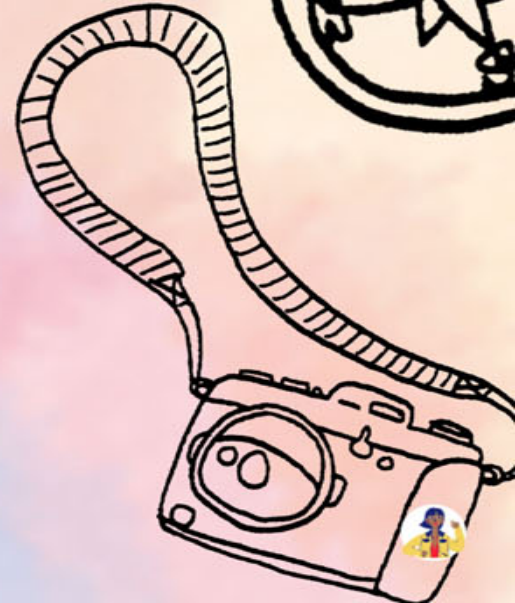




A Tramp's Sketches



by Stephen Graham



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Contents

Preface

Part One

1. Farewell to the Town
2. Nights Out on a Perfect Vagabondage
3. The Lord's Prayer
4. Days
5. The Question of the Sceptic
6. A Thing of Beauty is a Joy For Ever
7. A Still-Creation-Day
8. Sunset from the Gate of Baidari
9. The Meaning of the Sea

Part Two

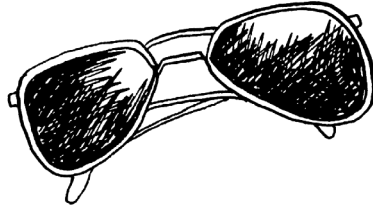
10. Hospitality
11. The Story of the Rich Man and the Poor Man

12. A Lodging for the Night
13. Socrates of Zugdida
14. "Have You a Light Hand?"
15. St. Spiridon of Tremifond
16. At a Fair
17. A Turkish Coffee-House
18. At a Great Monastery

Part Three

19. The Boy Who Never Grows Old
20. The Story of Zenobia
21. The Little Dead Child
22. How the Old Pilgrim Reached Bethlehem
23. The Wanderer's Story
24. The Unconquerable Hope
25. The Pilgrimage to Jerusalem
26. The Message from the Hermit

About Author



Preface

This book was written chiefly whilst tramping along the Caucasian and Crimean shores of the Black Sea, and on a pilgrimage with Russian peasants to Jerusalem. Most of it was written in the open air, sitting on logs in the pine forests or on bridges over mountain streams, by the side of my morning fire or on the sea sand after the morning dip. It is not so much a book about Russia as about the tramp. It is the life of the wanderer and seeker, the walking hermit, the rebel against modern conditions and commercialism who has gone out into the wilderness.

I have tramped alone over the battlefields of the Crimea, visited the cemetery where lie so many British dead, wandered along the Black Sea shores a thousand miles to New Athos monastery and Batum, have been with seven thousand peasant pilgrims to Jerusalem, and lived their life in the hospitable Greek monasteries and in the great Russian hostelry at the Holy City, have bathed with

them in Jordan where all were dressed in their death-shrouds, and have slept with them a whole night in the Sepulchre.

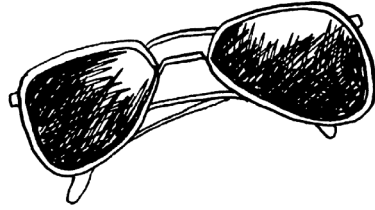
One cannot make such a journey without great experiences both spiritual and material. On every hand new significances are revealed, both of Russian life and of life itself.

It is with life itself that this volume is concerned. It is personal and friendly, and on that account craves indulgence. Here are the songs and sighs of the wanderer, many lyrical pages, and the very minimum of scientific and topographical matter. It is all written spontaneously and without study, and as such goes forth—all that a seeker could put down of his visions, or could tell of what he sought.

