

EYE OF THE ABYSS (OKO PRIRVY) [Kyiv, 1996]
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translated by Olha Rudakevych
(Chapters 14-24 and Epilogue)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN,
which describes the island on which Mykyta and his disciples lived

There were six disciples. Except Teodoryt, who had brought us here, each disciple approached us in turn, bowing and introducing himself. The first identified himself as Antonii. It was he who had helped us clamber onto dry land out of the water. A lad, taller than the rest came up to us next. He identified himself as Symeon; the fourth was Ievahrii, the fifth—Nykyfor, and the sixth—Heorhii. We, too, gave our names, while Teodoryt announced why we came. After the ceremony Antonii, who evidently served as elder here, informed us that we would now be left alone, as they each have their duties—we were thus free to do as we pleased, that is to say, we were to find a place to stay. If we have provisions, we can eat independently. If not, we are to partake of the communal meal, spare as it is: meatless, served once daily, at eventide.

“Wherefrom do you obtain food?” Sozont asked.

“The Lord provides,” Antonii replied. “That is to say, people who visit here bring alms. If that does not suffice, we buy it with the money left as charity for us by the visitors.”

“In that case,” Sozont stated solemnly, “we shall donate what we have brought. And we shall partake of the communal meal.”

“Your decision is noble,” said Antonii. “Brother Ievahrii will escort you to the kitchen. There, you can unburden yourselves of what you wish to relinquish.”

Bowing, he promptly departed. One by one the others followed. Ievahrii stayed with us. Stout, with stubby legs, he was the shortest of the lads; his bare arms, though, were muscular, like a warrior’s. His head was round, like a kettle, eyes dark, with remarkably thick and black brows. One could not say his eyes were lifeless, like Teodoryt’s—quite the contrary, they were alert and animated. His dark, curly head of hair was lovingly groomed.

Asking permission first, Sozont at once besieged him with questions. “Are we allowed to walk everywhere freely?”

“Everywhere, except past the fence. Climbing up to the saint is forbidden,” Ievahrii answered in his bass voice.

“Is it possible to stay near the fence in order to view the saint’s platform?”

“That is allowed.”

“Where did the rooster come from? Do you, perchance, breed chickens?”

“The rooster’s crowing announces the time. At dawn, we rise with his crowing. Later, it bids us to the saint’s morning sermon and to the meal—the rest of his crowing is meaningless.”

We headed away from shore along a well-trodden path; I gathered that this is how others arrive here, as well. Sozont seemed to overhear my thoughts.

“Is this the only path by which people can reach you?” he inquired.

“The only one.”

“Will we be guided in our return?”

“If you will wish not to remain here, you will be guided, according to that wish.”

“Teodoryt made it known why I arrived here. To chronicle the saint’s life, to circulate it among Christian folk. Will I be able to commune with the blessed one himself?”

“If he so wills. Although he rarely descends from his pole, and he rarely participates in exchanges with strangers. We, his disciples, serve to facilitate communication with the righteous one.”

“So how does he heal the infirm?”

“He has refused to heal diseases of the flesh. Spiritual ones—through prayer. For that, the one ailing is led past the fence to the pole. The blessed one prays, without descending.”

“Is there potable water on the island? As far as I can surmise, the water in the swamp is not suitable for drinking.”

“Before, there was no potable water,” Ievahrii told us. “It was carried from afar, across the swamp, or those who came here were instructed to bring water with them. Since there was a constant need for it, the blessed one petitioned the Lord to provide water, as He had for the thirsty Israelites in the desert once. That is when that wellspring, which you crossed in the middle of the Eye of the Abyss had formed. The water in it is pure and sweet. We draw from it, stocking the keg beside the refectory. We, the disciples of the saint do this: standing one next to the other, we pass buckets. Visitors carry that water to the kitchen, until the kegs are filled.”

“May I record the stories you, his disciples, tell us?”

“Teodoryt retains memories of tales about the saint most credibly. Although if Antonii agrees, we can tell you not a few stories as well. But Teodoryt must verify everything. That is why it is better for Teodoryt to tell the stories himself. Antonii can corroborate, as well.”

“Teodoryt has shared not a few along the way. Are there those among the disciples of the venerable one who can read and write?”

“Only Antonii.”

“So that whatever I record, Antonii must read?”

“He will read it to Teodoryt, who will verify.”

“How does Teodoryt know stories about the saint when he is unseeing? He had not seen what transpired, he cannot read about it?”

“The blessed one himself has related the stories to him. And Teodoryt never forgets what he hears. He never alters a narrative. He repeats word for word exactly what the saint has recounted.”

“If you do not possess a memory such as Teodoryt has, how were you able to corroborate him?”

“The Venerable Father himself has verified, not we.”

“Do you have the Scriptures here? Do you read them?”

“The Venerable Father knows Scriptures by heart. Antonii knows not as much. Teodoryt knows what he heard from them both. We know what we heard from three, actually, from Antonii and Teodoryt.”

“Only these two are allowed to approach the saint?”

“Rarely one of us, when the platform needs to be mended, or the walls of the saint’s place of standing. Or when he hails one of us himself.”

Meantime, we arrived at the kitchen. The island was overgrown with rather tall trees: alders, birches, a number of pines on slender, golden trunks. Bushes of alder grew below. The island was well above the level of the swamp and thus it was quite dry.

Ievahrii took his leave and departed. He let us know that if any questions arose, we could approach him or the other disciples of the blessed one, querying without reservation. Overall he made a fair impression. There was not within him that darkness, such as we perceived in Teodoryt. He answered questions directly, clearly, without being suggestively abstruse—this was

a simpler soul. In my thoughts I was astonished at Sozont's composure after the frightful tragedy that had befallen Kuzma in the Eye of the Abyss—he behaved as if Kuzma had never existed and as if no terrifying puzzle concerning his death existed. Moreover, he had at once proceeded with his habitual probing, and had already questioned one of Mykyta's acolytes. Whereas I could not suppress the tremor in my being. My ears still reverberated with Kuzma's screams. Thus, I harkened the exchange between Sozont and Ievahrii with only half an ear, so that perchance I am not delivering it accurately now. Although my memory, I believe, is no worse than Teodoryt's.

The cook was a one-eyed fellow. He was clad in peasant garb. His face and hands were almost black—from the smoke or from the sun. The kitchen had no enclosure: the kettle was set directly into the masonry of a fireplace with a tall chimney. He took the food from us without a word. Lifting a wooden lid, which we had not noticed in the ground at first, he carried the food into a small cellar. Two rather large barrels stood there. To access the water, there were taps near the bottom of the barrels, a larger one, for pouring water into a bucket that stood right there, and a smaller one, possibly for filling a smaller container. Pulling out a small cup, Sozont asked the cook permission to drink. Without replying, the man waved his hand. We drank water from the bucket using Sozont's dipper. The water was indeed sweet, with no hint of mud. Sozont tried chatting with the cook, posing innocent questions, but the cook affixed his one, suddenly enlivened eye upon the deacon, and signaled for us to leave. Clearly, he was either mute or had taken a vow of silence.

Left to our own devices, we embarked on exploring the island. Until now, we had not met anyone, though we had heard rustling in the brush. We began checking behind every bush, and were astonished to discover that the island was populated with a most peculiar assortment of freaks and cripples: we saw the noseless, the armless, and the blind; we saw cretins with heavy, obtuse features; dwarves; flat-faced beings with narrow, crack-like slits for eyes; men, youths and boys with growths on their legs, backs, faces, some with red splotches on their faces, at times swollen and blackened—I believe this is known as wolf's meat. We saw a lad with six fingers and toes. Noticing us, he stopped, his thick lower lip hanging open in wonder—these were all creatures of the male sex. Seeing us, some of them hid or ran off, others, stunned, stared in our direction without moving. They were dressed every which way, usually in dark rags. Most were barefoot. Only a few had unimaginably old shoes or bast sandals. Here and there we came across lairs fashioned of hay, tree branches—forming the frame—and pine needles. Our first excursion took us in a circle along the island's shore where we found no buildings.

Ievahrii, of course, had told us the truth: swamps surrounded the island from all sides. An unenlightened traveller could neither get to this place nor leave it. At the same time, we felt, at least Sozont did—he was always sensitive to such things (so he whispered to us)—that someone was persistently tracking us. Later, Sozont quietly warned us not to talk about what we had seen or heard for the time being, as it could reach the ears of him who was sniffing us out. To make certain, we doubled back, reversing our steps several times, but we did not spy the tracker. We only heard quickly receding rustling. It might have been one of the island's freaks, burning with curiosity about the new arrivals, after all. Pavlo and I longed to discuss all the strange, peculiar things we had witnessed here, but Sozont again forbade us, and here I understood that like every hunter or scout he was quite a vigilant and cautious man. Keeping in mind what had happened to Kuzma (how can one forget?) we had no other choice. What irked me most and what I wanted to consider first, was Ievahrii's statement that we would leave this place when we wished. What he had in mind, I could not fathom. I was surprised, too, that so far, aside from Mykyta's five

disciples (the sixth was the blind one), we met not a single normal person.

“We ought now go to pay our respects to Mykyta!” Sozont said when we returned to the spot from where our walk around the island had begun, that is, to the kitchen. We set out along the well-trodden path. Soon we reached a fence, crudely assembled, like a wicker enclosure, out of branches, brush, and reeds. Beyond we saw creatures of the fair sex. They were sitting, standing and lying on mats. Like those we had seen in the bushes, they, too, were maimed and freaky: crooked, blind, noseless, bow-legged, dwarves, cretins with squinty, puss-filled eyes—clad in incredible rags, they were dirty, with uncombed hair, and frightened. Spotting us, some of them shrieked and sprang under the enclosure to hide, while others stood motionless, staring at us, awestruck. Like a blossom amid dung an attractive, slender and graceful maiden stood out among them, with neatly combed hair and dressed exactly as were Mykyta’s disciples—that is, in a linen habit.

“Come nigh, Sister,” Sozont addressed her, stepping closer to the wicker enclosure. “I would like to ask you a few questions.”

But shaking her head sharply, the maiden turned away. Sozont shrugged, sighing, and returned to the path. We set out again. Presently, we saw Mykyta’s place of standing: two pines growing from the same root. Solid, golden barked and massive, probably centurians, they were cut at a height of approximately thirty and then some elbow lengths. A log platform was hammered therein; a rail fashioned likewise of logs, though narrower, surrounded it. Upright corner logs supported a reed-covered roof. Openings between the walls and roof were veiled with blinds woven of cattails; the hut itself was small, as tall as the height of a man, and about five elbow lengths wide. A sturdy ladder led into the hut. It was crafted of two sapling trunks, in which grooves were carved; steps were fastened in the grooves. The entry, as well, was screened with cattail blinds but for a round opening, the width of a human face. A face, rugged and shaggy like Sozont’s, was thrust into the opening. Only the eyes, a broad nose and the narrow strip of a forehead were visible. Approaching closer, they saw a fence tall as the posts, actually a palisade with gaps between the spiked poles, though even a child could not squeeze through the gaps. A deer hide was nailed into one of the posts. A few villagers hung around the gate. Folks milled around inside the enclosure, as well. I believe they were Mykyta’s disciples.

“First, we will pray to the saint,” Sozont advised. We speeded up our gait. Upon reaching the peasants we kneeled, praying. Beholding us reciting prayers, the peasants began crossing themselves. After praying, we arose. Only now were we able to see what was occurring in the yard: all of Mykyta’s disciples were there. A pauper was holding on to one of the cut-pine posts. He was sobbing.

“What is going on?” Sozont asked one of the peasants.

“This man, named Joseph, has slayed a number of people in their homes, on the road, assailing folks in villages, along roadways,” the peasant explained. “And so we resolved to root him out. As we hunted him, he came here, to this sacred place.”

And we heard a rasping, high-pitched voice—the furry head, thrust into the opening of the hut’s door blind spoke: “New arrivals are here! Evince who you are! Wherefrom, and why have you come to me?”

Joseph raised his tear-stained face. He declared in a nasal voice: “I am Joseph, a thief. I have effected only evil. I have come here to atone for my sins.”

“And you, folks, what have you said to this? Repeat everything for those who have just arrived.”

“We said that you, Reverend Father, should surrender this thief onto us. We will try him in

our people's court. He deserves to die a miserable death."

"I have not had a chance to have a word with you, my children. Now I shall speak," Mykyta exclaimed. "God brought him here, willing his penitence, not I. He was placed here by God. If you can, break into the yard and snatch him. I myself cannot surrender him to you or tell my disciples to—I fear that the Lord has sent him to me."

"We will not seize him without your will, Father, not to act against you," a peasant said. "But punish him with devout prayers—we cannot be saved from him."

"God shall punish him, not I," Mykyta proclaimed. "And not from my prayers, but from yours!"

And the peasants fell to their knees, and lifting up their arms they prayed. We, too, kneeled, though we did not lift our arms. Nor did we pray. This did not concern us. Mykyta's furry head, eyes blazing, stuck out of the opening. Hearing something crashing behind me, I looked around and saw the cripples, the freaky, the infirm and the downtrodden entering the clearing where we all stood from behind trees and bushes. They ran out and fell to their knees, raising quite a racket: baaahing, meeehing, mooing, screeching, some whining hoarsely, some faintly—of course, only creatures of the male sex appeared. Within the enclosure Mykyta's disciples kneeled at once, as if following a command, simultaneously lifting their arms.

And the thief stopped crying. He stood, staring with eyes wide open: genuine horror burned in those eyes. The crowd was already going mad: it wept, howled, yelped in screeching, whining voices, some beating their bodies to the ground, some tearing at their hair, others thumping fists into their chests so violently, that an echo resounded, some scratched their already dreadful faces with their nails. I glanced at our Pavlo. Frightened, I nudged Sozont: Pavlo's face had turned blue, the hue of a corpse. Foaming at the mouth, he hit the ground as he stood. His teeth chattered, his body writhed, his spine bent like a bow. Sozont grabbed a stick and inserted it between his teeth. He then pressed him to the ground.

The gate creaked meantime. A calm and collected Antonii passed through. "Let him be," he told Sozont. "The blessed one has taken notice." And abruptly, he yelled at the freaks and the crippled who were still going mad: "Enough! Enough, I said!"

And suddenly, from behind his belt, he pulled out a whip and cast lashes around him. Wailing, the freaks and cripples quickly scattered like mice, in a moment vacating the clearing. Only we and the peasants remained. Pavlo lay still, sleeping. This time, his attack was brief.

"Thank you for your prayers, children," the furry head in the opening said. "And now go ye with God. I have been summoned by Him to prayer. Pray to Him! Morning and noon and evening and night: according to your prayers, such shall be your reward. Amen!"

And the face disappeared. The peasants scratched their heads. An elder amongst them said uncertainly: "Shall we go, or not?"

Another replied: "Yea, we should pro'bly go."

A third ventured: "Let's stay a li'l past the swamp. We can 'natch the thief scurrying."

They left, and Sozont whispered into my ear: "Stay with Pavlo. I will escort them out." And he shouted to the peasants: "Hold on! I will walk a bit with you!"

He left. Only now I noticed that the sun was getting hot. Pavlo lay unprotected, so I pulled him to the fence into the shade. Sitting next to him, I was able to look about the premises better through the openings between the poles of the palisade. Under one of the posts the thief stood, praying. From his shoulders hung the deer pelt. A grave, marked with a birch cross and covered with turf rose under another pole. Evidently, Mykyta's mother was buried there. A small hovel stood in the enclosure, where Mykyta's disciples were probably now hiding—not one of them

was in the yard. The yard itself was well-trampled. Grass grew only along the edges under the palisade. Unplastered, crudely fashioned of logs, the hovel stood under a roof thatched of reeds; the windows could be drawn shut. One of the window shutters was open and I saw the back of one of Mykyta's acolytes; actually, the linen of his habit. It wavered for a moment and disappeared from my field of vision. The door creaked open. Antonii appeared. He walked lamely across the yard, stepped through the gate and stood next to me.

"He hasn't awakened yet?" he asked calmly.

"I've just pulled him into the shade," I said. I did not want Antonii to think that I was spying on them.

"Where is the third one?"

"He is escorting the villagers a bit," I explained. For some reason, I felt a quiet sadness filling me.

"He wishes to leave the sacred place with them?" Antonii asked with feigned indifference.

I glanced at him briefly: why should that trouble him? "I do not believe so," I replied. "He is obeying a duty to record the life of St. Mykyta. So he is questioning folks about him."

Pavlo's chest rose evenly. He was sound asleep. At moments his face twisted, twitched, even smiled—he must have been dreaming.

"Who willed him to do that?" Antonii asked with the same feigned indifference. He sat by the palisade, leaning against it with his back.

"Perchance, the holy fathers of Kyiv," I said. "I do not know!"

"Is he not your friend?" asked Antonii, regarding me intently.

Sorrow bore into me more and more. It happens at times: though weaker, pervading only the senses, it is similar to Pavlo's seizures. Everything appears fine, everything seems ordinary, and suddenly a stifling, dark tide rolls over, flooding me, oppressively wearying my spirit, rendering me idle and drained. I then sit, staring at one spot, seeing nothing as I attend my peculiar inner tumult. The heart feels calm, though apprehensive, as before a storm, and I feel serene, though ever more tense and lackluster.

"Not my friend he is," I stated. "I am trekking from Zhytomyr. He and Pavlo, from Kyiv—I did not know either of them before. I joined them in Zhytomyr."

"Is it true that you transcribed the Gospel? One book, or the entire New Testament?"

"The translations of the first four books of the New Testament, arranged in chapters and headings, presented in compliance with the complete twelvemonth cycle of Orthodox sacred readings. I translated this book, copied it and designed many ornamental illustrations, headpieces, and illuminated initials. Next to these I lay miniatures set in adorned marginalia. And before that, back in 1554, I illuminated the Gospel. Vasyl Zahorovsky, my patron, later acquired it from me. Oh, that was a goodly piece of work! Morning til night, Monday to Saturday, month to month, year to year. Many years, Brother!"

"Why do you speak of it with such sadness?" Antonii asked warmly.

"The work has drained me, like water drained out of a cup, has sucked the strength out of me like marrow from a bone. My bones and the vessel of my being have dried up, cracked and hollowed. The vessel is there, but no water. I know not if this interests you, Brother, but I do know that I shall never scribe nor illuminate anything like it again: I do not wish to execute anything worse, and I am unable to produce anything like it."

"No need to," Antonii replied crudely. "It means that you have effected that which you were to effect in this world."

"You see, the thing is, Brother," I smiled confidingly, not knowing myself why I suddenly

took to being frank with him. “I am incapable of anything any more. Do you understand? Nothing!”

“Trust!” Antonii stated curtly, rising. “With faith all your petitions and desires will be rewarded!”

And he walked toward the gate, calm and distant, while I regretted my words scattered in vain: was I not casting pearls before swine? Antonii opened the squeaky gate and entered the enclosure.

“Father Mykyta! Father Mykyta!” the thief was yelling from the pole.

The furry head appeared in the round opening. “Why are you disturbing me in my praying?” Mykyta asked.

“I wish to ask you: when do you will me to leave?” the robber shouted.

“Will you return to evil deeds?” the head asked.

“That is not the departure I speak of, Father! I sense my end approaching!” he shouted.

“In that case, do as you see fit!” the face said and disappeared.

And here something remarkably startling happened: I saw Antonii approach the thief with a measured gait. A knife appeared in his hand who knows from where; he plunged it into the thief’s back. The thief yelped and fell to the ground.

Antonii extracted the knife from his body, calmly wiped it clean with the evildoer’s clothes, shoved it behind his belt and slowly, stepping somewhat shakily, walked to the hovel, in front of which stood the rest of Mykyta’s disciples.

“Bury him!” Antonii said calmly. “He has received that, which he petitioned the Lord for.”

And he went into the hovel. Teodoryt hid in the doorway behind him. The rest of the disciples, chatting and joking as if this concerned a nice plaything, walked together to the pole. Two of them grasped the thief by the legs, two others by the arms. They dragged him out of the yard.

“So full of human blood,” Symeon said. “Heavy as a rock.”

I sat under the palisade stiff, as if smitten with tetanus.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN,

in which the wayfarer’s communion is retold—their reflections about what had been revealed;

Sozont’s monologue about the game is presented; an evening repast at the island refectory is described

Pavlo awoke not long before Sozont’s return. At once he inquired: “Where is the thief? I do not see him by the pole.”

