk and letting off their guns just for a lark."

It had grown dark by now. The streets, dark enough in war time, seemed even darker than usual—my companion informed me that this was due partly to the disorganisation of the railways which had failed to bring in the requisite fuel, partly to the fact that the working-men were holding another of their meetings that day to discuss the extermination of the "boorjoos." We made our way along the narrow streets, dodging here and there small but reckless parties of men with guns. We strayed into a restaurant. The place was dark and cold for want of fuel. But dimly lit up with candles, which were stuck in empty bottles standing on the tables, it was filled mostly with "comrades," though here and there a pale "boorjooy" might be distinguished among them. We found a table.

"Waiter." I called. Everyone turned and looked fiercely in my direction. "Good God! my friend," whispered my companion to me, "you mustn't use that word. The Bolsheviks have decreed that you mustn't call a man a 'waiter' but an 'officiator.' It's ridiculous, but you must conform if you value your life."

"Officiator!" I called. This seemed to calm my neighbours.

The officiator officiated. That is to say, he brought us everything that my purse would permit: a cupful of a dark, dirty-looking liquid which he called coffee—no milk was available; and a piece of bread two inches square with a small pat of margarine. For this I was charged for my friend and myself 16s., so far had money depreciated in value. The stench and the smoke of the place were horrible. Presently a newsboy came in shouting the names of his papers: the *Red Gazette*, the *Red Standard*, the *Red Voice*, the *Red Dawn*—every newspaper seemed to be Red in this new England. Upon inquiry I learned from my *vis-à-vis* that the old Conservative papers like *The Times* and the *Morning Post* had been suppressed long ago, that the Liberal papers like the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily News* were not long in following suit,

that even such Radical Socialist newspapers as the *Herald* and the *Labour Leader* were now considered by the new political leaders hopelessly *bourgeois* and "counter-revolutionary." I was further to learn that the editors of these newspapers were in the Tower of London awaiting trial by the Revolutionary Tribunal. Freedom of speech had ceased to exist.

The things I had learnt in the course of the day depressed me, and, holding what would have been considered in the old days as Liberal, even Radical, opinions, I suddenly realised that I would now be deemed by the new régime to be an excessively dangerous character for holding opinions so palpably Conservative and old-fashioned. With this fear upon me I decided to visit an old friend of mine, and seek some comfort in his counsel.

With fear and trembling I made my way cautiously through the dark streets, for I could still hear an occasional rifle-shot, and at last reached the Queen Alexandra Chambers, now renamed the Karl Marx Flats. The large double doors, open at this hour in the old days—for it was not much later than half-past eight—were now shut, indeed locked. In response to my ring a tiny door, no larger than that of a cage, opened just above the letter-box, and through the opening peeped out the gleaming barrel of a revolver.

"Don't shoot!" I cried out in alarm.

The revolver retreated into the darkness behind the door.

"Who is it?" said a voice, which I recognised as that of the housekeeper, an old man.

"It is I—Mr. S——, don't you remember me?—Mr. Thornton's old friend. Does Mr. Thornton still live here?"

An eye looked out at me through the little aperture.

"So it is really you?" said the old man more softly. "And there is no one with you?" The key turned in the lock, and the door opened, admitting me. "I thought it might be a band of those 'comrades.' You can't be too careful nowadays. This sentry business is no joke, let me tell you. These are dark days, governor."

The lift not running, I stumbled up the dark staircase; my friend lived on the fifth storey. I rang the bell. For some time there was no answer. My hearing being particularly acute, I heard, at last, someone approaching, as if in slippers on tip-toe. I knocked.

"Who is it?" I heard a timorous feminine voice on the other side of the door.

"A friend," I replied, in reassuring tones.

The door opened slightly, on a chain. A woman's frightened eyes looked out in the candle-light. I recognised my friend's wife.

"Oh, it's you!" she cried, recognising me at the same time.

"I was so frightened, I thought it was——"

"The comrades!" I finished the sentence for her.

She let me in, and locked and bolted the door.

My friends found me a place at their supper table, and

put a plate of thin vegetable soup and some bread crumbs before me.

"I am sorry I have nothing better to offer you," said my host apologetically. "I live like a bird of the fields."

"You mean to say that you, a great literary celebrity, who have given England of your best, have come to this?"

The great man smiled sadly. "Yes, my friend," he said. "I am regarded as a parasite, a 'boorjooy,' a counter-revolutionary. I am a man past fifty, all my work is behind me. My contribution to literature counts for naught, simply because I cannot subscribe to the political opinions of these proletariat tyrants. Let me whisper a secret to you. These men hate the artist and the man of intellect far more than they do the capitalist. For they can take away the wealth of the rich man, as, in fact, they already have done, but they cannot take away for their own use from the inexhaustible capital that is in a man's brain; they can only shoot me, which they probably will do, but they cannot *confiscate* my intellect." He laughed ironically, and there was a suspicion of triumph in his voice. "My brain shall die with me," he added.

He invited me to remain for the night, suggesting that it was dangerous to be out after dark.

I had not lain in bed long, thinking over the day's adventures, when I was startled by a loud knocking on the outer door. Presently a number of men burst into my room, and, ordering me to dress myself, hustled me into a taxi, and drove off. It seemed ages, that journey in the taxi. We arrived at a building, which I recognised as the Tower. I was taken up the little spiral staircase of stone, leading to a famous prison-cell, which I remember once having paid sixpence to see, and left there. I do not remember how long I remained there. The time seemed immeasurable. Then I was led down again, and into the courtyard. I was placed against the wall, and found myself looking into the barrel of a revolver. It must have been but a moment, but again it seemed like ages. I cried out . . . I woke up . . . The perspiration ran down my body in streams. . . . I took it for blood at first . . .

Now I was fully awake. I put on my dressing-gown and my slippers, and walked over to the window. I looked out on the Strand. There was nothing unusual in the street. The bright red omnibuses sped their way in their accustomed fashion, and streams of people moved restlessly on and on. A Union Jack fluttered in the breeze, and caught the glint of the sun. I rang for the waiter, and ordered bacon and eggs to be brought into my room. It was good to be back in England.

JOHN CURNOS.

IF you are interested in the overthrow of Bolshevism; if you want to help to save civilization from the menace of Anarchy, write to the Literary Secretary, Russian Liberation Committee, 173, Fleet Street, London, E.C. 4. Telephone: Central 805.

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