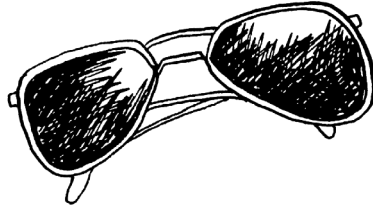
There will follow, if it is given to the author both to write and to publish, a full story of the places he visited along the Black Sea shore, and of the life of the pilgrims on the way to the shrine of the Sepulchre and at the shrine itself. It will be a continuation of the work begun in *Undiscovered Russia*.

Several of these sketches appeared in the St. James's Gazette, two in *Country Life*, and one in Collier's of New York, being sent out to these papers from the places where they were written. The author thanks the Editors for permission to republish, and for their courtesy in dealing with MSS.

STEPHEN GRAHAM.



Part One



1

Farewell to the Town

The town is one large house of which all the little houses are rooms. The streets are the stairs. Those who live always in the town are never out of doors even if they do take the air in the streets.

When I came into the town I found that in my soul were reflected its blank walls, its interminable stairways, and the shadows of hurrying traffic.

A thousand sights and impressions, unbidden, unwelcome, flooded through the eye-gate of my soul, and a thousand harsh sounds and noises came to me through my ears and echoed within me. I became aware of confused influences of all kinds striving to find some habitation in the temple of my being.

What had been my delight in the country, my receptivity and hospitality of consciousness, became in the town my misery and my despair.

For imagine! Within my own calm mirror a beautiful world had seen itself rebuilt. Mountains and valleys lay within me, robed in sunny and cloudy days or marching in the majesty of storm. I had inbreathed their mystery and outbreathed it again as my own. I had gazed at the wide foaming seas till they had gazed into me, and all their waves waved their proud crests within me. Beauteous plains had tempted, mysterious dark forests lured me, and I had loved them and given them habitation in my being. My soul had been wedded to the great strong sun and it had slumbered under the watchful stars.

The silence of vast lonely places was preserved in my breast. Or against the background of that silence resounded in my being the roar of the billows of the ocean. Great winds roared about my mountains, or the whispering snow hurried over them as over tents. In my valleys I heard the sound of rivulets; in my forests the birds. Choirs of birds sang within my breast. I had been a playfellow with God. God had played with me as with a child.

Bound by so intimate a tie, how terrible to have been betrayed to a town!

For now, fain would the evil city reflect itself in my calm soul, its commerce take up a place within the temple of my being. I had left God's handiwork and come to the man-made town. I had left the inexplicable and come to the realm of the explained. In the holy temple were arcades of shops; through its precincts hurried the trams; the pictures of trade were displayed; men were building hoardings in my soul and posting notices of idol-worship, and hurrying throngs were reading books of the rites of idolatry. Instead of the mighty anthem of the ocean I heard the roar of traffic. Where

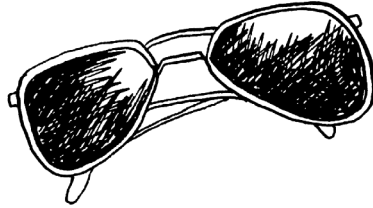
had been mysterious forests now stood dark chimneys, and the songs of birds were exchanged for the shrill whistle of trains.

And my being began to express itself to itself in terms of commerce.

“Oh God,” I cried in my sorrow, “who did play with me among the mountains, refurnish my soul! Purge Thy Temple as Thou didst in Jerusalem of old time, when Thou didst upset the tables of the money-changers.”

Then the spirit drove me into the wilderness to my mountains and valleys, by the side of the great sea and by the haunted forests. Once more the vast dome of heaven became the roof of my house, and within the house was rebuilt that which my soul called beautiful. There I refound my God, and my being re-expressed itself to itself in terms of eternal Mysteries. I vowed I should never again belong to the town.

As upon a spring day the face of heaven is hid and a storm descends, winds ruffle the bosom of a pure lake, the flowers droop, wet, the birds cease singing, and rain rushes over all, and then anon the face of heaven clears, the sun shines forth, the flowers look up in tears, the birds sing again, and the pure lake reflects once more the pure depth of the sky, so now my glad soul, which had lost its sun, found it again and remembered its birds and its flowers.