Not wishing to shock him after the attack of his affliction, I simply said: “The thief has died.”

Pavlo’s face beamed, smiling. “I beheld his death in a dream.”

And he retold the exchange between the thief and Mykyta, saying that the thief had simply died after the exchange. Too, he saw peasants returning to recover the corpse of the thief. They would show it to those, who had sent them after him. The peasants had supposedly approached the gate, shouting: “Father, release our enemy’s corpse. Because of him, none of the surrounding villages knew peace.”

“He Who brought him to me shall with a multitude of heavenly warriors take him—pure

through repentance—away! Do not sadden me!” replied Mykyta.

After, the peasants had departed. “Was it not so?” Pavlo asked.

“Exactly!” we heard a voice. Nearby stood Antonii, smiling faintly. “Or did you see it differently?” he asked, his eyes meeting mine. I sensed blind darkness filling me.

And my tongue unwittingly pronounced: “It occurred as he described.” And to justify my lie, I added: “With a few alterations.”

“I expect both of you will receive deliverance from St. Mykyta. Recount the miracle to your friend, the hagiographer,” said Antonii. In his voice I detected an undertone of mockery, or perhaps a challenge.

Sozont approached meantime. To Antonii’s question as to where he had been, Sozont quietly replied that he had questioned the peasants whether they had heard any stories about miracles performed by St. Mykyta. They related that the blessed one possesses the gift of prophecy. A rumor had spread throughout the region once: famine and plague will strike in a year—and soon, locusts without number will come—the saint had prophesied this.

And thus, the peasants claimed, it came to pass; we had locusts two years ago, and last year we suffered a famine and plague.

“That is true,” Antonii said. “I can attest to that.”

The sun slanted westward as all this was being told, and Sozont asked Antonii how they would be summoned to the refectory.

“The rooster’s crowing,” Antonii replied. “One crow—you go, two crows, the women go.”

“Who was that maiden we saw in the women’s camp?” Sozont asked.

“Our sister in spirit,” Antonii said. “And the spiritual betrothed of the saint, Marta.”

“Can one who does not allow woman to approach him be betrothed?” Sozont asked.

“He is not the betrothed of Sister Marta, rather, she is his betrothed,” Antonii explained calmly. “About Sister Marta spiritually he knows no more than about the other maimed, infirm souls. In his name, she serves in the women’s camp. It is the same as virgins who seek betrothal to the Lord. They see themselves as such. But does the Lord honor betrothal to them all—there would be too many. At the same time, their desire is not denied.”

“Is Marta also sick?” Sozont inquired.

“All of us here are in our own way afflicted. The saint has imposed a penance upon her to provide succor to the lame. And so she is striving to effect what is willed.”

“Why have so many maimed and afflicted assembled here?” Sozont asked.

“They have been abandoned by relatives. They cannot live in peace, they are so grievously tormented. The Lord did say: ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!’¹ Fulfilling this commandment, St. Mykyta does not banish them. For they know not worldly enticements and temptations. They are, therefore, closer to God than those who live in peace, enmeshed in the snares of worldly enticements.”

“Why are women kept fenced in, like cattle?” Sozont asked.

“For they are the Lord’s herd. Free, they would go astray, like those, who are mentally lame. Sister Marta guards them against that.”

“And do not the men penetrate the camp secretly, at least at night?”

“At night, everybody here sleeps. And if someone attempts to penetrate it, the Eye of the Abyss swallows him.”

“You cast him into it?”

“No, he goes of his own will, led by the power of repentance.”

¹ Note in the margin of the manuscript: “Matthew, Chapter 11, Verse 28.”

“Are not children born of this?”

“Oh, no! These people are not for propagation. The Lord has seen to that.”

“Forgive me my curiosity, Brother,” Sozont said.

“Revealed uncertainty is better than hidden,” Antonii responded. At that moment a rooster crowed.

We at once set out to the refectory, since after only a light breakfast and no midday meal, we were quite hungry. All the crippled and maimed had turned out from behind bushes and trees walking, crawling, limping onto the path, in an instant crowding it by forming a long line. We ended up in the tail end, not pressing close but standing a bit apart. As no one stood behind us (I don't think anyone could have heard us), Deacon Sozont delivered a sermon-speech about the game. I shall recount it from memory in my own words:

“I know not, if what we are witnessing and attending seems peculiar to you, but I believe that these people are playing an intricate game which I have not yet been able to comprehend sufficiently. I see nothing evil in the game, as a man's life, according to the will of God, is composed of two parts: work and play. Working, man earns his daily bread for sustenance, and at play man entertains himself. No wonder the ancient Romans demanded two things: bread and spectacle, that is to say, work and play. Bread sustains man through life, while games provide a fascination with life; work exhausts man and play lures and captivates. Play, my dear Brothers, is more primeval than work. God created Adam while playing, and Eve was created for Adam's entertainment. Children were conceived for the amusement of each and both of them; competition ended for their children in slaying. Before arriving on earth, Adam and Eve knew only play; cast out of paradise they learned to work. Work is self-enslavement, while play is entertainment one need not be enslaved to. To make the drudgery of work less unpleasant, man masks it in play: singing while toiling, inventing, altering something, thus availing novelty to enslavement, which means: he begins playing at work—turning it into pleasure, enjoyment. All learned men, all inventors, all lovers of books and writers, dancers, gamesmen, storytellers are like children at play. So that the more one lives, the more entangled one becomes in the game. Soldiers ply battles and competition, bidding Death along with the implements of killing into their games; priests have transformed temples into play places, for where there is ceremony there is a game. All holidays are play, all festivities, weddings, funerals, families, spring rites, harvest rites, etcetera. Toying with ideas, philosophers erect thought structures, song writers—songs and rhymes, musicians—delightful sounds, builders—buildings; play captivates man ever more. Play, my dear Brothers, gives one the will to live; kings wield games, politicians, judges and pages play games while investigating a crime; heretics and schismatics, the originators of agnosticism and sects sport games. One game is sacred with tradition, another breaks all tradition; one game, my dear Brothers, is considered benevolent, as it bears no evil, while another is wicked because it spreads evil. Competition on Mount Olympus was a game, all Parnassi are filled with amusement. Evildoers, deceivers, tricksters, knaves, defilers, adulators, connivers, glorifiers and censors, heretics and saints, tyrants, thieves, warriors, detesters, prophets, merchants, usurers, misers, money collectors, land barons all play games, because without play man cannot survive. And because the greatest of all players is the Lord, God, Who while amusing Himself created the world; all creation involves play. It was He who wove an earthly web, interlacing the world with threads of life-giving waters, enabling life to begin. And so heaven, hell and life on earth are a game. Grand, incomprehensible to the human mind, but a game nevertheless. Play ends only where man toils for profit. Even a cat plays with the mouse before eating it, though often the game of prey and consumer lasts all too briefly. And Death,

after all, dallies with man, snatching and releasing him, or hatching disease, which is a kind of match with Death. Death is instrumental in the nourishment of all living things: a bird kills caterpillars, insects; birds of prey—predators; insects and caterpillars kill plants, growing plants absorb the sap of decaying, dead plants or live creatures for nutriment, or from manure, and manure is dead life. The wolf ravages sheep, sheep eat grass, grass consumes the dead wolf and sheep—without killing and destruction, that is, without Death, there can be no existence, and therefore no game. Work, after all, is also the servant of Death, as it provides nourishment for man, and nourishment involves killing. Work, therefore, is the science of annihilation in the name of consumption. And so the sole instruments in the hands of God for His eternal, inscrutable game with us is the game itself and Death. These are the two incontrovertible pillars of existence, whether we like it or not.”

“And the evil spirit?” Pavlo asked.

“Samuel had spoken of it,” replied Sozont. “When the evil spirit from God is upon thee, that He shall play with his hand, and thou shalt be well.”

“So then the evil spirit is indeed from God?” I asked.

“Not a pace without His grace,” that is to say, God is in everything, and everything is in Him. The evil spirit is one of the sporting bones in God [gaming dice that God has].”

“You do not share Kuzma’s notion that God and the devil are mutually contradictory and independent of each other’s will?” I asked.

“I say unto you: Satan is one of the dice in God’s great game.”

“But in a game everything is unreal, devised, relative,” Pavlo said.

“And I believe that reality is most real in a game. Reality itself is an outcome of a game.”

“You express peculiar thoughts,” Pavlo said. “Is it not irreverence labeling God a player?”

“I have said: I see nothing evil in a game, and if so, I do not contradict nor judge God’s game, which is the world and reality. The game itself, as I have said, can be either good or evil. Reason was bestowed upon man to enable man to distinguish good from evil, and in the end to effect good or evil, which means playing a good game or an evil game.”

“Was Kuzma correct in saying that there is a contradiction in the love of God and love of one’s elders?” Pavlo asked, his kind, blue eyes widening.

“There is no contradiction,” Sozont replied quietly. “Jesus Christ said that the love of God supercedes the love of one’s elders, and this is the first commandment in the first line; love of one’s elders is the first commandment in the third line. That does not mean that there is contradiction here. St. Symeon was able to love completely both God and his mother, not infringing on the status of either, as he had both the time and ability.”

“You mean St. Mykyta?” Pavlo said.

“The story of the mother and the saint is from a book,” Sozont stated calmly. “Taken from the Chronicles of the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter. Almost all the stories about Mykyta duplicate the life of Symeon, with small variations.”

“But this might mean something other,” Pavlo said. “These folk are followers of Symeon. Thus Mykyta lives exactly as did he. Perchance, this is a symeonian sect?”

“I, too, believe that,” Sozont declared. “Although I have not yet come across any such sect.”

“You have not heard of one yet,” I entered the discourse, “because it is here, and has not yet spread. That is, the founder of the sect and his disciples are in one place, on this island.”

Sozont regarded me favorably. “You have a sound mind, Brother,” he said warmly. “And so I say that these people have devised an intricate and not completely comprehensible game. But I have learned one thing for certain: Mykyta has not performed a single miracle of his own.”

“What about the marvel with Kuzma or the one with the thief?”

“The miracle with Kuzma we need to reflect upon, while the marvel of the thief Brother Mykhailo can elucidate. I, likewise witnessed it all: I hid behind a tree.”

Briefly, I described how Antonii murdered the robber. Pavlo stared at us with surprised, wide eyes: they were filled with horror.

“And now, let us remain quiet, mine Brethren,” said Sozont. “Mealtime is approaching.”

Scattered around the refectory the cripples and freaks, the dwarves and mentally lame sat on the ground, each holding a wooden bowl in his lap, a wooden spoon dashing swiftly from mouth to bowl. We waited a bit for the cook to ladle broth to the last. The bowls and spoons they carried with them, leaving their sacks at the camp sites. The cook measured our food with a metal cup.

“You did not have to wait for me to feed this brood,” he said in a hollow voice. “They are idlers. You brought provisions.”

“We are in no haste,” Sozont said. “Nor are we scornful towards these poor souls. As Jeremiah said: ‘And pride shall flounder and fall.’”

“Sacred words you are uttering, Father. But one’s patience can snap at times,” the cook declared.

“Are they baleful?” asked Sozont.

“No! But looking at them day after day one forgets who they are. It seems at times that there are no other people.”

“And the saint’s acolytes?” Sozont asked.

“Well, they do not come here. Unless they are bringing someone, like you. I have no time to go anywhere. I work continually.”

“What keeps you here?” Sozont asked while inspecting what was ladled into his bowl.

“Well, I have sinned. So the saint has imposed a penance. I will tow my line until the frost, and after, may it be done with.”

“And how do these hapless ones survive winters?”

“They wade across the frozen swamps, trudging through villages seeking charity. They return with the warmth, while the ice is still solid.”

The cook regarded us seriously with his one eye. And suddenly that eye winked at us. “To tell you the truth,” he whispered, “I should not be chatting with you. Do not tell anyone.”

“Have faith!” Sozont responded connivingly.

The food we were served was peculiar: herbs boiled in water—wild sorrel, of orach, or both together (both plants flourished on the island), unseasoned [or with no roux?] but for a bit of salt. A few millet grains floated in the gruel, evidently, the millet we had contributed. We even got a piece of stale, dry bread, so hard that even when soaked our teeth could barely mash it. But we were hungry, so we gulped it all just as skillfully as the crippled and freakish did. Our bellies more or less filled. Feeling weary, we strove only to reach our camp site. We still needed to fashion sleeping mats of branches, weeds and grass, like the ones we saw used here by the settlers.

As we walked past the enclosure to the women’s camp, we saw that Sister Marta had lined everyone up in pairs. Holding a bowl and a spoon, they all waited in front of the gate. Apparently, they were waiting for us to pass. Seeing Marta among the crippled and freakish once again, I recognized the power of the cook’s words: communing with such one soon forgets what normal people are like. Marta was no beauty, but in this setting her ordinariness glowed with loveliness, captivating my eye, even as I am far from being a youth and due to my celibate way

of life, have not desired a woman's wiles in some time. Marta openly gazed in our direction with ardent, glittering eyes. Obediently, patiently, with eyes humbly lowered stood her subjects.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN,

which recounts our meeting Musi, the dwarf, and our evening chats

We lay on the ground to rest a bit before starting to arrange our lairs. Burnished by the evening sun, the saffron bark of the pines glowed alluringly; the grass, weeds, the leaves on the bush nearby shone lustrously. Each stalk glistened, brimming with light.

"Have you noticed, Brothers of mine: Mykyta's disciples chose uncommon names for themselves?" said Deacon Sozont. "Symeon the Pole-sitter's disciple was Antonii, Teodoryt recorded his life story, Symeon was Metafrast, author of the notable 'Lives of the Saints'—Ievahrii—the Scholastic, likewise chronicled the life of Symeon the Pole-sitter, as did Nykyfor of Kalishten and Heorhii Kedry from Constantinople."

"Your erudition is awesome," I remarked.

"No, it is not. It is unremarkable," Deacon Sozont modestly contradicted. "Once I have taken upon myself to record the lives of saints, I must at least know those who have fulfilled similar duties before me. Just as a cobbler must know his hammer, rasp and pliers, a tailor his scissors and needles, a blacksmith his hammers and forge."

"Why did Mykyta not become Symeon?" I asked.

"If they really are symeonides, then a follower of Symeon should not bear his name just as Christ's apostles did not adopt the name of Jesus Christ," Sozont stated. "Besides which, every enlightened Christian is familiar with Symeon the Pole-sitter, yet only elected scribes know his chroniclers. This may, therefore, have been an act of hypocrisy. Though perchance not." "But that means," I responded, "that some among them are well acquainted with the writings of the holy priests of our church. That is, they are among the chosen scribes."

"Either Teodoryt or Antonii," Sozont reckoned.

"But Teodoryt is blind," Pavlo countered.

"Perhaps he has lost sight due to excessive reading of sacred texts," Sozont said. "One thing I know: we are faced more with obscurity than with revelation."

This conversation was interrupted by a distinct rustling in the bush closest to us. Springing to his feet, Sozont darted into the bush like a bullet. In the next instant, he was leading a dwarf, holding him by his ear. The dwarf was barefoot, dressed in sack-like rags, belted with a cord, the ends of which were tattered. His head was overgrown with thick curls.

"Let go my ear!" he wailed.

But Sozont held on to his ear until he brought him to us. Then he let go.

"Why were you hiding there?" he asked sternly. "Were you spying on us?"

Blinking, the dwarf scratched his ear. "I wanted to have a look at you," he said, his voice full of pain.

"What is your name?"

"Musi," said the dwarf. "I willed no-o-o evil onto you."

"Then we shall do no evil onto you," Sozont said. "Come, sit with us."

Kneeling, the dwarf sat on his heels. He observed us with large, bulging eyes.

"Did you like today's meal?" asked Sozont.

"Oh-h! To-o-oday's supper was go-o-od," the dwarf said, his face beaming. "To-o-oday there was millet in the soup!"

“We brought the millet,” Pavlo said.

“I kno-o-ow! We lo-o-ove visito-o-ors!” the dwarf said. “Supper is go-o-od then!”

“Have you lived here long?”

“Lo-o-ong! Chewing bread, here I am! Hee-hee!” We glimpsed his rotted teeth.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Oo-o-oh, I dunno-o-o! I’m o-o-old! As o-o-old as you are! Why should you, so-o-o o-o-old, come here?”

“Why did you come here?”

“Oo-o-h, I did!” the dwarf said. “It is go-od here! They feed us. No-o-o need to beg f’r bread! You, to-o-o do not want to beg f’r bread?”

“We wish to be healed,” Pavlo explained.

“Eh, that’s useless! There are so-o many of us, yet no-ot one has been cured by St. Mykyta. He says, he will cure us when we die, hee-hee!”

“Mykyta said so himself?” asked Sozont.

“Nah, Mykyta sits in his hut. Tho-o-ose around him said that.”

“Do people come here often?”

“Nah, not o-often. Hard to-o get here. There! But tho-ose who come do-on’t always leave. There!”

“What becomes of them?”

“O-o-oh, St. Mykyta helps them...”

“How does he help?” Pavlo asked.

“Like this, by the tail into-o-o the sack, there!” the dwarf grasped his throat. “Knock-knock—and gone, hee-hee! And into-o-o the Eye—wham, bubble,” and the dwarf gurgled as if rinsing his throat.

“He murders and drowns them?” Pavlo asked, surprised.

“Nah, no-ot murders...he helps them...there!”

“But you yourself said.” Sozont clasped his throat. “Knock-knock!”

“Aha! Hee-hee! But Mykyta kills no-o-one. Mykyta sits in his hut.”

“So, those around him?”

But the dwarf had no chance to respond. His eyes suddenly widened, and he lunged, headlong, fleeing into the bushes. Looking toward the path, we spied Mykyta’s disciples heading in our direction, all six: Antonii, Teodoryt, Symeon, Ievahrii, Nykyfor and Heorhii. They turned off the path and made themselves comfortable on the ground around us.

“What did the midget tell you?” Antonii asked calmly.

“Nothing of note. That today’s meal was good, thanks to our millet.”

“We do not grow or harvest anything, except wild herbs,” Teodoryt said, his lifeless eyes glowing. “So we serve and eat that which is brought to us as alms. We have no gold, nor reserves of money. Money is spent for [ialmuzhna] for food, which we sometimes need to buy.”

“Of course,” Sozont said.

“We do not summon anyone here nor do we force anyone to come here, or to stay. People come of their own will. They leave of their own will. We share as Christians. What else did the dwarf say?”

“He said,” Sozont replied, “that St. Mykyta has not healed a single cripple or freak.”

“He spoke the truth,” Teodoryt said, his voice circumspect, easy. “St. Mykyta lives not for the corporeal. Why should he heal people for life in this world? He cures souls sore vexed, flawed. He is a spiritual, not a physical healer. Things physical—crippling, freakishness, a feeble

mind, as also health and strength are endowed by the Lord and we ought not meddle in His will. Spiritually, one progresses on one's own, and here is where St. Mykyta can and will succor. But one must come to him in faith, as I have already said."

"The dwarf said that not all who arrive here depart from here," Sozont said. "There are those, whom the Eye of the Abyss swallows. Do they die, or are they slain?"

"This, too, is true," Teodoryt stated thoughtfully. "Before your eyes the Eye of the Abyss swallowed Kuzma, who had dishonored God and was passionate in not displaying any faith in the saint. I did not slay him. Some do die here at times, as anywhere else in the world, not having overcome physical demise. We slay only those who appeal for that. That is, by the way, how the thief perished in front of Brother Mykhailo. Concur, Brother Mykhailo, that the thief had begged the saint for death."

"Thus it was," I said.

"We always execute these things openly, to have indisputable witnesses. Never hidden. Nor caused by our wrath or insensibility. Besides which, we never slay of our own will; only when the saint sanctions through divination that the doomed one has arrived at his life's end. That is to say, we free that person of needless suffering. What would have happened, had the peasants taken the thief, you know yourselves."

He was right: the thief would have been tortured mercilessly, and then slain.

"How did the thief learn of the path through the swamp and the Eye of the Abyss?" Sozont asked.

"Local folk know of the path. They serve as guides for pilgrims. You yourself, Brother Sozont, walked with the peasants to the Eye of the Abyss and saw that they departed with no help from us. This same thief had been here before. He wanted to seize our gold and money, which we never possessed, at least gold and valuables. He dug up the whole island, even climbed up to the saint and fell off the ladder, breaking a leg. That is when he left with his compatriots."

