

Dostoevsky for Parents and Children: (VII) A Little Boy at Christ's Christmas Tree

Scris de D.C.C.

Joi, 31 Martie 2022 12:17



Previously in the Dostoevsky for Parents and Children series:

[Varenka's Memoirs](#) (from the novel Poor Folk, 1846 [1883, 1887, 1897, DPC I])

[An Honest Thief](#) (from Stories of a Man of Experience, 1848 [suggested by the Introduction to

the 1897 anthology, DPC V]

[Nellie's Story](#) (from The Insulted and Injured, 1861 [1883, 1887, DPC VI])

[At The Select Boarding School](#) (from the novel The Adolescent, 1875 [1883, 1897, DPC II])

[The Merchant's Story](#) (from the novel The Adolescent, 1875 [1897, DPC IV])

[The Peasant Marey](#) (from The Diary Of A Writer, February 1876 [1883, 1897, DPC III])

{In square brackets we indicate the original Anna Grigorievna Dostoevskaya anthologies in which each story appeared, followed by its order of posting in the present Dostoevsky for Parents and Children (DPC) collection. Thus, [1883, 1897, DPC II] means the story appeared in the first (1883) and third (1897), but not in the second (1887) Anna Dostoevskaya anthology, and as the second in this series of postings. Please find [here](#) our brief introduction to the original Dostoevsky for Children anthologies, and to this English online version.}

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A Christmas story consonant with the idea that [all real joy is hidden in the Cross](#) ... Does it not also read almost like an alternative epilogue to

[Nellie's story](#)

? Is it not more timely today than yesterday, this year than yesteryear? But let us also notice, with

[Met. Anthony Khrapovitsky](#)

, its inner regenerative power:

'We have spoken of the prophetic heart, of man's soul which knows tenfold more than "the person itself." It is in this soul, according to its very nature and also owing to the recollections of childhood preserved, in this soul, even disfigured by passions, lies, and theomachia [fighting against God], that there still remains a deep penchant for holy salutary compassion. If only man would not rudely repulse this sacred emotion, but would follow its indications... The author is not preaching "rosy Christianity", as K. Leontiev accused him: his task is to persuade people of the possibility of regeneration offered to them by God and their own soul; their using it depends on their free will... [W]e are convinced that all the listeners and we hope most readers of the moving story of Dostoevsky "A Little Boy at Christ's Christmas Tree" should be included [among those "whose hearts were softened" by it]... [T]he author, and sometimes his friend, the writer [Dimitri V.] Grigorivich, read [this story] at literary gatherings. On these occasions tears of Christian compassion for the little orphan, freezing under the lighted windows of a lordly house where children enjoyed themselves around the Christmas tree, welled up in the eyes of many even of the male listeners, not to mention most of the female ones. Christ the Saviour came to

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the boy and carried him to heaven to enjoy an eternal Christmas. He was met there by his mother, who had died an hour earlier in the basement; her corpse, growing cold, had frightened the child. This is how strong compassion is. Not for nothing does our author write: if you pity an unprotected being, you will get attached to it, and strongly attached (The Adolescent.)' (Ludmila Koehler transl.)

F.M. Dostoevsky

A LITTLE BOY AT CHRIST'S CHRISTMAS TREE

(from The Diary Of A Writer, January 1876; Boris Brasol transl., 1919; illustrated 1885 Russian edition [here](#))

But I am a novelist, and it seems that one "story" I did invent myself. Why did I say "it seems," since I know for certain that I did actually invent it; yet I keep fancying that this happened somewhere, once upon a time, precisely on Christmas Eve, in some huge city during a bitter frost.

I dreamed of a little boy -very little- about six, or even younger. This little boy woke up one morning in a damp, cold basement. He was clad in a shabby dressing gown of some kind, and he was shivering. Sitting in the corner on a chest, wearily he kept blowing out his breath, letting it escape from his mouth, and it amused him to watch the vapor flow through the air. But he was very hungry.

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Several times that morning he came up to the bedstead, where his sick mother lay on bedding thin as a pancake, with a bundle of some sort under her head for a pillow.

How did she happen to be here? -She may have come with her little boy from some faraway town, and then suddenly she had fallen ill.