2

Nights Out on a Perfect Vagabondage

I have been a whole season in the wilds, tramping or idling on the Black Sea shore, living for whole days together on wild fruit, sleeping for the most part under the stars, bathing every morning and evening in the clear warm sea. It is difficult to tell the riches of the life I have had, the significance of the experience. I have felt pulse in my veins wild blood which my instincts had forgotten in the town. I have felt myself come back to Nature.

During the first month after my departure from the town I slept but thrice under man's roof. I slept all alone, on the hillside, in the maize-fields, in the forest, in old deserted houses, in caves, ruins, like a wild animal gone far afield in search of prey. I never knew in advance where I should make my night couch; for I was Nature's guest and my hostess kept her little secrets. Each night a new secret was opened, and in the secret lay some pleasant mystery. Some of the mysteries I guessed—there are many guesses in these pages—

some I only tried to guess, and others I could only wonder over. All manner of mysterious things happen to us in sleep; the sick man is made well, the desperate hopeful, the dull man happy. These things happen in houses which are barred and shuttered and bolted. The power of the Night penetrates even into the luxurious apartments of kings, even into the cellars of the slums. But if it is potent in these, how much more is it potent in its free unrestricted domain, the open country. He who sleeps under the stars is bathed in the elemental forces which in houses only creep to us through keyholes. I may say from experience that he who has slept out of doors every day for a month, nay even for a week, is at the end of that time a new man. He has entered into new relationship with the world in which he lives, and has allowed the gentle creative hands of Nature to re-shape his soul.

The first of my nights after leaving the town was spent on a shaggy grass patch on a cliff, under three old twisted yew trees. Underfoot was an abundance of wild lavender and the air was laden with the scent. I am now at New Athos monastery, ten miles from Sukhum, and am writing this in the cell that the hospitable monks have given me. My last night was in a deep cavern at the base of a high rock on a desert shore.

The first night was warm and gentle, though it was followed by several that were stormy. Wrapped in my rug I felt not a shiver of cold, even at dawn. As I lay at my ease, I looked out over the far southern sea sinking to sleep in the dusk. The glistening and sparkling of the water passed away—the sea became a great bale of

grey—blue silk, soft, smooth, dreamy, like the garment of a sorceress queen.

I slipped into sleep and slipped out again as easily as one goes from one room to another, sometimes sleeping one hour or half an hour at a time, or more often one moment asleep, one moment awake, like the movement of a boat on the waves.

Once when I wakened, I started at an unforeseen phenomenon. The moon in her youth was riding over the sea as bright as it is possible to be, and down below her she wrote upon the waves and expressed herself in new variety, a long splash of lemon-coloured light over the placid ocean, a dream picture, something of magic.

It was a marvellous sight, something of that which is indicated in pictures, but which one cannot recognise as belonging to the world of truth—something impressionistic. To waken to see something so beautiful is to waken for the first time, it is verily to be in part born; for therein the soul becomes aware of something it had not previously imagined: looking into the mirror of Nature, it sees itself anew.

Where my sleeping-place would be had been a secret, and this was the mystery in it, the further secret. I was definitely aware even on my first night out that I had entered a new world.

To sleep, to wake and find the moon still dreaming, to see the moon's dream in the water, to sleep again and wake, so—till the dawn. Such was my night under the old yews, the first spent with these southern stars on a long vagabondage.



How different was last night, how full of weariness after heavy tramping through leagues of loose stones. I had been tramping from desolate Cape Pitsoonda over miles and miles of sea holly and scrub through a district where were no people. I had been living on crab-apples and sugar the whole day, for I could get no provisions. It is a comic diet. I should have liked to climb up inland to find a resting-place and seek out houses, but I was committed to the seashore, for the cliffs were sheer, and where the rivers made what might have been a passage, the forest tangles were so barbed that they would tear the clothes off one's back. In many places the sea washed the cliffs and I had to undress in order to get past. It was with resignation that I gave up my day's tramping and sought refuge for the night in a deep and shapely cavern.