"Why did the Eye of the Abyss not swallow him?" Pavlo asked.

"We are not to give commands to the Eye of the Abyss, but we warn people, just as we warned you and Kuzma. It is in its will to take one or not."

"Evidently, the Eye of the Abyss did not take him," said Symeon, a lad taller than the others, "to allow him to come here to do penance, for punishment to be meted out here. And thus it passed."

"We do not wish for misconceptions or distortion," Antonii said. "Therefore, be open with your doubts and thoughts before us. We are open before you."

"Has it ever happened that a visitor was held here against his will?" Sozont asked.

"That never has nor can happen," Teodoryt stated.

"What is the Eye of the Abyss?" I asked, as this interested me most.

"It is that which neither you nor we can fathom," said Teodoryt.

"According to me, it is God's prudent spirit. It restrains us, helpless, before the evil of the world," Heorhii said. He was completely white, with white hair, brows, lashes, white fuzz on his bare arms.

"Has it claimed many?"

"We do not keep track of the dishonorable ones," Teodoryt replied. "Let God keep track of them."

"Did you cast the thief in, also?" Pavlo asked.

"On the island we have only one grave—that of Mykyta's mother. Generally, relatives reclaim those they had brought here, who died. And when there are no kin, nor friends, we cast

the deceased into the Eye of the Abyss.”

“Do you throw them in with a weight or outright?” Sozont asked.

“Plainly,” Teodoryt said.

“And cadavers never resurface?”

“Not once has that happened,” Antonii said. “I imagine a queer aquatic beast lives in the Eye of the Abyss. It was seen only once—Nykyfor saw it. Tell us, Nykyfor.”

Nykyfor had a round, slightly slant-eyed face with a flattened nose and full lips. He recounted how once he had ambled toward the Eye of the Abyss while contemplating the ways of the Lord. He had stopped at the shore, reflecting, when suddenly the water churned and a round spine with angled fins surfaced. This had lasted only a moment, however; the spine disappeared, rings rippling the water. Then everything became still.

“And I believe that that boa constrictor, cured by St. Mykyta lives in the Eye of the Abyss,” Teodoryt said.

“As you can see,” Antonii said, smiling, “we do not know that for certain ourselves.”

“Were you ever attacked by the beast while fetching water from the lake?” Sozont asked.

“Being aware of that creature or serpent, we fetch water ourselves. And we have never been attacked,” Antonii said. “Are these all your questions?”

“One more,” Sozont declared. “Will the midget not be punished for talking so much?”

Surprised, Mykyta’s acolytes exchanged glances.

“Why would we punish him?” Antonii said. “Brother Teodoryt has announced that everything he related is true.”

“But something else about this dwarf unsettles us,” Teodoryt said. “Sister Marta has informed us that he hangs around the women’s camp coaxing one of the dwarves to come to him. Blunders are severely judged here—wantonness has no place in this hallowed spot.”

“And how shall you punish him if he sins?” Sozont asked.

“We will attempt to teach him discretion,” Antonii said. “You, too, as his acquaintances can chide him.”

“During the courtship he will be left alone. Punishment will come when and if the blunder is consummated.”

“Who will punish, and how?” Sozont asked.

“He will punish himself,” Teodoryt stated. “He must leave the island, that is, he will be free to cross the Eye of the Abyss. His luck, if he crosses, and if not, he will accept punishment. The Lord, not we, will punish.”

“Your words are clear. They explain everything,” Sozont said. “I have no reason not to believe you.”

“Then let us turn to that for the sake of which we came,” Antonii said. “We came, Brother Sozont, to recount what we know about St. Mykyta for your chronicle. Will you record it, or will you remember it?”

“I have recorded everything related to me until now,” Sozont said, retrieving a leather-bound folio. “Though I have not had time to record all I heard. Shall I read it to you?”

“No,” Antonii said. “Recount what you are familiar with.”

“Fine,” Sozont began to speak. “His childhood and youth in Cherniakhiv, his respite at Zhydachivsky Monastery, his stay in the well and on the mountain top, his departure to this island and his pole-sitting—these are the themes of his life, and I have them recorded. Now the miracles: his trails, the devil’s trick, the saint’s mother, Kateryna, his drawing sweet water out of the swamp; the woman who swallowed the snake along with the water, the boa constrictor with

the injured eye; the deer slain by the pilgrims—here I have not yet recorded everything. I myself have witnessed two miracles: the death of our fellow-traveler Kuzma, who had failed to demonstrate faith in St. Mykyta; the death, and before that, the repentance of the thief; the prophecies of the saint regarding famine, the plague and locusts. That is all.”

Mykyta’s disciples listened to the list intently.

“You have presented the themes well, though inadequately,” Teodoryt said. “You do not know everything. So that if you agree, let us kindle a fire here and let each of the saint’s acolytes, besides me—I have told mine—relate one of St. Mykyta’s miracles. That way we will be able to identify if anything was left out of your notes, and you will have a chance to gain assurance that you have effected your duty. Who obliged you to this?”

“I have already told you: the holy fathers of Kyiv. I intend, having copied Kassian’s transcript of the Kyiv Lavra Patericon to add to it interpretations of celebrated miraculous phenomena in the Orthodox Church of our land. This is why I am journeying and troubling people with my inquiries.”

“An act worthy of God you are effecting,” Teodoryt said. “We are glad to be of service.”

All threw themselves into gathering kindling. Soon a fire blazed. We sat around it any which way. The tales began.

Antonii related about a soldier, one of Prince Konstantyn Ostrozky’s armed attendants, who brought—actually carried on his shoulders, as he was of gigantic build and quite strong—his sick brother. The soldier’s name was Spyrydon Chaika. He petitioned the saint for his brother to be cured. The righteous one declined, as he desires to cure not physical ailments, only spiritual ones. Spyrydon Chaika then declared that his brother’s ailment was indeed spiritual, not physical, as in their old age their elders had been tempted by a demon to adopt Arian heresy, and he surmises that his brother suffered due to the sins of his elders. Both elders abided in sin. The saint then willed the afflicted one be brought to the pole. He asked: “Do you renounce the improbity of your elders?”

He did, and the blessed one proceeded: “Do you believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?”

The afflicted one confirmed that. Then the blessed one commanded: “Arise. Your brother carried you here, and now you shall have strength enough to carry your brother.” Reflections of flames flickered across our faces. All listened with rapt attention. Behind us, something snapped: out of the gloaming in the thicket the crippled, the freaky appeared, their forms, like imitations of humans carved out of wood by a master with aberrant taste, stiffening mutely. While observing those still specters in the twilight, I suddenly realized that which I had sensed before but was unable to express or voice, though perhaps the idea sounds strange: beauty dwells in orderly, harmonious arrangements, and the better and finer an image is arranged, the more beauteous it is. Embellishing the Peresopnytska Gospel with representations, say, of the Evangelists, I played with white, blue, yellow, red and green, that is to say with pure pigments, twining ornaments, shapes, depictions of mountains or edifices into a knot of wondrously connected and interlaced lines, containing nothing superfluous or contradictory, attesting to the existence of an eternal truth, which is everlasting beauty. And now, while watching those freakish figures—benumbed, nearly dissolved in the dusk while illuminated strikingly with flames, I thought that one can seek and find beauty not only in the youthful, pleasant, pure, perfect, harmoniously blended, but in the old, ruined, monstrous, broken, clashing—and this will not be a mutilated shadow or the converse of beauty, it will, instead, be its surprising variegation. Was this not, I mused, why the Lord sends not only the healthy, the pleasing, full of beauty and

strength, the full-blooded and comely into the world, but also the freakish, the maimed, the sick, the clumsy, the feeble, the ugly, the crippled—all this is necessary for one to be able to grasp the multi-dimensionality of the world: in this way an uniquely profound understanding of it is imparted. This is what I was thinking as my ear harkened the conclusion of a parable recounted by Antonii: gigantic Spirydon Chaika, a-straddle on his brother's shoulders, a stalwart fellow, was carried by the youth as if he were stuffed with straw instead of weighty flesh and bones. So that in his unfitness a strength was summoned, in some way reminding one of the beauty of the freaky: might is often borne of impotence, while strength is consumed like cloth by moths. Whether this was a miracle or not is not important to me. I was awed with the singularity of the parable itself, concealing a truth which could be interpreted two ways. Spirydon himself, Antonii continued, crossed the entire swamp on his brother's shoulders, holding in his hand a missive to their elders from the saint. Their elders, upon reading the letter were ashamed and repented, dispelling the Arians from their property and erecting a new church. "The power of a spiritual utterance can be immeasurable," Antonii said.

"What town or village were those brothers from?" Sozont asked.

"From the village Ryzhany," Antonii said. "They live there still. Their elders have been honored? with? blessed? [konchyna]."

"I will stop in that village on my return. According to me, it is in the vicinity of Turchynka."

"So it is," Antonii said. "Do stop in."

"Your turn now, Symeon," Teodoryt said.

Symeon, the tallest among Mykyta's disciples stood straight and tall. Looking up, he cleared his throat, coughing, and recounted a story about Olena Puliavska, a lady from the nearby town of Volodar. She petitioned the saint for prayers, as she was barren. And the venerable one inquired: can peas be found in the kitchen, and if so, to deliver an unthreshed pea. Peas there were, and they were delivered with other offerings from that same lady. The saint placed a pea into a dipper filled with water—the water was from the Eye of the Abyss. When the pea puckered up, he prayed over it and sent it to the lady, willing her to swallow it whole. Soon the lady was with child. She bore a son the following year. She wanted to visit the righteous one, bringing her son with her, but upon hearing that woman is not allowed to commune with the saint, and as she did not wish to sojourn in the camp nearby, she sent the child with her servants. They were to relay the following: "This, Father, is the fruit of your sacred prayers. Bless him! If you can, forward me another pea from my offering."

This the blessed one effected. The year following, the lady bore another son.

A madness seized her then—she claimed the blessed one to be the father of her sons. She began relating that for that he visited her in her dreams. The righteous one understood: at work here was the power of the Devil, not of the Lord. He vowed to stand on one leg for an entire year, as he had after his first trial. The Lady of Volodar bore no more children. Those she had are alive and healthy to this day. Sozont can, if he wishes, call upon them.

Sozont was intrigued with the story. "How many years have passed since?" he asked.

"About five," Symeon said.

"Has any of you seen the children?"

"Yes: Antonii, Ievahrii and I," Symeon spoke.

"So that at that time there were three of you disciples with the saint?"

"We were all there already. Though Teodoryt could not see, while Nykyfor and Heorhii had trekked from village to village for alms."

"Do you still seek charity?" Sozont asked.

“We do,” Antonii stated. “We could not survive otherwise, with so many mouths to feed.”

“I shall visit Lady Olena Puliavska. Why did the blessed one believe that the power of the Devil was at work here?”

“Because woman is a vessel of the Devil. The blessed one ought have remembered that while blessing the pea. That is why he vowed himself to penitence, suffering mightily, tormenting his body,” Antonii stated.

“Bearing children is man’s destiny from God,” Sozont said. “It is stated in Psalms: ‘...oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!’”

“And Hosea said: ‘They have dealt treacherously against the Lord: for they have begotten strange children...’ and the blessed one could not nor did he desire to be an adulterer. That is why he accepted it as his transgression and as a warning not to interfere in matters where the Lord acts,” Teodoryt said. “Since then he has not settled issues of bareness, not to minister to women.”

“You have convinced me,” Sozont said. “The blessed one acted honorably. Who then was the father of those children?”

“Her husband with the aid of prayers from the Reverend Father.”

“Then wherein lies the sin of the blessed one?”

“In that a woman’s lips were emboldened to address him sinfully,” Antonii said. “Honor lies with the blessed one—he severed the sin before it became a sin...”

I looked around. The crippled and freaky had crowded around us. Surrounding us from all sides, like a dark wall, they were like night terrors or like devilry behind a circle sketched with inviolable chalk. Their silence added to the feeling of uncertainty and dread. To me it had even appeared that they were not breathing. Still, even as I was admiring their monstrousness, it seemed that it would suffice for Teodoryt or Antonii to wave a hand and that appalling herd would attack us, shrieking, tearing at our flesh to roast us over the fire for the evening meal. I glanced at my fellow travelers: Sozont was composed, as usual, even pleased about something. He lay by the fire on his side, his arms and legs spread comfortably. Pavlo sat, squatting, his blue eyes sparkling with ardor—the tales, obviously, had completely captivated him and he saw nothing around him. The flames rose high, evenly. Once in a while Mykyta’s disciples added brush to the fire. Only now I noticed that several dwarves were supplying the brush, but he, with whom we had communed—Musi—was not among them.

“Indeed, you are recounting truly instructive tales,” said Sozont.

“From those tales we learn to abide in piety,” Teodoryt said. Reddish flashes of flames reflected eerily in his blind eyes. “Your turn, Ievahrii, to tell a tale!”

“What can one say about the ineffable feats of the saint?” Ievahrii said. “They transcend human power, and it is impossible to describe them. Though perhaps I can share this...”

And he told how from his long standing the righteous one’s other leg became afflicted with an abscess. It oozed blood, completely staining one of the pine trunks. The blood flowed and flowed as if the blessed one’s body were an inexhaustible source. Yet this did not divert him from godly intentions: he suffered bravely. He was forced to show his abscess for the following reason: one day a priest from Zhytomyr arrived at the hallowed place. He was a kind man, inspired by God. He said, “I seek the truth—that truth, to which mankind is drawn. And so, I ask, pray tell: are you a man or a fleshless being?”

And the venerable one inquired: “Why do you ask this of me?”

And the priest said: “I heard about you. I heard that you do not eat, that you have not

imbibed any liquid for some time, only now drinking a bit, very little; you do not sleep. All of these are natural for man. Man cannot exist without food, sufficient drinking, sleeping.”

And something which had never happened before happened then: for the first time ever, the venerable one willed the priest, that is, one of the newcomers, to ascend the pole. He allowed his putrid abscess full of maggots on one leg as well as the bloody leg (the blood flowing unceasingly) to be viewed.

And the priest was astonished—how could this martyr stand on his own with such wounds. “Why do you not heal your abscesses? You possess such power of prayer!” the priest asked.

“Let Him Who rendered them onto me heal them,” the blessed one replied.

“Are you not afraid of dying of those wounds?” the priest asked.

“I live only for that,” Mykyta replied. “I long for Death. It is a release for me. I expect to be accorded a place in divine chambers.”

“Are you certain,” the priest asked, “that this is what God wills of man? Rather than a peaceful, pure, decent, virtuous life of self-designated labor, bringing forth progeny in loving kindness?”

“In the midst of sin, strife and mortality accursed by God there is no place for a pure, decent, virtuous life in this world.”

“If man did not toil,” the priest said, “if man did not care about his descendants, life on earth would perish, as would humanity.”

And with great joy the saint proclaimed: “They would perish, therefore, they would return to paradise, having atoned for original sin to once again inhabit it, replacing the rebellious, outcast cherubim. All that is mortal must be quelled.”

And those words uttered by the saint shocked the priest, and he descended, recounting all he had heard to the disciples. And he proclaimed that he shall never return to the vale of misery, the place of sorrow, remaining forever in the hallowed place.

“And he stayed?” Sozont asked calmly.

“And he stayed,” Ievhri said proudly.

“Was it you?” Sozont asked.

Ievahrii looked down modestly.

“Describe the rules the venerable one lives under,” Sozont asked.

The fire blazed, bursts of flames reflecting in the faces of those gathered. I noticed that the crippled, the monstrous drew soundlessly closer, almost pressing in on us in a closed circle, walling us in. Now I heard their hushed breathing, as if the tales told here bewitched them. Mykyta’s disciples, meanwhile, acted as if they did not notice that crowd, leading a discourse only with us.

“Here is the order of the venerable one’s life,” Antonii said. “All night and morning he stands at prayer, until the first rooster crows. He then parts the reed curtains for all to see him at morning prayers. At the crowing of the second rooster, when the sun has risen a bit, he delivers a sermon to those present. For this, those willing, women excluded, assemble to listen. Then, if such present themselves, he heals the spirit of those possessed by demons, the spiritually infirm, grievously tormented, those smitten with grief, gripped with fear. Oft times peasants seek mediation in quarrels; he represses human discord and contention. After, he once again stands at open prayer—all can witness him praying and doing obeisance; folks can, if they wish, join him in prayer and obeisance. Drawing the curtains, he continues praying in solitude—this lasts until the next morning. He leads his entire life in this way. To folks in general the hardship of his life seems hardly bearable. At the same time, his incessant praying brings him closer to God.”

“How many years has the righteous one lived and prayed this way?”

“He has been performing feats as a pole-sitter for 12 years,” Antonii said.

“Have all of you, his disciples, spent that time here, besides Brother Ievahrii?”

“Disciples of the venerable one arrive and they depart,” Teodoryt said. “Those who have sated their hunger for knowledge depart. They embark to perform their own feats in deserts and monasteries. Those thirsty for knowledge arrive. Antonii and I have been here from the beginning, Symeon—seven years, Nykyfor—six, Ievahrii—three, and Heorhii has been here only a year.”

“Has any disciple of the venerable one died here?” Sozont inquired.

“None of his disciples has died,” Teodoryt said. “We abide under certain protection from the venerable one’s prayers...Now you tell a tale, Nykyfor.”

And Nykyfor narrated a story about a marsh wolf. This was a beast of extraordinary proportions and merciless ferocity. It lived in the marshes, so that it was impossible to cross the swamp summers or winters. It ravaged all. People stopped coming to the sacred place. It was said the Devil himself had transfigured himself into the beast to besiege the sacred place, to root it out. Hunters hunted it, a few perishing while the wolf could not be slain. It vexed not only those at the sacred place, but in surrounding settlements as well, ravaging cattle, at times people, especially children. They pursued him with dogs, but even the herd of dogs, trained for hunting, was unable to weaken it—it savaged them while escaping unharmed. It could tread the swamp and hide in water. It would leap out at one while crossing the swamp, appearing like a pillar of water—one would die not from the wolf’s teeth, but of fright. It was ubiquitous, as if flying from place to place. Though it eluded our island, it finally got the courage to attack even here, each night devouring, biting some of the crippled and monstrous.

That is when they asked to be permitted within the enclosure near the pole overnight.

After harkening them, the righteous one said: “Take some soil from the enclosure and some water from the Eye of the Abyss. Scatter that soil where the wolf climbs out of the swamp, sprinkling a bit of water over it. And retire peacefully.”

That is what they did. Each snatched a bit of soil from inside the fence and as there were not a few of them, and as they knew not wherefrom the wolf appears, they strew soil along the entire shoreline, sprinkling it with water. In their terror of the beast, however, they were unable to sleep. So that at midnight they heard an awful howling from the swamp—their hair stood on end. It was the wolf circling the island, unable to find a safe place to climb out. It howled louder and louder. The crippled and monstrous fell to the ground, plugging their ears with their fingers—they could not bear it. Abruptly, the howling broke off, a whining resounded, finally that, too, subsided. The entire night the crippled and monstrous shook with fear. Next morning, armed with sticks, the more courageous carefully set out to the place whence the whining echoed. Their dread, though, was senseless: the huge beast lay atop the heaped soil, its fur bristling like needles. Its mouth was clogged with soil, its dislodged eyeballs dangled around its jaws. Shouting joyously, the crippled and monstrous ran to us and we, barely able to move the beast hauled it to the Eye of the Abyss where we let it fall into the water. It sank like a rock. The water foamed in that place, as if boiling, for a long time after. Have I told the truth?” Nykyfor yelled to the crippled, the monstrous.

And filling their lungs with air the crippled and monstrous whooped in one voice: “E-e-ah!”

Once again they grew silent, as if their mouths were full of water, drawing yet closer to us.

“Have local inhabitants seen similar swamp wolves before or since?” Sozont inquired.

“Mud wolves they have seen, but never such a large or ferocious one,” Nykyfor said. “At the

time we had a few peasants on our island.”

“What did you eat during the wolf’s siege?” Sozont asked.

“Fish had suddenly appeared in the swamp, though not in the Eye of the Abyss. It had not appeared before. It does now, sometimes. It clung to the shore, so we fashioned a linen pouch into which we drove enough fish for chowder. To the chowder we added herbs native to the island. It is true that the fish stank with mud. But as we had no bread (those few villagers who came ashore were our only guests in a while), that fish was tasty and nutritious enough for us,” Nykyfor said. “The appearance of that fish we consider a miracle, too.”

