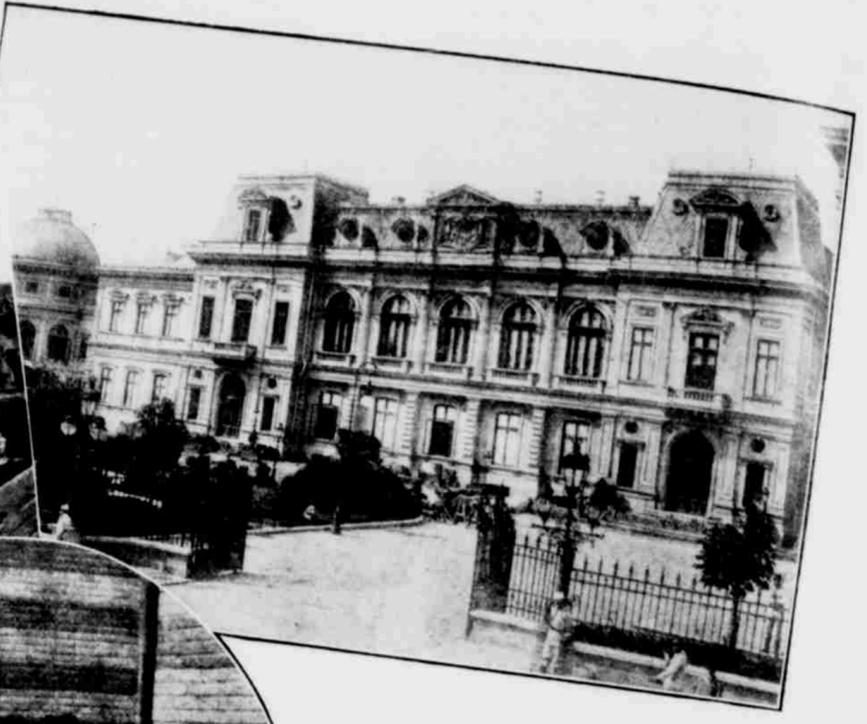


The Country Without a Middle Class



National Bank in Bucharest

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Royal Palace, Bucharest.

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Photo by Paul Thompson

Because they cannot afford a shop in which to work, these poor Rumanian shoemakers squat on the sidewalk and cobble.

By H. de WISSEN

SQUATTED down on the fat, fertile plain sweeping north from the Danube and eastward from the Carpathians to the Black Sea, is Rumania—the land of plenty. But, alas, much of the wealth of the land rests not in the pockets of its people but locked in the earth itself. And that part of the wealth which has been unlocked from the soil sifts through the fingers of a few aristocrats who let fall a golden stream into the coffers of Paris, London, Monte Carlo, the Riviera—while at home, their countrymen, by the millions, grub and swine the earth, to the end that the stream of gold for their *boyars*, or masters of the land, be unending. For Rumania is rich and Rumania is poor—abysmally poor. It is a land of contrasts—of gaudy splendor and of squalor; of pretentious houses, their roofs red with tiles, their fronts grey and abundant with the gilt of the modern French; and it is a land of mud walled huts thatched with straw, dank with caves dug beneath in the oily soil so that they—the millions—may descend into the earth for warmth. In the streets of Bucharest, the capital city, over-jewelled and overdressed women, slumbrous eyed, heavy lipped, painted, languidly lolling back in smartly appointed carriages, drive up and down in the twilight hour; and foreign shopkeepers who have waxed fat on the money showered upon them, smirk and bow; at the street crossings fussy little policemen herd the peasants to the end that miladies of the rouge, and their escorts, may not be annoyed. Perchance a peasant might seek to cross the street and disturb the rhythm of the carriage parade. I exaggerate?

Let us look over the facts. Less than ten per cent of all the Rumanians who own land, own more than half of all the land. Out of a population of about seven million—allowing for the wastage of war—some four thousand persons own the most and the best of the arable land. Of the balance of the population, about six million are peasants, earthgrubbers who live miserably and produce for someone else. Of the remainder, some work the oil wells, the railroads and do the labor in the cities. Of Rumanian shopkeepers there are few. A Rumanian Middle Class almost does not exist. Retail trade is to a large extent in the hands of foreigners, of Frenchmen, Austrians, Germans. There is an upper class composed of the *boyars*, the great landholders, like the Prussian *junkers*, and of industrial "Get Rich Quick" men who "got theirs" in oil; and

there is the under class of six million odd peasants, Sons of Mary, who slave. They vote but that is quite absurd. For Rumanian voters are assigned into three classes on the basis of their earning power. In a nutshell, it takes the votes of a hundred peasants to equal the vote of a man with wealth. And why is

