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To the People!

Alexander Berkman

In my mind I see myself back in the little Russian college town, amid the circle of Petersburg students, home for their vacation, surrounded by the halo of that vague and wonderful something we called "Nihilist." Again I sit among superior beings, reverently listening to the impassioned discussion of dimly understood themes, with the oft-recurring refrain of "Bazarov, Hegel, Liberty, Chernishevsky, V NAROD." To the people! To the beautiful, simple people, so noble in spite of centuries of brutalizing suffering! Like a clarion call the note rings in my ears, amidst the din of contending views and obscure phraseology. The People! My Greek mythology moods have often pictured HIM to me as the mighty Atlas, supporting on his shoulders the weight of the world, his back bent, his face the mirror of unutterable misery, in his eye the look of hopeless anguish, the dumb, pitiful appeal for help. Ah, to help this helplessly suffering giant, to lighten his burden! The way is obscure, the means uncertain, but in the heated student debate the note rings clear: to the People, become one of them, share their joys and sorrows, and thus you will teach them. Yes, that is the solution!

The Nihilists! How much of their precious blood has been shed, how many thousands of them line the road of Russia's suffering! Inexpressibly near and soul-kin I feel to those men and women, the adored mysterious ones of my youth, who had left wealthy homes and high station to "go to the People," to become one with them, though despised by all whom they held dear, persecuted and ridiculed even by the benighted objects of their great sacrifice.