“Why do you, the disciples of the saint, not eat in the communal refectory?” Sozont asked.

“Two reasons,” Teodoryt said. “Firstly, to keep a spiritual distance between us, chosen by the saint and them, the small-minded. And secondly, our abstinence is greater than is theirs—their food is too rich for us. We are striving to achieve the state the blessed one is in: to not consume food at all. Thus we eat very little, some of us not every day... Your turn, Heorhii!”

“As I am the youngest and most recent arrival, my tale will be short,” Heorhii said. “About how Sir Vasyl Puliavsky of Volodar, husband of Lady Olena visited the sacred place to thank the blessed one for the birth of the children.”

And he described how having heard that the righteous one is angered with his wife for having called him the father of those children, with the agreement of Lady Olena, Sir Vasyl embarked alone across the swamp, led by a guide. The righteous one agreed to commune with him. Sir Vasyl apologized in his wife’s name for her inapt utterance, assuring the saint that she had in mind not physical fatherhood, but spiritual. It is accepted to label a monk, a priest father, and this is the fatherhood she ascribed to the blessed one not only in regard to her children, but for herself as well.

“And I, too,” Sir Vasyl said, “consider Your Reverence to be my spiritual father.”

During this exchange a maggot had fallen off the blessed one’s abscess, sliding down the pine trunk to the ground right under Sir Vasyl’s feet. He picked it up, put it into his hand and left. The righteous one dispatched Heorhii after him willing him to ask: “Whyfor did you pick up that stinking worm that fell out of my putrid flesh?”

And Sir Vasyl opened his fist. Heorhii saw a sparkling diamond in his palm. It shone and glowed like embers.

“It is not a worm, it is a diamond,” Sir Vasyl said to Heorhii. “Report this to the righteous one.”

Heorhii rushed off and told the righteous one what had happened. The righteous one said: “Inform him that it is a gift from me for his faith. Let him keep it.”

Past summer, when this occurred, Heorhii was spending time in Volodar. While visiting the nobles Puliavskys he inquired whether the diamond had been preserved. And Sir Vasyl showed it to Heorhii set in an icon of the Mother of God. If one wishes, one can view it to this day at the nobles of Volodar.

“By all means, we shall,” Sozont said. “Have there been similar incidents with others?”

“This happened only once with Lord Vasyl,” Heorhii said.

Silence hung over us. The fire faded; Mykyta’s disciples had obviously stopped adding brush. Only embers smoldered, glimmers of flames lapping them from time to time.

“Is there anything else you would like to ask us?” Antonii inquired.

“Just one thing,” Sozont said. “Has the saint remained on the pole all twelve years, or does he sometimes descend?”

“He descends occasionally,” Antonii said. “When he still ate, he descended to take care of

natural urges, and when he stopped accepting food—three times a year: at Christmas—we have no outsiders at the sacred place then, unless one wades here by chance—he celebrates this holiday with us singing psalms and songs pleasing to God; at Easter and Pentecost, at which time we usually have folks here so that he goes around blessing all. Pentecost is day after the morrow and you will be able to observe this. But he descends only at night, for a brief time, and after circling the island, after the Christmas singing he returns. Have you asked everything?”

“Everything. I am quite satisfied with your stories and answers,” Sozont said.

After, Antonii raised his hands, clapped and shouted at the crippled and monstrous: “Time to retire! Go to sleep! Enough ogling! And no wandering about at night!”

The crippled and monstrous shoved off into the darkness. Mykyta’s disciples waited for them to disappear. Bidding us a good night, they left: Antonii first, behind him Teodoryt, then Symeon, Ievahrii, Nykyfor and Heorhii.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN,

which describes a second meeting with the dwarf Musi; the nocturnal and morning events on the island

We were tired. Gladly, we settled in, at least I did. Sozont, however, said: “Everyone has related a miracle except you, Brother Mykhailo. Perchance, you do not know any?”

“I do know one. But I am sleepy,” I said.

Sozont himself was weary: he yawned loudly. “Let us pray before retiring, and let us sleep!” he said.

We kneeled, praying half-heartedly. But no sooner had we lain down, we heard a rustling in the darkness. A large-headed form appeared, treading stealthily.

“Why are you not sleeping, Musi?” Sozont asked calmly.

“Shh-shh!” hissed the dwarf. “I want to tell you something.”

“Is it true that you frequent a dwarf in the women’s camp?” Sozont asked.

“They know abo-o-out it already?” the dwarf asked, whistling.

“If we know about it, of course they know,” I said.

The dwarf scratched his head. “That damned Marta to-o-old them! The bitch!”

“One ought not utter shameful words, Musi!”

“And if it’s true, o-o? She go-o-es at night to-o-o tho-ose studs, and they umpf her!” The dwarf made an indecent gesture.

“All six?” Pavlo asked, horrified.

“I dunno-o-o,” the dwarf admitted honestly. “They shut themselves in. But they breathe heavily, and so-ometimes she screams. Wenches scream when their pudenda is being jammed, there!”

“But she’s dumb!” I said.

“As dumb as I am a hunchback,” Musi said. “And that woman dwarf I visit, she’s my wife, there!”

“Married?” Sozont asked, surprised.

“Nah, but we perfo-o-ormed a wedding, there! And I’ve screwed her many a time.”

“Are you registered with the authorities?” Pavlo asked.

“We are,” Musi declared proudly. “And I screw her licitly. She’s my wife, there!”

“Do they know that?”

“Indeed! But they say: unwedded therefo-ore unmarried, there! And I can’t screw her, there!”

And we've been to-o-gether lo-o-ong, but here it is no-o-ot allo-owed, there!"

"Be careful with this, Musi," Sozont said, concerned.

"Why do-o they no-ot allo-ow me to-o screw my o-own wife?" Musi whimpered. "Why?"

"Such is the custom here, Musi: no co-habitation here, you know that yourself."

"I kno-o-ow. But I'm quiet abo-o-out it, and at night, there!"

"They have their eye on you. They are sniffing you out, Musi! Be careful! You had something to tell us?"

"Indeed! Don't sleep at night. Co-o-ome to the po-ole. You hee-hee will see so-o-omething, there!"

"What will we see?"

"So-o-mething 'teresting, hee-hee! I'm running alo-o-ong! There!"

"Be careful, Musi," Sozont cautioned once again.

But Musi was gone, dissolving in the darkness. We settled in.

"Is what Musi said true?" Pavlo asked. "They explain everything so finely and rationally. Is not Musi's thinking unfounded?"

"Musi has a child's mind," Sozont said, slowly. "The lips of babes utter truth. In Psalms it is stated: 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise.' And Jesus said: 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers...all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries...but be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ.' I Did you, Brother Mykhailo, scribe these words in your Peresopnytska Gospel?"

"I did," I replied, "and more than once I have meditated on their power."

"The power of Christ's words is indisputable," Pavlo said. "But the acts of these people can be understood differently. They have forsaken the wicked world. They compose prayers to the Lord as do few others. They have vowed themselves to poverty and abstinence, through mortification directing themselves out of the temporal towards God. And they are not angels, but men. They are sinful, perhaps they transgress, but through their ascetic life of loving kindness they atone for it. Perchance, they are in instances wicked, for Jeremiah said: 'wicked is the heart of man,' and 'we are all one man's sons.'²"

"The Eye of the Abyss has descried you, Pavlo," Sozont said sadly. "Consider this, from Psalms: 'Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man; preserve me from the violent man.' 'Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips.' 'Incline not my heart to any evil thing, to practice wicked words.' The rest our evangelist Mykhailo can recite. Speak, Brother!"

And I said: "'And lead us not into temptation.' 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it.' 'When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that receiveth the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while.'"³

"Two concepts, Brother Pavlo, are being confused: evil in a man, and an evil man."

"So this, then, is the Eye of the Abyss according to you, Brother Sozont?" I asked.

¹ Note in margin: "Matthew, Chapter 23, Verses 1-10."

² Note in margin: "Genesis, Chapter 42, Verse 11."

³ Note in margin: "Matthew, Chapter 6, Verse 13; Chapter 12, Verse 39; Chapter 13, Verses 19-20."

“This is one of its peeks into the human soul,” Sozont said. “May the Lord protect us from that!”

“Amen!” Pavlo and I said.

Our minds were refreshed and enlightened with Sozont’s sermon, and we fell asleep not having agreed about anything for the night, as if we forgot what Musi the dwarf had said.

And I dreamt that I am sitting at a table. A sheet of parchment lies before me. Rulers, brushes of various thicknesses and inkhorns with pigments are arranged along the table. And I am rendering the Eye of the Abyss—a shiny, milky substance shaped like a clear ball with a pupil, like a shaft. And in that ball I painted two pine trees, or trunks, rather, and Mykyta the Pole-sitter atop them with bat wings instead of arms, impatient to take off, even as his legs are girt with cord to the trunks. And I painted Kuzma in that Eye, Kuzma being devoured by an invisible dragon-beast, and the mud-wolf, both eyes aflame, and the dwarf Musi stuck in its outstretched jaws, desperately grasping at the wolf’s teeth, wrenching himself out of its jaws. I painted tens of the crippled, the monstrous dancing, while embracing crippled, monstrous women, and amongst them the beauty holding a lash, with an exuberant twining of stalks arrayed in an image of a child sprouting from a pea in her womb. Around her I painted six youths, arms wreathed, and a worm with a diamond on its head, its luster scattering, and I painted yet another youth carrying a stout soldier on his shoulders. I painted Mykyta’s mother Kateryna frozen in a *pietà*, arms raised, tears of blood streaming down her cheeks, and a woman with a serpent in her belly. I painted Olena Puliavska as a modern Eve holding in her hand not an apple but a sprouted pea, Mykyta’s face gracing the surface of that pea. I compassed all of them with the long form of a serpent, on whom instead of a serpent’s head I devised a human skull. Everything stirred in that transparent form of the eye, everything shimmered, moved as if alive, not painted. Still, something was missing in it. So I painted Pavlo, wracked with convulsions, and he really was convulsing. Then I painted Deacon Sozont glued to the round side of the Eye, a blade in his raised hand, and as I painted, Sozont began beating and stabbing the milky membrane of the Eye with his knife. Blood seeped out of the bruises and incisions, even flowing like a stream. And the blood collected at the bottom of the Eye into a round lake, and in that lake I painted a second pupil in which a splinter was stuck, like a tartar sabre. And finally I rendered the Eye as the head of a youth draped in a linen tunic, shod in bast shoes, wrapped in linen swatches, laced with linden fibers.

I studied this strange picture lengthily. At once, I realized that I had failed to render one of the participants in this vision. Of course the missing participant was I. But then, that worm, with the diamond on its head—was that not I?

Someone was shaking me. I opened my eyes, Deacon Sozont stood over me. “Wake up, Brother Mykhailo,” he whispered. “It is time!”

“Time for what?” I asked.

“To see what dwarf Musi was talking about.”

Half-awake, I sat. “Will we rouse Pavlo?” I asked.

“No, let him sleep. He’s tired.”

“Do we need to see that, Brother Sozont?”

“We do,” Sozont declared firmly. “That is why we came here.”

“Perhaps,” I muttered, “it would be better to leave them in peace? ‘...verily He is a God that judgeth in the earth.’¹ And Ecclesiastes states: ‘God shall judge the righteous and the wicked.’ And in Matthew: ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged.’”

¹ Note in margin: “Psalms, Chapter 57, Verse 11.”

“We are not here to judge, brother Mykhailo,” Sozont whispered, “but because as Matthew quoted Christ: ‘Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.’ And further: ‘Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst for righteousness.’ There is, Brother,” he said, in a whistling whisper, “nothing accidental in the world. Once God brought us here, let us fulfill His will.”

And I submitted. Cautiously attentive, we set out along the path, heading toward the fence near the pole. All was silent. We detected an indistinct, light figure next to the fence. We hid behind tree trunks. We did not have long to wait: we heard nimble steps along the path. In an instant, a female shape sprang out—it was Marta. She headed directly toward the guard at the gate. Flooded with moonlight, they were both clearly discernible in their linen raiments. They whispered something one to the other, and Marta strode across the yard to the hovel. The hovel was illuminated. The shutters were shut.

The door opened; a shaft of light fell to the ground.

Marta entered. The door closed.

We intended to walk along the fence to get closer to the hovel when we noticed someone descending the pole down the ladder. The man was clad in similar raiment. He approached the gatekeeper. His hairy face shone in the moonlight: it was indeed Mykyta. After ex-changing a few words with the gatekeeper, Mykyta almost ran to the nearest trees, that is to say, close to the place where we were hiding. Bending over, we pressed closely to the trunks—I was afraid that Mykyta might uncover us. Instead, he stooped under a bush near us and we heard sounds one might emit while taking care of an important natural need. After, Mykyta rose and returned to the gate. “Bury it!” a hoarse voice said.

Picking up a shovel behind the gate, the gatekeeper carried it to the bush. Mykyta, meantime, headed to the hovel. The door opened, and light vividly illuminated the linen garb, the shaggy head.

The gatekeeper manipulated the shovel by the bush. Then he went to the gate, taking the shovel to the hovel. Utilizing the moment, we snuck in the shadows along the fence to the hovel. We fell to the ground as the gatekeeper exited the hovel. From the fence, he again headed toward the yard. We continued crawling after he resumed his post. Though the hovel stood almost next to the fence, it was impossible to hear or see what transpired. We heard muffled voices. We lay for a while until the door opened again, Marta came out, started toward the gate, exchanged a few words with the gatekeeper and left along the path to the women’s camp. Mykyta came out after. He, too, visited with the gatekeeper and then climbed the ladder up the post. Soon after, one of Mykyta’s disciples, I believe Ievahrii, appeared to relieve the guard. The light in the hovel remained lit until finally it went out. Nothing else could transpire here, so we crept back to the trees, and from there, we set off to our night spot.

“Were they eating the evening meal there?” I asked.

“Certainly,” Sozont said. “I know not, Brother Mykhailo, if you’ve noticed that all those stories we were entertained with are also book stories.”

“And about the mud-wolf?”

“In the Chronicles of the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter it is not a wolf, but a panther.”

“And Olena Puliavska and her husband?”

“That, too, is from the chronicles, though without the pea. The pea comes from folk tales—Kotyhoroshok.”

“So that they’ve adapted the book stories to their life here?”

“Exactly,” said Sozont, chuckling quietly. “And now let us sleep.”

But I could not fall asleep. To me it appeared for some reason that Sozont's gladness was not wholly good-natured; not only that, it seemed malicious. The idea that the deacon reminded me of a hunter crossed my mind, a hunter pursuing a wild animal not because hunger forces him, which is to say, a man's vital physical need, and not because this animal means to devour the man or is causing harm and discomfort, - the hunter is urged by a passion to lure and destroy that animal—the animal is, after all, less powerful. So that the hunter is driven by his fervor for the hunt, which is the fervor of a killer, and it does not interest him what the pursued beast is experiencing. At that moment, in my mind I repeated Pavlo's words about the fact that the acts of these men among whom we find ourselves can be interpreted not only critically, but from a benevolent aspect, as well. Yes, they are creating a life story; as any story, it is not wholly true. But the fact that the story itself begins to create them needs to be taken into account—that is to say, having devised a life story they begin to live not according to their will, but according to what the story wills. They have elevated themselves to perform deeds loftier than human nature allows, therefore contrived; for man cannot leap higher than himself. Hence they ended up in a snare they had themselves set up; in a ditch they had themselves dug. They were forced to transform into scribes and pharisees who say one thing while effecting another. And so this became their curse. They are well aware that they are contradicting God's will as well as their human destiny, designated by God, which means that God, to whom they gave themselves up to serve will have no mercy and will cast them into the Eye of the Abyss. They have embarked on creating their own hell. Fleeing the Eye of the Abyss—this world—they became the creators of a new Eye of the Abyss, starting to serve it like a pagan idol, zealously protecting that idol, standing by it like bound dogs. But to that end they have vowed themselves knowing full well that the Eye of the Abyss, by them devised, will swallow them sooner or later. Deacon Sozont recognized and understood this well though he did not wish to sympathize with them, and therefore did not strive to save them. The hunt enraptured him. With flared nostrils, he raced after them, glad to have discerned their hypocrisy, unmasking it, ready at any minute to stab his prey with an imaginary blade or lance. Thence, while uncovering evil, he himself abided in evil, that is, in the Eye of the Abyss, which means that he himself was compromised while being convinced that his fable about his own veritable system of judgment was indeed true. He led himself to heights greater than was designated for man. It was this that terrified me.

My spirit was alarmed and full of sorrow from such thoughts, for I already knew: this journey will not renew a right spirit within me nor will it fill my being with the fire I burned with while designing the Peresopnytska Gospel. The reason is simple: to burn with the lofty flame of spirituality, one must be spiritually whole—my spirit is broken, like a vessel. My misfortune lies in that I began fearing the hypocrisy of creative inspiration, so I became incapable of inspiration. Hence I thought: what would man be if he rejected improvising of stories? Would he be capable of elevating himself above a brute; would he know God, even though his God is often one of his tales. For the composing of tales is likewise creation. Everything born must live and requires nourishment. The essence lies, obviously, in how man lives; while breaking the boundaries of his destiny does he remain beneficent? And if he is not beneficent, is he worthy of acclaim? If he is beneficent, is his benevolence genuine? And how can one find a gauge for beneficence to be forewarned not to create eyes of the abyss in this world? This, I thought, is where we need God. Not an imaginary, definitive God, but one Who would lead us firmly along His narrow path. So that a pure, open soul must lead us to Him, not rational constructs. Then He will find in us a vessel in which to place a kernel of His mystery. But the vessel of our soul must be prepared for that. And I fancied: there is no genuine or disingenuous faith predicated upon ritual and service,

in other words, games of faith, be they eastern or western, be they sects, such as these symeonides, or even Islam, or any other. Only faith or the lack of faith are important, since every faith is genuine, while faithlessness is disingenuous; only that mystery which exists or does not exist in a man's soul is significant. I knew that I would not have the courage to herald these thoughts any time soon as those, for whom faith is a game of rituals will condemn and revile me. But on that night they—those thoughts—sprouted within me and I was convinced that they bore no evil: they were founded on tolerance. And evil appears where intolerance reigns.

Glimmers of daylight dawned when I heard cries and lamenting from the women's camp. I shook Deacon Sozont. He immediately sat up.

"I fear that our Musi the dwarf has been caught," I said.

"What happened?" Pavlo sprang up.

"Sleep, Brother, sleep," Sozont said. "We shall go see the bit of night diversion."

"What diversion? What is happening?" Pavlo could not regain his senses.

"One of this night's mysteries," Sozont said, rising.

We set out toward the path. Pavlo, by the way, came with us. We heard an odd pounding from the camp, as if timpanis were being struck, though the sound was hollower. The pounding drew nearer, so we stepped off the path and stood behind trees. And in the pale, diluted morning air we saw a crowd trudging slowly along the trail like a flock. Musi the dwarf led the way. Bearing a torch, a strange person with an enormous head on a small torso on even shorter legs walked beside him; behind them streamed the crippled and monstrous women led by a female dwarf, evidently Musi's wife. Marta apparently was not among them—the crippled and freakish walked without their sister-guardian. Except for Musi the dwarf, the woman dwarf and the torch bearer, in their hands everyone held a wooden bowl (the one they ate out of), beating it with a spoon. That was the source of that timpanic noise. We heard crashing sounds. The crippled and freakish men tore through the bushes toward the path. They stood and stared, as did we.

Stepping onto the path, we joined the procession. We let the women pass, and the crippled and freaky men clambered onto the path behind us. The procession arrived at the gate, where all six Mykyta's disciples stood. Mykyta's hut on posts stood in silence, as if melting in the mist. The round entry opening was shut.

"We have caught the debaucher and ripped a piece of cloth off him," a squeaky voice announced. Who spoke, we could not see.

"I am no-o-o debaucher! I was visiting my wife," Musi screamed. "Everyone kno-ows she is my wife, there!"

"May the saint pass judgment on him!" the squeaky voice continued.

"The saint passes no judgments," we heard Antonii's voice. "The saint prays for all and beseeches the Lord to have mercy on your sins and afflictions."

"Then you judge the debaucher!" the voice shrieked.

