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The Guest

Nikolai S. Lesskov

Many years ago, in Czarist Russia, a man was traveling through Siberia. While he was staying with a family in a remote village, his host told him this story:

OUR DISTRICT IS ONE of the places in Siberia to which exiles are sent as a punishment for political offenses, or for other reasons. But in spite of this it is not a bad place to live in, with a life of its own and plenty of trade. My father settled here as a young man in the days when serfdom was still the rule in Russia—so you can see how long ago that was! I myself was born here. We have always been fairly well off, and even now we are not poor. We belong to the Mother Church of Russia and we hold firmly to the simple faith of our fathers. My father was a great reader, and he taught me to love books and knowledge. So it came about that all my friends were people who had the same taste. In my youth I had a very true friend, Timofai Ossipovitch, and it is his story I want to tell you.

When he came to us, Timofai was still a young man. I was eighteen at the time, and he was a little older. He was a young man of excellent character, and you may wonder why he had been banished to Siberia. In a village like ours we never asked an exile why he was there. It might be too embarrassing. But so far as we could understand this is what had happened: Timofai was an orphan, and had been brought up by his uncle, who was his legal guardian. When Timofai was about seventeen he found that nearly all his fortune had been either wasted or simply used selfishly by his uncle. When he discovered this, he

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was so angry that in a quarrel he fired at his uncle. Fortunately he only wounded him in the hand. The judge treated Timofai leniently on account of his youth, so he was exiled to Siberia, and indeed to my own village.

Now although Timofai had lost nine-tenths of his inheritance, the tenth was enough to keep him in some comfort. He built a small house close to us, and settled down. But the injustice he had suffered still affected him very deeply. He was so angry and resentful that he could not lead a normal life. For a long time he lived like a recluse; he refused to make any contact with his neighbors. He shut himself up in his house; the only people he saw were the couple who looked after him. He spent his time reading book after book, most of them on serious subjects, and especially on religion. At last there came a day when I was able to talk with him over the fence; then later, he asked me to come to his house. From that time I often went to see him, and we became very good friends.

At first my parents were not very pleased with me for making friends with Timofai. "We don't know who he is or why he hides himself from everybody. We do hope he won't do you any harm." But when I told my parents the kind of man he was, how we read religious books together, and talked about the Faith, they were satisfied that there could not be anything seriously wrong with him. Then my father visited him, and invited Timofai to come to see us. At once my parents saw that he was a good fellow and they began to like him. Indeed, they were very sorry for him, because he was always brooding over the wrong that had been done to him; if anyone happened to mention the uncle, Timofai would go as white as a sheet, and looked as though he were about to faint. He was a very honorable man, and had a good mind; but owing to this bitterness of spirit he could not settle to any useful work.

However, when he fell in love with my sister this extreme bitterness passed away. He married her, gave up his melancholy brooding, and began to live and prosper; he went into business and became wealthy. After ten years everyone in the district knew and respected him. He built a new house with large rooms. He had everything he needed, his wife was very capable, and he had healthy, delightful children. What more could he want? It seemed as though all the troubles of his youth were over and forgotten. But one day when we were out driving in his pony cart I suddenly asked him: "Brother Timofai, are you now quite happy in your mind?"

"What do you mean?" he said, looking at me with a strange look on his face.

"Have you recovered everything you lost in your youth?"

He went very white, and said nothing; but he went on driving through the forest. After some moments of silence I said, "Forgive me, brother, for asking this question. I thought all that trouble was over long ago...over and forgotten?"

"That's not the point," he answered, "it makes no difference that it happened so long ago. It is over, yes, but I still keep thinking about it."

I felt very sorry for him, for I now saw that although Timofai knew the Scriptures so well, and could talk eloquently about religion, he still nursed the memory of this injustice in his heart. "Surely," I thought, "this means that the Word of God is of no avail to him?"

For some minutes we drove on in silence; I was deep in thought. At last he looked at me and said, "What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, all sorts of things!" I said, rather lightly.

"I don't believe it! I believe you are thinking about me."

"Well, yes, I am thinking about you."

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“Tell me what you are thinking about me.”

“Please don’t be cross with me, brother, this is what I have been thinking: You know the Scriptures, yet your heart is full of resentment and anger, and you will not submit to God. Does this mean that all your reading of the Bible has done you no good?”

