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THE AGE OF WOOD

by Stephen Graham

Stephen Graham, a Russian-speaking Englishman traveled freely through Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, visiting large cities and remote villages alike. His popular writings, now mostly out of print, were among the first detailed English accounts of provincial life in pre-revolutionary Russia. The following excerpt is from his book “Undiscovered Russia,” published in 1912 by London’s Bodley Head Press.

*“They tell me your carpenters,” quoth I to my friend the Russ,
“Make a simple hatchet serve as a tool-box serves with us. Arm
but each man with his axe, ‘tis a hammer and saw and plane and
chisel, and – what know I else? We should imitate in vain the
mastery wherewithal, by a flourish of just the adze, he cleaves,
clamps, dovetails in, – no need of our nails and brads – the man-
ageable pine: ‘tis said he could shave himself with the axe – so
all adroit, now a giant and now an elf, does he work and play at
once!” Quoth my friend the Russ to me, “Ay, that and more upon
occasion.”*

– Browning

...I had now left the region of the tundra, but was still in the land of marsh and stream, where the man who loses himself in the forest comes upon strange silent lakes unknown of man and unused by him. It is a country not unlike Finland – now familiar to the minds of western tourists.

What it lacks in charm it makes up in mystery, for all forests are ghoulishly haunted. An impressionable man, walking all day along an endless rutty forest ride, where the trees almost touch above his head, is constantly filled with terror, expectation, foreboding. For my part, I often fortified myself to expect I know not what – bears, wild men, bogies.

Opposite: Dormition Church, Kondopoga, Russia.

But the peasant who lives there has lived this life of terror, expectation, mystery, for generations. The forests have looked into him. He himself is a forest mystery, a thrall and vassal of the pines. Behind his eyes are endless dark forests.

Consider what the forest is to the moujik [the peasant]. Iron, you must know, and iron-moulded and manufactured commodities are almost unknown in Archangel Province. The moujik's cradle is a pine bole, scooped out like an ancient boat. It hangs with hempen ropes from a springy sapling in his mother's cottage. His coffin is but a larger cradle, a larger, longer pine scooped out, with an axe-hewn plank to cover it, and wooden pegs to nail it down. And between the cradle and the coffin, he lives surrounded by wood. A robust baby, he clammers out of his cradle on to the pine floor, also of grand axe-hewn planks too solid to wear into holes like other poor men's floors. He crawls about till he learns to run from one solid hand-carved chair to another, and at last takes his seat at the table his father made a month before the wedding. He crosses himself to the sacred symbols painted on birch bark. He eats all his meals with a wooden spoon – forks and knives are almost unknown in the forest. He eats off wooden plates, or out of wooden Russian basins. Even the salt-cellar is from the forest, and was plaited by his sister from reeds last year.

He gets big enough to go out to the forest with his brothers and sisters, and they take birch-bark baskets and gather mushrooms or *yagodi* – all forest fruits are called *yagodi*, berries. Vania, they call him, little Vania, Vashka when he looks a dirty little urchin. See him every day, in muddy little bare legs, hunting in the forest for berries or chasing the cows who have gone astray there. He learns to walk nimbly on the uneven, moss-covered ground, and can even run among broken branches and thorns, and leap from one dead tree to another, or swarm up the straight grey-green trunks. He learns to trap rabbits and catch young woodcocks, knows the wolf's paw, the fox paw, the bear paw in the soft soil.

The priest teaches him a little in the school about God and the Tsar, and the observances of the Church, and such education suffices for Vania. He is becoming a woodsman, the forest is the best school – but he never remembers how it was he learnt there. He came to know that when the sun set it was evening, and when it rose it was morning. He learned that the foliage of a tree takes shape according to the sunshine it gets and the time of day

Opposite: Detail of Russian house in Nizhni Novgorod.





the sunshine reaches it, and when he is in the dark forest he knows by the shape of a trunk the way out. Every tree is a compass in itself. But so deep and subconscious is this knowledge that he does not look at trees at all. He does not know how he knows. Ask him the way out of the wood, and he will point in this direction or in that, as the case may be. But he would not be able to tell you how it was he knew.

As I said, the forests are behind his eyes as well as in front of them. The forests look into the simple soul, placid as a lake, and draw their own pictures there.

The time comes for Vania to marry, and he had better build himself an izba [hut]. It is of pine, and three friends help him to build it, while his father stands by and directs. They have no planes and chisels, saws, squares, joiners' tables and the like. All is wrought by the axe and every joint is axe cut, and every smooth surface axe-hewn.

The walls of the house and of the great stove are panelled. Vania hews out a sleeping shelf for himself and his wife above the oven. He makes unbreakable chairs to sit on and make merry, and a table, and finally, without other tool than his axe, builds a cart to take himself and his bride from the church, and he builds the shafts and the Russian collar arch to which the horse is yoked, all of wood – even the wheels are not faced with iron, and the harness is of wood and leather.

