

THE PILGRIM'S STORY

A TALE OF OLD RUSSIA

Some of the wonderful experiences I had as a child are connected with the stories of the holy pilgrims who passed through the Russia of old on their way to and from shrines. My mother and father welcomed these men and women very hospitably when they knocked on our door and asked for food and shelter for the night. It was a blessing to harbor these saintly people.

I remember one pilgrim who rested with us. She was a 'babushka'. In Russian that means a grandmother, an elderly person.

Jude Fischer



She arrived at suppertime on an overcast November evening. Her face was full of wrinkles, yet somehow they were laughing wrinkles, pleasant wrinkles. She had the bluest, merriest eyes and she smiled a dazzling smile.

We fed her, made her comfortable and after supper everyone gathered to listen to her tales. The fire in the wood stove crackled as if it were singing a little ditty, very pleased with itself. As usual, I was sitting on the floor at the feet of the pilgrim.

She made a large sign of the cross before she started talking. She told us how she had put her house in order before setting out on her pilgrimage. Her son, having recently married, had brought his bride home. She felt that the young people should have some time to them-

selves, and that this was a good chance to go on pilgrimage. She took her loaf of bread, her package of salt and her gourd of water and off she went, light of heart, with a soul full of joy and a mind full of prayer. For the next two months she travelled slowly, reverently, prayerfully, never hurrying, from one shrine to another.

Late one rainy October day she was glad to find a lonely log cabin at the edge of a forest. The next village was quite far away and she was tired. Humbly, she knocked at the door. It seemed to her that a low voice inside bade her enter. Enter she did.

She looked around for the holy icons that were to be found in those days in every home, even the humblest; they were always in the east corner. Sure enough, they were there. Then, as is the custom of my people, she blessed herself three times, bowed low before the icons in honor of the most Holy Trinity, and then looked around to greet whoever was there. "Peace be to this house," she said, using the greeting commanded by the Lord (Lk 10:5).

The only person she saw was an old man lying in a bed, looking very, very sick. He didn't seem to know she was there. She wondered who it was who had bidden her to enter, but she soon forgot as she busied herself with the fire which was low. The old man looked as if he

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had been unattended for a long time. She soon realized he had a fever and she began nursing him.

There was much to do. There weren't many provisions but in the barn she found a cow that also needed tending and a few hungry chickens. It wasn't long before she had the place shipshape and the man was getting better.

Finally he was up and about. He was still weak, but much better, and grateful to her, though he said very little. As she got to know him, she confessed that she began to stand in awe of him. She couldn't explain to herself exactly why; she just did. She especially liked the way he broke the bread at mealtime and handed her a piece, how he poured the tea and always handed her the full mug. There was a certain majesty about the way he made those simple gestures. It reminded her of something—but she couldn't remember what. Eventually she began to think of going on her way. One evening, she told the man she would be leaving in the morning.

The next morning, when she arose, she found the place in perfect order. The kettle was on the stove, boiling for her tea. The porridge was simmering quietly nearby. The table was set—but for only one person! There was no sign of the man. She went out into the barn and to her astonishment found no cow and no

chickens. She returned to the house to have her breakfast, wondering, and a bit perturbed.

She spied the bible which the man had read from so often. It was open and her eyes fell on the words, "I was sick and you nursed me. Whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me" (Mt 25:36,40).

She began to tremble with great awe. She fell on her face before the holy icons. She blessed herself many times. Then, since there was nothing else for her to do, she continued on her pilgrimage to the next holy place. But she confessed to us that ever since that experience her feet had wings, or so it seemed to her. She seldom was tired, and her heart sang and sang with great joy, a joy that never left her.

After telling her story, she fell silent. I looked at her face. The blue eyes under the dark eyebrows and lashes were as young as a little girl's, even though they were in a face full of laughing wrinkles. It truly seemed as if her youth had been renewed like the eagle's.

Ah, the stories that the pilgrims tell!

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