

# The Woodcarver

by John Herbert Marr

If you approach *Moorhouse* as a casual visitor, the first presence you catch is the unvarying, rhythmic tap-tap-tap, echoing through the open window and across the yard to the little gate, and the lane beyond. There is no sign outside to advertise this conspicuous activity; it seems to speak gently and persistently for itself, proclaiming its business to any caller without need of more strident notice. If you will open the gate, with its intricately shaped acorns and oak leaves surrounding the house name, and step into the yard, you will be drawn as if by the magic of a steady drum beat, and might marvel at its hypnotic and repetitive power, carrying like a cord to embrace the children it has sired, set in silent adoration round the yard: masks and totems, birds and fish, hares and lions, all cut in loving detail from the drowsy timber and resting now beneath the shade of open roofing.

Here the sound is firmer, and you will catch through the glass shadowy movements of their progenitor. The idly curious turn here and leave, fearful perhaps of disturbing such intense activity; but if you are of sterner stuff, you will lift the latch of the heavy double doors and probe further. It is dark inside, the windows curtained with a lacery of fine wood dust; and the dust is heavy on the floor, and already you have left steps in it as you tread. Around the large shed are piled great beams and heavy frames awaiting sawing, and the scene is like an Escher print leading from lifeless blocks to half-sawn outlines to living forms emerging by gradual change, till on the bench lies the full life image of a woman's head. Now the man is seen clearly, bent across her features, the tap-tap-tap curving her neck, pausing only to turn the figure in her blocks, degree by patient degree, until the whole shape is coarsely outlined.

Still you might leave, wondering at the great concentration which seems oblivious of your presence; but should you break the still scene, with question or comment, he will answer without turning, letting nothing break his rhythm until he alone judges the moment right. Then he will pause and slowly stretch and turn, and you might wonder how this little man could make such mighty beasts. He is short, with grey-white hair, his face lined from concentration, and tanned from the open window; his glasses have slid down his nose, and his deep black eyes penetrate from above their rim; his arms are bare and thick with the strength of the hammer, and

his hands seem huge, gripping the mallet and chisel as though they are part of him, the skin thickly calloused from his work. He wears a simple apron, looped about his neck and tied behind, with a wide pouch pocket; once white, but long since greyed by time, it fits him like some priestly vestment, symbolic of his life. From the pouch a folding wooden ruler protrudes, and behind his ear is wedged a thick, oval carpenter's pencil, chiselled to a squared point that spoke better of its owner than any boastful sign.

Now the woodcarver takes his pencil, gripping it at some awkward angle as though handling a fine chisel, and brushes in some thick outline round the figure's neck. A moment later, a wide curved cutting edge is chasing through the hard oak like a knife through cheese, reaching for the wooden folds beneath the surface before baring the neck within its loose eternal garment. Now the more sensitive or discerning spectator will slip away, overawed perhaps by such engrossed determination and the steel will which seems to admit no other agent but its own imagination; but today a young man stands before him, watching the emerging figure with a casual glance, and we must strain to catch his thin voice above the hammer's noise.

"I heard about your work."

"That's good." The old one taps on, not yet pausing nor turning to face him.

"Yes, a friend of mine – Graham Thompson – you did a piece for him."

"Oh? Maybe."

"Yes, Graham Thompson," persists the stranger. "From Castleford – you carved him a bird."

"A perched eagle, carved in oak." He taps on.

"That's it – an eagle. It's a beautiful work."

The woodcarver makes no sign, and the rhythm never varies as the tool follows a line set as though on rails. Every aspect of the young man contrasts with his present surroundings: he is tall and thin, and he has to stoop slightly to avoid yet other planks suspended from the beams of the ceiling. His suede shoes seem to attract sawdust, and a few curling shavings - falling in a steady stream from the bench - catch his dapper city suit and neat waistcoat. These he flicks off with an attitude of disdain, pulling a painful face as though each is a needle in his side.

