



THE MECK SHALL INHERIT..

*A novel
by Valery Shevchuk*



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Ш37

Валерій Шевчук
НА ПОЛІ СМирЕННОМУ,
або ж Новий синаксар Київський,
писаний грішним Семеном-затворником
святого Печерського монастиря
Роман

Translated from the Ukrainian
by VICTORIA KHOLMOGOROVA

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*Q u e s t i o n: Who are those two engaged in
the most fierce battle of the world?*

A n s w e r: They are Life and Death.

*Q u e s t i o n: Who was the first prophet
of the divine mystery?*

A n s w e r: Adam...

*(From the manuscript
of I. Yaremetsky-Bilakhevich,
18th cent., p. 174)*



CHAPTER I

in which I explain why I started this book

After having read Polycarp's *Patericum*, conceived for the edification of future generations, I, the unworthy Simeon, was lost in thought. I have sufficient time for reflection, since I am unfit for physical labor at the monastery, and besides, I can afford a servant, so I am free to indulge in idleness and quiet observation of the ever wonderful and prodigious sky. Perhaps this was the true reason why I became a monk, for I thought that no one could interfere with my idleness here.

I like to come out of my cell and sit in the sun contemplating, or else I kneel so as not to be too conspicuous to the brothers of the monastery; thoughts come light and transparent, and I also become more light and transparent myself. I love this state of mine for only then, perhaps, do I feel truly close to God. During one of my trances I started contemplating of Polycarp's manuscript, which I had just finished reading at the Father Superior's behest. In a way I envied Polycarp, for he had the honor of describing the heroic deeds of our fraternity. The fact was that he had arranged all the stories with his high-flown eloquence, relating true and fabricated tales like those that senile monks liked to tell. These stories sound

startling by the weak and shimmering light of icon-lamps. I also liked to visit old monks and humbly nurse them though there were times I couldn't help being irritated, for old people can be erratic and even nasty sometimes. I absorbed their stories exactly like Polycarp did, but the difference was that he had done so with the blessing of the Father Superior and the Metropolitan, intending to compose a book that would become immortal and divine in the centuries to come. As for me, I attended story-telling parties out of sheer curiosity which will probably be regarded as a sin on the day of the Last Judgement. I, however, believed that a sin was something which could bear evil and bring misfortune to the world. I thought that my curiosity did no harm to anyone, and I acted exactly like Polycarp, but without the blessing of my superiors.

It was a lovely evening and I stood motionless, looking at the bright sky without a single cloud. It emanated an unusual pinkish-blue light which filled me with bliss; it seemed to me that some sweet wave carried me up into the divine realms. This ascent convinced me I could follow in Polycarp's footsteps and perfect the descriptions I didn't like in his manuscript. In that pinkish-blue twilight, I decided to write down all the stories I had heard on parchment I could afford to buy on my own. Then I planned to become a hermit so as not to plague our community with my strange occupation.

Now as I write these lines, the process of creating fills my soul with the same bliss that I experienced when I decided to devote myself to writing: I feel light and transparent. I am seized by a strong and unexpected desire to create my own synaxarion or a patericum, but not to extol or denounce the Holy Fathers. I want to transmit all the stories I have

heard in the most objective and scrupulous way. Polycarp trimmed all the true stories to serve his aim, which was to extol or denounce. In contradistinction to Polycarp I do not long for fame, and neither do I intend to give my work to copyists. Our community would never bless me for this, for telling stories at leisure and taking up writing are two different tasks.

The former is the result of vanity, but the latter must always serve the glory of God or man. What I have in mind — let it not be considered a sin — is that even man's vanity serves the glory of God. People's memory must treasure not pious lies but the real truth, though I realize that truth is something like the fluff of a dandelion. I am not sure I will be able to avoid extolling or denouncing, but I hasten to explain that the evaluations are mine. However, I will certainly not change the stories themselves or keep anything back. I will leave my manuscript in the hands of God and not in the hands of man, for I am not seeking that kind of fame. I will put my parchment into a jug (I have already found one) with a piece of tarred paper on top. After that, I will wrap it all up in leather to protect the parchment inside and to fertilize our Mother-Earth at the same time. I have all I might need in my cell: the only thing I miss is the sky. I have always loved it, both before I entered the monastery and in my monk's cell. It was only my relentless will to write this book that made me enter the underground darkness stirred only by the weak flame of a candle or a torch. And, besides, I wanted to understand the men I was going to write about, for many hermits in their solitary cells were somehow growing closer to Satan than to God. To avert that danger, I decided to stay for a month in my hermitage and then come out for a certain period of time, and then withdraw again. I needed it not to interrupt my

communication with the sky. I must look upwards from time to time and find blue wells between white clouds for the pure blue happiness that pours down into my soul. This prepares me for revelation. When I am in my hermitage, I can close my eyes and see a piece of azure sky with my mind's eye, and I feel authentic elation in my soul. "Oh, My Lord," I whisper, "give me enough strength to do what you have commanded me to do. It is not Satan that rules over my aspirations but you, My Lord. The Evil One could never let my mind's eye admire such azure; neither this pure sparkling joy nor my holy inspiration and fervor could come from Satan. Here, in the darkness, I seek Your light, My Lord, and Your light is good, while the Evil One never does good. Let all that is petty, unworthy, dark, envious, and slanderous leave my sight, and may there always be a piece of azure sky before my eyes; and let it be my light."

I kept repeating that prayer until tears came to my eyes. At that hour of highest revelation, my cell was filled with a strange light that was faint but pure.



CHAPTER II

in which I tell the story of a possessed man

The monk Laurentius, who would later become a hermit, was famous with us for his ability to cure the possessed. The story I am about to tell happened in September, which was special that year. The sky was as bright as in spring. Huge woolly clouds, dark at the bottom and sparkling at the top, moved across the sky. From time to time, they bunched into a dark and heavy rainclouds that poured down in brief torrents which lasted only until the wind drove away the gray bulk and the sky became bright again, the same clouds scudding across it, dark at the bottom and sparkling at the top.

Perhaps it was the weather that aroused something dark and ailing in the soul of the man whom we took for someone possessed. He stood howling right in the center of his garden, thus terrifying all the neighbors. He howled craning his neck and staring into the sky and at the clouds. This poor possessed soul was a giant of a man, strong as an ox, and a few men who attempted to tie him down had to run away from his yard as fast as possible, for this lummoX broke one of the men's collar-bone, while the other two got away with bruises. Then Laurentius was sent for, and I accompanied him out of curiosity. Many people gathered at the yard of the possessed man, and no one

had any doubts Satan's whole family had inhabited the giant's body. As we approached, the crowd of people started explaining what had happened, shouting and interrupting each other. Upon seeing us, the giant shuddered and started crying in a hoarse voice, cursing to drive us away. Laurentius stayed calm. Showing no fear, he approached the fence where he could easily step over it and asked the possessed man in a loud voice, carefully articulating every word, if the latter wanted to talk to him. After that the man turned deathly pale and dropped to the ground, writhing in pain, and turning even paler until he began to foam at the mouth.

"He is not yet ready to talk to me," said Laurentius to the crowd. "But if you insist, you can tie him down now."

Five men stepped out of the crowd, but at the same time, the possessed man stopped writhing and jumped to his feet. I was surprised to see how adroitly Laurentius moved away from the fence.

"It was the cross that hit him," Laurentius explained to the crowd and made the sign of the cross himself.

A strong gust of wind dishevelled leaves on the trees and tore at Laurentius' clothes, playing with the thick hair of the possessed man who was standing in the middle of the garden and moving his head in a strange way, perhaps still in pain.

"Don't you dare touch me, anyone!" he cried out hoarsely. "It is not Satan in me but the sickness!"

The crowd echoed with whistles and laughter. The possessed giant snatched up a stake, ready to repulse an attack.

"I'll smash the head of anyone who dares to step into my yard!" he cried out desparingly.

The wind roared and whistled, bending the crowns

of the trees; their trunks squeaked. The gusts of wind were so strong that they were almost taking people's hats off. Therefore, the sky was also changing: first the sun dived out of the clouds, then it disappeared again. The light and the dark kept trading places. When the sun appeared, everything lit up.

"Listen, Procopius," Laurentius cried out, "I order you to go to the monastery. You will be cured there."

"Who are you sending me to?" asked Procopius angrily. "Are you sending me to those who are not able to cure themselves?"

"I am sending you to the Holy Fathers," uttered Laurentius.

The possessed man's head twitched and twisted, a grimace distorting his face.

"Your Fathers are not holy enough to cure me," he said wearily, sitting down onto the pile of logs in the middle of the yard.

"Why are you abusing the Holy Fathers, Procopius?" Laurentius asked loudly. "That is Satan speaking for you."

"There are only five men in your monastery who are really holy," answered Procopius.

"Name them!" Laurentius ordered.

In return, the possessed man raised his head and roared with laughter. The spasms of laughter were like gusts of wind interrupting his speech. He named them, but he mentioned neither the Father Superior nor Laurentius, or even the Zealot. He didn't mention either me, the sinner, or Jeremiah the Perspicacious. The person he did name was Isaac the Blessed and a few lay brothers and serfs who did all the dirty work in the monastery. Laurentius grew dark with anger.

"The Evil One is in you, Procopius," he screamed. "Let me come up and talk to you. You better let me do it for your own good."

During their conversation, five men crawled along the fence planning to attack the possessed man from behind his house. But they failed to catch him unawares. He roared like a wounded animal brandishing his stake at the men, and he would probably have succeeded in finishing them off if not for another attack of pain. He stood motionless for a second and then shuddered, dropping his stake and collapsing onto the trampled grass. While he writhed and trembled, a few men attacked him and tied him down, punching and kicking him. Procopius howled, tossing and turning on the ground. The men rolled back and then leaned all their weight upon him again until they were entangled in a confused, screaming and panting mass. Then new volunteers rushed to help the fighting men. They tied Procopius so he couldn't move but only spit and rattle. Laurentius was present there and kept making the sign of the cross over the sick man.

The invaders had to leave the yard once again when Procopius stopped writhing, and with an effort, snapped the ropes as if they were rotten threads. He jumped to his feet, clasping his stake.

He looked terrifying. He was extraordinarily tall, his clothes torn, and his face battered and dirty. He waved his stake above his head and drove all the people out of his yard. Even the fearless Laurentius ran away. It seemed to me that the wind was blowing so hard that it swept all of the invaders away.

"You will not capture me!" the possessed man cried in a hoarse voice. "Do you hear me? You won't! Stop attacking! Anyway, you won't take me!"

"Put your stick away!" Laurentius ordered. "Put it aside and let me talk to you. No more fights, we have to talk."

The possessed man cast a glance at Laurentius as

if seeing him for the first time. He put his stake down and leaned on it like a cane.

"I am afraid of your Holy Fathers," he said.

Then Laurentius walked straight toward him. He jumped over the fence fearlessly and stopped in front of the possessed giant. Taken aback, the crowd fell silent. Even the wind was startled and stopped attacking the trees and people, while a rain-cloud slipped away and let the sun appear and fill the yard with the miraculous shimmering light in which there stood two men, one huge and the other very small. Perhaps, Laurentius uttered something, but nobody could catch it. The crowd saw Procopius throw away his stake and grin. Then Laurentius said something else in a low voice, but I couldn't decipher a word. Laurentius made the sign of the cross over the man and then crossed him twice again. The cloud covered the sun and everything became dull again. The wind grew still, and that strange silence made everyone feel odd. Well, maybe, I was the only one who felt that way. I pricked my ears trying to hear at least a word of the conversation in the yard. I heard somebody sniff by my side and noticed Polycarp whose eyes shone with curiosity.

"Look, Brother Simeon," he whispered to me. "Laurentius is not afraid of the person who frightened ten men."

The possessed man quieted down completely. He turned and walked to the other end of the yard where there was another pile of logs. He and Laurentius sat down there and started a conversation. The people kept quiet as if under a spell, but they couldn't hear what the two men were talking about. I looked at the forests and fields that stretched beyond the houses. Everything was bright in the sunlight, and the sky was almost cloudless and flat closer to the horizon. It

seemed to me that right there where the chains of clouds stood out against the background of the bright azure sky, spring and autumn met. But, maybe it was summer's chimerical way of saying good-bye to the sky and the earth. In full daylight, the people's faces turned dull and expressionless, for they could not sense the beauty of the world while they all watched with strained attention the negotiations between Laurentius and the possessed man. At the same time, some men tried to approach the sick man.

"Don't," ordered Laurentius. "My prayer has almost reached his heart."

The crowd around me gave a startled shriek and people started making the sign of the cross hastily. Two young women tried their best, their eyes shining with curiosity and excitement. I was sure that in their heads there were tangles of words — the legend was being created at that particular moment. I thought that in Polycarp's head there was another tangle of words, for he, being a story-teller, could not help but think over what he had just seen.

"My prayer has calmed him," said Laurentius, and took Procopius by the hand. He stood up and Procopius rose jadedly with him.

"Come on, my son. Let's go to the smith who will chain you, and then we can go anywhere you want." Laurentius said this loudly, carefully articulating every word so everybody could hear him.

The crowd, Polycarp, and I were all taken by surprise when we saw the indocile giant being led by a feeble monk, because only a while ago, he had been waving his horrible stick.

"This is a miracle!" exclaimed Polycarp by my side. "People, you have witnessed a miracle."

He fell to his knees, and all the people did the same. I had to stand still, too, but I was in doubt, as usual.

Laurentius led the possessed man by the hand, while Procopius used his free hand to wipe his forehead with the sleeve of his torn shirt. They were approaching the smithy, and the people who had witnessed everything followed them. An undersized broad-shouldered smith walked out of the black womb of his shop and stopped on the porch, waiting for them.

"Chain his feet and hands, and put an iron chain on his neck!" Laurentius ordered weightily.

Procopius stretched out his arms obediently and the smith started putting the chains on him.

Polycarp was not there with us; he had fled to the monastery from the yard. Right before that, Laurentius had whispered something in his ear.

"Did you manage to convert him to faith, Brother Laurentius?" I asked the monk while the possessed man was being chained. "He grew still so quickly..."

"My prayer was answered," Laurentius answered humbly.

"Which saint did you pray?" I asked him in the same manner.

"I prayed to all the saints," replied Laurentius. "I hope this man recovers soon."

I doubted that, for I knew the miserable fate of the possessed who were chained in dark caves. They dashed around, screaming and pleading, howling and cursing themselves and the whole world. They were calmed down by prayers and rods. My heart ached when I heard the whistling of the rods and the cries of the possessed who wept like wounded animals. More than once I was puzzled by their sick eyes like those of martyrs. I thought that, maybe Christ had such eyes when he looked at this world. They died in their caves and were buried there like offal. I often tried to understand why the Evil One inhabited the sick and deranged brain. What was his reward in this case?

After all, Satan usually possessed our thoughts, aspirations and desires directed at evil: at evil deeds and schemes. As far as Satan was concerned, it seemed to me, he would rather inhabit sound clever people, though, of course, he didn't loathe the ailing or the stupid.

Satan is invisible and omnipresent, you can never touch him. Both heaven and hell are in our souls, our souls being their eternal battlefield. Such sick and suffering eyes can belong only to people standing aloof from that struggle; they do not think about good and bad; they long for freedom. People like us who are safe and sound think about good and bad, and that is why our souls are receptive to Satan. I used to think of that during my long and lonely hours of prayer before the sacred images. Those thoughts interfered with my prayers, but I didn't dismiss them, for they were sound. Thoughts poured out of me and I directed them to the sky, to the sunny azure wells I loved so. I believed it was only in the first sky that the clouds, thunder and lightning fought in a reflection of our passions; but higher, there was surely pure silence. Human passions derive from our destination and life in the world. One who walks the earth ploughs the land, but he also unsheathes his sword; not only does he sweat over his land and corn that preserves life, but he also plunders and tramples its fruit. When such thoughts crossed my mind, my soul used to become thin and transparent, and I was filled with a blue fire from the sky. The lucidity in my mind was similar to some sharp, insatiable pain; perhaps it was my soul crying since it was not easy for my poor spirit to be dressed always in the awkward and heavy garb of a body.

By that time the feet and hands of the possessed man were already chained, and he had a wide leather collar

with a chain leash attached to it. Laurentius took the chain in his hand.

"Have you ever been to the Monastery of the Caves?" solemnly asked Laurentius in a loud voice. "Do you know the brothers who live there?"

"I have visited the monastery, but I don't know any of the brothers there," replied the possessed man reasonably, and the crowd listened with curiosity.

"Who are you afraid of there?" asked Laurentius quite loudly again as if he had forgotten that the sick man had named only five holy brothers before. This time, the first people he named were the Father Superior, Laurentius and Polycarp. He also named the Zealot, Jeremiah, Matthew, Athanasius, Nicetas, Agapetos, Gregory, Mark, Theophilus, Theodore and his mediator Basil, Olympius, and Spyridon, and neither did he forget me. He went on with the names until there were thirty three of them. Laurentius had a beaming smile on his face, while the possessed man hung his head.

"These thirty three men can cure me or send me away," he said in a muffled voice.

"We will lock you in a cave, and thus you will be freed," announced Laurentius.

The possessed man raised his head, his eyes flashed.

"What good will it do to me if dead people treat me?" he asked firmly. "If you want to see my struggle for life why don't you take me to living monks?"

Laurentius pulled the chain leash and led him. The giant walked obediently. Laurentius advanced with measured steps by his side, and behind them, at a distance, followed the crowd, buzzing like a swarm of bees. I walked behind all of them, and it seemed to me that I was witnessing some chimerical ritual. Suddenly the possessed man stopped looking around, and muttered something.

"He speaks Greek. Latin and Hebrew in turn," announced Laurentius, and it puzzled me even more, for Laurentius did not know any of these languages. The crowd grew frightened, and the distance between the possessed man and the crowd increased.

The monastery gate appeared, and we could see the Zealot waiting for us meekly.

"People," the possessed man said all of a sudden turning to the crowd. "They are leaving me alone! I am relieved of them, people!"

The crowd sighed softly. Laurentius crossed himself and walked around Procopius, making the sign of the cross from all sides.

"The devils are leaving him because he is approaching a holy place," solemnly announced Laurentius. "You have witnessed a miracle, people, a real miracle!"

The procession entered the monastery gate. The Zealot crossed himself.

"Where do I have to go?" asked the possessed man.

"To the church. You are not afraid of the church, are you?"

"Not any more," uttered the man. "I can even see the thirty-three men waiting to cure me."

And indeed they were waiting for us in the church, the Father Superior and all the brothers. I joined them.

"Do you know any of these people?" Laurentius emitted a piercing shriek.

"I don't know any of them," answered the man.

"These are the men whom you named."

"I don't know them by sight," answered the sick man.

The Father Superior took a step forward and looked sharply at Procopius.

"Who has cured you?" he asked.

Procopius staggered and fell to his knees before the icon of the Virgin.

"It was she," he cried out. "The Holy Fathers came with her to meet me. There were thirty-three of them, and I was cured."

Then everyone fell to his knees, and I too, for I didn't want to stand out from the others. I thought then that it was better if the Almighty received more praise even from the cunning men, for the world should have been more than darkness and evil alone. I noticed that there in church, the possessed man mentioned the first holy men he had remembered in the very beginning besides the Holy Fathers he enumerated a minute earlier. And though he had already named thirty-eight holy men, nobody seemed to mind. As far as I was concerned, I felt relieved in a strange way, because if there existed at least five upright souls on Earth, it could not be won by the Evil One. Satan interferes with our thoughts and hearts, but He never comes to those who are not aware of His existence, and whose eyes, the eyes of the sick and mourning, shine.

The chains were removed from Procopius; this wasn't hard for Laurentius to do. The giant bowed and the Father Superior gave him permission to retire. He fell to his knees before the venerable old man and tears appeared in his eyes when he was blessed. Only after that did he leave. The crowd made way for him to pass staring at him with admiration.

I was standing by the door and, thus could follow him. The western part of the sky was covered with a dark depressing cloud which meant that it was raining hard somewhere. The wind started blowing again, attacking a tree in the center of the churchyard. Right above my head, I saw glittering silver clouds trembling against the bright azure sky. The wind hit the possessed man in the face, disheveling his thick long hair. He

bowed down, walking fast towards the gate. I had the feeling he was trying hard to keep from running. I believed he would turn back at least once again to say good-bye to those he was running from, so I hurried to catch up with him to see his face at that particular moment.

And so it happened. The fierce gust of wind struck Procopius again and he turned back, looking in the direction where he had left his tormentors. His eyes widened and grew dark. The sun peeked out of the clouds, and its bright light illuminated Procopius' ghastly face. I stood still, trembling and petrified for this was a face from an icon. And I thought with a lump in my throat that this was truly a wonder, for there he was: the sick and mourning man.



CHAPTER III

*in which I tell a story about
Jeremiah the Perspicacious*

When I heard the sound of the bell, I realized that I could hardly get up. It was still dark, and the lay brother was trying to wake me up by timidly shaking my shoulder.

I walked through the damp twilight with Gregory moving slowly in front of me and Nestor, the author of the Chronicles, sighing heavily behind me. We were all subdued that morning and kept our lips sealed on our way to the church, though we usually exchanged remarks regardless of the rules. Titus, the priest, and Evargius, the deacon, whose enmity and anecdotes about it were well known, celebrated matins wearily and inertly. The Father Superior was in the same disposition. He stood in his place rocking slightly, and in the dim candle light, he looked hunchbacked, his cowl sticking up. I found a place to one side from which I could see the whole community. At the very end, there stood a gray-haired man with a wrinkled face, not tall but rather broad-shouldered, his eyes narrowed as usual. This was Jeremiah. That morning he was absolutely motionless, still as a corpse, and only his walking stick kept him upright.

The chin of Jeremiah's heavy face jutted out, and his white beard resembled a dirty mop in that dim

light. My feet grew numb, and, perhaps others had the same problem. Brother Matthew swayed and nearly fell down. After a while, Jeremiah's eyes opened, and they were clear and bright like green water between the snow-covered banks of a river. Brother Matthew shook his head to dispel the blackness in it. At that very moment, Brother Theodore swayed and nearly collapsed, but in a second there were those clear green eyes surrounded by thick gray hair shining behind him. Theodore stopped singing and waddled towards the Father Superior who was unusually stooped. Our singing seemed to drown in Brother Theodore's whisper as he excused himself for not being fit. The Father Superior's cowl nodded, and Brother Theodore backed away then turned and drifted toward the doors like a shadow. Strangely enough. I still remember his face. It was ashen. Jeremiah looked at Theodore, too, his big green eyes flashing; and I even thought I could see a big gray cat atop a mount searing a good-for-nothing mouse with his eyes as it crawled toward him. Theodore passed by Jeremiah like water flows round a stone, and I noticed that his lips twitched and his eyes went out for a moment.

We all fidgeted when we thought of Brother Theodore in his warm bed, because we were chilly and uncomfortable on the stone floor, and a cold wind was playing with our robes, getting inside and freezing our bodies. It seemed that dozens of invisible hands were moving about the church seeking out every one of us. I tried hard not to doze off, though I could hardly keep my eyes open. It was as if some warm heavy Dream was sitting on my shoulders, closing my eyes with his hands.

Brother Matthew swayed again and had to lean on a pillar so as not to fall down, and Jeremiah's eyes flashed again like green ice against the hoar-frost of

dead grass. Matthew walked towards the Father Superior, unable to bend his knees, his withered buttocks jutting out. The church was filled with a rustle that could have come from a tree with iron leaves. The cowl nodded again, and Matthew — like Theodore before him — drifted to the doors in the direction of the green fire of Jeremiah's gaze.

I leaned my shoulder against a pillar hiding from Jeremiah behind it, for I could not keep from yawning any longer, and it was tearing my jaws apart. That was the reason I stopped singing. My mouth opened so wide I was afraid it would get jammed.

At last the long matins came to a close, and we hurried out of the church. Only Jeremiah remained motionless, standing like a pillar himself. His eyes were wide open, and they were the color of the withered grass under the first frost. His lips were compressed in a mocking smile. Everyone felt uneasy passing by him; we all lowered our eyes under his mocking gaze, because each of us had a warm shaggy-haired dreamer inside who was keeping us warm and drowsy. We could think only of our cells and beds, which had probably become cold by then, but they would soon be warm again.

I was not fated to rest that morning. Something prompted me to remain in the church. I stood by the pillar, my curiosity excited by Jeremiah's blissful expression.

The Father Superior walked past, supported by Polycarp, and he was weary and drowsy. This time Jeremiah directed his green fire at the Father Superior.

"Did you want to say something, Jeremiah?" asked the venerable old man.

"I have seen a great miracle today," Jeremiah slowly said.

"You are always seeing miracles," uttered the Father Superior, directing his small black eyes at Jeremiah. "You see nothing but wonders, my son. Isn't it too much for you?"

"This one was special," said Jeremiah, lifting his head with its dishevelled beard. "The Evil One was here with us today."

"The Evil One?" the Father Superior exclaimed in terror.

"I saw him dressed as a merchant," Jeremiah explained, and his eyes went out, for he blinked momentarily...

He was extremely old and withered, and what he saw was butterflies that suddenly filled the church. They flapped their silver wings, and white drowsiness made the old man ache all over: nobody knew how old he really was. They said he was three hundred years old. When he came to the monastery, he was as old and gray as he was just then, or so they said; for some reason, he had saved the gray hair that was cut when he was tonsured. He was all gray: his beard, moustache, eyebrows, and the skin of his face. His visage was ashen as a whitewashed wall and it looked startling against his black robe and cowl. That was why he had visions so often: that day he had seen a swarm of white and green butterflies that had whirled above him. But then they disappeared and he probably dozed off, waking up each time one of the brothers left the church early.

"That merchant was wearing a white cloak," added Jeremiah, "and he had a bunch of flowers under it. He walked stealthily, his feet hardly touching the floor. He would pull a flower from his bouquet and throw it on the backs of those brothers who did not sing during matins but only opened their mouths instead. These flowers are called thistles. So, he would pull one out

and throw it. And if it stuck to someone's robe that person would sway and nearly fall down. That person yawned, invented some ailment, came up to Your Worship, and then escaped from the church."

The old man had to exhale for he had been speaking for too long, but his eyes were shining again and playing like spring waters.

"None of them returned to church," the old man said solemnly. "They all went to bed..."

...So the merchant in the white cloak walked around taking flowers from under his cloak and throwing them at the backs of the singing brothers. Those flowers stuck to them, making them drunk, while the merchant laughed, covering his mouth with his hand. And Jeremiah the Perspicacious was the only one to see it, for he was so ancient that no one knew how old he really was; and those who were asleep in their cells had sinful dreams, because the flowers were growing in their closed eyes and mouths. Perhaps they were giving those flowers to beauties with fluffy hair, forgetting their vows...

The Father Superior stood in front of the Perspicacious Jeremiah, his eyes dim with drowsiness. Polycarp had a mocking smile on his lips, thin as a thread. He and Jeremiah were not drowsy.

"The story of Brother Jeremiah is worthy of great attention," the Father Superior said to Polycarp. "We must call all the brothers together, and he will tell them of his visions. The brothers who yielded to Satan must do penance. As for you, you shall write about it in your Patericum."

Polycarp bowed, and the Father Superior headed for the door. He could hardly move his bad feet, and it wasn't easy for Polycarp to support him.

Jeremiah stood still for some time longer, peering at something in front of him. It could have been the

green and white butterflies flitting out of his eyes, or the merchant in a white cloak with a bunch of flowers under his coat. I thought then that he definitely knew what sinful dreams were like, particularly those with fluffy-haired beauties. And I realized that every person disclosing his inner world left a good part of it concealed. I also realized that Jeremiah's only joy was to watch. I took pleasure in it, too. For instance, it was a delight for me to overhear that very conversation. Thanks to it, my drowsiness disappeared. Now I understand Jeremiah better — especially his passion for observing and shadowing others — but alien to me was his joy when the brothers were punished after his reports.

I stood in the corner thinking of all that, and suddenly a wave of sadness came over me. I closed my eyes to comfort my soul.

"Why are you standing here, my son?" I heard Jeremiah ask me in an even, rasping voice.

His big green eyes shone in front of me, and those eyes were like leaves that had fallen onto the show before their time.

"Well, I wanted to help you back to your cell," I lied without hesitation.

"It is very kind of you to help me, my son," said the old man. "My legs are stiff, and it is hard for me to walk."

"How old are you, Father?" I asked humbly leading him by the arm.

"I never count my years," Jeremiah answered displeased. "Count your sins, not years. Did you hear the story that I told the Father Superior?"

"It is a wonderful story," I answered.

"Tell it to the brothers," uttered the old man. "And share the penance of those who are going to be punished. To share someone's penance is pleasing to God."

"Do you, really, know everything, Father?" I asked all agog. "I would like to ask you something."

"Go ahead," said the old man indifferently.

"Isn't all that immense knowledge a burden to you in your old age?"

"Knowledge that comes from Satan is a burden, but not the knowledge given by God," he answered. "Let's stop for a while, Brother, you are walking too fast."

"How can you tell the difference between the two?" I asked.

"You mustn't doubt," explained the old man after he had caught his breath.

We continued on our way. Jeremiah walked towards the bell. He loved to sit on the log that was there. He spent all his spare time sitting on this log, either brooding or dozing. I helped the old man sit down.

"Why did you ask me such a question?" he inquired, and the green light of his extraordinary eyes shone on me.

"I want to meet my old age with God-given knowledge, for I shall grow old like everyone else sometime," I said.

"Then you must pray more," said he. "I look at you, and I see that you really need to pray more."

"Why me, Father?"

"You are concealing a sin. You won't be punished for that sin, but you have to be careful with it, for it is a grave sin."

"Which sin do you mean?"

The old man kept silent, staring at me and gumming. I was waiting patiently, trying to bear his piercing gaze.

"You are different from others," said Jeremiah at last. "Beware of evil pride, for it will consume you if you are different from others."

"But, Father," I replied softly, "you are not like others either!"

"That means I am burdened by the same sin."

He closed his eyes and plunged into his usual meditation. I looked at him in silent astonishment: his face was as white as snow. White eye-lids, white cheeks, and a white beard growing from his absolutely white skin. The day was dawning. A shimmering light was flooding the earth as if someone were waving a white cloak, and that cloak filled the earth with light. It could have been the merchant of Jeremiah's vision, or, perhaps it was the white flowers that opened somewhere nearby just then. Millions of snow-white butterflies flew from the flowers to the sky where they dispersed and dissolved into the ethereal, shimmering light that emanated from the clouds. High up in the firmament, a magic show was taking place: the darkness was melting and the virgin azure sky was appearing there.

"May I go, Father?" I asked in a low voice.

The old man nodded. I turned and walked away. Suddenly the sound of the same voice stopped me, but this time it was rasping or trembling.

"Brother Simeon, come here!"

I turned back. Blind fear pierced my heart. The old man's eyes were wide open, and they resembled the leaves of snowdrops breaking through the snow.

"A flower has stuck to your back," he said, and on his lips there appeared the same smile he wore in the church earlier that morning. "It is a thistle to be sure!"



CHAPTER IV

*in which there is a story about the Zealot,
the former Prince of Chernihiv*

1

He raised his ax above his head, and its edge flashed in the sunlight. He struck the log and it split into pieces; chips scattered all over the snow, and everything around was covered with the pungent yellow chips. The Zealot raised his ax again and another log noisily split to pieces. It smelled of soft resin, and that fine subtle scent reminded the Zealot of hunting, the barking of the dogs, and the shining eyes of hounds' masters. He gritted his teeth and swung the ax, his face becoming gloomy. Deep mournful wrinkles grooved his forehead. He stamped his feet, and his bast shoes left cross-like tracks in the snow. The yellow wood sparkled in the cold sunlight, and vapor rose above his cowl, as if the former Prince of Chernihiv were on fire and smoke was rising from him. He was chopping logs monotonously, without pausing for even a moment, when a dark-haired man dressed like a young prince stopped nearby, sadly watching the Zealot and his labors.

"Glory to Jesus Christ!" he said softly.

"Eternal glory to Him," replied the monk, putting his ax aside.

The stranger bowed.

"I have already told you," the Zealot said in a hoarse voice breathing out vapor and the words with difficulty through his pursed lips. "Never render homage to me."

"I can't help it," moaned the stranger. "I owe you so much, my Prince."

The Zealot sat down on a log and nodded for the stranger to take a seat.

"I can see, Petro, that you are a true friend," he uttered horsely. "Or, maybe someone sent you to me..."

Petro shook his head in denial.

"I gave up everything I had: my wife and children, my home and power, my brothers and friends, my serfs and villages. I have nothing in common with that world, for everything in it is false. The mundane passes away, while the spiritual treasures are eternal. The Kingdom of Heaven created by God for those who love Him is eternal."

Petro sadly shook his head again.

"But God taught us to love," he said lowering his eyes. "Out there in the world are many people who loved you, my Prince, and asked for your love. In rejecting that love, do you become closer to God?"

"I reject earthly love for the sake of eternal love," wheezed the Zealot, gray smoke wreathing from his mouth. He gritted his teeth in the end. "I gave up more hate than earthly love, for there is no power without violence. No, I couldn't go on..."

He raised his face, and it resembled a mask in the bright light.

"Your wife has shared her anguish with me," said Petro. "She came here to see you, but you hid from her, my Prince."

"I did not want to re-open old wounds. Women tend to forget their anguish very soon. So, please, don't feel sorry about that. She will never try to see me again."

"Your children have shared their misery with me. They weep and miss you."

"Children have short memories. Tell them their father is dead."

"Your brothers are inconsolable..."

The Zealot laughed rather rudely.

"My brothers secretly rejoice at my apostasy. I left them my principality..."

"The boyars that served you, hoping to become great and famous with your assistance are reproaching you now."

"The boyars will eagerly serve some other prince, and that will surely console them."

"But I will never be able to console myself," said Petro, brushing away tears. "For I am the one who grew up with you and whom you saved from death, the one you always shared your thoughts with, and who was always a good listener."

"I have nothing to talk about now," said the Zealot, rising from the log. "My only conversation is prayer; I have no words for anything else. I want to be useful to the brothers, at least, by chopping firewood."

He swung his ax again, and its edge sparkled in the sun; the log crackled but didn't split.

"You are not used to this kind of work, my Prince," said Petro, rising from the log. "You should be careful with your health and not torture your body with boundless work and ceaseless abstentions. God wants a pure heart but not abstinence and excessive work."

"There are no pure hearts without abstinence in this world," said the Zealot turning his face, illuminated by the bright winter sun. "I have learned so much about this world, and have come to realize that one man alone can never change it. I don't think many people together can do so either! You can only change your garb, while the world will always be full of hate

and malice. The only way to find comfort is to achieve harmony of spirit, and only then will you be rid of that struggle the world is consumed by."

"The world is struggling because it is alive," said Petro. "You are right, my Prince, there is a struggle in this world; the struggle between good and evil, between darkness and light. What would happen to our world if all the kind-hearted and virtuous people renounced it? Then the greatest darkness would fill it, endless, infinite darkness."

The Zealot raised his ax again, and the log split that time.

"The Almighty alone knows what destiny each of us deserves," said the Zealot. "The Father alone knows whether to send the world darkness or light. He makes the humble withdraw here..."

The Zealot raised the ax and struck the log with such force that it split into pieces, and the ax dug into the frozen ground...

I, Simeon, the servant of God, the author of these notes, overheard this conversation when I was on my way to visit my friend, our cook Spyridon. I sat by the window looking at the sunlit, snow-covered garden, and at the wooden wall, and at the path by that wall, and at the light blue sky which seemed to be propped up by that wall. Spyridon was offering me smoked fish when I overheard the conversation I am writing about. The Zealot chopped firewood for quite a long time until his friend, who was marking time, offered to help. The Zealot rejected the offer, and Petro walked away, stopping from time to time and looking back. I continued to watch the Zealot chop logs, but more than that, I was drawn by the sky. It looked so pale and haggard that day, that the azure color had almost

left it, and it resembled diluted bluing. That night, the frost set in, and the logs in the sheds and their wooden walls groaned and creaked.

2

In spring, rafts arrived at the monastery. The logs were put on the steep river bank, and only then taken up the hill. The crushed clay made a crunching noise under the feet of those who were carrying the logs. Sometimes a log would slip off their shoulders and roll down the hill. The people at the top of the hill warned those below with shouts and whistles, and the latter scattered. It smelled of water, damp verdure, and fish. Not far from the bank, fishermen were putting out their nets. The sky was in bloom, bright, azure, and young. The fishermen pulled out the nets and the holes were still covered with water. They glittered in the sun as if they were silver.

The Zealot stopped for a moment and stared at the Dnieper. It seemed to him that he and his wife were approaching Kiev in their boats. He played the trumpet call to greet the wooden walls and towers, and the setting sun lit up the water with gold. The Zealot gritted his teeth and lifted a log onto his shoulders.

"Don't overstrain yourself, Brother Nicholas," said a small monk with beetling brows, Brother Nicodemus. "Let's try together."

But the Zealot only cast a glance at Nicodemus — later Brother Nicodemus became the Bishop of Suzdal — and carried the log up the hill. His robe and mantle were stained with marsh dirt, and his rough high boots were red with clay. He walked slowly along the slippery path, balancing the log. From time to time he would grab at the bushes, all covered with green buds, to keep from falling down.

"Let me help you, Brother Nicholas," said Isaac the Blessed, coming down the hill. He was the person who had been visited by the Evil One in the guise of Jesus Christ. "Otherwise your princely shoulders will be aching."

I was standing by the piles of logs at that very moment, for I had been appointed by the Father Superior to oversee the transporting of the logs. But even from there I could clearly see the Zealot's neck redden.

"Thank you, Brother Isaac, for reminding me of my nothingness," said the Zealot humbly, trying to bow to the other. It cost him much trouble, for he stumbled and fell down on the slippery clay. The log tumbled from his shoulders and rolled noisily down.

"Ha-ha-ha!" chortled Isaac the Blessed, trembling with laughter. "This is nothing like sitting at the table on a feast day."

I shouted Isaac down, but he bent his head to his shoulder and laughed happily. The Zealot got up, his robe and mantle shining with mud; his face was surprisingly peaceful.

"He said that from the bottom of his heart," the Zealot told me. "And he is absolutely right, because carrying logs cannot be compared with feasting."

Isaac stood on the hill chuckling. He caught hold of a tree and hung on it, choking with laughter.

"Why don't you rest a while, Brother Nicholas," I said affectionately.

"I'm not tired," replied the Zealot, gasping, and his blue eyes flashed.

"Don't indulge in his whims, Brother Simeon," shouted Isaac from the tree. "Since he had girded himself in meekness, let him work like the rest of us."

The Zealot lifted the log to his shoulders again. This time he walked unhurriedly and quietly, groping his

way before stepping; he even bit his lip to increase his concentration.

By the high stacks of logs on the hill, stood Petro watching the Zealot's unlucky ascent. I saw him rushing to help his former master, but the latter rejected his assistance, and threw the log onto the stack. They stood face to face, having a heated argument. I could have reproduced that conversation, for it was easy to guess what they were talking about, but being true to the commandment of serving the eternal truth, I abstain from hypothetical, apocryphal speeches; that is why I suggest that they talked about the hard and thankless labor of carrying logs. Petro tried to convince the Prince to refuse to work or to ask for leave. For my part, I would have gladly complied with his request, for my heart is not at all cruel or malevolent; and, besides, only the monks who had to do penance were expected to do such arduous labor, while the rest of the workers were peasants hired by the monastery. The Zealot had volunteered to work himself and the Father Superior couldn't refuse him.

They walked down the hill together.

"It was nice talking to you, Petro," said the Zealot as they went. "A conversation with you restores my spirit wonderfully. First I have to carry the logs, and then we will be able to sit down on one of them."

"What if I offer you my help, my Prince?" asked Petro.

"You are wearing expensive clothing," said the former Prince without even a shadow of a smile. "You'll soil the expensive cloth, and it will be ruined."

"Cloth is made to wear out," objected Petro.

"Then I won't go against your good will," replied the Zealot meekly and asked me if I minded.

They started carrying logs together. They would lift a log onto their shoulders and climb, balancing the

log. Once the young lad slipped and fell, proving the Zealot's words perhaps, and his clothes were spoiled indeed. His cord-robe collar, the breast and hem of his coat were all covered with brownish stains, but Petro didn't seem to mind. The two of them carried the logs very carefully. As for me, I made cuts on a cudgel so I would be able to count the logs later. When the workers were slow in coming, I could admire the Dnieper, where the fishermen were still dragging their silver nets: big sparkling fish struggled desperately in them. And when the sun was ready to set, they pulled out the last net and dumped the fish into the boat. After that, they started singing as they went up the river in their boats. These fishermen belonged to the Prince. Their song rang out quietly over the river, as quietly as their oars cut the water striped with gold; and the echo of that song reverberated on the hilly bank. I admired the high cloudless sky, and my soul softened from that wonderful tune spreading over the water and the golden patches of light playing on the ripples. I could feel the cool distinct breath of the earth, from which the seeds sown in autumn were almost ready to sprout. I absorbed the perfect silence of the spring night, silence that drifted from everywhere and was sweet and divine. "It is a happy day that ends in golden silence," I thought.

The Zealot and Petro came down for the last logs.

"Now, Petro we can talk. We still have time before vespers," said the Zealot, rasping. His eyes were bulging, and his face dreadfully pale from the hard work. I examined this man carefully and noticed some hidden pain in his bulging eyes. Immediately it echoed in my heart, because a person who hides his pain deep in his soul is worthy of benediction.

"It is a misery to me, my Prince, to see how you humiliate yourself," said Petro. "And your pious brothers show only disdain for your extreme squalor. I am amazed at your stomach: there were times when it wasn't satisfied with delicious food, and now it tolerates crude porridge and stale bread. Take care, my Prince, or illness might seize you; and if your body is not strong enough, you will die. In that case I won't be able to help you."

They were sitting by the kitchen on a willow log. The Zealot was busy knocking off the mud that had stuck to his boots with a stick. He didn't seem to be listening to the young lad. He looked ridiculous and pathetic as if he had gotten into a big brawl and, moreover, had wallowed in the marsh. His face was sad, or even chimerically sad against the greenish smoke that filled Gregory's garden. He took off his cowl, and his wet and tousled hair was sticking to his head. His long black moustache almost touched his chin. So they sat like that for some time, either listening to the spring silence or brooding over something sad.

"Now think," said the Zealot, "wasn't I right? My wife no longer seeks opportunities to meet me, and she doesn't try to convince me to give up my idea. And my children? It's as if I never had any."

"She has lost all hope," said Petro without changing his pose. "And your children are too small to set out on such a journey."

"Don't you understand that I'm free of all that now? Where are all those boyars you praised so highly? You are the only one who is really true to me."

"One is enough. But you cannot blame your brothers for their indifference."

"From time to time, the Grand Prince visits me here," said the Zealot in the same unhurried manner, staring at some point in space with unblinking eyes. "My second brother came to see me here once when he was visiting Kiev. But I am not pleased by their visits, since they are a temptation for the community. What is this miserable old man who is visited by the Grand Prince himself?"

"He comes here not as the Grand Prince, but as your brother. And you cannot forbid him to carry out his brotherly duty."

"Unfortunately, you are right," said the Zealot slowly, tossing away his cane in disgust. "After all, we have nothing to talk about though we are brothers. His affairs are of no interest to me, and mine do not interest him. Moreover, I have no business but my humble service at the kitchen."

I was sitting by the window at my friend Brother Spyridon's place when he turned in my direction. And even from that window I could see the Zealot's empty exhausted eyes.

They looked at each other, the former Prince and the young servant, until Petro couldn't stand it any longer.

"When I leave the monastery," he said so softly that I could hardly hear him, though my hearing was quite keen, "I have the feeling that you are suffering from some grave mental illness, my Prince. However, when I am talking with you face to face. I believe you are right. But, anyway, to live in such deprivation..."

The Zealot laughed drily.

"I accepted poverty in the name of God, in order to find Him," he said. "To die for Him is a very good idea, while living in deprivation like Job is like being a king to me."

"Job was not like that," said the lad. "And, besides,

there has never been a prince who did what you have done."

"I will set an example for them," sneered the Zealot. "Perhaps, someone will envy me and become my follower. The rest is no business of yours, or of those who have sent you here..."

I was stunned by the way the Zealot pronounced these last words, for he sounded unkind, cruel, and even rude, as if he wanted to get rid of his uninvited guest as quickly as possible. "This would be a gold mine for Polycarp," I thought then. Later Polycarp composed a story that made the Zealot famous. He composed it with my help, having inserted the story into the letter written by Bishop of Vladimir and Suzdal, Simon, which Polycarp claimed he got from Simon himself, because in that letter, the bishop tried to dissuade Polycarp from becoming a bishop. That was how Polycarp announced his wish to the world; everyone then admired his valor for writing against himself. This would help him to become a bishop after all in time, while Simon would never find out about this letter, because he was a blessed and weak man, and writing was never his strong point. Moreover, he was totally deaf, and thus, he couldn't hear what the others whispered malevolently about Polycarp in his ear. As far as I, Simeon, the servant of God, am concerned, I do not long for any promotions in this world, and, thus, I can tell the truth: what I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. That night, when I was the guest of Spyridon, the cook, he offered me some delicious Dnieper fish, which caused me to remember clearly the other twilight with the fishermen, their song, and the patches of golden light on the river.

It was necessity that forced me to tell that story to Polycarp, because the young lad Petro went to the

Father Superior after his conversation with the Zealot. I didn't have admittance to the Father Superior's office, so no matter how much I wanted, I couldn't have heard that vital conversation. Polycarp had heard the second conversation, so we decided to exchange information. I explained to Polycarp that it was sheer curiosity on my part, while the latter didn't try to conceal his intentions.

"Some day you will become another Jeremiah!" he uttered solemnly. I wasn't offended, for all of us under the sun are poor in spirit.

4

Jeremiah was sitting on a moss-covered log under the bell, and it seemed that he was covered with moss as dense as that on the log: his cloak turned green, and his cowl resembled the thatched roof of a strange peasant house overgrown with moss. His beard sparkled like pure silver, and his eyes were closed in peaceful slumber, covered by bluish eye-lids. There was an aspen tree by the bell, and its sticky green buds had awakened only that morning. The spring sun shone on the aspen tree and the decrepit old man quietly dozing near-by. I was returning from Polycarp, thinking of the story I heard. It seemed so ordinary and insignificant that I wasn't sure it was worth telling; how the young lad asked the Father Superior on behalf of the Grand Prince to make his friend's life easier.

"The Prince has chosen this life himself," said the Father Superior humbly. "We only granted his request."

"You obey the will of the Prince, but after God, we all depend on the Grand Prince who holds the supreme earthly power," said the young lad.

"Amen!" exclaimed the Father Superior and looked at the stranger with his small black eyes.

"The Grand Prince believes," Petro announced solemnly, "that his brother's status is humiliating to him."

"In our monastery, we are all equal before God," answered Polycarp.

"The Father Superior's word is an order for every monk," said Petro firmly. "That is why the Grand Prince would like the Father Superior to transfer his brother to a worthier place."

"How can you prove the Grand Prince's good graces?" asked Polycarp, and the Father Superior narrowed his eyes in agreement.

The young man thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a purse full of *grivnas* *, which he tossed on the table. The coins in the heavy purse tinkled.

"We appreciate the Grand Prince' consideration," remarked the Father Superior, taking the money. "Tell the Grand Prince that his wishes will be granted. Though our monastery is the abode of the humble, and the brothers might not be pleased with this, we will do as he asks, for it is in our power to appoint brothers to whatever positions we desire..."

"Was it the Prince's wish or the lad's?" the Father Superior asked Polycarp looking out of the window and the young man who was approaching the gate at that moment. "But I am not sure I understand why it matters to him."

I knew why Petro had been so extravagant, for I had seen great love in his eyes as he gazed at the Zealot, bent under the weight of the log. I had heard great love in his voice when he had tried to convince the Prince to leave the cloister. It is common knowledge

* *grivna* — a large silver coin in medieval Russia

that we serve God who bequeathed great love to us. "Where is the border of God's presence," I wondered at that moment, "if unselfish love prompts this young man to attempt to persuade his old friend to leave the God's abode? This friendship was unequal, for when I listened to their conversations, I noticed that the Zealot did not feel any love or gratitude toward the young man. Here, in the cloister, he was calm and thought only of his own salvation, while a person from the secular world, who was probably worse than he, thought of the salvation of the one he loved. It was difficult for me to apply the customary criterion to such things. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't put that to minute scrutiny. And though our intellect is weak compared to the power of Heaven, I couldn't help noticing that we often find good people where no one seeks for them, while those who are worthy of Hell hide in the garb of the meek. I did not invent this rule; it was established by life itself..."

