Chapter VIII

THE FIRST OF MAY IN PETROGRAD

IN 1890 the First of May was for the first time celebrated in America as Labour's international holiday. May Day became to me a great, inspiring event. To witness the celebration of the First of May in a free country--it was something to dream of, to long for, but perhaps never to be realized. And now, in 1920, the dream of many years was about to become real in revolutionary Russia. I could hardly await the morning of May first. It was a glorious day, with the warm sun melting away the last crust of the hard winter. Early in the morning strains of music greeted me: groups of workers and soldiers were marching through the streets, singing revolutionary songs. The city was gaily decorated: the Uritsky Square, facing the Winter Palace, was a mass of red, the streets near by a veritable riot of colour. Great crowds were about, all wending their way to the Field of Mars where the heroes of the Revolution were buried.

Though I had an admission card to the reviewing stand I preferred to remain among the people, to feel myself a part of the great hosts that had brought about the world event. This was their day--the day of their making. Yet--they seemed peculiarly quiet, oppressively silent. There was no joy in their singing, no mirth in their laughter. Mechanically they marched, automatically they responded to the claqueurs on the reviewing stand shouting "Hurrah" as the columns passed.

In the evening a pageant was to take place. Long before the appointed hour the Uritsky Square down to the palace and to the banks of the Neva was crowded with people gathered to witness the open-air performance symbolizing the triumph of the people. The play consisted of three parts, the first portraying the conditions which led up to the war and the rôle of the German Socialists in it; the second reproduced the February Revolution, with Kerensky in power; the last--the October Revolution. It was a play beautifully set and powerfully acted, a play vivid, real, fascinating. It was given on the steps of the former Stock Exchange, facing the Square. On the highest step sat kings and queens with their courtiers, attended by soldiery in gay uniforms. The scene represents a gala court affair: the announcement is made that a monument is to be built in honour of world capitalism. There is much rejoicing, and a wild orgy of music and dance ensues. Then from the depths there emerge the enslaved and toiling masses, their chains ringing mournfully to the music above. They are responding to the command to build the monument for their masters: some are seen carrying hammers and anvils; others stagger under the weight of huge blocks of stone and loads of brick. The workers are toiling in their world of misery and darkness, lashed to greater effort by the whip of the slave drivers, while above there is light and joy, and the masters are feasting. The completion of the monument is signaled by large yellow disks hoisted on high amidst the rejoicing of the world on top.

At this moment a little red flag is seen waving below, and a small figure is haranguing the people. Angry fists are raised and then flag and figure disappear, only to reappear again in different parts of the underworld. Again the red flag waves, now here, now there. The people slowly gain confidence and presently become threatening. Indignation and anger grow--the kings and queens become alarmed. They fly to the safety of the citadels, and the army prepares to defend the stronghold of capitalism.

It is August, 1914. The rulers are again feasting, and the workers are slaving. The members of the Second International attend the confab of the mighty. They remain deaf to the plea of the workers to save them from the horrors of war. Then the strains of "God Save the King" announce the arrival of the English army. It is followed by Russian soldiers with machine guns and artillery, and a procession of nurses and cripples, the tribute to the Moloch of war.

The next act pictures the February Revolution. Red flags appear everywhere, armed motor cars dash about. The people storm the Winter Palace and haul down the emblem of Tsardom. The Kerensky Government assumes control, and the people are driven back to war. Then comes the marvelous scene of the October Revolution, with soldiers and sailors galloping along the open space before the white marble building. They dash up the space into the palace, there is a brief struggle, and the victors are hailed by the masses in wild jubilation. The "Internationale" floats upon the air; it mounts higher and higher into exultant peals of joy. Russia is free--the workers, sailors, and soldiers usher in the new era, the beginning of the world commune!

Tremendously stirring was the picture. But the vast mass remained silent. Only a faint applause was heard from the great throng. I was dumbfounded. How explain this astonishing lack of response? When I spoke to Lisa Zorin about it she said that the people had actually lived through the October Revolution, and that the performance necessarily fell flat by comparison with the reality of 1917. But my little Communist neighbour gave a different version. "The people had suffered so many disappointments since October, 1917," she said, "that the Revolution has lost all meaning to them. The play had the effect of making their disappointment more poignant."