“I want you to carve me a figure,” the young man adds, with a tone of casual assurance that it will be so. “A full size head. Do you think you can do it?”

The woodcarver finishes the section and lifts the figure from its clamps, laying it reverentially in a green felt cloth on a separate finishing bench. He stretches and straightens now, his height helped by the wooden platform from which he works. He is still shorter than the other man, but his face and shoulders seem to dominate the room with his deep-set eyes overhung and enclosed by hooded brows. If he feels any resentment at the question, he does not show it, but answers a slow and simple “yes”.

“Good”, replies the other. “I’ll want it as soon as possible. I want it to represent me, if you can. I’ve got some photos here for you to work from. How much will it cost?”

Again there is an uncanny pause before the other replies. “I charge a fair price; I’ll need to measure up the timber and cost it. I’ll let you know.”

“Well don’t be too long,” the other answers curtly. I’m in a hurry. I’ll be back at the end of the week, is that soon enough for you?”

“I can get you a price by then. I’m not sure how soon I can do it, mind. I’ve a lot on at the moment.”

The young man’s brows furrow, “I’ll make it worth your while, don’t worry. I’ll be back on Friday.” He spins round and stalks briskly out, pausing in the yard to give his coat a final brush with his hand before heading back to the gate.

The old man looks more sorrowful than distraught and, as he reaches for the next piece to place on his bench, he shakes his head slowly. We too might stay for longer, but our story is with the younger man so let us leave with him.

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On Friday evening the man returned. The weather had broken, and the air was dark and over-heavy with thick, grey cloud. Cold uncertain winds scuttled round the streets and caught the unlatched gate, which blew to and fro with an irregular bang as he approached. The man caught it with disdainful finger and thumb to lift it open, and moved into the yard. A warm light dropped from the windows of the workshop, leaving heavy shadows outside, and the carved figures in the gallery looked like dark shapes cast from a troubled mind. Inside, an old paraffin stove gave

welcome warmth, with its flame glowing red behind a coloured glass panel. The old man was splitting a beam, driving in wedges and checking the grain.

“This is hard graft,” he grunted. “I could take it to the mill; they’d rip through it in a minute, but you’ve got to respect the wood. How old do you reckon this timber is?”

The visitor looked and saw a ragged square beam, worked with old slots and holes. “I really have no idea. Fifty years?”

“Nearer two hundred and fifty. It’s English oak from a well they uncovered at that new factory site. They were going to burn it, till I asked the foreman for it. He would have given it me, but I gave them the price of a drink. Pay for what you take or be in debt to the devil.”

The other seemed to perk up at the mention of pay. “Have you worked out the cost yet? I told you I’m in a hurry for it.”

The old man named a figure. “But I’m not sure when I can start,” he added. “I’ve a lot of other work on.”

“But that’s ridiculous. I told you I’m in a hurry - you don’t charge enough for your work. You could charge three times that figure, and do half as much and still be better off.”

“And who are you to say what better off is? I like my work. These figures are my life; they will live on long after I’m pegged out – they’ll still be here long after you’re dead and gone.”

“Well, you could still do as much and charge more – I could get you twice that figure from any decent furniture store. You’re hardly covering your costs at that rate.”

“My needs are minimal enough. What costs do you have in mind?”

“Well, wood for a start. You can’t get it all from old wells.”

“We got all our wood from yardmen when I was apprentice, but all the great hardwood yards are gone now. Most of it’s second-hand these days – you’d be surprised how much mature timber there is from old buildings or disbanded timber yards. Come out and look at this.” He led the other outside, to a shaded corner of the yard where several heaps of sawn boards lay flat, a few square wooden battens separating each board. “And all the tree felling. That was from the Long Wood at Arbury End, where the new bypass is going through – most of it stacked out here

is seasoning from sapwood – it'll all be ready in a year or two. You have to keep it straight to stop it warping and splitting. It all takes time, but time costs nothing.”