"Where are you hurrying, Brother Simeon?" I heard Jeremiah call to me, and it was so unexpected that it took my breath away.

"I am in a hurry to carry out the instructions given me," I answered.

"You have no instructions, have you?" inquired the monk, and my eyes met his wide and green ones which resembled aspen buds against a white cloud. "Come sit by me."

Suspiciously I sat down on the edge of the log.

"Sitting here, Brother," said Jeremiah good-naturedly and affectionately to my surprise. "I saw a strange thing. It was a crowd of people coming from the gate. I raised my eyes and noticed an enormous boar, hairy as a beaver, black as pitch, with horrible fangs. Someone was riding it, and the rest of the people surrounding them walked peacefully..."

The old man opened his mouth, and his breath was rasping, his face mocking.

"So, I want to say they were walking just like that," continued Jeremiah. "I asked them where they were going. When I glanced at them, I saw Satan riding that boar...

"It was the Evil One who was hairy as a beaver and absolutely naked. He had the reins in his hands and a golden rod with which he was whipping and lashing. He had a big black face with extraordinarily large nostrils, and a terribly big mouth and eyes. His ears were narrow and tufted like those of a lynx; two stag's antlers crowned his head, and there was a cherry tree between them, with red fruit sparkling on it. With his free hand — one was holding the reins and the golden rod — he picked cherries and threw them to the crowd; but they were filled with blood instead of juice. The crowd was getting drunk on those wicked cherries; they danced and sang silly songs, shouting and twisting profanely, while the Evil One opened his red mouth from time to time and roared with laughter.

"Where are you going?' I asked them and the crowd surrounded the old man. The boar grunted. Naked men and women jumped about. That wanton group was encircled by merry people with sooty faces who clapped their hands to the echo.

"You ask where we are going?' the Evil One said and suddenly stopped laughing. Satan was still riding the boar. 'We are following Mikhail Tolbekovich, where else could we possibly go?'

"The old man made the sign of the cross, and the evil spirits disappeared."

"So, I called you, Brother, to ask you to go and see if Mikhail is in his cell."

I stood up, ready to go.

"If he is not there, come back to tell me. I will be sitting here under the bell."

He closed his eyes. There was a linden tree nearby with tiny new leaves, and the sky was azure, happy, quiet, and warm; the Father's heavenly disk beamed down upon us, trembling and radiating delicate warmth.

I knew that Mikhail was not in his cell, because in the morning, I had seen him climb the fence. I walked to the dormitory and found a cozy place behind the building where I sat to bathe in the sun like Jeremiah. After a while, I saw a lay brother passing by. I called him over in a languid voice, and sent him to tell the old man that Mikhail Tolbekovich was not in his cell.

5

The Zealot was appointed to sit at the gate of the monastery, and he started making bast baskets so as not to be idle; the bast was brought to him by the monastery's lay brothers. He learnt to make so many baskets in a day that soon he covered the whole road near the monastery with them. The townspeople used to come and buy those baskets for they were strong and beautiful. He kept on weaving them day after day until there was no more bast near the monastery. So the lay brothers had to travel far to bring bast to the Zealot, who didn't stop for a minute, because his hands had grown accustomed to that work. He donated all the money to the monastery, and the Father Superior was kind to him. At sunset, when the sky was glowing, Petro used to come and visit the Zealot. They had lengthy talks together, and I thought I knew what they were talking about: Petro became the only link the Zealot had with the world.

Once when I became too curious, I hid in the largest basket made by princely hands to hear their conversation. In the piercing evening light, when no sounds were heard and silence fell on our cloister, the voices of the talking men sounded subdued and almost affectionate.

"I spent all my fortune while I was in Kiev. Now I have to go to work for the Grand Prince to make a new one."

"The birdie never thinks of its daily bread, does it? God provides everything for it," said the Zealot with a ring of irony.

"It would be hard for me to leave Kiev now. I can't live without you, my Prince..."

"Everything is in the hands of God," the Zealot remarked drily and indifferently. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, more than thy friend, or thy wife, or thy father..."

"But, anyway, you should love them all, shouldn't you?" asked Petro. "I hope, my Prince, that you will come back to our ordinary life. It is not difficult to be good and kind having withdrawn from the world, but it is hard to stay good and kind living with other people."

"I never said I was kind," objected the Zealot. "Why should I care about other people when I am thinking about the salvation of my soul? My own soul..."

"Look, my Prince! The sky is glowing. Doesn't your heart respond to that beauty? Doesn't your soul become more sensitive when you hear the nightingales sing? Don't you admire a young mother singing lullabies to her baby? Don't you stop to stare at the river water glistening in the morning light?"

"It is the vexation of spirit when your soul is confused. It is Satan who endows the world with beauty in order to lure us, not Our Lord."

"What you say is most strange, my Prince!" exclaimed the young man. "Beauty is God's magic power. God creates beauty, while the Evil One sends the darkness. Does he who prefers darkness to the sun serve God?!"

"I will answer you, Petro, with your own words," answered the Zealot humbly, while his hands were busy making another basket. "It is not hard to serve God bathing in the sun; it is much harder to be His servant in total darkness..."

"But what for?" exclaimed Petro.

"Our spirit is burning and rebellious," the Zealot whispered hoarsely. "We are broken in two. How can we achieve grace when we are so restless?"

"Is it worth living in hell while you are still alive? Even if it is for the sake of eternity? Doesn't it start the eternal fire of hell?"

The Zealot suddenly stopped working on his basket. He turned abruptly to Petro, flushed with anger.

"What you have said is terrible nonsense," he said. "This world is evil. This world is inhabited by Satan, and he who enjoys it serves the Evil One."

I was looking through a chink in the basket, and suddenly I shuddered: the young man was weeping. Tears were rolling down his face, while the Zealot's visage was impassive and severe.

"All your efforts to tempt and weaken me are lost upon me," he uttered gritting his teeth. "My decision is final and firm. Everybody has forgotten about me. You are the only one left, so you must do the same."

"Not me, my Prince, never!" Petro exclaimed. "I still hope I can convince you; I won't let you die."

"I am not dying, it's you who's lost," the Zealot said coldly. "Today I will ask the Father Superior to allow me to live in the caves."

"Why, my Prince?" asked the young man, frightened.

"I won't live long now," he said staring gravely at Petro. "In three months I will pass from this world..."

"Oh, my God!" cried out the young man desperately, covering his mouth with his hand.

Later I understood what the Zealot meant by that phrase; it wasn't his own death that he had fortold. Who knows, perhaps a person who wants to quit living in this world has to be as unkind as the Zealot was that day.

There are many links that connect us with life. All these links are our love. It is not so hard to overcome hate by separating oneself from those one hates. It is not so easy to get free of those one loves, for love itself is the reflection of God in our souls. It is almost impossible to hate someone if he is not there, while it is possible to love someone who is long dead and gone. This is our great fortune and we must make the most of it. That is why I have always been in touch with the world, even after taking vows of *schema**, for I did this not to become a martyr but to gain access to book and to be in touch with universal wisdom. There were people who did not understand that ambition of mine, and I had to become reticent. I often think that my true vocation has always been watching the world live instead of living in it. My inspiration is different from Jeremiah's. Jeremiah was driven by hate, and he often harmed the fraternity. As far as I was concerned, I was motivated by a great desire to cognize the world in order to reproduce it later as best as I could. It would be a mistake to accuse my manuscript of misanthropy, for I describe all kinds of deeds to be weighed thereafter on the scales of supreme justice. Let deeds be judged, not people. That has been my

* *schema* — the strictest monastic rule in the Russian Orthodox Church

rule; it could also have been Jeremiah's but he denounced people's deeds at the time they were done, while I have tried to be true to eternity.

The young man could not understand the Zealot's words then. He fell to his knees (I was still watching from inside the bast basket) and washed the Prince's boots with his tears.

"Oh, what a misery, my master and benefactor," he uttered weeping. "I live my life for you and I love your charity, my Prince, and whatever good is in me is yours. I was sure of myself and knew why I was living when you were near. Who will console your brothers, your family, and your wife, when you are gone? No one will ever be able to comfort me. Tell me, please, if you are ill, my Prince. I will go to the world's end to find a potion to cure you. I will bring the medicine even if I have to sell all I have, and I am sure your brothers would want to help."

The Zealot stopped making his basket. His hands were motionless on his knees, and his dark turbid eyes were staring somewhere beyond the silent petrified young man. Then I thought that the lad's love, as well as the Prince's faith, was excessive. When I tried to compare the infinite love and the excessive one, they were not equal. The excessive love is never reciprocal. There is something wrong with that extravagant feeling. I could clearly see the tears on my mother's face when I was about to put on my cowl, but I didn't feel sorry for her then. Now that I was sitting in the basket, I realized how cruel I had really been. My face blushed as I understood that what I had done was truly a sin.

The young man seized the Prince's hands, repeating: "Don't go away without telling me what's wrong with you and how you found out. I am ready to sacrifice my life for your sake. If this was God's

message to you, pray so that I might die instead. If you leave me, where will I lament and mourn? Here, by that dump, or at the gate where you live?"

Upon hearing that, the Zealot's eyes flashed maliciously, as if they were lit by some thought. I didn't understand then what kind of thought it was. His friend was still crying, while he himself was still staring beyond his friend's head.

I was uncomfortable sitting inside the basket and it creaked when I tried to stretch my numb body at one point. Fortunately, they didn't hear it, because the Zealot began talking at that moment. His speech was slow, and his voice hoarse, his tongue hardly moving in his mouth.

"I prefer to trust in God rather than man," he said. "God knows how to feed His creatures, and how to defend and save the poor. Our Lord knows better who is ready to die: the one who asks Him for it, or the one who desperately wants to live. Thus the Lord spoke to me, saying: 'Take vows of *schema!*...'"

Petro started weeping. He looked at the Zealot through his tears, his lips twitching.

"Come show me where we shall live," he pleaded.

The Prince rose to his feet abruptly and bast chips fell from his knees. Having forgotten his duty as a guard, he walked with broad strides across the monastery yard. Peter followed him. I rolled out of the basket and walked after them.

Jeremiah was sitting under the bell as usual. I crossed my hands on my breast and bowed to him, hoping he wouldn't notice me. But his eyes were already lit by that special green fire.

"Where are you hurrying, Brother Simeon?" he asked me.

"I am hurrying to carry out an order," I answered without hesitation.

"You have no orders to carry out, have you?" he remarked as the previous time. "Come sit by me."

I had to obey, though I desperately wanted to follow the Zealot and his friend.

"Sitting here, Brother," Jeremiah began narrowing his eyes, "I dozed off for a minute. And again I had either a dream or a vision, I am not sure. I saw a fox wearing a cowl, a mantle, and a cloak, and it barked, that fox. And then many birds appeared. They were blue, and they were flapping their wings. After a while some of them disappeared. I saw that the fox had a white crane in its mouth. That crane's song was so sad that my heart wrung. And there was something else that I could see: the monastery gate was left open, and the merchant in the white cloak was entering. Can you help me decipher the dream?"

He cast a burning glance at me which was like a green mantle thrown over glowing coals. The thought that the old man was really omniscient, chilled me to the bone. I couldn't dare answer him directly and kept silent.

"Who is the guard at the gate?" asked Jeremiah.

"Brother Nicholas," I answered humbly.

"Brother Nicholas is a worthy monk. But every worthy man can become unworthy at times. Could you go, Brother, and see if he is still there. You know who that merchant is, don't you?"

I rose to my feet. My feelings were somewhat strange. Jeremiah's hints made tears well up in my eyes. He was probably right. The Evil One had entered our monastery. The Evil One with the white cloak and sunny smile on his face. He didn't have the thistles under his cloak this time. He just strolled about, gesticulating and whistling a merry tune. It seemed to me then that Jeremiah had somehow tried to become friendly to me. His brain was not touched by

senility yet, which was strange for his advanced age, and he was probably very lonely here under the blossoming aspen tree and the bell, motionless until the appointed time.

I didn't have time to think it all over properly, for I was in a hurry.

"Don't forget to come back and tell me," Jeremiah warned me.

I ran after the Zealot and the young man. And again I met a lay brother on my way whom I sent to Jeremiah to say that the Zealot was not at the gate, and hurried down to the caves. My feet trembled and my tongue was twitching.

6

I walked into the caves, lighting my way with a torch. I passed by the hermits' cells and heard them tossing and turning in the depressions they had hollowed into the cave floor. Not many of them had light. Somewhere ahead I heard someone digging. From afar, I could see three dark figures of men with dishevelled hair, while a fourth was digging. At last two of them moved, bent over and grew still. When I approached them, I recognised in those two figures the Zealot and the young man. They were busy filling their sacks with earth. Mark, the cave attendant, was doing the digging — he was a grave-digger in our monastery — while the fourth man standing still and watching was Laurentius, known for his ability to calm the possessed, who later became a hermit, too.

The Zealot shook his sack and I helped him lift it. The Prince sighed and hurried towards the exit, covering all the way in complete darkness. The young man raised his sack to his shoulders and ran after the Zealot.

"What's going on?" I asked, feigning disinterest.

"I am watching what is happening here," answered Laurentius.

"The Prince ordered to dig a grave," uttered Mark from the pit.

"For whom did he order it, himself or someone else?" I asked.

"For his friend," said Laurentius, laughing, and we fell silent, because the Zealot was returning with an empty sack. The young man came running after him. They started filling their sacks with earth again.

"Are you thinking of dying, Brother Nicholas?" I asked.

The Zealot raised his dirty face. His eyes were sparkling in the flickering light of the torch.

"I intend to cut off the last link connecting me with the world," he answered gravely.

This could be translated in various ways and nobody really understood what he meant. We nodded sympathetically.

The Zealot rammed the earth into his sack, and I helped him lift it onto his back. The young man followed him like a shadow, without a single word. Suddenly, Mark's spade hit something hard.

"Hey, brothers," exclaimed Mark coming out of the niche with a yellow skull in his hands. "Somebody was buried here before."

"It was Prokhor the Goose-Foot-Man," explained Laurentius. "The man who knew how to make bread of goose-foot."

"Why did you bury him without honors?" asked Mark.

"You'd better ask Jeremiah about that," said Laurentius, yawning and making the sign of the cross at his mouth. "God knows how long Jeremiah has been here."

"We cannot make a grave here!" announced Mark.

"Why not?" asked Laurentius with surprise. "The Goose-Foot-Man will remain buried below, and we can put this one on top."

I looked at Mark, the cave-digger, and felt odd: his eyes were wide, black and terrifying; and his voice made us shudder. Even the Zealot and the young man grew still in the darkness.

"Tell me, Prokhor, the Goose-Foot-Man," uttered Mark, "will you be able to hold the ashes of one more brother?"

Dead silence ensued in the cave. The silent skull looked at us, baring its teeth, empty and dumb. I brushed the perspiration from my forehead. Laurentius sneered.

"He has agreed," Mark announced solemnly and put the skull carefully back into the grave.

Then the Zealot moved from his place and headed towards us, his friend following him like a ghost.

7

They were standing by the ready niche. The Zealot asked us to step aside, and so we did. We stopped at a distance to hear their strange conversation.

"Who wants this grave more, you or me?" asked the Zealot harshly.

"No one would welcome a grave," answered Petro, "but you, my Prince, must live, so let it be my grave."

In dead silence, we tried not to breathe in order not disturb the two of them.

"Let it be as you say," the Zealot announced solemnly. "They will bring you everything you need for the taking of monastic vows. Stay here."

He walked away and we could hear his heavy steps echoing in the darkness.

The young man began to cry. He wept, sobbing like a child. I was stunned when I realized how extraordinary his love for the Zealot was. Neither I, nor the other brothers of our cloister who stood beside me craning their necks with curiosity, listening to the lad's sobs, were capable of such love. Everyone of us was bearing his cross, and some brothers even shared the penance of the others. But there were none who would agree to die for someone else. I felt awful in that darkness, and I couldn't imagine then that one day I would become a hermit to cope with my writing. Now it seems to me that my fate has very much in common with Peter's. He chose the darkness for the sake of his love, while I am writing for the sake of mine. He died here for a new grave-digger to unearth his skull one day and examine it by torchlight, while I did almost the same, hoping that someone would unearth my parchment and read it. We both agreed to non-existence — none would ever canonize us in this cloister, and our remnants would never become a shrine. Someone like the Zealot, or Jeremiah, or Mark, or Laurentius would be worshipped in our stead. This was a real heroic deed to agree to non-existence and eternal darkness for the sake of the supreme fire we dare to keep up in our hearts. I listened to the sobs of the doomed young man and wept myself. Who knows, maybe at that particular moment something special was born in me; something that would later become an unsatiable desire to burn in that fire. "Don't ever judge," I said to myself then, "try to understand first."

Mark the cave attendant moved away, while Laurentius and I decided to wait. Soon there arrived at the cave Nikon the Father Superior, Pimen the Faster, Isaiah, Jeremiah the Perspicacious, Isaac the Hermit, Agapetos the Healer, Gregory the Thaumaturge,

Nicholas (who later became the Bishop of Tmutarakan), Nestor the Chronicler, Gregory, the writer of canons, Theoctyst (who later became the Bishop of Chernihiv), Polycarp, the author of the *Patericum*, Onysiphorus, and the Zealot who followed them all. Everyone had a candle in his hand, and they brought the Gospels, a cloak, a mantle, a cowl and all the rest which was necessary for the taking of monastic vows.

"Would you like to take monastic vows?" the Father Superior asked the lad, and we saw the latter weep again.

"God brought you here to execute my heart's will!" he said.

"Brother," began Jeremiah, "prostrating before this sacramental altar and the holy fraternity, tell me if it is your true wish to take monastic vows."

"Yes, it is," Petro said softly.

They completed everything in order. The lad was tonsured, he was dressed in a robe with a cowl. All of them started singing together. Their singing was wonderful, sad, and majestic. Their voices sounded much louder than usual in the cave, and their faces looked solemn in the candle light. I stood behind the backs of these worthy men weeping, because it seemed to me that they were reading the burial rites for a living soul that would never see the sky or sunlight again. I was witnessing, it seemed, a burial instead of a solemn ritual of consecration. Then I saw the face of the lad, whose name was changed to Daniel. There were no more tears on his face, but there was something in it that I had seen in the face of the possessed man, who had been cured by Laurentius. It was probably the eyes that were wide open, sick and mournful. Illuminated by the candlelight, his face shone, becoming absolutely colorless. This was the visage of an icon. And I suddenly thought with a lump

in my throat that here he was: the sick and mourning man.

The Zealot was the only one who did not see the holy light in the face of his true servant and friend, for his own gaze was still dark and turbid. His lips were mouthing a prayer, and he kept locking and unlocking his fingers.

The Father Superior lit a candle and handed it to Brother Daniel.

"Let this candle burn for forty days and nights," he said.

The monks turned and walked away having taken the tonsured hair of the new monk with them folded in a kerchief.

8

Brother Daniel wept for three months, day and night, incessantly. We used to visit him, comforting him and praying. but our consolations were lost upon him: tears kept rolling down his face. His face changed drastically: it would never be fresh and plump again. The lad lost weight and grew sickly, but his eyes shone with a kind, pure light. He looked more dead than alive; his complexion was yellowish, and his nose was like a beak. The beard that covered his chin was gray and sparse. It took him just a few months to become an old man: his forehead was covered with deep wrinkles, and his arms were like a skeleton's. The Zealot didn't pay a single visit to his servant and friend. for he was busy making bast baskets. Most of them had been bought by his brother who used them to fortify the walls: the baskets were filled with earth and arranged in rows. The fact that there were so few baskets left disturbed the Zealot's peace. as well as the peace of those lay brothers whose duty was to

bring bast to him. He started his work at dawn and continued until it was too dark to see the bast. Lots of people from Kiev came to the monastery to buy his baskets that became so famous. Only when he had made so many baskets that they covered the whole entrance, as if forming another gate to the monastery, did he remember about Brother Daniel. He rose to his feet, brushed away bast chips from his knees, and walked with difficulty — his feet were numb from constant sitting — to the caves. I saw him on my way back from the city where I had been sent to strike several bargains for the monastery. So I followed the Zealot into the caves.

He walked with a candle in his hand, and I followed after him stealthily. At last I slipped into the corner where I had hidden with Mark and Laurentius before, and overheard the conversation of the Prince and the young man. I could hear every word of the conversation between these strange men perfectly.

The Zealot approached the lad and examined him carefully.

"Brother Petro," he uttered, calling Daniel by his former name. "Do you want me to take you with me?"

The lad rose from his miserable bed with difficulty. They stood facing one another. Petro started crying.

"Why do you cry all the time, Brother?" asked the Zealot in a muffled voice, but the lad didn't answer him. "If you want," repeated the Prince stubbornly, "I will take you with me."

"I want you to set me free," answered Petro, still weeping. "All I want is to die for you. Pray for me."

I couldn't help looking at that face, for it was pure and tender, and even the gray beard didn't spoil it. This handsome and slim young man stood facing the former Prince.

The Zealot silently observed the person who had become his fellow-monk by chance. The Prince looked gloomy.

"Carry on, Brother, and be ready," he said at last. "You are going to pass away in a few days."

He gritted his teeth as he always did when remembering his former life, and turned to trudge away. The Zealot was probably anxious to get back to the gate, because as I was returning from the city, I saw a cart full of bast being brought for him.

From that time on, Petro-Daniel did not cry. He became quiet and humble. The next day he received Holy Communion, lay down in his bed, adjusted his garb, stretched out his legs, and passed away without waiting for his time to come as divined by the Zealot.

At that time, I, Simeon the servant of God, was present, and before he passed away, I asked the blessed man if he wanted to see any of the brothers. He shook his head in denial, and I realized that he was cured of his overwhelming love, though he never defiled his soul. I closed his eyes and couldn't suppress my burning tears. I lamented and mourned as if he were my blood kin.

Then I left the caves. It was a stifling summer evening. The sky was pale, and there were a few torn clouds drifting across it. I perspired when I was leaving the cave: the air was sultry and still, and I could hardly breathe. I had to rest for a while, because sweat was running down my temples and my hair was soaking. At sunset the sky was covered with an opaque coating as small clouds bunched into ponderous thunderheads.

I headed for the gate having noticed the Zealot from afar. His face was also wet with perspiration.

"Your friend and brother," I said softly, "has just passed away."

He cast a dark meaningless glance at me, and then bared his bad teeth.

"What?" asked the Zealot startled and turned to me.

"Your friend and brother," I repeated louder, "has just passed away."

"Brother Simeon," he exclaimed cheerfully, "that means no more links tie me to this world."

He lowered his head to his shoulder and his lips formed something that resembled a smile. I backed away from him in terror. The still yellow face of a corpse loomed before me. There was almost no sweat on it, and his eyes looked glassy.



CHAPTER V

*in which there is a story about Prokhor,
who could make bread of goose-foot
and salt of ash*

1

He had a stove in his cell, and something was always boiling there. All the walls were covered with shelves filled with all kinds of bottles and jars. The monk was a small man, stooped at the waist, with a tiny goatee, and a wrinkled boyish face. He was always practising witchcraft over his numerous pots, coming out of his cell only to attend mass. After matins, when everybody else went back to bed, he would take his sack under his arm, put a knife in his pocket, and mince off to the hills behind the monastery, where he wandered gathering goose-foot, filling his sack with it. Then he would lift his sack onto his hunched back and return to his cell. Then he kindled a fire to get everything fizzing and bubbling again. He smelled, stirred, mixed and tasted his magical slop. He never ate in the refectory. He ate neither vegetables, nor bread, with the exception of the host. For hours and hours, he would sit in the middle of his cell, grinding his herbs with a pestle first, and then rubbing them between his palms. And since he had taken a vow of silence, he never spoke

to anyone. From time to time, some of the monks who were most curious evesdropped at his door or at the window to find out if he spoke to himself, but there was always dead silence in his cell. Only sometimes they could hear the rustle of the herbs and the bubbling of various potions in the pots. In winter, he used to collect the cinders from the other brothers' cells; it even became his duty. He melted resin from wood and painted his cell with it so it was all a glistening black. Those who spied on him — even Jeremiah, who was always more curious than anyone else — did not quite understand what exactly that dwarf-monk did. No one knew anything about Prokhor's ambitions and thoughts. No one could look him in the eye, for when he was on his way to church or to the hills to collect goose-foot, he looked down, never raising his eyes. And he seemed so self-denying that some of the persistent fasters were envious. Before he took the vow of silence, he had expressed only one thought, which was later repeated by the others many times. This thought, in fact, was not his own for he quoted the Gospels.

"Look at the birds in the sky. They sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns: yet your heavenly Father feedeth them," he used to say.

Maybe that was the reason Prokhor liked birds. If he heard the flapping of their wings, he raised his goatee, forgetting about his hunched back and watched the birds fly. Birds were not afraid of Prokhor, a stork built its nest atop his cell. Everybody said (though I didn't really believe it) that when Prokhor went to gather goose-foot in the morning — he usually gathered and dried it for the year ahead — the stork flew to him, landing on his hunched back, and they wandered together along the paths. On these very hikes, Prokhor violated his vow of silence, they said: he talked to the bird, and it answered him by clicking

its beak. This looked very much like a real conversation. The omnipresent Jeremiah was much younger then. He would crawl up to that strange couple, but the accursed bird grew frightened whenever he was near, so he couldn't get very close to them: Prokhor would grab his sack and run from the dangerous place, while the stork flew after him until they found themselves in some other deserted place. When Jeremiah told the whole community about the extraordinary friendship between the man and the bird, someone suggested that this was Prokhor's way of communicating with Satan so perhaps, as he said, they should break all his bottles and jars, and pronounce him possessed. But Prokhor, however, carefully attended all church services and prayed zealously, lying down or beating his forehead on the floor. "And, anyway," said the Father Superior of those days, "birds are heavenly creatures and cannot be evil." Jeremiah had no peace. He even searched Prokhor's cell secretly and tasted the liquids in the bottles. They all tasted like medicine, but the smell in the cell was disgusting. Prokhor boiled his slops every day, and that was why they did not turn sour, though in some jars, the potions were quite bitter. Nobody knew how the monk himself could eat them. Prokhor made a cellar in his cell where he kept barrels with the cinders he collected in winter.

Some of the brothers were so curious that they went to visit Prokhor. They would come in, sit down, and watch. Prokhor was never surprised to see a guest. He, however, never greeted him, following the rule of his vow, but he made no secret of his strange cooking: he kept boiling, mixing and tasting his slops, and sometimes, when he was in a good mood, he offered the pot for his guest to try. Only a few men dared to taste it but those who did said the slops had no taste at all. It was just like any other potion. After tasting it, though,

the person did not feel hungry and was cheerful till the end of the day.

Jeremiah was present when Prokhor broke his vow of silence. Jeremiah used to sit in Prokhor's cell watching him rub the goose-foot between his palms and then put it into a tub, adding some liquid from one of his pots. Then Prokhor kneaded the resulting dough like a baker, for his fists were small but strong. This used to take so long that Jeremiah would get bored and leave the cell, and he didn't know what Prokhor used to do after that. But one day, Jeremiah returned to the cell very quickly, driven by some special premonition. Prokhor met him on the porch with a loaf of baked bread in his hands. It was like any other bread but green in color.

"From now on, Brother, I renounce my vow of silence, as the angel that came to me from heaven told me to do. This bread I give to you, Brother, because you have shared my loneliness, and entertained me, bringing joy to my heart more than anybody else," he said.

He pressed one hand to his chest, holding the loaf of bread in the other. He bowed to Jeremiah who accepted the bread and was about to kiss it. The smell of that bread was extraordinary, warm and delicate as a flower. Jeremiah kissed it and broke off a small piece. The whole cell was filled with that warm and delicate smell, and the bread happened to be real. Jeremiah ate it with pleasure. And while he was devouring the bread, a sunny dewy morning appeared to him, the same kind of morning as when Prokhor had wandered with his stork in the hills, Jeremiah crawling after them.

"This is the unsown bread from unploughed land," Prokhor announced solemnly.

He took another loaf and walked out into the yard. Raising his tiny goatee, he called out to someone in

a strange voice. Suddenly there appeared his stork with a she-stork and a few baby storks. Prokhor began feeding them the bread and they ate it with pleasure, too. Jeremiah went out of the cell and scared the storks off. They flew screaming to the roof. A flock of little birds approached Prokhor taking crumbs from his hands on the wing, cheeping incredibly; Prokhor smiled in perfect bliss, and his face looked even more boyish.

That day the sun was enormous, and it shone so brightly that all the verdure laughed and sparkled in its rays, as did the river, which could be seen from the monastery. Jeremiah stood on the porch eating bread, and at that unforgettable moment, he suddenly fell in love with the sky, the sun, the sparkling river, and that small bent man surrounded by a flock of birds that resembled a cloud. The storks on the roof were tapping their beaks in excitement. Jeremiah had a feeling that he had witnessed a great feast.

"You are a miracle-worker, Brother!" he said to Prokhor, and the latter laughed contentedly.

"It is the evening that brings misfortune," he uttered, his eyes sparkling with happiness, "morning is always triumphant!"

He hobbled back to his cell to take two more loaves of that bread, and headed, his back hunched, for the Father Superior's cell. On his way he met Nestor the Chronicler, and offered a loaf to him.

"Today an angel told me to renounce my vow of silence. As an earnest mark of this, take this bread and eat to your heart's content, for the angel told me: 'Your soul has accumulated too much good during these long years! Confess, and then you may eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!'"

Nestor crossed his hands upon his chest and bowed to Prokhor. He took bread from him, kissed it and

broke off a small piece. Prokhor went on with a bright smile on his face, happy as a child. Jeremiah and Nestor followed him, nibbling on the bread. They entered the Father Superior's cell all together. Prokhor bowed low.

"Father Superior," he said happily, "an angel told me to renounce my vow of silence."

"How did it happen?" asked the Father Superior.

"He appeared to me in the guise of a bird. The bird perched in my cell and sang a beautiful song. I understood it..."

"Maybe, it was just a bird, and not an angel."

"It was an angel," replied Prokhor confidently. "I am sure, for this morning I baked bread of goose-foot."

He handed a loaf of that bread to the Father Superior. It was like any other bread but green.

"How did you do it?" asked the Father Superior in surprise.

"I rubbed the goose-foot in my palms first," Prokhor said humbly. "Then I added some water and kneaded it like dough. After I sprinkled it with my sweat, the dough began to rise. In half an hour it had risen, and in another half-hour I baked this piece of bread..."

"We will transfer you to the bakery," decided the Father Superior munching on a piece of bread. "It is good and healthy bread, indeed. The lay brothers will gather goose-foot, and you will bake the bread. You have done well by yourself, and now you can serve the community."

"This is true," Jeremiah and Nestor exclaimed together.

Prokhor closed his eyes and the expression on his face became grave. He sighed, grief-stricken, and shook his head.

"I would be happy, Father," he said and tears welled in his eyes. "But I can bake only five loaves a day."

"Why only five?"

"God has endowed me with such a modest ability..."

2

It was a lean year. People ate dogs and cats. They ground tree bark and ate it to soothe their stomachs. That year, Kiev was marked by an ill omen. Once on a summer night, the streets were filled with the clatter of hooves, as if thousands of horses were trotting, but actually these were devils scouring the streets. People locked the doors of their houses, but no one could sleep. Loud music could be heard outside: psalteries, fifes, and drums were playing. Someone was dancing and shouting, jumping and whooping, and singing obscene songs. Women were heard screaming either in freight, or lust. Those who dared to come out were attacked by the devils and eaten alive. The bones of the victims were used for making whistles, the sound of which was enough to deafen the whole world. People locked their doors and didn't dare open them, even when they heard somebody knock or call them with the voices of their neighbors or relatives.

That year was marked by a hail of stones that fell on the city, and there was a tremendous broom in the middle of the sky. There appeared a fortune-teller in Kiev who said the end of the world had come. He was locked in a cage for that.

That year, thousands of mice invaded the city. There were so many of them that when they crossed the streets, it seemed that the ground was covered with a rough carpet. And those who happened to be out ran as fast as they could, because those mice attacked the

legs of men and horses alike. The only possible way to walk was to wear stilts. In the old days, people used those stilts only in foul weather. You couldn't take a step without squashing a mouse. The dead mice were eaten immediately by the rest of them. All those vermin attacked store-houses and gobbled up supplies, gnawing through even thick logs. A great famine ensued. People were in the jaws of death.

Prokhor continued his work, gathering goose-foot. Early in the morning, he would come out of his cell, and his stork accompanied him. They would wander the hills overgrown with goose-foot. Prokhor cut the goose-foot with his knife, while the stork clicked his beak, either guarding him or talking. Prokhor would talk to him, too, but their conversations remained a secret to other people. Even Jeremiah couldn't get close enough to hear, for the bird was very vigilant. From time to time, the stork would toss something up with his beak, usually a mouse, for he could swallow a lot of them in a morning. The mother-stork with her grown children would visit them in the hills. They all ate mice, thus protecting Prokhor.

They said that a piper saved Kiev from the invasion of mice. He left the city playing his pipes and the hordes of mice followed him. Both the piper and the mice perished, but such a horrible invasion never occurred again. That musician was from Podil, a district of Kiev. His widowed eighteen year-old wife cried her eyes out. That summer their child had died, and people said that his grief and desperation endowed him with such power.

Prokhor learned to bake fifteen loaves a day. Once a stranger knocked on his door. That stranger was destined to disturb Prokhor's peace and quiet. Tall and gaunt, with a swarthy face, he stood on the porch looking at the small monk; and he was so much taller

than Prokhor that when he talked in a low voice, the monk couldn't hear him at all.

"Speak louder, good man," asked Prokhor, raising his head.

"I have heard about your amazing ability," said the man louder. "Could you teach me so I can save those who are starving? What do you make this bread of?"

Prokhor threw his head back so he could see the strange visitor better. He was surprised at how tall and gaunt the man was; the man's eyes were wide and shone either with great grief or even greater kindness.

"I make this bread of goose-foot," chattered Prokhor. "Of goose-foot, my dear man. That's why it's green."

"Well, I will try to make it, too," said the man in a low voice that didn't match his height. "My family is dying, you know. Maybe I can still save my wife and neighbors."

The man went to the hill where Prokhor gathered goose-foot and collected so much that when he carried it back, he resembled a green mountain. Prokhor went out of the monastery gate and was stunned at the sight of that mountain. Jeremiah was also stunned, but Prokhor shook his head grievously, saying:

"Can't you see that his family is dying, and he has no money to buy bread with."

He brushed away tears from his eyes and minced toward his cell. Jeremiah was grief-stricken, too, and didn't know what to do. So he followed the person that amazed him so much, though he knew he couldn't help him.

A cart with a high railing travelled about the city, and when the coachman struck the gong, people carried the bodies of the dead and put them like logs onto the cart which had a lattice-work at the bottom. The man

who carried goose-foot stopped by that awesome cart, weeping.

Jeremiah looked at him through an open door. He could only see the man's back, for he was bent over the pile of goose-foot, grinding it. Jeremiah entered the yard.

"How do you do," he greeted the man. "What are you doing?"

"I intend to make bread of goose-foot," the man answered, turning to Jeremiah. "My wife is dying, and the neighbors are one foot in the grave."

"You will never be able to do it," remarked Jeremiah sadly.

"Why not? The monk does it, doesn't he?" exclaimed the man.

"He knows some secret," Jeremiah continued, just as sadly. "And conceals secret very carefully. Let's go and watch."

The man rose to his feet and bits of goose-foot fell from his lap. They walked out of the yard and stopped by a fence, making way for the terrible cart to pass. The coachman, however, looked absolutely calm. He swung his whip, his back bent, and his bright blue eyes looking from under the straw hat.

"I know half of these people," said the man, nodding at the cart. "They were my good friends..."

That day Prokhor managed to make eighteen loaves of bread. Fifteen of them were big and soft, while the other three were dark and flat. He put those fifteen loaves into sack and headed for the city. He left the other three on the table.

Jeremiah and the man were waiting for Prokhor to leave. The man sat down on a log, while Jeremiah watched the door of Prokhor's cell. The tiny old man came out onto his porch and looked around. The storks above his head cried happily.

"Why does God endow a man with a gift if that man works only for his own sake?" asked the visitor gravely.

"No one can know the ways of the Lord," said Jeremiah.

At that time Prokhor was walking along the path with a sack of bread on his back.

"Now," commanded Jeremiah, and they entered Prokhor's cell.

The shelves on the walls were filled with pots. Some of them were wrapped in cloth, and other were covered with soot. They saw a barrel of ashes in one of the corners. There were three loaves of bread on the table. The stranger rushed towards the bread and broke off a piece. The bread was bitter, and he couldn't eat it. Jeremiah laughed.

"Don't get upset," Jeremiah said. "This bread is not real. Take a sip of this."

And he handed him the pot that was left open on the table. The visitor drank it greedily.

"Leave some for me, too," said Jeremiah.

And he also drank some. The drink was like wine or mead, and Jeremiah had never drunk anything like it before. Right after that, both Jeremiah and the stranger heard wonderful music and they felt satiated and happy. They were dizzy, and smiled at each other as if they were old friends.

"This is a very strange cell," commented Jeremiah with a smile. "Something is happening here, but I cannot understand what. The only thing I can tell is that the old man cares more for his profits than for the good of others."

"Then I would like to take two pots with me, if you don't mind," said the man. "Maybe I can still save my wife and neighbors."

"You may take as many as you like!" announced

Jeremiah, walking to the door. Green and blue light played in his eyes, and sweet happiness filled his soul. The visitor took two pots from the shelf and left. The minute he went outside, he saw a miracle: the whole earth was covered with fragrant flowers, and there was a butterfly on each of them, the same color as the flower. There were so many butterflies that the stranger thought a motley snow was falling. He held the stolen pots under his arms, a happy smile on his face. He even didn't notice the monastery wall, for he almost flew over it as if he had wings. Then he started running. His feet carried him very fast as if he had eagle's wings. He had the feeling his feet didn't touch the ground, or perhaps there was a bed of flowers beneath them. His bare feet could almost feel the butterflies as if they were fish in the sand. He hurried to bring the pots to his wife and neighbors, hoping to save them, and music was playing in his soul.

He also felt that he had turned into a house with a hundred rooms, and that reed-pipes were playing in each of them. He saw the ground covered with flowers of every color but, nevertheless, he still wasn't relieved of his grief.

Prokhor noticed the man with the pots and stopped in astonishment. That man staggered along the street. He was tall as a tree and had a broad smile on his face. Moreover, he looked drunk. Prokhor realized that those pots were surely his, and he knew the reason that man looked so happy. He shrieked in his small voice and attacked the giant, jumping high and hitting him between the eyes.

It seemed to the man that a black bird had hit him between the eyes, and he fell down across the road.

"Don't you dare to set foot in my cell again!" hissed the bird hovering over him. Raising himself a little, the man stretched his arms toward the bird.

"Oh, bird, have mercy!" he pleaded. "Have mercy, for God's sake! My beloved wife is dying, my three children have died." The man laughed hysterically and tears were rolling down his cheeks.

The small stooped monk stood by the motionless giant, the monk's goatee jutting out. He stood there and saw stars. He took his pots back and held them under his arms, backing away from the petrified man. His heart skipped a beat and, he feared he might really begin to feel sorry for that strange man.

3

After that incident, Prokhor used to lock his cell. The man's wife died, and he carried her to the cart where the gong struck every day. He also brought several neighbors who were his friends to the same cart. Then he came right to the monastery, his eyes dry and glowing. He stopped by Prokhor's cell and stood there until the monk appeared on the porch. Prokhor was frightened by the dry glowing eyes and staggered backward. But remembering that he was on his way to mass he passed by the giant.

"They are dead," said the man. "I've come to tell you this, for you were the only one who could have saved them..."

Prokhor looked up at the stranger, shaking like an aspen leaf.

"I am not here to get revenge," continued the visitor. "I have come here to die by your porch."

"You can become my servant," chattered Prokhor. "You won't have much work to do, and you will survive. There is one thing you must do now: go to the Father Superior and tell him what you did to me. Tell him you wanted to steal bread, and explain to him

what bread you found in my cell, I mean, tell him if it was good or bad."

The visitor shook his head and his eyes faded.

"Don't tell him about the pots that you stole," ordered Prokhor. "I forgive you for that, but let the Father Superior forgive you for the stolen bread."

The stranger would later tell Jeremiah that he saw the dear faces of his relatives and friends who ended up on that terrible cart, and he was sick at heart, for he was still kind and compassionate though he had no more tears left. The pain escaped from his heart and became a groan that flew like a bird toward that horrible road with the horrible cart. The bird sang a sad song, for it also was born with a compassionate heart. Prokhor noticed nothing, and neither did he understand what had happened. He thought he was doing a great favor to the stranger, sending a message to God about his good deed which could be a credit to him some day.

"When you come back from the Father Superior," uttered Prokhor in a fit of generosity, "I will allow you to have a sip of the drink that you already tried, remember?"

The Father Superior didn't believe the story. He absolved the man's sins, for he repented with tears in his eyes. But when he left, the Father Superior sent for Jeremiah.

"Go to Prokhor and secretly take a loaf of bread," he ordered.

Jeremiah came to Prokhor's cell only to find the new servant there. The servant was squatting by the cell, his eyes wide open, a blissful smile on his lips. Jeremiah came close and spoke to him. The man didn't respond. Jeremiah waved his hand before the servant's eyes to make sure he didn't see him. The man was rocking slightly, smiling, and humming some tune.

Jeremiah entered Prokhor's cell. It was quite dark in there, but the monk seemed to be absent.

"Brother Prokhor," he cried out.

The wind was whistling in the chimneys, and the day was rather cool. Autumn had come. There were two loaves of bread on the table. Both were dark as soil. Jeremiah smiled and took one of them. Prokhor's servant was still squatting, his face lit by a smile, and his hand outstretched.

"Where is Brother Prokhor?" asked Jeremiah.

The servant didn't respond.

Then Jeremiah went to the Father Superior. They broke the bread and found that it was bitter as wormwood. Jeremiah concealed his doubts for the Father Superior was yearning for a miracle.

"Now, my son, let Prokhor bring his bread himself," said the Father Superior.

But at that very moment, Prokhor was entering the Father Superior's cell with a loaf of bread under his arm.

"Father Superior, someone came to my cell," he said after receiving the former's blessing, "and stole a loaf of bread. This is the last one, so I brought it with me lest it's stolen, too..."

"Will you offer us some bread to taste?" asked the Father Superior softly. "There are legends about your bread already."

They looked at each other: the Father Superior and the monk with the goatee. Prokhor took out the bread and broke it. The bread was green, but the smell was wonderful, and the taste was sweet like mead.

"How did you manage to do it?" asked the Father Superior.

"I ground the goose-foot with my palms," answered Prokhor meekly. "Then I added some water, and kneaded it..."

He repeated the same story. The Father Superior glared at Prokhor, and the monk couldn't bear it.

"Don't treasure whatever it is what you are concealing," said the Father Superior at last. "Otherwise, evil pride will consume you."

4

I, Simeon, the servant of God, wrote this story after pestering all the old monks with questions about Prokhor. Jeremiah told me more than anyone else. Jeremiah and the servant became good friends, and thus he learned a lot about the servant and Prokhor. I didn't see any of this with my own eyes, so I have no right to testify to the truth of the whole story. A good part of it resembles Jeremiah's tales, where all geese are swans. I told that story to Polycarp, and he included it in his *Patericum* to edify future generations. I wrote down all I heard, and if anyone happens to read my notes, he is free to think whatever he wants. The only thing I saw with my own eyes was Prokhor's skull. And that was when the Zealot buried his sworn brother alive. The skull was filled with earth and couldn't disclose its secrets. Brother Prokhor obviously knew many secrets, but he never shared them with anyone, and that was why he was buried without honors instead of being buried like a saint in an open niche. It might have been due to the pride that had lived in Prokhor's heart.

Jeremiah was convinced that Prokhor was in league with Satan, and all his miracles were nothing but Satan's tricks. Jeremiah even swore that he had seen a little devil dancing on Prokhor's hunched back whenever the monk carried goose-foot to the monastery. The little devil was a merry creature, laughing all the time, while Prokhor at that moment — as Jeremiah saw

him — resembled an ass. I am not going to argue whether Prokhor was a wonderworker or a possessed man, I am just going to relate one more story about this extraordinary man. I heard this tale from ancient monks, and let the Omniscient God be the judge.

Prokhor's new servant spent a lot of time squatting outside the cell, rocking slightly; Jeremiah saw him there quite often. He could spend hours and hours like that, because Prokhor used to give him the mysterious drink from the pot. The servant saw divine visions then: the whole world covered with flowers, merry birds singing all around, and thousands of butterflies flying about. If he happened to see people, they all looked like angels to him, the angels that visited the kingdom of flowers to pick armfuls of them. Then they would disappear, leaving soft soothing music behind. In that music he could decipher the small voices of his children. In the midst of the flowers, in the emerald aid there appeared two heads. These were two boys singing a wonderful sad song. Prokhor's servant would weep while listening to that song.

Prokhor was busy boiling, mixing, and pouring his liquids into other jugs. The fire whistled in his stove, and red patches of light played on his face. Smoke swirled under the ceiling, drifting towards the door which was cracked open. Prokhor whispered something illegible, or perhaps he was humming or praying. Jeremiah couldn't grasp the meaning of it, no matter how he tried. Sometimes Prokhor would come out of his cell, sit down by the door, and converse with his servant, asking him about his dead children and wife. The servant always answered him sadly and monotonously. Their life went on and on until one day when Prokhor thought his servant was intoxicated and rocking slightly by the wall, the servant entered the cell. Prokhor turned his head and saw the stranger as

he remembered him from their first meeting: a tall gloomy man with dry burning eyes.

"What's the matter?" asked Prokhor softly, some strange fear seizing him.

"I'm leaving you," said the servant.

Prokhor raised his sooty beard.

"What's wrong?" he asked meekly.

"I'm not doing anything here," said the servant coldly.

"You chop firewood, gather goose-foot, and you clean the stoves of the brothers," explained Prokhor. "You've got enough work for a servant."

"It is almost nothing for me."

"You still mourn over your family," said Prokhor, shaking his head. "Their graves still haunt you."

The servant nodded, and his eyes flashed with pain.

"Why don't you go to visit their graves?" Prokhor asked as humbly. "But remember, Lazarus, I need you."

"I don't understand a thing of what you do here," said Lazarus. "I won't lie about the reason I stayed here. It wasn't for my daily bread, I assure you. I wanted to learn your secret, but I failed."

"Some day I will initiate you in these mysteries..."

"What you do is remarkable. Just imagine, bread of goose-foot... No matter how hard I tried I couldn't manage to do it myself."

Sitting at the table, his gray sooty goatee raised, Prokhor roared with laughter, his eyes glowing and his beard shaking.

"Bread is not the only thing I can make," he said after he finished laughing. "Look!"

He took a wooden spade and filled it with ashes from the barrel. Then he sprinkled it with the liquid from the pot. The ashes fizzed and coagulated. In a minute, white crystals were sparkling on the spade.

"Try it," suggested Prokhor merrily.

Lazarus took a few crystals with his big hand and put them on his tongue.

"It's salt," exclaimed he amazed.

"Yes, it is real salt," Prokhor cried out laughing and raising his beard again. "All the barrels with ashes that I keep are not just barrels with ashes for me. I can turn it all into salt."

Lazarus' gaze was still severe. His big black eyes were glowing, and there was something in them that made Prokhor stop laughing and regret his fit of frankness. And he turned again into a withered old man, wiping his nose with his sleeve. His face became sad and he cast a glance at the small passage that was left after Lazarus blocked the door. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat, and he even stood on tiptoe, betraying his excitement.

"What more do you want from me? Why are you looking at me like that?" he cried.

The giant's eyes softened, and his dry lips whispered the words that the little monk listened to with great attention.

"You can be of great benefit to the people, Father," he said. "You could help those who are dying of starvation, and there are too many of them in the world. Your skill could save them."

Prokhor was still tiptoeing, a small and angry man, whose faded eyes had no more sparkle.

"Save them?" he asked coldly. "Was there anyone who tried to save me? Was there anyone who cared?"

The giant standing by the door became even sadder.

"This is because your life is filled with iniquity, Father," his lips whispered. "You have never lived for others..."