He is married at a forest church, itself forest made, built years ago by his grandfather and other villagers of their day. It is natural-shapen, a reflection in itself of the forest fir. Look at [one of our wooden churches] – you will see it is itself shaped like a tree – the cross is the topmost twig. It is not harmonious, not symmetrical – no, but then it is eye-measured; no rulers and lines were used in its construction, and not a plane or a saw in cutting the planks. Once Russian architecture was Byzantine, but the moujik has made this of it, he has made an architecture all his own and built thousands of wonderful wooden churches all over North Russia – again, he has looked at it with eyes in which are reflected endless forests.

Vania is wed, and at his father's house are casks of sweet beer and tubs of soaking mushrooms, and great carved bins of meal, and wooden platters full of cakes, and loving cups, and beer tankards – all of wood. Then what rejoicing, what drinking!

Opposite: Birch bark bags.

The time comes to scoop another cradle out of pine, and find a springy sapling to hang it from, a young fir or a young birch, and it is fastened from the roof. Human life goes on a stage, and a little baby Vania peeps into the light of day. There is a little cry, a new cry in the world and the father sees his baby. Little Vania is put in the new cradle, and...Father Vania sits by the side and sings wonderingly, as his father long ago sang to him... The new baby grows and watches his father carving on the floor –

“The Kremlin rare and rich He deftly cut and carved on lazy winter nights, As to rights Piece upon piece, he reared the fabric nigh complete – ”

watching him –

“Just in act to drop ‘twixt fir-cones, – each a dome – The scooped-out yellow gourd presumably the home Of Kolokol the Big; the bell, therein to hitch, – An acorn-cup was ready.”

One night, great grandfather Vania, that is, the father of Vania’s father, comes into the new house and prays to God. Then he tells them that his time is passing. He is an old man. Tomorrow he will take a new log and build a coffin for himself, and he will cut a wooden cross to put above his grave. Grandfather Vania makes his coffin and puts it away till it may be necessary. Meanwhile it can hold rye-meal, or if there is little space in the old home, he can make a bed in it and sleep in it of nights. The time will come when he will rest there all night and not awaken the next morning. Old grandfather Vania will be dead. Vania’s father and Vania and other villagers will carry the coffin to the grave, and the old man’s body will be committed to the ancient pine mould.

Then Vania’s father, himself a grandfather, follows in the steps of Man down to the grave, and Vania ripens to his prime, and little Vania grows up and marries. All among the standing trees. Little Vania has a child, and the wheel of human life turns round a quarter-circle...

The trees in the forest are born, grow up, are glorious, are old, are decrepit, fall down and die and sink into the moss and become earth, or perhaps become trees again, springing up in young baby trees. And the forest man

Opposite: Hand-carved wooden cross.



likewise grows up, is glorious, becomes old, then decrepit, and he falls and dies and descends into the mossy soil. Much of his body returns to glorify God once more in tree and man.

I thought much of it along the road, and it seems the moujik is nearer to reality with all his home-made, axe-carved wooden things. He knows the origins of things, knows whence comes his wealth and happiness. God made the forests: God therefore gives him his cradle, his house, his church, his coffin. But when civilization sends him manufactured goods instead of his own rude homely ones, I fear he will not trace them back to God. Earth is the great hostess of the human race, and the Sun is the host. And, strange to say, the moujiks are the better mannered guests. As for us Westerns, think what liberties we have taken with our hostess!

All I have said will, however, prove inadequate to give a true idea of the Age of Wood. I must ask the reader to imagine the log railings; the long thin trunks tied to uprights with bast. Nails are rareties, and even leather boots are made with wooden brads. The horse-shoe, though of iron, is fixed with wooden nails. The windows hang on leather or rope hinges.

A striking feature of the village is the draw-well; it is a long pine trunk balanced on two firm wooden uprights. At one end hangs a wooden bucket, and at the other the pulling rope. The pine trunk is the length of an immense telegraph pole, and it stands out across the village street like the long arm of a crane.

Of course the moujiks could not understand my interest in their wood work, and were much more ready to point to the women's embroidery as something of interest to the stranger, and it was very awkward to sit sketching some common object such as a draw-well or a set of railings. When I was near Yemetsk I sat on a bank and drew a gate, and a peasant came up and asked me the usual questions. When I told him I was English, he inquired whether there was going to be a war. He looked very solemnly at the gate I was drawing, and concluded that I was a spy making plans of the strategic position. He asked, very cunningly, had I permission to draw, and evidently wondered if it would be possible to sell me to the police.

Finally, I took out of my pocket a little penny lathe-cut needle cask, such as one can buy at any draper's shop in England, and this set the little man a-capering, so that he forgot all about my treasonable practices. "How was it done? Who did it? Is it your work?" He knew of no axe or knife that could carve so daintily. But it is not in daintiness that the Russian excels. †