



THE ASCENT

LIUDMILA
KNJAZEVA

This story is based
on fact,
nothing in
it is fictionalized

Людмила Князева

The Ascent

«Автор»

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Князева Л. Ю.

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The life of hierodeacon Antony has been shaped by a cruel fate, indeed. It all began one day when he, a callow youth, was forced to leave his father's home and overnight became a wanderer and eventually a martyr. Having first deprived him of eyesight, of hearth and home, and finally of family happiness, the cruel fate, however, was unable to break his spirit and his resolve to live an honest life following the dictates of Christian conscience. But before beginning my story about this remarkable Orthodox monk I would like to ask you first who of you could define the meaning of your life? Do any of you know for certain and exactly why you came into this world? There are those among us who choose to turn our life into a gamble with death, while others play a lifelong game of chance for financial gain. There are those for whom life is a lifelong toil to provide for their family members, to feed their near and dear ones. For the hero of my story his life became a steady ascent to the pinnacle of true faith and the true meaning of earthly life. So here comes the story of the life and death of hierodeacon Antony, a blind Orthodox monk.

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In Lieu of Preface

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So here comes the story of the life and death of hierodeacon Antony, a blind Orthodox monk.

The Beginning

Hierodeacon Antony, (in the secular world his name was Alexander Semyonov), was born on August 19, 1913 in the village of Elaur on the Volga into a devout peasant family. The baby boy came into the world at midnight, to the accompaniment of church bells ringing the call to prayer at the all-night vigil on the eve of the Transfiguration.

His father, Dmitry Fyodorovich Semyonov, came of wealthy peasant stock and owned two mills, a watermill and a windmill, 14 horses, a dozen or so cows and a large family house of his own. He was a fairly well educated man by the standards of his day having finished a private school in the city of Syzran.

Alexy's mother, Natalya Alekseyevna, came from the village of Bukoyel, 60 km from Elaur. Her father, Aleksei Yefremov, was a merchant and shipowner who had traveled extensively on his trading business up and down the Volga and in the Caspian Sea. He also visited Persia and India from where he once brought a bride for himself. He had been looking a long time for the right woman. He found her when he was thirty. Her name was Ishna. Upon her conversion to Orthodox Christianity she was given the name of Irina.

Dmitry Semyonov and Natalya Yefremova got married in 1901. Of the seven children born to them only three survived and attained majority: two sons, Mikhail, Alexander and one daughter Katerina. The children got a religious education. Agathia, the nanny of little Sasha, hailed from Saratov and was a very devout and pious woman. She taught the boy to read and write and at age 7 he could read canonical hours in the local church.

However, he was destined to enjoy his happy and unclouded childhood only for four short years. The Bolshevik Revolution broke out in 1917 and rudely changed all that.

Early in 1918 his father, to the surprise of all suddenly sold all he owned, put his family on board a steamer and sailed up the Volga to the city of Cheboksary where the family disembarked. For another week they rode on horseback deep into the wilds of Chuvashia eventually halting at the village of Kakerli-Shigali, Chuvash for "red stone", about a dozen miles from the district center of Shemursha. In the village surrounded by thick forest there was a beautiful wooden triple-throned church dedicated to the Archangel Michael. Not far from it the Semyonovs built a large wooden six-room, two-storeyed house.

The house was not so much for the family's needs, as it turned out. The Semyonovs frequently put up passing pilgrims on their way to Sarov to venerate and pay homage to the relics of St. Serafim. Before long Sasha's father became the local church warden. His mother for her part looked after the pilgrims feeding them, preparing steam baths for them and, whenever necessary, treated them with healing medicinal herbs and folk medicine tinctures.

What made Sasha's father drop everything and move deep into the forests of Chuvashia is the subject of the next chapter of my story.

For now let us recall the words of the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from Evil,
Amen.

The Parents

Our parents. Are we always able to properly understand the motives behind their actions? When we are young we often tend to be too quick to take offense at their actions but as we grow older we come to appreciate, if belatedly, their wisdom and righteousness. Indeed, what is at bottom, the meaning of life for each one of us? Is it not the embodiment of our parent plans, their will and desire to see us become what we in most cases eventually become thanks to their efforts? Do we not regret sometimes that our growing up and maturity often comes too late in life? Before we can bring joy to our parents with our successes and accomplishment while they are still living. Sometimes we become not only the embodiment of their victories, merits and services but can also become an expiation of their sins. Each one of us continues to bear our cross and has to pay the price for the mistakes made by our parents. And so it is from generation to later generation. We either add to the good things that our parents did or else we come to atone for and expiate their sins and leave something for our children to inherit. But what exactly is it?

That is my question to you. What do you think?

What “baton” will our children carry on in the “relay race” of their life, our spiritual gains or will they have to atone for our sins in their later life? What do you think?...

And what of Antony’s parents? What was it that they had wanted to leave for their sons?

Repentance for their sins or an ascent as a reward for the righteousness of their ways?... Judge for yourself.

In 1901, long before Antony was born, his father and grandfather on the mother’s side, once got on a steamer and sailed to Saratov on the Volga. In the city’s cathedral they had the good fortune to meet St. John of Kronstadt, who gave them his blessing to abandon their estate and all possessions, and flee from the tornado of revolutionary change. Telling his own children later about this fateful meeting Dmitri Fyodorovich quoted the words of St. John of Kronstadt: “Spare nothing but your life. Drop everything, flee from your village. Take your family with you and run!”

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