"Iniquity has nothing to do with people. Any life is free of iniquity when lived for God. What can be

more eloquent than my dress," he indicated his mantle, "when we speak about whom I devote my life and soul to?"

Lazarus shook his head, and Prokhor could no longer bear his glare. Fear blazed in him like fire, and he had the feeling that the giant's tremendous hand was going to raise and strangle him.

"And if you care to know," said the old man arrogantly, raising his tiny beard, "I don't like people at all. That was the reason I withdrew to the monastery. Your people bring evil to the world and live in hate. God has damned them, calling their life vanity of vanities."

"But His Son loved these very people," said Lazarus.

"That was why he was put to death!" Prokhor exclaimed, dashing about his cell. "Don't think, man, I am stupid and you are clever, that you are good and I am bad. We are all measured by one standard, and our souls are not very different. But if a person is humiliated in life, and if his life is nothing but a misunderstanding, he never thinks of love. he thinks rather of eternity. If this person never experienced love and kindness he would think rather of his transience than of good. All that I have is far from enough to save the world, just as I am small compared to the world. This drop that I could offer to the people is too small. It would simply drown in the ocean of misery, as I will drown in it, too. I don't want to drown. I want to respect myself."

He raised his goatee arrogantly again, and a hard glint appeared in his eyes.

"All I can say," began Lazarus very softly again, and Prokhor thought that his burning gaze would finish him, "is that your life is filled with iniquity. You are endowed with a divine power, but love will never be your reward."

Prokhor looked at the giant condescendingly. He sat down on a stool and stared at the fire burning in the stove.

"I'm afraid," he said simply. "I'm afraid to disclose my secret to the people..."

"Why? It could save so many poor people who are starving!"

"I have lived long enough to understand this world," answered Prokhor in the same colorless voice. "That is why I am really afraid... Because people are apt to turn all good into evil!"

"Some of them do, but not all..."

The weather in Kiev was beautiful in those days, and then Lazarus felt that he was almost cured of his grief. For the first time, he left the monastery. The day before he talked with Jeremiah for a long time; he told the monk his thoughts and about his life with Prokhor. He headed for the city after that. He was still sad, and Jeremiah accompanied him out of love. Children were running about, people hurried in all directions, and everything looked as if that disastrous hungry year had never been. Lazarus looked around in surprise. Time had stopped for him while he had been in the monastery. He approached his former home. The house was empty, and the yard was overgrown with goose-foot. Lazarus went inside and stayed there for a long time. He was probably sitting and staring at the walls. When he came out of the house he looked even more gaunt and he had much more gray hair than he used to. He sat down on the porch, brooding. He sat like this until he heard someone's slow and cautious steps.

"Is that you, Lazarus?" his neighbor asked him. "We thought you had died."

"My wife and children died."

"Two of my little ones passed away, too," the

neighbor said, sighing. "The crops are wonderful this year."

The neighbor sat down by his side and they were both silent for a while.

"We are short of salt here," said the neighbor. "The princes are on bad terms, and they wouldn't let the merchants or the traders come here. Salt is awfully expensive."

"Prokhor, the monk, has plenty," said Lazarus. "Go to him and ask him to give you some."

"Who is he, this Prokhor?"

"He is the one who makes bread of goose-foot," Lazarus answered briefly.

He walked along the street, and when people hailed him he readily stopped to talk to them. And if they complained that they were short of salt he sent them to Prokhor.

He looked strangely tall and erect. His face was gloomy, and his feet were stiff. His thick gray curly hair streamed from under his hat onto the shoulders, and as he walked, his hair fluttered in the wind. He spoke briefly and curtly, but he addressed the people in a very friendly way. Some amazing energy and attractiveness that emanated from him made passers-by stop and turn back to look at him again. Jeremiah could also feel it, and he thought that after Lazarus had left the monastery, he was no longer just a poor fellow who had lost his family or a servant: he looked rather like a person who had been visited by the Holy Spirit.

"I was afraid to look at him," Jeremiah told me much later, "because his body possessed some enormous power that could only be of divine origin. I thought even that it wasn't good of me to follow him. But then I didn't belong to myself. Something forced me to go after him. I felt elated. Perhaps the people who talked

to him as he went felt the same elation. After talking to him, smiles lit their faces."

He went to the cemetery and found it empty and untidy. Lazarus weeded the graves of his wife and children whom he had buried there himself. He prayed and bowed to the graves, while the enormous sun shone on him and tears rolled down his face. Then he lay prostrate on the graves like a cross, burying his face in the earth. After a while he rose to his feet and stood motionless. It seemed to Jeremiah that he would begin to flicker like the candle he resembled and burn to the end in that abode of the dead, so mournful was he. When Lazarus turned back at last, Jeremiah didn't want to hide anymore and went forward to meet him. He saw Lazarus' ghastly face: his eyes were glowing like those of a madman, and his breathing was labored. Lazarus didn't notice Jeremiah, and the latter didn't have the nerve to call out to him. He walked along the streets, stopping to talk to people from time to time until twilight swallowed the city. Then he seemed to come to his senses and turned back to look at the glowing sunset. That crimson light illuminated the whole earth, reflecting in the windows and puddles. There were patches of crimson light on the faces of the people that made them beautiful, especially the women. The white houses acquired a special delicate warm color.

Lazarus picked up a stick from the dusty ground and examined it carefully. He looked at the sunset once more and his face was tender and quiet. He shook his long mane and walked quickly towards the Golden Gates. When he was outside the city, he turned back and made the sign of the cross three times. He went on and on along the road, disappearing into the twilight that swallowed him forever.

A stranger bowed to Prokhor.

"We are going through hard times, Father," he said. "The princes are on bad terms, so they didn't let the merchants or traders come to Kiev. We go hunting and manage to bring fish or game from time to time, but what can we do without salt?"

Prokhor stood by the door of his cell, a small stooped old man with a goatee jutting out, and looked angrily at the stranger.

"Who told you I had salt?" he asked severely.

"Your servant, Lazarus, did."

"Where is he now?"

"He went to the cemetery to visit his family's graves."

"I don't have any salt," Prokhor said harshly. "All I have is ashes."

"Have mercy, Father," said the stranger falling to his knees. "I can't pay you in gold... Only two of my children survived the famine... But if you don't mind, I can bring you fish..."

Prokhor's eyes narrowed and pierced the stranger. His breath was rasping.

"I will give you some salt," he answered after a pause. "but only on the condition that you tell no one."

"I'll bring some fish then," exclaimed the visitor.

"I don't need any fish," Prokhor interrupted him rudely. "You will pay me by not breathing a word about it."

"I swear by my land and children!" cried out the stranger almost prostrating himself before Prokhor.

It happened to be a sad day for Prokhor, though the weather was beautiful, and the sun was bright and tender. The breath of air was pleasant, and seeds were ready to sprout. Prokhor sat on an old willow log near

his cell. He stared into space, whispering something. He was sure more visitors would come.

The visitor who came next fell to his knees before Prokhor who looked at him from under downcast eyelids.

"Who told you I had salt?" he asked slowly.

"You servant, Lazarus," answered the visitor. "He told me about your kind heart and remarkable generosity..."

"Where did you see him?"

"I've seen him on his way back from the cemetery."

"I will give you some salt on the condition that no one ever finds out about it," said Prokhor severely. "Otherwise, the Prince might order it all confiscated."

A cheerful sun crowned the sky. The day was azure. All the verdure was fragrant in the warmth. Prokhor's stork left the roof and walked peacefully near the cell, trying to peep at Prokhor's face. The old man didn't seem to notice the bird. He sat looking at the world with narrowed eyes, feeling depressed. He didn't know where this grief had come from or what it was destined to bring.

He rose to his feet at last and whispered something to the stork. The bird clicked its beak in reply and flapped its big wings as if trying to blow Prokhor away.

Prokhor went into his cell, took a pot from the shelf, and poured some green liquid into a mug. He drank it all. His veins were gradually filled with warmth, and he brushed the tears from his eyes. He went outside and sat down on the log again.

The world around him was changing. It acquired a golden tinge, and amidst the weeds and grass there appeared flowers. The whole earth was covered with those flowers, and tiny delicate butterflies were flying about. His stork was drifting along those flowers. The

bird had a face of a man and a plume on its head that was cocked to one side. It had a reed-pipe in its beak. It played the pipe, and wonderful music filled the air. The stork was not the only one playing for Prokhor. A whole band of flowers and butterflies joined in as well. Prokhor stretched out his hand, and one of the bluebirds sat on it. Fluttering its wings, it started a song. There were a lot of bluebirds around, and they all sang the song that the stork was playing on the pipe.

"God knows," Prokhor whispered, "I wanted to take that man into my care. I wanted to cherish him as my kin. I wanted him to love me, for no one had ever loved me in this world..."

The third supplicant arrived and fell to his knees before Prokhor. He had come to ask for salt like the rest of them.

"Why do you all want salt from me?" asked Prokhor.

"We need it so badly," explained the supplicant.

He was a withered old man whose face was dark from grief and a permanent tan. But Prokhor saw a handsome young man in front of him.

"Who told I have salt?" asked Prokhor, for this question had already become a habit. He pricked up his ears so as not to miss the answer.

"It was your servant, Lazarus."

At that moment, Prokhor thought that Lazarus was called so for good reason.

"He lay at my gate, covered with sores, but I didn't pay much attention to him," said Prokhor.

"His grief was unbearable..."

"Where did you meet him?"

"I met him in the street, when he was talking to people. He stopped to talk to me, too. He told me you were kind and charitable. and that you had salt."

"Why did he do this to me?" muttered Prokhor. "If ever the Prince learns about my salt, he will order it confiscated, all of it. And the Father Superior will come to me and ask where the salt came from and why I hid it."

"Where did you get it from?" asked the supplicant with curiosity.

"I'm the only one who knows," Prokhor snapped out and went to fetch some salt for the beggar.

"Let it go no father," he pleaded.

He took a sip from another pot and the colorful picturesque world turned dark for him. There was a gray sun in the black sky, the grass and flowers faded, the blue air became pitch-dark and velvety. The stork that had a few dark spots on its feathers became solid black. Its beak turned into a snake that coiled and hissed at Prokhor while he was sitting on the willow log, tiny as a little finger, rocking slightly. In the distant corner of his recently keen brain was only a single twig with just one leaf and the only snow-white flower that was left. There was a lonely bird on that twig. It sang the same song that his true friend, the stork, had been whistling just a while ago.

"There is no good in this world," muttered Prokhor. "There is no love, no loyalty. No faith, no hope. There are only black nets that people make to entrap each other, and thus it will be until the end of time." At that moment, Jeremiah came up to him and sat by his side on the log.

"Who were you before you became a monk?" he asked Prokhor.

"I used to be the son of wealthy parents," Prokhor answered. "It was an awful ugly world. Do you know why? I couldn't devote myself to commerce; neither could I become a soldier. I couldn't even become an apprentice. I couldn't do anything in that world. That

was why I wanted to escape from it. I thought then that the world was not worth my attention."

They sat in silence for a while. The evening sun illuminated their faces, tinging them crimson and making them look younger.

"I've heard tales about your salt. What else have you invented? First it was bread, now it is salt, right?"

"I devoted my whole life to that. If you have bread and salt — and you can always find water — you will never be hungry, you are not dependent on the world."

"Salt has become very hard to find," said Jeremiah.

"I had a cellar beneath my cell," said Prokhor, the colors and forms of the surrounding world restored for him. "Somebody hid ten barrels of salt in there. Ten barrels, imagine that, Brother!"

Jeremiah laughed stringently.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said. "I won't give you away. And you know what? I don't believe that an angel told you how to make bread of goose-foot. I would rather believe it was the Evil One."

Jeremiah stood before Prokhor, his legs spread apart and his face turned sideways. He squinted, and his gaze was cunning. Prokhor didn't look at him at all. He looked at the path leading from the gate to his cell. A barefoot man in ragged garb was coming along the path, and Prokhor guessed that it could be no one but another beggar who wanted salt.

6

At last they arrived. They came with the stamping of their heavy boots, their greedy eyes sweeping the cell.

"What's that?" asked one of the Prince's courtiers, prodding the pots with his stick.

"These are herbal infusions," Prokhor answered calmly.

"Where is your salt?"

"I have no salt," answered Prokhor meekly, "I have only ashes."

One of the servants trust his hand into a barrel and drew out a handful of salt.

"Are these the ashes you are talking about, Father?" he asked, roaring with laughter.

Prokhor didn't say a word. This time he didn't need his potion to see the world painted black. He saw people with black faces, and their mouths were also black.

"There must be a cellar here," said one of the servants and threw the cellar door open. "Look! There are barrels here..."

"There are ashes in those barrels," Prokhor remarked quietly.

"Well, we'll take the ashes then," said the young courtier with a grin.

Prokhor started cursing them. He stood in the middle of his cell, his face ghastly, curses bursting from his compressed lips. All the curses he knew were ancient — purely pagan — for one of his forefathers had been a pagan and had been a priest in a heathen temple. He had not forgotten the curses of his grandfathers and hundreds of his ancestors. He invented new ones by naming all parts of the human body and cursing them. He cursed them, their ancestors and their descendants, calling them all thieves, swearing at them with the worst damnations, using all the vile language he knew.

"Shut up, old man," said the courtier angrily. "We are doing it on the Prince's orders."

But Prokhor was not able to stop. Curses kept bursting out of his mouth until the courtier caught him by the beard and hit him between the eyes,

blinding him. Prokhor fell down, losing consciousness and hitting his head against the bench.

At that time, the servants were busy carrying the barrels. Barrel heads were nailed to the barrels. They were too light to be filled with salt. Several carts were driven closer, and the barrels were loaded. As the courtier was leaving he splashed the old monk's face with water.

Prokhor opened his eyes. Everything around him looked pale and faded, as if wrapped in light and transparent muslin. He heard the rumble of the carts outside and stared at the ceiling in astonishment. Instead of a ceiling, he saw a faded sky with a faded sun on it. The sun was scattering white rays. He heard the rustle of leaves, and it seemed to him that he was lying in a white garden with white foliage.

He rose on his elbow and sat down, feeling a sharp pain in the bridge of his nose.

"It hurts awfully here," he complained to Jeremiah who was helping him get up.

"They have taken your salt," said Jeremiah grinning.

"It wasn't salt," Prokhor answered flatly. "It was ashes..."

"You have been inspired by Satan. Brother. Stop it..."

Prokhor rose silently. He walked to the table and took a sip from a pot. The white world turned pink for Prokhor who looked at it through some rosy haze. A pink man stood in front of him, grievously shaking his head. Jeremiah looked at Prokhor and noticed pink tears rolling from Prokhor's eyes. His tiny goatee was trembling.

That night, an enormous full moon glowed in the middle of the sky illuminating the earth so brightly that it was possible to see each blade of grass. Jeremiah stood on his porch for a long time listening to discreet sounds of the night. Prokhor couldn't sleep that night either. He sat by an oil-lamp for a long time, and for an even longer time, he prayed. Then he took the biggest pot from the shelf, put it under his arm, and blew out the light.

He went along a narrow path, his back stooping, and his feet wet with the abundant dew. He muttered prayers as he went, stopping from time to time and staring at the moon. The moon was shimmering right in the middle of the sky, lavishly pouring down its lifeless light.

He left the monastery through a hole in the fence. He could see the road in the moonlight perfectly. It was silver white. He walked with mincing steps like a big black hedgehog. On both sides of the road, toads croaked and grasshoppers chirped at the tops of their voices. Prokhor descended to the Khreshchaty Ravine and sat down to rest on a stump, for he was exhausted. He sat motionless, resembling a black mushroom. His eyes, attentive and glowing, sparkled from under the cowl.

He hobbled on, passing the bridge over a brook until he reached the city gate. The guard hailed him, and Prokhor explained that he was a wondering monk.

"Stay here until dawn," said the guard. "I have orders not to let anybody into the city at night."

Prokhor didn't argue. He sat down by the wall, his robe gradually becoming covered with dew.

"Tell me, Father," began the guard. "Why have you come to the city?"

"I am going to the St. Irene's Monastery."

"Come to my post and tell me what you have seen in the world."

The door creaked as Prokhor entered. He told the guard a few tales that he knew, and the later listened to him open-mouthed.

At dawn, Prokhor walked along the empty streets of the city. He hobbled, hardly bending his knees. Even from where he was, he could hear the hubbub in the quarters of the Prince's bodyguard — they were feasting.

Suddenly a dog appeared and rushed towards Prokhor. He dipped his fingers in the pot and sprinkled the dog with the liquid. It calmed down right away and hushed in confusion. It swayed drunkenly and crawled back to its yard.

Prokhor had only a short way to go, but it took him ages to get there for he was on his last legs. At last he found himself at the dump where all the garbage from the city was brought. He wandered among the heaps of garbage until he found what he was looking for. In the morning twilight he saw a few piles of ashes.

He sprinkled them with the potion from the pot. The ashes coagulated and hissed, turning white as the morning light. It started to sparkle in the shimmering day. Prokhor left a few big heaps of sparkling salt at the dump.

He left just one sip of the potion for himself, but he didn't drink it yet. He stood motionless, praying. He prayed and thought about his own life, and the bitter truth that he had heard from Lazarus. Prokhor could almost see Lazarus' face, and he desperately wanted to talk to him once again. He was sure they would have understood each other this time, and he would have made the giant believe his reason...

And he also thought then that human life was so short and transient that he hardly had time to look around; he was here today and gone tomorrow. A sharp pain pierced his heart. He was dazzled by the salt sparkling in the bright light of the new day.

In broad daylight, he drank the rest of the potion. He felt that a burden of years was taken from his mind. He was becoming young again. His long-forgotten youth filled his body with its youthful ardor and will.

He rose to his feet and where the dump had been he saw a valley overgrown with flowers. He saw butterflies and his stork with a pipe, and he heard magical music playing. Then he threw away his cane and walked along the street. When he met a person dressed in rags he would stop and tell him:

"While your masters are asleep, hurry to the dump and take some salt."

People didn't believe him at first, but the most curious ones went to check. And while the lords were sleeping, a lot of common people came to the dump and gathered all the salt there.

Prokhor hobbled to the city gate. He approached the bridge over the Khreshchatin brook and felt that he couldn't go any farther. He sat down on a stump and turned into a tree.

This is all that I, Simeon, the servant of God, heard about Prokhor the Goose-Foot-Man, whose skull I happened to see in the cave. After the old man's death, Jeremiah appropriated his pots of infusions. No one could ever find out how Prokhor made them. No one ever learned why he could make bread only in small quantities, or how he turned ashes into salt.

Jeremiah has recently drunk what was left of the infusion. He never learned to make bread of goose-foot though he used the contents of one whole pot

trying to do so. Neither could he make salt of ashes. He was awfully sorry that he had spent the precious liquid on that, because one sip of it could relieve a man of torment, as he said.

And a single sip of that drink made Jeremiah perspicacious. Prokhor never disclosed his secrets to the monastery, so he was buried without the ceremony befitting a saint. Only after reading Polycarp's *Patericum* did people start to consider him holy. And even Jeremiah never said a bad word about Prokhor.



CHAPTER VI

*in which there is a story about
Isaac who had a vision of Christ*

1

I heard steps in a distant corner of the cave, and hid my parchment under my cloak. It was Isaac looking in my window.

"Ha-ha," he chuckled. "Jeremiah sent me to see what you were doing here, Brother Simeon."

"I'm praying to God," I answered meekly.

"Jeremiah says the Evil One visits you here in your cave! I went through it in the old days... Jeremiah knows what's what."

"Of course he does, for Satan comes to him," I said quietly. "The Evil One of suspicion and uncertainty visits him frequently."

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Isaac. "I will go and tell him."

"Why should you?" I said calmly to stop him. "You'd better tell me again how Satan came to you."

"There is no point in retelling it," muttered Isaac, knitting his brows. "You know the story. Did you hear that Brother Nicodemus has passed away?"

I made the sign of the cross.

"Ha-ha-ha," laughed Isaac inopportunely. "He preferred to come down with an illness in the monastery."

His withered face became sad. His wide-open eyes were watering.

"The Father Superior beat me again today. He beat me severely because I told him that... Wait, what did I tell him? I told him I saw an ass instead of him in church today. But I did see an ass. What can I do?" he looked into the window, his eyes glowing. "Aren't you afraid to stay in here, Brother Simeon? I would be frightened if I were you."

"God will help me, I hope."

"Didn't I hope then?" exclaimed Isaac in a shrieking voice. "Maybe I hoped more than you do now. I took monastic vows when you were a baby. I put on a hair shirt and had a goat bought for me. Then I had it flayed and put on its skin. I dried that wet skin with my body. I lived in a cell that was four cubits long. I prayed to God constantly with tears in my eyes. As for meals, I had one communion bread every two days and a little water. I spent seven years like that. I didn't lie down to sleep, not even on my side. I slept sitting."

"Please, Brother Isaac, calm down. You really hoped more than I do," I said comforting him.

"I hoped mightily, but nothing came of it. Now everybody beats me and turns me out. My body is a mass of bruises."

"They do it because you never keep your mouth shut, Isaac."

"But I never tell lies," said Isaac and tears welled in his eyes.

"That is exactly why they beat you. If you lied, they would just laugh at you. They beat you for the truth..."

He went away. I stood motionless before the icons, deep in thought. That man came to me every day to complain. I knew his story by that time.

I looked around my cell. It was much longer than four cubits. I could lie down, and I could even walk. I wasn't fasting. But the smell in the cell was really

unbearable. I withdrew here voluntarily. I didn't intend to tame my flesh with disquietitude. The only reason was to brood and write. It is indeed a strange difference, but I am convinced that real thoughts depend on it. After I finish my parchment, I will leave this miserable place. I will probably take a crozier like Lazarus and wander about just to see the high sky above my head and the sun in it. My spirit is weighted down by the darkness here. The same thing happened to Isaac, Athanasius, and John. But to write about all these men is impossible without following their example. I had to become a hermit for that purpose. I wanted to become like Isaac, Athanasius, or John to feel what they had felt. If you want to tame or denounce something inside you, you have to know it well, at least, I believe so. And I am convinced it is the thought that is pleasing to God.

2

Day and night merged here in the caves. In the morning, an attendant would come to bring a mug of water, a host, and a tiny candle for praying. After prayers, Isaac would stare at the fragile fire of his candle illuminating the dry walls, the rye straw that covered the floor, and his robe. Isaac had a spade to bury bodily waste, but, nonetheless, the smell in the cell was disgusting. When the candle or torch died out, an impenetrable darkness filled his cell. From time to time, the darkness would be disturbed by a candle of a passing brother; then it would throw a yellow patch onto the small window, and a small spot of light would be reflected on the opposite wall. In the evening, the attendant would bring more fresh water and a torch, and he would also recount briefly

the latest monastery news. Isaac would listen without saying a single word.

When the old man's steps died in the distance, a hermit would light a torch under the icon and sing psalms, bowing low. He would sing at the top of his voice to penetrate the terrifying silence. He was sure he could hear the voices of other hermits who were scattered in different corners of the caves. They would join him in singing. Torn shadows swayed about. The flame would flicker, disturbed by his breath. It seemed to him that the darkness was stitched with thin threads that were ready to break, for singing in unison united the hermits in a particular way. They all felt relieved of their torment. Perhaps that was why he wept as he sang. Words burst out of his throat until he felt that he was alone again in the darkness, and no one was singing with him. He felt tired and empty, so he snuffed out the candle and sat down to rest. Hypnotic grief lulled him, weakening his spirit. At such moments, he was carried away by memories of the time when he was a rich successful merchant. Back then, he had had attacks of the same grief. That was why he decided to leave the world and become a monk. He gave away all his property to monasteries and relatives and became a hermit, hoping to be cured of that grief. After a certain period of time, he perceived the same kind of sorrow which was like some internal pain which consumed him. He was at his wits' end. He had left the world for the monastery to get rid of his sorrow only to find it here again. He would light his torch and pray, beating his forehead against the hard dirty floor. He sang psalms until his lips and tongue were sore. His eyelids would become inflamed and he would sink into short heavy sleep. The rustling steps of the attendant who brought him water, an occasional host, candles, and torches always woke him up.

The darkness around was amazing. It was ragged and fathomless: every rustle was deafening; every movement disturbed the putrid air. His eyes got used to the darkness, but, nevertheless, the moment he put out his candle it oppressed him, driving him to despair. A subdued moan would escape his lips. Isaac beat his head against the wall. In the dead silence of the cave, he could hear the other hermits' garbs rustling. Sometimes, the ground would collapse somewhere, and after that, the sands would sift for a long time. That sound made Isaac shiver as if he were feverish. He would stretch his arms and legs, moving his tongue and opening his eyes wide to make sure he was still alive. Then his hand would search for the flint to start a fire. He could watch the sparks for hours, scrutinising the walls and his humble belongings in that light. Then he would grow calm and bow low to the ground in prayer.

"My Lord, look at me," he said loudly and as if from the book. "Behold my torment, for I suffer in Your Name and for the sake of Your charity. Light up this darkness and lead me to Your light!"

Tears, bright and burning, exactly like the sparks from the flint, rolled down his face. He would tear his hair, rocking and moaning softly.

One night, the silence was most terrifying, and the darkness — after he put out the candle — was most impenetrable. Drowning in it, Isaac suddenly saw some light in the corner of his cell. At first, the light was as small as a fire-fly, gradually becoming bigger and bigger, and at last it filled the whole cell. Isaac closed his eyes with his hands. He was afraid that the light would blind him forever, and that he would see nothing but darkness. He saw two lads approaching him. They were dressed in silver raiment, their faces and smiles bright and clear as the sun.

"We are angels, Isaac," they said together. "And now you will see the one to whom you must bow low to the ground."

He jumped to his feet, startled by this divine vision. Filthy and unshaven, his face withered and his eyes burning, he stood in the middle of his brightly illuminated cell. His smile was blissful. Suddenly, some divine power made him bow low to the ground. He wept kissing the earth. Quick shadows darted about, clapping their hands. Someone started a sweet song and a dozen more voices joined in chorus.

"You are already with us, Isaac!" they breathed.

He raised his face and saw a Man with wide-open sad eyes surrounded by a multitude of youths with glowing faces. He shivered in astonishment.

"I heard your voice," said the Man he bowed to. "I have learned of your torment and came to comfort you." He waved His hand saying, "Take your fifes, the psaltery, and the drums. Let Isaac dance for us."

The singing of the fifes, the beating of the drums, and the strumming of the psaltery filled the air. The musicians were all youths with curly golden hair. A beautiful young woman came dancing toward Isaac. Her hair streamed down her shoulders in waves. Her eyes were glowing, and her scarlet lips parted. Her breasts, shapely and taut, moved slightly, in perfect harmony with her steps. Her belly was a smooth curve. Her hips sashayed as she approached Isaac and offered him her hand. He danced. The rest of them joined in the whirling and fleeting dance, their silver and golden robes fluttering. He felt hot, for that extraordinarily beautiful young woman was dancing round him. The musician playing a fife tried his best: his cheeks were puffed out; the drummer bobbed up and down; while the psaltery player sang as he strummed. There were no words to his song, just a melody. That whole group

of dancers stamped their feet, emitting cheerful cries now and then, either all together or one at a time.

Isaac danced with them. His exhausted, withered body was accumulating new strength. It seemed to him that he was not in his cell but out in a valley, covered with green grass and flowers. He felt as if he had attended the ceremony of abduction with people from his native northern region. Girls' calls and laughter rang in the air. Boys were merrily chasing girls, the latter happily trying to escape. Several couples were running in the warm shallow water, splashing it. Frightened fish were jumping from under their feet.

"I appear to those who grieve," said the One Isaac had bowed to. "I give Myself to those who might be redeemed from misery and torment. I turn the sorrow of the sorrowful into joy. Do not hate the world for My sake, for I never sow hate. Do not torment your body; I exist not for the sake of death. Life is my domain. It was the Savior who created the world, not the Evil One."

Perspiration covered Isaac's temples and eyelids; he was dazzled by that unusually bright light in the cell, but he kept on dancing. A charming young lady danced by his side, staring at him with her glowing black eyes. His head was spinning as she whirled around him.

"Oh, My Lord," he uttered, still dancing. "Must I also dance with this girl?"

"This girl is Life," answered the One he worshipped. "Life is my dominion. If you are together, you will understand the cause which I propagate for the sake of Life. Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. That is what God commands you."

"What about those who reject the world and leave it, withdrawing into the darkness to give you all they have? What is their fate?"

"They are all dead to Life," quietly answered the One he worshipped. "I am pleased with those who create life; and with those who are not prodigal with it. But those who try to escape from life, who never create it are not wanted by God or the world."

Isaac kept on dancing. It seemed to him that there was no more perspiration, and his body was dry and melting.

"Why are You making me dance?" he asked. "I'm exhausted!"

"This dance is a test for you," calmly answered the One who emanated light. "If you survive, you will leave this abode of misery and come out into the sun and light."

Isaac danced. His legs grew stiff, and he felt giddy. Everybody surrounded him while he danced on and on. The beautiful lady who was meant for him kept dancing tirelessly by his side.

"Are you pushing me into this woman's arms?" asked Isaac, his lips stiff. "A woman is a receptacle of wickedness and sins!"

"The receptacle of wickedness and sins is our poor sinful soul," said He who emanated light. "A woman replenishes life on earth and therefore she is praised by God. She shall be praised if she is pure in heart and soul, and if she is a good mother and wife. You must subdue your own sinful soul rather than that which creates life and replenishes it."

Isaac fell to his knees. His breath was rasping and rapid, and he began to foam at the mouth. His tired and senseless eyes flashed. The young lady tried to help him get up. She took him under his arms and lifted him.

"Don't give up," she said tenderly. "Try again!"

"I'm exhausted, My God," said Isaac, shaking his head. "I can't go on dancing."

"You haven't finished your dance yet," sadly said He whom Isaac worshipped. "You haven't enough strength for good and real life..."

Isaac stretched his arms toward the One who emanated light like the sun, Whose smile was like a bright day, and began sobbing.

"I gave all my strength to you, My Lord," he uttered.

"You have given all your strength to blind hypocrisy," remarked as sadly He whom Isaac worshipped. "You were afraid of your own sinful soul. That was why you locked yourself in here. You were trying to subdue your own self but you have failed."

"What can I do now, My Lord?" exclaimed Isaac wringing his hands.

"Live out the rest of your life as best you can," gravely said He whose smile was like a bright day.

3

He was plunging into the darkness, falling down in a slow whirling motion. During the descent, the light was fading and melting. He sank into the blue twilight, and his heart ached. Then he entered thick darkness and could see nothing except that tiny burning candle. He flew toward that light like a midge, and he was a midge attracted by the flame at that very moment. A piercing shriek escaped his lips and drowned in the thick darkness that vibrated around him. He desperately tried to clutch at something to stop that endless descent. Petrified, he was waiting for his inevitable and merciless end. He lost consciousness, and perhaps that was why he didn't feel how he hit the ground. His body was singed like a midge that had flown into the flame.

Next morning at breakfast time, the attendant came up to his window as usual.

"God bless you, Brother Isaac," he said humbly.

There was no answer.

"Brother Isaac," the attendant cried out. "Are you alive?"

"He has passed away, I'm sure," said Laurentius, who used to be an attendant then. "Mark, can you hear me?" he yelled. "Come here!"

Mark, the hermits' attendant, drifted out of the darkness. He had a spade in his hands.

"Run to the monastery and bring the Father Superior and the rest of the brothers," said Laurentius. "I will remain here and pray for his soul."

Mark put aside his spade and hobbled to the exit. Laurentius knelt, and pure sorrow washed his heart. He whispered a prayer and took the spade to remove the earth that blocked the door.

The Father Superior and all the brothers were approaching. Their steps resounded in the cave. Laurentius stopped digging and brushed the perspiration from his forehead. Mark took up the spade. In a minute, the passage was clear.

In the middle of the cell they saw Isaac sitting with his head lowered onto his chest. His body was contorted, and his clothes in rags. Mark, the attendant, took him under his armpits, while Laurentius lifted his legs, and they carried him out. The Father Superior examined the tiny cell.

"It was too small for him," said Agapetos, and they headed unhurriedly for the exit.

"Isaac is still alive!" said Mark, making a step toward the Father Superior.

The hermit lay on the ground covered with yellow leaves. His face was ghastly, and his tightly closed eye-lids were bluish. A cool sharp wind was blowing.

It spread around the pungent smell of the autumn decay. The wind played with the monks' beards and mantles, and some stirring anxiety seized them.

"This is the Devil's work," said the Father Superior, glancing at the gray ragged clouds covering almost the whole sky. Besides, the Father Superior had a toothache, and he had been in a foul mood all morning. A strong gust of wind tore leaves off a nearby tree and whirled a cloud of yellow leaves that were falling like a motley rain onto the monks. A few leaves landed on Isaac's chest, and everyone saw that it was moving slightly up and down.

"Put him on a bed," said the Father Superior, sucking on his bad tooth. He went away feeling that he was developing a headache in addition to his toothache in that wind.

Mark and Laurentius lifted Isaac and carried him away. The crowd of monks talked for a while and dispersed. Damp red and yellow leaves were falling on their heads as they walked away.

4

For two weeks he couldn't get up. He didn't accept water, and he ate neither bread, nor vegetables. During those two weeks, he was deaf and dumb. At the beginning of the third week, his lips began to stir.

"Where am I?" he whispered almost inaudibly.

"You are in Agapetos' cell," answered the doctor. "Can you hear me, Brother Isaac?"

"I hear you," whispered Isaac. "Why aren't I in the cave?"

"We thought you were dead, Brother Isaac," said Agapetos sitting down by his side. "So we took you out of your cell in the cave."

"I don't want to go back..." said Isaac, his lips trembling.

"No one is going to lock you there anymore," said Agapetos, comforting him.

Isaac tried to rise, but Agapetos wouldn't let him.

"Everything is spinning before my eyes," murmured Isaac. "I feel rather odd."

"You are weak, and not yet well," answered Agapetos.

They heard the sound of the bell ringing for vespers.

"Will you go to the church, Brother Isaac?"

"No," replied Isaac staring at the ceiling. "No, I won't go."

Agapetos left, and Isaac lay in bed staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. He was trying to remember what had happened to him. He could almost feel the pain in his eyes when he had been dazzled by that bright radiant light. He recalled the strange conversation and his descent into the darkness. He tried hard to understand what it all could mean and what had really happened. His heart ached a little. He closed his eyes, plunging into the darkness. Then he opened them again to see the light and brood over that conversation. In the evening, he accepted medicine from Agapetos' hands.

He sobbed at night. Tears were rolling down his cheeks, and his heart was heavy.

"Why are you crying, Brother Isaac?" Agapetos asked him woken up by his sobs.

"I can't sleep."

"Your soul is in turmoil. You must go to mass."

The wind howled outside, and even the cell was filled with the smell of decomposing leaves.

In his dreams, Isaac saw a land that was quiet, beautiful and moist. It was ages ago that he had walked along paths covered with fallen leaves. That

night Isaac came to understand the great misery of decay. He was looking forward for the minute he would step on those leaves again.

"Brother Agapetos," he called softly.

Agapetos wasn't asleep.

"What would you like, Brother Isaac?"

"Tell me frankly, how do we know that it is necessary to worship God as we do? Tell me, who serves Our Lord better — the one who sows good on earth, or the one who subdues his flesh? Does Our Lord require of us that we withdraw into the caves robed in black? Isn't it better to create life and make it flourish?"

Agapetos didn't answer.

"Why are you silent, Brother?" Isaac asked in a low voice.

"You are repeating someone else's words," said Agapetos. "What happened to you there, in your cell?"

Isaac told him. His voice was hoarse. He stopped from time to time to catch his breath, panting heavily. He was too weak yet. Whispering, he repeated the words he had heard then; and before his eyes, there was that land covered with fallen leaves whirling in the gusts of sad and intoxicating wind. The wind beat against the walls of their cell, and it seemed to him that they were in a boat that couldn't get out of the waves because of a squall.

Agapetos laughed.

"Satan has confused your soul. He wanted to beat your faith out of you, and for that reason he sowed these doubts in your soul," he said.

"Can Satan wear a smile bright as the sun?" asked Isaac.

"Evil pride is consuming you, Brother Isaac. Who are you for the Almighty to come to your pitiful hermitage? Don't you think he has more important things to do? You are nothing but a speck of dust, or

a humble poppy-seed driven by the wind and tossed about. Of what value are you to God? The Almighty gives laws that we must observe, for this is the most we can do. Even the Prince doesn't come calling on you like that. He may come if you commit a crime to punish you for it. You expect too much from God, Brother. It is your evil pride, and you must pray to subdue it."

"If I am of no value to Our Lord, of what value can I be to Satan?" asked Isaac on that windy autumn night. "Why should I be a poppy-seed and a speck of dust only for the Almighty, but not for the Evil One?"

"God considers us his flock when we fear Him, but He punishes sinners one by one," Agapetos replied reasonably. "The Evil One wants everyone of us to be a sinner. Satan is inside us. Our flesh belongs to the Evil One, while our souls belong to God. The Evil One would like to conquer our souls. We must mortify the deeds of the flesh for it is Satan's domain. Our Lord sifts our souls like flour in a sieve. He does not examine each grain, for He is only concerned that there be no dust in the flour."

The wind beat against the walls and the window of their cell and howled in the chimney. Isaac thought he could hear the leaves of the nearby tree falling down.

"Nevertheless, I think that there is something wrong with that," he said at last. "You overestimate Satan, and moreover, you belittle Our Lord. Tell me, who and when instructed people how to serve God? Is our way the only right one?"

"We live according to the rule codified by Theodore the Studite *," explained Agapetos, growing angry.

* Theodore the Studite, Abbot of the Monastery of Studium, founded at Constantinople in the 5th century A. D. by a Roman official named Studium

"The way we live is the heritage of our ancestors, and we follow the same rules without any changes. They served Our Lord in this fashion. and so do we."

"Who instructed our ancestors as to this way?"

"The Prophets, the Apostles, and Jesus Christ himself!" Agapetos explained harshly.

Isaac listened again to the wind beating against the walls as if trying to organize his thoughts so he could tell his brother something very important. Maybe that was why it was so sharp and gusty. At that very moment, a multitude of leaves fell down the tree — many more than were supposed to fall that night, Isaac thought.

"Something doesn't work here, Brother." Isaak whispered almost inaudibly. "Our flesh is not so important in this world as love. There is only one eternal law set by the Lord: All that is not love is evil. Everything that exists under the sun must be measured by love. A man mustn't do battle with himself. He must struggle for love against hate. Our Lord advocated love. He died because of the absence of love. The death of love, as the Lord told me, is His death, and His death is our sin. He who creates life sows love, and that is why he is considered blessed. He who sows hate is possessed by the Devil, no matter what garb he wears, a prince's or a monk's. The Lord told me that, and I believed Him. Satan can never teach love, for love is alien to him."

Agapetos jumped to his feet. The moon shone into their window, and in that phantasmal light, Agapetos dashed aside as if he were insane.

"Nothing is impossible to the Evil One!" he shouted angrily. "He can teach love, but the love He teaches is pleasing to him. It can be worse than hate. Love can be good and evil!"

"A tree is known by its fruit," remarked Isaac

softly, still listening to the wind behind the window. "How long must we wait for its fruit?"

"Nonsense!" said Agapetos with irritation. "It is all very complicated. Where love begins, hate builds its nest. Where hates exists, love begins to sprout. There is no common measure, and neither there is a simple answer to that question."

"This is exactly what we call the struggle of the Lord and Satan," said Isaac, his voice rustling like the leaves of a tree attacked by a gust of wind. "And I also believe, Brother Agapetos, that when a man looks at the bright clear sky, he never doubts if it is clear!"

5

The next day, the Father Superior, Gregory the Thaumaturge, Nicholas (who later became the Bishop of Tmutarakan), Nestor the Chronicler; Jeremiah the Perspicacious; the Zealot; Theodore and his advisor Basil; Theophilus and his brother; Onysiphorus, Laurentius, and Agapetos the Healer all surrounded Isaac's bed.

"Come to the church with us!" ordered the Father Superior.

Isaac lay staring at the ceiling.

The Father Superior made the sign of the cross at him.

"Brother Agapetos has informed us that sinful thoughts have seized you," he said. "It was the Evil One trying your soul in the caves. We want you to be cured. Rise and come to mass!"

"I'm too weak yet," Isaac answered. "Leave me alone..."

"Take him there," ordered the Father Superior and headed for the exit.

Several hands grabbed Isaac. He strained to free himself from them. They pulled him off his bed and dragged him towards the church. He yelled and struggled, biting the hands that were dragging him. Laurentius, the tamer of the possessed, lashed Isaac's back. Isaac cried out and stopped struggling. He hobbled along with them on his own. Whenever he stumbled and fell, those hands would catch hold of him, and the whip whistled behind his back. Isaac jumped to his feet, dashing from the whip in terror, for it not only whistled but hit him from time to time. When it did, Isaac emitted a piercing shriek.

There was a pale blue sky above their heads, with a motionless sun in it. The sun looked awfully sad; white jagged gossamers were floating in the air. Trees seemed to forget their major duty of shedding leaves, and they stood there as if lit by red and yellow foliage. The fallen leaves filled the air with a delicate smell of decay: rotting leaves and hemp, mushrooms, and cool fragrant freshness. The floating gossamer wrapped the men who were dragging the sick monk, but the snare wasn't strong enough to stop them.

"It is the Evil One crying in him," Laurentius remarked calmly. "Satan doesn't want to leave his body."

When they approached the church, Isaac desperately tried to stop and say something, but the whip whistled again, driving him into the building. Isaac fell to his knees and started to pray, trembling like an aspen leaf. The rest of the brothers prayed and sang. When they were singing Isaac kept silent, bathed in tears.

He was dragged to the refectory in the same manner. They made him sit separately. He touched neither bread nor water but stared blankly into space, trembling and sobbing. Agapetos would come up to him to put a piece of bread in Isaac's hand and push

the hand to his mouth. He would squeeze the bread into Isaac's mouth and tap him under the chin. Isaac would chew with effort, and the expression of his face was that of torment. Agapetos would take a mug of water and push it into Isaac's hand, helping him lift it, and poured water into his mouth. Isaac would swallow it, his eyes becoming even more sick and rheumy, tears welling up in them.

The Father Superior watched until he grew sick and tired of all that fuss over Isaac.

"Leave the bread in front of him, and push it into his hand," he ordered. "Let him eat on his own."

Isaac didn't touch bread and water that time. He sat staring at the window, which was blue, for it was a part of the bright cloudless sky. In the lower part of the window was the branch of a tree with red berries and yellow leaves on it, and it seemed to be made of clay. The sight of these bright leaves and berries against the blue sky comforted him. The brothers avoided looking at Isaac, for it was unbearable to see the pain and tears in his eyes. All of them pretended he was not in the refectory, and maybe they were right.

It lasted for several days. Isaac didn't eat bread or drink water. Neither did he speak to anyone.

Then the Father Superior said, "We must treat him as a possessed man!"

"I will cure him," Laurentius offered eagerly.

By that time, Isaac had left Agapetos' cell and was living in a dark barn for firewood, where he slept on the straw-covered floor. Inside the barn, it smelled of firewood and rotten leaves, because near the barn there was a linden that shed its golden leaves in a huge golden circle. The wind howled and whistled in the cracks of the walls, and Isaac liked to listen to these sounds for hours. There was neither light, nor a stove

in the barn, and he had to cover himself at night with his cloak. In the morning he used to get up and open the door to admire the hilly landscape shot through with red and yellow. He could even see the river from there. It was bright and glistening with silver and azure patches.

His face fell and grew yellowish, as if he himself had turned into an autumn leaf. Laurentius came to talk with him. When he approached the woodshed surrounded by the golden circle of fallen leaves, he saw an old withered man with a yellowish face, thin as a rail, standing by the door of his shelter.

"God bless you, Brother Isaac!" Laurentius pronounced their usual greeting, and his voice sounded affectionate.

The minute Isaac raised his eyes, Laurentius noticed for the first time that they were just like the leaves covering the earth or the branches of the trees.

"Did you understand what the Father Superior said, Isaac?" asked Laurentius gently, sitting down on a log by the woodshed. "He ordered us to treat you as a man possessed. Do you know what that means?"

Isaac stared at the far bend of the river that sparkled like silver, and a silver tear-drop rolled down his cheek.

"I know."

"I have seen many possessed men," continued Laurentius. "You know it is my duty. And I would like to tell you something — you are not like any of them. Your eyes glow with intelligence, Brother Isaac!"

Laurentius looked in the same direction as Isaac and saw the same silver bend in the river with sparkling azure patches, and the same feeling seized him: the gentle sadness of that mild autumn.

"I am not out of my mind," Isaac said slowly. "But the world doesn't interest me anymore..."

"Strange things you are saying," said Laurentius, laughing softly. "It doesn't have to have any meaning."

"I don't want to pretend," Isaac said simply. "Great doubts arise in my soul..."

"Doubt is the worst devil," Laurentius remarked good-naturedly. "God created the world, and every cell of it is connected with all the others. It is a sin to break or tear it apart."

"Men are like fish that rush into the nets," Isaac said in a low whisper. "When they find themselves caught in the net they struggle to get out of it. To break the net is a sin, while staying in it is prison."

"Of course, it's a sin," said Laurentius grinning. "How can you be free of God?"

A gust of wind stirred the fallen leaves around his feet. A few leaves spun above their heads as they fell to the ground. Maybe it was the wind, or the falling leaves that made the smell of decay so pronounced.

"A man doesn't want to be free from God," said Isaac louder this time, still staring at the sparkling river water. "He wants to be free for the sake of love and in the name of love. He wants this freedom for God's sake. But living with other people, he has to obey the laws of the world that are not always virtuous."

Laurentius kept silent, breathing heavily.

"You know what, Brother," he said at last, "let's make a deal. I haven't heard what you said. Maybe it is a great thought or it might be foolish. But I don't think we are fish. We're nets. We are nets for catching evil thoughts. And these evil thoughts are the fish. We usually say that these thoughts are whispered to us by Satan. Maybe that is correct. I don't want, Brother Isaac, to chain you in the caves or whip you, though it is supposed to be my duty. You are sensible enough to improve."

Isaac closed his eyes, shutting himself off from this world covered with fallen leaves and a sparkling river bend.

"You know, Brother Laurentius," he said softly, "the one who came to me in the caves with the face of Jesus Christ couldn't be Satan."

"Forget about it, Brother Isaac," advised Laurentius and his voice was friendly. He turned to Isaac, saying, "Forget it forever. Nobody is going to believe that God himself came to you. It is impossible. You are too humble for that. It is better to announce that it was Satan in the guise of Jesus. People will believe you and thus you will gain their sympathy. If the person chosen by Our Lord is not a king, people around him will be full of venom. But in case your spirit surrendered to the Evil One, you gain condescension from them. Such is the custom."

"What would I think of myself then?" asked Isaac, opening his eyes.

"Why should you think of yourself? Who cares what you think of yourself. You'd better think about what others think of you, for you have to live with these people."

He took a leaf, rubbed it in his hand and smelled it.

"You have to choose what you prefer to gain: respect or disdain."

"What about the divine truth then?" Isaac asked abruptly.

"The truth is spoken by people — I mean, powerful people. That is why God taught us to be humble. You have no choice. Either you come to the refectory and eat the bread they give you, or you'll be chained in the cave and given much worse bread than that."

They sat silent for a while. Right in the middle of the sky, there appeared a single cloud that blocked the sun, and then the sparkling bend of the river they

were looking at faded and became like cold melted butter. Laurentius blew his nose and breathed in the fresh damp air.

"And one more thing," he said. "When you take the bread in the refectory you will say the following: 'You clouded my reason, Satan, when I was locked in the cave, but now that I am free, I will surely conquer you. I am not going to return to the cave.' Will you be able to say it?"

Isaac didn't say a word. He was still staring at the trees in the distance, and suddenly he noticed that the trees were bare.

6

I heard this story from Isaac when I was in my hermitage writing this parchment. He would come up to my window and talk. He was a withered old man by that time, one foot in the grave. One thing was absolutely clear to me: he had never forgotten about the incident in the cave. Though he admitted to the rest of the brothers that it was all Satan's tricks, in fact, he concealed doubts deep in his heart.

"You should leave this cloister, Father," I told him once bluntly.

"No, Brother," whispered Isaac, and his face in the window saddened. "I was sent into the darkness, and in this darkness I must remain forever. This is my destiny and fate. I have endured it."

"Why, Brother Isaac?"

"So as not to reject Him and His love," answered the withered old man. "I understood Him perfectly when He said I was unfit for life."

