



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

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Old apple orchard, Valaam Monastery, Russia.

THE APPLES OF TRANSFIGURATION

A Transfiguration offering from *Road to Emmaus* – an excerpt from pre-revolutionary Russian author Ivan Shmeylov's, *The Year of the Lord* – the Orthodox year through the eyes of a young boy. In traditional Orthodox countries, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration, both marking the other-worldly events on Mount Tabor and offering the first-fruits of the harvest to God. The principal fruit of each region is brought to church and blessed during the service. For the Middle East, Greece, Romania, and Ukraine this is grapes; in Russia and northern countries, apples. As a mark of respect for the "Lord's first-fruits" no one eats of the new crop until after the Transfiguration blessing. In Russia, where orchards and gardens are an important part of life, and apples the main fruit crop, this practice is held in such reverence that faithlessness often invokes sadness and reproach on the part of one's Orthodox neighbors, and if confessed, a six-week penance of not eating apples.

It's Transfiguration tomorrow... the Lord's Transfiguration. Even now, there is a gentle, quiet light in my soul that seems to come from that bright blue sky, from our garden at dawn, from the fragrant mounds of straw, and from the *grushovka* apples hiding among the green and yellow leaves. It's a clear light-blue August day. There's no heat. Sunflowers have overgrown the fences and are looking out to see if the Cross procession is coming. Their caps will soon be cut off and fixed to the gold icon banners, accompanied by church singing. The first *grushovka* apples have ripened and grown red in our garden. We are going to shake them off for tomorrow...

...Gorkin is the chief today. Vasil' Vasilych the steward, 'though he's supervising the construction sites, will come running here for a short half-hour. There is only one other person admitted to the garden – out of respect – Trifonych, the old shopkeeper. The carpenters aren't allowed in now, but they climb the scaffold and give advice on how to shake. The garden is incredibly light. It has been a dry summer, the trees are thin and a little withered, the fence lined with sunflowers. The chirping of the grasshoppers seems to give off the same golden light. Lush nettle and burdock lie in thickets and the only shade is beneath their thickening stems. The stripped currant bushes glisten with light. The apple trees also glisten with the mat gloss of

the apples; the cherry trees shine, transparent, flooded with an amber glow. Gorkin leads the way to the *grushovka* tree, throws off his forage-cap, his vest, and spits into his fist.

“Stop, wait,” he says measuring the tree with his eye. “I’ll give it a light shake, for the first-rate ones. Its apples are weak... well, we’ll let them hit their sides a bit as they fall – it’s nothing, they’ll just be more juicy ... but don’t take it by force!”

He takes a proper stance and shakes the tree gently. The first-rate ones fall. Everyone rushes into the thickets. The sticky, languid smells of burdock and pungent nettle mix with the sweet, delicate scent – as if perfume has been spilt at a distance – of the apples.

...Even now, in a strange land, when I happen to see a plain-looking apple that smells like *grushovka*, I take and hold it in my hand and, closing my eyes tight, I remember through the sweet juicy scent, as if it were here alive, the little garden that seemed huge to me then, the best of all the gardens in the world, now gone without a trace.

...“Let me, Pankratych”!., begs Vasil’ Vasilych, rolling up his sleeves and trying to drive him away. “By God, I need to be back at the construction site.”

...Vasil’ Vasilych shakes the tree: a storm seems to fall upon us, a loud whistling noise and a rain of apples pours down on our heads and backs. The carpenters on the scaffold yell:

“Ye-ah! Tha-at was a shake, Vasil’ Vasilych!”

...The Lord’s Transfiguration, the day of the feast. It’s a chilly golden-blue morning. The church is overflowing. I’m standing behind the little fenced-off candle-counter where Father hands out candles without end, the silver and copper coins tinkling down. Candles flow from the boxes like a broken white ribbon, jumping over shoulders, making their way to the icons high in front – “To the Feast!”¹ Small bundles, passed overhead, float above the crowd with apples, prosphora, and more apples. Our baskets will get “censed” on the ambo – Gorkin says so. He fidgets about the church, his little beard flashing here and there. There’s a sweet scent in the hot, stuffy air; the apples are everywhere, even in the cliros, even wedged between the banner poles. I am so merry, as if this were not church at all, but just receiving guests at home. And everyone, so it seems to me, is thinking of apples. And the Lord is here with everyone, and He too is thinking of apples.

¹ “To the Feast” The crowd is too dense to allow those newly arrived to make their way to the feast-day icon, and candles are passed over shoulders to the candle-stand before the icon of the Transfiguration..

It’s Him to whom they have brought the apples: “See, Lord, what they are like.” And He will look at them and say, “It’s fine, children, you are welcome to eat them.” And people will eat quite different, holy apples, which are not from a shop, but from church. And this is it, Transfiguration.

Gorkin comes, saying, “Let’s go now, the sprinkling is about to begin.” In his hands he holds a small red bundle of “his own.” Father keeps counting candle change while we make our way to the memorial table. The golden-blue deacon carries a huge silver tray with red apples that have come from Kursk. All over the floor are baskets and bundles, familiar from other years. Gorkin and the church guard drag the baskets from the ambo, moving them “closer under the sprinkling.” There’s a general fuss and it’s fun – not like church at all.... The priests bless the water. Then the senior priest in a lilac *kamilavka*² reads a prayer over our Kursk apples, an extraordinarily joyful prayer for fruit and grapes, and starts sprinkling the apples. He shakes the brush vigorously and the silver splashes sparkle here and there....

People start coming to kiss the Cross. The sextons and Gorkin shove apples into everyone’s hands. Batiushka gives me a very beautiful one from the dish, and a deacon (he knows me) slaps me three times on the head with the wet brush and the cold streams run under my collar. Everyone is eating apples, there is such a crunch all over the church! ...Beggars on the porch are also given apples. People begin leaving.

Gorkin stands near the empty baskets, wiping his neck with a handkerchief. He makes the sign of the Cross over a rosy-red apple, takes a bite, and screws his face into wrinkles. “It’s a bit *kvassy*”³ he says, squinting his eye, his beard shaking, but it’s nice to eat it blessed and in time....” +

Translated by Inna Belov and Mother Nectaria McLees

² *kamilavka*: A tall hat worn by an Orthodox priest in church services.

³ “It’s a bit *kvassy*”: that is, a little overripe and beginning to ferment into cider.