“And what about your tools – your chisels?” the man persisted as they wandered back into the workshop. “Their cost must represent a substantial capital investment; you have to allow for that, and depreciation.”

“Some I made, and some I was given. We had to learn to shape the steel and temper the shaft, and then carve a handle for them. Some I bought when I was a boy, and they were over a century old then. Look at these –” he opened a chest filled with shelf drawers, stooping to pull one out. It slid easily in his hand, like something well used. Nestling on a bed of green felt lay a long line of chisels, each carefully placed in its precise place, like rows of sleeping babies in a nursery. The shafts were a dull metallic grey with each end honed to a brilliant reflective edge in the light, and each with a beautifully polished handle finished in a variety of coloured woods delicately incised with lines, the points kept apart by the ruffled cloth. “I’ve nearly three hundred different chisels in here; there’s one for every job, and there’s no two handles alike – I can put my hand to any of them and know which one I’m touching without looking. No chisel made since the war is worth using: the steel’s too soft now; they don’t keep an edge and grind down too quickly.”

“Well you’re a fool if you work for nothing. You run a business like any other; you’ve got to make a profit or you go under. That’s the rule of business.”

The old man’s features hardened as he looked back at the other.

“You seem to have plenty of wood here – what about that block?” He indicated a large, square, dark ochre-coloured piece, standing by itself in the corner. “That looks big enough to me. I want you to carve it in that wood.”

The woodcarver turned and looked slowly up at him. His hooded eyes darkened, and a grim mood took his face, as though an unexpected knot had appeared in his work and blunted a favourite chisel.

“That wood was for a sentinel piece in a church. It’s not right for you - I’m not happy with it.” The woodcarver hesitated inexpressively; his medium was wood not words, and he could not voice his doubts clearly enough to deflect the other.

“I want that wood. I want it for my head and I’m not prepared to wait. I’ll pay.”

Again the old woodcarver hesitated. He had worked with timber for so long he sometimes felt the grain was part of him, as though some unseen hand had shaped him long ago, with knotted hands and heartwood in his mind. He felt the sluggish pace of the sap within him moving; he could see the dust-filled fissures on his frame, and feel how fragile were the joints. He knew the weakened timbers of his limbs, and sensed how easily they might break. His wife had died, his children came but rarely, and his spirit now was closer to the wood he worked than to any mortal person. Sometimes he played the radio for company; at others, he talked to the wood, coaxing it into shape, or swearing softly with vexation, and heard no other voice all day but his own. He gave secret names to the figures he made, and walked in the yard to stretch himself, talking with them and getting encouragement and strength from the replies he knew they made. If the figures took on lives of their own, with personalities and individual idiosyncrasies, then he thought it logical that the timber from which they came must also have such features; as the child is moulded by the mother, so the wood was mother to his carvings, and he therefore was their father, drawing out new life from the mother’s potential. Each timber had its history, and its own unique potential; it could be used only once, and seemed to tell him what to carve. That block in the corner, seemingly of good elm, had stood aside for six months awaiting his hand, yet he had hesitated. He had intended it for a saint’s head to sit beside the altar of a church. The vicar had assured him there was no hurry – a memorial bequest, and the family were not impatient; but still he had not started, for the wood felt wrong. Now this perplexing stranger wanted it for himself, presumably from vanity, and the woodcarver did not know how to answer him. No one had yet come to his door without a reason, he thought, and he had always welcomed all who loved his work; but somehow this man seemed without love. He did not love the work or craftsmanship on display, nor did he appear to want the carving for love of someone else, as memorial or present. But perhaps this timber had been held back for just this presumptive man in some way he did not comprehend, for he was a great believer in fate and circumstance dictating his life.

“Yes,” replied the woodcarver slowly, with a grim look of foreboding, “you’ll pay for it all right.”