Those were the last words I heard from him. The end of the story was told to me by Mark, the cave attendant who used to bring food, candles and torches.

Mark would often stop by my window, for I had not taken a vow of silence.

One summer night, Isaac got into the storehouse where all the supplies of cloth were kept. He took the cloth and locked himself in his cell. He stayed there for a long time doing something and coming out only for meals and masses. He didn't do any work in the monastery due to his venerable age. Some time passed, and he went to the city, where he wandered from one house to another talking to the children. He returned to the monastery with a crowd of children following him. He looked weighty and inspired. To the utter surprise of the community, he led the children to his cell and dressed them all in monk's robes. The kids enjoyed that entertainment and chased each other, stumbling and falling, for the robes were too long for them. They were laughing happily, and Isaac laughed with them. He played games with the little ones, and their cries and laughter rang in the walls of the cloister. All the monks gathered, led by the Father Superior, and went to Isaac. When the latter saw them coming he shouted:

"Here come the profane to attack the pure in heart," he cried.

The Father Superior caught him by his beard and beat him with his staff, while the monks rushed towards the youngsters to take the monks' robes off them. The frightened children scattered. Isaac didn't struggle; neither did he cry with pain when the staff struck his back. Only once did he emit a shriek and fell unconscious to the feet of the Father Superior who hit him again. The monks saw that the face of the unconscious man was serene and happy, as if he were being blessed with a favor instead of being beaten. The Father Superior, upon seeing his face, contained his wrath and ordered water splashed into the face of

the unconscious monk. The old man opened his eyes, and a happy smile lit his wet face. He rose to his feet with difficulty, and noticing the Father Superior and the whole community around, fell to his knees before them.

"Thank you, Brothers! Thank you for your great kindness!" he uttered.

Everyone felt uneasy. The Father Superior spit and went away. The crowd dispersed, too, as if they were escaping from something shameful and cruel. Isaac, still kneeling, stared at the departing monks; and the expression in his eyes was exactly the same as when he had refused to eat the monastery bread. Laurentius was the only one who looked back to see Isaac's gaze. He made a warning gesture with his finger.

That year thunderstorms were frequent. The gusts of wind were so strong that several trees in the monastery yard fell. Several times, hail rained down from the sky, and some of the hailstones were as big as eggs. The sky was cloudy and stormy. Lightning flashed all over it. The thunder was probably very close and the walls trembled when it roared. Isaac didn't want to take shelter in that rain. With the first gusts of wind before the storm, he would come out of his cell, taking off his cowl. His shaven head glistened like silver. He walked unhurriedly from his cell to the church, raising his face, letting the rain wet it and the hail beat it. Isaac's lips whispered something as if he were talking to himself or praying. After one of these wild thunderstorms that toppled trees in the monastery yard and brought torrents of turbid water, Isaac went to the Father Superior and asked his permission to withdraw into a hermitage again.

"I was trapped by Satan in the cave," he said, "but it happened only because I wasn't aware of the tricks of the Evil One. Now Our Lord Jesus Christ is with

me, and the prayer of Theodosius, my father, encourages me. I believe Jesus Christ will help me, and I will win the struggle with Satan."

"You are too feeble in mind and body," said the Father Superior. "I wouldn't advise you to lock yourself in the cave."

"I would like to try my strength," muttered Isaac. "I heard the voice of the thunderstorm, and that prompted me. And, besides, it might be easier for you if I withdrew into the darkness of the caves."

"What you are saying now sounds quite reasonable," remarked the Father Superior. "Let it be as you wish."

It was then that Isaac went to the cave and talked to me for the last time, as I have already mentioned. He was sadder than ever before. When he called Mark, the cave attendant, to block the door with earth, there were tears in his voice.

7

He plunged into darkness, lighting a torch only for praying. He wept most of the time and slept very little. Shivering, he would talk to himself. Mark wasn't intelligent enough to understand what he heard. There was only one thing that was clear to him — that Isaac was repenting for some sin, pronouncing Laurentius' name, and blaming himself for obeying him.

After that he started to have visions.

One night, he heard voices. His cave was filled with people, everyone of whom had a candle, a hoe, and a pick ax. Those people were talking and waving their hands angrily.

"Where is he? Where is that man? Let's dig out this cave and bury him here!"

Cold perspiration covered Isaac's body. He stuck to

the window, trembling and looking at the people who filled the passage.

"What do you all want from me, men?" he whispered, frightened.

"Haven't you heard?" the strangers cried out. "We came to bury you here!"

"I know, you are darkness!" Isaac said then, stepping aside from the window and sitting down. "You walk in the darkness, the air you breathe is dark, and you came to take me with you. But I withdrew into this darkness on my own, I am with you."

And again he felt that he was plunging into the darkness, in a slow whirling motion. Light was pouring out of him as if he were a lamp whose light was about to die. In his descent, he passed the bluish twilight and his heart ached. He stretched out his hands into the darkness and prayed with fervor.

"You, the One who cast me into this darkness, the One who blamed me, have illuminated my reason! I bless You for this, for giving me the opportunity to understand my own hypocrisy. We seek hermitage in the caves because we are afraid of our sinful souls. We call ourselves Your servants, but, in fact, we all become Satan's sluts. And that experience of ours we turn into science for future generations. We preach love, but we harbor hate deep in our hearts. Our love is like sparks that flash and fade. Satan and God are both in our souls. They are engaged in the fiercest battle of the world, while we have lost the art of telling the difference between them. Oh God, My Lord, send Your fire and light to enlighten our dull souls!"

He wept as he pronounced these strange words, while the illusory people that had come to bury him — who were walking in the darkness and were the darkness themselves — disappeared like smoke, leaving the smell of burnt candles behind.

He would light his torch and watch its flame until it twitched for the last time and died.

Sometimes a bear would come up to his window, thrusting his paw through the frame and bellowing. Isaac would close his ears, driving the bear out.

"Go away! Go!" he said shrivelling. "You are the child of the darkness. Leave me alone!"

If the bear didn't leave, Isaac shouted until frightened Mark, the cave attendant, came running to his window.

"What happened to you, Brother?" he asked, gasping for air.

"There is a snake in here," said Isaac, terrified. "Could you bring me a candle, or an icon-lamp, Mark?"

Mark would bring a candle to him. He would look not for the snake but at the flame until it twitched for the last time and died.

When the air in the caves became stale and it was hard to breathe, and Mark, Laurentius, and the rest of the hermits felt their bones aching, Isaac ordered that the Father Superior be sent for. He arrived to Isaac's window accompanied by Laurentius, Jeremiah, Theophilus, the Zealot, Gregory the Thaumaturge, and Mark, the cave attendant.

"I am prepared to meet my Maker," said Isaac. "What season is it outside, summer or spring?"

"It's autumn, Brother Isaac," answered the Father Superior.

"Could you carry me out of the cave and put me in the sunlight," pleaded Isaac.

Mark and Laurentius, the cave attendants, dug out his cell and saw that Isaac was almost a skeleton. His eyes were still alive: enormous, glowing, and yellow...

Mark took him in his arms like a baby and carried him out of the cave. When they brought him outside, he saw the sun which was so huge that it blinded him,

or so all the monks thought, for his eyes widened, flashed and faded away. Isaac had a little strength left, and he stretched his arms towards the sky, as if he was about to point or say something.

He was put under a leafy tree onto bright yellow leaves. Above him was the yellow tent of the crown standing out against the boundless azure sky. His blind eyes stared at the tent and the sky, while his lips stirred in prayer to the sun, to the almighty sun. He tried to absorb the sky and the sun with his toothless mouth and his whole face that would never change its deathly color — neither would it have enough of the sky. Gradually Isaac's face acquired a serene, gentle expression like the one he had worn when the Father Superior had beaten him with his staff. Maybe that was the reason the Father Superior turned away at the moment. Several monks did the same, for they couldn't bear looking at that face. On the background of the damp fallen leaves tinted orange and red, it glowed like the leaves. It was just one of them, as transient and mortal. Its season was almost over, and like anything that comes to pass it was ready to become dust again. His face was still alive and glowing, gently exuding some moldering fragrance. All the monks standing there could feel it. They were all grievous, though not all of them were so kind-hearted.

Isaac was also breathing in that fragrance of moldering leaves and the dust sparkling in the sun, tears rolling from his blind eyes. His fingers stirred, searching for support, but they found only leaves, which they grasped convulsively and cast away.



CHAPTER VII

*in which there is a story about
Theophilus who spent his days waiting for death*

1

The Zealot sat as usual by the monastery gate making bast baskets when Theophilus knocked on that gate. He was returning from the city where he had been sent to take care of a few items of business for the monastery.

"God bless you, Brother Nicholas," he greeted the Zealot as he entered.

"God bless you, Brother Theophilus," answered the Zealot. "I have bad news for you."

Theophilus stopped turning deathly pale, and looked at the Zealot who bowed meekly to him.

"Your brother has passed away," he said almost sweetly.

"How can that be possible?" exclaimed Theophilus. "When I left the monastery, he was perfectly sound."

"Such was the will of Our Lord," said the Zealot bowing even lower. "No one knows what is in store for him. Your brother fell ill suddenly and passed away."

"Oh, my wretched lot," exclaimed Theophilus rushing towards the cell he shared with his brother. He flung the door open and stopped at the threshold.

"Stephen!" he cried out into the empty room. "Why don't you answer, Stephen?"

Jeremiah stood behind his back shaking his head.

"Your Stephen is no more, Brother Theophilus," he uttered.

Theophilus clenched his fists, raising them above his head and struck the door-post. Then his head dropped to his arms.

"He didn't suffer long," said Jeremiah. "He kept calling for you, Brother Theophilus. And what grieved him most of all was that he would pass away without saying farewell to you."

It happened in winter. It was a quiet mild day, and even the snow thawed a little and darkened. Theophilus turned his face to Jeremiah and it was as white as the snow.

"I couldn't even imagine such a thing might happen," he said in a low voice. "Brother Jeremiah, would you come to my cell? Let's pray for my brother's soul together."

Jeremiah left a few deep footprints in the snow as he entered Theophilus' cell which was terribly damp and cold since it hadn't been heated for a week. Theophilus fell to his knees, hitting the floor, and lifted his face to the sacred images. Jeremiah knelt by his side, very still, and they both whispered the appropriate prayers.

"Where is he buried?" Theophilus asked, a bit calmer after they had finished their prayers.

"In the grave that Mark made for the two of you," Jeremiah explained. "Don't grieve so, Brother. Heaven awaits your brother, for Stephen was a holy man, yes he was!"

"We loved each other very much," uttered Theophilus. "We used to share all thoughts and aspirations directed to Our Lord."

He was still depressed when Jeremiah headed for the door.

"Please, don't go away, Brother," Theophilus asked in a pleading tone. "I'd like to go and see my brother's grave. If you don't mind, let's go there together."

They came out of the cell. From the churchyard, they could see the Dnieper, distant, frozen and snow-covered. A grayish mist enveloped everything around, drowning the horizon.

They walked to the caves along the path trampled into the snow. I, the humble author of these lines, joined them when they were approaching the caves.

"I had a premonition," said Theophilus, stepping carefully, trying not to slip. "One night I had a strange dream, Brother. A huge spider approached me, weaving its web around me. When I was all encased in that web, I realized it was my brother in there, and not me, though I felt that the spider was spinning it around me."

Jeremiah slipped and nearly fell, but I managed to give him a hand.

Down near the caves was a mound of freshly dug earth.

"Mark is like a mole," I said smiling.

"What he does is pleasing to God," Jeremiah announced weightily.

At that very moment Mark came out of a small wooden church near the entrance to the caves. He had a sack on his shoulders. From where we were, he resembled a tiny black beetle. He dropped the sack, holding it by the corners in order to empty it.

The branches of the trees were covered with wooly snow. When we caught on the branches, it fell onto our shoulders in heaps. Mark noticed us and raised his dirty face.

Suddenly the strange feeling seized me that this

was a real mole that was on guard, not knowing whether to run away or attack the enemy. His snout with minute blind eyes was raised in our direction. For that burrowing creature, the light was there in the darkness. He did nothing but dig, day and night. He had shaggy eye-brows and a gray beard, and his teeth were black as tar. He stood there baring his bad teeth, waiting for us to come down the slippery path. He probably thought we were bringing news of another death. I felt sorry for that mole-man, for his eyes were not as blind as those of a mole. Just the opposite: they were quite intelligent. He must have had his own thoughts, and after all, he was created in God's image and after His likeness. I always feel sorry for the weak. I even understood why Our Savior cared most of all for the miserable and the poor. He was probably seeking the holy soul in them, though not all of them possessed such. "It is not so difficult to love the rich and the beautiful," I thought. "While it is really hard to feel love for the ugly and outcast. They are seldom grateful for such an affection."

"God bless you, Brother Mark," we each said in turn.

Mark crossed his hands on his chest and bowed low to us.

"God bless you," he answered in a subdued and rasping voice.

"I want to see my brother in his grave," said Theophilus, brushing the snow off his garb.

Mark raised his shaggy eye-brows.

"I already buried him in the grave that was prepared for the two of you."

"I'll pay you for this extra work," said Theophilus, taking out his money.

Mark accepted the money and put it indifferently into his pocket without counting. He shook his sack

once more and hobbled off towards the open door of the small church, stooped at the waist from his constant burrowing.

2

"Here," said Mark when we stopped by the niches dug out in the corner, "I made it as we agreed: two niches, upper and lower."

In the upper niche, covered with sackcloth, lay his brother's corpse. We made the sign of the cross and started praying. Theophilus was silent; he didn't pray.

"But, Brother Mark," he uttered icily, "why did you put him in the upper niche? It was supposed to be mine, for I am the elder brother."

Mark turned his face to us and I saw his eyes flash for an instant. The grave-digger bowed low to Theophilus.

"Excuse me, Brother, it is my mistake," he said in his rasping voice.

"He must be moved," said Theophilus with irritation. "Put him in the lower niche, for the upper one is mine."

The grave-digger looked at Theophilus gravely, his eyes flashing with anger. or perhaps I mistook the reflection of the candlelight in his eyes for anger.

"Do you want me to disturb his peace?" Mark asked slowly.

"Nothing is able to disturb him now," Theophilus replied, still irritated. "I want you to correct your error."

"I'll do it," said Mark menacingly. We were all petrified when we noticed how his appearance had changed. Mark unbent his stooped back and grew tall. He looked extraordinarily tall, his shoulders broad, though a minute ago he had been absolutely miniscule.

Red fire was burning in his eyes, and his voice was like a thunder lap in the caves.

"Brother," said Mark with such wrath that I was frightened, "get up and change your niche. Lie down in the lower one!"

When we saw what followed, our hair stood on end. I felt I was losing consciousness, becoming tiny and worthless in this world. It was not Mark who was small but I. I felt like I was a mere cubit tall and stupefied. Something creaked like wood against wood, and the dead man began to rise. It was a strange sight, for he was rising very slowly without bending his body. When the corpse was upright, Theophilus emitted a piercing shriek and fell to his knees beating his forehead on the floor in despair. At the same time, the corpse transferred itself to the lower niche, his body twitched, and his hair slowly fell back.

During my long life, I have seen few miracles, and I don't believe most of the stories about them. But this was something I couldn't understand at all. Mark's appearance changed again: he was a small and humble man. I realized that his power over the dead kept him in the caves. Later I found out how Mark faked this magic power, and could explain what and how it all happened then. But at that moment in the past. I was haunted by prejudice. I started having nightmares of that rising corpse with dishevelled hair.

Theophilus lay prostrate before Mark.

"Brother Mark," he whimpered. "I have sinned: I made my dead brother rise. I beg you, make him take the upper place again."

I looked at Mark and recognized the mole-man again. His blind snout jutted out, his teeth, black as tar, bared.

"God put up an end to enmity between men," he muttered. "You weren't satisfied, but this is no reason

for us to become enemies. Did you see that even the corpse of your brother showed its love respecting your seniority even after death."

Theophilus wept, washing Mark's feet with his tears.

"First I thought," rattled the grave-digger, "that you might use your seniority and lie down with your dead brother in this grave. But you are not ready to die yet. Go away and look after your soul, for in a few days you will be brought here. It is no longer in my power to order your brother to lie down in the upper niche. Maybe you, as his elder brother, can do it. Tell him to rise, and we'll see if he obeys."

Startled and confused, we came out of the caves. Mark accompanied us as if he were sorry that we felt depressed. We left the small church, but something made me turn back. What I saw seemed most strange to me: Mark was standing at the entrance to the caves, an ironical smile on his face, which faded the moment our eyes met. He winked at me cunningly like a conspirator.

Later, when I entered the caves as a hermit, Mark used to visit me there. He would come to my window to exchange a few words. I asked him what had really happened with Theophilus then. Mark sighed and hung his head.

"All of us under the sun are sinners," he said. "I am a sinner, too. You see, I was angry then... He paid me too little for my work..."

3

That winter was snowy but rather mild. Thaws were frequent, and the snow used to turn sticky. Roads and paths became slushy, and it was difficult to walk, for our feet sank and stuck in the slush. At that time,

Theophilus was in the habit of visiting the other brothers' cells. When he would appear on the threshold, the hem of his mantle would be soaked and sticking to his boots, water dripping from them onto the floor. Tall and gaunt, with a shaggy black beard and watering eyes, he would stop on the threshold, timidly shifting from one foot to the other.

"Brother," he would say hoarsely. "Forgive me all my sins, Brother."

Tears were rolling down his cheeks as he sobbed, nodding his head.

"God will forgive you," monks usually replied, while he took money from his pocket.

"You will pray for my sinful soul, won't you?" he would ask and leave. He walked on staggering as if he were inebriated, his feet sinking into the slush.

He wept day and night, kneeling in the middle of his cell, tears rolling incessantly from his eyes. If someone visited him, he wept and sobbed even more pathetically, his handkerchiefs and garb wet with tears. He grew so weak that he could no longer pray. The only thing he could do was weep.

"Listen, Brother," said Isaac during one of his visits, "that miserable earth-worm frightened and deceived you. Don't shed your tears in vain."

"I am waiting for my final hour," explained Theophilus, still crying.

"When are you going to die?" asked Isaac.

"Mark told me it would happen tomorrow or the day after. I thought I would drop dead right then in the cave. You should have seen his terrifying red eyes, Brother!"

"His eyes are red because he doesn't go out into the light, so, he is growing blind like a mole."

"Don't judge him. What I saw was a miracle plain and simple... Anyway, I don't need anything for

myself now. I have given away all I had. All I have is my mantle, my cloak, and my boots."

Isaac became more serious.

"What you are doing now is not pleasing to Our Lord. It is not good to predetermine the will of God," he said.

Theophilus looked at him, unable to understand, and the latter laughed.

"There is a better way of salvation for you. You cry and your tears are in vain," Isaac said.

"What is it?" asked Theophilus, raising his tearful eyes.

"I can give you a good piece of advice: save your tears, Brother. Take a pot and collect them in it; cry until it is full. Ask someone to sprinkle your body with your own tears when you die. Then it will be embalmed forever."

He cracked his fingers and roared with laughter again.

"I don't have enough time. Mark said I was going to die soon."

"And I predict a long life for you," said Isaac in a small but piercing voice. "Listen to me, the blessed, the most miserable of the miserable. Listen to the man who was visited by either the Evil One or the Savior himself."

"It could have been the Lord himself, you think?" asked Theophilus narrowing his eyes.

"Yes, it could have been Him," replied Isaac. "Live on and collect your tears in a pot until it's full."

A mocking grimace appeared on Isaac's face, but Theophilus didn't notice it, for he turned to the window to see snow noisily falling from the roof.

"You know, I have a feeling you are mocking me," said Theophilus. "It is not very kind of you. I saw the king of terrors with my own eyes. He is standing

behind my back, and behind yours, too. You might see him behind the backs of the rest of the monks, if you look carefully. You know, I took monastic vows because I was afraid of death most of all. And imagine what a horrible thing has happened here! I don't know what to do or where to go."

Isaac stared at the man kneeling in front of him, and his face saddened.

"Keep on crying," he said almost seriously. "Anyway, you aren't doing it for the sake of good, but just because you are afraid for yourself."

"What is that good of yours for? Why should I care about it if this body, and these hands will rot soon?" he asked showing Isaac his hands. "Why does the whole world and everything in it exist for, if I am going to perish? I will decompose like a dead bird or dog; nothing will be left of me."

"I am also walking in the darkness," said Isaac and turned abruptly to leave.

The weather was rather mild; snowflakes were falling thickly, melting right away. Melting snow was dripping from the roofs in a quiet and dull manner, as if measuring time monotonously. The falling snowflakes made the grayish air seem to shimmer. Isaac stretched out his hands and admired the beautiful snowflakes that melted as soon as they touched his palms.

"Their life is like a breath of wind," he whispered, "but all together they bring winter to the earth."

4

Two days passed, and Theophilus was still alive. He was waiting for death to come any minute. Nobody could make him stop crying so bitterly. Floods of tears streamed from his eyes, but still they didn't run dry.

He used to carry a pot for tears with him, and when tears began rolling down his cheeks, especially during prayers, he would put the pot in front of him to collect them. The minute he stopped, he would cover the pot with a lid. He took it with him wherever he went. He woke up at night very often in a cold sweat. Then he would clench his fists, or scratch the wall with his fingernails, and an awful moan would escape his chest like a presentiment of impending death that was tearing him apart. His heart started beating madly, and his eyes bulged. He used to have visions of his brother rising from his death-bed, his hair dishevelled, and his face ghastly. Theophilus cried in terror, his shriek filling the empty room. Shivering, he would jump from his bed, fall to his knees, and weep, never forgetting to put the pot for tears in front of him. A few years passed, and quite a few brothers had died. Theophilus was worried that his pot was already half full. Every morning, he woke up with one and the same thought "Will I live to see the night?" At night, he woke up wondering if he was going to see the dawn. Sometimes he feared that he had already been reduced to a skeleton, and it seemed to him that he was locked somewhere in the caves. Then he could even feel the stifling smell of the earth; he gritted his teeth, feeling that there was sand on them. His days were all alike, for he had no other thoughts, no other troubles. He ate without tasting the food at all, and nobody could make him eat anything delicious, for both bitter and sweet tasted bitter to him.

"Oh, Lord my God," he kept on whispering, "give me enough time to repent, let me live a little longer." "My Lord," he shouted locked in his cell, "aren't I worthy of Thy mercy? Don't let me die like a good-for-nothing bird or dog. My soul is weeping, fear gnawing me, that I might perish like a midge or a mosquito.

There have been a lot of people who woke up perfectly sound in the morning and didn't live to see a new dawn."

He wept bitterly without forgetting about his pot, trying not to waste a single tear-drop. He had really believed Isaac's mocking words, and was collecting tears for the day of his death. He believed that if his body were sprinkled with the tears, it would be embalmed after death.

His feet became stiff, and he dragged himself along. His tall frame drifted like a shadow, always carrying the pot for tears. His bony face withered and his eyes were feverish with tears. He walked barefoot summer and winter. He waddled as though his feet were not touching the ground. It cost him much effort to do so. In church, he could be seen weeping with the pot in front of him. After that he usually hobbled away estranged, heading for his cell.

Once a year, he visited the niche where his brother was buried. He wept, sobbing by the grave, asking Mark every time to forgive him. And every time Mark the grave-digger would forgive him. Comforted a little, he would return to his cell to weep and pray. His head was trembling but his hands held the pot firmly.

I felt sorry for that martyr. It was the same depressing feeling I had experienced when the three of us saw Mark, the cave attendant, when we were walking down the slippery path heading for the caves. Looking at Theophilus, I thought he reminded me of a tree that suddenly stopped blossoming and became withered at the root, or green grass scorched by a fire, or else, a flower that didn't live to see its seeds. I thought Theophilus suffered like thousands of sapient creatures whose fate was also to become grass or leaves. His overwhelming fear was sin. And that sin could be compared to that of a snake stinging its own tail. The

rest of the brothers laughed at Theophilus and his habit of carrying the pot everywhere he went, for that was a vain consolation. But I, for my part, never laughed at him. I never laughed at the miserable, humble or hunchbacked, one-eyed or cross-eyed. Whenever I happened to see them, my heart softened and was filled with pity. I can't claim that only these people found some innermost truth — all people suffer, more or less, from the same passions — but maybe some of them really did. But I would like to warn others: if you bend down to pick up a stone, think first, whether you might not be planning to throw it at yourself. If you take up a stake in wrath and swing it over your bent back, are you not going to strike yourself? I am not judging. I am just trying to understand those who have locked themselves behind the monastery walls to hide from the world. Only a man who has managed to subdue his biased rage can really feel the sky, high and bright, for the sky is the vigilant eye of Our Lord. It is always boundless, irrespective of its color: gray or light blue, deep blue or black. My soul longs for its light; I understood this in full measure only here, in my hermitage, in this cave which is dark as the grave.

5

"Theophilus," I said, "Mark has sent for you. Will you go to see him?"

Theophilus raised his bony ashy face. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's me, Simeon, your fellow monk."

"I can't see you, Brother," said Theophilus. "I woke up today and couldn't see the light. Is it night or day now?"

"It's a bright day, Brother Theophilus."

"A bright day, you say?" Theophilus jumped to his feet and covered his eyes with his hands. "What's wrong with my eyes?"

"You've cried your eyes out, Brother Theophilus," I replied sadly.

"Come closer to me," asked Theophilus worriedly. "No, I still can't see you. Maybe it's a prophetic voice and not Brother Simeon at all."

"No, it's me, Simeon, your fellow-monk," I replied, even sadder. "And I'm sure you've cried your eyes out."

It was spring. The sky was bright azure and clear as if it were washed. Tomtits were singing merrily all the time. The paths were swollen and slushy, and they glistened in the sun as if made of glass.

Theophilus wept again having forgotten about his pot for tears.

"Will I ever see the light again, Brother Simeon?" he asked.

I thought then that Theophilus had stopped seeing light much earlier. I felt a tickle in my eyes, and tears appeared in them, for there was something truly pathetic in this man. I saw an old withered monk, thin as a rail, staring at me with his unseeing eyes, tears streaming from them.

"Aren't you going to collect your tears, Brother Theophilus?" I asked, still sad.

"I'm crying for myself now," replied the sufferer.

I sat with my side to the door so that I could glance from time to time at the bright azure sky that poured through the open window. Theophilus would never be able to see it again. I looked at a silver cloud, illuminated by the sun, moving across the boundless sky. Theophilus was doomed never to see such a cloud again.

"Why did Mark send for me?" asked Theophilus after he had stopped crying.

"He wants to see all the brothers for the last time," I said as a purifying sadness filled my soul.

"Is he ill?"

"He is dying and wants to unburden his soul of his sins."

"He has no sins to confess," remarked Theophilus gravely. "He is a blessed man."

He wasn't crying anymore. Remembering Mark, his face lit with some divine light that could be interpreted as pure love. This surprised me, for it was Mark who had made him suffer.

"Don't you bear him any malice?" I asked cautiously.

"How could I possibly bear him malice?" replied Theophilus softly. "He only showed me how transient this world really is. He relieved me from my mundane prejudice."

I stared at Theophilus in disbelief. I realized that he welcomed his torment. There were people who derived pleasure from laughter, and there were those who enjoyed crying.

There in the caves, far from the bright daylight, lay Mark, ready to die; Mark who had power over the dead. He was confessing his sins, and among them was one that had taught Theophilus to derive pleasure from martyrdom. I had just left my hermitage, where I usually spent a month or two deliberately every year for the sake of writing this parchment. When I was in the hermitage that year, I got to know Mark better. He often came to my window to talk. I found out why Mark needed money: he used to go to the city and would usually bring back a barrel of mead. He would hide in the farthest corner of the caves and get drunk. He never even lit a candle. When he was inebriated, he usually needed to talk to someone. Some hermits,

especially those who had vowed to spend their whole lives in the hermitage, didn't want to talk to him. But most of them were eager to exchange a few words with Mark. In this case, Mark told stories about his life when he had been a brave soldier in the troops bearing the Prince's colors. He also admitted that it was he who had invented several devices and machines used by the soldiers to conquer the fortresses of Greek colonies on the Black Sea. His face pressed flat against the window, he would tell stories about great battles and the Prince's feasts with sheer inspiration.

"Why did you become a monk then?" I asked him.

"I am burdened with a grave sin," answered Mark, and his red eyes flashed in the darkness. "It happened so that I killed my sworn brother in battle."

After admitting this, he fell silent and gloomy and walked back to his corner which was close to my cell. I could hear some liquid bubbling as he poured it from his barrel into a mug. Then he would murmur prayers and incantations.

"Brother Simeon," Theophilus interrupted my thoughts. "I am ready to go to that blessed man..."

"Don't hurry to call a man blessed if he has not yet confessed his sins," I said.

"I still believe that he is blessed," Theophilus chattered. "And I would like him to help and cure me of my blindness."

"He will not be able to cure you," I said sadly.

"Don't be foolish, Brother Simeon," said Theophilus with aspiration. "Haven't you seen how powerful Brother Mark is? Take me there as quickly as possible, and you might witness a real miracle..."

At that moment I would have been happy to see a miracle, but that what Jeremiah, Theophilus and I witnessed — a corpse rising from the grave — was no longer a miracle to me. It was just the practical joke

of a drunken grave-digger who desperately wanted to relieve the tension of his loneliness. For a person who had built machines of war for conquering cities, it was not so difficult to execute.

I led the blind man to the porch. We stopped for a second, bathing in the rays of the sun coming from all around. Theophilus raised his face towards the sun, and tears started rolling from his eyes.

"The sun is shining," he said deeply moved. "It makes my face warm. I cannot believe, My Lord, that tomorrow I might not feel the warmth of Your sun."

6

We went along the path, proceeding with difficulty and slipping on the sticky clay, rolling down rather than walking, for Theophilus was not yet accustomed to his blindness, and I was a poor guide. All the way down to the caves he couldn't stop chattering of his hope that Mark the grave-digger would certainly cure him.

"Just think," Theophilus said, "this man has power over the dead. Giving me back my sight must be such a trifle for him. If he only wishes to cure me, that will be enough. Do you agree, Brother Simeon?"

I didn't say a word so far not to irritate the blind man. And, besides, I couldn't reveal the truth to him then, for he was too anxious and excited.

At one point, we fell down head over heels, and it was only a tree by the path that saved us: I caught at the tree with one hand, while with the other, I grabbed Theophilus by his leather belt. Somewhere very near, a tomtit was singing, and the soil smelled of seeds awakening; we could even see a raft being driven along the Dnieper, since logs were needed for the construction of cities along the southern border.

I took out a candle, lit it, and led Theophilus through the caves. Theophilus held onto my belt, and I felt his hand trembling.

We found Mark lying in his bed in the farthest corner of the cave. Here were stored all Mark's spades, pick axes, and sacks for carrying earth. There were also a few barrels where he used to keep his mead.

"Peace be with you, Brother Mark," I said. "I have brought Theophilus to you, but he has gone blind from his incessant crying."

Theophilus started weeping again. Mark was tossing and turning in his bed made of rags and thatch.

"Brother Theophilus," he said, gasping for breath. "I'm sorry I made you suffer for so long. I'm dying now, so pray for me. If ever I am granted God's graces, I promise I won't forget about you..."

Theophilus fell to his knees and crossed his arms on his chest for a prayer. The candlelight tattooed reddish designs on his tear-covered face.

"I know, Brother," said Theophilus, "I should have dropped dead there in the caves when my brother's corpse rose. But thanks to your holy prayers, God prolonged my life so that I would have enough time to repent. Now that you are going to face the Lord, you are even more powerful. I beg you, either take me with you, or make my eyes see the light again."

Mark's breath was heavy and rasping.

"I am a sinner and a weak man," he said. "I have no such power."

Theophilus crawled to his bed, groping his way with his hands and searching for Mark's hand. When he found it, he grabbed it and kissed.

"I know, Brother, you have power! I am sure you can do it! You could make the dead rise, so it is but a trifle for you to make my eyes see again. Let me see the sun, the flowers, and people's faces again.

Brother Mark, only after I went blind did I start to realize what a real happiness it is to be able to see the world. Will you work such a wonder? I will pray for you, my benefactor, till the end of my days. For what is this life in darkness?"

"You mourn, Brother, because you have lost the eyes given to your body," said Mark hoarsely. "You went blind for the sake of Our Lord. Now you must learn to use the eyes of your soul. I am to blame that you are blind, for I promised you death without having any power over it. I thought I could help your soul and your keen mind become pious and humble. We all know that fallen and humble souls are never rejected by the Savior..."

"Please, Brother, make me see again!" said Theophilus, without even listening to Mark, washing his hands with tears. "I'm sure you can do it!"

Mark made an effort and pushed Theophilus aside.

"You have no need to see this world," he said angrily. "Ask God to let you see His glory. And don't ask for death, for it will surely come to you, even if you don't want it."

Theophilus shrivelled and wept softly.

"I sent for you for another reason," Mark whispered, hardly audibly. "I ask you to absolve me of my sin, to forgive and bless me."

Theophilus, rolled into a ball, raised his unseeing eyes, and they flashed like two sparks.

"I will never forgive you," he exclaimed cruelly. "If you don't restore my sight, I'll condemn you forever."

Mark pressed his hand to his chest.

"I am dying and this is the only thing I ask of you!" he rasped.

"You are dying and I ask you to cure me of my blindness!" Mark made another effort to sit up in his

bed, he rose a little on one elbow, his eyes bulging, his hands clutching at his chest, and fell back.

"Cure me now!" Theophilus cried at the top of his voice.

I took the blind man by the hand.

"Get up, Brother," I said in a low voice. "Brother Mark has just died."

Theophilus howled, grabbing my hand.

"What shall I do now? Who can make me see the light?"

"What do you need your eyes for? Even when you had them, you were not able to see the light," I said bitterly. At that moment, I felt sorry for both of them: for the one who asked for forgiveness but had died without it, and for the other who had hoped for a miracle but didn't see it.

7

After that, Theophilus wept even more bitterly. He sobbed during prayers and at mass; he couldn't stop shedding tears as he ate or walked. Tears were rolling down his cheeks even when he slept. And he was so sorry he couldn't collect the tears properly with the pot which he again carried under his arm. He showed the pot to everyone who happened to stop and talk to him, asking to look if it was full, for he didn't dare thrust his hand into it, in order — as he used to say — not to defile the sacred liquid. Nobody had the nerve to tell him that his pot was empty — the tears evaporated so quickly! — and almost everyone assured him that it was full to the brim. Theophilus would smile happily, tears flooding from his blind eyes.

"I am sure now that I cannot escape death; I cannot avert it," he said once. "My last will is that you,

Brothers, should sprinkle my dead body with these tears to embalm it forever after my death."

"Why does it matter so much to you, Brother Theophilus?" I couldn't help asking him once.

"How can you ask such a thing, Brother Simeon?" he exclaimed in surprise. "Don't you understand that only in that case will I not dissolve in the earth and turn to dust."

"Why are you so afraid to become dust?" I asked. "A corpse and dust aren't so different. Dust is even more alive, for a vine or a pine tree could grow from it. What is going to grow from your dead withered flesh?"

"Nothing will grow from it, but it will exist, Brother Simeon!"

And then I was able to understand the great universal truth: Theophilus' fear of death was in fact his fear of life. Those who want to escape from life go against the will of the Lord, for He created them and commanded them to live. He placed them in the honeycombs of inscrutable nature, and each should fill his cell with honey. That honey is our good deeds, while our evil deeds are like plant lice for the honeycombs. If they start to rot, exactly the same way as when evil penetrates our world, it means this is the beginning of a painstaking, minute, and omnipresent war. This war makes the world struggle and revive. And thus it will be forever. Everything is determined by this struggle; where there is struggle, there is movement. This movement causes warmth, like a man who is running is never cold. This very warmth produces honey and fills the honeycombs of the universe, while the rotting cells finally die. So the living and the dead are well balanced, and there are no living beings without the dead, though the dead can exist without the living. We can put our faith only in the beauty of the world,

the beauty of nature and our good deeds. Everything under the sun must exist and be firmly established, and it must also change and disappear, for the world is one of the circles of the Universe. One who fears it and wants to escape is forthwith caught in the jaws of death; and a man who hates living doesn't live. One who doesn't want to see the sunlight goes blind, and, moreover, he cannot be saved, for he is already one foot in the grave, to be sure.

As for me, I belong to those who want to escape from this world, but the difference is that I fell in love with it. I feel excited when I see an opening bud, or feel the smell of the trees in spring when their young juices are coming to life. Sometimes I admire a girl and a young man as they wander by the walls of the monastery; I feel elated at seeing how beautiful they are, and how their eyes shine with love. The world is dying of illnesses and passions, but this very world give birth to the delicate flowers of love that make the world go on and on. And the world will live on as long as that flower is alive. But if one day the flower of love doesn't sprout, the world will die. This is written in the Holy Scriptures. And I believe that this is what must trouble people's hearts.

These thoughts came to me while I was sitting in Theophilus' cell watching the tears roll down his cheeks. I kindled a fire in the stove — the nights were rather cool yet — and stared silently at the flickering flame. The earth used to freeze at night and was covered with ice that would crackle under the boots of passers by. I felt nice and warm by the fire, and this gentle sorrow lulled me to sleep. A candle was burning in the cell, and Theophilus knelt in the corner with the pot for tears in front of him.

"I had a divine vision today," Theophilus said suddenly. "I am not sure whether I was sleeping or not,

but I saw a handsome young man. I narrowed my eyes to see the young man, whose face was lit with tenderness, better.

'You pray very well,' this young man said to me. 'But why do you grieve that your tears are vain?'

"Tears are not vain only when they are purifying, I thought, but there are such tears as defile your soul.

"That young man had a bowl bigger than my pot," continued Theophilus, "and it smelled wonderful."

At last I could imagine the young man with a big golden bowl in his hands.

"Look, these are your tears," said the young man to Theophilus. "You have shed these tears sincerely, praying to God, the tears that you wiped with your hand or kerchief, or those that dropped onto the earth."

Theophilus' voice was subdued and affectionate as if he were sharing some innermost secret. His blind face was illuminated by the yellowish candlelight. I listened to the fire crackling and watched the shooting sparks.

"All your tears I collected in this bowl according to the will of the Creator," the handsome young man said to Theophilus. "Your body will be bathed with these tears when your final hour comes. A delicate fragrant flower sprouts when your tears are sincere, but weeds grow from false tears."

I imagined a valley of fragrant flowers overgrown with weeds. Who would care to weed it?

"And then he disappeared," said Theophilus, just as ardently. "You are wise, Brother Simeon. Tell me, what does it all mean?"

"There are tears that are rewarded some day, and there are tears that are vain," I said unhurriedly. "The tears shed in heartfelt sorrow are blessed, and they are rewarded with joy; the tears shed in compassion and

kindness are even more blessed, for they are shed out of love," I said, my voice growing stronger as inspiration filled me. "The tears that are shed when you feel sorry for yourself, as well as the tears of hate and, of course, false tears are good-for-nothing and weeds grow from them."

I looked at Theophilus' face, petrified by the candle-light.

"What you have just said sounds somewhat strange to me," he uttered in a hoarse voice.

Then I felt even greater inspiration.

"You asked Mark to cure your blind eyes, Brother Theophilus. And I think I know how to help you see the light again."

"How?" he asked, jerking his head so that his neck crackled.

"You've been crying only for your own sake. Now try to weep out of love for someone else."

Theophilus laughed hoarsely.

"I am a withered blind old man. The Evil One has sent you to tempt and torment me. I don't have any gold to give away. I have nothing left. I don't even have a house to share with a homeless man. The only thing I have is my tears. Who might need them except God?"

Theophilus and I didn't understand each other. On this quiet spring night, we were breathing different air.

"Then live the rest of your life as you can," I said, suddenly repeating the words that Isaac had heard from the One whose smile was like the sun.

Theophilus' breath was heavy.

"Now you are talking of love for other people," he uttered, hardly keeping back his anger. "But you have come here to torture me. Do you really mean to say I have been crying for ages," he grabbed his pot and

handed it to me, "in vain and that only weeds will grow out of this?"

I felt awfully lonely in his dimly-lit cell, and the fire in the stove was dying out. Theophilus was right: my words were poisonous for his soul.

"I never judge; neither do I decide," I replied.

"Then don't say such spiteful things," Theophilus cried out abruptly, and his face shone fervently. "You'd better go to the Father Superior and tell him that I am unfortunately too weak and unfit to visit him myself, though I would like to tell him about my divine vision. Tell him an angel came to me, and I will probably pass away soon. Don't forget to tell him that God considers me worthy. I have been crying almost all my life, and there must be some reward for that!"

I walked out the door and stopped dead in my tracks. The breath of spring was overwhelming, life-giving, free and easy. The air was fresh and fragrant. It enveloped and washed me all over. I felt something painful piercing my heart. Tiny and powerless, I stood under the endless starry sky; I felt lost in this boundless world, and somehow, I seemed to resemble those who feel claustrophobic and bury their faces in their hands.



CHAPTER VIII

*in which there is a story about
Agapetos the Healer, and about the Armenian*

1

When the monastery bell rang for the monks to go to bed, Agapetos rose to his feet after the evening prayer and blew out his candle.

His cell was plunged into darkness. He usually sat still on his bed until his eyes grew accustomed to the dark. The Moon often helped him in that by peeping through his window covered with an ox bladder; pale turbid moonlight filtered through it. Agapetos would rise from his bed and head for the door. He opened it and glanced out looking around carefully. The whole monastery was asleep, except for Jeremiah, who would stealthily leave his cell and sit down waiting for something. So he sat in the moonlight in the shade of the tall oak growing near his cell.

One night he heard the door of Agapetos' cell creak and saw Agapetos peep out, looking around. Jeremiah didn't move. He kept on watching, and his patience was rewarded. In a few minutes, the door creaked again, and Agapetos appeared on the threshold with a sack on his back. He looked around cautiously like a thief and almost ran towards the piles of newly dug earth brought by the grave-digger. His movements

were swift and adroit, and his steps were almost inaudible. It seemed to Jeremiah that there was nought but a silent ghost wandering about. The door closed at last, and Jeremiah allowed himself to doze off for some time. He was sure that when the door creaked again, he would wake up.

But that night, the door didn't creak to wake him up. He awoke just because it had not yet opened again. Jeremiah rose and approached the cell. He pressed his ear to the small opening in the window and listened carefully for some time. There was dead silence in the cell. Then he pushed the door gently, and it opened without even creaking. Agapetos was not there, and Jeremiah noticed a pit in the earth where Agapetos' chest had been. He stared at it but went no closer.

Later, lying in his deathbed, Agapetos would reveal his secret, which would become known to Jeremiah, the Father Superior, Polycarp, and me, Simeon, the servant of God, for Jeremiah would tell me about it. Revealing this secret to me out of sheer love, Jeremiah asked me to swear that I wouldn't breathe a word about it to anyone.

That night, Agapetos went to empty only one sack of earth, because when he filled the second one, his spade cut into the monastery fence, making a hole in it, so the rest of the earth Agapetos threw outside the monastery walls. He hid the spade and the sack in the underground passage, and then he headed for the forest, beginning right after the monastery walls, passing by the houses that were by those walls.

He walked quite fast. Perspiration covered his forehead, and he wiped it off with his sleeve. The crowns of the trees in the forest rustled above his head in total darkness, and from time to time, an owl would emit a piercing shriek. Then Agapetos would stop and make the sign of the cross. Twigs crackled under his

feet, and the trees stretched out their long branches towards him as if they were hands ready to catch him. Many times he looked back in fear that someone might be following him. A few minutes later, he approached a clearing with a little log house in the middle of it.

There was the dark figure of a man on the porch. Upon hearing the footsteps, he moved.

"Who's wandering out there at night?" a weak old man's voice cried out.

"It's me, father," said Agapetos. "I came as I promised I would."

"Praise to the gods. They heard my prayers at last and brought you back to me."

"It's my love that brought me here to you," Agapetos answered meekly.

"Then what made you leave me?" his father asked harshly. "What made you withdraw behind the gray walls?"

"Let's not talk about it, father," Agapetos pleaded. "That is how it is, and thus, it will surely be."

"Come in, son!"

An oil-lamp flickered in the room; the wick was floating in the oil, producing a faint yellowish light. Distorted shadows danced on the walls of the house. The father put bread, a piece of roasted meat, and pies on the table.

"Sit down and eat, for you look famished after your monastery meals. Praise to the gods, people do not forget me, and bring bread and something else as a reward for my help. We could live together and do well for ourselves."

Agapetos sat down to table, cut off a piece of bread and meat and began devouring the food greedily.

"Aren't you well-fed?" the father asked sadly, looking at his son. "In my lonely hours I often wonder

why you withdrew to the monastery. What made you choose chains and give up your freedom?"

"I had come to fear the backwoods we lived in," Agapetos answered calmly, still chewing greedily. "I longed to live with other people."

"You could go to the city."

"What could I do there? I have no interest in commerce. I care neither for military service nor for the crafts. Most of all, I am interested in scholarly books that can be found only in the monastery..."

"You could become the Prince's scribe."

"The Prince's scribe is not a name to conjure with. How can you compare it to the fantastic stories about monks, their heroic deeds, and their divine power — stories that are so popular with the people?"

"But is that all true?" the father asked severely. "I believe that our ancient gods are much better for the people. I know it from the herbs. Each blade of grass, every herb, and every tree contains the divine qualities of the gods: they can be evil or good, poisonous or life-giving. There are herbs that kill, but a man can learn about them. The new god belongs to the Princes. He never appears to the people, and you can not see or hear him."

"But still He is Our Lord that reigns in the world!"

"He reigns in the world because He was introduced by those who rule themselves. Why did the princes want to get rid of our ancient gods? Nobody fears them, and they are too domestic. And, moreover, they don't help shed the blood of the people. At first, the princes wanted to make *Perun** the Supreme God, though He wasn't any more powerful than *Svarog***

* *Perun* — the pagan god of the Slavs, the god of thunder and lightning, the ruler of the elements, the god of fertility and light

** *Svarog* — one of the pagan gods of the Slavs

or *Lado* *. Perun had become too weak for them, for He could be heard and seen, while they needed a god of fear, and they found him. He can never be heard or seen."

"I don't want to argue with you, father," said Agapetos. "These are the speculations of a lonely wise old man on the one hand, but on the other, life goes on with its feverish activities. And in that life, some fly high, and the others fall; those who acquire eternal glory for themselves, and those who become dust. What would have been the use of my wisdom, father, if I were lost here in the backwoods? What glory could I hope for if I worshipped these ancient gods? This religion is considered sedition now in the present world. So I'm telling you I would have been lost in these woods. In the monastery, behind the gray walls chronicles and annals are being written to edify the future generations. Books are written, and the wisdom of the world is being accumulated. The cleverest and best people of our land have come to live there — not just ignorant and superstitious fools. Father, neither Theodosius, nor Nikon, whose other name was Hilarion, were ignorant men. They were sages, and the Princes appreciated their advice. Hilarion withdrew to the cave to write his *The Word of Law and Grace*. And just think that now in Kiev, no one but the monks teach children to read and write. They go to the city and bring children to the monastery. The Princes are so kind to us for good reason. They learn to see the light and know wisdom from us. Besides their desire for glory in battle, they long for education. The wisest of the Princes surround themselves with learned

* *Lado* — one of the pagan gods of the Slavs, the god of merriment, agreement and love

monks; they take monks under their patronage, and the latter teach them. What the future generations will say about the princes depends on what the scholars of today say: whether they extol or denounce them. Nestor's name, as well as the names of other such people, will surely enter the Book of the Glory of our land. Where else, except for our monastery, could Nestor accomplish his greatest deed. And, of course, there are men among us, who are — like you — trying to understand Mother Nature better. These Brothers have entered the monastery to be able to do so, and at the same time, to be with other people. They keep bees and grow trees. I am most sure that their names will some day enter the Book of Glory along with the names of the wise scribes."

"And you also want your name to be written in this Book?" the father asked with a ring of irony.

"Of course, I do, father. I fear even to think of the oblivion that awaits us after death. We are but guests in this world."

"Yes, we are guests. But we will be of no avail if we don't try to cognize the world. We will be absolutely worthless if we look for the abstract good instead of the actual good existing in the world."

"The good of the real world defiles the soul," announced Agapetos.

"This is true if you consume it instead of creating it..."

Agapetos finished eating and leaned back in his chair.

"Your words, father, have some extraordinary power, and I miss your prophetic pronouncements behind my gray walls, as you call them," he said.