"I am no-o-ot a debaucher, there!" cried the dwarf. "I was visiting my wife, there!"

"Who can attest to the fact that she is your wife?" Antonii asked.

A gloomy silence descended.

"Everyone kno-ows!" the dwarf shouted. "I to-o-old everyone!"

"Everyone knows, because you told," Antonii said. "But no one was present at your wedding and no one witnessed your marriage ceremony. Is that not so, Musi?"

"My wife can attest to-o-o it, there!" the dwarf cried. "Let her speak!"

In the ensuing perfect silence, a feeble, somewhat musty yet shrill, though quite audible voice emerged. "Here we came to pray to Lordy, and he, this Musky, that shameful disgrace,

wants my pudenda.”

“Are you his wife?” Antonii asked.

“He wants me to be his wife, so I dunno. He wants my pudenda and I came to pray to Lordy.”

“Are you no-o-ot my wife?” Musi the dwarf shrieked.

“Heh, so you said,” the feeble voice continued, “as you crawled to my pudenda with your shameful disgrace. And I came here to pray to Lordy.”

“You be your own judge, Musi. There is no place for you among us,” Antonii said. “The saint does not pray for debauchers.”

With the utterance of that word, the crippled and freaky beat their wooden bowls with spoons while suddenly stepping aside, clearing the path along which tread Musi, crying like a child. The large-headed creature bearing the torch, and the woman dwarf, smiling, her tiny eyes glowing, followed.

“I warned you, Musi,” Deacon Sozont said as the dwarf passed us. “Why did you not heed me?”

“Because she is my wife,” the dwarf whimpered. “But she lo-o-oves me no-o-o mo-ore, there! She has betrayed me, that damn bitch.”

“I am no damn bitch!” the woman dwarf squeaked indignantly. “I came here to pray to Lordy, not for you to shove your prick in. Debauching dog!”

Even larger tears rolled down the dwarf’s cheeks. Bowing his head, he continued walking. The last now became the first as they swept forward behind him. We followed. The crippled and freakish men wove after us; the women stayed back. The entire island was immersed in the dreadful, hollow knocking—everyone beat their wooden bowls with spoons. The procession headed toward the Eye of the Abyss. I looked around, but did not see Mykyta’s disciples. They remained beside the pole. Marta, too, was absent.

“‘And the governor said,’” Sozont recited words from the Gospel according to Matthew, “‘Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let Him be crucified. When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude.’”¹

“Do not dishonor God, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo said. “Why are you comparing this dwarf with Jesus Christ?”

“Because likening Himself to the wretched, the outcast, the unjustly executed, Christ accepted His destiny.”

“But Christ was King, and that Pilate acknowledged,” Pavlo said. “And He was not executed innocently—He suffered for preaching His sermons.”

“That is so, yet not so, Brother Pavlo,” Sozont stated. “Christ said: ‘If you knew, what this signifies: Mercy I seek, not sacrifice—you should cease judging the innocent.’”

Finally, the procession arrived at the Eye of the Abyss. Seeing this peculiar pool, or lake, I was shocked once again: perfectly round, it was milky around the edges, with a shadow in its center, like a pupil: a small, dark, brown ring.

We all stood around the curving bank, which cut bluntly into the island. Musi the dwarf was untied. He began to rub his arms. A hush set in: the beating of bowls with spoons ceased. At that moment the sky split open in the east, a blaze of yellow splendor pouring out. The water fumed, like smoke, a mist rising in delicate gray streaks. The sun had not yet risen, though the moment was near.

¹ Note in the margin: “Matthew, Chapter 27, Verse 24.”

“Will you co-o-ome with me, wife?” the dwarf asked.

“Fie! As if I need you!” the woman dwarf raised her little nose haughtily.

“I will so-on pro-ove to-o you that she is my wife! I will!” Musi the dwarf wailed. “And I shall cro-oss the Eye of the Abyss, there! And no-othing will happen to-o me!”

Silence. And observing the creatures standing around me, I was shocked—they were peculiarly freakish, perchance, the curiosity consuming them made them so freakish. And full of pain, I wondered: what are we doing here, among these hapless, why did we have to end up here? What are we seeking, and what do we wish to find? Why did we come to this pool? Was it not malicious curiosity that brought us here, as it did these crippled and freakish? Then how do we differ from the crippled and freakish? By being scribes and Pharisees?

Musi the dwarf found a staff and bravely stepped into the water. The moment he did so, tens of spoons struck wooden bowls; to this accompaniment the dwarf trudged slowly along the path, invisible under water. And I prayed raptly and sincerely to God for this little fellow to be saved, for I believed that he was innocent. That treacherous woman dwarf really was his wife. She stood, meantime, calm and indifferent, with head slightly turned to the side, her lips contorted in a capricious grimace. Who knows, perhaps, like every solitary mare she expected her stallion to be victorious and worthy of her? Meantime, the dwarf plunged in chest-deep, groping for the path with his staff. I remembered then that in the deepest spot, exactly where our fellow-traveler Kuzma had disappeared, the water had reached our armpits. The dwarf will be unable to cross if he does not know how to swim—the water will cover his head. But then, even if he knew how to swim, breaking away from the path, would he be able to find it—that is, would he have strength enough to swim to the opposite bank?

Musi tread deeper and deeper almost reaching the dark circle in the center of the pool. Only his head stuck out over the water. Suddenly, that head screamed wildly, and in an instant vanished. The crowd, standing along the bank, filled its lungs with air and in a single voice yelled: “Oooeeeah!”

And rings rippled across the surface: they rolled to the bank where we stood, slapping it with a splash.

Then the woman dwarf fell to her knees, grasped her hair in her hands, tearing at it and wailing, “Oh, Lord, why did You take him from me? I prayed for him! He was my husband! He was my husband!”

And her animal-like wailing trumpeted painfully.

The crippled and freakish stood, their hideous, grinning faces beaming. Inspired, they beat their bowls with their spoons.

At that moment the sun appeared: enormous, blood-red in an orange oreole, drowning in the blood of the just-slain night.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN,

in which Mykyta’s sermon is recounted, and our conversations with him

We returned to our place of sojourn. I was moved to the depths of my soul. Pavlo was saddened. Sozont was completely calm. We heard the rooster’s first crowing.

“Where do they keep the rooster?” Pavlo asked.

“Either in the hovel or in the hut atop the pole,” Sozont said. “We’ve spanned the island, and did not uncover a place for a rooster, nor the rooster. Perhaps Mykyta himself crows like a rooster?”

“Are you jesting, Brother?” Pavlo said. “The crowing sounds so authentic.”

“No jests,” Sozont replied seriously. “In actuality, it is projected from the enclosure; it only seems to issue from on high. One can easily mimic a rooster’s cry. If Mykyta truly kept a rooster, he would have trouble feeding it, cleaning after it; the rooster might flee. Though what I know not, I know not—I trust only sound, proven things.”

Again, I thought: in everything, everywhere, Sozont remains a lawyer-prober. An investigator. Bestowed on him by God, his talent is indispensable.

As it was early, we returned to our mats. Having had an utterly sleepless night, even though I was stunned by all that I had seen, I sank into deep, dreamless slumber—like

“Get up, Brother Mykhailo,” he said. “The crippled and freakish are already heading for the sermon.”

And the rooster crowed a second time. Though I felt dazed, I sprang to my feet. I sensed something indefinable, something gray stirring in my breast. Probably, from what we had just experienced.

“Tell me, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo, still saddened, said. “Is the only way out of this island through the Eye of the Abyss?”

“Why are you worrying about it, Brother?” Sozont asked.

“I believe we should leave from here as soon as possible,” Pavlo stated. “What do we expect to find here?”

Oft times we reasoned similarly, Pavlo and I: this same question I had asked myself, earlier.

“The peasants crossed the Eye of the Abyss,” Sozont said. “But they claimed that the thief had slipped onto the island some other way. At least along this path, which everyone uses, stood their guards. The peasants themselves know no other way, though they did say that their elders knew there had been another path. But it has been abandoned long ago—it was even more dangerous than is this familiar one.”

“So that we are altogether under the will of Mykyta’s disciples?” Pavlo asked.

“Altogether,” Sozont said. “It is our hope that they do not detain travelers here.”

“Then we need to be prudent,” Pavlo said, sighing. “Because otherwise, we will share Kuzma’s and the dwarf’s fate.”

“I am glad that you have determined that, Brother,” Sozont said gently. “Today I shall record what was recounted to us about Mykyta and his marvels. I will then read to, or let the disciples read what I have recorded. On the morrow we can embark upon our return.”

“Fear has possessed me, Brother,” Pavlo sighed. “Just as in Jeremiah: ‘My bowels, my bowels! I am pained at my very heart; my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet...’”

“You are in shock from the dwarf’s death, Brother!” Sozont said. “My heart is calm.”

“And you, Brother Mykhailo?” Pavlo asked, concerned.

“The same, as you. Cats are scratching at my soul.”

“Then may St. Mykyta’s sermon provide succor for you,” Sozont said. The familiar half-smile appeared on his face. “Time to go!”

And with confidence, he set off onto the path.

Many of the crippled and freakish had gathered around the enclosure, though only men. Parting in front of us, they let us approach the gate; Heorhii stood there. The rest of the disciples huddled together near the fence, their heads raised toward the hut on poles. The entry and side curtains were open—in the opening we saw Mykyta standing with his back to us, every so often

lifting his arms—he was praying. “Glory to Jesus!” we greeted Heorhii. Responding politely, he swung the gate open, bidding us in.

“Stand behind the saint’s disciples,” he said quietly. That is what we did.

Mykyta stood in the entry. For the first time, we saw him distinctly in the light. On him was a dirty, rent habit. His gaunt, almost black body was visible through the holes. His feet, unshod, were also nearly black; his face and head were overgrown with wild, abundant hair, more gray than black—disheveled, the locks mottled—it was never combed. His deep-set eyes, barely visible behind all the hair, glimmered; he had a wide, flat nose.

“I am aware of what happened today,” Mykyta said in a strong though hoarse voice. “I will, therefore, deliver a sermon about love today.”

Love is twofold: Divine and human. Love of God and love of mammon, or flesh. These two cannot unite, my children, for as the Lord said: ‘No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other’; or according to the Apostles; ‘Whosoever will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.’ To love things is to be covetous; love of flesh is wantonness. Despise, therefore, the lust of the flesh, as yourself, the world, and things in it, otherwise ye shall not hold, preserve, or find God. They that are after the flesh despise God with that love, and where there is hatred, therein dwells enmity; lovers of the world, too, hate God, for the world is the Devil’s incarnation whom we must flee and despise. Lovers of beauty despise God, for beauty is decay’s adornment, and where there is rot, there is abomination. The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God; one beloved by God must renounce the world, beauty, property, possessions, home, family, father and mother, his children, and firstly, his wife, the vessel of the Devil, for begetting children—man soils, rather than drawing closer to the Divine. It is not life God wills for the world, but death; therefore love death, bring forth fruit unto death while learning a single lesson - the lesson of fine demise. There is death from God as punishment, as the beginning of our judgment—those of us who let our spiritual life shrivel—and there is death in God, bringing joy, freedom from mortality and putrid flesh—with an exit into joy and happiness everlasting, as the only joyful soul is one drawing toward God. So perish, mine children, die with God, and may the damned, depraved world be forever extinct. Thence will man, cast out of paradise—that is, from the eternal into the temporal, mortal, from a realm of rot into a kingdom of the immortal—return into that which he was cast out of. So he who returns into the world like a dog into its vomit mocks the Lord, Who, by way of His crucifixion directed man onto the righteous path towards death, conferring the lesson of dying onto us to be co-crucified along with Him. For only those who co-suffer with Him, who have adopted His lesson on dying, who have elected death, renouncing worldly enticements shall inherit His kingdom—our life is in Him, He is our praise, He is our crown; to die for Him is happiness and revelation. Die, therefore, for the world every hour, every day, every month, every year—this, then is the path to God; death is its guide. As one cannot cross the Eye of the Abyss without a guide, so without dying one cannot reach God Who awaits, expecting one thing from us, for us to step onto this path, to enter death onto death, accursing the world and all that glimmers in it: thus escaping man’s eternal original sin. Love death, my children, instead of life. Take no thought for it, what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink, as flesh is your enemy. When she is your guide along the narrow path across the Eye of the Abyss, Death is your benefactress, for he who loves the world instead of God is devoured by the Eye never reaching the promised shore. He is devoured, my children, by a strange beast, unseen, horned, with big teeth and mouth; he devours mortal flesh along with the afflicted spirit—beware yourselves of that death! Shun it! It leads into the Abyss, not to the Shores of Redemption, where our great Lord awaits you with

His angels and archangels, with the saints and the righteous, Who loves only those who accurse this mad, wicked world, this Abyss, wherein the sun is darkness, moonlight—perdition. If we find gladness in privation here, know submission and obedience, co-suffering with God; and if we renounce the world—in glory in His kingdom shall we be, for ye cannot serve God and mammon. What one is taken with, that one will devote oneself to. Should Divine love triumph over us, God’s workers we shall be, and from Him shall we receive honey in life everlasting. Should we heed the voice of flesh and greed, passions shall rule, casting us to the enemy, the overseer of evil, and with him shall be eternal recompense for them, that in Hell for him will labor. Amen!”

Mykyta bowed deeply to all around, his voice fading grandly. He raised his beard haughtily.

Mykyta’s disciples and all the crippled, the freaky filled their lungs with air and shouted in unison: “E-e-e-ahh!”

“And now, my children,” Mykyta said softly, “those of you who wish, go. Pray to God. I shall commune with the newly-arrived, whom the Lord has brought me and who seek mine succor for their ailments and for their spirits sore vexed. Who wills to listen—stay.”

The disciples moved away. Teodoryt and Antonii stayed. Heorhii remained watching the gate. The rest left for the hovel. The crippled and monstrous, meantime, still stood, inert, like a wall.

“Come first, Brother Pavlo,” Antonii said. “You need the saint’s aid most.”

Pavlo approached, genuflecting. “Reverend Father,” he said, “I am tormented with convulsions. The fathers at Maniava Hermitage in the Carpathians prayed over me as did the holy fathers of the Lavra in Kyiv, but the ailment has not forsaken me. I was smitten along the way to you, and once here, near your sacred spot.”

“Is your ailment physical, or are you with demons?” Mykyta asked. “You must know, as you are the one tormented. If it is of the flesh, seek not healing from me, as I do not cure flesh, which is destined for demise. It is a sin to heal the body. I heal the spirit, so that it is not broken. So that it is restored to be worthy of joyous acceptance of the flesh’s demise in the name of God.”

“I do not know the nature of my ailment,” Pavlo said. “When it smites, I lose consciousness and memory.”

“The demon abides in you, then,” proclaimed Mykyta.

“Why then were the holy fathers of the hermitage and Lavra unable to rebuke it?”

“Because you seek to cure the flesh, instead of the spirit. The spirit can be healed only one way: by accepting the death of flesh, and therefore, the demon. For the greatest demon in us is our flesh. Kill the demon, and I shall pray for you. And if you wish your spirit to remain joined to your body, wait patiently for the demon to drag you into Hell.”

“So that you are advising me to die, Reverend Father?” Pavlo asked, horrified.

“With the name of the Lord upon your lips, having prepared yourself to feel the joy of death—not fear. Fear of death is a sword in the hands of the demon of flesh. Once you yearn for death you will be saved, and the Lord will cure you of seizures, receiving you in chambers of eternity. Step away from this sacred spot to reflect. You yourself must either heal yourself or destroy yourself.”

“You will for me to take my life, as did Musi the dwarf?”

“The dwarf Musi did not take his life. The Eye of the Abyss took him. From there he went to Hell. Taking one’s life is a sin for a Christian. He who gave life, that is, the Lord is to take your life. Die without taking your life. Learn the sacred art of dying. Die with God, not without God.”

Pavlo was astounded and disturbed—I saw that when I faced him. His eyes widened in a blue fervor, and his face became red as a beet.

“Now you go, Brother Mykhailo!” Antonii said.

I stepped forward and genuflected. “My affliction is dissimilar,” I said. “I know not, Reverend Father, whether it is, indeed, an affliction. But perchance it is, as it churns within me.”

“It churns, it is a demon. Speak!” Mykyta said.

“First in Dvirtsi, and later in Peresopnytsia I copied the Gospel, embellishing each page generously with ornaments, rendering many an illustration. Toiling thus, I had no greater contentment, no greater joy. Folks who saw my work said: there is none better or more accomplished, and indeed, it took me many years to effect. Each letter in the four books of the Gospel was scribed by me, every sentence reflected, meditated upon; I translated it into simple parlance, to bring folks closer to understanding Scriptures. Morning til evening, every day, except holy days and Sundays in Divine inspiration I toiled, every day sensing that God is plenishing me with the power of creation. I invested all my abilities, all my skills in this craft burning, every day, like a candle. And thus, my work was consummated, and I left for Zhytomyr, to begin copying another Gospel. Which is to say, I embarked on scribing one more book. And here I sensed something dreadful: my skill had vanished, the candle dimmed, and I became altogether unfit for work. Without my artistry, without my trade, what am I in the world?”

“Your sin,” Mykyta stated sharply, “lies in that loving the splendor of the world, you serve that mammon. The beauty of the world is one of the Devil’s most favored demons. And, even though you were scribing Holy Scripture, it was not God lighting your candle, it was the Devil. Holy Scriptures do not need calligraphy, exquisite illustrations and ornaments—they are fine and grand in their content, and that suffices. Like a moth, man’s allure was by God wasted, as ‘every man is altogether vanity,’ according to David. ‘Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids,’ said Solomon. Beauty lies in the flesh, not in the spirit, while ‘all flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it,’ Isaiah said. ‘But thou didst trust in thine own beauty,’ Ezekiel stated, ‘and playedst the harlot because of thy renown, and pouredst out thy fornications on every one that passed by;’ He who creates beauty builds unto himself an eminent place, - so said Ezekiel, - and like a whore has opened his feet to every one that passes by, multiplying his whoredoms. And the Lord said unto the prince of Tyrus: ‘I will bring strangers upon thee, the terrible of the nations: and they shall draw their swords against the beauty of thy wisdom, and they shall defile thy brightness.’¹ And again, Ezekiel: ‘Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty...I will cast thee to the ground.’ Rejoice! Be not saddened, Brother, that the Lord has caught sight of your delusion, numbing your hand and eye which served the Devil—He had mercy upon you! Rejoice! Without your craft, your artistry, you became a nonentity—you have thus drawn closer to God. Crafts, artistry are worldly inventions, and as the world is accursed, so are they accursed. Glory be to God that He freed you of it! Consider the incorruptible beauty of an obedient spirit instead of devised adornment. Embellishing Holy Scripture, you draped the timeless in temporality, flinging days and years of your life into the jaws of mammon. Have faith! Follow the narrow path through the Eye of the Abyss onto which the Lord has set you—with faith in Him, ye shall cross.”

And he pointed a finger toward the Eye of the Abyss.

His words fell on me like the blows of a hammer, soundly stifling me, stunning me. My physiognomy, evidently, looked like Pavlo’s, for I noticed the half-smile on Sozont’s face. I

¹ Note in margin: “Ezekiel, Chapter 28, Verse 7.”

stood next to Pavlo, and saw that he was still red as a beet. My face, too, was flushed, all my thoughts and intentions had become muddled, and a peculiar tremor took hold of me. Mykyta's words contained a mad, dazzling, pitiless, bruising power, and no wonder: he was slaying me not with his own words, but with words from Holy Scripture. I no longer saw myself as a worm with a diamond head, as I had rendered myself in the dream. I now knew for certain, that a worm I am, with a worm's head, and a worm on whom a metal-bound boot has stepped. And regardless of my will, I wept.

"Now you go, Brother Sozont," Teodoryt chimed.

Sozont stepped forward, bowing to Mykyta. He did not genuflect, as had Pavlo and I. "I have not come to you for a spiritual cure," he said evenly. "I have come as a duty. The holy fathers of Kyiv entrusted me with writing new Cheti-Minei, as an addendum to the Patericon of the Caves, which I am to copy. And so heeding the advice of the holy fathers, I wish to tell about you, to present your teaching."

"I have no need for earthly glory, I do not seek it! Earthly glory is demonic, not Divine," Mykyta droned gloomily.

