

## THE VILLAGE

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SYERY was being wasted, in vain, this year also. He had sat at home all winter long, with care-worn countenance, without light, cold and hungry. During the Great Fast (Lent), he had managed somehow or other to get a place with Rusanoff, near Tula: no one in his own neighbourhood would any longer give him a place. But before the month was out, Rusanoff's establishment had become more repulsive to him than a bitter radish.

"Oï, young fellow!" the manager once remarked to him. "I can see right through you: you are picking a quarrel so that you can take to your heels. Here, you dog, here's your money in advance, and now be off with you into the bushes!"

"Perhaps some sort of vagabond might take himself off, but not me," retorted Syery sharply.

But the manager did not understand the hint. And it became necessary to adopt more decisive means. One day Syery was set to hauling in some husks for the cattle. He went to the threshing-floor and began to load a cart with straw. The manager came along:

"Didn't I tell you, in good plain Russian, to load up with husks?"

"'Tis not the right time to load them," replied Syery firmly.

"Why not?"

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"Sensible farmers give husks for dinner, not at night."

"And how do you come to be a teacher?"

"I don't like to starve the cattle. That's all there is to my being a teacher."

"But you are hauling straw."

"One must know the proper time for everything."

"Stop loading this very minute."

Syery turned pale. "No, I won't stop my work. I can't stop my work."

"Hand me over that fork, you dog, and get out, lest worse happen."

"I'm no dog, but a baptized Christian man. When I've driven in this load, I'll get out. And I'll go for good."

"Well, brother, that's not likely! You'll go away, and pretty soon you'll be back again—and get locked up in the county jail."

Syery leaped from the cart and hurled his pitchfork into the straw: "I'm going to be locked up, am I?"

"Yes, you are!"

"Hey, young fellow, see that you don't get locked up yourself! As if we didn't know something about you! The master has nothing good to say about you, either, brother—"

The manager's fat cheeks became suffused with dark blood, his eyeballs protruded until they seemed all whites. With the back of his wrist he thrust his peaked cap over on the nape of his neck and, drawing a deep breath, he rapidly ejaculated: "A—ah! So that's the

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way of it! Hasn't a good word to say of me? Tell me, if that's the case—why not?"

"I have nothing to say," mumbled Syery, feeling his legs instantaneously grow cold with fear.

"Yes, you have, brother: you're talking nonsense—you'll tell!"

"Well, and what became of the flour?" suddenly shouted Syery.

"The flour? What flour?"

"The stolen flour. From the mill."

The manager seized Syery by the collar in a death-like grip, fit to suffocate him, and for the space of a moment the two stood stock still.

"What do you mean by it—grabbing a man like that, by his shirt?" calmly inquired Syery. "Do you want to choke me?" Then, all of a sudden, he began to squeak furiously: "Come on, thrash me, thrash while your heart is hot!" And with a jerk he wrenched himself free and seized his pitchfork.

"Come on, men!" the manager yelled, although there was no one anywhere in the vicinity. "Help the manager! Harken to this: he tried to stab me to death, the dog!"

"Don't come near me, or I'll break your nose," said Syery, balancing his pitchfork. "Don't forget, times are not what they used to be!"

But at this point the manager made a wide sweep with his arm, and Syery flew headlong into the straw.

The melancholy which had once more begun to take powerful effect on Kuzma along with the change in weather, went on constantly increasing in force in pro-