"These days," said the old man, "even sorcerers have become few and far between. Instead of cognizing the earth, rivers and plants, they mostly

practise fortune-telling, deceiving themselves and the world, and their prophecies are rubbish that no man can understand. They are forgetting the mighty bonds that connect man with the earth. How can you explain, my learned son, that different plants cure different diseases? How can you explain this divine dependance of the living human body on the surrounding world? What is a man without plants, water, and fire created by the earth and the sky? The greatest art of sorcery has been degraded, becoming nothing but beggary and deception. That is the reason I say the ancient gods are dying out, while the new ones cannot be seen or heard. These new gods exist only in the minds of the people."

"I know, father, you're the last sorcerer of this land. I also wished to follow in your footsteps and learn your magic arts. But I lack the extraordinary power you possess, and I don't have such a keen mind as yours. That was why I left the woods and went to join other people, for I want to become famous with them in some easier way."

"What is this easy way that you suggest?" asked his father rather coldly.

"I have been observing closely the life of our community behind the gray walls. I tried to learn as much as possible about the lives of those who are regarded as famous. And you know, father, what I saw? Every one of them has made himself famous on his own. Their fame is created by some secret means, and they never reveal their secrets to the others. The knowledge of how each man did it is what he treasures most of all. The main idea is to startle the people without showing them how you achieved this effect. After a while, others begin to talk about miracles. And that's the result: the one who works miracles is not just one of the crowd."

"All these thoughts are alien to me," said the father as coldly. "This kind of competition and deception are totally foreign to me."

"But they are not alien to me," uttered Agapetos. "And I'd like you to help me."

"But won't it harm the rest of the people?" the father asked.

"What harm are you talking about?" exclaimed Agapetos, roaring with laughter. "There is no harm in my wish to become famous as a healer, is there? But this is something I can never achieve without your help..."

The father stared at his son for quite a long time until their eyes met. Thus, they gazed at each other, and at last, Agapetos noticed that his father's face darkened for a second.

"Are you going to help me, father?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"As far as I can see, you are not trying to deceive me," began his father after a long pause. "I've never wanted fame for myself, and if you really want to do good in the world... Yes," he concluded. "Good is always good."

2

At that very time, the Zealot, the former Prince of Chernihiv, fell ill. On hearing that, the Grand Prince sent a doctor to him. This doctor was very skilled, an Armenian by origin and an Orthodox Christian by faith. At that time, the Zealot had a high fever and lay in his bed unconscious. When the doctor arrived, all the monks, led by the Father Superior, entered the Zealot's cell. Agapetos was among them.

The Armenian came up to the sick man, and pressed his ear to his chest. Then he took the Zealot's hand,

and raised his eyes upwards. Dead silence ensued. The monks were all standing by the walls watching the Armenian doctor with mockery, for they were convinced that the best possible treatment and help in sickness was a prayer, no doubt. It was a cool summer morning, and rain was tapping against the window covered with an ox bladder. They had to open the door, for the smell in the cell was unbearable. Gusts of cold wind burst into the room through the open door.

"He won't live much longer," said the doctor. "I believe he will pass away in about a week."

"Aren't you going to give him any medicine?" Agapetos asked.

"He doesn't need any," uttered the doctor and suddenly shuddered, for Agapetos' eyes flashed right in front of him.

"While I say," said Agapetos loudly and harshly, "he will recover! Father Superior, if you permit me, I will stay with the sick man and care for him."

"What are you going to cure him with?" the Armenian asked. "The science I have been taught cannot cure this man."

"While the science *I* have been taught," Agapetos answered as abruptly, "can surely help this man to recover."

"What are you talking about?" asked the Armenian, raising his brows in surprise.

"I'm talking of prayers to Our Lord," answered Agapetos, while the rest of the monks hummed all together in agreement.

I was among them then, and I, the humble Simeon, was still very young. I had no idea about Agapetos' secret then, and I was genuinely startled. The whole community was taken aback by the valor with which Agapetos stood up against the famous doctor. For Agapetos had not yet made his reputation as a healer.

But he looked so sure of himself that the Father Superior gave permission for him to care for the ailing Zealot.

"I will be genuinely glad if you manage to cure him," said the Armenian. "I have never made a mistake in my life in determining the day of a man's death... If he doesn't die within a week, I will bow low to you..."

He bowed with the greatest respect right after that, a smile playing on his lips.

"So this is how you treat the sick," pronounced Agapetos indignantly, his nostrils trembling. "By predicting his death and saying you can do nothing to help him?! If you are so skilled, make him live, but if you can't do it, go back to where you came from."

"I will, I am leaving now," said the Armenian rather angrily this time. "But this case won't bring you fame as a healer. I warn you that in a week he will surely die, at night."

"I swear by God that he will live!" said Agapetos, waving his hand as if there were an ax in it.

The whole community buzzed with anxiety, for what Agapetos had promised was beyond his strength.

Enraged and excited, tense and worried, they stood facing one another. The famous doctor was a tall stout man, while Agapetos was a feeble little monk. The sick man's breathing was heavy. The rain outside was pattering and splashing, as if trying to tell or even fortell something very important. The Armenian was the first who could bear it no longer. He swung his cloak, throwing it across his shoulder, and stepped onto the porch through the open door, disappearing into the rain. We all surrounded Brother Agapetos, chattering and interrupting one another in excitement. We were trying to convince him it was too heavy a burden, for if he didn't save the Zealot, dishonor would be his

reward. He stood before us, his face glowing with inspiration. When everybody stopped talking at last, and silence ensued, we suddenly heard his voice, coming from his tightly compressed lips.

"Brothers!" he said. "I felt some extraordinary power in me today. An angel visited me and ordered me to heal this man. This angel told me that Brother Nicholas was going to recover, for it was not yet his time to die..."

I thought at that moment, "Isn't here another saint among us who has seen that same angel?"

Jeremiah stepped forward, for he had visions more often than the rest of us.

"He's telling the truth, Brothers," he announced solemnly. "I also heard the rustle of its wings."

As for me, I heard nothing but the pitter-patter of the rain, and thought that this sound could also be interpreted as the rustling of wings. I was still young and naive; I believed almost everything they said without realizing that there existed an enormous world of thoughts and feelings concealed by people.

"God help you, Brother," said the Father Superior and blessed Agapetos, while the latter bowed meekly and kissed the Father Superior's hand.

We went out into the rain one by one, and the wind threw handfuls of raindrops at our faces. Our faces wet, we proceeded, the most simple and naive among us believing that they had witnessed a true miracle, while the wisest of us believed Agapetos was longing for fame. At that time, I belonged to the group of the naive, and I walked excited, not paying attention to the stormy weather, my soul yearning for a miracle. Gusts of wind were tearing green leaves from the trees, and a few of them stuck to my face. I raised it and let the rain wash it. Suddenly, I realized that I was about to grasp and embrace the colossal infinity

stretching before me, and though the sky at that time was covered with thunderheads, it seemed bright and clear to me.

Agapetos remained with the Zealot. Brother Jeremiah approached me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Are you waiting for something to happen?" asked Jeremiah, roaring with laughter. I didn't have any idea why he was laughing then.

3

Agapetos was running through the woods. Howling above his head, the wind shook the crowns of the trees, making them shed heavy drops, while he jumped from one puddle to the other. Though the night was rather cold, abundant perspiration mixed with raindrops covered his face. The darkness was squashing him from all directions, for there was almost no sky, nor was there any moon in it. Instead of the sky, there was some black gloomy mash. He got frightened that he had lost his way and was never going to find it again. He slowed down; the gray ghosts of the tree trunks surrounded him; the branches were intertwined like crossed arms. The path became slippery — the sticky clay made a squelching, crunching sound under his boots, while the wet hem of his mantle had stuck to his legs. His cowl often fell off, and he would crawl on all fours looking for it in the wet grass. Sometimes, raindrops fell on his shaved head, and this was a strange sensation as if a big black bird were pecking at his brain. Then he hurriedly made the sign of the cross and kept running on. From time to time, his feet would slide apart, and he fell down breathing in the smell of the wet grass and mushy soil. The verdure behaved violently; it was everywhere he looked —

beneath his feet, beside him, and above his head, and he felt he was drowning in it as he began to understand why his father loved it so much. The verdure was alive, breathing and swaying, plants were talking to plants; their juices were renewed by the thick life-giving liquid that filled their veins thanks to the greedily sucking mouth of roots. The flowers were tossing their heads as if blinded with tears. Mosquitoes covered Agapetos' face, biting him. Now and then he would squash a frog, desperately croaking, with his boots. He was frightened even more when he realized that the earth he was treading on was living flesh; his boots wounded it. He was sure his father had never experienced such superstitious fear, for he had probably never suspected there could exist such a nameless violent riot of grass. Each blade of grass was as familiar to him as if it were his sister.

He was exhausted from running, and the darkness, combined with the feeling that he couldn't find his way out of that dark hole depressed him. He sat down on a stump, wiping his perspiration. Hot vapor escaped from his chest. Sitting there, he thought that his plan was blurred as a hazy vision. The Zealot was probably destined to die in a week, and Agapetos would be made a laughing stock, for there were many men who had failed to work miracles, and they were all humiliated and spit upon. He gritted his teeth and pursed his lips until they hurt. His eyes flashed in the darkness.

Jeremiah saw the flashing sparks of Agapetos' eyes, because he had been following him all the way. It seemed to him that these were the eyes of a wolf or a lynx staring at him from the thick wood. Jeremiah backed away from that wood, then he turned and ran, his heart pounding fiercely, for he was quite an old man by that time.

Agapetos rested a bit, and then he got up and hobbled in the direction where his father's house had to be. The gray-haired old man was sitting on the porch waiting for his prodigal son to appear.

4

I cannot be sure what the Armenian thought when leaving the Zealot's cell. What I do know is that he came into the rain with a sarcastic smile on his face, and his servant, who was waiting by the gate with their horses, noticed that smile right away.

"These monks are out of their minds," the Armenian probably said, and his servant nodded in agreement in the usual way as all the servants in the world agree with their masters. Mounting his horse, the Armenian was most probably thinking whether he had to grieve the Grand Prince with the news of the Zealot's impending death — for it was the Grand Prince who had sent him to the monastery — or conceal his diagnosis, trying to foresee what might happen if the monk — the first person who dared to challenge his fame as a doctor — cured the sick man.

When he returned home, he was probably standing by the window looking through glass instead of ox bladder. He must have been watching the rain for quite a time, the raindrops tapping on the windowpane. His eyes contracting and opening wide again, he could think of nothing but Agapetos' arrogant burning gaze...

"He knows something!" the Armenian would think, and this very thought would torture him during the week he had predicted the Zealot would live.

Remembering the piercing gaze of the tiny inconspicuous monk — at least he looked so — the Armenian would feel the fingers of the rain touch him,

endowing him with doubt. He would also brood sadly over the fact that he had left his own country for the sake of the fame as the best healer in this foreign land. Back home, there were many doctors more skilful and wiser than he. But living here for so many years, the Armenian had forgotten about this, for in these lands, he was unsurpassed as a doctor. Maybe that was the reason his pensive eyes were contracting and opening wide again; he knew that by the end of the week, he would know the verdict: whether he was the best at his trade or not. Frankly speaking, he had always been afraid of competition, and he often had nightmares that another doctor who surpassed him had already appeared.

"That monk must know something else!" he thought, tapping his knuckles on the window-sill. "Without some extraordinary knowledge, he would never dare put everything at stake."

He probably called his servant, the one who had been waiting for him by the monastery gate with their horses. The servant had probably hidden from the rain at the guard post, chattering with the monk there. This was a part of his service: to chatter with everybody and know everything. This servant was also an Armenian, one of the doctor's impoverished relatives. They could converse freely, saying whatever they wanted even if the walls of his house had ears, for who could understand their native language? Still, staring at the falling rain tapping on his window, the doctor was asking his servant if the latter had found out anything about the impudent monk.

"He says constantly in the Prince's cell," the servant would answer. "He doesn't leave him even for a minute. He prays all the time, helps the sick man rise a little and then lie down again, he even carries him if need be to the other bed, and he feeds him and

gives him to drink, and cleans up everything after him."

"It sounds good," the Armenian would exclaim, nervously cracking his fingers. "What kind of medicine does he give him?"

"Well, he gives him something to drink, and probably he adds some sort of medicine to the liquid," the servant answered.

"Then I would ask you another question. Does he ever leave the monastery at all?" the Armenian doctor would ask abruptly. "Does he go to the woods to gather some herbs?"

"No, he doesn't leave the monastery, not for a minute," the Armenian servant would say lowering his eyes, feeling guilty, for he hadn't found out what interested most his senior relative and master.

"In a few days," the Armenian doctor would order, probably looking at the window spattered with rain-drops and listening to the rain coming down in torrents, "yes, in a few days, you will go to the monastery to find out if the Prince is still alive..."

And, perhaps at that time, he heard women's thin voices in the rustle of the rain. These could be the lamentations familiar to him since the day of his father's death, for his father had been a famous doctor, too. It was his father who taught him all his knowledge and secrets. These thin voices were ringing higher and higher, ascending to the sky and turning into a thin golden thread, almost invisible. And this thread would sing of love and torment. That was the usual feeling he had whenever seized by grief. The Armenian doctor always heard exactly the same lamentations. Again and again, he could clearly see Agapetos' burning gaze, thinking that life was always a race: everyone was trying to surpass the rest of them, and the winners were cheered and welcomed, while

the defeated were sneered upon. He would imagine all the peoples inhabiting our earth. And all these innumerable men and women belonging to a certain nation running in crowds as fast as they possibly could, and among each people were a few runners who surpassed the others, who outdistanced them. He could even imagine the clatter of thousands of feet, monotonous and incessant as if the whole earth was but an endless steppe, and all the peoples but herds of horses.

The Armenian would narrow his eyes as he stood by the window, and the moment his Armenian servant left the room, he would groan and moan, shaking his head, biting his lips and gritting his teeth.

5

A week had passed and the monks started to gather at the Zealot's cell in the evening. They arrived one by one: the Father Superior was the first to come, then Polycarp arrived. After, there came the rest of the monks walking carefully through the fine rain and sharp gusty wind. Their heads lowered, faces wet and their lips mouthing prayers, they were approaching the Zealot's cell. Most likely, they were praying for better weather.

Agapetos was standing on the porch, and the monks stopped in surprise, staring at their fellow-monk's altered face. He looked quite ordinary standing on the porch, his feet set firmly apart; his posture revealed great strength, and his face was lit with inspiration. Everything around was gloomy and deserted as if painted gray, and Agapetos' face contrasted with all that background, for it looked as if it were lit by the bright sun. The whole community was startled by his appearance, and they all bowed to

his sunny face and the robust power emanating from his body. Nobody really doubted it then.

"How is Brother Nicholas?" asked the Father Superior to begin the conversation, for the answer was clear to everyone.

"Brother Nicholas is a little better, and he can even talk today. Moreover, he is praying on his knees for the first time since he fell ill."

He chanted these words, and I even felt uneasy looking at his triumph, which he didn't try to conceal. I turned back only to notice the Armenian servant in the shade of the big oak growing nearby. He was craning his neck trying hard not to miss a word.

"We won't interfere with Brother Nicholas' prayers, will we?" asked the Father Superior.

"No, of course, not," answered Agapetos. "He is too weak yet to pray for long."

He turned back and went into the cell, and the rest of the monks followed him.

The Zealot was kneeling indeed, bowing low. The brothers lined up along the walls, waiting patiently.

At last the Zealot made an effort to rise, and Agapetos and I rushed to help him.

"How do you feel, Brother Nicholas? Are you all right?" asked the Father Superior.

"Since I am able to pray to the Lord, I am well enough!"

"Do you feel that your final hour is coming soon?" inquired the Father Superior.

"I feel rather that my strength is returning," the Zealot explained to the Father Superior.

He was still very weak. I could tell when we took him under his arms and he hung on us like a sack.

"This is a great event for our monastery," announced the Father Superior, and Polycarp nodded in agreement. "Brothers, your fellow-brother has worked a

miracle, and this will surely be a credit to him in the centuries to come."

The monks whispered and fidgeted. Agapetos stood still, his eyes lowered.

"It is not my power, but God's will," he said reasonably. "If it weren't for the Savior who has endowed me with that divine power, our beloved Brother would have been dead by now. The power of prayer has helped him recover, Brothers!"

"Ask the Armenian doctor's servant to come in," ordered the Father Superior, and I, being the youngest of them all, ran to carry out his order. It was raining hard and I could barely see the servant in the thick mist. His rocking figure looked blurred, merging with the mist, and I headed toward him in a firm stride. Thousands of fine whirling raindrops came down on my head, face and shoulders.

The Armenian servant was soaked to the skin. His black garb sparkled in the dim light of the gloomy day, and his face was anxious.

"Has the Prince died?" he asked almost in a whisper.

"Fortunately not," I answered merrily, for despite the rainy day, I was filled with genuine joy. "Come inside with me. The Father Superior is calling you."

He hesitated and looked back for some reason. But all he saw was the thick turbid gray wall of the rain. After that he hurried along the wet grass and I could hardly catch up with him.

The Zealot was put back to bed, but he didn't want to lie down, preferring to sit.

"Are you the servant of the Armenian doctor?" the Father Superior asked solemnly.

The servant nodded silently.

"Go back to your master and tell him that he can return to his country, for now we have our own healer who is wiser and more skilful than he."

Agapetos raised his eyes, and they were glowing, while on his lips, there was a mocking smile.

"And tell him that he should cure better instead of making false predictions," he added loudly.

6

"Your potion possesses a divine power, father," said Agapetos, sitting by his father's side on the porch. "I have saved so many people with its help now. They even brought me a *tysyatsky* *, who, according to the Armenian, was supposed to die within eight days. I gave him your potion and he has recovered."

"The powerful don't come to me anymore," his father said pensively. "Those who still come to me are mostly poor and humble. I feel much more at ease with them, or at least, I think so..."

The rain had just stopped, and the moon shone brightly. Wet soil and fallen leaves sparkled in the moonlight.

"There was a time when you tried to initiate me into the mysteries of your art. But I failed to grasp them then..."

"You failed because you did not have a kind heart open to the world," said the old man. "Herbs are like people; some live for the sake of good, others for evil. And besides, herbs agree with worthy men and reject their enemies. Herbal potions are different; some of them contain poison, and others neutralise that poison; some kill, others give life. The art lies not only in knowing all the herbs, but in knowing how to combine them."

* *tysyatsky* — a captain of a "thousand," a military unit of levies

"It takes a long time to learn this art," Agapetos noticed pensively. "Is it possible to learn it quickly? How long will it take, father?"

"Your whole life, son."

"That's too long for me," Agapetos said laughing. "Tell me is it true that there is a potion which can neutralise poison?"

"It is not a single herb, but a combination of several herbs," said his father. "You know, it is a good thing when a person sings a beautiful song, but when it is performed by a choir, it sounds much more beautiful, isn't it?"

The yard sparkled in the bright moonlight. The glade was surrounded on all sides by the trees and they seemed to resemble gray haycocks, while the abundant dew glistened on the grass.

"You never come to visit me in the daytime," said his father. "I have a feeling that behind those gray walls, you have come to fear the daylight."

"I'm afraid that someone would follow me and find out everything," Agapetos said simply. "Everybody thinks that I never leave the monastery."

"Your whole life is filled with deception, isn't it, son?"

"Deception can be double-edged, like that potion of yours. Some serve evil, while others are good. As for me, I don't do any harm. While doing good, I want a reward."

"But isn't joy for the heart the best reward?"

"The best reward for me is fame. To tell the truth, this fame is all yours. Would you like to enjoy it, father? Why don't you acknowledge the new God and come to live in the monastery with me? You could leave it whenever you wanted and gather herbs in the forest, like Prokhor the Goose-Foot-Man used to do. I mean, the one who used to gather goose-foot."

His father sat motionless. The Moon illuminated his white bearded face, while some dark sparks played deep in his eyes. He was calm.

"My faith gives freedom, son," he uttered softly, "but yours tends to enslave. And, besides..."

He broke off, as if hesitating about whether to say it or not.

"What is it?" asked Agapetos.

"No, nothing... I just wanted to say that my heart is content, and that's all."

"But isn't it also a deception, father?"

"It is not an evil one," said his father, grinning. "The only thing I missed was you. I wanted you to be close to me. Now that you come to visit me, I don't really ask for more..."

"But now I can't do without you," answered Agapetos, laughing rather sadly. "They have proclaimed me a healer..."

During the whole conversation he spoke slowly and sadly. Maybe the Moon in the sky or the rain that had just stopped influenced him in some special way, and he felt he was turning again into a little boy living with this lonely, extraordinarily wise old man. Even as a boy, he remembered him as an old man, a grandfather rather than a father. Agapetos had always known that he himself would never be as great or wise. His father had always been like an unapproachable rock for him, and his feelings were those of fear, respect and sorrow. Moreover, he felt totally worthless compared to his father. Looking from the corner of his eye at his father's serene, sagacious face illuminated by the moonlight, he thought that even if he had spent all his life on trying to learn at least a small part of what that silver-haired head knew, he would surely have failed. Nothing would have come of it. A feeling familiar to him from boyhood was

returning to him: his overwhelming fear of his father's unfathomable wisdom. He was sitting still on the porch by his father's side, actually feeling that he was shrinking under the gaze of this man with the ashy face, and he could respond with nothing but fear. That was the real reason he had escaped from him and taken monastic vows, but nevertheless, he could never escape his father's constant presence in his life. Sometimes he was inclined to think that his feeling for his father resembled more hate than love, but if he didn't see him for a long time, he missed him, and that was why he had dug that underground passage: to be able to leave the monastery and visit his father. "I'm still a boy," Agapetos thought trying to soothe the spasm in his throat. "But it is such joy to feel like a boy sometimes!"

Now that fame was not foreign to him, he desperately wanted to believe that he himself could be as great as his father. He glanced stealthily at his father again: a withered, terribly old man was sitting in front of him. He was petrified at the thought that his old father might die soon, and while he cured others, he might not know how to cure himself. A cold sweat covered Agapetos from his head to his toes at this terrible thought. He was about to rush to the old man and look into his open eyes.

"Human fame," said his father, opening his eyes, "is like rancid honey. They extol you today, but they might make you suffer tomorrow. It can be life-giving today, and poisonous tomorrow. He who is falling to his knees in front of you today might become your worst enemy tomorrow. The powerful of this world are walking along the sharp edge of a sword, and thus, they are poor. Their constant anxiety consumes them; they can't afford to forget about their affairs, for these very affairs are conquering them. This is why they

can never open their hearts to the world, and that's why I am afraid for you..."

By this time, Agapetos was relieved of his sorrow. And he imagined a scene that had taken place not so long ago: a row of monks passing by in the falling rain — a long black meek line — he was standing on his porch when they suddenly stopped and looked at him in awe.

"A famous man must always pretend and act," said Agapetos. "He must be a baffoon. and his performance must be as simple as the baffoon's. It is much easier to become a celebrity than to acquire the wisdom you have, father, for such wisdom makes you loathe people."

The old man sighed heavily. In the thick of the woods, an owl was hooting, and the leaves suddenly began rustling and glistening in the moonlight, as if on someone's behest.

"A famous man is a slave, son!" the old man whispered softly.

He rose to his feet and went into the house. In a moment, he returned with a pot wrapped in a linen cloth. Without saying a word, he handed it to his son, and turned his face abruptly in the direction of the rustling wood.

7

Meanwhile, the Armenian was probably standing by the window, looking at his own reflection. What he saw was an elderly man whose face was covered with wrinkles, and perhaps the reflection of the three candles standing on the table. Sad thoughts were probably clouding his mind, the same thoughts as the ones that had previously been inspired by the rain: what was a man who had lost his fame supposed to

live for? People rarely visited him, for almost all of them preferred to go to the monastery, to that plain arrogant monk, who probably knew some medical secret. The Armenian had probably found out by that time that Agapetos treated the sick with herbs, and his power lay in these very herbs.

At the same time, his servant was probably laying the table, serving wine, meat, and porridge; he was doing it silently running to and fro in the house. The Armenian doctor was thinking aloud, speaking in his mother-tongue, as he always did in such cases.

"Up to now, all the sick men he has treated have recovered, even those who were doomed to certain death. I was sure of it. Have you been to the Lord of the City?"

"The Lord of the City has agreed to give you a prisoner sentenced to death," answered the servant.

"I have to do something so that one of his patients dies," the Armenian doctor said as pensively. "His growing fame is a terrible evil to me... And, you know, I still cannot believe in his power as a healer."

"But his patients do recover, indeed," remarked the Armenian servant.

"That is because he knows some secret. It might be a previously unknown potion... But if a patient drops dead at his feet, everyone will surely realize that he is not omnipotent..."

"After the incident with the *tysyatsky*, the richest people go to him. Soon we will have to leave these lands as beggars, I suppose."

"No, we'll never do that," answered the Armenian doctor abruptly, "though it is a very difficult task I have to tackle. I need someone to die after being treated by this monk."

And he stared again into the window until he saw the thin monk with a burning gaze. Anguish was

consuming him internally, a gray snake crawled into his chest and coiled round his heart. Outside the window appeared the moon, and it illuminated the street. Wet rooftops glistened in the light, and reflections played on the puddles. There were as many moons as there were puddles. In the midst of the crowd of moons, he noticed a group of soldiers bringing him the prisoner sentenced to death. They were heading towards his house. The prisoner was tall, and he walked with his head lowered, for he knew it was the last time he would be free to count the moons in the puddles. He had murdered a man. His head hung low; the murderer didn't watch where he was going. He didn't go round the puddles, but stepped right into them, shattering the moons.

The Armenian didn't look out the window any more. He approached the fire — kindled by his servant — with a copper cup of poison to warm it up.

"This poison kills within two days," he explained to his servant. "In two days no magical potion will ever be able to cure this murderer."

He interlaced the fingers of his hands and cracked them, as if he were trying to break them, and turned to the door abruptly, for at that very moment, the three gloomy-looking men who accompanied the murderer appeared on the threshold.

"I was told that you wanted to live for a few more days," said the Armenian doctor.

"Yes, I wanted to have time to atone for my sins by praying," said the murderer, his eyes shifting from the Armenian doctor to his servant.

"Your request will be granted," said the Armenian doctor. "Drink this potion."

The murderer stretched out his hand timidly to take the cup.

"What is it?" he asked harshly.

"It's poison that will kill you within two days."

A grimace of horror distorted the murderer's face, and he rushed headlong to the window, intending to jump out and escape. But the three robust men caught him, knocked him down, and twisted his arms behind him.

"Turn him face up," the Armenian doctor ordered.

The three men turned the prisoner face up, holding his legs and arms. The Armenian servant rushed over to the murderer and opened his mouth with a knife. The Armenian doctor poured the potion down his throat quickly.

"Now, take him to the monastery, and let him pray!" said the doctor holding his hands above the washing bowl, waiting for the servant to pour some water on his hands.

8

He lay prostrate and cruciform on the flagstone floor of the church and wept. The sky was also weeping all day long. It was pouring rain, and the splashing and bubbling of the water could be heard through the open door. When monks started to arrive for mass, the prisoner rose to his knees and began beating his head against the floor.

"Why are you mourning, good man?" Agapetos came up and asked him.

"I'm a murderer, Father, it's a grave sin. I was sentenced to death, and they gave me poison."

"When are you supposed to die?"

"Tomorrow," answered the prisoner. "I can't bear the waiting. I am not even able to pray. Something is tearing me apart and burning inside."

"Who gave you the poison?"

"The Armenian doctor..."

The monks surrounded them and listened to their conversation with curiosity.

"What are you being punished for?" Agapetos asked the prisoner.

"I'm not guilty. I've been slandered. They said I killed a peasant who molested my wife. But he committed suicide; and that's the truth."

"What happened to your wife then?"

"He molested her then killed her," said the prisoner who had been condemned, tears pouring down his cheeks. "They put the blame on me, but I am not guilty, I tell you. I'm in such awful trouble!..."

I took a closer look at the murderer. His wild and angry face, and his tears were not very sincere, or so it seemed to me then. Agapetos, however, didn't pay any attention to that.

"I call to you, Brothers," he pronounced solemnly. "Look at this man; he is ready to repent."

"I'm ready to die, Father," said the murderer, tears streaming from his eyes.

"Don't be afraid of death," uttered Jeremiah from the other corner of the church. "Death brings liberation to man..."

Agapetos turned abruptly to the Father Superior. His eyes were glowing.

"Will you permit me, Father Superior, to save this man?" asked Agapetos.

"This man has already drunk the deadly poison," remarked the Father Superior.

"Yes, I know," uttered Agapetos feverishly. "Will you permit me to save him? He can become a monastery serf. Tell me, would you prefer to become a monastery serf or die?"

The prisoner fell to his knees before Agapetos.

"I would love to be a monastery serf, Father. Save

me, I plead. Save me, for God's sake, for the fire of death is already burning inside me..."

"Follow me," ordered Agapetos turning abruptly and heading for the door.

The murderer ran after him, and it was a queer sight, indeed. The little monk in black was walking with broad strides, his proud head held high, and the giant of a man, bent at the waist to look smaller, trotted after him. The whole community followed them, hoping to witness another miracle, while I hobbled behind all of them — even then there was something about it that made me feel uneasy. The tiny lively figure of Agapetos ran limping across the wet grass; everything around was plunged into the twilight of the coming rain. The soil was wet and made a squelching and splashing sound under our feet. The murderer ran, his bare feet shuffling on the water, and his heavy tough face resembled that of a dog fawning to be fed. I was absolutely sure that man was guilty — that his hands were stained with blood that was still fresh. Now he was about to become a serf, and if anyone killed him, that would be equal to killing an animal.

I hobbled on behind this procession, all of us drenched in the pouring rain. Gradually, my clothes became soaked, but still I couldn't understand whether what Agapetos was doing was good or bad. I wasn't sure the murderer had repented and was ready to be reformed. Perhaps he was just anxious not to miss a last chance to survive. But he was a human being, I thought, and he also wanted desperately to see the sky, the sun, and the earth, and, of course, he wanted to feel such rain falling on his face again. Pity and disbelief were struggling in my soul, for every one of us loved to step barefoot on the grass. That was the joy and bliss of being, and every one — even the man who robbed someone else of this joy — was able to feel

it. No matter that the rain was falling, the world around us was gorgeous; beautiful was the yard flooded with water, that wet stiff grass that had recently sprouted. Fantastic was that rain with its pure transparent torrents streaming from the sky, for it made everything flourish and rejuvenate everyone. I thought then that nobody could tell what was really happening, and probably that odd uneasy feeling of mine was vain. Perhaps that which was happening was worthy of the highest praise, for all people, animals, insects, birds, trees, and grass, and all herbs, and water had one and the same root, and were just different parts of one body. The name of that body was Nature, our Mother, or else we could call it our God. If that was so, it meant, that we all existed in one world as different parts of it. Everything in this world is intertwined in a complicated and diverse way: prisoners condemned to death, men like Agapetos, and these monks dressed in black; maybe they were exactly what the world needed. They were probably the meshes of a single net, while the net itself was the Lord. We knew too little about this world, so how could we judge or praise it, for wisdom and folly, kindness and cruelty were the cells of one spirit... I was in doubt, though I didn't quite understand the real reason for it. However, in all that affair, there was something that burdened my heart. It really depressed me, and I couldn't think of any kind words. After all, I was too young and unsophisticated then. I didn't know much about people's schemes and deceptions, while at that particular time, everything around seemed to be enveloped in a haze of deception as thick as that of the rain: both Agapetos and the murderer — who followed him like a cringing dog — were engaged in deception. I didn't yet realize that a man has both God and beast in him, and sometimes God gained the upper

hand, while sometimes the beast won out. And I didn't understand one more important thing: the moment a man got rid of the God within himself, he turned into a beast, but if he killed the beast in him, he ceased to exist.

Agapetos approached his cell. The murderer stopped by the porch. The whole crowd that followed them also stopped. The rain was pouring on us, but no one seemed to mind. In a minute Agapetos appeared on the porch again with a cup in his hand, and he stretched his hand holding the cup into the rain offering it to the prisoner.

"Drink this. It will cleanse your body of the poison," said Agapetos.

The murderer grabbed the cup with trembling hands and drank it greedily. The rain was washing his face, and his big Adam's apple was moving quickly.

Agapetos' face shone as if sunbeams were playing on it. It was as bright as when he had cured the Zealot.

"I appeal to you, Brothers!" he cried out from the porch. "The holy rain has neutralized the poison in his system, and now he is my gift to you..."

He raised his chin, and his eyes sparkled happily. I looked at this triumphant victor, and sudden grief seized my heart, for this was a good example of typical mundane happiness: one rejoiced, proudly raising his chin, while the other bowed to him, bending his back low. "Poor are the victors," I thought then. "The wild beast is mature in them."

But I also noticed that the murderer who was standing with his side to me, conquered by kindness, all stained with mud, was not shedding tears of gratitude and happiness. He didn't feel humiliating joy, but, on the contrary, was looking askance at his master, who was bathing in sunbeams, though there

was no sun in the sky at that moment. So the murderer stared at the monk until the latter noticed this steady piercing gaze, sharp as a blade. A gaze burning with hate. Agapetos shuddered and was the first to take his eyes off the prisoner, for he saw the wild beast that had been just let out of his cage by his own hand; and that beast had already made the first step to soothe the hunger that had been torturing him in that cage. The healer backed away in fright and made the sign of the cross in the air, filled with rain, people, and the gray haze of twilight.



CHAPTER IX

*in which there is a story of the extraordinary
patient John the Hermit who desperately wanted
to subdue his flesh*

1

I have often brooded over the human passions. The fabric of the world is woven of them, and man is always their prisoner. When two people meet, passions blaze up. Often they are difficult to evaluate, and when our deeds are being weighed on the scales of justice, you cannot always guess the result. We hate something, but at the same time, we love something else, and these two passions are two poles, two driving forces, of the eternal inner struggle. Some few people are aware of it, but the greater part of us are ignorant, and passions drive them to and fro like the waves of the ocean. The black and blue waters mix, making up the ocean of our mundane lives, and its waves drive the boats of our destinies. There are no saints and no sinners in this world. Neither pure love, nor pure hate exist in it, for the divine and the bestial are integral parts of our nature. Those who are aware of this are no better than those who never think about it, but nonetheless, this is not the main thing that upsets the balance of the scales.

Here, in the monastery, I have seen many men who donned the black mantle for fear that they might not endure this struggle. I must admit that I am one of them. I couldn't find a place for myself: mundane sorrows depressed me too much, for I took them too close to heart. No matter what I tried to do, I failed, for my heart never rejoiced in doing that, and my nature wept within me. In the monastery, I have met many monks like me, and our tears and misery were the same. But, unfortunately, these tears tend not to purify but rather to vex the spirit. People who cry from passions resemble those who attempt to escape from their own shadows, but are not able to do so. For our shadows, black and stubborn, follow us or run ahead, no matter how we trample them with our feet. Shadows always accompany light — isn't it simple? Many men were so frightened of their shadows that they preferred to sacrifice their light, thus withdrawing into total darkness. But still they couldn't rid themselves of their passions, for as long as a man lives, his passions never leave him. That is why I am sure that when a man tries to become higher than God, his pride will consume him, and in the end, he is destined to become dung once again. Instead of devoting himself to good works, man tried to subdue his own flesh, thus, struggling with the Lord who created his body. Instead of living in harmony with his nature, man tortures himself, because he fears death most of all. One who struggles with his passions is seized by even greater passions, and one who goes against the laws of his nature struggles against God, for it is a grave sin to doubt the Providence of Our Lord.

That is the reason I dare to propagate this art: Let your good works remain in the world, and they will balance your evil deeds, whether they be sins of commission or omission. In speaking of Our Lord God,

His name is love and good works. If you love your wife and children, and your neighbor as yourself, you are faithful to God, but if hate is burning in you, you are being consumed by the bestial part of your nature. Don't love or hate your body: let it live in harmony with nature. Don't engage in this vain struggle with yourself, and then you will truly be glorifying the Lord.

When I think of this, tears well up in my eyes, for so few people are able to understand it. Too many are being consumed by the fire of hate, envy, and disdain, and these people talk of lofty ideals and goals. I can't help advancing my humble idea concerning this matter, at least on parchment: beware of deception, for the worst of us is he whose lips praise love and goodness, while his hands are stained with sin. He who harbors a grudge is not capable of love, though even in him, sometimes the divine spark might flare. We must learn to balance the divine and the bestial in us. Otherwise we shall be punished by our own natures.

2

All these thoughts came to mind while I was brooding over the story of John the Hermit. I heard this story from the late Isaac, now with God in His Heavenly Kingdom, who told it to me through the window of my cave. I never saw John with my own eyes, for he entered his hermitage when I was a baby and passed away in his cave before I was tonsured. They left his mortal remains in the cave, simply bricking up his window, for the stench from there was unbearable.

John had always been a very timid man. He didn't dare approach a girl or woman, for he feared the overwhelming passion which always seized him at such

moments: he couldn't breathe, his body would tremble and grow stiff. John was embarrassed by his own behavior, which he considered shameful, and every time he had such an experience, he would run away outside the city and bury his head in the grass, weeping like a child. But the smell of the earth reminded him of the female body, so he would jump to his feet and run away, trying to escape, though how can a mortal man escape the earth that gave him life?

The fire of this passion became unbearable. Finally, one evening, when the sunset was extraordinarily beautiful and bright, and golden patches of light played on the water tinging as if it were really on fire. By the river he saw a valley overgrown with flowers, and four of the neighbor girls were walking there. They were having fun, swinging the bouquets of flowers which they had gathered there and dancing. At one point, they interlaced hands and moved in a circle, floating in a dance. One of these girls was Nastya, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Whenever he met her, he was seized by fear and his head was in a dither. She was dressed in white, and when she turned to where his hiding place was, he saw her head crowned with a thick coiled plait and her gleaming teeth that were white as pearls. A sharp pain pierced his body like an arrow, and he fell down unconscious. When he finally regained consciousness the reddish lights on the river surface had faded, and the water was bluish-gray. The green valley had also dimmed, and he was all alone, but the air was still filled with some sweet fragrance that he took for the scent left by the girls. His nostrils trembled, his body grew numb with sweet delight, and he walked on the grass covered with evening dew. He headed for the valley where the girls had been dancing not long before. It seemed to him that he could guess the stems

from which the girls had picked the flowers, for he could almost see the sap dripping from them like blood from a wound. It seemed to him that he saw the prints left by the girls' bare feet in the grass, and again he felt the smell of their fragrant soles. Choking with all these female smells, he picked some grass and rubbed it between his fingers, inhaling its odor to clear his head of the other one. Then he walked toward the river to the place the girls had washed their feet. He had seen them from behind the bushes — they were surrounded into a sparkling white halo. On the sand near the river, he noticed footprints so delicate and tiny that it seemed to him each of them was filled with some aromatic oil. He couldn't help falling down on the sand and breathing in that intoxicating scent. He was hot with fever, and he buried his face in the sand. Tears were streaming down his cheeks, and he felt nothing but the smell of the girls. The whole evening was filled with it: the earth, the water, the dew and this sand. Again he experienced fear and bliss. Then he hurried back home, hoping the passions which had tormented him would disappear. He couldn't sleep all night long: every time he closed his eyes, he saw the sunlit river, the bright green valley, and the girls all dressed in white. More clearly than anything, he could see Nastya, who was surely aware that he had hidden behind the bushes. All night through, he listened to her resonant laughter, seeing her head crowned with the thick plait, and her glowing smile when she looked at the place where he was hidden. Either this laughter or just the black, sultry turbid night made John feel the familiar piercing fear again. He opened his eyes, but it was so dark that he couldn't understand at first where he was. And again, it seemed to him that he saw the girls, but this time they were naked, and very near to him. They inter-

laced their hands, floating in a dance. Before his eyes appeared their tender delicate breasts glowing in the sun as they sashayed in their dance, and he saw their shapely legs covered with golden young skin. He gasped for air and tore open his shirt, probably collapsing unconscious, drowning like a small boat in a stormy golden sea. It seemed to him that his own flesh was melting; or rather dissolving into a liquid that poured into the night, mixing with it like milk spilt from a jug. Then he felt a spasm that pierced his body like lightning — almost the same as he had experienced on the river bank. The familiar disgust followed immediately. The voluptuous vision suddenly disappeared, and the sweet bliss perished at once.

Exhausted and pale, his head spinning, he awoke in the morning and felt sick at the sight of the first woman he saw from his yard. He turned his face away, and a grimace of disgust distorted it.

"Oh, God," he thought, "why are you tempting me?"

He didn't receive an answer, but he understood clearly that if he didn't free himself of that torment, he wouldn't be able to survive.

3

He went to the nearest church. The priest there was his uncle, and the boy confessed everything to him right after mass. They stood together by the church, looking at the reddish-blue twilight that was enveloping the earth. Stars were appearing gradually in the sky above their heads, and the boy felt terribly lost and restless.

"You know, I feel that I just can't find anywhere to hide, as if there is no place for me under the sun," he said to his uncle.

"You take it too close to heart, Jacob," said the old

priest — John's name was Jacob before he was tonsured — staring at the Pochaina River glittering in the moonlight. "The problem is that you were born too sensitive. All you need is a hot woman."

"A woman?" asked Jacob, horrified. "Did you say a woman?"

"Of course!" said the priest roaring with laughter, and this laughter sounded kind and condescending in the falling darkness.

Then Jacob had to tell his story again with all the details, describing the piercing fear he felt when approaching any woman, and his crazy heartbeat, and the sweet bliss in his body.

"Imagine that!" exclaimed his uncle roaring with resonant laughter again. "Your blood is too hot, nephew. Too hot!"

Then he told his story again, adding the details about the disgust that followed the bliss — exactly what he had experienced at night. And he also explained that upon waking in the morning, he felt nothing but disgust when he looked at a woman.

"Find yourself a girl!" advised the old man good-naturedly and stepped into the new darkness that had just taken the place of the reddish-blue twilight. Jacob stood open-mouthed in the darkness that surrounded him. More stars were appearing in the sky, and he decided that his uncle was making fun of him, for he couldn't think that it was possible to climb the forbidden wall that separated him from the divine creatures dressed in flowing white gowns. Fear seized him again in the darkness, and he stood still, anticipating the torture he would have to endure: he would writhe in pain, beating his head against the earth. He was absolutely sure he would die before that which his uncle promised him could happen. Then he plunged into thoughts about his neighbor, Nastya, who had

guessed that he was hiding in the bushes, watching the girls dance. After that incident, they saw each other a few times, and every time their eyes met — it was a surprising feeling — he felt as if someone had stabbed him with a knife.

He stood petrified in the new darkness that was destined to become an ordinary quiet night. He thought that Nastya might appear out of the darkness and come very close to him, or even closer — she might as well enter his heart as if it were her home. And thus he would stand on this hillock near the church until he withered and grew thin and was ready to merge with the twilight — it might as well be the reddish-blue twilight. But there came a black wave that swept him from within his body, and the only thing he wanted was to escape from that girl who was about to open his heart so boldly and enter as if it were her home. Then he saw a smile on the girl's face, and it seemed to him that it was proud and scornful.

His uncle could not be seen anywhere in the newly-born darkness that filled the reddish-blue twilight. At that moment, Jacob came completely to his senses and wanted to run after his uncle and tell him his story once again, adding the dream where the girls appeared before him absolutely naked...

He didn't have any sisters, only brothers, while his mother was a withered old woman, thin as a rail, and he never thought of her as a woman. Anyway, who had ever seen a woman in his mother? All the women lived behind the fences, filling the local streets and houses, looking from time to time out of their windows, or from behind the fences, or else they walked out to meet him with empty buckets. These women had wonderful eyes, and their glances lashed the boy as he looked at them. He would grow pale, his complexion, ghastly, and the blood would stop flowing in

his veins. He could hardly walk; his legs would go stiff and his arms numb, so feeble he grew. At night, his flesh was diluted in a strange manner, and he was dreaming of a jug full of milk spilling into the dark blue, almost black night air. And again his body shuddered with the familiar disgust, and he wept, still seeing the young bodies curving in a dance, but he didn't respond anymore. He was shivering from the cold, which added a burning sensation to his body, and he woke up in a cold sweat. A moan of relief escaped his mouth, for there was no more green valley, and he was all alone.

He lived with these secret passions for months, until one day he woke up after an extremely turbulent night. He was exhausted, and pale as a whitewashed wall, or as the milk spilt into the night. His hands trembling, he dressed and tried to wash his face, but the water seemed dry as sand to him. Without even wiping his face, he went out into the street. He didn't notice a lone woman with empty buckets; neither did he pay any attention to the women looking out of their windows. He walked past Nastya without even seeing her, while she noticed him and covered her mouth with her palms. Bareheaded — he had left his hat at home — he advanced, looking at the world with narrowed eyes, turning gray instead of white, for he was inhaling the grayish air. He saw the gray sky above his head as he approached the Monastery of the Caves. He knocked on the gate loudly and desperately. Jeremiah was the watchman back then, so he was the first to hear Jacob's story.

"Satan is torturing you," said Jeremiah, ponderously determining the malady. He had taken a sip of Prokhor's drink, and the whole world was painted black for him. "If you don't get rid of it, the Evil One will torture you to death and shove you into Hell."

"Oh, My Lord!" exclaimed Jacob frightened.

"Satan inhabits the female body first and foremost," continued Jeremiah — he had had too much of that Prokhor's drink that day to be sure. It even seemed to him that he could see the fires of Hell. "The Evil One makes us suffer mostly because of women."

"What shall I do, Father?" asked Jacob, wringing his hands in despair.

"You must devote yourself to God," the other uttered, looking down at the earth. "You must pray night and day for God to deliver you."

"But I pray constantly," said the young man. "But it doesn't seem to help."

"That means you don't pray very well, since the Evil One has possessed you," announced Jeremiah. "Be sure to remember that a woman is the receptacle of the Evil One. She committed the first sin, bringing condemnation upon humankind."

"But some women are good and kind," remarked Jacob timidly.

"There are no good or kind women," Jeremiah hissed. "They are all liars and whores. Haven't you said that you fear them?"

"Yes, you are right. Father," agreed Jacob.

"You have to escape from them," Jeremiah continued to murmur. He was enjoying this conversation, for it relieved the grief of Prokhor's drink for him. "You must escape from the world which is deceitful, false and unbearable. Join us, and you will be able to cognise the Holy Truth. You will be relieved of all your sorrows."

Jeremiah stood facing Jacob, who was destined to become John. Even then he was a dark wisened old man, bent at the waist, and his eyes were glowing and dark. He pointed to the monastery. Called by this gesture, Jacob went towards the monastery, ready to

forget the world and all its beauty, ready to forget his own name and his unbearable passions. He was entering the monastery, having left behind houses and streets, filled with creatures in long flowing gowns with long flowing hair, whose eyes and glances lashed his heart; whose attraction he couldn't bear: they were like a tempting fire so dangerous for carefree butterflies; they were beautiful, but their beauty existed only to lure and ruin. These thoughts accompanied Jacob as he was approaching the monastery, and in this Jacob, there was a little bit of John already. He thought he was growing closer to God, though in fact, he was escaping from Him. Both he and Jeremiah, who led him astray, had forgotten that woman was also the creation of God, and that it was woman who gave birth to the Son of God, as well as to Jeremiah and Jacob, and, moreover, that woman alone knows the supreme mystery of childbirth, thus making life go on. They didn't remember either that although Eve had picked the forbidden fruit, Adam had tasted of it, too. And that was probably what God had expected them to do, for He wanted them to be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. Woman was as fruitful and rich as the earth itself, and though she had sinned, man was an even worse sinner, for he was the one who killed, ruined and trampled the earth. God endowed woman with the seed of love, and as long as that love lived in her, she was close to God and could not be separated from Him. She might know evil passions, but these passions were mundane, and not she but the world must be judged for them. I, Simeon, the unworthy servant of God, dare to say here and now that everything which is endowed with love belongs to the Lord, while that which bears hate belongs to the Evil One. God and Satan both live in the souls of people, irrespective of whether the soul

is that of a man or a woman. He who stands up against the creation of life is against God, and he is sure to be punished for abusing the Mother of God. So, I am saying that this half-Jacob half-John was going astray instead of growing close to God, for the Almighty had endowed him with a great passion, and his God-pleasing mission in the world should have been to multiply and leave a big fruitful family after himself while he was ready to withdraw into the darkness and punish himself for his God-given passion. He had forgotten Christ's teaching that one should not care about himself, but rather should do good works on Earth, for one who did so would be blessed.