"Not for earthly glory am I embarking on writing my Cheti Minei," Sozont said. "For the edification of Christian folk. Do you consider sacred preaching to be worldly, useless, as well?"

"If that were the case," Mykyta said, "I would not be sermonizing to the faithful every morning. Though some do consider sermons to be superfluous addenda."

"I am endeavoring to disseminate your sermons, your teachings, your life story among Christians, so that your ideas resound not only among the few here on this island, but among many. However, if you will not bless me, I shall not write about you. I came here for your blessing."

"Why should I believe you?" Mykyta asked.

"Why should you not?"

"It is stated in Psalms: 'They speak vanity every one with his neighbor: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak.'"

"Let me follow your example," Sozont said. "'The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things: With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?'"

"I have said: 'Every man speaks with a lying tongue.' 'The proud have forged a lie against me.'"

"'I hate all manner of lying.' 'I hate and abhor lying.'"

"'He who speaks with a lying tongue shall be doomed,'" Mykyta said.

"We have amused ourselves with sketches from Holy Scriptures, and now let us get to the matter," Sozont said calmly. "I have recorded most stories about you from your followers, from your folk—this day I must complete recording everything. If you will not bless my duty, I shall surrender into your hands, or the hands of your disciples what I have written. If you bless me in my endeavor, I shall read to your disciples, or they can read themselves, and if you will, you will read what I have. Should you uncover any falsehood, we will blot it out of the draft; if you will wish to add something, we will add it. Let me repeat: I am effecting all this not for your renown or earthly glory but as a duty to glorify the church. To the flock of the church I shall present your sermons. Your will, I shall effect it, if not, let me go in peace."

For a time, Mykyta stood, gazing intently at Sozont. "The holy fathers of Kyiv have elected a wise man to effect their duty," he said finally. "We can manage to check what you have written, but departing from here, will you not bear misthinking about what to you is sacred?"

“You give pause to your righteousness, Holy Father?” Sozont asked. “Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off?” Job said. Were I to deride you, I would be the one disgraced, judged before God, not you. So that if righteous you are, if you are certain of it, I should be the one afraid, not you.”

Again Mykyta reflected. “You are right,” he stated. “Effect your duty. My disciples, not I, shall listen to, or read what you have recorded. That suffices. A judge cannot judge himself, not to fall into the sin of arrogance. Now I am weary and would like to pray.”

“Amen!” Sozont said and retreated toward us.

Mykyta withdrew to the center of the hut and stood, unmoving. We stayed in place, as did Antonii, Teodoryt and Heorhii. Symeon, Ievahrii and Nykyfor came out of the hovel and paused next to Antonii and Teodoryt; the crippled and monstrous, too, did not move. Mykyta stood, beard raised, even as there was no sky above him, only a ceiling.

Some time passed. Pavlo at least had regained his senses, he was not as red; I, too, though I still lacked the strength to counter rationally the words of Mykyta—quiet respite is needed for that. We could have departed, after all, but as it seemed everyone was awaiting something, Deacon Sozont, whom we silently acknowledged as our elder, did not budge—we continued standing like posts in the yard.

And then we saw Mykyta shudder. He bowed once. Twice. Thrice. At first, he bowed slowly, but the more bows he bowed, the faster he bowed. Impulsively, who knows why, I counted: forty bows already, fifty, and he was still bowing and bowing, bending, unbending, as if he was doing this not of his will, as if a force similar to the one smiting Pavlo with seizures convulsed him. Producing a distinct, flat rhythm, like a clock pendulum, Mykyta bent and unbent; already I counted one hundred fifty-three, in my neck I felt stabs of pain from staring up the pole, while he bowed and bowed, seemingly not at all tired from bowing, bend-bend up and down; now I counted two hundred bows and I was amazed: how many more will he be able to endure? My eyes watered, my neck hurt—I counted to three hundred ten and had to stop. I lacked the strength to keep track. He bowed and bowed, bend, bend, up, down. I glanced at Pavlo and Sozont. Pavlo appeared surprisingly sad, gazing at his feet instead of up. Sozont looked up, counting the bows, of course, as I had before. But finally he too, grew weary. Only Mykyta was unspent, bending, bending up and down. The sun overhead was scorching. Sozont’s eyes met mine and I noticed his half-smile. He winked at me, who knows why, perchance cheering me up—probably, for soon after, he took Pavlo by the arm, pressing him lightly—he truly was cheering us up. Mykyta bowed and bowed, bending, unbending, there was no end to that continual bowing. I looked at the crippled and freakish: they were as if bewitched. They stood beyond the fence, so watching the saint was easier for them—they did not have to crane their necks as did we. Standing erect, like soldiers, Mykyta’s disciples were not looking, likely they had witnessed this more than once. And, wickedly perhaps, I thought to myself: while transcribing the Gospel first in Dvirtsi and later in Peresopnytsia, illuminating it, was I not likening myself to this hermit and pole-sitter, was I not prostrating myself in one-dimensional bows with my endless toil for long years. Though there was a difference: my bows had yielded an outcome. I saw the result in the image of a wondrous book, the creation of which I do not consider my reward, rather the Lord’s, as He inspired me to it. God was in my thoughts while I toiled. With my artistry I glorified Him. What was the outcome, I wondered, of Mykyta’s bowing? Unless astonishment will resound briefly in the unthinking minds of the crippled, the freakish, or ours, the visitors’; so for what and for whom is Mykyta effecting this? To impress the Lord? Does the Lord need such feats? More likely he is demonstrating his dexterity, an

artistry no less, though he himself condemned artistry, in front of those watching. And if so, then is he not bending and unbending himself for vain, fleeting glory? What does the Lord need more, I mused: our beneficent deeds, bringing forth fruit, with the help of which the Lord sustains life on earth: the fruit of grasses, herbs, trees, insects, fowl, animals and men, visible as well as invisible fruit, corporeal and spiritual on the basis of which conception of further beneficent deeds, or idle depletion occurs, such as this buffoonery, these peculiar games the effect of which is useless sweating, evaporating like dewdrops? And, I thought, does the Lord wish man to disregard all the grand, wise earthly inventions, including his own creations, desiring to devastate life in oneself, around oneself, striving to remake the world into a desolate desert? So to whom is Mykyta bowing endlessly: God in life, the Creator of life, or the Angel of Death, ravenously devouring, obliterating everything?

And Mykyta bowed and bowed, bending, unbending, bend-bend here and there, endlessly, flatly. Suddenly I was sorry for the enormous power and vigor he was tossing into the Eye of the Abyss, as if he wanted to dam it up with the stones of his feats, his visions—was he not doing it out of fear of that Abyss? Ripping his feet off mother earth, the wretched one landed them atop the pole supposing that in this way he will be closer to the firmament. His feet, though, remained bound to the floorboards of the poles and even if the pines were ten times taller, would his feet be any less anchored to the base? And the obeisance he continued to perform endlessly, was it not a hopeless effort to conquer gravity, to trample his nature, to soar into the heavens? But all know that only one designed for flight is able to fly—for one designed to crawl, attempting flight is useless. That is not in his nature. He can climb a pine tree, he can ascend a mountain to its highest peak, but earth will still be pulling him back. Even a bird cannot fly higher than its wings will permit.

And here Mykyta stopped. He stood, breathing heavily like a blacksmith's bellows, his mouth grasping for air, of which there was not enough; his eyes were bulging. At the same time, he was watching us, beard haughtily raised, as if he were proud and glad to be able to impress us. No other man was capable of such feats. But it seems he failed to realize one thing, the poor man: his feat of bowing flitted away like a bird into timelessness, wilted like a flower on the tree of time. Indeed, this is how it is when a bird sings. The bird lingers, though its singing has ceased, not a trace of its song remaining. So that had he not worked so hard for the mundane, which he reviled so? No. For he expected recognition for his feat. Not uselessly, but for recompense he strained. But who will recompense him?

CHAPTER NINETEEN,

in which another of Sozont's conversations with Mykyta's disciples is retold; his attempt at reasoning through Mykyta's vows

Mykyta was catching his breath. He then drew the curtains of the hut, disappearing from sight. The crippled and freaky started to disperse: some along the path, some straight into the trees and bushes. We alone remained with Mykyta's disciples.

"This day I must record the stories you had recounted yesterday," Sozont said. "Perchance you would let me into your hovel, if there is a table? Writing on my knees, I am afraid my scribbles will be illegible."

"We have no need for a table," Teodoryt said. "Of what use is a table to those, who serve no meals? We have only a bed with humble bedding and a stove for heat in winter."

"Fine. I shall write the way of the pilgrim," Sozont said.

“Is your memory that good that you can record word for word what was said yesterday?” Symon asked.

“Not word for word, but I shall deliver the gist,” Sozont said. “Since man is imperfect, as is his memory and mind, at eventide we shall read and verify.”

“Do you harbor suspicions about any of which you have seen or heard?” Teodoryt asked.

“A few things unsettle me,” Sozont admitted. “Does Sister Marta ever visit you in your hovel?”

“Musi the dwarf saw and told you?” Antonii asked.

“Yesterday we saw her walking along the path to the hallowed place. A few things we have learned from the dwarf.”

“Your frankness delights us,” Antonii stated.

“Sister Marta is the spiritual betrothed of St. Mykyta,” Teodoryt said. “So that she is permitted to visit at night—never during the day—to pray to the blessed one, to feel his spirit upon her, to be cleansed.”

“Does the saint descend to her?” Sozont asked.

“Only in exceptional cases,” Teodoryt said. “When the demon begins to torment Sister Marta.”

“She is tormented by a demon?”

“That is why she came to the sacred place. One does not arrive here for no purpose,” Teodoryt said. “She wished to remain here. The demon in her is robust and tenacious, even though the saint had rebuked it once; it returns from time to time.”

“The dwarf said she moans and squeals with desire.”

“That is the demon in her moaning and squealing with desire,” Teodoryt said.

“How does the saint rebuke demons?”

“By praying. Employing a ritual,” Antonii answered.

“How is the ritual performed?”

“The same as priests in churches and monasteries perform,” Antonii answered.

“Does St. Mykyta not have the power to rebuke the demon definitively?”

“He has,” Teodoryt said. “But he lets the demon return from time to time so that Sister Marta can test her spirit, so that she can perfect her contest with the demon. That is, to be able to wrestle with him alone, without the saint’s aid.”

“Is it not better to rebuke him, to free her?” Sozont asked.

“The saint is tempering Marta’s spirit so that she will be able to wrestle not only one demon, but others when she departs the sacred place,” Antonii said.

“She wishes to leave?”

“Yes! She wishes to take vows, to become a nun. But first, she wants to prepare herself.”

“Is the demon in Sister Marta lasciviousness?” Sozont asked directly.

“Yes! That is why she strives for mortification of the flesh. Prior to this, it was whoredom.”

“Would I be able to observe St. Mykyta rebuking the demon from her?”

“Of course,” Teodoryt said. “If the demon should assail her during your stay at the sacred place, we shall summon you. In Leviticus it is said: ‘Ye shall therefore keep all my statutes, and all my judgments, and do them: that the land, whither I bring you to dwell therein, spue you not out.’”

“I have no more doubts,” Sozont said.

“If any should arise, about anything, do not hide them, so that misthinking does not take hold,” Antonii said.

“Indeed,” stated Sozont asking: “So that on this night St. Mykyta is to descend, to walk around the island?”

“You are lucky to be able to see it,” Teodoryt said.

“If what I have recorded is accurate, will we be able to depart from the sacred place?”

“If any of you so wish,” Teodoryt said.

“And if you will not record that, which you will witness tonight,” Antonii added.

“And if I will record it?”

“You will submit it for verification—and may you have a good journey!”

We bowed to Mykyta’s disciples and left. Along the path Pavlo started: “Brother Sozont, so it turns out that instead of healing my affliction, the saint is recommending that I die.”

“That means, Brother, that he is incapable of healing your affliction. After all, is he to be more powerful than the fathers of the hermitage or the holy fathers of Lavra? He is, though, sadly right: the dead feel no pain.”

“So that no man can aid me?” Pavlo sniveled. Sometimes he was childish.

“I am no doctor, Brother Pavlo. I am a lawyer. Writing prescriptions is not my province—investigating, inquiring is. Have you gone to doctors?”

“I have, before being tonsured into monkhood. All my fortune was spent on them, though they found no remedy, even as I was given all kinds of repugnant potions to drink, to swallow; even as they rubbed me with ointments.”

“Go to sorcerers, then.”

“I have done that. They kneaded me, nearly breaking my bones, they cracked an egg over my head, they whispered, they sighed. But I derived no relief from them, either. Perchance that, which St. Mykyta said is true?”

“You have a mind to determine for yourself,” Sozont said. “I cannot infuse my mind into your head.”

“Do not pretend to be less than you are, Brother Sozont!” Pavlo cried. “Your mind is much greater than is mine: unbalanced, confused! Did Mykyta state the truth?”

“Truth regarding what?” Sozont asked.

“Regarding Christian teachings.”

“Unfortunately, Pavlo, there is no one sole Christian teaching. Both the western church, and the eastern, especially the Greek, as well as ours, and the Muscovite, the Protestants, sects and various orders of the western church—they all consider themselves to be veritable and the others falsifiers, heretics and blunderers, which is why they quarrel among themselves like dogs—afflicted, all of them, with the greatest of the great sins—the sin of intolerance. Hence, they create differences in their dogma often quite heathen and absurd, for example in teaching how to cross oneself.”

“The words ‘tolerance’ and ‘intolerance’ do not exist in the Gospels,” I said. “There is ‘patience’, ‘suffering,’ and that is not always the same.”

“You are right, Brother Mykhailo. They are substituted with the words ‘love’ and ‘hate’ and sometimes ‘patience’ and ‘impatience.’ And some excessively fervid Christian minds, not without the help of the Devil, who muddles man’s thinking, interpreted patience as a need for perishing, for suffering torture. That is why two schools of thought have emerged in Christianity; the misanthropic and what today is known as the humanitarian. Mykyta avows the misanthropic point of view based not on love, as his love is likewise misanthropic, but on a hatred towards God’s great creation –mankind and his world. An abyss passes between these two points of view, not between the conditional dogmatic differences arrived at by small-thinking men. As far as I

am concerned, he who divides love into carnal and Divine sins mightily, for God is present in carnal love as well. Immortality relies on transientness and mutability, as we see in a rotting seed. Decaying, the seed sprouts, yielding not only one new fruit, but tenfold, a hundredfold. To deny love for all things earthly, for beauty, loving only God is, according to me, a weighty sin, for earth is God's creation in the name of man, placed on earth by God. As I have said, it was not out of vengeance or hate, but out of love that God alienated man, casting him out of paradise into earthly life, to create perpetuity out of mortality. And when Christ said 'In your patience possess ye your souls'¹ or when James said 'Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire wanting nothing,' patience ought be understood not as a challenge to breed maggots in one's sores, but as tolerance, as love. For Christ said: 'As my Father loved me, so do I love man. Abide in my love.' Whom did He love? Men of the world, men who dwell in benevolence, and as such, create a beneficent world. Two worlds are being devised: a godly, beneficent world, and a demonic, evil world. This, too, is effected of God's will, to make benevolence evident in its opposition to evil and hatred. The abyss appears when man ceases to see white a white, naming hate—love and love—hate, that is to say, dishonors the Lord's commandments, substituting them with his own, contrived. That is when blasphemy, sacrilege take root, and, as Proverbs tell us: '.....' and 'the scorner is an abomination to man,' and 'judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the backs of fools.'"

We arrived at our sleeping place as we listened to Sozont's sermon. Pavlo and I lay down. Sozont continued standing until he finished. The power of his words was more approachable and desirable to me than was Mykyta's, but Pavlo, evidently, thought otherwise, for I noticed distrust in his expression.

"What is the lesson of dying?" he asked after Sozont ended.

"Oh, that is a grand theme!" Sozont stated. "I've told you already: either one of Mykyta's disciples or perhaps Mykyta himself was acquainted with the not insignificant doctrine in a world he grew to hate so much. Most likely he studied not in our lands. Have you heard of *ars moriendi*?"

"The art of dying?" I asked.

"Exactly. Or *ars bene moriendi*—the art of fine dying, about which Seneca, Epicurus and Cicero had spoken. Cicero used the term *mori discere*—the science of dying."

"So then this is not a Christian art or science?" Pavlo asked.

"Everything that exists is rooted in what was," Sozont stated. "Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, who lived in the third century after the birth of Christ, in his treatise 'De Moralitate' instructed that death is not to be feared if one wishes to become one with Christ. Only through death can one enter the Kingdom of Heaven. St. Ambrosi, John Chrystosom and St. Augustine wrote about the art of dying. Rupert de Deutz, too, wrote of it in the eleventh century; the thirteenth-century pseudo-augustinian treatise 'Speculum morsis' also comments on this, and it is treated in an especially detailed manner in the form of questions and answers in Anselm of Canterbury's tract 'Admonition morienti.' Anselm exhorts the one dying to attain penance for sins and to seek remission, being grateful for Christ's death in the name of man's salvation. This tract can be considered the first in which the art of dying is presented. St. Joseph wrote of it, as did, later, the German Dominican Henrik Seus in 'Horologium sapientiae,' and especially Ioann Gerson in the tract 'Opusculum tripatitum.' A Polish treatise, penned by Matteus of Krakow, 'Ars Moriendi' exists. And if this does not suffice for you, I can name Domenicus of Karpaniku and his book 'Speculum artis bene moriendi'—he lived closer to us, in the last century."

¹ Note in margin: "Luke, Chapter 21, Verse 19."

“Your mind is remarkable, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo said quietly.

“Listening to you it is apparent that you have studied much, and not in our lands,” said I.

“It is impossible to study such a science in our insular land.”

“So where did you study?” I asked.

“First in Krakow, then in Heidelberg, where Matteus of Krakow was rector for a time. Later, in Bologna.”

“And why did you return to our, as you say, insular land?”

“For a man is born not only of his elders’ will, but of the will of God. And if God assigned man a place of birth—that means, his dwelling place is likewise designated. I dared not violate that law. A man torn from his roots is spiritually fractured.”

“Let us not deviate from our discourse,” Pavlo said. “I admit, the fear of death has gnawed at me for several days now. What do scholars say of this?”

“Both Jacob of Paradyzh and Erasmus of Rotterdam claim that fear of death is necessary, it is a constructive fear. It must move one towards a readiness to meet death. For that the school of fine dying was established.”

“I wish to become a student of this school, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo stated quietly. “But I fear, it may be too late.”

“Edification is never late, if one’s heart is open to it,” Sozont said. “If you have a need, brother, apply spiritual remedies.”

“I am prepared for that,” Pavlo said.

“Summon the doctor called Truth and Kind contemplation. Let him feel your pulse and ask what you know.”

“What am I to know?” Pavlo asked.

“Yourself, your own elapsed life, the good you have effected, the transgressions. And utilize the spiritual remedy.”

“Tell me what it is.”

“In recognizing your vices, take humility most. Add to that a deliberation on a true conversion onto the Lord and three handfuls of herbs of penance. To that apply a pound of genuine spiritual repentance. Mix well with tears generously shed while bewailing sins by you committed. Thence, with heavy moaning and pounding of the chest awaken your conscience, filter it all through the sieve of justice, for God to have mercy, and for your neighbor to ignore that, which was impure in you. Meanwhile, with the clear potion of conscience, douse the spirit to absolve it of old sins.”

“A fine recipe you have, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo said.

“It is not my recipe, it is the recipe of learned men who meditated upon *ars moriendi*. If you want mine, I shall tell you.”

“You will do me a favor, Brother,” Pavlo said.

“Expect Death, prepare yourself for it, but do not yearn for it nor summon it—Death herself knows when to come. When you are ailing, do not wish for all around you to ail, and be joyous not for dying, but for the health of those around you. Do not wish for the world with its beauty and creation to perish, as you are perishing, but pray for those bearing darkness, night within them, for them to be able to cross over into daylight, that is, to grow into goodness and love. Do not hate the haters—be merciful towards them. You have not been despoiled with their hatred, they are the ones despoiled—they were incapable of seeing the light within you, seeing only darkness. Consider whether what they perceived in you was just, and if you regard that you are incapable of judging, repent for that which evoked hatred or hostility towards you. Know that

your kindness triumphed over evil, light over darkness, love over hatred; may intolerance grow into tolerance. Know that the loving kindness you effected in the world is that burgeoning shoot sprouting out of decaying matter into a future bud, your mortality being darkness, evil, nonlove. Know that mortality must be discarded, though without it a germ cannot sprout. Your mortality is God's creation, as is the world, humanity, and all life. Trust that the beauty of the world is God's image in it, monstrosity—the background over which it is made manifest, while the fleetingness of beauty is the background over which eternity is introduced. Amen.”

