

Bokke's early years

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MORNING, HIGH NOON AND EVENING

I woke up skating on a tiny pond in the vicinity of a huge mill Ten Versts from St. Petersburg in Russia at a place called Alexandroffsky. I couldn't have been more than three years of age. It must have been a startling experience to have registered on my memory so long ago. I remember the sheet of ice, just a puddle, and a great big lady holding me up and trying to show me where my feet belonged. This lady developed in later years to be my Aunt Addie, Tabbie for short. She was, I was to find out, just about five feet two inches high and was the personification of good cheer and comfort to all my brothers and myself when we were each one of us at the age of eleven sent to school.

My brothers were sent to George Watson's College, Edinburgh, and myself, being by far the youngest, was sent first to London, Buckhurst Hill, Essex, then Liverpool High (the same school as the great Gladstone had attended) and then last, but not least, the funny little university of those days which has grown to be one of the finest buildings in Liverpool - but thereby hangs a tale -

My brother Jim (my Jonathan) was a gifted amateur musician, one of the plodding kind, infinite patience, endless practice, a ravenous concert and opera goer, improviser and dreamer was my first teacher, without giving me any sort of technical lessons. I just lived his life with him and got all the teaching I could assimilate that way. He was six and a bit years older than myself. All my brothers, except my eldest brother, who I actually met for the first time in 1910, when I became chief conductor at the age of 27 of the Imperial Opera House, St. Petersburg. Such is often the case when families migrate away from their own lands. As I was saying, all my other brothers used to come and spend their summer holidays at home in Alexandroffsky and a happy, very happy time we all had of it. Cricket, tennis, boating on that superb river the Neva, bicycling then in its infancy, solid tyres and such like atrocities, but at the time we

all thought it grand.

We, the Coates, actually played the first game of tennis in Russia, and could only get half moon raquets until the real racquets arrived from England. Nobody had ever seen a real racquet in St. Petersburg up to the time of their coming from England as for the tennis court, it was built the same way as the original pavements of the great Nevsky Prospect, blocks of wood cut into five quarters, tightly interwoven, and we had the same experience as the Nevsky Prospect experienced when the frost about the middle of April, usually, was about to abate and the rains and the warmth loosened all the blocks and we had a dickens of a time settling them down again in their proper order, but when that was accomplished, what a slick game it became!

Cricket, too was something never to be forgotten. To this day I cannot drink a lemonade from the bottle without the sweet scent of mown grass and seeing a two storied pavilion full of happy and excited faces. The smell of the pads, the bats, and the shouts of the coach on practising evenings, and the fuss and bother which Mother and all the other ladies made when there was a real match on, especially when we had challenged another Club from across the river. The next day, being Sunday, Church my brother Jim, who was our beloved organist, used to improvise all sorts of rollicking tunes, preludes and postludes, if we had won our match, but oh! what grim ones if we had lost the match. Expostulations followed during Sunday dinner by both Pudgy and Mudgy, our loved names for our parents (we never, in my memory, sat down to a Sunday dinner less than 12 to 16 people) But my brother used to just grin and the younger ones were always the first to side with him and so it went on.

Football passed us bye, the reason being the heavy snows and frosts that gripped this Northern city during the winter, and Autumn and Spring was a very short affairs. Summer seemed just to crumple up and winter was upon us and again, after a short spring, to come out all at once after the ice had broken and cleared the Neva for navigation. As there were no hills of any kind for miles around St. Petersburg, I geared my bicycle to a very slow turnover

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and so was able to go miles further than the others, whose legs were not so long or not so strong. It was thanks to my bike that I nearly became an astronomer - on one of those exquisite May evenings when the sun only sets for a couple of hours, I found myself at the age of 13 miles in the country, having visited some near relations of mine on their farm, and the sun's slanting rays seemed to be hitting a small hill, the only one in the vicinity of St. Petersburg, and lighting up some sort of copulas as I thought then a whole lot of monasteries or convents, which are so prevalent in the south of Russia. I was greatly intrigued to know and set forth encountering the most atrocious roads I ever in my life experienced. At long last I got to the bottom of the hill and had to dismount, quite a formidable length of rise coupled with the bad roads nearly made me turn round and aim for home, 15 versts away, but something prompted me to go on and I am very grateful that I did so. Coming into a sort of square surrounded by what I now saw were not churches but dome-like towers, I realised that I had stumbled quite unwittingly into the grounds of the Pulkova Observatory. Gazing around not knowing quite what to do, I was accosted by a kindly gentleman accompanied by a few boys, who spoke to me in Russian. My Russian was very limited at that time, so he called to a lady some distance away, and in no time we were talking English. I wish I could remember their names. He was actually the Astronomer Imperial to the Emperor and this dear lady was his wife. They invited me in and soon I was absorbed in watching him lecture. When the boys had to find a certain star, he showed ~~me~~ them how to find any star, even with the sun still shining brightly but using the British Nautical Almanac, which since 1834 has been published by the Admiralty, giving latitude and longitude of every known star at any given time, a really mystifying phenomena of the power of the human brain. I was completely fascinated and when he turned to me and said in quite good English 'Young man, find me Venus' I gasped, did as I had watched the other boys do, latitude so and so longitude so and so, path finder forward, and lo, there despite a

