

VEGETARIANS BY CONTRACT

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A DELICIOUS fragrance of frying bacon was wafted my way as I sat up, wondering. Did some dream of longing account for it? No, there was no mistaking the bacon smell as I came wide awake.

"It must be", I decided, as I inhaled the enticing odour, "the new teacher. Surely she knows the regulations." We were the staff of the Doukhobor school, back after the holidays to our apartments over the schoolrooms, where each boarded herself. One of the requirements which somewhat nullified the good salary was that no meat of any kind might be cooked or eaten by the staff. The Doukhobors are vegetarians, and their zeal includes all who live with them.

So I crossed the hall to the teacher's room. She had just been added to the staff. As senior, I might be expected to save her from the embarrassment that would surely be hers if the parents of her pupils smelled bacon. For the olfactory nerves of these people are far reaching for odours other than their own.

"Did you read your contract, especially the paragraph about meat eating?" I asked her.

"Meat eating?" she queried vaguely, as she finished the last rasher. "But bacon isn't meat in that sense, is it?"

"These people make no exceptions, and they are very curious. I shall not be surprised if that odour brings one of their chief matrons over this evening; so be prepared!"

These peculiar people are full of taboos. They represent a survival of the original Russian village community or Mir, a remnant of a primitive Indo-European institution. The Mir has an interesting place in Russian history, for it afforded a basis for imperial taxation; tax collecting became easy when the community did the collecting. Each family had a house within the community in which it had proprietary rights, but could sell only to someone in the community. The houses were built in some central place. The families shared according to the working capacity of the males, while widows had equal rights.

Thus situated, these communities were easily influenced by the itinerant preachers who from time to time visited them. Many dissenting missionaries worked among them, but for

fifteen years the Quakers were their teachers. They early became dissenters from the Orthodox Russian church, and from time to time added other elements of dissent. At the beginning of the nineteenth century they were subjected to severe persecution for their beliefs, which served only to fix them. In the meantime was added to the persecution of the Greek church that of the military authorities and the Tartars, for the Doukhobors are conscientious objectors when it comes to military service. They moved about from place to place, seeking to carry on their peaceful pursuits of farming and handicraft. They finally reached the Caucasus, and were living in that Georgia which produced Stalin, where they were in serious trouble when Tolstoi, hearing of their plight, wrote one of his fiery letters to the English papers, with the result that the Quakers and British socialists succeeded in getting them land in Western Canada.

After coming to Canada, they scandalized their neighbours by working their women in the fields often harnessed to the plow. Like other European women, theirs felt this no hardship, and worked side by side with the men. Later when their leader, Peter Verigin I, joined them after a prolonged stay in Siberian prisons, they moved to British Columbia, where they engaged in fruit farming. Here they presented many problems, among which the failure to educate their children lest they might lose their community ideas was now being dealt with by the provincial government.

From the beginning of their history their obstinacy has been remarked. In their early history they seem not to have been either vegetarians or abstainers from alcohol. At first they expelled members from the community for disobedience. Later they pursued a method of attrition. If anyone in their opinion did not partake of the spirit, such a one was subjected to slander, and in consequence under various pretexts was greatly persecuted. To-day they have not greatly changed. They still have their stubbornness, their concealments, their attrition methods.

As a result, many strange things occurred in Canada. Schools were burned, and there was no way of bringing the actual culprit to justice. In fact, teachers lived among them at considerable risk. It became necessary to practise plenty of tact, not to say deceit, to cope with them. One of their first taboos, when schools were forced upon them by the local authorities, was that the teachers should conform to their strict vegetarian

diet. Within these restrictions their women were kind, and many of the teachers made friends with them.

It was not therefore a surprise on this occasion to see a large matron coming ponderously out of the community house and crossing the fields. It proved to be Sascha, an expert in those subtle methods of elimination which had made the life of so any teachers in our community unbearable. As she approached the door, I could see by the tilt of Sascha's nose that she smelled the trail left by that bacon. She came first to my room with an offer of some of their whole wheat bread and sunflower seeds, the latter their only sweetmeat. But the scent was not there, so it was not long before Sascha decided to visit my new colleague. Nor was I left long in doubt about Sascha's ability as a detective, when at the end of the week a warning came from the inspector of schools that our contract must be followed to the letter!