Two days ago the landlady of this wretched hovel had been seized by the police; most of the tenants had scattered in all directions - it was the holiday season - and now there remained only two. The peddler was still there, but he had been lying in a drunken stupor for more than twenty-four hours, not even having waited for the holiday to come. In another corner of the lodging an eighty year-old woman was moaning with rheumatism. In days past she had been a children's nurse somewhere. Now she was dying in solitude, moaning and sighing continuously and grumbling at the boy so that he grew too frightened to come near her. Somehow he had managed to find water in the entrance hall, with which to appease his thirst : but nowhere was he able to discover as much as a crust of bread. Time after time he came up to his mother, trying in vain to awaken her. As it grew dark, dread fell upon him. Though it was late evening, the candle was not yet lit. Fumbling over his mother's face he began to wonder why she lay so quiet, and why she felt as cold as the wall. "It's rather chilly in here," he said to himself.... For a moment he stood still, unconsciously resting his hand on the shoulder of the dead woman. Then he began to breathe on his tiny fingers in an attempt to warm them, and, suddenly, coming upon his little cap that lay on the bedstead, he groped along cautiously and quietly made his way out of the basement. This he would have done earlier had he not been so afraid of the big dog upstairs on the staircase, which kept howling all day long in front of a neighbor's door. Now the dog was gone, and in a moment he was out in the street.

"My God, what a city I " - Never before had he seen anything like this. There, in the place from

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which he had come, at night, everything was plunged into dark gloom - just a single lamp-post in the whole street! Humble wooden houses were closed in by shutters; no sooner did dusk descend than there was no one in sight; people locked themselves up in their homes, and only big packs of dogs - hundreds and thousands of them - howled and barked all night. Ah, but out there it was so warm, and there he had been given something to eat, while here.... "Dear God, I do wish I had something to eat!" - And here - what a thundering noise! What dazzling light! What crowds of people and horses and carriages! And what biting frost! What frost! Vapor, which at once turned cold, burst forth in thick clouds from the horses' hot-breathing muzzles. Horseshoes tinkle as they strike the stones through the fluffy snow. And men pushing each other about.... "But, good heavens, how hungry I am! I wish I had just a tiny bit of something to eat!" And suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his little fingers. A policeman passed by and turned his head away, so as not to take notice of the boy.

"And here is another street. -Oh, how wide it is : Here I'll surely be run over! And how people shout and run and drive along! And what floods of light! Light everywhere! Look, what's this? Oh, what a huge window and, beyond it, a hall with a tree reaching up to the ceiling. It's a Christmas tree covered with gleaming lights, with sparkling bits of gold paper and apples, and all around are little dolls, toy-horses. Lots of beautifully dressed, neat children running about the hall; they laugh and play, and they eat and drink something. And see, over there, that little girl - now she starts to dance with a boy! What a pretty little girl she is! And just listen to the music! You can hear it from inside, coming through the window!"

The little boy gazes and gazes and wonders; he even starts laughing, but... his toes begin to hurt, while the little fingers on his hand have grown quite red-they won't bend any longer, and it hurts to move them. And when at last he became fully aware of the sharp pain in his fingers, he burst into tears and set off running.

Presently, through another window, he catches sight of a room, with trees standing in it, and

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tables loaded with cakes, all sorts of cakes - almond cakes, red cakes, yellow cakes!... Four beautifully dressed ladies are sitting in the room; whoever enters it is given a cake.... Every minute the door opens, and many gentlemen come in from the outside to visit these ladies. The boy stole up, quickly pushed the door open, and sidled in. Oh, how they started shouting at him and motioning him out! One of the ladies hurried toward him, thrust a small copper coin into his hand, but she opened the door into the street. How frightened he was! The coin rolled from his hand, bouncing down the steps he was just unable to bend his little red fingers to hold on to it.

Very fast, the little boy ran away, and quickly he started going, but he himself did not know whither to go. Once more he was ready to cry, but he was so frightened that he just kept on running and running, and blowing on his cold little hands. How dreadfully lonesome he felt, and suddenly despair clutched at his heart.