blazing sun outside, Venus in all her glory. When I got home that evening they must have thought I had got sunstroke - I shouted and jumped around like a distracted thing-a-mu^{me-jig}, despite having ridden miles and miles on unbelievable roads. My brother Jim, a mighty man of business, leastwise that's what he said he was, was anxious to know something about the stars himself but as he was not supposed to ride bicycles, or make any strenuous exertions and his days were full of tiresome office work, he could only go Fridays and that by steam train to St. Petersburg, then horse tram to the Tzarski Celski station, and out at Pulkova, a village cart from the station to the observatory, a distance altogether from start to finish of about 50 kilometers, instead of 15 on the bike, and we had it all to be done again the next morning after a night with the stars, but it was well worth it. Nothing but kindness and affection from our teacher, who often spoke about the people who would garner the results of his researches in 300, 400 or even a thousand years hence. It meant nothing to him he seemed to live in the fourth dimension, where there is no time and no space. Among other wonderful inventions, he took us to see Prince Galitzens seismograph - the Princess in later years, when I was chief at the Imperial Opera House, became a most fascinating and loyal friend to us and thanks to her great scientist husband the Bolsheviki in their turn gave her a splendid pension to live on. But I am going too fast.

Music with my beloved brother Jim, surrounded by the rest of the family and many friends and relations, was the entertainment of the evenings after dinner. We had a Mason and Hamlin organ, quite a good one, and several pianos in different parts of the big house, but in the evenings it was always in the music room with the organ and piano, all our unforgettable improvisations took place. Everybody has heard of one person improvising on a random theme, but when two people on two different instruments started it is a very different event. Of course the improvisations of jazz orchestras is not ⁱⁿ the same category musically as what we endeavoured to do. We changed instruments also at random. To

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show how close we two brothers were in thought and action, I only have to relate to the reader of the first time either of us had heard the Tchaikovsky Pathetic Symphony - it was in the great Conservatorium Hall of St. Petersburg and Safonoff, the baton-less conductor, on account of an affectation of both his thumbs, was the conductor. We had had a grand season of music under him and were thrilled with everything he had done, so when it came to Tchaikovsky Pathetic we looked forward with eager anticipation, but not more eagerly than to other symphonies we had already enjoyed. The Pathetic was the first thing on the programme, why? I cannot tell you at this great distance of time, but it was and as the last bars ~~before to quote~~ were played to quote Tennyson "And on the mere the wailing died away" sounded, we both mutually got up and without a word, we drove all that distance home over 10 kilometers by sledge and horse, muffled up over our heads it being the depth of winter, which made talking quite impossible. We got home, had our midnight tea and went to our several rooms silently, and brimfull of the stupendous work we had just heard. He a boy of 19, I 13. We stayed up all night, unbeknown to each other, and wrote out from memory all we could remember of the symphony. The next morning we astonished each other by producing manuscripts, scribbled over nearly incoherent, but when we put the two together, I found Jim had remembered what had passed me by, and I vice versa. Father had these documents in his wooten for many and many a year.

It is time I told you something about my family. Father was born in Bridlington Quay near Hull, Yorkshire. His grandfather had been a wealthy man but had lost all his fortune in the tragedy of the south sea bubble. My grandfather was a man of action, and immediately turned to the sea for a living, becoming at long last a captain of a steamer, which plied between Hull and St. Petersburg. His eldest son, my Uncle William, remained in England, but my father and his sister, Aunt Francis, were both brought over to Russia at a very early age, my father being only 11 and Aunt Francis still younger. Grandfather married again, this time the daughter of a sea captain. I remember her very well and her whole family.

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Grandma Rose, Rolly polly for short. I never saw my Grandfather, he passed on long before her. My Mother was born in Russia, Pavloffsky was a summer resort, much frequented by the upper classes with wonderful music. Johann Strauss was for several seasons an honoured guest there. Father was immensely musical and the adoration he had for Johann Strauss from all accounts made him use a subterfuge to get to know him. He, 'by chance knocked him down' and, being @ @ very quick witted, made profound excuses which Mr. Strauss accepted charmingly and they became friends. He actually spent quite a lot of time under my parents roof.

Since my youngest recollections, I was often in publicity for the big symphony concerts, always first class conductors and soloists. Mother was born a few kilometers from this beautiful place in Analova on the river. Her parents were also immigrants and her whole family, eldest brother, to her the seventh child, were all born in that small village. Grandpa Gibson being director of the Nevsky Spaffky Stearine Works there - Grandma Gibson was of a very different calibre altogether, her ancestors had evidently had Tartar blood in them, despite her Irish name of Randall, and she brought to our family an amazing virility and fearlessness which was the chief asset of all my Gibson uncles and aunts, including my own Mother. Why?! Dammbuster Gibson of this last war's heroes as Mr. Winston Churchill calls him, was a direct descendant of this great comrade, my second cousin. Father and Mother were married, he 19 and she 18 in St. Petersburg b old daddy Key, who at a very advanced age was also my teacher and friend. At their marriage Father had the amazing small sum of 75 roubles a month about £7.10.- to live on and rear a big family. I was the seventh son (no sisters) although we all longed for a baby sister, and an eighth son, Frank, was born after me but died within the year. By the time I had to go to school to England, between 11 and 12, Father had become one of the Directors of the Thornton Woollen Mills, an entirely English enterprise in which he had started from rock bottom and we lived in one of the three great houses built for the Directors on the river front, with beautiful huge gardens laid out by English