“Words wholly opposite to what Mykyta had instructed you are uttering, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo said. “Your words are powerful, though Mykyta's were no less so. Where is verity? Somewhere in the middle?”

“The abyss lies in the middle, Brother Pavlo,” Sozont said, “out of which the eye gazes at us. That eye shall judge us, shall examine us. ‘The truth shall set us free,’ Ivan Bohoslov said. May the Lord recompense us according to our truth.”

“And what is truth, Brother Sozont?” Pavlo inquired.

“I shall respond citing Psalm 85: truth is where ‘Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven. Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her increase. Righteousness shall go before him: and shall set us in the way of his steps.’”

“Too many things you have presented for me to ponder, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo said. “I fear I will have no time to crack this nut.”

“It is never late to reflect,” Sozont said. “And for that one does not need an appropriate moment. Only one thing is required: good will in one. Without good will, as without His grace—not a pace.”

CHAPTER TWENTY,

in which how we spent our second day on the island is recounted

This day Pavlo and I mostly reposed. Sozont was busy chronicling the life and feats of St. Mykyta; he wanted either to read it or submit it for reading to the pole-sitter's disciples at eventide. Pavlo withdrew from us, kneeling for a long prayer. I, having spent a sleepless night and feeling quite weary from the two sermons, Mykyta's and Sozont's, felt my head splitting: so far I lacked the strength to digest the weighty wisdom of both great men who as if came together here to clash, though, as I have said, Sozont's wisdom seemed more convincing to me. So I delayed my own meditating about what was said for a quieter time, after we leave this island with its peculiar settlers. Thus, being tired beyond measure, I fell asleep. I dreamed of a scaly beast with bony ridges along its spine, like the one supposedly living in the Eye of the Abyss—that odd pool that truly resembled an eye.

That beast had a long, tailed body, like a gigantic lizard, with a lizard-like head, though with enormous eyes, like two encased mirrors reflecting everything it saw. Now the beast was regarding me, and I saw two refractions of me: one eye cast me as I was while scribing the Peresopnytska Gospel: still young, full of verve, buoyant, burning with a great passion to design the book of books, the likes of which existed nowhere, with which I longed to glorify not so much myself, as the Lord—He inspired me to this feat. The other eye mirrored me as I was now: older, lean, the right side of my head and beard gray, the left side still dark, though with gray hairs here and there appearing. This second I: eyes dimmed, emanating sadness and weariness,

and where the lips in the first are smiling provocatively, in the other they are tightly pressed and a bit twisted. Thick wrinkles laced my forehead—in the first my high forehead was glowing. And these two images, reflected in the eyes of the beast from the Eye of the Abyss, began a conversation: “Do not languish in yourself,” the young I said. “Do not roam the world vainly, do not seek wind in the field, do not waste time, do not rack your brain with ideas your mind cannot fathom. Return to deeds you can and are able to perform, and the less free time you will have, the less confused and roiled you will be.”

“I will not effect anything better than what I have created,” the I of today said wearily, “and something worse I cannot effect.”

“Something made better or worse—is, nevertheless, effected,” the young I said. “The unmade is forever unmade. Work begets strength, not idleness. Strength is lost and dies in idleness.”

“Strength requires vim,” today’s I said. “And that is what I lack. When one is spent, is it not effective and courageous to stop creating instead of effecting pretense?”

“Vim comes from work, in daily achievement, attainment,” the young I contradicted.

“Vim comes from Divine inclination and enlightenment,” the I of today said. “Without it, everything effected becomes feigned.”

And then the beast opened wide its jaws, wherein I saw blade-like teeth gleaming like polished steel, and I saw a long, red tunnel with a little flap protecting the gullet. That little flap opened and I felt tempted to start into it, as I had ventured on this journey in its time. It seemed to me that at the end of the tunnel I would find a windowless, doorless chamber where I would be able to commune with God, as had Jonah. And here is what I would say, in the belly of the beast: “I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God.”¹

My spirit fainted. And even as I was unutterably tempted to enter the belly of the beast of the Eye of the Abyss, my legs lacked the strength to move. My tongue lacked the strength to speak. Smitten with an otherworldly terror, I screamed. That fear woke me.

Squatting, with head bent to the side, Sozont was writing on a small wooden panel which he carried with him in his sack. “Why did you scream so in your dream, Brother Mykhailo?” he asked calmly.

I described my dream.

“This lake or pool is the only place my mind cannot fathom,” Sozont said as he stopped writing, rising, straightening himself. “I can believe that an unknown beast lives there. We do not know everything about the world. It is more difficult to imagine in what way it effects Mykyta’s will, or rather, of his disciples. As I walked along the path, when Kuzma fell in, I felt heaving underfoot. Pavlo felt it, too.”

“I saved myself by hedging my staff into the tract so that I would not fall in,” I said.

“That’s interesting,” Sozont remarked, “since you, Brother, were closest to Kuzma. So that he who was last had to perish.”

“Does that explain something to you?”

“No,” Sozont declared, considering. “Somehow they are effecting it. The tract could have shaken from Kuzma’s motions, but it could have moved of itself, throwing Kuzma off. A question: who, how moved the tract? It is obviously suspended, crafted by hand.”

¹ Note in margin: “Jonah, Chapter 2, Verse 5-7.”

“I, too, thought so,” I said. “I drove my staff in and it stuck so that I was barely able to yank it out.”

“Let us recollect how Mykyta’s disciples had stood,” Sozont said. “Scattered along the curving shore. One of them could have jerked a hidden cord fastened to the tract. I can think of no other explanation.”

“And how was it with the dwarf?”

“The matter with the dwarf is simpler. For him it became too deep. He did not know how to swim. Mykyta’s disciples, by the way, were absent.”

“If Kuzma was cut off by one of Mykyta’s disciples,” I asked, “and it was not Teodoryt, how could they know that it was Kuzma they had to cut off?”

“I say onto you, Brother: the pool is the only thing my mind cannot fathom, and I am expressing not what I know but what I am surmising. When accusing someone, it is not fitting to surmise...Teodoryt, treading first, may have signaled his friends whom to drown.”

“Kuzma himself chose to be last,” I contradicted. “To drown someone in the manner you have described is more difficult from the center.”

“I have thought about that, as well,” Sozont said. “Two things are possible: either a section of the plank is tugged from under someone along the tract, or circumstance played a role and was taken advantage of. I repeat: these are bare, bare, bare suppositions.”

“What have we, thence?”

“The same again: there is, among them, a devilish mind, or, more exactly, a leviathan head under water, as Psalms tell us, stuffed with knowledge, cunning and artfulness.”

“Is it Mykyta’s, or his disciples’?”

“One of his disciple’s, I believe,” Sozont answered.

“Teodoryt and Antonii are chief among them.”

“It would be unwise for that head to expose itself. And this is a wise head. Perchance, Symeon,” Sozont said.

“Why are you considering Symeon?”

“Every wise head is afflicted with vainglory,” Sozont said. “He has named himself Symeon as they are followers of Symeon the Pole-sitter.”

“Was Symeon Metafrast not among the hagiographers of Symeon the Pole-sitter?” I asked.

“That is why he might have been tempted to name himself Symeon. Though this, too, is mere conjecture.”

“Teodoryt and Antonii always answer your questions. And, admittedly, they break off your hooks mighty wisely, not leaving even a spike. Even in the matter of Sister Marta. So who was being truthful: the dwarf or Teodoryt?”

“The dwarf, of course,” Sozont stated. “Mykyta and Marta are going astray. Perhaps even the disciples, or one of them, too.”

“Do you know this or are you surmising?”

“Surmising, though more firmly than about the Eye of the Abyss—we have a witness here who surely tracked them.”

Sozont began writing again.

“Are you writing what you wish, or what they wish?” I could not resist asking.

Sozont glanced at me in surprise. “I would be a fool to write as I think,” he said. “Otherwise, we would never leave this island, Brother. We would be fodder for their beast. Though I am chronicling not one life, but two: one on paper, and the other in my mind. On paper, the evident version, and in my mind, the real version.” All at once, Sozont chuckled quietly. “At any

rate,” he said, “the manifest is wholly uninteresting. It is copied word for word from the Chronicle of Symeon the Pole-sitter, as I have said. Some things impress me here, as well.”

“What, exactly?”

“The story of the thief whom we saw and whose death we observed, likewise Mykyta’s bowing: that had not been recounted, we saw it with our eyes. Both instances are described in the Chronicles of Symeon the Pole-sitter. Mykyta’s bowing might be an imitation, for these folk are symeonides, but what about the thief? The thief was genuine, the peasants were genuine, and he really was murdered. As they dragged him, I myself saw a trail of blood. This is the other thing my mind cannot fathom.”

“Could it be coincidental?” I asked.

“I do not believe in coincidence,” Sozont said. “Coincidence in the case of Kuzma, coincidence in the case of the thief—that is too much.”

“And if this was a mime act, similar to those performed by skhmorokhy or [rybalty]?” I asked.

“Well, then a diabolical mind is truly devising it all,” Sozont stated emphatically.

Pavlo, who had been praying, returned at that moment. He was pale. His eyes looked vacant. “I am following your lesson on the art of dying, Brother Sozont,” he said humbly.

“Why do you always speak of it, Brother Pavlo?” Sozont asked delicately. “No need to be overly concerned with things that are apparent and words of the mad.”

Pavlo stopped and stood straight, gazing somewhere into the distance. “I shall not leave this place,” he muttered. “Thus spake my heart when I stepped onto this island, thus speaks my heart now: I shall not leave.”

“You wish to remain among Mykyta’s disciples?” I asked.

“No,” Pavlo replied quietly. “I shall not live to the morrow.” He looked around in fear checking if anyone was eavesdropping. “And you, Brothers, steal away quickly, as soon as you can. Horror compassed me the moment I stepped onto this island. And that horror has not forsaken me. I know not its cause, but it is in me like a lump of soil. And all the while, a scent of soil lingers around me. Brother Sozont, you have a great mind, do not delay—think how to get out. Do not tarry!”

He regarded us with widened, azure eyes. His cheek began to twitch.

“Calm down, Brother,” Sozont said gently and quietly. “We shall live to the morrow and all together we will leave. And there, in the free world, we will pray for these hapless: may the Lord have mercy and may their prayers be answered. Lie down, Brother Pavlo, rest. Or go with Brother Mykhailo for a stroll. I must finish recording the life of the saint today. We have done them no evil, and they are aware of that. Why would they spring on us...”

“Fine, Brother Sozont. May it be as you say,” Pavlo said agreeably. “But I do not wish to leave this spot. I will repose after prayer, only to start it again. Following your and the learned men’s lessons.”

“May the Lord hear you,” Sozont said warmly.

Pavlo lay down. I decided to go for a walk along the island. I felt an urge, suddenly, to be close to the Eye of the Abyss, to scrutinize it. At least I wanted to investigate whether there is a rope tied to a tree or shore somewhere. I had no wish, I know not why, to make my intentions known. Silently, I left for the depths of the island.

The sun stood high in the sky. In the heat herbs, grass and leaves effused a particular pungency. Perhaps all of earth—as it seemed to Pavlo. I have always loved the sun. It made me eager to work, filling me with vigor. Back when I scribed the Peresopnytska Gospel, I would,

when weary, stroll out into the sun, wallowing, directionless, in the flood of herbs, grass, flowers, trees, wading, nearly blinded by the dense shafts of sun, scented with rye, the suffocating fragrance of blossoms, the heady breath of weeds. That air, that aroma intoxicated me, oddly diffusing my spirit—I felt spilled around the air, I felt mellow and a bit unraveled in the sun, and my heart radiated a kind of sacred solemnity. My gaze soared into the deep yonder, alighting upon a faraway tree or upon a cloud; my feet barely touched the ground. I waded across the meadow, aglitter, like emeralds; a delightful effervescence blinded me with its dazzle. Looking around to see if anyone was about (there are many among our folk who look askance at baring one's body, or at swimming), I undressed slowly, my body humming beneath the sky, a golden intensity filling me like spring water filling a vessel. Then I plunged off the bank into the water. I dove, not shutting my eyes, into green tallow—and all around me a strange world undulated, a world of algae and fish, the fish floating up to me, fearless, lips grazing me, as if kissing. Planting my feet in the sand and maneuvering my arms for support, I exploded through the surface, the sun once again blinding me, once more blessing me. Through a watery film I saw the world laughing—grand, miraculous, spacious, green, full of sap, of life; in the thick of grass there was not a patch of soil on which something did not crawl, did not move; in the air above, agile birds hovered loosely - I, too, was a part of this life, this world. Floating easily, I felt my flesh shivering in the coolness of the sun-mingled water. After, I climbed out of the water sensing the last morsels of fatigue trickling out of my mind, evaporating into clouds on high. I dressed and lay facing the sky. My being flowed into the azure air, and the azure air poured into me. I became light, almost formless. All around me crickets sang in a maddening, rapturous chorus. Larks' windpipes burst with inspiration in the blue vastness. Tufts of grass surrounded my head, my arms, my torso, its pods, full of seeds, swaying. Picking a blade of grass, I tasted it, savoring its cool sweet juice, while searching for shapes among clouds. Closing my eyes I felt the sun's rays kissing me all over my skin, like the intrepid little fish in the water. Peace fell upon me then: inviolable, cherished. My mind and heart full of tranquility, with peace on my lips, eyes shut, I envisioned a fresh page, still clean and light and glossy, on which I was to sprinkle seeds of letters, of words, embroidering it with lines and renderings of plant life. In my imagination, I sketched a frame with flora twining around it, for even though I was scribing a most woeful of woeful stories about Him Who in imparting to the world a lesson of love was to suffer an onerous, tyrannical death, that story was not in praise of death, but in praise of life. The Aggrieved One sowed seeds of love not as homage to non-existence, but as triumph over death. That is why across a field of white I sowed seeds of letters, each of which sheltered a germ for sprouting. It would, inevitably, burst forth, and nowhere but in this world, in these people, once sent here by God—in their minds and hearts. And I thought then as I think now that if the Lord willed death for the world, it, this world, would not have existed long ago. Shoots would rot then, not the germ, the germ hardening like stone, no longer producing endless profusions of sprigs the human mind is incapable of enumerating, examining. Prescient possibility and Divine law would not be concealed in each seed, the sun warming it like a bird its egg, and that sun and seed—those birds' eggs and animal and human seeds would parch and wilt transforming the living world into a barren desert. Thus, I thought, I too, am like a seed cultivator, a planter of spiritual fruit, of an egg; the warmth provided for it to burgeon cannot produce death, only life-giving strength. The Peresopnytska Gospel, then, designed and copied by me is like one of the seeds amidst the fringes of life's verdure, like a seed in the apple of the world, while I myself am a simple tool creating it, not the creator—it is created by Him Who functions within the law of timelessness. No Mykyta can convince me that it was not the will of the Almighty that impelled

me to produce the fruit of my life—that I was urged by the will of the evil spirit; for a pure intent, an act of Divine creation cannot harbor the evil spirit. So that it is not God, not the Creator that wills to level, to destroy this world, into which He invested so much of His love, but the impure one who has no need of the world, of lofty ideas, of beauty, of the mystery of eternity.

With these thoughts I arrived at the lake. I stopped, staring at the pool. The immense eye lay half surrounded by the island's shore, half with sparse, arched saplings growing on hillocks, resembling eyelashes of that eye. It gaped dejectedly into the pale blue flood in the sky. The sun did not sparkle nor frolic in it as it does in pure water. No ripples or bubbles formed in the lake or pool, there was no play of colors. It appeared congealed in a timeless, grim lifelessness, and a nauseating, fleshy odor, the feeble stench of carcasses emanated from it. Looking at that Eye I felt the just-recognized joy and rapture gradually fading within me along with the warm memory of happy days - my vivid, hearty plenishment. I sensed myself becoming rigid, dark, obscure, twisted, hollow. Denser and denser smoke filled my empty viscera. I glimpsed the grass under my feet: it was thin, half-wilted, its ends shriveled, dry. Similarly the trees' leaves did not harden, did not shine with polish—in stillness they hung, neither succulent, nor withered.

With head hanging low, I walked along the edge examining the strip of land between shore and water.

“Why are you so pensive, Brother Mykhailo?” an unexpected voice startled me.

Under a tree, leaning against its trunk stood Symeon. His eyes glowed wisely in an elongated, lean, even emaciated face. To myself I confirmed this observation: Symeon's eyes reflect intelligence.

“I am pondering what St. Mykyta said to me,” I stated. “His sermon, too, was mighty powerful.”

“Indeed,” Symeon said. “Is that why you came to gaze upon the Eye of the Abyss?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “It emits an unfathomable force. What is in it?”

“I agree with you,” Symeon said. “Sometimes it seems to me that God has placed it here as a symbol of earthly life. I myself come here to meditate.”

“‘A symbol of earthly life,’” thought I. “‘An ignorant man would not speak thus! An ignorant man would not seclude himself to meditate.’”

“What is it you encounter here?” I asked.

“Probably the same as what you are now encountering,” Symeon said. “The transformation of all that is mortal.” [?]

“Have you lived here long, Brother Symeon?” I inquired as nonchalantly as I could.

“Sozont had already asked me...yes, a while,” Symeon replied.

“Who were you prior to this?” I asked.

“A sinful, dishonorable man, making a mess of his life while stifling his spirit,” Symeon said sadly. “But God sent me to the venerable one, and he shed light on my ignorance. Thus I forsook my property, rich food, worldly enticements and seductions, my most lovely wife; I stopped worrying about the morrow, about material comforts, following Mykyta along the narrow path, instead.”

“How did the saint and his disciples come across this place?”

“They became pilgrims with no goal, no direction, trusting the Lord's guidance. That is what brought them here. They tread simply: forward, forward, without digressing, not returning, not looking around—they knew what had happened to Lot's wife. You must know, Brother Mykhailo, Sodom and Gomorrah are, after all, a symbol of our time, and the Lord chose to lead only Lot and his family out of it. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. They tread

lengthily, so they said, stopping only when darkness fell, never in towns or villages, but wherever they happened to be.”

“And they stopped here,” I said, “because from here there was no place to go?”

“Yes. They were searching for exactly such a place. A place from which, without returning, there is no place to go.”

“How remarkable!” I exclaimed. “Can I recount this to Sozont so that he records it as yet another of St. Mykyta’s marvels?”

“As you wish,” Symeon said. “We are spiritually open, we conceal nothing. Although, if you want to know the truth, I believe Brother Sozont is effecting a useless thing, wishing to tell the world about us. We seek no glory, we do not strive to disseminate information about ourselves, for we have vowed ourselves to the will of God. Our goal now: to continue onward without stopping, without looking about, not to become salt pillars—continuing not along the path of the flesh, but along a spiritual, empyreal path, elevating us higher and higher, until we attain the expected, mercilessly mortifying our flesh. May all that is mortal crumble into dust, become fodder for worms. Our path leads to the everlasting, the blessed.”

“Did the saint erect his pole as a reminder of the salt pillar?” I asked.

“You reason well, Brother,” Symeon said. “Seeing the pole the saint abides on we are steadfastly to be reminded of the salt pillar Lot’s wife became.”

“And if one of you wished to return into the world?” I asked.

“A few of Mykyta’s disciples did just that, though not returning to secular life, but into self-reliant hermitism. We do not keep anyone here forcibly. We do not compel anyone to assist us. One cannot follow our path without free will. And our will has a good watchman—there he is,” and Symeon nodded at the Eye of the Abyss. “When one’s spirit is enfeebled, this is a good place to come for solitary reflection, as did you, as did I.”

“A great and incomprehensible power flows out of this water,” I said.

“Two streams connect here: one living and one dead. The milky water is dead, and that dark water is spring water. That is the water the Lord has provided for our nourishment in answer to the saint’s entreaty. We drink it.”

“How did you learn that the milky water is foul water?”

“When we first arrived here, one of the saint’s disciples, thirsty, tried it. He drank it and died, suffering horribly.”

“How did you have the courage to try the dark water?”