Timofai wasn’t angry with me, but his face darkened and he said, “You don’t know the Bible well enough to say this kind of thing.” Then he began to argue with me, trying to justify himself. He said I was too ignorant of the Bible and of the world, to understand him. I agreed. He went on to say, “There are injustices which no honorable man can put up with.” Then he added, “I have never spoken about this to any one, but because you are my friend I will tell you. My uncle caused so much pain and sorrow to my father and mother that in the end my mother died of it. My uncle slandered my father; above all he spread such lies about me that he prevented me from marrying a young girl I had loved from childhood, and all this because he, an older man, wanted to marry her himself. Can anyone forget such an injury?” he asked. “I will never forgive him, ever!”

“You certainly have had a raw deal,” I replied. “I agree, but this does not alter the fact that you aren’t getting any help from all your study of the Holy Scriptures.” Then he launched into a long argument about my scanty knowledge of the Bible and of all the passages in the Old Testament where good men stood up for themselves and even killed their enemies! The poor fellow was trying to justify himself in my eyes.

“Timofai,” I said, “I know I am only a simple fellow, and not like you. Yet even I can see that there is a great difference between the Old and the New Testaments; there’s a lot about revenge in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament it’s all about love and forgiveness.” He was silent. Then I went on,

very quietly, to remind him of the way our Lord was treated in his Passion: how he was beaten and ill-treated and insulted and put to death by his enemies. But he forgave them all. Timofai was not offended by my frank speech. After further conversation he pressed my hand and said, "I can't help it! Stop talking about forgiveness, you are only making me very sad." I stopped at once, for I could see that he was very unhappy. But I was sure that one day he would change. Now this came about in a most remarkable way.

At that time Timofai had been in Siberia for sixteen years; he was about thirty-seven. He had a good wife, three children, and a pleasant life. He was very fond of flowers, especially roses—there were roses everywhere, in the garden, and in the house. Indeed, the whole house was full of their beauty and their fragrance. In summer he always went into the garden about sunrise. First he examined his roses, to see if they needed any attention, then he sat down among them on a bench, took out a book, and began to read. I believe he often said his prayers there as he sat in the early morning sunshine. One day he was sitting there as usual, reading his New Testament, and he came to the passage where Christ went to a rich man's house, and his host did not even give him water to wash his feet. Timofai put the book down and began to think, and as he brooded over the great poverty and love of the Lord he burst out, "Oh Lord! if you were to come to me I would give you all I have and am!" Suddenly a wind passed over the roses and he seemed to hear the words: "I will come."

Later in the morning Timofai came over to see me and told me what had happened. He said anxiously, "Do you believe that the Lord will really come to me as a guest?" I replied, "That, brother, is quite beyond my understanding! Is there anything about it in the Holy Scripture?" Timofai said, "Well,

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he is the same Christ, today and forever. I don't dare to refuse to believe it."

"Well, then," I said, "believe it!"

Timofai reflected for a few moments, then he turned to me and said, "I know what I'll do. I'll have a place set for him at our table every day." This did not seem to me quite the right line to take, but I felt I could not suggest anything else, so I shrugged my shoulders and said, "You must do what you think right."

Timofai told his wife that from the next day he wished an extra place to be prepared at every family meal; this sixth place was to be put at the head of the table for an honored guest, and a special armchair as well. She was astonished, and very curious. "Whom do you expect?" she asked. But Timofai kept his own counsel; he merely told her and the rest of the household that he had ordered this because he had made a vow, "for the most honored guest who may arrive." No one knew what he meant, and they were left wondering.

Day after day Timofai waited for the Lord: the next day, then the following Sunday, but nothing happened. Sometimes he waited in a fever of impatience, but he never doubted that the Lord would come, as he had said. One day he came to me and said, "Brother, day after day I pray, 'Lord, come,' and I wait, but so far I have never heard the answer for which I long: 'Yes, I will come soon.'"

Secretly I felt uncertain how to answer Timofai when he talked like this. Sometimes I was afraid that my friend had become "puffed up," and that this was a temptation which had come to him. But Providence meant it otherwise.

Six months passed, and Christmas was approaching. It was a hard winter. On Christmas Eve Timofai came to me and said,

“My dear brother, tomorrow I am expecting the Lord!” I said simply, “And why are you so sure of it this time?” “This time,” he said, “after I had prayed the usual prayer, my whole soul was moved, and I seemed to hear very clearly the words ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Tomorrow is his festival. Could there be a better day for him to come? I want you to be there, with all our relatives, for I feel awed and afraid.”