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Winter came, with the dampness of a wet towel, its mist entering the yard to touch the silent figures with ghostly shadows. Through the window the woodcarver could be seen, standing and holding the heavy timber before him. He turned it side to side, and on each end, eyeing the grain, looking at the knots, assessing weakness and strength, feeling for some inner shape to guide his hand. There were a few splits in the timber, but these should come out as he cut the wood away. The trick was to arrange their orientation to lie where the very deepest parts of the head would form – the neck, the hair – or else to lie at the back, out of sight. The parts in greatest relief – the nose, the chin, the cheeks, and the most delicate features such as eyes and lips – needed a fine, smooth grain. Carving figures in the round demanded all his attention; the whole figure had to be assessed for depth and shape to command the block, filling it with new life. Once a commitment had been made it could not be reversed or redressed, so an error now might lose the block which could then only be split for smaller figures or house signs.

As though he could read the surface markings like an X-ray, he began to form a mental impression of inside the block and saw the head within. With a grunt of satisfaction and determination he sat on his high stool, the block between his knees cradled by his apron, and reached for his pencil. A few deft strokes shaped the main outline on each surface, and he took it over to the band-saw to rough out the shape. This was one of his few acknowledgements to modern methods. He did not altogether like it, but the weakening of his limbs had forced its use. The blade was much coarser than his old fret saw, so he could not take out as much wood or get so intricate a shape. On these hard woods, if he hurried too much there was a danger of burning the wood, so he pushed the block slowly against the blade, turning it gently to feed and feel it through. As the waste fell away, he could see the fresh timber for the first time, and begin to judge its worth. The surface splits were finer with the depth of cut, but they had not cleared completely, and one or two seemed to spiral in across the grain so ended up at places he had not expected. The beam had been cut from the heart of the tree, and some fine splits ran star-like across the concentric circles that were centred on the top face. The grain too had an unusual quality to it. Wood has a natural oil within it, which gives polish and colour even after centuries; but in this timber, some parts had dried more than usual giving parts of the wood a grey colour with a brittle feel, and making the cells distinct. The woodcarver thought it must be the result of the strange, thin shakes in the wood, carrying air into the inner grain with irregular local drying and shrinking. He hoped it would improve as he cut deeper, but where the wood was affected he

knew there would be a lacklustre finish, which even good polishing would not disguise. He continued cutting and turning the wood, until he began to rough-hew the face itself. The surface he had selected had been free of blemishes, but to his surprise three tiny splits appeared as he cut down to where the mouth, eyes and brow would be. Sometimes such disfigurements were within the wood and could not be anticipated, but here he thought they must have continued from those on top. He sighed and lifted the wood from its jig and carried it back to the corner. His instinct about the beam had been right, so this order would have to wait after all. There was no rushing a good job.

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The young man returned one week later to check the progress on his figure. He stepped through the door unannounced, dripped water on the concrete floor, and swept his gaze round the workshop. He saw the half-cut figure in the corner, and smiled approvingly. “You’ve made a start then, I see.”

The old man looked round and stopped his work. He walked across the room, lifted the hulk and carried it back to his bench. It had a sullen, square look, with cuts taken in straight lines and wedges, but already was recognisably a human face. “There’s a problem with this timber. Look, you see these splits, they’re going to interfere with the finish.” He turned it so the other could see. The small splits had opened slightly giving off tiny radiants like some parody of mouth and eyes.

The young man picked it up and turned it slowly, cradling it for support. “That’s just what I’m wanting - it’s got a solid feel to it.” He saw the blemishes as natural patterns, and could feel the weight in the wood, which he took to be strength. “I want you to finish this as quickly as possible – no more excuses. We have an agreement, and I intend you to stick to it.”

