

The Boy with His Hand Out, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky

The Boy with His Hand Out

Children are a strange lot; I dream of them and see them in my fancies. In the days before Christmas and on Christmas Eve itself I kept meeting on a certain street corner a little urchin who could have been no more than seven. In the terrible cold he was wearing clothes more fit for summer, but he did have some sort of old rag wrapped around his neck, which meant that someone had dressed him before sending him out. He was wandering 'with hand out'; that's a technical term meaning to go begging, a term coined by such boys themselves. There are many like him; they hang about you, whining some well-rehearsed phrases.

But this boy didn't whine; his speech was innocent and unpracticed and he looked trustingly into my eyes; obviously he was only beginning this profession. In answer to my questions he said that he had a sister who was out of work and ill. Perhaps that was true, but only later did I learn that there are hordes of these urchins: they are sent 'with hands out' even in the most terrible cold, and if they collect nothing, they probably can expect a beating.

Once a boy has collected a few kopecks, he returns with red, numbed hands to some cellar where a band of 'dodgers' are drinking. These are people who, 'quitting work at the factory on Saturday night, return to work no earlier than Wednesday evening.' In the cellars their hungry and beaten wives drink with them; their hungry babies cry here too. Vodka, filth, and depravity, but vodka above all. With the kopecks he has collected in hand, the urchin is at once sent to a tavern and he brings back more vodka. Sometimes, for the fun of it, they pour half a bottle into his mouth and roar with laughter when, his breath catching, he falls to the floor scarcely conscious: '. . . and pitilessly he poured and poured/The horrid vodka into my mouth . . .'

When he gets older he's quickly packed off to a factory somewhere, but he's forced once again to bring all that he earns back to the dodgers,

and they drink it up. But even before they get factory jobs these children become fully fledged criminals. They roam about the city and know places in various cellars into which they can crawl to spend the night unnoticed. One boy slept several nights in succession in a basket in the quarters of a janitor who never even noticed him. It is only natural that they become thieves. Thievery becomes a passion even among eight-year-olds, who sometimes even have no awareness of the criminality of their actions.

In the end they bear it all – the hunger, cold, beatings – only for one thing, for freedom. And they run away from the dodgers to take up a vagrant's life on their own. A wild creature such as this sometimes knows nothing at all – neither where he lives, nor what nation he comes from; whether God exists, or the tsar. There are even stories told about them that are hard to believe, yet they are facts.

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The End