4

It wasn't surprising that John found no comfort in the monastery, though he did everything for his salvation. He fasted for two or three days or even a whole week at a time, he refused to take water. He wore heavy chains and stayed awake for nights on end, fearing his terrible dreams, for he couldn't control them. The minute he closed his eyes, those naked girls on the bright green grass appeared to him. The valley and the naked bodies of the girls were sunlit, every flower was fragrant and sparkling like a precious stone, while the female bodies were so perfect and exquisite, it seemed to him that this beauty was beyond compare. Sometimes he would see the girls running along the golden sands toward the bright blue river. They would dive into the water, splashing and appearing on the surface, their wet bodies sparkling. Nastya would come up to him, and he would order her to take her clothes off. He would watch her body sparkling in the sun, as he remembered it when she had danced in the valley with the other girls. Her body

imparted some divine fragrance. The girl stood in front of him, a timid smile on her lips; her eyes were ablaze, and her cheeks flushed. Her long white neck curved gracefully; her large firm breasts were like two suns whose nuclei were deep purple. Her belly was like a white unsown field that rounded voluptuously; her long thighs were broad and open like an enormous white flower. Her shapely legs were an extension of the lines, and every line was smooth and perfect. The girl raised her hand, fair-skinned and slender, and waved it as if it were a bird's wing.

"Come back!" Nastya said in a tender languid voice. "Come back, darling, for I am the missing half of your body, and it is so hard for me to live without my other half. God created woman from the rib of man. You will suffer as long as your other half is wandering alone in the world. Let us join our bodies and you'll see how perfectly they fit, for they are two integral parts of a single whole. Sweet bliss will come to you, and your life will be easy and pleasant..."

John would wake up covered with perspiration, as if someone had poured ice-cold water on him. He thought these were Satan's attempts to lure him away, so he prayed all night and beat his forehead against the floor until it was tender and red. He was afraid to close his eyes for even a second, since he was sure the vision would appear again, and again he would hear those tempting words.

"You are torturing yourself in vain," the sweet darling voice would say. "And you are making me suffer as well, for I am your intended bride, and without you I can never be happy. We were destined to become one flesh with you, and no one else can make me happy in your stead. My soul groans and weeps, darling, for half of me is missing. You are the part of my flesh I must serve, and you should

rule over me. The world around me is empty, and I know it is also empty for you, my darling. I am calling to you, can you hear me? Come back as soon as you can, otherwise I will search for another half that belongs to someone else against my own will."

He would wake up, his eyes full of tears, and think again that it was the Evil One tempting him. After such awakenings, he couldn't go back to sleep. But if he did, he saw Nastya all dressed, her eyes sad, and her smile grave and apologetic. In this cheerless state, she looked no less beautiful than she did unclothed. The garb she had on seemed to turn darker and darker whenever he tried to banish her from his sight.

Three years passed, but John knew no peace. Then he shook his head as if trying to drive away some ghosts, and went to Jeremiah who had convinced him to withdraw to the monastery.

"You promised me comfort and freedom from my evil passion," he said gravely and firmly, and his eyes under the beetling brows were round, small, and piercing. "But I haven't been able to free myself from it, and now I am burning in its fire even more..."

Jeremiah had drunk only one sip of Prokhor's brew, so the world he saw was covered with flowers. He smiled rather peacefully on hearing John's words.

"That means you don't pray enough," he said.

"You mean that I pray night and day, and that it is not enough?" asked John.

"Everything is in your hands, John," Jeremiah didn't feel like talking, for the world around him was covered with flowers. He longed for peace and solitude, just to be able to sit on the log under a tree and admire the flowers.

But the impertinent young man stuck to him like a leech.

"What do you mean it is in my hands?" he asked.

"Look after yourself," Jeremiah said, annoyed this time. "Otherwise it will become worse. You must do the right thing now so you won't suffer through your own fault in the future."

John approached Jeremiah as if he were about to beat him, breathing heavily and menacingly.

"It seems to me that you have tricked me, Father," he said. "Why am I suffering now?"

As a result, the fragrant and beautiful flowers around Jeremiah faded, and he grew cold as a stone. His stony eye-lids opened, and those eyes full of deep eternal wisdom stared at John. John had a feeling that a big wise old lizard was looking at him.

"The repentance God gave you," said Jeremiah not very loudly, but distinctly and humbly, "is exactly as much as you can endure to become pure as gold in the fire. God never sends a greater ordeal than one can possibly bear, but He is like a master who appoints the strongest slaves to do the hardest work. That is why he makes you suffer so much."

"I've tried everything," said John stepping aside from Jeremiah. "There is no freedom for me."

"Why don't you become a hermit?" asked Jeremiah, his voice thin and weak. "If you become a hermit, you will surely find the truth: the struggle will be over, and God will help you with the prayers of His Saints..."

They stood facing each other. John's eyes were lit with pain and hope, while Jeremiah's eyes were filled with grave and inevitable wisdom.

5

When I entered the monastery Jeremiah was a withered old man. He used to sit motionless under the bell, and by then he really did resemble a lizard: his

eyes were closed as if he were asleep, and not a single muscle stirred in his face. However, everybody was aware that he wasn't asleep, but just the opposite: he was watching carefully and knew more than the Father Superior about every brother, though he didn't let everything out, and it was hard to tell what he was about to disclose and what to conceal. That was why they were more afraid of him than of the Father Superior, and tried to avoid Jeremiah as best as they could. That was also the reason Jeremiah was so lonely. He had not a single friend or benefactor in the monastery. When he noticed that I also observed the brothers of our community, he suddenly started showing affection for me, inviting me to sit down beside him. Quite often he told me stories. On serene summer or autumn evenings, when everything was soft and motionless, and when the primordial peace set in and every living soul tried not to upset it even with a gesture, then Jeremiah's lizard eyes opened, and I could see bright green eyes not touched by the old age. When he was telling stories, he stared into the distance. Perhaps the Dnieper sparkling at the foot of the hill attracted his attention, or it could have been a boat drifting along the reaches of the river as if it couldn't get to the other end. Jeremiah's voice flowed, quiet and reasonable. It didn't seem to belong to his owner, for his bright green gaze and that old rasping voice couldn't have the same owner. So I came to the conclusion then that Jeremiah was extraordinarily wise, though he seldom acted according to his wisdom. He betrayed several friends of his to the Father Superior, and all his fervor was put on rather than genuine. He liked practical jokes, and John's story was just one of them. Jeremiah never opened his heart to a single person. Though he tried to become friends with me, I must admit that it was not love that made

him seek a friend but rather loneliness, for poor are those who never disclose their innermost thoughts and who are not able to share their feelings. They resemble hollow trees, for one storm is enough to snap them. That's why the rustling of the leaves on such trees is so self-conscious: they desperately want to live but know that they might die any minute. Though Jeremiah was a very old man, I didn't think any of the brothers living then would witness his death; everybody else might die, but he would outlive them all. If he died no one would mourn him, for no one had ever been in his good graces with him.

I don't write this to judge him or denounce his deeds, though sometimes I can't help it, and this is my grave sin. I believe, for it looks as though I have denounced John as well. Who can measure the importance of someone's life? Who has the right to judge whether a man is a saint or a villain? Everything in this world is intertwined in such a complicated way, and our feeble minds grasp only the shadow of the universe: the shadows of things and people. That is because all things and people under the sun reveal only a small fragment of their qualities. The rest stays concealed until the proper moment — if ever it comes — when that person can open his heart. But I think it is enough to remain unbiased. My pure impartiality is all that is needed, for there is a clever saying that every man is a lie, and that he cannot know everything about this lie.

6

After that John went to live in a narrow, miserable cell locked away in the cave. His existence was transformed from alternating nights and days into constant night, though night had been his main problem, and

this became the most unbearable trial for his spirit. The minute he plunged into the darkness, Nastya appeared to him in mourning. At first she was dressed in a black garb, tears rolling bitterly and irrepressibly down her face, for she saw with her own eyes that her beloved was drifting away from her. He was absolutely calm as he watched her weep, for her tears convinced him that he was going the right way. His face was stony and his expression ice-cold. His eyes were severe. Then Nastya wanted to melt this ice, and her dress gradually became light. One of the next visions was Nastya exactly as he remembered her in the green valley. Bright and gorgeous, dressed in white, with a thick plait hanging to her waist, her enormous eyes tender, she was approaching him, and her smile was affectionate and tempting.

"It's strange," he said then. "When I was your neighbor I didn't pay much attention to you. It was only after the vision in the green valley that you charmed me. Why do you come to me?"

She didn't answer. She came up to the unshaven, filthy, petrified man, and pressed his head to her breast.

"Please, release me, let me go," he whispered, shaking his head. "What do you want from me? Get out of my sight, for you are the Evil One!"

She whispered as softly as a silver brook splashing somewhere nearby.

"No, I am not the Evil One, my darling, but your match in this world. I am destined to save you."

Big tears streamed from his eyes, and those tears were almost black, leaving dirty stains on her dazzling white gown. He could sense the sweet fragrance of her body and the disgusting smell of his own flesh. He raised his head, and his neck grew stiff, for he couldn't take his eyes off her slightly

swaying face, so kind and beautiful. She looked down on him with patience, love and kindness. He was choking with the delicate warmth that emanated from her.

"You are cold, darling," she whispered, and he was listening to this soft murmur of the hidden brook unseen in the darkness. "How can I make you warm and pour life into you? I am afraid that you might die in this unbearable humidity and cold, my beloved."

Gradually her gown melted and faded as if it were made of ice or smoke. Through this disappearing gown, he saw her silver body that glowed in the darkness in front of him, and it seemed to him that it was turning into an unusual lamp. Lying in his miserable bed, he watched with wide-open eyes this divine miracle: a silver goddess full of remarkable beauty and magic.

"Move a little," she said, her lips hardly stirring. "I'll warm you..."

Whenever he had such visions and felt strong enough, he would drive her away, cursing her in the foulest language, shouting at her till he began to foam at the mouth, threatening her with fists clenched. She would slowly merge with the darkness: first her body, draped with a white cloth, faded, then the cloth grew dark and gradually turned black. She moved away into the background, leaving him alone in the impenetrable black night, trembling and angry, perspiring and exhausted, and filled with sheer disgust. Then he would plunge into deep sleep without any dreams as if ceasing to exist for a short while. When he came to, he would feel feeble and stiff, and his body would be wasted alive.

He was not always strong enough to drive her away, and not always so filthy. Then she would lie down by his side and cuddle up to him, and he felt her

delicate warmth, and her slow caress. that was lulling. As for him, he didn't move a finger to get closer to her, though he eagerly drank her caresses, and every cell of his body responded to her presence. His head would spin, while some beautiful lulling music filled the air; his eyes could see again the green valley, the bright blue river, and the girls floating in a quiet beautiful dance. He could perfectly see only one of the dancers, for she was the only one who turned her head to look at the place where he was hidden. Her thick plait pulled her head down a little, and a heavenly smile played on her lips. Then he approached the one who came to meet him, leaving the other dancers behind. She was the one who lay by his side at the moment, making him warm and comfortable. He would take her head into his calloused hands and drink milk from her parted lips. Milk would fill his whole body to the brim, and he would doze off, slowly plunging into the crib of warm, blue lulling waves, and the night full of stars and some mysterious breath. That what followed was beyond him. it was much more that he could bear: a sharp pain grew inside him like a thorn bush. This pain originated in his heart, pouring out of it, making him writhe and twist. She was kissing him tenderly, washing his face with her tears, burning like fire.

"My poor, poor boy," she whispered passionately. "Why are you torturing and humiliating yourself? You sacrifice yourself because of you stupid fear. Just look how big the sun is outside while you writhe here in the darkness. You must have forgotten the songs of nightingales and the delicate voices of cuckoos on a May night. You probably have long forgotten the gorgeous play of the dew at dawn, or the youthful rain which is for the earth exactly what you are for me. My poor, poor boy. You are sleepy and cold. Why don't

you wake up, my darling, and come to me that is real."

But he was still lying in his bed like a block of ice, his body motionless, his lips dry. His eyes were closed and empty, while little black grass-snakes seemed to be multiplying in his mouth. He felt disgusted with himself and this beautiful silver girl who had appeared from nowhere in his cell. The black grass-snakes were crawling out of his mouth: he spat out some filthy words that sounded like hoarse barking of a dog. The black grass-snakes attacked the beautiful girl, and it was a pleasure for him to see the smile on her lips fading, the light in her starry eyes dying out, and her frightened gesture when she grabbed her white mantle to cover her body. He saw clearly that she was afraid, and her face was tense and frightened as she kept looking back. He couldn't stop spitting out those little grass-snakes, choking on foul words and curses. Her body was no more to be seen under the white mantle which was also turning gray. She covered her ears with her palms, and big silver tears were rolling down her cheeks. He didn't feel any pity or compassion towards her as he rattled and barked out the foul words that immediately turned into vipers coiling and crawling toward the frightened girl. Her clothes would become dark blue, and she would step away into the background, stretching out her silver palm as if protecting herself from the vipers that crawled in a row in front of her, hissing maliciously. Her gown was almost black as she merged with the darkness in the background, and she was almost invisible, and then he would calm down and hush, closing his eyes at last.

A black toad was growing in his chest, and this black toad was sucking the blood from his heart, and he was glad about that. When the cave attendant brought

water and bread, he sent him away, never taking either bread or water. It happened so that once he asked for heavy chains, and when they were brought, he put them on, having taken all his clothes off.

7

But this didn't relieve him of his misery. It couldn't comfort him, and Nastya would come to his cell once again to weep and wash him with her burning tears that healed and cicatrized the wounds left by the chains. There were moments when he wasn't able to fight her love and he permitted her to lie down by his side to feel the warmth and excitement of her body. He would see the green valley again and the young dancers in it. He drank milk from Nastya's lips, and it filled his exhausted and enslaved body with surprising new strength.

"Leave this filthy pit," Nastya kept urging him tirelessly. "Come to me. I am real, and I'm still waiting for you. My grief is like black flowers, and my pain is like faded leaves. I miss you as much as you miss me. Tell me. how long must we torture ourselves and humiliate our love? How long is that awful unbearable fire going to burn inside us?"

But he saw in the deep blue night that the jug was toppled over and the milk from that jug was spilt into the night. The milk was unfolding like a silver scroll, and his strength was pouring out of him as if he were a hollow tree. He would feel disgusted again, and the girl would step aside, tears covering her face that was darkened with grief. She would turn back to look at him several times: she never blamed him for those filthy spiteful words, but felt sorry for him rather, and this made him rave even more. The minute he closed his eyes, he could clearly feel the toad stirring in his

chest, and he guessed that the toad's name was nothing but loneliness, and that it was destined to suck out all his blood. And then he thought what else he could possibly do to torture his body in order to drown the fire still burning in it.

One lonely night when Nastya didn't appear, and his last candle had burnt to the end, it was still a long time before dawn, he thought of another way to free himself of his torment. He decided to hide his body from Nastya. He took a spade — every hermit used to have one in his cell — and started digging a pit in the middle of the cell. Though he was very weak, the inspiration made him feel much stronger as he was digging. He was scattering the earth around as if he were a mole pushing it out and sinking deeper and deeper into it. He breathed in the fresh aroma of damp clay, and his head was spinning. He would stop and rest for a while, then dig again. He kept digging the whole day and the whole night until he fell down exhausted. He buried his face and hands in the fresh clay, inhaling its acrid smell. He laughed, pressing his face to the clay.

Then suddenly he noticed Nastya standing at a distance — she was dressed in some dark clothes. She was watching him sadly.

He got very angry.

"Go away!" he cried out, infuriated, threatening her with his fists clenched from the pit. And all the foul words spurted out of his mouth again, as it had happened before so many times when he had seen her. She didn't move, but grievously shook her head, silver tears glistening on her cheeks.

When the Lenten fast began, he got into the pit, which was as deep as his shoulders and started covering himself with earth, intending to leave his head and arms above ground. He spent the whole fast in the pit

covered with earth, unable to move. But even then Nastya didn't leave him. She would come up and kneel before him, feeding him from her breast, so he wouldn't die of hunger. At first, he shook his head, pushing her aside. But once he started crying, his tears were black, and he couldn't help welcoming her caress. He took her silver breast in his black lips and drank the warm wine from it. The world went spinning around him, and he saw the dawn at last. He could hear the nightingales singing and thousands of dandelions in the grass, and the gray mist enveloping the river, and a cuckoo that cried once in the thick of the mist. It cried once and choked as if something sharp had stuck in its throat.

"So, it was you who brought this disaster upon me," he hissed, and for the first time he struck the gentle face bent over him with a swinging blow.

She recoiled from him, weeping, and slowly moved away. His anxiety grew along with the distance between them. At first, his anxiety was just the itch where his feet were supposed to be buried in the ground. Then the warm waves attacked him, becoming stronger as the bent black figure receded. When it turned almost completely dark, and only the contours of her body loomed in the distance, he felt that his feet were burning in a real fire. He felt his veins contract and his bones crack. He thought he was long dead and burning in the fires of Hell, while black shifty shadows were scurrying about, dancing and shouting, and the flame reached his abdomen. There in the distance, Nastya's pale face, covered with tears, was turned to him as if she were hoping he might call her after all, that he would ask her to save him at last, and the two silver traces of her tears emanated a shimmering light in the total darkness. Then he cried out, a terrible shriek escaping his mouth, pleading for

God to save him, without even realizing that God had tried to do so more than once by sending His angel to him. This shriek was so terrible that Mark, the cave attendant, and Isaac came running to his window — the two of them had been drinking mead secretly back in the cave.

"What's wrong with you, Brother?" shouted Mark into the window. "Shall we dig you out?"

"No, for God's sake, no!" John cried, fearing that they might see his burnt body if they decided to dig him out.

Mark, the cave attendant, and Isaac hurried away from the window, anxious to drink the rest of the mead from the barrel that Mark had brought earlier that day. They sat together by the light of the oil-lamp, drinking from a mug that they were passing back and forth. Meanwhile, John saw a terrible wild serpent that was ready to swallow him. The serpent was breathing flames into John's face, showering him with sparks, and beating his tail against the wall with dreadful noise. John felt a sharp pain penetrating his body again and he whimpered softly, pleading for God to save him from Satan's invasion. On the night of the Resurrection of Christ, the wild serpent leapt on top of him, and in a second, both John's head and arms were in the serpent's jaws. He felt his hair burning and cracking in the fire.

"Oh, God. My Lord," he shouted in the serpent's jaws, "why have you forsaken me? Have mercy, My Lord, and save me, a sinner! Free me from the fire I am burning, and save me from this monster that is eating me!"

The serpent left him alone, backing away with a snarl, for a lightning flashed, and it was a golden sword in the hands of a woman dressed in a white mantle. This woman had Nastya's face, but there was

no smile on it: only sadness. The lightning flashed again, and the wild serpent disappeared, for the earth opened wide and swallowed it. The soft silver voice that belonged to Nastya sang — or probably wept — over the sufferer.

“Poor John! You rose against the divine power of the Almighty when you humiliated me and flouted your own nature... Remember that sinners are both those who yield to all their temptations, and those who flout and ignore their natures...”

Nastya approached him and started shovelling the grayish clay aside with her silver sparkling hands. He lowered his head, groaning loudly. At last she had almost unearthed him — she had done it much faster than he had dug out the pit with his spade. She took him by the hand and led him out of that grave.

“Who are you?” John asked her harshly.

“I am your abandoned love in this world,” answered the girl. “I have come to help you find your conscience.”

He stood facing her impertinently.

“God could never send me into your wicked arms,” he replied, looking thievish as a cat, lecherous lights sparkling in his eyes, “I know who you are! The Evil One!”

“Poor John!” said the girl with Nastya’s face, shaking her head. “A man who can not tell the difference between God’s word and Satan’s can never become a saint.”

Then he looked at her as only a man can stare at a woman.

“So, you are here to tempt me, the Evil One...”

Nastya smiled sadly.

“I am calling you to your destiny.”

He stood facing her and his breathing became heavy. His eyes were piercing and lustful as he looked at her

from under his brows. The girl stepped aside, frightened. Silver, pure, beautiful in a divine way, charming and sparkling, she stood right in front of him. He loomed before her, filthy, covered with clay, unshaven, eyes glowing, mouth wide-open. He grinned rapaciously and took a step toward her as if she was his trapped prey. She emitted a shriek and rushed away from him, though she failed to escape from his strong and greedy hands. He caught her silver mantle with his black fingers and tore it to pieces, throwing it to the ground at his feet. Her silver body struggled helplessly in his arms. He growled, biting her face and lips, and she didn't turn away. Then he threw her down on the fresh earth, falling on top of her pure and virgin body like an enormous black clod, tearing it apart and trampling it...

She didn't struggle anymore. Tears were streaming from her eyes; her body cramped. He got to his feet and stared for some time at her maimed body. It was no longer silver or sparkling, for it was as dirty and trampled as his own. A dark wave grew in him, starting from his toes and reaching his chest; finally, his black toad awoke. He shuddered with disgust, dark anger seizing him. He grabbed the body which was no longer silver and sparkling and threw it into the pit. Feverishly, he started raking the earth with his hands and feet, filling the pit with it until it was all covered with earth and clay. Then he heard a groan from under the earth and lamentations, and the voice pleading for mercy.

He didn't pay any attention to those groans and lamentations. Neither did he pay attention to the voice full of suffering that pleaded for mercy. He began trampling the mellow soil, first with just one foot, and then with two feet. In a minute, he was already dancing on top of the grave. The more he danced, the lighter

and happier his heart became. He roared with laughter and jumped like a madman on the grave. He kept jumping, grunting, and stamping his feet. He laughed, shook his head, still stamping his feet. He kept stamping his feet as long as he could hear groans, weeping and prayers from under the earth. He couldn't stop trampling the soil, and sweat was pouring from his body as if he were standing in a waterfall. The sweat was streaming in floods, while his body seemed to be melting; it was becoming thinner and thinner. Hoarse spasmodic shrieks escaped from his chest, but he couldn't stop even for a second.

He interrupted this extraordinary dance only when he felt completely exhausted. He fell onto his bed, feeling wasted as a dry pumpkin. He heard the howling of the wind, and it seemed to him that he was lying in a draught, and the wind carried sand and threw it at him. The grains of sand were beating his body and whipping his face. Almost dead, he lay in the wind and drifting sand. When at last he regained consciousness, he saw the Father Superior, Mark the cave attendant, Isaac, and the rest of the Brothers standing by his bedside. They all formed a semi-circle, each holding a candle in his hand.

"Would you like to confess your sins before your death, Brother?"

"Yes, I'd desire to do so," he replied, and told them this story, and I have written it down after Isaac's words. He was the one who wanted to die in the sunlight and asked to be carried out of the caves for this purpose.

I am relaying the story without changing a word of it, though it might sound untrue to some extent. One thing I know for sure: evil visions tortured John, and those visions were the language of his soul. He couldn't tell the difference between God's word and

Satan's, for he had not cognized the truth. And the truth is that love of God is measured by love of life and the world, and good deeds are appreciated, while the one who withdraws into the darkness becomes the child of the darkness itself. I don't denounce his lies, for they were not hypocritical but rather involuntary. But he mistook his own fear for God's will, thus defiling the will of the Lord in deed.



CHAPTER X

*in which there is a story about
Gregory the Thaumaturge who provided
serfs for the monastery*

1

Three thieves stood in the shade of the trees staring at the monks who gathered for the evening mass. The bell was tolling loudly and the peals resounded in the quiet of the falling night. Gregory walked out of his cell. He was a gaunt old man with a bent back. He minced off, leaning on his staff, looking down at the ground. The other monks also left their cells and silently joined the file of monks on their way to mass. Their eyes were lowered as they went. Black and humble, they seemed to drift without even touching the ground.

"Look," said one of the thieves, a tall robust man. "He pretends to be a poor simpleton, just a poor miserable old man."

"He is the owner of vast treasures, so why does he live here as a monk?" replied the second thief, licking his lips. It was a stifling summer evening, and he was thirsty after they had drunk mead.

"Everybody is crazy in his own way," said the third thief, who was the youngest of the three. "His life is not so bad here, is it? He has everything he might need, and he probably loves to pray!"

"Do you think he locks his cell when he leaves?" asked the first one.

"Ivan said that he usually doesn't lock it. And, anyway, no one can open locks better than I," said the thirsty one rather boastfully. "And Ivan also said that the treasures this monk keeps in his cell are countless indeed."

"He didn't donate them to the monastery, did he?" said the youngest thief.

"It will be theirs the minute he goes to his eternal reward," the tallest thief said with a grin.

The monks went into the church, making the sign of the cross frequently. Jeremiah the Perspicacious was the only one who remained to overhear the conversation of the thieves. However, he didn't rush to warn Gregory, for he bore him a grudge. The thieves crawled toward Gregory's cell in the shade of the trees, while Jeremiah sent a serf to the Father Superior with a message that he didn't feel well and couldn't attend the evening mass.

The thieves walked noiselessly and even the sand didn't crunch under their feet. When they approached Gregory's cell, they looked around. There was nobody about.

"Do you think we should leave someone on guard?" asked the tallest one.

"No one is going to come here until the end of the mass," answered the thirsty one.

The tallest thief tried the door; it was locked. The thirsty one came up and examined the door.

"Oh, it's just a simple latch here," he commented and thrust a wire hook into the key-hole. He pressed something, and the door creaked open.

The thieves looked around cautiously once again and stepped inside. The faint evening light poured through the window covered with an ox bladder. This

light was not sufficient to see things inside the cell properly.

"Light a candle, will you," ordered the tallest one, glancing back.

The cell looked humble inside. There was a bed covered with a dark bedspread, an empty table, and a stool. Part of wall was covered with a curtain.

"Where are the treasures?" asked the youngest thief with disappointment.

"Did you hope the treasures would find you on their own?" asked the tallest thief.

The thirsty one bent to look under the table.

"Hey, look!" he exclaimed. "There is a box here... And it also has a latch. Give me some light!"

The youngest one knelt down to illuminate the box. A minute later, the box was opened, and they could smell something delicious and roasted.

"Wow!" exclaimed the thirsty one. "There is a roasted goose and a bottle of mead in here."

He took out the bottle, threw the cork away, and drank greedily from the bottle.

"You shouldn't drink now," said the tallest one severely. "We'll take all of it with us later if we can carry it."

"I'm thirsty," said the thief, gasping for air. "I have never tried such mead before, I tell you fellows!"

"It's not surprising, for he used to be Master of Hounds for the Prince," remarked the tallest thief, approaching the curtain on the wall. He drew back the curtain, and laughed with satisfaction.

"Look, there's a door here!"

The thirsty one put the bottle back into the box, and a minute later he was examining the door.

"The lock here is quite strange," he announced pulling the belt that was nailed to the door instead of a handle. "Oh, it's open!"

The door was shut tight. There was something behind it that blocked it.

"Hold it, and we'll squeeze in," ordered the tallest thief.

The youngest one was the first to enter; he had a candle in his hand; the tallest thief followed him.

"Come here!" cried out the tallest one. "It's amazing, what we've found in here!"

The thirsty one squeezed in and let go of the door — so stunned he was — and it swang shut with a click.

"Careful!" cried out the tallest thief.

They stood still staring. In front of them was a carved wooden cupboard with dishes that were all of great value. In the shimmering light of their candle, the plates glittered.

"I reckon it's his pantry. There are no windows here. And, look at this box here!"

A silver-bound chest stood in the corner of the pantry. The thirsty thief rushed towards it.

"This lock looks familiar to me," he said happily. "Though it's not the easiest one."

"You open it while we gather the dishes."

The youngest thief stuck the candle on an empty shelf, the tallest one pulled out a sack from under his clothes.

"Hold it!"

He began packing the dishes carefully and very quickly.

"How are you doing?" he asked when the sack was filled and set aside.

"I'll have it opened in a second, to be sure," said the thirsty one.

"You're too slow there..."

But at last the lock crackled, and the lid of the chest was flung open. Precious metals glittered coldly inside the chest.

"Gold and silver!" the three thieves exclaimed in unison, and it took their breath away.

"I'll take the sack, and the two of you will carry the chest," ordered the tallest thief. "We have to hurry and get away from here. Give me a hand!"

The youngest one helped him lift it, and the tallest thief rushed to the door. But it was locked.

"Cyril!" cried out the tallest one, "come here and have a look!"

The thirsty one ran to the door. There was no handle there; neither could he find a key-hole.

"Let's try and lift it!" he said.

He worked with his wire but no matter how he tried the door didn't budge an inch.

"What the devil!" the tallest one exclaimed hoarsely putting the sack to the ground.

"It's terrible, folks," wheezed Cyril. "But I don't know how to open this door."

2

They beat on the planks and tried to lift the door; they even slashed it with their knives, and they also tried to dislodge the door with their shoulders, but the door didn't budge. It didn't move an inch, but only rumbled a few times. At last the prisoners heard the entrance door creak, and they grew still for fear of giving themselves away. Gregory immediately noticed that he had had visitors — the entrance door was left open, and the lid of the box was open, too. He closed the box and locked it carefully; after that he started praying. First he recited prayers and then started singing hymns. At last he finished, and exclaimed so loudly that the thieves could hear him.

"My Lord, let your servants sleep after a hard day

of vain work. Their work was of benefit to their enemies!"

Then Gregory sat down to a table laden with roasted goose and mead. He ate, sucking and munching, while the thieves who had butterflies in their stomachs, were craning their necks toward the door, for the sounds were more than they could bear. They put out their candle to save at least the end for the future. They sat in total darkness on the damp earthen floor, having laid the sacks they had brought under their backs. Sometimes Gregory would leave his cell, or pretend to leave and stand at the door listening. Then the thieves would stir and fuss, pushing the door and hammering at it. A blissful smile appeared on Gregory's face at such moments, and his eyes blinked almost blissfully, too.

"Why are you smiling so happily, Gregory?" Jeremiah asked him once passing by his door.

"I'm smiling, for I know I am following the path pleasing to God," Gregory answered mysteriously and went back into his cell to give the thieves some rest — they were too persistent in trying to free themselves.

The thieves grew still, and Gregory sat down at the table again to devour a quick snack. He used to do it often, championing and gulping noisily, and at these moments a mysterious, contented, almost happy smile lit his face.

Two days passed but the thieves still didn't want to be discovered yet, while Gregory was patient and prayed zealously and loudly so that the thieves could hear his prayers. And he also sang at the top of his voice, which was cracked, high, and sweet. He sat singing and rocking, and when his throat was dry he would take a sip of his mead. During these two days he sang more hymns than he usually sang in a month.

On the third day, the thieves could no longer bear

it, and knocked on the door while Gregory was busy singing.

"What's that? What's the matter?" exclaimed Gregory, pretending he was frightened. "Those must be devils knocking on the door."

"We are not devils," replied someone from behind the door. "We are thieves, and we came here to rob you, Father."

"Where are your voices coming from?" asked Gregory, laughing in his sleeve. "From the sky or from under the ground?"

"Our voices come from your pantry where we are locked in," a faint voice answered.

"Who locked you there?" asked Gregory, craning his neck in order not to miss the answer.

"The Evil One has probably locked us in here," replied the same faint voice. "We can't endure it here any longer, I'm afraid."

"It wasn't the Evil One," Gregory answered solemnly raising his finger in a preaching manner. "It was rather the power of my prayers. God caught you red-handed at a repulsive deed and locked you in there."

"Let us free, Father," the voice pleaded. "You'll never see us again. Father, we will never dare to offend you, we promise!"

"You have offended Our Lord, not me!" said Gregory still holding his finger up. "It wasn't me who locked you in there, and it won't be me who lets you out."

"What shall we do then, Father?" the voice said plaintively.

"Go to sleep, and I am going to pray for you. Oh, Lord, My God," he exclaimed. "They must be really tired after the hard work they accomplished for the sake of our enemy. Let them sleep, for they still are Your servants!"

Gregory laughed softly and started singing loudly again. When he felt tired, he fortified himself with roasted goose and mead. When he had finished all this food, he sent for a lay brother and asked him to go and buy bacon and bread, explaining to him in great detail how he should choose the bacon and what type of baked bread he should buy. Upon hearing that, the thieves were practically howling, and when the lay brother had finally left, they hammered at the door with their fists pleading with him to unlock the door.

"What is troubling you again?" asked Gregory very humbly.

"Don't torture us, Father," said the tallest thief from behind the door. "We swear to God that if you let us out, no thief will ever dare to touch your treasures. And we promise you a good ransom. Let's talk it over. Don't let us die of hunger."

"And thirst!" exclaimed the thirsty one.

"Be merciful to my youth!" cried out the third thief who was the youngest of them.

"No, you are not humble enough yet, and you haven't heard enough prayers and hymns," explained Gregory, rather humbly. "I want to help you to devote your lives to Jesus Christ. Do you hear me, thieves? I want you spend your lives in this holy abode and forget forever your repulsive deeds."

"What do you want from us, Father?" wheezed one of the thieves.

"I will inform you on the fifth or sixth day. For now, be humble and patient."

"But the thing is that we can't tell nights from days here, and, moreover, we have no idea how long we've been suffering already."

"You've been here for four days, so it's only your fourth day, in fact," Gregory answered eagerly. "Well, my boy," he addressed the lay brother who had re-

turned, bent under the heavy purchases, for he had brought the bread and bacon. "Did you manage to buy good food?"

"It's the best possible bread and wonderful bacon," the lay brother answered solemnly.

"Wait then, help yourself," said Gregory, cutting a tiny piece of bacon with a trembling hand and putting it on a small piece of bread.

"Thank you, Father, and may God prolong your life," replied the lay brother humbly, not able to take his eyes off the enormous piece of glossy brown smoked bacon.

3

Gregory kept praying and singing hymns and sipping *from the bottle of mead*, and he ate the bacon with his prayers. He grunted with satisfaction and pleasure, praising the food loudly. The thieves didn't seem to respond, and Gregory worried a bit. "Have they died there in the locked pantry?" he wondered. He walked over to the door and pressed his ear to it, trying to overhear what was happening in the pantry. His face became tense and his mouth flew open. But then he discerned a slight rustle and shut his mouth relieved. He tiptoed to the middle of the cell and started a hymn.

"Listen, Father!" cried out the tallest thief at last. "You are a malicious, stone-hearted man. Listen to what I am going to tell you: we'll bury all your silverware and gold so deep that neither you nor us will ever be able to get it — that is if you don't set us free."

"Gold and silver?" asked Gregory with feigned horror. "What are you talking about? How can a poor man like me have such treasures? It must have been the devil who showed you that which doesn't exist."

Satan has tempted you sinners. Light up the room and have a better look."

"We have no light, Father," answered the tallest thief. "But even in the darkness it jingles well..."

"It jingles in your sinful souls," remarked Gregory. "Now I realize that Satan rules over everything you do, and dims your eyes with mischief. Five days are not enough; it's still too early for you to come out..."

The thieves fell silent. They were probably consulting with each other.

"Forgive us, Father," said the thirsty one at last. "My friend is sick with hunger, and that is why he talked to you so indecently. He is repenting sincerely, for there is neither gold, nor silver here. There is nothing but broken pottery shards here..."

"One of you is beginning to use his head," Gregory replied with satisfaction, and even lowered his head onto his shoulder like a bird. "Let the others confirm it!"

"Forgive me, Father," pleaded the tallest thief after a pause. "What I said was disgusting, but it was due to my dreadful hunger. You have neither gold, nor silver here. All you have is old and useless pottery shards."

"Now, the third one, please!" ordered Gregory.

"Please, forgive me, Father," said the youngest thief faintly. "I'm too feeble to speak."

Gregory paced about the cell, his hands locked behind his back, his beard jutting out, then he stood rocking on his feet.

"Now we can discuss the conditions. Are you ready to listen to me?"

"We are ready, Father," answered the prisoners meekly.

"Tell me your names and where you all come from. I will send the lay brother to check it out. If anyone

lies to me, he will stay in my pantry for ever and ever more. Only those who tell the truth will be allowed to come out."

"I'm Cyril, but everyone calls me Yamchich, and I live in Podol, which is not so far from the gate," said the thirsty one.

"I'm Daniel, and my nick-name is Squint-Eye," answered the tallest thief. "I'm Cyril's neighbor."

"I'm Mikhail, Daniel's son," replied the youngest one inertly.

"Now my lay brother is going to check all this information. So you can have rest," said Gregory, opening the box under the table. He took out a bottle of mead and took a long sip...

"One of you called me a mean and malicious man," began Gregory almost moved. "That is a dirty lie, if I were indeed mean, I would have taken my revenge on him for saying so. I'm not cruel, but the opposite, I'm rather kind, and that is why I am trying to save you thieves from your own evil, and teach you good. You know the hair in my beard is very thin; it's so thin that even flies get caught in it... They whizz and buzz, ha-ha! It is so funny. I love every living soul under the sun, you know. And I love you, too, thieves. And maybe my love for you is greater than you think. I am trying to save you thieves. And if I don't save you, it is probably better for you to die! You choose the path to hell and it's a black one. Your souls have turned black, too. You are totally black, from your head to your toes. If you don't believe me, look at each other and you'll see. You are darker than the night, you foul thieves!"

He sipped from the bottle again, and the mead bubbled in his throat. One of the prisoners wept.

"We are black, Father, absolutely black!" said Mikhail and Cyril together.

"Your ears and tongues are black. Black are your mouths and faces, as well as your arms and legs. You are pitch black from outside as well as from within," said Gregory, standing in the center of his cell and rocking on his feet, his hands locked behind his back. At that very moment, a fly appeared from somewhere and got stuck in Gregory's beard buzzing and whizzing piercingly, and he brushed it aside impatiently.

"Black hearts beat in your pitch black chests; you are being consumed by the black night. I can even see through the wall, and my heart writhes in pain and weeps for you..."

The thieves wept.

"Set us free for God's sake, Father," Cyril cried plaintively. "We can no longer endure such torture..."

"That's exactly what I am willing to do," Gregory chattered. "Isn't that what I'm talking about? But I will free you on one condition only."

"You will tell us about your condition. Father, won't you?" asked Daniel.

"No, that's not the point. You must accept this condition before I tell you what it is."

Silence ensued in the pantry.

"What if we ask you first to tell us your condition?" Daniel asked timidly.

"You know quite well, that I can forget about you forever, poor creatures. It is not so difficult to forget about you, is it?.. The Evil One hopes to win your souls, I'm sure."

Silence ensued again. Gregory was waiting patiently. He was grinning happily, baring his bright white teeth.

"We accept your condition, Father," said Daniel and Cyril in unison.

"What about the third one?"

"I accept it, too," said Mikhail with difficulty for he was too feeble to speak.

"I've prepared a parchment for you thieves. It isn't fair to call you thieves in it, so I decide to call you debtors who failed to pay off their debts to me in time."

"Do you want us to become your serfs, Father?" Daniel asked rather inertly.

"I would like you to become the serfs of the holy monastery, of course!" answered Gregory very humbly. "You would serve the community and you would have a place to confess your sins. This is a God-pleasing and holy aspiration, don't you think?"

He lowered his head onto his shoulder like a bird, narrowing his eyes cunningly, and laughed with his cracked voice, his beard trembling.

"Your works are divine, My Lord!" he said, interrupting his laughter and rocking slightly. "I work hard for the sake of Your glory and in Your name. Make me happy, Our Father, and let me teach these men whose souls are black. Hey, you," he cried out rudely. "Can you hear me there? I'll teach you how you should behave!"

4

Gregory invited all the brothers into his cell, and when the whole community gathered they saw how humble it was with their own eyes. Until that day, no one except the Father Superior and the lay brother had visited him there.

"Some thieves crept into my cell," said Gregory meekly. "I prayed for them and they went to sleep. They have slept for five days and five nights. So I called you, brothers, to help me wake them up."

He opened the door to the pantry and cried out into the darkness.

"Hey, you, how long are you going to hide in vain? Get up and come out!"

Exhausted and emaciated, the thieves crawled — for they were too feeble to walk — into the light. One of them was very tall, and the other one was licking his cracked lips, and the third one was thin as a rail. He was covering his eyes with his palm, though the light in Gregory's cell was quite dim.

"Why did you come to my humble abode?" Gregory asked very loudly.

"Satan tricked us into thinking that you had lots of money," replied Daniel the Squint-Eye...

"And did you find any money?" Gregory asked abruptly.

"Not a single *rez* *," answered Cyril. "You are poorer than we are."

"Did you sleep well while I prayed for your souls?"

"Dreadful dreams tormented us, Father," said Mikhail. "They were awful nightmares indeed."

"Then an angel visited us in our dreams," said Daniel. "He ordered us to become monastery serfs as a punishment for our sins."

"He also told us to give up our repulsive business," added Cyril.

"Do you hear that, Father Superior?" Gregory asked turning abruptly on his heels toward the Father Superior. "They want to become monastery serfs. Ask the Father Superior for such grace!"

In a second, the three thieves fell to their knees and bowed low to the ground.

"We beg of you, Father, be kind and let us become monastery serfs."

* *rez* — a small coin, part of a grivna

"Let it be so," said the Father Superior. "And you, Brother Gregory, prepare the parchment. But don't write that they wanted to become serfs; put down that they are the monastery's debtors."

"We claim that we are the debtors of the monastery," said the former thieves.

All the monks nodded in agreement, for they thought this was God-pleasing. indeed. There was only one monk, whose name was Isaac, who didn't rejoice in seeing the reformed thieves. Who knows why tears glistened in his eyes, but nobody except Jeremiah seemed to notice. Jeremiah threatened Isaac with his finger, and the latter blinked in fright and quickly brushed his unbidden tears away.

I wasn't in the monastery when it all happened. Jeremiah and Isaac told me this story. Isaac relayed the story through my window while I was living in my hermitage. Nobody knew why the tears appeared in Isaac's eyes again when he remembered this story.

"And what amazed me most of all about this story," said Isaac in the end. "was that Gregory was absolutely sure that he was sowing love on the earth, and that his deed was really pleasing to the Lord. He had probably forgotten that a man who puts a yoke on another man is the worst possible slave himself."

5

At night, when everyone else was asleep, he loved to enter the pantry where he kept all his treasures. He used to lock the entrance door and light a candle. Then he would open his treasure chest. He emptied chest box onto a sackcloth and began counting all his treasures, putting each piece back into the chest separately. There were coins there, *grivnas* and *rezes*, and there were special compartments, in the chest for

those coins. There were special compartments for Greek, Polish, German, and Khazar* coins. He had gold and silver bullion, as well as scrap-gold and silver. He would examine every piece, caressing it with his fingers, and humming sweetly all the time. His eyes were almost closed, and his lips made a smacking sound. That was what the omnipresent Jeremiah happened to see through a hole he made in the wall — he took out the cork from the hole and could see through it. He desperately wanted to inform the Father Superior of this, but the latter probably knew all about Gregory's treasures.

"Brother Jeremiah," said the Father Superior reasonably. "let's be wise. His objects do no harm. He just treasures them, our Brother Gregory. He has no relatives, and we are the only kin he has, I mean, his brothers in the faith. Why should we be envious of him?"

Jeremiah agreed with the Father Superior and thought that his consideration was perfectly correct. After that, he almost stopped watching Gregory and shadowing him, or at least he tried to be fair, but watching and shadowing was still his talent and predestination. Once he told the rest of the Brothers a story.

"I had a vision, Brothers. Our Brother Gregory was riding a golden horse with a silver stick in his hand. But then his horse bolted, and Gregory fell into the mud..."

The community laughed at this Jeremiah's joke, but everyone guessed why he had been talking about a golden horse. They couldn't understand, however, why

* *Khazars* — a Tatar people which in the 7th century had a mighty state stretching from the Urals to the Dnieper, and from the Caucasus to the middle reaches of the Volga

he had spoken of Gregory's fall, hinting about the mud. Later Jeremiah would explain the story to me. In the meantime, Gregory had done another heroic deed for the sake of our monastery — for which he was praised to the skies in Polycarp's parchment.

The blessed Gregory had a vegetable garden and a small orchard. There were many monks who looked at his garden with sheer envy. But they were afraid to come near it, for Gregory set traps round the garden, and if anyone got caught in those traps, he could lose a leg. Gregory spent much time in his garden gathering vegetables. The garden was situated on the slope of the hill and the monks could usually see his bent back when he was working there. He put the ripe vegetables and fruit at the edge of the garden on the grass, and then he called his lay brother to pick them up and carry them to his cell. But he never allowed even the lay brother to enter his garden where the beds were. Gregory always rewarded his servant with a handful of cherries or a few carrots. Gregory cooked the vegetables himself, and he ate the cherries sitting on the porch of his cell and spitting out the stones in all possible directions. He loved to do this at his leisure on summer evenings.

"You have access to Gregory's garden, don't you?" Jeremiah once joked with the lay brother. "You could make good profit at his expense. Look, you are nothing but skin and bones."

"God forbid, Father!" exclaimed the lay brother, frightened. "That garden is like an unconquerable fortress!"

The garden really was like a fortress, and all the chance passers-by couldn't take their eyes off the fruit and vegetable which were absolutely enormous. The pumpkins were the object of total admiration, for they lay in the beds like colossal heads. The monks told

many stories about those pumpkin-heads, saying that they were omniscient, and, moreover, that they could talk at night and often exchanged remarks with each other. They twinkled at night, and if you looked at those lights, you would surely ruin your eyes. Every autumn when the pumpkins got ripe, the monks could see a withered old man sitting atop one of the giant vegetables. The man seemed to resemble a tiny mushroom bathing in the last rays of the autumn sun, dozing, while the reddish crowns of the trees were glowing in the sun above his head. Due to the fact that no one could approach Gregory's garden, the monks began gossiping — quite arrogantly — that Gregory surely didn't pray to God alone, for the fruits in his garden were so big. There was only one trodden path that led to the garden, and it belonged solely to Gregory. Sometimes his lay brother could use it, when he was asked to pick up the vegetables and fruit, that is, and take them to his master's cell. Once Isaac dared to walk along this path, and this trip became the talk of the whole monastery. His foot got caught in a noose, that snapped and pulled tight. It wouldn't let him go. And the harder he tried to free himself, the more nets fell onto him getting tangled like grass snakes that twined around him. Isaac was twisting and crying, and all those who happened to see it — Jeremiah was one of the first witnesses — couldn't figure out what had happened to Isaac. And, indeed, he was suspended in the ropes and nets, howling and struggling, as if caught in a spider's web. While a small gaunt monk with a large head was walking up the path leaning peacefully on his staff. He walked, shaking his head and narrowing his small eyes, and it seemed that he was making his way along his web towards this strangely prostrate fly. Those who watched this scene were terrified. It seemed to them that the big-headed

creature would approach his victim and hit him with the staff, then poison would spurt out of it. Next, the victim struggling in the nets would grow still, and the big-headed creature would drag him along the webbed path to his abode.

Then the witnesses saw that Gregory was stretching his staff toward Isaac.

"What were you doing here, Isaac?" he asked angrily. "Didn't you know that I have nets here?"

"I can go wherever I like!" cried out Isaac in an offended tone. "And I hate it when someone catches me in his traps as if I were a beast."

"You probably came here to steal something, Isaac," said Gregory meekly. "If that is so, I'll have you hanging here for a good two days."

Isaac laughed in Gregory's face.

"Hey, Brothers!" he cried out. "This skinflint is wallowing in wealth, but he's trying to accuse me of being a thief!" Isaac shouted at the top of his voice and everyone could hear him, even in the farthest corner of the monastery. The monks were leaving their cells and standing on their porches to listen.

"Look at him, Brothers!" Isaac continued crying. "This man eats bacon and roasted goose, and he dares to call me a thief!"

"Shut up, you crazy fool!" said Gregory maliciously. "If you don't shut up now, I will squash and strangle you with these ropes, and then I'll swear that you strangled yourself by chance."

"Why are you calling me a thief?" Isaac asked baring his teeth. "You can surely strangle me but I am not going to let you call me a thief. Remember, I am the one who is really poor, while you only pretend to be poor."

"Even if that is so," uttered Gregory in a low voice — they were both talking in low voices then so

no one would hear them. "I swear that I won't let you out of those nets until you repent publicly for your offensive words."

"Set me free, and then I'll repent," said Isaac.

Gregory relaxed the ropes, and Isaac tumbled to the ground. Monks crowded around at a distance. They were watching the scene with pleasure, for such events were rare in the monastery.

"Bow to me and repent!" hissed Gregory.

Isaac rose to his feet and started rubbing his sore arms and legs.

"Honest men have no peace because of people like you," he wheezed. "Because of you and those like you. You've set your traps all over the world, and everyone else has to be careful not to get caught. Soon you'll set your nets in the sky, too..."

