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A Christmas Gift from Fyodor Dostoevsky

By John Freedman

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I don't think it is a hoax. Although I haven't found much hard proof to back it up, either.

"It" is a Christmas poem that goes by one of two titles — "God's Gift" or "An Angel-child on Christmas Eve." The Russian blogosphere is virtually bubbling over with electronic copies of this poem apparently written by the great novelist, fierce Christian believer and frequent religious skeptic Fyodor Dostoevsky. There are hundreds of posts of the text.

But that is where the information stops. My fairly extensive search in the Russian-language internet turned up no information about when the poem was written, or where or when it was published. My 15-volume collection of Dostoevsky's works makes no mention of it.

An admittedly half-hearted check in the English-language internet turned up nothing at all — no translations, no references, no dates, no anything.

On the other hand, I see no reason to doubt hundreds of Russian bloggers. And throughout his life Dostoevsky did write a couple of Christmas stories and several poems, so it all makes sense to me. This particular piece looks like the great novelist may have been reading up on his Charles Dickens at the time he wrote it.

In any case, my Christmas gift to you this year is to pass on this rare treat — a Christmas tale written by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and translated somewhat hastily, as they used to say in the 19th century, by your humble servant. I had some expert help from one Frances Freedman, who happens to be my mother. And I would love to have help uncovering more information about this poem. The comments box below awaits anyone with knowledge to share.

"God's Gift"

By Fyodor Dostoevsky
Translated/adapted by John Freedman

An angel-child on Christmas Eve

Did God send to the world.

"As you walk among the pines,"

He said and then he smiled,

"Do cut a tree and, in my name,

Do give it to the kindest

And the sweetest child on earth."

The angel-child was puzzled deep:

"Whom shall I give it to?

How shall I know which of the babes

Has earned the prize of our Lord's grace?"

"You'll know," was all God said,

And the Heavenly Host did part.

The moon stood high and lit the road

That led into the city.

The air was full of happy song,

Joy awaited every child...

So with the tree upon his back

The cheerful angel boldly strode.

Now, take a look in every window:

What cheer in every room!

Christmas trees all burning bright

As they do on Yuletide night.

The angel now began to rush

And made his way from home to home,

So as to find that special one

Who would receive God's gift.

And everywhere he looked, he saw

Such fine and mindful girls and boys.

But each, on seeing the Christmas tree,

Forgot their manners and their poise.

Some said, "That tree's for me!"

Some answered, shameless as could be:

"You aren't worth half a tree,

I'm better than you, you see!"

"Oh, no, I say, that is my tree

You are not half as good as me!"

The angel listened quietly

And looked upon them sadly.

Every one was full of boasts

And each did praise himself the most.

Their eyes did squint with envy,

Their gazes — black with fear.

The angel ran onto the street,

And heaved a sigh, "Oh, Lord, my dear!

Do tell me which of them deserves

Your kind and precious gift!"

Then on the street our angel met

A tiny boy, at best knee-high.

He stared right at that green pine tree

His face did glow and shine.

"A tree, a tree!" he clapped his hands,

"Oh, what a shame I don't deserve

This gift — it's not for me...

But won't you take it to my sis,

Who lies at home in bed so sick?

It would make her happy! Yes!

No one deserves it more than she!

She earned it with the tears she shed!"

The boy then poked the angel-child

And the angel-child did smile

And gave the boy that Christmas tree.

And then, as if by miracle,

The stars fell from the sky,

And sparkling like green emeralds

They encircled that Christmas pine.

It shimmered, twinkled, winked and gleamed,

For it wore the mark of grace Divine.

That little boy stood struck amazed

And trembled in his rapture...

The angel witnessed that boy's love

And tears streamed down his face.

And the angel brought to God that news

That was the greatest grace.

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