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CHRIST VISITS A MUZHNIK

*By Nicholas Leskov, 1885
Dedicated to Christian Children*

I heard this story from an old Siberian who was closely familiar with the event, about how Christ Himself came to visit a *muzhnik* at Christmas and taught him something. I will relate what he told me in his own words.

Ours is a place for exiles, but a good one, with flourishing trade. My father and I were born here during the time of serfdom in Russia. We had an income quite sufficient for our position; nor are we poor now. We keep the simple Russian faith. Father was well read and he gave me a taste for reading; a person who liked to study would have been my best friend, and I would have gone through fire and water for him. And so, the Lord once sent me as a consolation an acquaintance named Timofei Osipovich, the one I want to tell you about – to tell that is, about how a miracle happened to him. Timofei Osipovich came to us when he was still young. I was then eighteen and he was probably something over twenty. Timosha was of irreproachable behavior. Why he was sent by the court to live here no one ever asked. We spared his feelings, as is accepted in our position, but rumors circulated that it was due to his uncle. This uncle was his guardian but he had wasted or carried off almost all his inheritance. Timofei Osipovich at that time was hot-blooded, as young people can be, and had a quarrel with his uncle and struck him with a weapon. By the Creator's mercy, the sin of this madness was not realized. Timofei only pierced the uncle's hand. Being very young he did not receive a great punishment, he was only sent to live here.

He had been born into a family of first-guild merchants.¹ Timosha's possessions, although nine-tenths had been plundered, were still enough to support him, even the remaining tenth part. He built a house and settled into it, but his heart was tormented by the offense and for a long time he

Opposite: A Strannik. 19th-century oil painting by Vasily Perov.

¹ In Tsarist Russia, merchants were divided into official and social grades, the first being the highest.

kept apart from everyone. He stayed at home, where he read books, the most sacred ones, and was only seen by his farm-labourers, a man and a woman.

At last we became acquainted through the books. I began to visit him and he received me willingly. Our hearts became inclined to one another. At first my parents did not readily let me go to see him. He seemed too queer to them. They said, "No one knows what he is like, and why he hides from everyone. He may teach you something bad." Although I was obedient to my parents' will, I told my father and mother the truth: that I had never heard anything bad from Timofei and that what we did was to read and speak about the faith – how one must live by God's holy will so as not to ruin and deface the Creator's image in oneself. Then, they allowed me to stay at Timofei's place as long as I wanted, and my father also went to see him once, and then Timofei Osipovich himself came to visit us.

My old people saw that he was a good man, and came to love him and feel very sorry for him, for he was often gloomy. The old offense would suddenly come to his mind, particularly if you said one word about his uncle. Then, he would go pale and afterwards look disturbed, and walk about with his hands hanging at his side. He did not want to read then and instead of his usual caressing kindness, wrath burnt in his eyes.

He was a person of exemplary honesty and a bright mind, but due to these depressions, he did not take up any business. However, the Lord soon helped him with the despondency: he fell in love with my sister, married her, and his melancholy vanished. He began to live fully and to earn money. Within ten years everyone knew him as a most capital person. His house was like a palace: there was an abundance of everything, and he himself enjoyed everyone's respect, a good wife and healthy children. What else does one need? One would think that he would forget all the past troubles, but he remembered the offense and once, when the two of us were riding in a cart, talking placidly, I asked him,

"So, Brother Timosha, are you now where you were?"

"What," he asked, "do you mean?"

"Do you have everything that you were once deprived of?"

At once he went pale, and did not say a word, driving the horse in silence. I apologized. "Forgive me, brother, for having asked. I thought that the evil had long ago passed and been forgotten."

"No matter," he replied, "that it happened long ago. I remember everything."

I felt sorry for him, not because he used to have much more, but because his heart was so darkened. He knew the Holy Scripture and talked well, but he had such a remembrance of wrongs that the Holy Scripture did not do him any good.

I fell to thinking. I considered him more intelligent than myself, and I hoped to make good use of his bright reason, but still, he remembered evil done to him... He noticed this and said:

“What are you thinking?”

“Well, nothing in particular...”

“No, you are thinking about me.”

“About you, too.”

“And what are you thinking about me?”

“Don’t be angry. I just thought this – you know Scripture, but your heart is wrathful and does not obey God. Is the Scripture of any use to you in this?” Timofei did not get angry, but his face became sad and darkened.

“You are not competent to cite the Holy Word.”

“In this,” I said, “you are right. I am not competent.”

“And,” he said, “you do not know what offenses exist in the world, offenses that cannot be borne.”

He told me that it was not for the money that he felt so badly towards his uncle, but for something quite different, something that could not be forgotten.

“I wanted to be silent my whole life as to all this,” he said, “but to you alone, my friend, I will disclose the matter.”

And he revealed to me that the uncle had hounded his father to death, made his mother perish from misery, slandered Timofei himself, and in his own old age had flattered and threatened some people into making their young daughter marry him (the maiden whom Timosha had loved since he was a child and himself wanted to marry).

