

TWO WAYFARERS

BY

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Two men with bundles over their shoulders were walking along the dusty highroad that lies between Moscow and Toulá. The younger man wore a short coat and velveteen trousers. Spectacles gleamed out from under the brim of his new peasant's hat. The other was a man of about fifty, remarkably handsome, dressed in a monk's frock, with a leather belt round his waist and a high round black cap, such as novices wear in monasteries. His long dark beard and dark hair were turning grey.

The younger man was pale and sallow, was covered with dust, and seemed scarcely able to drag one foot after the other. The old man walked cheerfully along, swinging his arms, his shoulders well thrown back. It seemed as though dust dared not settle on his handsome face nor his body feel fatigue.

The young man, Serge Vasilievich Borzin, was a doctor of science of Moscow University. The old man, Nicholas Petrovich Serpov, had been a sub-lieutenant in an infantry regiment during the

reign of Alexander, then he had become a monk, but was expelled from the monastery for bad conduct. He had, however, retained the monastic garb. The men had come together in this wise. Borzin, after taking his doctor's degree, and after writing several articles for the Moscow reviews, went to stay in the country, to plunge into the current of peasant life and to refresh himself in the waves of the popular stream, as he put it. After a month spent in the country in complete solitude, he wrote the following letter to a literary friend of his, who was editor of a journal:—

" My Master and Friend Ivan Finogeich,

– It is not for us to predict – indeed we cannot

– the ultimate solution of those problems which are solving themselves in the secrecy of the village life of the Russian people. Various phases of the Russian mind and its phenomena must be carefully taken into consideration – the seclusion of their lives; the revolutionary reforms introduced by Peter; etc., etc."

The long and the short of it was that Borzin, having been deeply impressed by the everyday life of the people, had become convinced that the problem of determining the destiny of the Russian nation was more difficult and complex than he had been wont to imagine, and that in order to find its solution he must traverse Russia on foot; so he asked his friend not to discuss the question in his journal pending his return, promising to set forth all that he discovered in a series of articles.

Having written this letter, Borzin set about making preparations for his journey. Though it annoyed him, he had to consider such details as what he should wear. He bought a coat, nailed boots, and a hat such as the peasants wear, and, shutting out his servants, studied himself for a long time in his glass. He could not get rid of his spectacles, as he was too near-sighted. After this, the most essential thing was to get some money. He needed at least 300 roubles. There was no money in his cash-box, so Borzin summoned his bailiff and accountant and went through his books. Finding that he had 180 quarters of oats, he ordered them to be sold, but the bailiff remarked that the oats had been kept for seed. In another column he found an entry of 160 quarters of rye, and asked if that would suffice for seed. The bailiff replied by asking if he wanted them to sow last year's rye. The conversation ended shortly after, the bailiff recognising that Borzin knew as little about farming as a babe, and Borzin realising that the rye had been sown already, that new seed was usually used, and that after deducting enough for daily needs from the 180 quarters of corn, the rest might be sold.

The money having been obtained, Borzin made up his mind one evening to start next day, when he heard an unknown voice in the hall, and his father's old valet Stephen entered and announced Nicholas Petrovich Serpov.

"Who is he?"

" Don't you remember the monk who used to visit your father? "

" No, not at all. What does he want? "

" He wishes to see you, but I don't think he is quite himself."

Serpov entered the room, bowed, stamped his foot and said,—

"Serpov — a wayfarer." They shook hands. " Nothing but ignorance — no education. I admonish Russia in vain. Russia is a fool. The peasant is industrious but Russia is a fool. Don't you agree? I knew your father. We used to sit and chat, and he would say, ' You will get on.' But why are you dressed like that? I am as plain-spoken as a soldier, and I ask why? "

" I am going to make a journey on foot."

" I am on the road myself. I am a wayfarer. I have been all the way to Greece, to the Athos Monastery, but I never saw any one as honest

as our peasants.”

Serpov sat down, asked for vodka, and then went to bed. Borzin was puzzled. Next day Serpov was the listener and, as Borzin liked to talk, Serpov heard all about his theory and the aim of his journey. Serpov thoroughly approved of it, and ended by offering himself as companion, which Borzin accepted; partly because he did not know how to get rid of him ; partly because, with all his craziness, Serpov could flatter; partly, and chiefly, because Borzin regarded the monk as a remarkable, though somewhat complicated, phenomenon of Russian life.

They set out, and when we found them on the highroad they were nearing the place, where, according to their plan, the first night was to be spent. They had accomplished the first twenty-two versts of their journey.

Serpov had a glass at the public-house and was in good spirits.