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portion to his closer acquaintance with Durnovka, with Syery. At first the latter was merely sad and ridiculous: what a stupid man! Then he became irritating and repulsive: a degenerate! All summer long he had sat on the doorstep of his cottage smoking, waiting for favours from the Duma. All the autumn he had roamed from farmstead to farmstead, in the hope of attaching himself to some one who was bound for the clover work. On a hot, sunny day a new grain-rick on the edge of the village took fire. Syery was the first person to present himself at the conflagration, where he shouted himself hoarse, singed his eye-lashes off, and got drenched to the skin directing the water-carriers and the men who, pitchforks in hand, flung themselves into the huge rosy-golden flame, dragging out in all directions the blazing thatches, and those who merely dashed about in the midst of the fire, the crackling flames, the gushing water, the uproar, the holy pictures, casks, and spinning-wheels heaped up near the cottages, the sobbing women, and the showers of blackened leaves scattered abroad from the burnt bushes. But what did he do that was practical? In October, when, after inundating rains and an icy storm, the pond froze over and a neighbour's boar-pig slipped from an ice-clad mound, broke through the ice, and began to drown, Syery was the first to arrive at full speed, leap into the water, and save it. But why? In order that he might be the hero of the day, that he might have the right to rush from the pond into the servants' hall, demand vodka, tobacco, and a bite to eat. At first he was all purple; his teeth were chatter-

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ing; he could barely move his white lips as he dressed himself from head to foot in some one else's clothes—Koshel's. Then he became animated, got intoxicated, began to brag—and once more narrated how he had served honestly, nobly, at a priest's, and how cleverly he had married off his daughter several years previously. He sat at the table greedily devouring chunks of raw ham and announcing in self-satisfied wise:

“Good. Matriushka, my girl, you see, had been making up to that Yegor. Well, she made eyes at him and made up to him. Nothing happened. One evening I was sitting, so, near the window, when I saw Yegor walk past the cottage once, then again—and that daughter of mine keeps diving, diving toward the window. That signifies, says I to myself, that they've settled matters. And I said to my wife: ‘Do you go give the cattle their fodder: I'm off, summoned to the village assembly.’ I set myself down on the straw behind the cottage, and there I sat and waited. And the first snow began to fall. And I saw Yegorka come sneaking along again. And she was on hand too. They went behind the cellar-house; then—they whisked into the cottage, the new empty one alongside. I waited a bit—”

“A nice story!” remarked Kuzma, with an embarrassed laugh.

But Syery took that for praise, for enthusiasm over his cleverness and craft. And, feeling himself a hero, he went on, now raising his voice, now viciously lowering it: “So there I sat and listened, and waited to find out what would happen next. So, as I was say-

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ing, I waited a bit—then after them I went. I leaped over the threshold—and straight at her, and seized her! Weren't they frightened, though—horribly! He tumbled flat on the floor, as limp as a sack—helpless enough for any one to cut his throat—while she went off in a faint—lay there like a dead duck. 'Well,' says he, 'now thrash me.' That was what he said. 'I don't ne-ed to thrash you,' says I. I took his coat, and I took his waistcoat, too—left him in his drawers only—pretty nearly in the condition when his mother gave him birth. 'Now,' says I, 'get out, go wherever you please.' And I myself set out for my house. I looked round—and he was behind me. The snow was white, and he was white, and he was sniffing. He had no place to go—whither could he run? But my Matryona Mikolavna rushes off to the fields the minute I am out of the cottage! She went at a lively pace—a woman neighbour had difficulty in grabbing her by the sleeve when she had got almost to Basovka, and brought her to me. I let her rest a while, then I said: 'We are poor folks, ain't we?' She said never a word. 'And your mother—is she a poor wretch, or is she a decent woman?' No answer. 'You've put us to shame. Hey, haven't you? What do you mean by it—are you thinking you'll fill my house with that sort, with your bastards—and I'm to shut my eyes to what's going on? Seeing how poor we are, you ought to watch what you're about, and not make us a laughing-stock, dragging your maiden braids all over the place—you trash!' Then I began to tan her hide—I had a fine suitable little whip on hand. Well, to say it simply,

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I cut up her whole body to such a degree that she slid down at my feet and kissed my felt boots, while he sat up on the bench and yelled. Then I began on him, the dear man—”

“And did he marry her?” inquired Kuzma.

“I should say he did!” exclaimed Syery; and, conscious that intoxication was getting the better of him, he began to scrape up the fragments of ham from the platter and stuff them into the pockets of his breeches. “And what a wedding we made of it! As for the expense, I don’t have to blink my eyes over that, brother!”