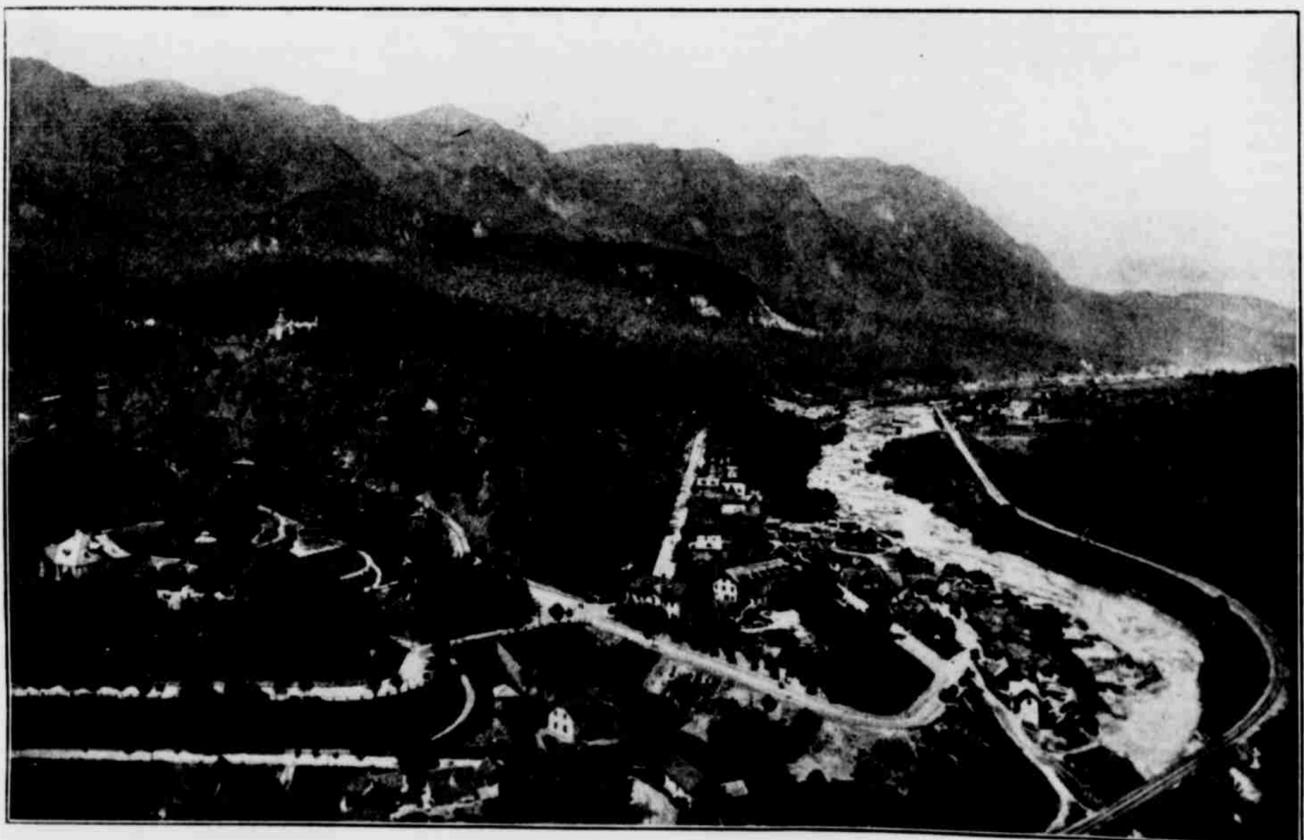
trousers and shirts worn on the outside and delicately embroidered with pretty floral designs, ever crooning soft songs and looking out at the world with dreamy eyes, the peasants seem not to possess the virility that rumbles up, demanding better things. Also, they are very ignorant—in many rural communities not more than two per cent of the people can read or write. Also, they are exceedingly religious and dark with superstition.

One has but to motor thirty miles away from their capital city, Bucharest, to come among the great estates of the *boyars*, vast acreages of rich land tilled for him by peasants who live in hovels while he swigs his vintage wines under the striped awnings of a Champs Elysées restaurant and maintains a gorgeous establishment on one of the fashionable boulevards of Paris. And in this little community which is just to the north of the capital there is no schoolhouse but a bulb-domed church. Also, there are clerics, petty dignitaries of the Rumanian Church. And the peasants who work the *boyar's* land for him pay great heed to the clerics he provides for them. If a man dies—they believe—he must have a candle in his hand, else he will lose his way in hell and never get out. Unfortunately few persons happen to be holding a candle at the moment death comes. So it would seem that the peasant is irretrievably lost—but hold—a ray of hope. For a sufficient number of *Lei* the cleric can go through certain incantations that will fix things up for the poor departed peasant in hell, that will get him

out even if he has gone without a candle. After which in the little community of the *boyar* there is drinking of wine, great rejoicing, and singing of soft songs. For the dead man's kin are very grateful—even though it has taken considerable *Lei* for the cleric to defeat the purposes of the Evil One. But then, they earn twenty cents a day and that is a lot of money.

There is that superstition to which the Rumanian peasant is a prey—to that of the "vampire." Let several deaths quickly follow one another in a village and it is thought the spirit of the first man to die is a "vampire" and that it will slay the entire village unless it is laid. Only the cleric can put this bad spirit to rest. He

does it by having the body exhumed from the grave at midnight, cutting out the heart and driving a peg through it. This rids the village of the "vampire." The charge of the cleric to perform this rite is about twenty dollars. Of course, we smile, but the pity of it. The



Sinaia: Upper Prahova, Rumania.

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this not changed? Because the Rumanian peasant is a very docile and subservient person. He is gentle like his songs and his dances. Strangely enough one finds none of the Balkan fire in him. Almost effeminate in dress and in manner, the men running to white linen