

THE CHURCH IN SIBERIA

For years Siberia was looked upon as a barren desolate waste, peopled by criminals who dragged out a miserable existence in a land of which little was known outside of official Russia. Of late years, whatever may have been the case in the past, Siberia is beginning to wear another aspect. It is being opened up to Western civilisation and commerce, even one of our New Zealand exports finds a competitor in the English markets in Siberian butter, and the English housewife is pleased to be able to place on the breakfast table Siberian eggs in preference to the more expensive Irish or Danish products. Siberia is fast becoming the favorite and even fashionable route to the Far East. You may now travel across this vast continent in a most luxurious train of large, commodious sleeping cars, elegantly fitted up; good dining car, piano, library, baths, and every comfort. You have a long seat to yourself, and the conductor furnishes you with pillows, sheets, and all you require.

A correspondent, describing some time ago the visitation of a Catholic Bishop to this part of his very extensive diocese and very scattered flock, writes as follows:—The Government placed a railway carriage at the disposal of the prelate and the six priests who accompanied him. At the same time it fixed some awkward conditions. No demonstrations, or any show of triumph, could be permitted, no speeches must be made; no gifts must be presented. As usual, in this country, the best and safest way is to obliterate your individuality as much as possible; yet there is scarcely anything you cannot do if you do it quietly and make no fuss about it. The force of bureaucratic authority, however, diminishes as the square of the distance from its centre increases. It took him five months and a-half, and he covered 25,000 versts, and visited the distant island of Sakhaline, establishing missions and founding new churches. The visitation of

A Diocese of Over 225,000 Square Miles, without including the provinces of European Russia which are under his jurisdiction, is rather a formidable and arduous undertaking. It is about one and a-half times larger than all Europe, extending from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific, to Tashkent and China in the south. Starting from Petrograd, the bishop visited the Russian towns, Vologda, Viatka, Perm, and Ekaterinburg, where there are well-built brick churches. The writer has frequently assisted at Mass in the two last mentioned. Then crossing the Urals by the curious zig-zag railway which runs up and down and round the spurs of the hills in such a manner that it is only with difficulty you can sit upright, you soon enter Siberia, the future land of promise, the coming country. Petropavlosk is the first important town across the frontier. As a fine church is only in course of construction, Mass was celebrated in the open air, under the canopy of heaven: the same also at Tiaga. At Omsk, out of a population of 94,000, 5500 are Catholics. Then followed Kainsk and Tomsk, a wonderfully situated town, seat of the Government of the province, and

Intellectual Capital of Siberia;

also a region rich in gold, silver, and other mines: a paradise for the followers of St. Hubert, as it is a great hunting centre. As many towns that were visited were a considerable distance from the station, they had to be reached in the rough conveyances of the country, and Russian roads are none of the best. At Bogatol, Atchinsk, Nijni Oudinsk, Verkui-Oudinsk, the foundations of new churches were laid. It is a peculiarity of the people here that they are not disposed to come down with the cash until they see that work is begun; and it is a peculiarity of the authorities to insist that, before anything is undertaken, a good round sum must be laid down. Thus the poor priest is placed between two fires. The Government can scarcely be blamed for this precaution, and the people have probably learnt by experience it is the best plan: so until somebody gives the money required nothing can be done. At Stratsensk, however, 2000 roubles were at once collected.

Irkutsk can boast of a fine church and a Catholic population of 3756. This town, after Tomsk, is the most important in Siberia. Winding round the shores of Lake Baikal, beautifully situated, and encircled by mountains, Tchita, a military centre, and Stratsensk are reached. All these towns were visited, Confirmations held, and confessions heard. From this station the Bishop descended the Amour by steamer to Blagovetchensk, Kharbarovsk, and Nicholaef, where the foundation of a church was laid. From this point the island of Sakhaline is reached. Everywhere the Bishop received a hearty welcome from the Catholic and Orthodox population, who thronged the stations to receive him. At some towns the governors of the province invited the Bishop to dinner, and the greatest cordiality prevailed. A great impression was made on the Russian clergy, numbers of whom attended the Catholic churches. Altogether about 30,000 confessions were heard and 20,000 received Confirmation. Many returned to their religious duties and were reconciled to the Church. On the return journey another route was taken. At Tcheliabinsk another line runs to Moscow; thus the Bishop was able to visit many towns in Russia that had never been visited before. Zlataoust and Ufa are situated in the most lovely part of the Urals, which here present a magnificent panoramic view, reminding you of the valley of the Wye; it is difficult to conceive a more lovely spot. There is a neat little church, which, when visited by the writer, was undergoing repairs. Mass was said at a side altar, all the workmen being present. Unfortunately I was at Ufa when the Bishop was to arrive; but from some cause his Lordship came some days later than the time at which he was expected. The church is a wooden structure, but well built and well kept. The Catholic population is 2160, out of 30,000 inhabitants. The congregation was naturally anxious to give the Bishop a good reception, as indeed they were at all the towns he visited. There were several little difficulties to overcome. A throne had to be improvised, with the aid of an expert upholsterer. That was easily managed.

A Hearty Welcome.

Again, it would never do to allow the Bishop to come from the station in a not over clean public drosky driven by a heathen Tartar; but where could a respectable carriage be procured? There were but two in the town—those belonging to the Russian Bishop and the Governor. The latter kindly lent his carriage and horses, so the Bishop arrived in state. A reception was held; visits were exchanged between the ecclesiastical and civil authorities. Here, and at all other places, the Bishop received a hearty welcome. The church was tastefully decorated with evergreens, and all was conducted in a most friendly manner. At one town, the name of which I forget, the Governor, a Lutheran, gave a dinner to the Bishop. Now, all this is as it should be, and proves that when the mailed hand of bureaucracy releases its grasp the kind-hearted, good-natured disposition of the Russian expands and shows itself entirely free from ignorant prejudice and bigotry.

Although this country has hitherto had a terrible reputation not likely to attract visitors, it is by no means so bad as it has been painted. North of the Arctic Circle, it certainly would not be an enviable place for a residence, but in the centre and south it has many attractions in its majestic forests, in the floral beauty of its meadows and grassy slopes, which present a perfect mosaic of wild flowers, many unknown in Europe. Winter breaks suddenly, and three or four days of sunshine are sufficient for Mother Nature to clothe all in her summer robes; and, as she is left much to herself, she designs the landscape in her own fashion. There is little to suggest anything about criminals or capital punishment. You may, indeed, see occasionally in towns a band of grey-coated prisoners, the most desperate of them in chains, treading their way to the station, the women and children in carts, to be conveyed to their destination by train, but I have never remarked that they were in any way badly treated by their leaders. On the contrary, permission was given to chat with them and distribute cigarettes.

LANGFORD & RHIND,

Address—HERBERT LANGFORD, 19 London Street, Richmond. Phone 689

(Late W. & H. Langford) FUNERAL FURNISHERS and EMBALMERS
LONDON STREET P.O. Box 523

Town Office—104 Cashal Street