“Timofai,” I said, “you know that I don’t profess to understand this matter, and I certainly don’t expect to see the Lord, sinful man as I am—but you are part of our family and I will come. But may I say something else? Since you expect such a Royal Guest would it not be wise to invite not only your own relatives and friends, but the sort of company that he would desire?”

Timofai smiled and said, “I see what you mean. Yes, I’ll send out my servants into the whole village to invite all the exiles who are in need and poverty here, so far from their homeland. It is only fitting that when the Lord comes he should find the kind of guests he would want to see.”

So on Christmas Day we all went to Timofai’s house a little later than was usual, for a midday meal. We found all the large rooms filled with people, typical Siberians, that is, people who were exiles from their own countries. There were men and women, and many of the younger generation as well, people of very varied callings and from different regions, Russians, and Poles, and even some from far-away Estonia. Timofai had arranged that all the exiles who had not yet found their feet in a strange land should be invited. The long tables were covered with fresh white linen cloths, and all sorts of good things were placed there for the guests. The maids bustled about and brought in meat-pasties and kvass for the first course. Outside, the short winter day was drawing to a close, and all the guests

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were assembled. No one else was expected. Outside a snow-storm had begun, and the wind swept round the house; it was a terrible storm. Only the one Guest was missing: the One for whom they were waiting. The candles were lit, and the guests were about to take their places at the table. Outside it was not quite dark, and inside the house, apart from the candles, the rest of the rooms were in semi-darkness; the only light came from the little lamps burning before the icons. Timofai kept moving about from one room to another; he could not sit still, he was so agitated. "Could it be," he wondered, "that after all the Guest would not come?"

He whispered to me, "I can't make it out. Perhaps I have misunderstood the message? Well, we must go forward in God's Name. We must give thanks and start the meal."

Timofai stood up and went to the icon and began to pray the Lord's Prayer aloud. Then he added, "Christ is born today! Let us praise the Lord our God! Christ has come down from heaven, let us all rejoice that the Most High has visited us, and is even now in our midst."

He had hardly finished these words when there came a great gust of wind which shook the house, followed by a loud noise, as if something had fallen against the door; suddenly, the door burst open of itself. The guests were so frightened that they left the tables and huddled together in a corner; some fell down on the floor, others stood still and looked at the doorway. On the threshold stood a very old man dressed in rags; he was so weak that he could hardly stand. He was leaning on the nearest chair in the room; but behind him there was a wonderful light, and a delicate fragrance seemed to come in with him. Some people thought they saw a little lamp, burning with a steady flame unmoved by the wind.

As Timofai gazed at this strange figure, he cried out, "Lord!

I see him, and I receive him in thy Name! Do not come to me thyself, for I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof.” He knelt down, and bowed his face to the ground. Then he cried out in a loud voice, “Let us rejoice, for Christ himself is among us!” And all the guests said, Amen.

Fresh candles were brought into the room, and Timofai stood up and looked intently at the old man. The radiance and the fragrance had faded; only the old man remained. Timofai went forward, took him by both hands and led him to the empty place reserved for the guest of honor. He knew who he was: his old uncle, who had done him so much harm. As they sat down together the other guests went back to the feast. Then the old man told Timofai that his whole life had gone to pieces; he had lost his family and all his possessions. For a long time he had been wandering about the forests and plains of Siberia, trying to find his nephew, for he wanted to ask Timofai to forgive him. He longed for this, though he was frightened of Timofai’s anger. In the snowstorm he had lost his way completely, and he was so cold he was afraid he would freeze to death that night. “Suddenly,” he said, “I met someone who said to me, ‘Go to that house, over there, where you see the lights. Take my place, and you will be warmed and fed; you may eat out of my plate!’ Then he took hold of both my hands and helped me. Somehow I reached this door.”

“Uncle,” said Timofai, “I know who led you here. It was the Lord who said that...so you are welcome to the best place at the feast. Eat and drink in his Name, and I invite you to stay as long as you like, to the very end of your life.”

So the old man remained with Timofai and when he was dying he blessed his nephew. And Timofai had peace in his heart for he had learned to obey the words of the Lord: “Love your enemies, do good to those who ill-treat you...” “Come

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Lord Jesus! Come quickly and abide with me.”

This story is excerpted from “Home for Christmas” available from Orbis books.

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