But lo! -What's going on here? -In front of a window people are standing crowded together, lost in admiration... Inside they see three tiny dolls, all dressed up in little red and green frocks, so real that they seem alive! A kindly-looking old man is sitting there, as if playing on a big violin ; and next to him-two other men are playing small violins, swinging their heads to the rhythm of the music; they look at each other, their lips move, and they talk - they really do, but one simply can't hear them through the window pane.

At first the little boy thought that these moving figures were alive, but when at last he realized that they were only small puppets, he burst into laughter. He had never seen such figurines, and he didn't even know that such existed! He felt like crying, and yet the dolls looked so funny to him - oh, how funny!

Suddenly he felt as if somebody grabbed him by his dressing gown: a big bully of a boy, standing close by, without warning, struck him on the head, tore off his cap and kicked him violently. The little fellow fell down, and the people around began shouting. Scared to death, he jumped quickly to his feet and scampered off. All of a sudden he found himself in a strange courtyard under the vault of a gateway, and leaped behind a pile of kindling wood: "Here they won't find me! Besides, it's dark here!"

He sank down and huddled himself up in a small heap, but he could hardly catch his breath for fright. But presently a sensation of happiness crept over his whole being : his little hands and feet suddenly stopped aching, and once more he felt as comfortable and warm as on a hearth. But hardly a moment later a shudder convulsed him: "Ah, I almost fell asleep. Well, I 'll stay here awhile, and then I'll get back to look at the puppets" - the little boy said to himself, and the memory of the pretty dolls made him smile: "They seem just as though they're alive!" And all of a sudden he seemed to hear the voice of his mother, leaning over him and singing a song. "Mother dear, I 'm just dozing. Oh, how wonderful it is to sleep here!"

Then a gentle voice whispered above him: "Come, little boy, come along with me! Come to see a Christmas tree!"

His first thought was that it might be his mama still speaking to him, but no - this wasn't she. Who, then, could it be ? He saw no one, and yet, in the darkness, someone was hovering over him and tenderly clasping him in his arms.... The little boy stretched out his arms and... an instant later -"Oh, what dazzling light! Oh, what a Christmas tree! Why, it can't be a Christmas tree," for he had never seen such trees.

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Where is he now? -Everything sparkles and glitters and shines, and scattered all over are tiny dolls - no, they are little boys and girls, only they are so luminous, and they all fly around him; they embrace him and lift him up; they carry him along, and now he flies, too. And he sees: yonder is his mother; she looks at him, smiling at him so happily. "Oh , Mother! Mother! How beautiful it is here!" -exclaimed the little boy, and again he begins to kiss the children; he can hardly wait to tell them about those wee puppets behind the glass of the window.

"Who are you, little boys ? Who are you, little girls?" -he asks them, smilingly, and he feels that he loves them all. "This is Christ's Christmas Tree," -they tell him. "On this day of the year Christ always has a Christmas Tree for those little children who have no Christmas tree of their own."

And then he learned that these little boys and girls were all once children like himself, but some of them have frozen to death in those baskets in which they had been left at the doors of Petersburg officials; others had perished in miserable hospital wards ; still others had died at the dried-up breasts of their famine-stricken mothers (during the Samara famine); these, again, had choked to death from stench in third-class railroad cars. Now they are all here, all like little angels, and they are are with Christ, and He is in their midst, holding out His hands to them and to their sinful mothers.... And the mothers of these babes, they all stand there, a short distance off, and weep: each one recognizes her darling, her little boy, or her little girl - and they fly over to their mothers and kiss them and brush away their tears with their little hands, begging them not to cry, for they feel so happy here....

Next morning, down in the courtyard, porters found the tiny body of a little boy who had hidden behind the piles of kindling wood, and there had frozen to death. They also found his mother. She died even before he had passed away.

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Now they are again united in God's Heaven.

And why did I invent such a story, one that conforms so little to an ordinary, reasonable diary - especially a writer's diary? And that, after having promised to write stories pre-eminently about actual events! But the point is that I keep fancying that all this could actually have happened! I mean, the things which happened in the basement and behind the piles of kindling wood. Well, and as regards Christ's Christmas Tree - I really don't know what to tell you, and I don't know whether or not this could have happened. Being a novelist, I have to invent things.