



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

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THE CHRISTMAS VIGIL



We continue with our selections from the 19th century long-banned classic by Ivan Shmyeloff. Recently re-published in Russian as *The Year of the Lord*, the story of a year in the life of a young Russian boy, the book was forbidden publication by Soviet censors for seventy years. Now it is reaching millions of Russians, who treasure it as a living memory of their own Orthodox past, a time when childhood could be truly innocent. Road to Emmaus is pleased to be able to offer this first English translation to you as our Christmas gift.

We are going to the all-night vigil.

Gorkin left before us. He is busy at the candle counter. Father leads me by the hand across the square so that the horses do not run into me on the slippery patches. Glavnyusha and Sanya Yurtsov are going with us. Sanya, a stutterer, is a novice at Trinity-Sergius Lavra. The monks have let him go see his grandfather, Trifonych, for Christmas. They both are singing in half-voice a little verse that I have never heard before, about how the angels rejoice and people give glory, and all creation exalts because Christ is born. And Father didn't know this verse either. They sing so gently, gladly, and Father says, "Oh, you are God's people." Glavnysha says, "All are God's," and stops us with his hand. "Just listen, listen to how all things play!... both on earth and in heaven!..."

It's a frosty night, the stars are so bright, — and the tolling, as if the whole sky were ringing and pealing, the bells sing. They sing as joyfully as if all of creation were playing. Smoke covers us from the houses, the stars play in the smoke, and their brilliance is so cheerful. He says: "Look, look! The smoke seems to be carrying glory up from the earth... like a pillar playing!"

Sanya, the stammerer, began to talk after him, "Th-th-th-the sky is p-p-playing and the earth is pl-playing..."

Then, for some reason he starts to cry. Father gropes in his pocket and gives him something, ringing silver. They do not want to take it, but he commands them: "There, give it to whoever you like. God's children... pray for us sinners... You are simple-hearted. We have a joy for the feast. Our Doctor Klin had sentenced our famous bass Lomshachok to death, saying that he would die from his heart and leaving him only a week to live... his breath kept stopping!!! But he got better. He was signed out of hospital the other day. He'll show himself now when he strikes up "God is With Us!..."

We were so delighted! Gorkin had already wanted to order him a little death gown.

The church is full, full. Gorkin whispers to me: "Look, our Lomshachok... there he is rubbing his throat on the *cri—los*¹. It means that he's getting ready, he's going to launch "God is With Us" with everything he's got."

The chandeliers are lit and the whole church begins to shine. I watch Lomshachok opening his mouth so wide, his head leaning back... everyone stands still, waiting, and then it bursts out like thunder, "God is With Us..." My heart leaps, tears burn in my eyes and I shiver on the back of my head. Gorkin prays, and whispers to me, "Our Lomshachok, risen from the dead!"

"Understand, O ye nations, and submit yourselves... for God is with us!"

Sanya and Glavnyusha radiate with light. They say they have never heard such singing before, as if all the cherubim and seraphim are trumpeting from heaven. And I feel glad that God is with us. When they sing "Thy Nativity O Christ, Our God, shone upon the world with the light of knowledge..." such joy rises in me... as if I can see the cave, the manger, the shepherds, and the Magi... and the motionless sheep rejoicing. Glavnusha whispers to me: "If there were no Christ, there would be nothing, — no light, nor knowledge, but pagan darkness!"

¹ Gorkin means cliros, the area where the choir stands, but uses a rustic pronunciation.

Suddenly he begins to weep, trembling all over, and cries out... they hold him under his arms and lead him out into the frost because he feels faint, — “He has fits,” everybody says, pitying him.

As we walk home, we stop again at the marketplace near the pond and watch the stars and the smoke rising above the roofs. The snow glistens lit by the largest star, the Christmas star. We visit Bushuy, patting him in his doghouse, and he licks our fingers and also seems glad that creation is playing today.

We go to the stables and there is a church lamp shining, set into a lantern for fear of fire. God save us from it! Antipushka our stableman, sits on the hay, about to go to sleep. I tell him: “You know, Antipushka, all creation is playing tonight, Christ is born!”

And he says: “Of course I know...” Here I have warmed a church lamp...

It’s true: the horses aren’t asleep; they are still moving. “They feel it even better than we,” Antipushka says. “When they heard the church bells peal for the all-night vigil, they pointed their ears and listened to everything.”

We go to Gorkin’s. He has a honey kutia² made of wheat and he treats us — to break the fast with a holy meal. We listen about divine things. Glavnyusha and Sanya tell about the shining desert, about the shepherds and the wise Magi who had counted all the stars, about the angels singing and the Star that stood above them, also listening to the angels’ song.

As if he had heard father say those nice words to Glavnyusha and Sanya, Gorkin exclaims, “Oh, you dears... God’s people! And again, like at the pond, Glavnyusha replies, “All are God’s people...” ✦

² Kutia, a dish of wheatberries and honey, blessed in church.