CHAPTER XXII

STUDYING LINE AND COLOUR IN RUSSIA

FROM Hungary we continued our quest of line and colour of folk costume into Russia.

Strangely enough, Russia throws off the imperial yoke of autocracy, declaring for democratic principles, at the very moment we undertake to put into words the vivid picturesqueness resulting largely from the causes of this astounding revolution. Have you been in Russia? Have you seen with your own eyes any phase of the violent contrasts which at last have caused the worm to turn? Our object being to study national characteristics as expressed in folk costume, folk song, folk dance, traditional customs and fêtes, we consulted students of these subjects, whom we chanced to meet in London, Paris, Vienna and Buda Pest, with the result that we turned our faces toward southern or "Little" Russia, as the part least affected by cosmopolitan influences.

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Kiev was our headquarters, and it is well to say at once that we found what we sought,—ample opportunity to observe the genuine Russian, the sturdy, dogged, plodding son of toil, who, more than any other European peasant seems a part of the soil, which in sullen persistency he tills. We knew already the Russians of Petrograd and Moscow; one meets them in Paris, London, Vienna, at German and Austrian Cures and on the Riviera. They are everywhere and always distinctive by reason of their Slav temperament; a magnetic race quality which is Asiatic in its essence. We recognise it, we are stirred by it, we are drawn to it in their literature, their music, their painting and in the Russian people themselves. The quality is an integral part of Russian nature; polishing merely increases its attraction as with a gem. One instance of this is the folk melody as treated by Tschaikowsky compared with its simple form as sung or danced by the peasant.

Some of the Russian women of the fashionable world are very decorative. Our first impression of this type was in Paris, at the Russian
PLATE XXVIII
A skating costume worn by Miss Weld of Boston, holder of the Woman's Figure Skating Championship.

This photograph was taken in New York on March 23, 1917, when amateurs contested for the cup and Miss Weld won—this time over the men.

The costume of wine-coloured velvet trimmed with moleskin, a small close toque to match, was one of the most appropriate and attractive models of 1916-1917.
Modern Skating Costume
1917 Winner of Amateur Championship of Fancy Skating

Courtesy of New York Herald
Church on Christmas (or was it some other holy day?) when to the amazement of the uninitiated the Russian women of the aristocracy appeared at the morning service hatless and in full evening dress, wearing jewels as if for a function at some secular court. Their masculine escorts appeared in full regalia, the light of the altar candles adding mystery to the glitter of gold lace and jewels. Those occasions are picturesque in the extreme.

The congregation stands, as in the Jewish synagogues, and those of highest rank are nearest the altar, invariably ablaze with gold, silver and precious stones, while on occasions the priest wears cloth of gold.

In Paris this background and the whole scene was accepted as a part of the pageant of that city, but in Kiev it was different. There we got the other side of the picture; the man and the woman who are really Russia, the element that finds an outlet in the folk music, for its age-old rebellious submission. One hears the soul of the Russian pulsating in the continued reiteration of the same theme; it is like the endless treadmill of a life without
vistas. We were looking at the Russia of Maxim Gorky, the Russia that made Tolstoy a reformer; that has now forced its Czar to abdicate.

We reached Kiev just before the Easter of the Greek Church, the season when the pilgrims, often as many as fifty thousand of them, tramp over the frozen roads from all parts of the empire to expiate their sins, kneeling at the shrine of one of their mummied, sainted bishops.

The men and women alike, clad in grimy sheepskin coats, moved like cattle in straggling droves, over the roads which lead to Kiev. From a distance one cannot tell man from woman, but as they come closer, one sees that the woman has a bright kerchief tied round her head, and red or blue peasant embroidery dribbles below her sheepskin coat. She is as stocky as a Shetland pony and her face is weather-beaten, with high cheekbones and brown eyes. The man wears a black astrachan conical cap and his hair is long and bushy, from rubbing bear grease into it. He walks with a crooked staff, biblical in style,
and carries his worldly goods in a small bundle flung over his shoulder. The woman carries her own small burden. As they shuffle past, a stench arises from the human herd. It comes from the sheepskin, which is worked in, slept in, and, what is more, often inherited from a parent who had also worn it as his winter hide. Added to the smell of the sheepskin is that of an unwashed human, and the reek of stale food, for the poorest of the Russian peasants have no chimneys to their houses. They cannot afford to let the costly heat escape.

Kiev, the holy city and capital of Ancient Russia, climbs from its ancestral beginnings, on the banks of the River Dnieper, up the steep sides and over the summit of a commanding hilltop, crowned by an immense gold cross, illumined with electricity by night, to flash its message of hope to foot-sore pilgrims. The driver of our drosky drove us over the rough cobbles so rapidly, despite the hill, that we were almost overturned. It is the manner of Russian drosky drivers. The cathedral, our goal, was snowy-white, with frescoes on the outer walls, onion-shaped domes of bronze
turned green; or gold, or blue with stars of gold.

We entered and found the body of the church well filled by peasants, women and men in sheepskin. One poor doe-eyed creature crouched to press his forehead twenty times at least on the stone floor of the church. Eagerly, like a flock of sheep, they all pushed forward to where a richly-robed priest held a cross of gold for each to kiss, taking their proffered kopeks.

The setting sun streamed through the ancient stained glass, dyeing their dirty sheepskin crimson, and purple, and green, until they looked like illuminations in old missals. To the eye and the mind of western Europe it was all incomprehensible. Yet those were the people of Russia who are to-day her mass of armed defenders; the element that has been counted on from the first by Russia and her allies stood penniless before an altar laid over with gold and silver and precious stones. Just before we got to Kiev, one of those men in sheepskins with uncut hair and dogged expression, who had a sense of values
in human existence, broke into the church and stole jeweled chalices from the altar. They were traced to a pawnshop in a distant city and brought back. It was a common thing to see men halt in the street and stand uncovered, while a pitiful funeral cortege passed. A wooly, half-starved, often lame horse, was harnessed with rope to a simple four-wheeled farm wagon, a long-haired peasant at his head, women and children holding to the sides of the cart as they stumbled along in grief, and inside a rough wooden coffin covered with a black pall, on which was sewn the Greek cross, in white. Heartless, hopeless, weary and underfed, those peasants were taking their dead to be blessed for a price, by the priest in cloth of gold, without whose blessing there could be no burial.