There was plenty of dry clean sand on the floor, and there was a natural rock pillow. I spread out my blanket and lay at length, looking out to the sea. I lay so near the waves that at high tide I could have touched the foam with my staff. I watched the sun go down and felt pleased that I had given up my quest of houses and food until the morrow. As I lay so leisurely watching the sun, it occurred to me that there was no reason why man should not give up quests when he wanted to—he was not fixed in a definite course like the sun.

Sunset was beautiful, and dark-winged gulls continually alighted on the glowing waves, alighted and swam and flew again till the

night. Then the moon lightened up the sea with silver, and all night long the waves rolled and rolled again, and broke and splashed and lapped. The deep cavern was filled with singing sounds that at first frightened me, but at last lulled me to sleep as if a nurse had sung them.



Between these two beds what a glorious Night picture-book, a book telling almost entirely of the doings of the moon. I remember how I slept once under a wild walnut-tree. In front of me rose to heaven forested hills, and the night clothed them in majesty. Presently the moon came gently from her apartments and put out a slender hand, grasped the tree-tops, and pulled herself up over the world. She showed herself to me in all her glory, and then in a minute was gone again; for she entered into a many-windowed cloud castle and roamed from room to room. As she passed from window to window I knew by the light where she was. A calm night. The moon went right across the sky and returned to her home. Rain came before the dawn, and then mists crept down over the forests and hid them from my view. Cold, cold! The mountains were hidden by a cloud. Loose stones rolled down a cliff continually and a wind sighed. I snuggled myself into my blanket and waited for an hour. Then the sun gained possession of the sky.

I went down to the river, gathered sticks—they were very damp—and made a fire. Once the fire began to burn it soon increased in

size, for I had gathered a great pile of little twigs and they soon dried and burned. Then in their burning they dried bigger twigs, sticks, cudgels, logs. I boiled my kettle and made tea.

Whilst I bathed in the river the sun gave a vision of his splendour: a thousand mists trembled at his gaze. An hour later it was a very hot day, and the village folk coming out of their houses could scarcely have dreamed how reluctantly the night had retired at the dawn—with what cold and damp the morning had begun.



Another night, just after moonrise, a wind arose and drove in front of it the whole night long a great thunderstorm, with lightnings and rollings and grumblings and mutterings, but never a spot of rain. At dawn, when I looked out to sea, I saw the whole dreadful array of the storm standing to leeward like ships that had passed in the night, and as though baulked in pursuit the roll of the thunder came across the sky sullenly, though with a note of defeat.

The nights were often cold and wet, and it became necessary for me to make my couch under bridges or in caves or holes of the earth. On the skirts of the tobacco plantations and in the swampy malarial region where the ground never gets dry I slept beside bonfires. I learned of the natives to safeguard against fever by placing withered leaves on bark or wilted bracken leaves between myself and the ground. At a little settlement called Olginka I slept on an accumulation of logs outside the village church. On this occasion

I wrapped myself up in all the clothes I possessed, and so saved myself from the damp. Next morning, however, my blanket was so wet with dew that I could wring it, though I had felt warm all night. I had always to guard against the possibility of rain, and I generally made my couch in pleasant proximity to some place of shelter—a bridge, a cave, or a house; and more than once I had to abandon my grass bed in the very depth of the night, and take up the alternative one in shelter.



A tremendous thunderstorm took place about a fortnight after I left home. I had built a stick fire and was making tea for myself at the end of a long cloudless summer day, and taking no care, when suddenly I looked up to the sky and saw the evening turning swiftly to night before my eyes. The sun was not due to set, but the western horizon seemed as it were to have risen and gone forth to meet it. A great black bank of cloud had come up out of the west and hidden away the sun before his time.

I hastened to put my tea things into my pack and take to the road, for it was necessary to find a convenient night place. In a quarter of an hour it was night. At regular intervals all along the road were the brightly lit lamps of glow-worms; they looked like miniature street lights, the fitting illumination of a road mostly occupied by hedgehogs.