"Repent!" ordered Gregory, his voice icy.

Isaac bowed to him, almost bending in two.

"Forgive me! I have offended Brother Gregory by calling him a miser and by saying that he wallows in wealth!" he cried in a piercing voice. "But that is not true, for he is poor; he is just one of us; he lives from hand to mouth, but he is also as generous as the earth itself. Brothers!" Isaac shouted. "Is there anyone of us who hasn't seen Brother Gregory's graces? Take me, for instance. I've filled my belly with the fruit from his garden," he raised his arms, shaking them. "These fruits, brothers, are sweet; they were probably sent from heaven. I would also like to taste his pumpkin porridge. That would make me the happiest man in the world. Brother Gregory was so generous that he has invited all of us to taste his pumpkin porridge, though he might not have mead to sweeten it. Look at me, Brothers, I am bowing low to Brother Gregory for he is not a miser, but an obedient humble monk with all possible virtues!"

He bowed to Gregory again, bending over double.

"That's enough!" said Gregory with satisfaction.

"Take a pumpkin as a reward for your services."

But Isaac was running away from him as fast as he possibly could. He ran, constantly looking back.

"It's a lie, Brothers, that he sleeps on a box full of gold," he was shouting. "It's a lie that he counts his treasures every day! It's an awful lie that he eats smoked bacon and roasted goose secretly and still isn't satiated. And no doubt, it is a lie that his heart is made of stone and that anyone who stands on his way will be wiped off the face of the earth. All that is a lie, an awful lie!"

He stopped in the middle of the path, raising his arms as if he were about to fly. And so he stood still, nailed down by some power.

"Indeed, it's a lie!" Gregory said quietly and began untangling the nets that were all in a mess after Isaac's fall.

6

A few days later, three men came to the monastery. They walked by all the cells, stopping at every door. The first one was silent, while the other two men pleaded with everyone, interrupting each other.

"This is our friend," said one of them. "He has been condemned to death."

"We beg of you, please, give him some money so he can pay off the one he offended."

The monks gave them all they could, and the convict silently bowed low to them.

And so they went, begging for alms until they approached Gregory's cell and stopped by the door. Gregory was already standing on the porch leaning on his staff, his beard jutting out with curiosity.

"This is our friend," said the first beggar, "he has been condemned to death."

"We beg of you, please, give him some money to pay the one he offended," said the other one.

"What was your sin, son?" asked Gregory, a tear glistening in his eye.

"He struck the Prince's groom," explained the first beggar.

Gregory wept.

"Oh, he is in serious trouble, this man!" he said rocking. "His final hour has come."

"Could you give him a few coins, Father?" asked the second beggar. "If we collect enough money to pay off the groom, he won't die."

"How shall he be executed?" asked Gregory wiping the tears from his eyes.

"They want to hang him from a tree."

"Well, that sentence is rather merciful," said Gregory. "But it would be better to hang himself. As for the alms, I'm sure you'll get enough. Goodness knows I have no money, but you can go to my garden and take all the fruit and vegetable you can possibly carry. When you sell them, you will have enough money."

The condemned man bowed low to Gregory, and his friends thanked him heartily.

"With your help and alms we'll save the poor soul," they said.

Then Gregory wiped the rest of his tears and headed for the cave where he loved to pray, for there he could withdraw from all mundane sounds and worldly vanity and vexation.

The three beggars rejoiced and went merrily towards Gregory's garden. The monks who gathered there witnessed this miracle and longed to see the end of the story.

The beggars went along the path talking to each other quite merrily. They passed the place where Isaac had been caught in the nets, but nothing prevented them from entering the garden. The condemned man climbed one of the trees to gather fruit, while the other two men bent over the vegetable beds. Suddenly the two men cried out and tried to dash away, but they couldn't move from the spot; at the same time, the prisoner who climbed the tree cried out, too, and fell from the branch and was hanging upside down. The two men on the ground saw what happened to their friend and yelled even louder, tossing and struggling in the nets. As a result, they got tangled even worse. Then Jeremiah went to the cave where Gregory stayed praying zealously with tears in his eyes.

"The beggars got into your garden," he said.

"Don't interrupt my prayers, Brother," Gregory pleaded meekly.

"But, Gregory, you know what it means to get into your garden," said Jeremiah getting angry.

"I'm praying, Brother Jeremiah," Gregory answered dryly this time. "Why don't you stay and pray with me. After we finish praying, we will surely go and have a look at the thieves."

The monks came closer to the garden. The men who were caught in the traps pleaded to be let free with tears streaming from their eyes.

"How did you get into this garden?" Jeremiah asked them as he approached.

"Gregory sent us here himself," explained one of them.

The condemned man was hanging head down, and it was hard to tell whether he was still alive. His feet were caught in a noose.

"Gregory is praying for your souls," said Jeremiah, making the sign of the cross, then headed for his cell.

The monks also started to disperse, leaving this spectacle one by one. Some of them might have wanted to help the sufferers, but they were probably afraid of the traps.

When the day was drawing to a close, the small, big-headed monk came out of the cave and hobbled off towards the dangerous path, leaning on his staff.

"What are you doing in my garden?" he asked menacingly. "Why is this man hanging there?"

"You sent us here yourself, Father!" cried one of those who were caught in the nets.

"Whether I sent you here or not, no one knows for sure," Gregory said humbly. "But the fact that you were caught here as thieves is known to everyone."

"Father, have mercy!"

"Your souls are defiled by sin," Gregory continued rather harshly. "For you have lied to me. Last week you were seen begging at the churches, asking money from the laymen; you were lying."

"We can swear that we were telling the truth!"

"While I can swear that you were not telling the truth," said Gregory as mercilessly. "And that you have been caught before and punished for this repulsive business."

"Set us free, Gregory," shouted those who were tangled in the nets. "We are not to blame!"

Gregory was standing in front of them, his arms locked behind his back. He stood rocking from his heels to his toes.

"There are no innocent people in the world," he said quietly. "From birth, we are guilty before God. You'll stay here for two days and two nights. And your friend will hang for two days and two nights as well. After that I'll come to see you and we'll talk of your sins."

Gregory turned away and minced along the path.

Thus they spent two days and two nights. At first, they cried and wept whenever they saw one of the monks passing by. They prayed, too. But no one came to rescue them. In the meantime, Gregory prayed zealously in the cave where he went every morning, coming out regularly only for masses, and, of course, he didn't forget to eat. Whenever he was passing by his garden, the prisoners yelled at the top of their lungs, pleading with him to be merciful, but Gregory didn't seem to pay any attention to them. He walked peacefully leaning on his staff, shuffling his feet, for he never hurried when he walked and his eyes were always lowered humbly. Several times it rained, and the prisoners were soaked to the bone. Only the sun, when it appeared again, could dry their wet clothes. They fed on the carrots growing near them. Even the Father Superior asked Gregory to let the prisoners go free. But Gregory in turn convinced and comforted him. Little by little, the prisoners grew sickly and withered. They could no longer weep or pray. They lay prostrate, awkwardly twisting their bodies, for they could not make themselves comfortable on the ground because of the traps and nets. Only after two days and two nights did the small big-headed monk step onto his insidious path and hobble towards the garden, leaning heavily on his staff.

He stopped by the prisoners, waiting for them to get up.

"Your wish has come true," he said humbly. "You ignored the Lord, and He has ignored you."

"Forgive us, Father," lamented the prisoners. "We'll never forget it."

"The Enemy has taught you to disguise your vanity as lies," said Gregory. "That is why God has not pardoned you. If you lived a dishonest life, stealing the fruit of someone else's labor, never even trying to

work on your own, you'll stay idle here for the rest of your life."

The prisoners cried and howled again, tears streaming from their eyes, and asked the old man to let them free, promising and giving oaths never to commit that sin again.

Gregory stood facing them, and rocking slightly on his feet. He looked at them humbly and gently.

"I took your misery to heart," he said at last. "If you want to work after all and to help others by your labor, then I might let you free."

"That would be very kind of you!" said the prisoners.

"I will do this because my heart is so kind," said Gregory. "Even the hair of my beard is so thin and gentle that a fly might get caught in it, and that's the main point! Thus I say, blessed is the Lord Our God! From this moment forth you shall work for the holy community, sacrificing yourselves for the sake of the servants of God. Swear that you will never breach your oath and sign this parchment ratifying our agreement."

He then freed the prisoners and allowed them to bury their friend, and thus they all stayed in the monastery till the end of their days, working for the community, since they had no other choice.

7

It is difficult for me to write about Gregory, for I never met him myself, and the stories told by the others might be erroneous. Polycarp praised Gregory to the skies as the Thaumaturge, and perhaps it was true, for he was a wonderful master at making traps and locks, and he didn't hide his talent under a bushel.

On the contrary, he exercised it as much as he could. There are both virtuous talents and evil ones. In our monastery, his talent was considered a great virtue, but there also exists the Supreme Judge of our deeds, for everyone of us must appear before Our Maker. I don't know what the result will be when Gregory's deeds are weighed on the Supreme Balance of Justice, but when I think of that my heart becomes grieved. I often have dreams about that garden of his, for it is still there and growing. People are trapped in it. These people struggle in the nets like wild beasts or fish, and I also see the tiny gaunt figure of a monk with a large head, walking slowly towards the garden, staff in hand, intending to administer justice and mete out punishment. Let him be judged by the court of the Supreme Judge of us all, while I shall relate the story of how Gregory ended his days.

It so happened that anxiety filled Gregory's heart. Every time he entered his cell, he felt some disgusting sweet smell. He looked everywhere, rummaging through all his property and belongings, and examining every crack in the walls and the floor, but still he couldn't find the source of that smell. He would open the door to let out the strong, foul odor, but that didn't help, and the stench was getting even worse. Then Gregory realized that some offal was out in the yard. So he raked the whole yard, searching in the grass, but he couldn't find anything. He burned incense in his cell, but the heavy odor was only aggravated. Then he started praying zealously, hoping that the power of his prayers would drive out the poisonous stench. But the more he prayed, the more pronounced the awful smell seemed to him. He sang hymns as often as he used to when he had the thieves imprisoned in his pantry. That didn't work either.

No one except the lay brother had the right to enter

Gregory's cell. That was why he asked the lay brother if the latter could smell the foul odor in the room.

"It seems to me," answered the boy humbly, "that the foul smell has always been here."

The lay brother was angrily thrown out, but the smell was still there. Sometimes Gregory smelled his own hand and had the feeling that the foul odor was coming from his body. Gregory couldn't bear it any longer and went to see Jeremiah the Perspicacious to invite him to his cell. Jeremiah agreed and hurried toward Gregory's cell. However, he could not enter it.

"Brother!" he cried out, "You must have offal rotting somewhere here!"

"Yes, indeed," Gregory agreed humbly, comforted that Jeremiah also reacted to the disgusting smell. "Could you help me find the offal? I have ransacked everything here, but I couldn't find anything like it."

"What are you talking about, Brother?" exclaimed Jeremiah with indignation. "Do you take me for an expert in finding scum?"

"You are well-known as the Perspicacious, Brother," answered Gregory patiently. "Can't you use your intuition to save me from this evil hallucination?"

Jeremiah gazed at Gregory and suddenly winked at him.

"Perhaps the Lord is punishing you for something, Brother?" he asked mysteriously. "Would it be fair if I interfered with Providence?"

"It cannot possibly be His punishment," Gregory answered calmly. "I pray zealously and live in accordance with the Monastic Rules and abstinence. If only someone would count how many times I bow to God. Can you imagine how often I usually do it?"

"Yes, I know that," said Jeremiah, for he could no longer stand the foul odor that was flowing in waves from Gregory's cell. "I would have been glad to help

you, Brother, but I can't see what it is that you are concealing, I'm afraid."

He left Gregory's cell and walked out into the open air, breathing in its wonderful pure fragrance. Gregory didn't believe in Jeremiah's ability to see things perspicaciously any more, and started rummaging his cell and the pantry once again. At first, he thought that the stench was stronger in the pantry. It seemed to him it emanated from the box where he kept his money. He turned every coin upside down, but there was no offal anywhere. Then he looked through the gold and silverware, and again it seemed to him they were the source of the foul smell. He shook every dish and plate: from one of them fell a dead dry bat, and from another one fell the skeleton of a mouse, but it didn't help. Then he went to the well dug by Antony to fetch some water to wash the dishes. It seemed to him that the smell coming from them wasn't that bad. But, nevertheless, the air in his cell was unbearable. Gregory went to Titus, the priest, and got some holy water. He sprinkled every corner in his cell with that water. He didn't burn incense anymore, for the smell became even stronger after that. He left his cell and went to his cave to pray. He stayed there for the whole day. When he returned to his cell after all, he could no longer bear the putrid odor. And, moreover, the same smell had spread to the cave where he used to pray so zealously. Gregory decided not to infuriate the rest of the Brothers, and left the cave. He thought he would go to the Dnieper to wash himself — he hadn't done this for quite a long time — for he had a secret suspicion the foul smell was coming from his own body. He walked slowly down the path, leaning onto his staff and constantly murmuring prayers, without even paying attention to the pale violet cloudless sky above his head. The last rays of the evening

sun were playing in the sky, and the light warm music of the sunbeams left everything around spell-bound: the blades of grass, and the weeds, and the trees. The earth seemed to be breathing and sighing, it smelled of dust and wormwood. A couple of gulls, white as milk, soared in the sky. In the meantime, Gregory walked on, seeing nothing but the path beneath his feet which was occasionally crossed by insects. He tried hard not to step on them. Suddenly his ears seemed to clear and he heard the happy harmonious chirping of grasshoppers. Horses snorted very nearby, and he raised his beard to have a look what was happening. In the deepening twilight, he saw a brigade led by the Prince riding a strapping bay horse. The Prince was followed by his servants. He had come to Kiev to meet his brother and make arrangements with him concerning their military campaign.

"Look, fellows," cried out one of the Prince's servants. "That monk looks like a devil!"

"Hey, look," replied the other one, "he's got horns. Let's see if he has a tail!"

"He smells like hell!" said the third one, roaring with laughter.

After these words, a mighty wrath pierced Gregory's heart. He stopped and spat three times on the earth, shaking.

"For your foul words, you shall be damned three times!" he said. "Weep, for you are going to die to atone for your sins so you can face your final hour with honor."

He looked at the Dnieper and the play of the sparkling patches of light on its surface. He squinted his eyes; and the water in the river was gentle and blue.

"As the Lord is my Judge," continued Gregory, "you are doomed to die in the water!"

The Prince got angry. He swooped upon him with his horse, and struck the old man with his whip.

"Look out, you old scarecrow! You'd better take your words back!" he ordered harshly.

Gregory lost his head upon hearing these words, though he still looked calm, except for the fact that his beard was trembling.

"For those rude words addressed to a servant of God, you will die," he said to the Prince. "Be damned, and let the waters swallow you."

"Tie him down, lads!" ordered the Prince. "And let him die the death he just promised me!"

The strapping lads jumped off their horses and grabbed the old man. They tied a stone to his neck and dragged him towards the Dnieper, where Gregory had been heading to wash himself. They swung his light withered body and threw him into the water. The old man's body splashed into the midst of the silver patches of light on the light-blue surface in the middle of the river. The deep river swallowed Gregory, and the only memory of him left on the shore was the putrid smell. The young men who drowned Gregory sniffed their hands worriedly: Gregory's filth had been transferred onto them. But they were young and thoughtless, so they washed their hands with sand and water, and mounted their horses again with determination, merrily baring their teeth. They were ready to gallop towards their happiness or death...

The monastery fishermen caught Gregory's corpse in their nets. When they were carrying him to the monastery, the corpse didn't smell putrid at all. Perhaps those whose earthly lives had ended could no longer be judged by an earthly court.

After they had buried Gregory, the Father Superior called all the brothers of the community together and ordered the door of Gregory's cell forced. Cyril

Yamchich, the monastery serf, stepped forward saying he could open the door. He did it easily, and the Brothers entered the cell. The strong putrid smell stunned but didn't stop them. Then Cyril Yamchich opened the second door, having examined it thoroughly beforehand. The Brothers entered the pantry. So the monastery took all Gregory's treasures for its needs.

"Now you see, Brother Jeremiah," the Father Superior said in a low voice. "Living things are for living men, while dead things are for the dead."

"Yes, indeed," uttered Jeremiah, and his face acquired a pious expression.

The three former thieves carried the chest with the treasures, and their faces were lit with deep-felt humility.



CHAPTER XI

*in which there is a story about
Theodore and his advisor Basil*

1

And indeed, what do I need my wealth for? Fedot thought, grief-stricken after the monk had left him. This monk had been visiting him very often that month, trying to convince him to donate all his wealth to the monastery.

"You are no longer a young man, and it's time to think about your soul. When you die, your relatives will pounce on all the gold you have. They are just waiting for you to die, and don't hope for their gratitude. They will take everything that belongs to you, and then they will denounce you. A poor hungry crowd of them will take over your house, having thrown your corpse out for the worms to eat, while they themselves will surely feast at your expense."

Fedot nodded sadly. This month was a month of misery, oppressing and incurable, and all these sad things stuck to his heart. Every time the monk was ready to leave him — after he had filled Fedot's heart with burning words — Fedot would thrust a few coins into his hand. Left alone, he tried to digest all he had heard as if it were food.

Basil seemed displeased that Fedot gave him money.

"I'll give it all away to beggars," he would repeat

every time, quickly hiding the money into his pocket, and leaving Fedot with an unbearable and infinite silence.

That winter, there was a lot of snow; white flakes kept falling from the sky day and night, covering the streets and houses, and his servants had to clean the path from the house to the street often. The snow piled up on both sides of the path till it reached the chest of any passer-by. Sledges could not be used, while the trodden paths had a ridge of snow in the middle. If one stepped off the path, his whole leg sank into the soft snow. So the monk used to come to Fedot all covered with snow and terribly cold. He would stand by the stove, warming his large red hand — his other hand was withered — and telling Fedot about the snow and the snowdrifts in the hoarse voice of a man with a terrible cold; and most of all he would dwell on the subject that the root of all evil was greed for money.

"The words of the Lord in the Gospels are as follows: 'If a man doesn't sell what he has and give to the poor, he can't come and follow Him.'"

"What about one who lives, doing no harm to anyone?" Fedot asked him timidly. "What awaits this man?"

And the monk, whose name was Basil, would turn his face to him staring with surprise, as if he hadn't expected such a stupid question from Fedot.

"Damnation!" he answered in a harsh whisper. "Damnations and the fires of hell!"

"I never robbed anyone to make this fortune," Fedot tried to explain just as timidly. "I have always been lucky, and I made my fortune by fair commerce."

The greatest misery always seized Fedot after the monk's visits. It was as if he left behind some invisible winged creatures that hovered over him, disturbing and confusing him. The falling snow

covered the windows, sticking to the glass, and it seemed that someone's white face was pressed to it. And all this superficial white monotony made his heart empty and cold, for Fedot's misery was great. At such moments, his servant, a tall old man with a long moustache and a bare chin, would enter the room to announce that the poor had crowded into the yard. Fedot would rise to his feet, his bones creaking, and slowly head for the porch. In the middle of his yard, in the deep path in the snow, the poor were lined up from the street all the way to his porch, and they were dressed in ragged robes and had no hats on their heads. Covered with snow, their faces dark from cold, they sang sad hymns, opening their mouths in unison, while the falling snow covered them, as well as the grief-stricken Fedot, from their heads to their toes. It seemed to him that all these poor people looked exactly like Basil, as if ten Basils had come to his yard together to demand — not just to beg — alms. The poor opened and closed their mouths, either toothless, or with a few dark rotten teeth, their voices hoarse like those of people with a cold. However, they kept singing from sheer inspiration, though their eyes had a cautious expression as they watched the sad man standing on the porch. He stood muffled up in an expensive fur coat, shaking his head in time with their song. He patiently listened to everything the poor had to say with their song. When they stopped singing, he would stare at them, his eyes senseless, while they stood in the snow as if they were nothing but motionless rocks. Then Fedot would go into the house, unlock his treasure room, and open his treasure chest. He would take handfuls of silver and gold coins to give the poor out on the porch. Each approached him in turn, crutches and wooden shoes tapping. The next day, they would come again to stand in line on the

path deep in the snow and sing with the same inspiration as the day before. The falling snow would cover them again from their heads to their toes, while the grief-stricken Fedot would think that it was Basil who learned to appear in the plural in some strange way, for the faces of the poor were exactly the same as the day before. Almost always, after these visits by the poor, Basil would arrive and begin his awful sermon about the torments awaiting the greedy in hell. Everything he used to say when they were sitting in the room plunged into grayish twilight, the fire crackling in the fireplace and the snowflakes whispering outside the window, startled Fedot in a strange way.

"It is very good of you to give generous alms to the poor, but it would be much better if you donated all your wealth to the monastery."

"I haven't very much left," said Fedot looking at him with faded eyes. "Go into the room and take the rest of the money. But, first of all, tell me how I should live after that."

"Have you dismissed all your servants already?" Basil asked severely.

"One of them stayed on; he didn't want to leave."

"Have you got any money except what you will donate to the monastery?"

"None at all," answered Fedot.

"Then leave this house and follow me," ordered the monk.

He put the rest of Fedot's money from the treasure chest into his sack.

"Where will we go?" asked Fedot, tears welling up in his eyes.

"We are going to serve God," the monk replied with determination, putting the sack of money on his shoulder.

"Do I have to go now?" Fedot asked inertly.

"No, not now. The Father Superior will be asleep by now. Come tomorrow around midday," said Basil, opening the door — he was surely in a hurry — and a gust of wind flew the snow in with a cold blast. The monk's back bent even lower under the weight of the sack, and he stepped out into the snowstorm, into the impenetrable darkness. It was a dark night, indeed.

Fedot sat staring at the fire, for the logs that Basil had put there were still burning. When there were only a few glowing coals left, he rose to his feet and went to the porch. In the small wooden house of the servant, there was a light in the window, and he wanted to walk up to the window and knock, but his hand rose and fell a second later. He could see the pale figure of a woman, icy and divine, in the whirling snow.

2

He turned from a rich man into a poor one; his name was changed from Fedot to Theodore, and in accordance with the will of the Father Superior, he lived in the Varangian Cave. A few years passed, and his appearance changed drastically. He looked withered and thin, for he had been eating nothing but the monastery meals, while he had been given one of the hardest jobs. He brought millstones into his cave and worked tirelessly for the sake of the whole community. He took the corn from the abattis and milled it incessantly, taking his hands off it only for prayers. The torch was always burning in his cave, for he was busy turning the millstones round and round, and they screeched as they milled the corn, while he thought of eternity awaiting him at the end of this transient life. Whenever he thought of this, it was much easier to

work, though the sorrow that was tormenting him in the world wasn't relieved at all, even in the monastery.

This sorrow was born in the memorable winter, when the earth was enveloped in a grayish twilight and the snow was falling incessantly. Theodore was remembering his late wife. She had been so fragile that she couldn't give birth to a child. She had died in labor. Their child was still-born. It was then that his sorrow was born. It never left him alone. Then Basil had appeared like a black, merciless, and passionate embodiment of this misery.

When his hand grew numb from milling, and when his eyes were closing from fatigue, he would lean his back against the wall and see a white desert covered with snow before his eyes, and in the middle of this desert appeared the faint figure of a woman, divine and icy. This woman looked exactly like his late wife, and in her arms was a tiny naked icy baby. The woman with the icy baby stared at him with her enormous sorrowful eyes, and a faint, cold like the winter twilight, smile was on her lips. And it always seemed to him that the twilight and the smile could never be separated, just as he himself could no longer be separated from them.

After such visions, he felt exhausted the next morning, and everything that surrounded him was light, paultry, and unreliable. He could clearly hear the sounds of the falling snow, though this was absolutely impossible in the cave, and the beautiful woman with the icy baby in her arms appeared once again before his eyes.

"My dearest, you are in heaven," he said to himself, "and I don't want to go to hell, for I must meet you!"

So he was milling day and night, dozing off for just a few hours a night. He didn't have any dreams; neither did the woman with the icy baby come to him;

he just plunged into total darkness, and during those few hours of sleep, he was more dead than alive. He usually woke up covered with sweat after such a sleep, and then he would rush to his millstones. And so it continued for several years until another surprisingly snowy winter came.

Then he stopped milling, rose to his feet, and left the cave which had become his home. He came out into the world. Snowflakes were whirling, light and carefree, and the whole earth seemed silver. Staring at the snow-covered tops of the trees, he whispered in some revelation.

"My God, what have I done? I used to have everything, but now I have nothing. No relief, no peace, no home, no property. I used to be a free man, while now I'm nothing but a slave."

At that moment he saw Isaac limping down the path. Isaac was dressed in rags, his bast shoes with cloth puttees all torn, and straws sticking out. His skin was bluish and covered with goose-pimples, and there was a gray frozen drop on his nose.

"Ha-ha," he laughed, pointing at Theodore with his finger. "Here he comes, the abandoned and deceived man..."

Theodore caught Isaac by the sleeve and pulled him closer.

"Why do you say that I was deceived?"

"Don't beat me, Brother," Isaac wheezed in a tiny voice. "Can't you see I'm a holy fool man? I talk nonsense; I say anything that comes to my mind."

Theodore let go of Isaac's sleeve, for the old man's bones were almost cracking in Theodore's strong hands. Their gazes met, and Theodore looked him straight in the eye.

"So tell me what was on your mind? Tell me more of your nonsense," he asked.

Isaac lowered his head to his shoulder, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"I'm afraid that you might beat me," he said narrowing his eyes cunningly.

"As God is my witness," said Theodore making the sign of the cross, "I will not lay a hand on you."

"Then I'm going to tell you the silliest of all possible things," said Isaac laughing. "The poor you gave alms to every day were all Basil's friends. They also live here in the monastery. They divided your wealth among them."

Theodore was still staring into Isaac's eyes as if he hoped to see something very important in those sparkling yellow irises.

"You are talking nonsense, indeed," he uttered slowly. "How do you know that?"

"Did I say I knew it?" asked Isaac, lowering his head to his shoulder. "That is just some of the nonsense that comes to my mind."

"Was it you who were visited by the Lord Jesus Christ in your cave?" asked Theodore, suddenly guessing something.

"God save you, Brother! No! It was the Evil One in the guise of Christ!"

He hurried away from Theodore, swinging his arms, and mincing off in his torn bast shoes with straw sticking out of them.

He made the signs of the cross very frequently, and when he turned back and looked at Theodore, his face was as white as snow.

3

After this conversation, or maybe due to the surprisingly snowy winter, Theodore changed in a way again. He hadn't forgotten about the pale figure of

the woman, icy and divine, who looked so much like his late wife, with the naked icy little baby in her arms. In addition to this misery, there appeared a new one. While milling corn in his cave, he started counting how much money he had given in alms to the poor and added to it the sum of money he had donated to the monastery. It turned out that the two sums were almost equal. He could visualize all the coins. He could remember each one of them perfectly and say it had been spent, for his memory was flawless. Gradually, he remembered the faces of the poor people that had visited him then, and then he picked them all out in church during mass. Thus, he was convinced that they were the same people, and, besides, they were all monks living in this monastery. But when they had lined up in his yard, they had always changed places: those who had been in the front went to the middle, and the ones who had been in the back came to the front, while those who had been in the middle of the line stood in the back. They had also changed their clothes, attaching moustache or a beard, and painting their teeth with tar. So Theodore's millstones were spinning round not only making flour, but also turning back the wheels of time. He cudgeled his brains, for Theodore was reliving every day of that sorrowful month, trying to see things in another way. He remembered that Basil had taken the second half of the money in the sack and hadn't let Theodore go with him. Theodore had never asked the Father Treasurer how much the latter had received then. Now that he knew how much was spent all in all, his head — so used to calculations — was working out how much he could have made, what he could have bought, and what the profit after all these years spent in vain would have been. The results of these calculations startled him, for his profit could have been doubled,

even taking into consideration the normal commercial losses.

He would stop milling again and stare at the eyes of the Son of God who looked coldy down at him from an icon.

"Oh, My Lord," he whispered to himself. "I used to be a free man. Now I am nothing but a slave. Tell me, did I do right? Is it true that this sacrifice will help me meet my beloved wife and child?"

Then he would plunge into his gloomy thoughts again, and in this brooding state of his I, unworthy servant of God that I am, once saw him. I came to visit him, worrying that he had fallen ill. But as it turned out Theodore was not sick. He turned to me and asked me bluntly how he could possibly find out how much money he had donated to the monastery.

"The cellarer is in charge of it," I replied.

"I'm going to ask him," said Theodore. "Do you think I could ask them to give me at least some of that money in case I get sick or feeble, or in case I can't eat this plain monastery food?"

He looked somewhat worried and seemed to be beside himself.

"No," I said laughing. "It is no use crying over spilt milk."

"Don't laugh at me, Brother Simeon," he pleaded humbly. "That money's mine, isn't it?"

"It was no more than a mug of water poured into a tub, I mean, a full tub," I said.

"But the money has to be counted," remarked the former merchant.

"That is if you don't spend it, but if you come to think of everyday expenditures, the money runs low as a brook when its spring dries up."

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed Theodore, looking down-cast.

"Do you regret that you wasted all your money, Brother?" I asked.

"Of course, I do!" exclaimed Theodore jumping to his feet. "Instead of being a guest here, I am a slave. What's the use of my presence here then? Even an idiot man could grind grain with these millstones, while my brain was created for commerce. I keep thinking about it. My brain is idle now, and it yearns for thinking and calculating," he said it and struck his forehead with his hand. "This stupid work of a slave is not for me, I know."

"We are all servants of God," I replied to add fuel to the fire.

"But can't you be a servant of the Almighty and do what you were born to do? Who said that it is pleasing to the Lord when a free man becomes a slave?"

"Our Lord God wants everything we can give Him," I answered cautiously; that which I had heard from this man was surprisingly to my liking.

"He has it," replied Theodore with fervor. "Like it or not, we are all subject to His will and law."

"Why don't you renounce your monastic vows and take up commerce again?" I asked.

"But how?" he questioned me, raising his arms in desperation. "If I leave the monastery as a poor man, I'll be poor forever. What I need is a certain sum of money to start with."

"The monastery also engages in business," I remarked. "Why don't you ask the Father Superior..."

Theodore glanced at me looking sorrowful again. His mood seemed to be melting.

"You must know, Brother," he said softly, "That Basil is in charge of all the monastery's enterprises."

Soft downy snow was falling on the trees, making their crowns even more shaggy and rounded. There was no wind, and the weather was rather mild that day. The snow swept the earth from one end to the other. For the second time, such a snow unsettled Theodore, and he gave way to his feelings. He went to Basil. He approached Basil's cell and stopped, staring at it. Snow covered his cowl and his garb, and his eye-brows jutted out like white awnings. His back was bent under the weight of the snow that had stuck to it.

"What's the matter, Brother Theodore?" asked Basil, coming out onto his porch. "Is it me you looking for?"

"Yes, Brother Basil," Theodore answered humbly, bowing low to Basil.

They stood facing each other: Basil was on the porch and Theodore down at its foot. Lots of snowflakes were dancing, whirling and spinning between them, and they stared at each other through this lace of snow.

"A strange thought came to my mind," Theodore said at last. "When I am sick and feeble, and when I cannot eat the plain monastery food, will I be able to take at least some of the money that you took from me as a donation to the monastery?"

"Nothing's left of that money, Brother Theodore," answered Basil pressing his withered arm to his chest and staring indifferently somewhere beyond Theodore's head. There, in the distance, behind Theodore's back, was the garden that Gregory used to tend, and the trees there looked lacy and beautiful.

"What is going to happen to me when I grow old and feeble?" asked Theodore just as humbly. "Almost all of you have your own money and supplies. Will you share yours with me then, Brother Basil?"

"I didn't take your money for myself," replied Basil, still pressing his withered arm to his chest tight. "You gave away all you had to the poor and to the monastery. And then you volunteered to don the mantle of the poor."

"That is right," said Theodore, nodding his head in agreement. "But there is one more thing I would like to ask you. Didn't all those poor people become rich as merchants after I became poor? Didn't they replace me in my house? Did I do something pleasing to God when I did away with one merchant and created six new ones instead?"

"Don't worry about yourself, Brother," answered Basil descending from the porch, his voice sounding softer. "For the Lord Our God said that we shouldn't worry, and we shouldn't ask what we will eat or what we will drink. 'Don't ask what robe will I wear? Behold the birds of the air'..."

"This I know," Theodore interrupted Basil. "For they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns. while a man has to do it. Our forefather was told that only by the sweat of his brow he would eat bread."

"Then go and work by the sweat of thy brow," suggested Basil, unable to hide his grin.

In his turn, Theodore raised his head, and the snow fell from his face, disclosing his pitch black eye-brows and red lips.

"The people born into this world are not alike. The Almighty determined a certain destiny for every one of us, and one must seek for it. Tell me, why did you knock me from my place in life and shove me into a dark cave?"

"You were plunged in grief when you lived in the world, and I came to rescue you from your misery."

"But instead, you relieved me only of my wealth, for my misery is still with me."

Then Basil, Theodore's fellow-monk, put his hand on Theodore's shoulder, and looked at him with the same burning eyes Theodore hadn't been able to forget on that sad night. The winter that year had been as snowy as this one, and he had been miserable then.

"I beg of you, Brother," said Basil, "don't defile your contribution. If it's wealth that you long for, I will give you all I have. All you have to do is ask me before God, and all I will give you will be my alms. Then you'll be able to live in wealth again, knowing no misery. But beware!" said Basil and his voice became harsh and piercing. "Is God going to forgive you then?"

Theodore shuddered and involuntarily looked at Gregory's former garden which was covered with downy snow. And what he saw was the pale figure of a woman, icy and divine, that looked exactly like his beloved late wife; and this woman was holding a little baby, icy and naked, in her arms.

"I don't want to take your wealth from you," Theodore whispered in embarrassment. "What I want is to get my own wealth back."

Basil put his arms on Theodore's shoulders and led him to his cell in the cave. He related a story that had taken place in Constantinople once when a rich man had regretted that he had given away all his gold as alms. That man had suddenly dropped dead in church, and the devils had dragged him away along with all his gold.

Tears welled up in Theodore's eyes, and he seemed to have forgotten all that Isaac had told him about Basil, for he felt the affectionate warmth emanating from this man, and he plunged again into the same familiar state: loneliness in the snowy night, and the great torment of his grief. This was the old familiar feeling he had had when he had spent long nights with

Basil staring at the flame of the fire in the fireplace. A great silence had ruled over the house then, uniting them in peaceful warmth.

"Your power of persuasion is divine, Brother Basil," Theodore said excitedly. "But your words about the birds of the sky were not quite true, I'm afraid. The divine predestination of a bird is different from that of a man."

5

And again the millstones were spinning round and as long as the millstones span, thoughts were being woven. He seemed to hear the rustle of the falling snow, because the sounds of the working millstones reminded him of the rustling snowflakes. These were the sounds when the woman, icy and divine, with the icy and naked little baby used to appear by his side. So the millstones didn't stop turning until the end of winter. The pale figure of the woman left him, dissolving and melting away like the snow. And his thoughts were mostly about coming spring. Spring was the time when the Prince and the merchants usually came down to the sea by boats along the river; they were headed for Constantinople taking furs and honey with them. He had taken part in such journeys several times — though once he had almost lost all he had taken with him — but three times he returned with tremendous earnings. He used to come back fit and cheerful and spent nights feasting in the Prince's bodyguard chambers. Those nights were filled with music: reed-pipes sang, and psalteries played, drums beat, and the guests sang songs, while the Prince's bodyguards joined in. Once he was coming back home from one of those feasts in the wee hours of the night. He saw a fragile black-haired girl in one of the

windows. She was as gentle as the dawn that morning. The beautiful girl smiled to him as if they had known each other for years. When he came home, he opened his treasure chest and poured all his Byzantine coins into it. And the fact that the beautiful girl had smiled at him as if they had spent their whole lives together made him happier than his money.

Whenever Theodore remembered that happy morning and the happiest minute in his life, his millstones stopped spinning, and a kind, happy smile played on his lips. He would lean against the wall and stare into the darkness untouched by the light of his candle where chimerical shadows were supposed to live.

At one such moment, the door of his cell creaked and opened. Basil entered the cell almost noiselessly. He looked somewhat changed; his eyes were not glowing anymore, and his gaze seemed to be pleading. That night Basil was quiet and soft as a cat.

"How's your life now, Theodore?" he asked in a friendly voice, sitting down on a low bench.

"Don't you see, I'm milling," Theodore answered cordially. "Working night and day, and more..."

"So the Evil One doesn't tempt you any more, does He?" Basil asked insinuatingly. "Do you still suffer from your love of wealth? I think that you still haven't forgotten the estate that you lost."

Theodore looked at Basil. His heart skipped a beat. But he lowered his eyes.

"My grief had nothing to do with my wealth," he said in a low voice. "Thanks to your prayers I am perfectly all right now. You have strengthened my will, and now I can enjoy peace of mind."

"Our peace is hidden deep within ourselves," Basil announced significantly. "Every one of us must seek its source within."

Theodore stared at Basil without saying a single

word. He barely recognised him, for Basil was now too gentle and even refined.

"I have been praying for you," said Basil after a long pause. "And I believe that soon you will be rewarded for your sacrifice. Ask God, and He will give you a lot of silver and gold."

Theodore laughed, but his laughter was not happy.

"Have you come here to mock at me, Brother?"

"I'm not joking, it's true. I have really been praying for you. And God has revealed something special to me... You mustn't leave this cave or let anyone come in here."

"What you say is most strange, Brother Basil."

"Maybe so, maybe not..." replied Basil, smiling at Theodore mysteriously. "I tell you, I prayed for you. An angel visited me and said that enormous treasures are hidden in this very cave. The luckiest one is going to get it. And then I thought that it was not good that you still bear a grudge against me for a fortune that has been spent."

"Then why has no one ever found it before me?" asked Theodore.

"No one knew it was here. Though in the life of St. Antony, it is written that in one of the caves, the Varangian treasures are hidden. There must be a lot of precious Latin tableware and cutlery there. But who can guess where exactly this cave is?"

"My cave is called the Varangian Cave," replied Theodore.

"That's exactly what the angel told me. Maybe you are the one who will be lucky enough to find the famous treasure?"

"Why don't you want to be the lucky one?"

"No, Brother," Basil answered laughing rather softly. "I lived in this very cave long before you came to our monastery..."

He looked around. The oil-lamp by the icons was spreading a dim light, while the torch on the wall was a little brighter. A faint smile appeared on his lips, and his eyes almost felt the dimly lit walls, the ceiling, and the floor. He wasn't sure what he wanted more, to think or not to think of the treasures, for there was something suspicious about it all. "This is surely another one of Basil's tricks," he thought, and one hand started rotating the millstones again, while the other hand was adding corn.

After the stones were spinning, he had nothing to do but think, and as his thoughts about the treasures were the most recent, he plunged into them. Involuntarily, he brooded over the problem of where he would hide the treasures if he were a Varangian, taking into consideration that other people knew about the treasures. And he also thought that since St. Antony's time, there had been a lot of hermits who had been digging all over the floor and walls had been searched many times over. He was absolutely sure that Basil had dug here, too. He even could imagine Basil standing with a spade in his hand, his forehead covered with perspiration. While the millstones were rotating, his eyes were absorbing the space of the cell, then returning to the millstones. Simultaneously, different threads of desultory thoughts were whirling and tying into tight knots of clear thoughts. The image of Basil, his face yellow in the light of the torch, and his humble, and at that time, even impassive eyes, still haunted him. There was something concealed in this almost unfamiliar face, with its narrow eyes and gentle wrinkles by the mouth. Basil probably had some reason for behaving in such a fashion, for Theodore hadn't yet asked the Father Treasurer how much of

his money Basil had given to the monastery. And, besides, Basil was most probably sure that Theodore could not find the buried treasure. But it would be a very good way to distract and calm him. However, Theodore was absolutely calm in fact. He had been calm since that conversation with Basil when he had stood facing the other out in the cold and snow by Basil's cell.

No. Theodore didn't get excited over the treasure. Moreover, when thinking about it, he was plunged again into his old sorrow and grief. He wanted to revive other memories from the old times when he had been Fedot, hoping they would soothe him, but he failed. He couldn't recall the vision of the pale woman with the icy baby in her arms, for May was in full swing, and this lady visited him only in winter when snow swept the earth from end to end. Theodore was milling, lost in thought. He wanted to guess precisely where the unattainable treasure might be hidden, and the walls of the cell drew his attention more and more. The treasure should be either in the walls or in the ceiling — that is in the places no one had ever looked. Sometimes he would stop milling and walk along the walls, tapping on every little piece. It was slow and tiresome work. The falling dust covered his forehead, but he stood there listening with utter concentration. However, all four walls seemed to be blind. He also thought that the Varangians had probably hidden the treasure without leaving any empty space; they could have just filled it with earth; but, nevertheless, he knew that the soft soil would have sunk, leaving a depression, at least. That was why he kept crawling around by the walls, having forgotten about the millstones. He ground grain only when he wanted to ponder another idea. The movements — when he was working on the millstones — were monotonous and

measured. He even forgot about the small window in the door, so any curious eye could peep in. Once he noticed just such an eye when he suddenly turned to the door. That was when he was about to abandon all hope of finding anything.

"It seems you have been seized with this passion, Brother Theodore," said Basil.

"I'm acting on your instructions," Theodore calmly replied.

"Why are you searching the walls instead of examining the floor?"

"Only because you already searched the floor before me."

The eye that watched Theodore narrowed and though he couldn't see Basil's lips, he was almost sure that his tormentor was grinning.

"I never thought about the walls," said Basil. "Would you like me to help you in your search? When we find it, we'll share it."

"Wait! Why should we share that which is wanting?" answered Theodore.

"It must be somewhere here, I am sure," said Basil. "But perhaps you don't like my company..."

They fell silent — two eyes against one. They were looking at each other as if they wanted to drain all the strength from each other.

"Tell me, Brother Basil," Theodore asked in a low voice without taking his eyes off the blinking eye in the window. "Why did you come to my house when I was in mourning? Why did you deceive me so cunningly, and why did you rob me of my wealth? Why do you care so much that one man is wealthy, but another is not? Could you answer me frankly, Brother Basil, for you didn't probably do it for the love of God."

The eye in the window narrowed.

"Do you really want to know the truth?" asked Basil. "It is true that I didn't feel any love for you when I came to your house, but I didn't feel any hate either. You are asking me why I care that some people are rich, while others are not. Yes, I do care! Even when I was a child, this feeling was like a thorn in my side, you know, for some lived off the fat of the land, while others couldn't make both ends meet. My parents were among the latter."

Theodore kept looking sadly at the eye in the window.

"Did it worry you that others were poor, or just you?"

His laughter was heard from the window, but the eye itself was as wide and serious as before.

"Well, didn't I make it plain that I cared only about myself... Once I was passing by your house, and an idea came to mind. I thought that you were rich, and I was poor as a church mouse. And then I thought that it would be a great compensation and comfort to make a rich man poor as a church mouse. I wanted you to become like me."

"You are not so poor, Brother Basil!" replied Theodore sadly. "Now you aren't poor..."

"Not anymore," Basil answered quietly. "But when I came to your house I was poor as Job."

Theodore nodded his head as if trying to convince himself of something. His face showed neither indignation nor offence.

"Now, could you tell me one more thing," he asked. "Does this Varangian treasure you told me of really exist?"

The wide-open eye watched him intently, but Basil didn't say a word.

"Why are you trying to lure me into this?" Theodore asked.

The eye watched him just as intently, but no answer followed. Basil was still silent.

Then Theodore sighed, taking a piece of some cloth, and approached the door to cover the window and the unblinking eye that gazed at him.

7

The millstones were spinning, for he had already examined the third wall by tapping every spot on it, and it was solid, too. There had been just one spot where the sound had been a bit hollow, Theodore broke the clay there only to find a small hole washed by the waters. At one point, Theodore was ready to admit that Basil was fooling him by making him look for something that didn't exist at all... Nevertheless, he was absolutely calm, with the exception of one unusual thing. His night dreams were rather strange. He dreamed of gold, and the events of his past were coming to him in these dreams. Most of these events were unpleasant, and each time he woke up, he brooded. The night after he had examined the third wall, he dreamed that a shower of golden coins was falling on him. Those coins were falling from the skies, beating his naked body. And the sun in this dream was as enormous as when he had returned from Constantinople — when his friend Stepan had died on the way back — and he had had to give Stepan's money to his relatives. In this dream he saw the coins that he had counted secretly and taken from Stepan's share. The sun illuminated those coins and they were so dazzling that tears welled up in his eyes. And in this dream, he was grabbing the treasure again. but suddenly he saw a miracle. Every coin turned into an eye, exactly like the one that had been watching him through the small window; and then a flower on a

silver stem sprouted from each coin. These wonderful flowers covered the whole field around Theodore. In a second, he saw a fair-haired, handsome youth coming towards him, and this youth looked exactly like the late Stepan. His fair hair was wavy and reached his shoulders, while the youth's eyes were cornflower blue. His long garb with gold embroidery almost touched the ground. The youth raised his hand with silver nails and caressed Theodore's head as if he were a child, while, in fact, Theodore knelt, grabbing the coins.

"What has happened to you, monk?" he asked. "Is some evil passion torturing you?"

"This is not a passion," uttered Theodore, and tears appeared in his eyes. "I want to be free."

"Do you grieve over your lost wealth?"

"I grieve over my lost freedom. But what is freedom if you are poor?"

"One who strives for money cannot find freedom," said the youth.

"I don't want bitter freedom," said Theodore. "I want to live as I was destined to."

Then the youth waved his hand, pointing somewhere to the field.

"These are all the coins that passed through your hands. Walk through this and think about whether you earned them in an honest and fair way."

Theodore rose to his feet in doubt and saw Basil's narrowed eye watching him from the flower-coins that were growing near him.

"I am afraid of this eye," he said in desperation.

"Why should you be afraid of it?" the youth inquired quietly. "You should know that wealth and envy always come hand in hand..."

He woke up all covered with sweat. The cell was pitch dark. It was so dark that he couldn't see his own

hand. It seemed to him that he could hear sand sifting somewhere. Grains of sand were rustling, and this sound was so pronounced that Theodore felt odd. He began whispering prayers to drown the rustle. He rose to his feet with difficulty, started a fire and lit his oil-lamp. The darkness retreated to the very corners of his cell. He sat motionless in the circle of yellow light. At last he heard someone's heavy breathing somewhere close to him, but, in fact, it was nothing but his own breathing that he heard.

"What attracts you more: striving for freedom, or greed for gold?" he asked himself rather loudly and shook his head with determination, for he already knew where to look for the buried treasures.

He took a spade and dug out a deep pit by the wall. Then he grabbed a pick-ax and began breaking the wall. All of a sudden, his pick-ax dropped into a hollow space. Shivering, he fell to his knees and started taking the earth out with his hands until he reached a passage that was filled with earth. Breaking his nails, cutting the soil with his knife, he kept on digging. The thick smell of the fresh earth was choking him. Half of his body was inside when he heard his own heartbeat which seemed too loud. At last, his hand broke through the earth and reached an empty space. He excavated the rest of the clay and crawled through a narrow passage. He found himself in a dungeon. He could even stand up there. His candle illuminated the narrow earthen walls of the cave. Theodore walked along this corridor, stooped over, his candle's flame became very tiny, it was almost dying, and Theodore had to stop to protect the flame.

When, finally, he reached a small earthen cell, he stopped. There was a bed with a skeleton lying on it, baring its teeth. He saw a bench there with another

skeleton sitting on it, leaning against the wall. There was also an enormous chest, and Theodore rushed towards it the moment he noticed it.

He took the ring of the handle, intending to open the lid, but something fell with a thud behind his back. He turned back abruptly to see that the skeleton that had been leaning against the wall had fallen down and shattered to pieces.

Theodore's body was all covered with cold sweat. He stood shivering when a bare white skull rolled up to his feet. He stared at the skull, and it seemed to him that it was gradually being covered with skin, and a moment later, he was sure that it would be Timko, one of his friends, lying by his feet. Once Timko had come to him and asked to lend him some money, for he couldn't pay off his debts. Theodore had refused him then, for he had hoped to buy Timko's property at the auction for nothing. He remembered that Timko had been weeping then, and now his head was lying at Theodore's feet. But then, something cruel and cold was born inside Theodore's heart...