“Can,” he said, “all this be forgiven? I will not forgive him all my life.”

“Well, yes,” I replied, “The offense was great, that is true, but neither is it a lie that the Holy Scripture is of no use to you.”

Again he reminded me that I was not so good at citing the Holy Scripture as he was, and began to prove that in the Old Testament holy men did not have mercy on the lawless, and even immolated them with their own hands. He, poor thing, wanted to justify his conscience before me.

I said, “Timosha! Yours is a bright head. You are well read and you know everything, and I cannot reply to you from the Holy Scripture. I admit that because I am a sinful man and have a small narrow mind, I do not even understand all that I read. But I tell you this: everything is old in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament it is said clearly: ‘Forgive and love.’ I like this. It is like a golden key that unlocks any lock. And what should be forgiven if not the greatest guilt?” He was silent.

Then I thought, “Lord, is it Your will to say a word to the soul of this brother through me?” And I told him about Christ, how He was beaten, hurt, spit upon and how they arranged the whole thing in such a way that there was no place for Him anywhere. He alone did not have a place, and He forgave everyone.

“You had better follow this,” I said, “because ‘many books madden you.’ Fight against yourself. As long as you remember the evil, it is alive. Let it die and your soul will live in peace.”

Timofei listened to me and forcefully squeezed my hand in his, but did not speak at length. He only said, “I cannot. Leave me, I feel so bad.”

And so I left him alone. I knew that he was in pain, but I kept silent, and another six years passed. I watched him all the time and saw that he suffered, and that if he were left to do what he wished and if he reached his uncle at last, he would forget all the Scripture and work for the liar, Satan. But deep in my heart I was at peace. I was sure that God would save my friend from this sin, and it came about in a surprising way.

Timofei had been in exile here for sixteen years now, and fifteen years had passed since he been married. So he was about thirty-seven or thirty-eight, and he had three children and everything was fine. He had a special liking for flowers – roses – and had many in the windows and in the orchard. All the space in front of the house was covered with roses and the house itself was full of their fragrance.

Timofei had a habit. When the sun was about to set he would come out to his garden, tend his roses, and then sitting on a bench, take up a book. As far as I know, he sometimes prayed there too. Once he came there in his usual way, bringing with him the Gospels. He looked after the roses, took his seat, and began to read. He read how Christ came to see the Pharisees, and that they did not even give Him water to wash His feet. And Timofei suddenly felt unbearably hurt and sorry for the Lord, so sorry that he even

wept. At this moment the miracle began. Timosha told me about it in the following way:

“I looked around and thought, ‘I have everything in abundance. I am well-off, but my Lord lived in such poverty.’ My eyes filled with tears that I couldn’t blink away, and then everything around me became rose-hued, even the tears themselves. And then, in a kind of oblivion or swoon, I exclaimed, ‘Lord, if You came to my house, I would give You even my own self!’ Then, on a breath of fragrant wind, from somewhere,

“I will come!”

In trepidation, Timofei ran to me. He asked, “What do you think? Can it really be that the Lord will come to my house?”

I replied, “This, brother, is above my understanding. What is there in the Scripture about it?”

Timofei said, “In the Scripture are the words, ‘Christ is the Same, now and forever.’ I cannot but believe.”

“Well,” I said, “then believe.”

“I will order a place to be set at table for Him every day!”

I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Don’t ask me, just look for what His will might be. As for the table setting, I see no offense to Him in it, only, is it not pride?”

“It reads,” he said, “He eats with publicans and sinners.”

“But it also reads like this, ‘Lord, I’m not worthy that you should come under my roof...’ I like these words too.”

“You don’t know.”

“Well then, let it be as you say,” I replied.

From then on, Timofei asked his wife to put an extra place at table. They would sit at table, the five of them – himself, his wife, and the three children, and there was always a sixth place, a place of honour with a big armchair at it.

His wife was curious, “What is this – why, and for whom?” But Timofei did not tell her the whole truth. He just said to her and to others that this was done to fulfill a promise of his soul, “for the first guest who comes.” The real story no one knew except him and myself.

Timofei waited for the Saviour the day after the word was said to him in the rose garden, and he waited the day after that, and then the following Sunday, but his expectations remained unfulfilled. For many long days he waited. On every church feast he expected Christ to visit him and wore him-

self out with anxiety, but his hope that the Lord would fulfill His promise and come did not weaken. Timofei confided to me:

“Every day I beg, ‘Yea, Come O Lord,’ and I wait, but I do not hear the long-desired answer, *‘Behold, I come soon.’*”

My reason was at a loss as to what to tell him, and I often thought that my friend had fallen into pride and was now mixed up in vain temptation. But God saw it differently.

Christmas came. That winter was cruel, but Timofei came to me on Christmas Eve, to say, “Dear brother, tomorrow I will receive the Lord.”

I had long been indifferent to such talk, and now only asked, “What assurance do you have of this?”