I found a dry resting-place under a tree and laid myself out to sleep, watching the moon who had just risen perfectly, out of the East; but I had hardly settled myself when I was surprised by a gleam of lightning. Turning to the west, I saw the vast array of cloud that had overtaken the sun, coming forward into the night—eclipsing the sky.

A storm? Would it reach me? My wishes prompted comforting answers and I lay and stared at the sky, trying to find reassurance. I did not feel inclined to stir, but the clouds came on ominously. I marked out a bourne across the wide sky and resolved that if the shadow crept past certain bright planets in the north, south, and centre, I would take it as a sign, repack my wraps, and seek shelter in a farm-house. But the clouds came on and on. Slowly but surely the great army advanced and the lightnings became more frequent. My sky-line was passed. I rose sorrowfully, put all my things in the knapsack, and took the road once again.

The lightning rushed past on the road and, blazing over the forests, lit up the wide night all around. Overhead the sky was cut across: in the east was a perfectly clear sky except at the horizon where the moon seemed to have left behind fiery vapours; in the west and overhead lay the dense black mass of the storm cloud. The clouds came forward in regular array like an army. Nothing could hold them back; they came on—appallingly. And the moon looked at the steady advance and her light gleamed upon the front ranks as if she were lighting them with many lanterns.

I had lain down to sleep quite sober-hearted, but now as the lightnings played around I began to feel as excited as if I were in a

theatre—my blood burned. I had tired feet, but I forgot them. I walked swiftly. I felt ready to run, to dance. Very strangely there was at the same time a presentiment that I might be struck by lightning. But all Nature was madly excited with me and also shared my presentiment of destruction. We lived together like the victim and the accomplices in a Dionysian sacrifice and orgy.

And the clouds kept on gaining! Far away I heard the storm wind and the clamour of the sea. The thunder moaned and sobbed. I hurried along the deserted road and asked my heart for a village, a house, a church, a cave, anything to shield from the oncoming drench.

Spying a light far away on a hill, I left the road and plunged towards it. I went over many maize-fields, by narrow paths through the tall waving grain, the lightning playing like firelight among the sheath-like leaves. I crossed a wide tobacco plantation and approached the light on the hill, by a long, heavily-rutted cart-track. This led right up to the doors of a farmhouse. Big surly dogs came rushing out at me, but I clumped them off with my stick, and having much doubt in my mind as to the sort of reception I should get, I knocked at the windows and doors. I expected to be met by a man with a gun, for the dogs had made such a rumpus that any one might have been alarmed.

The door was opened by a tall Russian peasant.

“May I spend the night here?” I asked.

The man smiled and put out his arms as if to embrace me.

“Yes, of course. Why ask? Come inside,” he replied.

“I thought of sleeping in the open air,” I added, “but the storm coming up I saw I should be drenched.”

“Why sleep outside when man is ready to receive you?” said the peasant. “It is unkind to pass our houses by. Why do you deny your brothers so? You said you slept in the fields, eh? That is bad. You shouldn’t. The earth here is full of evil, and the malaria comes up with the dampness. Your bones grow brittle and break, or they go all soft, you shrivel up and become white, or swellings come out on you and you get bigger and bigger until you die. No, no! God be thanked you came to me.”

He asked me would I sleep in the house or on the maize straw. His sons slept on the maize; it was covered, and so, sheltered from the rain. I could sleep in the house if I liked, but it was more comfortable on the straw. His three sons slept there, but as it was a festival they had not come home yet.

I agreed to the straw. My host led me to a sort of large open barn, a barn without walls, a seven-foot depth of hay and straw surmounted by a high roof on poles.

“If you feel cold, or if the rain comes in, just burrow down under the straw,” said the peasant. “Very glad I am that you have come to me, that you have done me the honour. Much better to ask hospitality than to sleep out.”

I quite agreed it was much better to sleep with man on such a night. The lightnings were now all about—never leaving a second’s pure darkness. The thunder grew more powerful and rolled forward from three sides.

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