

An Exile's Story

Many years ago, in Czarist Russia, a man was travelling through Siberia. One day while he was staying with a Russian family in a remote village, his host, a very quiet person, told him the following 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 & 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. (*serfdom: the feudal system of peasants, called serfs, who served their masters, called lords.)

We have always been fairly well off, & even now we are not poor. We belong to the Mother Church of Russia (the Russian Orthodox Church) & we hold firmly to the simple Christian faith of our fathers. My father was a great reader, & he taught me to love books & 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, Timothy Ossipovitch, & it is his story I want to tell you.

When he came to us, Timothy was still a young man. I was 18 at the time, & he was a little older. He was a young man of good upbringing, & 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: Timothy was an orphan, & had been brought up by his uncle, who was his legal guardian. When Timothy was about 17 he found that nearly all his inheritance which should have been saved for him had been either wasted or simply used selfishly by his uncle. When he discovered this, he was so angry that in a quarrel he fired a gun at his uncle. Fortunately he only wounded him in his hand. The judge treated Timothy leniently on account of his youth, so he was exiled to Siberia, & indeed to my own village.

Now although Timothy had lost nine-tenths of his inheritance, the tenth that he received was enough to keep him in some comfort. He built a small house close to us, & settled down. But the injustice he had suffered still affected him very deeply. He was so angry & 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 neighbours. He shut himself up in his house; the only people he saw were the couple hired to look after him.

He spent his time reading book after book, most of them on serious subjects, & 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, & we became very good friends.

At first my parents were not very pleased with me for making friends with Timothy. "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, & talked about the Faith, they were more at ease. Then my father visited him, & invited Timothy to come to see us.

At once my parents saw that he was a good fellow & 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 his uncle, Timothy would go as white as a sheet, & look as though he were about to faint. Except for this problem, he had a good character, & a strong mind, but because of 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, & began to live & prosper. He went into business & became wealthy. After ten years everyone in the district knew & respected him. He built a house with large rooms. He had everything he needed, his wife was very capable, & he had healthy, delightful children. What more could he want? It seemed as though all the troubles of his youth were over & forgotten.

But one day when we were out driving in his pony-cart I suddenly asked him, "Brother Timothy, are you now quite happy in your mind?"

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

"With all that God has blessed you with, have you recovered everything you lost in your youth?" He went very white, & 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 & 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 Timothy knew the Scriptures so well, & 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 & 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!"

"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 & anger, & you will not submit to God. Does this mean that all your reading of the Bible has done you no good?"

Timothy wasn't angry with me, but his face darkened & 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 & of the World, to understand him. I agreed. He went on to say, "There are injustices which no honourable man can put up with."

Then he added, "I have never spoken about this to anyone, but because you are my friend I will tell you. My uncle caused much pain & sorrow to my father & mother, & in the end my mother died in a very sorrowful state. 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, & 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, never!" (*slandered: to spread malicious, hurtful, false stories about someone.)

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

"Timothy," I said, "I know I am only a simple fellow, & not like you. Yet even I can see that there is a great difference between the Old Testament & the New Testament. In the New Testament it's all about Love & forgiveness." He was silent. Then I went on, very quietly, to remind him of the way our Lord was treated in His final hours on Earth, how He was beaten & ill-treated & insulted & put to death by His enemies. But He forgave those who knew no better.

Timothy was not offended by my frank speech. After further conversation he pressed my hand & 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 prayed that one day he would change. Now this came about in a most remarkable way.

At that time Timothy had been in Siberia for 16 years; he was about 37 years old. He had a good wife, three children, & a pleasant life. He was very fond of flowers, especially roses. There were roses everywhere, in the garden, & in the house. Indeed, the whole house was full of their beauty & 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, & 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, & he came to the passage where Christ went to a rich man's house, & His host did not even give Him water to wash His feet. Timothy put the book down & began to think, & as he brooded over the great Love of the Lord he burst out, "Oh Lord! If You were to come to me, I would give You all I have & am!" Suddenly a wind passed over the roses & he seemed to hear the words, "I will come."

Later in the morning Timothy came over to see me & told me what had happened. He asked 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 Scriptures?"

Timothy said, "Well, He is the same Christ, today & for ever. I don't dare to refuse to believe it!"

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

Timothy reflected for a few moments, then he turned to me & 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 approach to take, but I

felt I could not suggest anything else, so I shrugged my shoulders & said, "You must do what you think right."

Timothy 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 honoured Guest, & a special armchair as well. She was astonished, & very curious, "Whom do you expect?" she asked. But Timothy did not answer; he merely told her & the rest of the household that he had ordered this because he had made a vow, "for the most honoured Guest Who may arrive." No one knew what he meant, & they were left wondering.

Day after day Timothy waited for the Lord: 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 & said, "Brother, day after day I pray, 'Lord come,' & 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 Timothy when he talked like this. Sometimes I was afraid that my friend had become "puffed up", & tempted with pride, in thinking Jesus would visit him. I was later surprised at how things turned out.

Six months passed, & Christmas Eve was approaching. It was a hard Winter. On Christmas Eve Timothy came to me & 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, & 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 & afraid."

"Timothy," I said, "you know that I don't profess to understand this matter, & as sinful a man as I am, I certainly don't expect to see the Lord.--But you are part of our family & 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 & friends, but the sort of company that He would desire?"

Timothy smiled & 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 & 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 Timothy's house for an afternoon 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 & women, & many of the younger generation as well, people of very varied callings & from different regions--Russians, & Poles, & even some from faraway Estonia. Timothy 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, & all sorts of good things were placed there for the guests. The maids bustled about & brought in meat-pastries & borsch (Russian beet soup) for the first course. Outside, the short Winter day was drawing to a close, & all the guests were assembled. No one else was expected. A snowstorm had begun, & the wind swept around the house; it was a terrible storm.

Only the One Guest was missing--the One for whom they were waiting. The candles were lit, & the guests were about to take their places at the table. Outside, it was not quite dark & inside the house, apart from the candles the rest of the rooms were in semi-darkness. Timothy 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'm puzzled. Perhaps I have misunderstood the message? Well, we must go forward in God's Name. We must give thanks & start the meal."

Timothy stood up & 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, & 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 & huddled together in a corner. Some fell down on the floor, others stood still & 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, & 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 Timothy gazed at this strange figure, he cried out, "Lord! I see who has come, & 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, & bowed his face to the ground.

Fresh candles were brought into the room, & Timothy stood up & looked intently at the old man. The radiance & the fragrance had faded, only the old man remained. Timothy went forward, took him by both hands & led him to the empty place reserved for the guest of honour. 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 Timothy that his whole life had gone to pieces; he had lost his family & all his possessions. For a long time he had been wandering about the forests & plains of Siberia, trying to find his nephew, for he wanted to ask Timothy to forgive him. He longed for this, though he was frightened of Timothy's anger.

In the snowstorm he had lost his way completely, & 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, & you will be warmed & fed!' Then he took hold of both my hands, & helped me. Somehow, I don't know how, I reached this door."

"Uncle," said Timothy, "I know Who led you here. It was the Lord Who guided you, so you are welcome to the best place at the feast. He wanted me to forgive you & I do. Eat & drink in His Name, & I invite you to stay as long as you like, to the very end of your life."

So the old man remained with Timothy & when he was dying he blessed his nephew. And Timothy 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..."

--Nikolai Lesskov

(--Do you forgive?)