“Today,” he replied, “As soon as I prayed, ‘Yea, Come, O Lord,’ my whole soul was roused, and in it a trumpet seemed to sound, ‘Behold, I come soon.’”

Tomorrow is His holy Nativity. Is it not on such a day that He will visit me? Come to my house with all your people, because my soul is trembling with fright.”

I said, “Timosha! You know that I am not capable of judging about such things and being a man of sin, am not expecting to see the Lord – but you are, and we will come to you. And you, if you are hoping to receive the Great Guest, invite not your friends, but arrange a company pleasing to Him.

“I understand,” he answered, and will now send my servants and my son round to the villages to invite all the exiles that are in need and in trouble. If He comes, He will find everything in accord with the commandments.”

But I did not like these words of his, either. “Timofei,” I said, “Who can arrange everything according to the commandments? One you don’t understand, another you forget, and the third you are unable to fulfill. But still, if all of this is so loudly trumpeting in your soul, may it happen as it has been revealed to you. If the Lord comes, He will fill what is lacking; if you forget, He Himself will bring anything that is needed.”

And so, on Christmas we came, our whole family, but late. He had asked us to come late so that everyone else would have already arrived. We found his spacious home full of people, our Siberian exile types: men and women and little ones, of all ranks and lands, Russians, Poles, and Finns. Timofei had gathered all the poor exiles that had failed in every enterprise of their own. The tables were large, covered with tablecloths and everything necessary. Women servants were running back and forth, laying out kvass,

plates of pirozhki. Dusk was falling and there remained no one to expect. All the envoys had returned home, and there were no more guests to arrive, because outside there was a snowstorm like the end of the world.

Only one guest was still missing – the dearest One of all.

It was already time to light the candles and sit down at the table. Dusk had almost fallen, and we all stood waiting in the dusk, with only a crimson light shining from the lampada.

Timofei paced the floor, and then sat, obviously gnawed with anxiety. All his hope was shaken, he saw that there would be no “Honoured Guest.”

Another moment passed. Timofei sighed, looked at me despondently, and said, “Well, dear brother, I see that either it is the Lord’s will for us to be laughing-stocks, or you are right. I have failed to gather everyone He wants to meet Him. Let God’s will be done: let us pray and sit down to table.”

“Read the prayer,” I replied.

He stood in front of the icon and read aloud, “Our Father, Who art in Heaven,” then, “Christ is born, give ye glory, Christ comes from heaven, meet ye him, Christ is on earth...” As soon as he uttered these words, something struck the outside wall so fearfully that everything shook. A noise sounded in the entrance-hall, and suddenly the doors to the guestroom were flung open by themselves.

All those present dashed to one corner – many of them falling face down on the floor, and only the bravest dared to look towards the door.

In the open doorway there stands a very old man dressed in awful rags. Shivering, he holds onto the doorpost with both hands, trying not to fall, and from behind him, from the entrance-hall, shines an indescribable rose-colored light. Behind the old man’s shoulder, a snow-white hand appears, and in the hand is an old-fashioned clay lamp, filled with fire, such a lamp as is painted in “The Talk with Nikodim.” The wind and snow is tearing in from the yard, but the light does not flicker. It shines on the old man’s face and on his arm, and on the old man’s hand, “leaping to the eyes,” is an old scar, white with cold.

As he stares at this, Timofei cries out: “Lord, I see, and I will accept him in Your name, but do not Yourself enter my house. I am an evil, sinful man.” With this he bows his face to the floor. I too, fall with him to the floor – out of joy – rejoicing that he has been touched by real obedience, and exclaim to everyone: “Pray, Christ is amidst us!”

They all cry, "Amen!" – that is, "It is true!"

At this moment the lights were brought in. Timofei and I arose and saw that the white hand was no longer there. Only the old man remained. Timofei got to his feet, took him by both hands, and set him at the place of honour. Who the old man was, you have perhaps already guessed for yourself: he was Timofei's enemy, the uncle who had ruined him. In a few words he told us that everything had gone to rack and ruin, that he had lost his family, his wealth, and had long been wandering to find his nephew and ask his forgiveness. He had longed for it, but was mortally afraid of Timofei's wrath. In the snowstorm he had lost his way, and slowly freezing, had desired and expected only death.

"But suddenly," he said, "Light shone all about me, and someone invisible said, '*Come, warm yourself in My house, and drink from My Cup.*' He took me by both hands, and then I found myself standing here, not knowing how."

Timofei replied aloud, "Uncle, I know that your guide was the Lord Who said, '*If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him to drink.*' Take the first seat in my house, eat and drink to His glory, and, if you will, stay with me for the rest of your life."

After that, the old man stayed with Timofei, and as he lay dying he blessed him, and Timofei's heart was at peace forever.

In such a way Timofei was taught to set a manger in his heart for Christ to be born on earth. And every heart can be such a manger if it fulfills the commandment to love your enemies, to do good to those who persecute you. And Christ will come into that heart as into a morning chamber, and will make a shelter for Himself there. ✦

Translated by Inna Belov and Mother Nectaria McLees