The woodcarver scowled and set the piece down. Under the gaze of the stranger he felt an uncomfortable compulsion, unknown since his apprentice days, to obey his commands. He cleared the bench of work and fixed the block in the special vice he had made for such pieces, with heavy gauge screws into the base and the top of the head to steady it. The wood at the top would be removed last, once the details of the face were completed. He reached for a medium gouge and his heavy lead mallet and began pounding the wood in long curved sweeps, cutting timber at a furious rate, pausing only to turn the head from time to time in its support. Gradually

the waste fell away to reveal an inner form: a thin neck curving with arrogant grace to the delicate jaw, the chin small but firm with a small cleft, the nose thin and slightly arched, the narrow brows and shallow eyes, and the ears set well back, half covered by straight hair whose darkness was lost in the light timber. The woodcarver worked without recourse to the photos before him; he was carving from memory, for the man's face was so clearly etched in his mind he had no need to look round to see him. At last he stopped. "I have to go out tomorrow. You'll have it finished by the weekend."

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At ten past eight the following day, the boss above the head was removed, and final cuts were taken to shape the hairline. The grain was irregularly marked on the crown, with deep annular rings and radial striae already darkening from natural weathering. The wood should take a deep polish, thought the woodcarver, setting a beautiful lustre to these high shades, which were ruddy under his thin bare light. He still held reservations about the fissuring, but it had not deepened, and he felt the natural admiration for his own work of any craftsman pleased with his skill. He stood the figure on the bench and found a cloth to cover it. He would apply the first coat of polish in the morning to seal the wood, then bring it up with a second coat later. As he looked at the piece, it seemed to creak and sigh almost like a living thing, and as he approached with his baize cloth, the slight fissures present in the mouth suddenly split open in a great gash, leaving a disconcerting black leer across the lips, and breaking one of the teeth in two. Then, as he went to touch the wood, the splits in the left eye - which until then had been barely noticeable - also twisted open and turned out, pushing the carved eye with it. As though not satisfied with this disfigurement, the crown that he had just been admiring opened also, along the very radial lines he had thought to give polish. It was as though some huge pent-up tension in the wood had suddenly been released, as the inner figure was finally revealed. The final result was horrendous; a distorted parody of a man whose outer features were superficially conforming to good taste, but wrecked by these inner cross-grained forces. The old man grimaced, and wondered again at the mystical relationship that seemed to spring up time and again between subject and medium. He hesitated, before deeming to give the figure a light polish, propelled by the habit of years to 'finish the job'. Finally he put it to one side to dry, turned the fire low and the light off, then crossed the yard to his house.

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When at last the young man returned, the woodcarver took him over to the bench and pulled the cloth away. “Here’s your face,” he said, “take it.”

The man looked for a long time, slowly turning it on the bench, adjusting the angle-poise lamp to different effect, stepping back and scowling, then moving until his nose almost pressed against the grain of the figure, as though getting the smell of the fresh wood into his nostrils gave him a new dimension of understanding. Finally, he picked it up, slowly, with a quiet dignity that held the old man’s attention, and when he spoke it was softly, reverentially, with awe in his voice. “How did you achieve this? It’s magnificent – but this isn’t me you’ve carved. There’s so much raw power in it. Every cut speaks with passion: tension, anger, hatred, there’s even jealousy and envy in it. This figure speaks of so many emotions – but there’s one I can’t see. It doesn’t have love. There isn’t one tiny spark of gentleness or care, or concern. What happened to it?”

“I carved what I saw. I took it from life – from your life. I didn’t ask you to like it. That’s how you looked when I carved it.”

“No, this isn’t me,” said the younger one quietly. “I may have ambition, even selfishness and greed, but this isn’t me. Look at it again: this figure is a face you know much better than mine – this is your face.”

The woodcarver stood still, thinking of the figure still half hidden by the other man’s arms. If he was disturbed by the thoughts the other had begotten, it did not show. “You won’t be wanting the head, then.”

The young man made no move to replace the figure. He again spoke slowly, and so softly the old man had to strain to hear. “We had a bargain; take your money. The head is mine now. It speaks of all that was in you.”