"Get away," he whispered. "I have already been punished for what I did to you and Stepan. God took away from me those whom I had loved more than anything in the world. And now I am poor and humble. I am a nobody," he whispered, sitting down on the crate. "And my only wish is that God would forgive me and let me meet those whom I love in some next life..."

The skull was still rocking, but there was no living face on it. It was nothing but dead bones. Theodore wiped the perspiration from his forehead and opened the lid of the chest. He was dazzled by the twinkling of precious metals. There was gold, silver, and tableware. He took a handful of coins and put them into his pocket, then he took just one bowl and walked

away. He went out and began filling the passage with earth. Then he filled the pit he had dug in the wall with earth, too. Then he tamped the earth on the surface. Theodore felt very tired and went to lie down in his bed. He was still shivering, and some sour saliva collected in his mouth. He spit it out and began to weep. He wept like he used to when he was a little child, bitterly and sincerely, for the first time since his troubles began. An invisible shield was shattered in his soul, and something delicate and precious was spilt, and now it was pouring out of him. The green waves of misery rocked him while he shed tears to drown this misery. Only then could he understand that the death of that beautiful and fragile woman that was like a flower, the woman he fell in love with the moment he saw her on his way home from the Prince's feast, was his greatest loss. He lost her because he had fallen in love not with a human being, but with a morning, and she had been the gentle morning that wasn't destined to live long personified. And he also thought that he probably was no worse a sinner than those around him, than the other merchants and nobility. If he had asked Timko for a favor, who could tell whether Timko would have lent him money; or if he had died, wouldn't Stepan have taken some of his money. His fate, however, had to be different, for he had received Holy Communion from that holy morning, pure and delicate, and had seen the light. That was the reason he wept so late, for he realized that he could never go back, and that more than anything else in the world, he wanted to be granted one more meeting, albeit posthumous, with his love, and he was asking the Lord for a clear vision. And the Lord spread a winter path before Theodore's feet. Through the opalescent mist of his tears, he saw the pale figure of the woman, icy and divine, that looked

exactly like his late wife, and she was holding a little icy baby in her arms. She was looking at him with her enormous sad eyes, and a faint delicate smile played on her lips.

"I'll come to you," he whispered raising his arm in a greeting. "I am coming to you, my loved ones. No one will ever catch me in the black fatal nets."

Suddenly, Theodore heard that someone was scratching on his door, and Basil's soapy voice followed immediately.

"Open the door, Brother Theodore! Can you hear me, Brother Theodore!"

Theodore rose to his feet and went to open the door. Basil was standing on the threshold. And again he had a feeling that he wasn't the ordinary Basil, for this one was smaller and meeker; while in his eyes there were strange sparks flashing now and then.

"An angel has visited me again," he said. "He informed me that my prayer had been answered, and you found gold and silver. Is it true?"

"Yes," said Theodore nodding his head in agreement. "It's almost true."

"Show me!" Basil breathed. His eyes were sweeping the cell greedily, however, failing to find anything of interest there.

Theodore took a handful of golden coins from his pocket. Basil rushed toward him rapaciously, but the hand closed into a fist in front of his face.

"Is that all?" he asked with dissatisfaction.

"This is almost all," said Theodore. "Or maybe not..."

"Brother Theodore," exclaimed Basil, rubbing his hands with joy. "Didn't I tell you that you would be rewarded? God said that everyone who gave up his estate or house for His sake, would receive a hundred-fold. Now the treasure is in your hands! It was me,

and no one but me, who helped and directed you with my prayers and instructions!"

He stared at Theodore but the eyes of the latter were cold and expressionless.

"I longed for this money to gain my freedom," replied Theodore. "But I didn't know then what true freedom meant..."

After these words, Basil became staid and serious. Once again he looked like the monk who had come to Theodore's house on that memorable sad winter day, one of the days of the month that was sinking in snow.

"Brother Theodore," he said reasonably, "beware of the devils that might slander you, and again you will be tormented by your grief, as you were before. I order you to take the treasure and move to another land. There you will buy an estate. You'll leave your treasures to anyone after your death, and that will be the memory you will leave of yourself."

And again his gaze was met by Theodore's dark, cold eyes.

"You showed me the way to what I desired during my lonely nights. But why do you want me to do this, if you feel no love for me? All you feel is envy. As for me, it is a shame to do it now. I gave up the whole world and everything that belongs to it; and I promised to God to stay here until the end of my life."

"Envy was what I felt towards you before, Brother Theodore," replied Basil. "I envied you when you lived in a wonderful house. Then you were my enemy. Now you are my fellow-monk."

"Then why are you sending me back to a wonderful house? Do you want me to become your enemy again?"

"No, Brother!" said Basil, approaching him and putting his hand on his shoulder. "If you trust me, I will go with you. We won't become enemies this time if we enter a wonderful house together. Listen to

me. You won't be able to conceal the treasure. Someone will surely find out about it, as I have found out about it. God would have never granted you such treasure against His will; it means He wants you to possess it. And, besides, you won't handle the treasure on your own. There might be a lot of enemies who want to get everything for free while you are on your way. You'd better sit and wait here. I will take care of the carts for transportation. You will only load your treasure on them, and we'll leave. And one more thing, I'll hire a few guards to protect us on our way."

What he saw were Theodore's dark cold eyes, and he didn't even finish the sentence.

"I can see you don't believe me," said Basil, and his eyes became sad. "You won't agree, but I promise you to keep it a secret."

Theodore opened his hand, and the golden coins glittered. He took Basil's hand and put all the coins into it. Then he went to the corner of his cell to fetch the golden bowl.

"This is the treasure, I mean, all of it, Brother Basil," he said in a low voice. "I am giving all I have found, so you can be richer than me again."

"Why are you doing it?" asked Basil, his open palm full of golden coins.

"I would like to keep you safe from committing a grave sin," Theodore answered sadly.

8

And the millstones were spinning again grinding grain. For several days, Theodore had been enjoying his work, for before that, when he had been busy looking for the buried treasure, he had been in a state of utter confusion. There was only one sad thought

that came to his mind during those few days. And it was that if he hadn't refused to take the treasure, he would have been totally helpless. Once he had had an enemy like that, and how many enemies he would have gained this time? These few peaceful days passed, and he felt that he didn't want to work the millstones as he used to. So misery inhabited his soul again, tearing it apart. There was no way to get free of it. He understood that if he forgot about the treasure forever, he would have to mill grain for the rest of his life; but if he took it, he would be doomed to torment and maybe even death. His dreams were ordinary and dull; all he dreamt of were the millstones spinning before his eyes. And he saw his own hands putting in more grain and taking out the flour. He felt unsettled once again, though he didn't want to give up. He was longing for the bright sunlight. He was aware that the whole earth was in bloom, for May was in full swing. Merry birds, hidden by the foliage, were singing. He imagined the enormous sun, and this vision depressed him even more. Misery was sown inside his heart; it began to sprout like verdure in May, and one night it seemed to him that he could hear a nightingale singing.

Theodore was visited by Polycarp who was the Father Superior's envoy.

"This cell must be too damp and narrow for you, Brother Theodore," he said looking around. "The Father Superior wants you to move to another cell upstairs."

"I like it here," replied Theodore, ignoring his thoughts about the sun. "And, besides, it is much easier to save your soul from the evils of the world here than anywhere else."

"Only one who obeys his seniors without objections," moralized Polycarp, "might hope for the salvation of his soul."

Then Theodore took his cloak under his arm, for it was all he had, and walked to the door.

"Let someone bring the millstones to my cell," he said humbly. "I've grown too feeble."

They walked out of the cave. It was a dusky, opaque morning; the sky was lowering, and the crowns of the trees resembled dishevelled balls. Suddenly, from one of the trees growing nearby, a nightingale's song burst forth. Theodore stopped and raised his head, while Polycarp had to stop and wait while Theodore listened to the song. At last, he was ready to go, but suddenly, he saw that he had trampled a flower accidentally. He jerked back and bent down to smooth the flower's head — it was a dandelion, yellow as the rising sun. Only then did he notice that the hill was thickly overgrown with yellow flowers that were like tiny lights. He turned his darkened but still pale and unshaven face to Polycarp.

"What a magnificent sight, Brother Polycarp!"

Polycarp hemmed rather indifferently.

"That is because you've gotten out of habit of seeing the world."

He didn't look at Theodore, who had stopped again. This time the hermit wasn't looking at the beauty of nature, for he was closely watching Polycarp's face that was gray by the dim light of the dusk, and his eyes, nose and lips were hard to decipher...

"Who's going to move into the Varangian Cave?" he asked unexpectedly.

"Brother Basil asked us to let him move in there," said the voice coming from the blurry face. "He would like to have some rest there, recall his life and think about God."

It seemed both sad and funny to Theodore. He was looking around with interest. The nightingale sang much louder by then, and the dandelions on the hill

became even brighter. The mist was dissolving. The sun was rising behind their backs, and the mist was quickly melting in its rays. Theodore turned abruptly to the sun, and his eyes, that were not accustomed to the bright light, were filled with tears. The sunrise was pinkish-gold, and there was a sphere of flame at the horizon.

Theodore thought then that the world was so enormous, so limitless, that one could enter it just like that, with a cloak under his arm and a free heart. Only the cowl along with and the mantle could be changed to a simple robe. He also thought that he wasn't ever going to return to the caves, no matter what treasures were hidden there. There was something greater than all these treasures out in the world, and that was the bright sun and the infinite world itself. This was a fleeting sensation that touched his soul, that amazed and charmed him for the first time ever. About this particular experience, he would later tell me, Simeon, unworthy servant of God, when I visited him right before he got into serious trouble. But then, he walked out into the daylight, and it was an early May morning. Tears were streaming from his eyes, for had he dared to look straight into the face of the heavenly disk at the horizon; and after that, Polycarp's face seemed so blurred to him, and the nightingale was singing above his head, while the sunlit hill seemed illuminated with numerous yellow lights — the dandelions. It was then that he experienced purification of his soul.

"Do you have any idea what happened to me then?" Theodore asked me in utter surprise.

"The sky was entering your heart," I replied and he glanced at me in sheer disbelief, for he wasn't sure it was possible, and suspected that my inspiration was false to a certain extent.

Unfortunately, this man didn't have enough time to see the true light. But it was important that he had already understood that this pure light did exist, and that there were feelings which were not defiled by evil passions, and that eternity sometimes looks a man straight in the eye. I've experienced several similar enlightenments which endowed me with this divine light; and I hope it will serve me till the end of my days.

But then, on the May morning, Theodore followed Polycarp, a sad smile illuminating his face. It had appeared the moment he heard about Basil's hermitage. His eyes were still moist with the tears, but deep inside his heart there appeared a bright sparkling piece of the boundless sky.

9

The millstones were brought to his new cell, and he was busy milling grain, giving free play to his thoughts. In the meantime, his advisor was busy digging at the walls of the Varangian Cell. Time went on for both of them, and their thoughts always turned on one and the same subject. Theodore worried that Basil might find the treasure, that buried chest full of gold, silver and precious tableware and cutlery, while Basil kept digging. Theodore didn't want this treasure for himself, but neither did he want Basil to have it. Curiosity gave him no peace.

Several times, he was on the verge of going to the caves. One night when everyone else was asleep, he could no longer resist the temptation. He slipped out of his cell noiselessly. The high summer sky above his head was covered with thousands of stars, and the Moon was remarkably bright that particular night. The earth, covered with sparkling dew, was soundly asleep

in its chimerical light. Though Theodore was walking stealthily, his steps resounded in the silence of the night, and it seemed to him that under this sky, all passions were nothing but vexations of spirit. But apart from the sky, there was the earth, as he thought, and they were all tied to it. He believed that all human passions came from the earth. He didn't know for sure yet why he was going to his old cell — whether to watch Basil work, or just for the sake of his own peace. He stopped for a minute, illuminated by the cool moonlight that set the earth around on fire, the flames were a peculiar blue.

For all that, he entered the cave, having taken off his shoes, and without even lighting his candle. He crawled along the walls. The familiar smell of the earth and that of the melting wax was spreading all round him; the faint light of twinkling oil-lamps illuminated just a few spots. He stopped by the door of the Varangian Cell and pressed his eye to the small window.

He saw a half-naked monk whose withered hand was dangling lifeless, while with his other normal hand he was tirelessly working the pick-ax. Basil was chopping at the wall. Pieces of clay were breaking off and falling to the floor, and the cell was all in a mess. Theodore laughed behind the door involuntarily, for Basil was digging out of desperation rather than calculation. The sound of Theodore's laughter was so sudden that it made Basil shudder, but when he saw a glowing eye in the small window, he got truly frightened.

"All your labor's in vain," Theodore said, "you are not going to find any treasure. Those coins and the bowl were all there was."

"You're lying," Basil said calmly, wiping the perspiration from his face. "You told me it wasn't all

there was. You told me. It was you who told me. I'm sure I'll find it. By hook or by crook, I'll do it!"

"If you ever find it, consider it yours," said Theodore, becoming sad again, for the atmosphere of the cell where he had spent so many years and where he had lived with his misery, depressed him.

"You won't get a single coin, you scoundrel," hissed Basil, his eyes glowing red in the dim light of the cave; and then he cried out in a shrill voice, "Do you hear me, not a single coin!"

He stood shaking his head in the middle of the cell, girdled with his mantle. His naked body was dirty, and his beard dishevelled, and his hair was gray with age and clay. His eyes flashed with fury, his mouth, with its few bad yellow teeth, was wide open. He bent down a bit as if ready to attack Theodore, or rather, the eye that stared at him. A broken wall, cracked by his pick-ax, was behind his back, and piles of earth lay at his feet; it looked as if the monk had just emerged from those piles of dirt. Theodore was suddenly seized with a strange pity for this doomed man, and it seemed to him that he was looking at himself through the tiny window. He was looking at himself, a worthless, down-trodden, dirty man seized by an evil passion. It was him, but with a withered hand which had been used to rake in his ill-gotten gains, and the rotten remains of what used to be his teeth, his dishevelled gray hair, filthy and matted with clay. And then he thought about these amazing tricks of human fate, for there in front of him was a man who had passionately tried to convince him that money defiled the human soul, and that only a poor faithful man could be truly pure. He could no longer bear to look at Basil. The man in front of him was neither his friend, nor his enemy. He was just a wretched little man. What happened after that was seemingly in

answer to his thoughts. This man, dirty and exhausted, ruled by passion and fury, was growing smaller and smaller until he disappeared in the piles of earth that loomed at his feet. It seemed that some unfathomable power was washing him away from Theodore's eyes; he could see a tiny figure somewhere in the distance, in the depths of a clay pit dimly lit by a torch. This man was about a cubit high, and he was still saying something, waving his good hand and pressing the withered one to his chest. Theodore was no longer interested in what this man would say; neither was he afraid of the words, they just didn't matter.

In his turn, Basil had no idea of what was going on in Theodore's mind; neither did he know about the light that had been born in Theodore's heart. All he could possibly see was an enormous unblinking eye that was draining him with its gaze. It was rage that Basil felt toward this unblinking eye, and that was why foul curses spurted from his mouth.

"Go away, Theodore," he said after he had exhausted all his resources of foul language. "Don't try my patience any more!"

But the eye was still staring at him, and, seized by a black rage, Basil bent down, took a handful of earth, and threw it right into the eye that was draining his soul.

10

Basil worked fiercely and tirelessly to break down the walls. The cell was filled with piles of clay. They were everywhere, even covering his bed. Both the warmth in the cell, and the fire burning inside him made it impossible to bear the stuffy heat. He had slipped out of his robes, and continued to work naked. The monk had broken down two walls and had started

on the third one. As for the door, he attached a curtain to it and took his bread and water by thrusting his hand through the curtain, explaining that he was fasting. His stubbornness wasn't rewarded, for he was too foolhardy in his digging. He was filling the cell with more and more earth, but instead of getting closer to the hidden treasure he was digging further and further away from it, or, at least, I suppose it was so, for no one found out Theodore's secret. Theodore told me just a part of the story about the dungeon he had found and how he got there. Theodore was absolutely sure that the rabid Basil would never be able to find the treasure.

All Basil's efforts were in vain. Rage was growing in him. Once, he went to visit one of the Prince's advisors, a boyar, whom he had known before.

"Theodore, that is the monk who stayed in the cave before me, found the hidden treasure: a lot of gold, silver, and precious tableware. He wanted to escape to a foreign land with all this. I have prevented him from going abroad... Now he pretends to be a holy fool man, and won't tell me where this treasure is hidden. Now he denies that he ever saw any treasure at all, but he is only trying to deceive everyone. He will surely escape whenever he possibly can taking the treasure with him."

"What cave is that?" asked the boyar.

"It's the Varangian Cave. The thing is that I have been digging there for quite some time already, but failed to find anything of importance. You might also fail if you try."

In the meantime, Theodore and I were sitting in his cell, and he was telling me this story. He dwelled on all the details, and his voice resembled the sound of the millstones turning. At the same time he continued to work; the millstones were turning, and

white flour was sifting from under the stones. I was watching the sifting flour and listening to the howling wind — the weather was foul that day — and I felt at ease with this sufferer.

"We are forgetting our nature, we are going astray," I said when Theodore fell silent. "Instead of living in harmony with it, we are trying to defy it. This is the reason our evil passions come to be. Sometimes, we don't measure human life with good deeds. Sometimes we set out to do good deeds, but, in fact, they are not inspired by our heart, for we hope to be rewarded for them by earthly fame, and thus, the grace of the Lord. The grace of Our Lord has nothing in common with fame. It is rather inner peace. Being impure, is impossible to achieve the Lord's grace, though sometimes even villains look as if they are at peace. But they are putting on airs, for inside they are far from being peaceful. And I can tell you one more thing: the one who tortures himself, hoping to be marked by grace of God is a sinner no less than one who does evil openly. So, instead of living against his nature, man must live in accordance with it. Don't try to teach a cherry tree to bear raspberries; let a cherry tree be a cherry, and a raspberry be itself, too. Evil deeds are the result of our inability to live in harmony with nature in this world. We keep forgetting that we are all integral parts of it. We must not exclude ourselves from it, but the opposite, we must ennoble it with our powerful intellects. And this is truly the best service to the Supreme Power, for we all exist under Its protection."

Theodore nodded in agreement.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Let a man be judged by his good deeds. My life was quite unfortunate till this day; I gave away all I had to the people who happened to be rogues. You know, Brother," he said putting his

hand onto mine, "I think I still can do at least one good deed."

I looked at him, and his face was perfectly serene.

"I have forgotten about the treasure," continued Theodore. "I've forgotten about it forever, both for myself and everyone else. I know that if I decided to take the hidden treasure, many evil passions would blaze up. Basil would run after me in order to kill me. If I gave the money to the monastery I'm not sure how they would spend it. If I gave it to the Prince, for instance, he would spend it on wars and feasts, no doubt."

He was turning his millstones as he said this, and grain was ceaselessly turning into flour.

"I want to leave the monastery," Theodore continued in the same unhurried manner. "I will earn my living by doing manual labor, and most of all, I'm going to care about the peace of my soul. What do you think of that, Brother? Would you call it a good deed?"

"Yes, indeed," I agreed, for my innermost thoughts were absolutely the same.

In the meantime, as these words were being pronounced, the boyar was bringing Basil to the Prince.

"Catch Theodore as soon as possible," said Basil with fervor, "and take the treasure, my Prince. If he refuses to give it to you, threaten to beat him. If he refuses even in this case, torture him severely. But if then he refuses to confess, call me and I will be here to establish his guilt in your presence..."

"It's settled, Father," said the Prince rejoicing. "Take this for the brilliant news!" he added, giving a silver coin to Basil. "If we get this treasure, you will also receive a good payment. Saddle the horses!" he ordered one of his bodyguards.

A trumpeter played the trumpet call in the yard,

and in half an hour the Prince and his entourage set out for the monastery as if they were going on a big hunting party, or even to war.

I left Theodore's cell but before I reached mine, the Prince's bodyguards burst into the monastery yard and surrounded Theodore's cell. This was in autumn. I was standing by the Gregory's former garden all covered with fallen leaves, and I saw everything that happened from there. They bound Theodore, dragged him from his cell, and threw him over the horse. Monks came running from everywhere. Even the Father Superior hurried towards the soldiers. The Prince rode up to him, got off his horse and received the Father Superior's blessing. They talked about something, and stood facing one another for quite a long time.

I hurried over to Theodore as well. He lay thrown across the saddle, his beard hanging down.

"An evil year it is for me, Brother Simeon," he said anxiously. "Pray for me."

Somebody lashed up the horse and it cantered off. The Prince was already on horseback, and the whole entourage galloped to the gate, the fallen leaves whirling under the horses' hooves.

I raised my eyes upwards and looked at a gray gloomy tree. Snow-flakes were falling to the earth. Light and slow, they were spinning and whirling. And suddenly, I realized what Theodore would be thinking at this particular minute. He was recollecting the great snowy winter, while rocking in rhythm with the horse's gait, or perhaps he was seeing the trampled face of the woman under the horse's hooves. This face was probably smiling to him, its faded lips slightly curving at the corners of her mouth.

I stood in the middle of the yard, sad and cold. Theodore was one of the few men who truly wanted to seek the peace of God which passeth all understand-

ing. But instead he was a plaything of fate. So how can we cognize this world, full of human passions as well as good deeds? Are we able to understand in full measure the will of Our Lord? Is it possible for us to create something less transient than the snowflakes that were filling the air — that is when any minute the fatal blow might strike? Do we have enough good intentions and good deeds, and are pure intentions considered to be deeds? What is eternal in this world, and what can never be changed? What will survive us, and what will remain after us? What is not subject to death and decay, I mean, of that what we create with our hands and minds?

I was thinking about all that, and tears were rolling down my cheeks. I felt pity for this warm-hearted, candid man who could be truly kind.

11

"Untie him!" the Prince ordered. "I would like to speak to him nicely first."

Theodore was untied, and he stood rubbing his numb arms and legs.

"Excuse us, Father," the Prince uttered affectionately. "Excuse us for having treated you so roughly, but I must tell you that we had to do it. Now you tell me if it is true that you have found some hidden treasure? I would like to share it with you, and you may become Confessor to me and my father, as well."

"It is true that I have found a hidden treasure," said Theodore artlessly. "But it is hidden in the cave, and there it is safe."

"Is there much gold, silver and other precious dinnerware and cutlery?"

"A lot of things like that. But it all will stay hidden there forever."

"Why don't you want to give it to me?" asked the Prince almost tenderly. "Why are you refusing to give it to your son? As for you, you could certainly take as much as you need..."

Theodore's face twitched and he turned to the window. Through that window he could see the whirling and dancing snow-flakes. He noticed the figure of the woman in the falling snow, and she was icy and divine; she resembled his late wife, and was holding a tiny icy naked baby in her arms. But this time, the woman didn't smile to him. She was just staring at him with her enormous frightened eyes, while the icy baby seemed to be crying, for his lips were parted. Theodore's face became gloomy for a second.

"I don't need anything for myself," he uttered slowly. "Why should I take that which I don't need? I am free of wealth, and I have no regrets. But I fear for you, my Prince... I fear that once you've taken all the treasures, you might sow much evil and wicked passions."

The Prince frowned, gritting his teeth.

"I order you by my right as your ruler to disclose your secret to me. If you don't want anything for yourself, it's up to you, but I want to get my share."

Theodore looked into the window indifferently.

"You can take it," he said turning abruptly. "I can't stop you from taking it, can I? As for me, I've forgotten where it is hidden, so I can't help you."

The expression on the Prince's face became grave, he spoke through clenched teeth.

"This monk who refused my graces must be chained hand and foot. No water, no bread for three days..."

In the meantime, Basil was busy digging. He disclosed his secret to the Father Superior, and the latter sent several strong navvies. They dug up the floor, chopped out the walls and the ceiling, filling sacks

with earth and taking them out, their bodies were covered with hot unbearable sweat. At that time, Theodore was chained in prison, hungry and thirsty. I don't know what he felt during those bitter hours, but I believed he was patient and calm, for he had gone a long way to achieve this peace of mind. And it was so, because after these three days he was brought to the Prince again and asked where the treasure was supposed to be hidden. He repeated the words he had said before.

He was beaten, tortured with a red-hot iron, and pierced with swords, but not a single word escaped his mouth. His eyes were fixed on the window, staring at the snow falling outside. It wasn't difficult to guess what he saw there: in the snow was the woman, icy and divine. Then he was ordered to be hung in the chimney above the fireplace, then a fire was kindled in it. Theodore couldn't bear the horrible torture, and a shrill cry escaped his lips, resounding in the chimney so loudly that all the people who had gathered in the Prince's yard heard this cry. I was among them, for I had come there to try to convince the Prince that it was useless to torture the poor man, for he really didn't know where the treasure was hidden, and all he had found was just the handful of coins and a golden bowl that he had given to Basil.

The Prince heard me out and ordered Theodore taken out of the chimney. He looked horrible, black with soot, his skin burnt. He was groaning, but when he saw me, his eyes pleaded with me, as I understood, to remain silent.

"Here your fellow-monk says that you didn't find any treasure," said the Prince bending over the sufferer. "That you just spread rumours about it. If that is true, tell me, but if not, you'd better give me my share."

Theodore was writhing in pain, his mouth wide-open and gasping for air. At last, he managed to utter with great difficulty:

"I've told you the truth... I found the hidden treasure... But I consider it a grave sin to give this treasure to you. Now I have no idea where I hid it."

I felt ashamed, for Theodore turned out to be more honest and tougher than me at the time when I wanted to save him. I have never forgotten about it till this day. The world we live in is unfathomable and complicated, and all human deeds are measured in copper coins instead of gold. It is not easy to be an honest man in this world. Each lie, each cowardly deed becomes a burden for our souls, and this burden ruins them. Each one of us yields to circumstances too often, and is apt to betray and discredit his own brother for the sake of his temporary salvation. Greater fear whips us, making us complaisant as a tough, supple twig. Trees that bend in the wind do not live for centuries, while those which do must grow slowly and with great effort.

The Prince sent for Basil, the architect of Theodore's misfortune. Basil did not want to go on his own, and had to be dragged by force from the monastery.

"I did everything you told me to do with this villain," said the Prince.

Basil stared at Theodore's smeared body, covered with blisters and enormous burns. The latter was lying in the corner groaning. Basil's face changed in a queer way, his eyes shifty, like those of a trapped beast.

"I didn't tell you anything," he said glancing askance at me, and backing toward the door.

"Look at him!" said the Prince rather firmly pointing at Theodore's burnt body in the corner. "This is the one who refused to deliver up the hidden treasure to me."

Basil backed another step toward the door. His eyes became dark and narrow.

"These are the tricks of the Evil One!" he shouted in a shrill voice. "He tempted you and slandered me! Nobody ever saw me leaving my cave."

Then the boyars laughed, for they had witnessed the conversation. One of the boyars said:

"We were present when you spoke with the Prince."

Basil raised his arms above his head, crying out in his shrill voice:

"You have all been tempted by the Evil One! I never left my cave, and I have never seen any of you!"

In a terrible rage, the Prince ordered Basil beaten. The servants stripped him, and everybody saw that he was covered all over with clay stains, even his withered hand that he was pressing to his chest. They started beating him across the back with sticks. Basil cried and moaned, twitching and tossing, admitting his sin, that he had betrayed Theodore. Theodore fell silent in the corner where he was lying. I came to kneel by his side; his gaze betrayed that he was near death. His eyes were clear, and his face was turned toward the window, where he could see the downy whirling snow. I was almost sure that the vision of the woman with the child was there until his last minute. Despite the fact that he was suffering, a faint smile appeared on his lips, illuminating his face like a falling leaf could illuminate the earth in autumn.

"He has passed away!" I announced, closing Theodore's eyes.

"Well, what can we do now?" the Prince said rather calmly. "If that one didn't show us the treasure, this one will do it instead, right?"

He took a bow and strung an arrow.

The monk fell to his knees, covered with the clay

stains, and stretched out both arms, one good and the other one withered, toward the Prince. Enormous tears streamed from his eyes, leaving clear traces in the clay. Then he cried out in utter despair:

"Have mercy on me, my Prince! God can see that I didn't find those treasures!"

The arrow hissed and pierced Basil's chest right between his good and withered hands raised in a pleading gesture, and he fell down on his back by Theodore's side. So, there they were, lying side by side. The face of one of them was serene and enlightened, while the face of the other was distorted — they both had been tortured by one and the same passion, they both died by one and the same hand — but their last moments had been different.

"Take away this offal, monk!" the Prince said to me. "Otherwise I will have them thrown to the dogs..."



CHAPTER XII

*which is the last one, telling the story how
I happened to be brought to the court
of the Brothers*

I am writing my parchment after Polycarp wrote his. I'm doing it because in his parchment, there are too many unbelievable, false stories. It could be that all who witnessed the events described therein will pass away. And then all Polycarp's stories will be considered the only true testament of our state of mind and soul. and future generations will judge us by them. For my part, I, the sinner, was too curious about everything, and, like Polycarp, wrote down all the stories old people told me. At first, I did it for my own peace of mind. Now I realize that I didn't do it simply out of curiosity, but maybe it was Providence itself, for the inspiration that made me take up writing wasn't evil — I'm not writing all this for evil reasons. No matter how I tried I couldn't avoid my personal opinions and, sometimes, I expressed my own attitude towards the events taking place in the monastery. But, nevertheless, I described all those events exactly as they were told to me, or the way I saw them with my own eyes. So, if somebody told me lies, I was apt to repeat them, but if I misinterpreted something I saw, I would ask God to

forgive me, since I didn't do it for evil reasons, but just because I didn't have the correct information. There is a true saying, that nothing can be perfect, nothing can be complete.

I had bigger ambitions for my parchment than Polycarp. I wanted to tell my own stories as well as the ones he dwelled upon. And, of course, I didn't mean to take up only the dark aspects of our life; I longed to describe the spiritual giants among us, and the scholars and teachers I had who taught me loyalty and many other clever things. The time has come to finish this. I have been writing in secret, withdrawing into the hermitage, but though I took all possible precautions, I failed to keep it a secret. At times I was so caught up in my writing that I didn't notice the rustling of garbs outside my door, and sometimes, I even absent-mindedly left the window of my cell open. Besides, quite a few monks visited me in my cell. I never concealed the thoughts I express in my parchment. My favorite companion was Isaac, but he has passed away, and I still feel sorry for him. I could even show him these pages without fear. He taught me more than I could possibly teach him. Then one of the youngest monks, whose name is Nikon, began to visit me more than the other brothers. I came to love him with all my heart. He always stopped by my cell when I was tired of writing, and preferred to exercise my ability to express myself through the spoken word. It made me happy to see his clever eyes, and I wanted to share a lifetime of thoughts with the young man.

"My friend," I used to say to my attentive listener, "I've read so many books while I've been here, and they all share the same fault. They are all too monotonous, too single-minded. The Creator puts up with that though. He reveals Himself in many things.

He is never inert or motionless. He is always creating and destroying. He is eternal like a tree; some of its branches wither and die, while new branches grow. Leaves appear and then fall, but He will exist as long as life itself exists. Life, my friend, is the Lord himself, it is what makes the world go on spinning eternally. There is no perfect image for Him. He sows fear and brings joy, for He is the life-giving Spirit. Everything that contradicts its own nature is opposed to Him, for it serves the Evil One, but that which is in harmony with nature belongs to God and is pleasing to Him, I tell you."

Those clever eyes seemed to drink in all my words; they were very attentive and didn't miss a single thought I expressed during those conversations.

"Isn't it true that God commanded us to deny earthly pleasures and worldly wealth?" he would ask me timidly.

"It's true," I would reply. "But He had in mind evil joys, and the wealth that some people produce with the blood and sweat of the others."

"Is there any other wealth?"

"Yes, there is. It can't be measured in gold. Rich is the man who is pure of heart."

"But hungry," said Nikon with a sad smile.

"A man doesn't need much to alleviate hunger," I said. "But the thing is that a man knows no bounds where satisfying his whims is concerned. If you were to collect all the money that is spent vainly, you could feed all the hungry people in the world. Men live to take as much as they possibly can from life — they fear hunger — and stuff their stomachs with everything they can, though nobody seems to be aware that if the next day, hunger were to come, the food eaten the day before could never satiate it. But this is not the most serious trouble with men, for men are human,

and they are apt to care about their lives. It is much worse when a man rebels against his own nature and draws a sword against it, for he, in fact, threatens himself and is ready to stab himself. It is much worse when a man believes that his mind is supreme and that he has the knowledge of everything, because then he doesn't believe in what is innermost. Folly is displayed where doubts don't exist. This is the source of depression, decay, and mediocrity. Truth is boundless, and every boundary fetters the truth. The only appropriate measure for it is the good deeds of a man. If you did a good deed, look back and see if it harmed other people, for there is good that is true, and there is also good which turns out to be false. The false good yields evil complications, while the true good is eternal. It lives on for centuries and is good for everyone. The same thing can be said about truth. There is temporary truth and that which is eternal. The temporary truth rusts and becomes covered with lies, while the eternal one shines through the centuries and is boundless. Everything that exists under the sun is divided in two, and these two parts are locked in eternal war. Try to find your place in the whirlpool of life! Try to defend your individuality and purity. It is not so easy, and not everyone is able to do so, for in the existing world, one bows to another and submits to him. But don't ever forget that the dream of his supreme predestination never dies in a man. If mundane filth touches you, you can't be equal to God, for that filth will turn into a peatbog later. But, the one who preserves his purity and his god-like state, cannot ignore or despise that filth — evil pride is also filth of the soul. The one who throws a stone at a feeble or fallen man is throwing this stone at himself."

We had so many talks. Or rather it was mainly me talking, while Nikon used to listen. The other monks

also visited me, mostly those who like to contemplate and want to cognize the world and themselves better. The rest of the time I spent reading. I have plenty of books in my cell. I kept my parchment a secret not because I was afraid for myself, but because I doubted what the attitude of the brothers would be towards it. I was afraid they would say that my intentions were evil. This was the reason I decided to let the Lord judge. If necessary, people would unearth it and read it. If not, it would become dust like everything else in this world.

I already knew what I wanted to do after finishing this parchment. This great and boundless world attracted me more and more. The minute I had buried the parchment in the earth, I would leave my cell, and without even warning anyone, I was determined to leave the gray walls of the monastery and the humble world within them. My soul had grown larger than that frame. I wanted to live in freedom. I longed to welcome the joys and sorrows of the world. I wanted to laugh at funny things, and I also wanted to be free to shed tears. I didn't know yet what good I could do in this boundless world, but I was absolutely sure that I wasn't going to harm anyone. I longed to feel the sun above my head and the succulent grass at my feet. I just wanted to live among people who lived in harmony with their natures. As for me, Nature assigned me the pitiful role of observing the world and sifting all I saw through my heart and soul. It allowed me to be an observer but not a participant. I accepted that poor lot, and I promised to live with it, for I had said myself that everyone in the world must be what he is and none other.

So I thought when I was finishing the story about Theodore who had died but managed to purify his soul.

It was midday, and I was brought bread and water. After a humble meal I rested with pleasure. Suddenly, I heard sounds of footsteps. The footsteps could possibly belong to a crowd of people coming along the corridor. My parchment was hidden carefully, as I always used to hide it after finishing my work. That was why I listened to these steps calmly. The crowd was approaching swiftly and solemnly. There was something inevitable and determined about these footsteps. My heart sensed that something bad was about to happen. And so it did. The crowd stopped at the door of my cell.

My eyes were fixed on the window in the door. What I saw were the piercing attentive eyes of the Father Superior.

"Brother Simeon," he said firmly. "Open the door, we want to come into your cell."

I opened the door. The Father Superior, John, his deputy, Pimen the Faster, Polycarp, Isaiah, Jeremiah the Perspicacious, Agapetos the Healer, Nicholas, Onysiphorus, and Nikon, whom I loved to talk with, came into my cell. I wanted to look into his eyes as we had done before, but when I saw his unusually reserved face, Nikon was looking at some point in space but not at me.

"We have come to you," said the Father Superior, "to the man who has been tempted by the Evil One and endowed by false wisdom. This is the only reason for your impious conversations with the rest of the brothers, for your prophecies and temptations. We are also aware of the fact that you are writing some manuscript and concealing it. In it, you call the monastic life unnatural and not pleasing to the Lord. This is also the reason why you have stopped praying zealously, as any monk should do. From all this we understand that you have been lured by the Enemy,

and thus you may become our enemy, that is if you are not moved by our pious prayers.

"Who has slandered me?" I asked, looking rather reserved.

"It was me, Brother Simeon," replied Nikon. "The one who listened more than anyone else to your evil speeches. At first, I thought I liked them, but then I realized that it was the Evil One speaking through you in this way. And to save you and myself, I went to the Father Superior and confided everything to him."

He was staring at me with his cold, estranged eyes, and suddenly I was seized with great sorrow, for the person I loved had betrayed me.

"It's a pity, Brother," I said sadly. "You saw evil in my preaching against it."

"Your words were good," Nikon answered just as coldly. "But there was evil in them."

Then I understood that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't convince him to change his mind. He had been inspired by an evil passion against me, though I couldn't understand what the roots of the hatred that seized him were. I felt suddenly that I was nothing but a feeble, sick, and lonely man.

"Where is the writing that you conceal?" asked the Father Superior.

My parchment was buried in the earth. What I had in my cell at the moment was clean parchment.

"I was only going to start writing," I answered. "I just wanted to complete Polycarp's work."

"It is a God-pleasing business that you have conceived," said Polycarp. "But haven't I done it well enough?"

"You did what you could, Brother, while I wanted to do what I can do."

"There is no sin in such an undertaking," said the

Father Superior. "But the whole community must read and discuss what has been written in order that our monastery might not be defamed. If you do something that brings shame to our monastery, it could become a grave sin, and the damnations of St. Antony and St. Theodosius would come raining down upon your head."

"I was going to write only the holy truth, and nothing but the truth," I answered.

"The holy truth is everything that contributes to the fame of our holy monastery," said Polycarp. "If you write something just for the sake of bringing the monastery into disrepute, it is considered nothing but evil lies."

"Indeed, you are right, Brother Polycarp," said the Father Superior, nodding his head in agreement. "Brothers, have a look to see if Brother Simeon has any writings here."

The young monks started searching the cell, and the most ardent among them was, of course, Nikon. Then Jeremiah approached me and put his cold, and trembling — for he was awfully old — hand onto my shoulder.

"In your parchment you should write only God-pleasing words, my son," he said, and I turned to look into his eyes. There was a sparkling light there, I noticed with amazement.

"I had a vision today, Brothers," he continued, squinting his eyes that were green as the grass in spring. "And this vision was only about Brother Simeon. I saw him in the guise of a raven, holding a parchment in his beak. The raven was sitting on a branch, and there was a devil in the guise of an angel asking Brother Simeon to give him this parchment. Brother Simeon was about to give it to him, for he had been lured and believed that it was an angel in

front of him. But a she-dove flew from the treetop and struck the false angel's eyes with its beak. That angel grew black and turned into a coal, and then I could see Brother Simeon again. He was still a raven, but he was white."

He opened his eyes and they were like bright green leaves against the bright sky.

"Your vision is good," I said humbly. "But how do you happen to know, Brother Jeremiah, that the she-dove wasn't the incarnation of the Evil One?"

"She didn't turn black, while the false angel did," Jeremiah answered rather good-naturedly. "And you, Brother, somehow turned white."

He squinted cunningly, it was clear he didn't wish me harm.

"I also had a vision last night," I said, looking at my finger nails. "In my vision there was also a raven and a parchment. The difference was that the angel was holding the parchment, while the raven was attacking him, hoping to grab it. And, somehow, the angel of my vision was so helpless before this raven that he didn't even struggle, but only was covering his face with his hands."

"Did the raven manage to take the parchment?" Jeremiah asked with curiosity.

"No," I said. "The angel's tears washed away what was written on this parchment."

"Who do you think that raven was?" asked Jeremiah, his gaze piercing.

"How can I possibly know?" I replied. "I noticed nothing but the colors. They were white and black, and that black was attacking the white."

The monks stopped searching my cell, and as I supposed all they have found were the pen, ink, and spare parchment. This seemed to comfort the Father Superior. He approached Jeremiah, and they whispered

about something for some time. I couldn't hear the words, but perhaps they were discussing whether to claim that I had some liason with the Evil One or not.

Then I felt something very unusual for me; I was plunged into some unbearable grief. I looked around my cell and saw how dark and gloomy it was. It had been my home for some time, and I had been happy here, for it was here that I was endowed with the fire that helped me write these phrases. I was sad for another reason. It was sad that everything in the world was ethereal and unreliable, and even this deserted cave — people didn't even know it existed — wasn't safe, and the people dressed in black trampled everything, searching for the parchment in my soul. They were wandering in my head, in the catacombs of my brain, sniffing everything out like watch-dogs. Their boots were rumbling, and their eyes were full of passion to find something. They were looking for something that could ruin and denounce me. They were not interested in my soul or my good deeds. They wanted to see me as a villain. Tears welled up in my eyes. It was unbearable to feel that I was such a cell being trampled by those black boots.

"All right," said the Father Superior. "We'll go out and discuss it with the rest of the brothers."

They all left my cell. The only person who stayed was Jeremiah.

"You shouldn't do it, my son," he said softly, his enormous green eyes shining on me.

"What shouldn't I do?" I asked quickly.

"That which you know and I see. Don't let it be a matter of principle."

"I don't think you are right, Father," I answered not without arrogance. "What's the harm of my doing it? Who suffers from that?"

"Doubt has been sowed in you, Brother Simeon," said Jeremiah pensively, nodding his head. "Doubts and the Evil One, isn't it the same?"

"Can it possibly belong to the Evil One, that which purifies the soul?" I asked.

"Maybe you are right, maybe not..." Jeremiah said quite seriously. "But there is one thing that I know for sure. The Evil One has been tempting you, I have no doubts about it."

"God be with you, Father!" I exclaimed in a low voice.

"Think of that," said Jeremiah closing his eyes. When there were no eyes on his face, it seemed so old and withered. "Think, my son. You are sinful, and I am sinful, too. If you admit that the Evil One has tempted you, we will all pray for you, and you might become one of us again. We have all been tempted by Satan, and all of us repented. Without repentance, there is no way back."

"Way back where?" I asked.

"Don't pretend that you don't understand what I'm talking about," said Jeremiah. "Way back to life, if you treasure yours, of course."

I thought about it. The same grief seized me again, like when the black boot had been trampling the inside of me. Though I preferred to keep my thoughts secret, I shared them anyway with other monks, too. Of course, they were considered my friends, but I let my thoughts out like a bird hunter lets a bird out of his cage. They flew into the world, and they would never come back. I realized that Jeremiah wished me well, indeed, for he didn't believe the whole world existed behind the gray walls of the monastery. Then I came to understand the message of his story, for it was true that I was becoming the black sheep of the family and I was destined to be driven away and beaten like such

a creature or find the flock where I belonged. I realized at last that there was no bright clear transparent sky anywhere; neither could there be empty roads, though that was what attracted me most. There were thousands of corners and dead ends, hundreds of places, and each of them was supposed to be surrounded with their own gray walls. Leaving one of them, you were destined to find yourself in another. And there, I would have to stretch out my hand, begging for bread. Similarity is that what brings people into a society and allows them to coexist. No two people were absolutely the same, and contradictions had always existed among them. That was the reason they tried to put on the same dress and express the same thoughts. That was also the reason their thoughts were two-faced. They were apt to keep some of the thoughts to themselves and mouth the rest of them for other people. The power of similarity unites people, but at the same time, it divides them. Everyone is trying to hide behind his neighbor. This reminds me of a very strange game of hide-and-seek. Behind your neighbor's back you create your own defense, electing the stupidest ones to be in the front. This power that drives everyone to be no different from others is inordinate, and that is why human lies live long. Due to this, evil has nine lives like a cat, for the same power results in intolerance. A man becomes a hypocrite; the two faces are so different that he has to put a mask on the real one. Poor is the man who discards the mask, who refuses to be two-faced! He is doomed to become an outcast, and the brothers he is surrounded by will despise him. Then the next step for him is to become homeless until he finds another flock that he can join. The saddest thing about it is that the one who rebels against the tendency to be no different from the others actually supports it, but in a new hypostasis. I realize

that it is not a curse but rather the feature of existence.

But still, there is something in every man that makes him different from others. That something makes him raise his eyes to the sky and become god-like. Sometimes I tend to think that the tendency to be like everyone else derives from the fact that no two people are alike. Though there certainly exists some force that unites them, there is another one that singles out every man from the crowd, like a river escaping from a marsh, and at first, it is only a tiny brook, but it might become great and powerful in time. There is one more thing; there are brooks that manage to escape from the peatbog, but they are not destined to become rivers, however. My lot is this, and I accept it without complaining. If this is the way I am, then I'm needed this way, for there is nothing worthless under the sun.

"Why are you silent?" asked Jeremiah. "You don't seem to have a choice."

"All right," I said in a very low voice, and tears appeared in my eyes. "All right."

Then Jeremiah waved his hand, and all my fellow-monks came into my cell one by one.

"Our Brother Simeon wants to express his repentance," Jeremiah announced loftily and solemnly. "In our conversation he confessed that the Evil One has visited him. And though he tried his best to struggle against Satan, he failed sometimes. Our prayers may save Brother Simeon. Fall to your knees, my son!"

I fell to my knees. The roar of many voices made me seem that I saw the shepherd that whips the cow which has gone astray, driving it back into the herd. Tears streamed from my eyes, for I couldn't keep my pain and despair back.

"Pray zealously, Brothers," the Father Superior said. "He is weeping, which means that the devils are leaving him alone."

This time everything is going to end well, I thought. Everyone is sinful, and everyone is tempted by Satan, this truth is eternal and all people know it. All they need is to see you bend and comply. Then everyone will be compassionate, though for some time they might look at you with suspicion, they will never reject you. It is much worse if someone cannot comply and bow. Then the whip that beats him is cruel and merciless!

They prayed for me for quite a long time. In the meantime, I was thinking about the beautiful month of May which was in full bloom. And the verdure was green and succulent, and fragrant. I thought that the sun then could be also green, for the clouds and the waters were green. The breath of this green world I could feel at the moment in my cell in the caves, though my cell smelled of burnt wax and something else that didn't belong to the world. I cried even more bitterly, for I could no longer stay in this grave for the living.

The monks were pleased by my crying, though even Jeremiah the Perspicacious didn't know the reason. He wasn't singing with the community. He was too old and tired after talking so much. He was standing in the middle of my cell, his feet apart, leaning on his staff, and dozing off. And then it came to mind that a long time ago, he used to have the unruly spirit. He probably used to look up at the sky sighing, for he had also been tied to the place restricted by the gray walls. "My poor, poor Jeremiah," I thought. "You have turned your unruly spirit into intolerance." And I also looked at Nikon, for I had been attached sincerely to him and I could even have called him my pupil. He

was singing with utter inspiration and ardor, as if trying to attract my attention. This time our eyes met, and a wave of sheer hatred washed me, a wave that originated in his frenzied eyes. "Here he is, the true guardian of total uniformity," I thought. "He is the worst of them all, for he is aware of my thoughts." Nevertheless, I didn't despise or hate him. I felt only pity for him, and this feeling was deep. "You will become a bishop some day," I thought. "But poor, poor Nikon."

At last they stopped. They had finished singing a certain number of hymns and psalms. Then they took my ink, the pen, and the parchment and went away. They were sure I had repented, while I felt nothing but pity for them...

I am writing the last few lines, using for this several spare pieces of parchment that were hidden in my cell. I also had another pen and some ink there. When I run out of ink, my tale will end. But anyway, I am going to do as I planned. I will put my parchment into the jug that I prepared beforehand, cover it with a piece of paper, then tar it properly — the monks who searched my cell didn't take the tar, since it is of no use for writing. Then I am going to bury my treasure deep in the earth and leave it in the hands of the Lord. This done, I will leave my hermitage, for I can no longer stay in here, in that darkness. Who knows, maybe I will leave our cloister, or maybe I'll stay. Who can tell, maybe it is very important to take a staff and go into the world to be able to see the sky that spreads above all the roads. I will stop for a while in the small cloisters inside other gray walls just to see if the dance of life is performed in the same way everywhere. If it is the same all over, my heart will be grievous, but if it is not, I will probably rejoice. Neither my grief nor

joy can ever change anything in the world. If I grieve and shed tears, the tears will dry soon on the face of the earth. While my joy will be echoed in the song of a bird, and this song is precious as long as the bird is singing. I know one thing for sure. I will live in the world in order not to harm anyone. If I succeed, the sun will probably bless me and no one will denounce me, I hope.