“It appeared after the saint’s praying and under his protection. He willed us to drink it.”

“Great things you relate, Brother Symeon,” I said.

And Symeon smiled: it was a smile full of sorrow. For a moment it lit up and enlivened his lifeless features, though it dimmed abruptly. “Do not stay near the Eye of the Abyss for long, Brother,” Symeon said warmly. “You are not accustomed to it. It can make you feel ill.”

“Thank you for cautioning me, Brother Symeon.” I bowed and withdrew, leaving Symeon standing under the tree.

I was oddly impressed with all I had heard. I hastened to relate it to Sozont. Patiently and attentively Sozont listened; Pavlo, meanwhile, once again kneeled in the bushes to pray.

“So that they have placed a guard at the Eye of the Abyss,” Sozont said. “We have confirmation of my conjecture: Symeon is no simpleton.”

“What about the fresh and foul water?” I asked.

“The story about the creation of a wellspring is described in the Chronicles of the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter, though there the spring broke through a cliff. So, as with other so-called

miracles, the fable begat raiment of the day.”

“Are you not simplifying, Brother Sozont?” I asked.

“Are you asking,” he said sharply, “is not Mykyta truly a saint and miracle worker?”

“The Christian church wills us to believe in saints and miracle workers. Christ was a miracle worker, as were His apostles.”

“One who performs miracles during one’s lifetime as well as after death, and whose relics become imperishable is considered a saint by our church. So that during one’s life one is not sainted,” Sozont declared, reflecting for a moment. “Christ is Lord, and about God’s miracles, there can be no doubt. His apostles, having entered into a direct relation with God became His instruments. Whether other saints were similarly instruments of God or whether they were sorcerers, as was Simon from the Acts of the Apostles, I am not firmly convinced. There may have been those among them chosen by God, or they may have been hypocrites. Hark back on the Acts of the Apostles: ‘But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.’ So that, Brother, it is difficult to designate who among them was an instrument of God, and who a sorcerer. I have embarked on this journey to examine Mykyta. Saints of yore only God can confirm, while those among the living, today, who plot into sainthood, even I, a sinful man can authenticate.”

“But is it necessary to disclose them?” I asked.

“The Lord willed us to reveal the concealed, saying, ‘There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed and hid that shall not be known.’ The true God is the God of righteousness, not of falsity. With the lips of David God said: ‘O, ye sons of man, how long will ye turn My glory into shame? How long will ye love vanity, and seek after leasing?’ and ‘Blessed is that man that maketh the Lord his trust, and respecteth not the proud, nor such that turn aside to lies.’ When I removed my lay clothing, Brother, and donned cloth of the church, I implored the Lord: ‘I despise all manner of lying, Lord, I hate lies and those for whom falsehood rules. Preserve me from a path of falsehood.’ In the world, falsehood reigns pompously. Man finds refuge in lies. Our elders inherited lies. And we—from them, and our children from us. And thus, as St. Paul stated, ‘Who changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator!’ This, Brother Mykhailo, is what guides me.”

“I believe and understand you. But something other torments me: what if your suspicion of these folk is false; what if that which they profess is true and that which they profess they profess verily; what if the dwarf, your only witness, driven by carnal lechery—had spoken with lying lips, and not they; what if their denial of your suspicions about their replies to your questions, which you yourself admitted were true, are genuine? And if lies appear as truth, then can not truth appear as lies, while not being lies? How can you prove, Brother Sozont, that your reasoning is faultless, that you are able to measure truth? For if you said you were a billow of the sea, will your truth not be like the billows of the sea?”

“I am a man as small and sinful as are you, Mykhailo. I am not elevating myself or my mind,” Sozont said. “But there is human, variable truth, and Divine. Hark back on Psalms: ‘The Lord loveth righteousness,’ and ‘Grant us truth, oh Lord!’”

He broke off, thinking. Then abruptly he raised his head. A half-smile appeared on his face. “The veracity of my suspicions will be proven tomorrow,” he stated.

“You have decided something?”

“I am not, Brother Mykhailo, a foolish or careless man to be self-confident. Not once have I said to you: an inkling is not proof. I am afraid that for us to attain confirmation from an inkling will not be easy. But an examination must occur. The concealed must be revealed. So that if they are what they purport to be, if they are not ruled by a satanic mind, on the morrow, Brother, we will depart from here calmly and freely. You yourself know: I am recording two chronicles: on paper and in my mind. If we leave here undisturbed, I shall recognize the chronicle recorded on paper as truth. If on the morrow I should die while crossing the Eye of the Abyss, as did Kuzma, the chronicle recorded in my head shall be recognized as truth. Then you shall carry it out of here.”

“You speak of terrible things, Brother Sozont!” I shuddered. “They resemble fortune telling. Like that hag claiming that something might happen, yet it might not.”

“This is not fortune telling. This is a test, Brother. If they are indeed genuine, not hypocrites, why should they fear me? Why kill me?”

“Why are you certain that it is you who will perish, not I, or not both of us, or Pavlo? Why are you depending on me, instead of on Pavlo?”

“I fear for Pavlo,” Sozont declared, “that he will not live to the moment of departure. Look at him: he is crazed, full of the foreboding of death. You will tread along the path in front of me—I will, as Kuzma was before, be the last.”

I regarded Sozont in disbelief, though he remained, as before, calm, a puzzling smile across his lips. With its bony paw, fear touched my heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE,

which recounts how Sozont saved me from the serpent; the reading of the Chronicle of the Life of St. Mykyta

In the afternoon, we started feeling hungry. We had no inclination for gluttony, I at least practiced fasting and abstinence with regard to food; I believe my fellow travelers did likewise. But yesterday’s gruel was hardly nourishing, and we had expended plenty of vigor, especially mental. We had long to wait until eventide. Even Pavlo ceased praying, complaining of hunger. We could think of nothing better to do than to sleep; that night, to boot, we were to gather for Mykyta’s pentecostal procession around the island, and we did not wish to miss that—it is easier to endure hunger asleep. So we lay in our bedding. At once I was swept into chimerical mazes of phantasmal visions. Oddly, the dream was impious.

I was walking along a path in a thick forest. Suddenly, I saw Sister Marta peering at me from behind a tree, exhibiting her bare breasts. I threw myself at her. Laughing, and completely naked, she ran onto the path. She ran, and I chased her, but hard as I tried, I was not able to shorten the distance between us. Out of breath, I sat under a tree, wiping thick sweat off my brow. No longer running from me, Marta entered the forest. In a moment I felt my arms being grasped from behind and stretched around a tree trunk, the flat of my hands bound tightly. Some force lifted me to my feet, standing me upright. Marta began circling the tree, winding a cord about me—in an instant, I was girt to the tree. When I looked at the cord binding me, I shuddered—it was a long serpent, its tail dragging along the ground, its head swaying right in front of my face, thrusting a little forked tongue at me. It was Marta’s head.

“Are you pleased?” Marta the snake said, or hissed.

“But I am suffocating!” I jabbered.

“Such is carnal pleasure,” Marta’s head laughed, “for those who chase whores.”

“But I have never chased whores, nor have I ever had anything to do with women,” I forced out of myself.

“Therein lies your sin,” Marta hissed. “Did not God provide this for you?” she shook my engorged rod. “Why is it withering uselessly? Why is your ill will killing your semen? Why are you not coupling it, as designated, with the seed of a woman?”

“For cultivating fruit of the spirit is my destiny,” said I.

“And I shall force you to grow earthly fruit,” Marta hissed. “Enter me!”

“Perish! Vanish, Devil!” I shrieked. “I am old for earthly fruits! Numb!”

“If you were numb, you would not be chasing me, desiring me! You are not dead! And this in you is not dead!” She shook my lure again.

“I shall not go astray!” I declared valiantly.

“You already have! You have! Do you not feel it?”

And I felt the serpent’s sting. A torrid fire engulfed my body, consuming me along with the tree I was bound to. Tongues of flames enveloped me, ravaging me, and I shrieked wildly. I awoke.

And I saw Sozont beating his staff against the ground.

“What happened?” I shouted, frightened.

“Everything is fine,” Sozont said lifting a dead serpent off the ground with his staff. “It is a good thing that I was unable to sleep, that I sat down to write again. Another moment, and you would have been in trouble, Brother! It slithered on top of you!”

Pavlo, too, awoke, watching in horror. “It was coming for me,” he mouthed.

“Do not trouble yourself with nonsense,” Sozont said. “Were it after you, it would not have erred. And remember, Brother, superstition, too, is a sin.” Sozont waved his staff, winding the dead serpent onto it. But it fell off, dropping into the grass. “Coincidences everywhere,” he grumbled. “The crippled and freakish sleep on the ground, they’re not afraid of serpents. Therefore, there should not be any around here.”

“Serpents in mud are a normal occurrence,” I said, my teeth chattering from what I had experienced.

“Then I, too, am errant, may the Lord forgive me. ‘Every man is altogether vanity,’ I believe David sang.”

At that moment the rooster cried, calling all to the refectory. The sound obviously came from the enclosure, from Mykyta’s hut on the pole.

“St. Mykyta bids us to fortify our flesh,” Sozont said, smiling. “My bowels are bursting.”

“I will not go,” Pavlo said, bleary-eyed. “I don’t want to eat.”

“You can pass your portion to us,” Sozont said. “And what about you, Brother Mykhailo?”

My teeth stopped chattering, though I, too, did not want to eat. So I told Sozont.

“I will gladly eat your portion, as well,” Sozont said. “Let us go!”

We set out along the path, already crowded with the crippled, the freaky. A small, crooked-nosed fellow with a solid staff was last.

“Are there serpents on this island?” Sozont asked him.

“Serpents?” the fellow asked. He was crippled, though not freakish. “I have not seen any. Have you?” he asked with interest.

“We are recent arrivals here. We are sleeping on the ground, that is why I asked,” Sozont said calmly.

“There are serpents in the mud,” the short fellow said gravely. “But St. Mykyta’s prayers prevent them from coming here. Unless one were to slither to the saint for healing.”

“The saint cures serpents?” Sozont asked.

“The saint is capable of everything,” the little fellow hooted, snorting air out of his nose.

“I am telling you, Brother,” Pavlo whispered when the fellow turned away. “It was sent after me...”

“Sent by whom?”

“How do I know,” Pavlo murmured. “Here I know nothing, understand nothing. All my fishing poles are fettered with fear, Brother!”

“Muster your strength,” Sozont squeezed his arm by the elbow. “You are bound by a fear you yourself summoned. Mykhailo and I are not bound by it.”

“For you will leave this island. And I will not.”

“Can one guess one’s fate, Brother Pavlo?” Sozont asked sadly. “Had I hesitated for a moment, Brother Mykhailo would have perished, not you. So that our lives are but a moment. And a moment brings death.”

Sozont showed himself to be wiser here, too; we declined food, agreeing, as it were, to give our portions to Sozont, as to the heartiest. Receiving food in our cups, however, both Pavlo and I gulped it as greedily as did Sozont or the crippled and freakish who made themselves comfortable around us. Though the soup did not quash our hunger, at least it calmed us. When we returned to our lairs, another surprise awaited us: the dead serpent had disappeared.

“Probably you had not killed it,” Pavlo stated.

“Coincidences all around,” Sozont muttered. “When I beat, I beat well. What will you say, Brother Mykhailo?”

I remained silent. And here we spied Mykyta’s disciples slowly, solemnly treading along the path, accompanied this time by Marta, who had appeared in my dream so indecently. I sensed a rush of color to my cheeks. I had not, by the way, recounted my dream to my fellow travelers.

Mykyta’s disciples approached and silently sat, scattered, on the grass.

“This time we brought Marta with us,” Antonii said. “She is the spiritual betrothed of the saint, being no less familiar with his life than are we. Have you completed your task, Brother?”

“I have,” Sozont said. “Though perhaps in haste. But all your observations will be corrected and copied flawlessly.”

“Read, then, and we will listen,” Antonii proposed.

Whereupon branches snapped and there was rustling in the bushes—the crippled and freakish were peeking out. Just as yesterday, they stood, compassing us, watching silently.

“It would be better, if you would read, Brother Antonii,” Sozont said. “Look, is my writing legible?” Sozont held out his folio.

But Antonii did not budge. “We have no reason not to trust you,” he stated evenly. “You read! But read slowly, clearly, with pauses, so that all will hear you.”

The crippled and freakish stood around in a circle, craning their necks attentively. The deacon read, as if in church: clearly, calmly, in sections. Everything was recorded exactly as it had been recounted, and once again I marveled at Sozont’s remarkable memory. My memory, too, was considerable, but he delivered the stories word for word, with not the slightest deviation, at least so it seemed to me. Engrossed, Mykyta’s disciples listened; Marta alone appeared wholly indifferent, not minding Sozont, instead glancing from time to time at Symeon. Absorbed in listening, he did not respond to her looks. To me it appeared that it was Symeon Marta was not indifferent to. I think she noticed that I was observing her, for I felt a scorching flash of her eyes as she glanced at me—similarly to the way she had eyed me in my dream, though she immediately turned away, scanning a tree near by. I glanced in that direction and saw

a squirrel leaping among limbs.

Dusk was creeping in by the time Sozont finished reading.

He had paused after each story, waiting for comments, and only after all had confirmed that there are no remarks, continued his narration.

“Everything is authentic,” Antonii stated. “Though, as far as I am concerned, you ought blot out the following: about Kuzma and about Musi the dwarf. They are not relevant to the chronicle of St. Mykyta.”

“Did not St. Mykyta’s will bear upon what had happened to them?” Sozont asked. “And is that not a miracle?”

“St. Mykyta does not kill,” Antonii asserted. “Perchance this truly is a miracle, but they killed themselves with the Lord’s will. Unless the righteous one declined to protect them.”

“According to me, that is the miracle,” Teodoryt said. “When the saint deprives one of his protection, is that not his will?”

“Let the other Brothers speak,” Antonii said.

Ievahrii and Heorhii supported Antonii, while Symeon and Nykyfor—Teodoryt.

“It is in instances like this that we need Sister Marta,” said Antonii. “Your word, Sister!”

“It is a miracle,” she said, gazing lovingly at Symeon.

“Then let it remain as is,” Antonii said.

“Should we, perhaps, ask St. Mykyta himself?” Sozont asked carefully. “I would not wish to spread things uncertain.”

“The righteous one has declined to participate in this, and you heard him,” Antonii declared emphatically, “He has placed the duty of confirmation on us, unworthy though we are. So that if we have determined that those stories can be considered a miracle, so be it. Amen.”

“Amen!” Mykyta’s disciples all said, rising.

“Will the saint be descending today?” Sozont asked.

“As was said,” Teodoryt replied. “He will descend.”

“Can he be approached for a chat?”

“Only if he starts it, that is, when he addresses you. Usually, though, he does not stop to chat,” Antonii said. “What would you like to discuss?”

“I would ask him about Kuzma and the dwarf Musi,” Sozont replied, “for I have doubts here.”

“What is it you doubt?” Antonii asked, his tone hostile.

“I consider, as do you, that they perished of their own will.”

“And I deem as was determined,” Antonii declared firmly.

“Then may Ievahrii and Heorhii confirm it.”

“I agree that that was a miracle of St. Mykyta,” Ievahrii said.

“I, too,” Heorhii said.

“In that case, I have no doubts,” Sozont said. “One more thing: am I to submit my folio to you for reexamination without me?”

“Does it contain other notes?” Antonii asked.

“It does,” Sozont said. “Those that I jotted down prior to arriving at this hallowed place.”

“Then submit the folio. It is too dark to read now,” Antonii said. “We will return it to you on the morn. What else interests you?”

“If everything is fine, will we be able to depart here at morningtide?”

“We already told you: everything is in your will,” Teodoryt uttered.

“Will someone guide us across the Eye of the Abyss and across the mud?”

“Across the Eye of the Abyss we will lead you. Beyond that, the way is safe,” Teodoryt said.

“I fear we will get lost,” Sozont said.

“With your shrewdness, you will not get lost,” Antonii said.

And they set out onto the path, and dusk instantly swallowed them. The crippled and freakish, too, disbanded silently in the bushes and trees.

“And now, my Brothers,” Sozont said, “let us pray each for himself. Who knows what this night and the morrow shall bring us. May the Lord help us!”

And we parted. Alone, we surrendered ourselves in earnest praying.

In my prayer I said: “Lord! Following Your will I found my way here. Will my safe departure from here. Preserve, oh Lord, my fellow-travelers Pavlo and Sozont, so that together we can wrench ourselves out of this swamp. For all my sins, voluntary and involuntary, I repent. The voluntary I know and ask forgiveness for; lay the involuntary before my eyes so that I can repent. Heed these folk among whom we find ourselves: if they tread along a righteous path, may righteousness be theirs, if they tread along an evil path, may they recognize it, turning onto Your path of righteousness, not theirs!”

As I prayed, I examined my own life, poring diligently over what was good, and what was evil. I petitioned that upon returning into the world my skill not languish within me, but that I should have strength and means to effect acts pleasing to God. That is, to be able once again to scribe and paint not for my glory, but for the glory of God.

The rooster’s crowing echoed from the enclosure. It reverberated loudly in the stillness of the night, and I rose off my benumbed knees. Raising my face I beheld the star-strewn sky, grand and mysterious. A sprinkle of dust appeared to scatter from the twinkling, iridescent stars.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO,

relating Mykyta’s descent off the pole, his promenade along the island, and other events of this night

Near the pole, a bonfire erupted. As if waiting for that, two more bonfires erupted: one in the women’s camp, the other—where the crippled and freakish men had gathered.

“Well, Brothers of mine,” Sozont said, “let us go view the spectacle.”

“I will not go,” Pavlo said. “I feel faint.”

“Are you afraid your affliction will smite you?” Sozont asked sympathetically.

“That cannot be known,” Pavlo said. “But right now I am not afraid.”

“Repose, Brother,” Sozont said, almost soothingly. “Gain strength for the morrow. A difficult journey awaits us.”

“Indeed!” Pavlo said. “I will lie a bit. Worldly spectacles delight me no more.”

“You said it well, Brother,” Sozont said. “Perchance, we should stay with you, not to abandon you alone?”

“No, you go,” Pavlo sighed. “That is why we came. To see.”

“This, too, you said well, Brother,” Sozont said.

And we set out for the path. In a short while we arrived at the fence surrounding the pole. A fire blazed in the middle of the yard. Compassing the pyre, as if intentionally positioned there, stood all of Mykyta’s disciples holding solid sticks. Atop the pole, in the hut, the curtains were thrown open and we saw Mykyta bending, unbending, bowing innumerable times. This time it did not last long. As Mykyta came down the ladder, we noticed a radiance around his head, though perhaps it was the fire illuminating him. He descended, turning his face. No, I was not

mistaken: his head as well as his face, actually the hair which stuck out of his habit, truly shone. The moment he stepped onto the ground his disciples thrust their sticks into the flames, in an instant raising processional torches burning brightly above their heads.

His gait serene and slow, St. Mykyta started toward the gate, where we stood. His disciples followed. We bowed deeply before kneeling.

“Where is your third?” Mykyta asked.

“He has fallen ill, Reverend Father,” Sozont said.

“In a while he shall be free,” Mykyta declared as he blessed us, bowing.

He strode along the path, his face glowing; behind him, two to a row, walked his disciples: first Antonii with Teodoryt, then Symeon and Ievahrii, and in the rear, Nykyfor and Heorhii. We followed.

The disciples sang: Love us, oh, Lord,

Thou pure, Thou holy,
From a life of passion
Unto You, us receive –
Have mercy.

From all calamity deliver us,
The sacred hour approaches.
This world have we accursed
With our intent –

Have mercy.

Wolves, aburdened, have awakened,
With jaws outstretched,
Claws toward us straining,
To devour us they crave –

Have mercy.

Along a path narrow we tread,
Through mire sinking –
This accursed world –
We come to know you –

Have mercy.

“There are song writers among them,” Sozont whispered to me.

I pressed his arm above the elbow, cautioning him.

Mykyta shuffled along very slowly, his body barely swaying, as if keeping time with the melody, or devising in this way a kind of tank[?]¹—his disciples did the same. Thus we reached the women’s camp. A fire blazed in the center.

The crippled and freakish women arranged themselves in rows of four, a guarded distance between each. The moment they spotted the procession, following Marta’s signal, who stood at the head, they began beating their wooden bowls with their spoons. Stepping up onto a small mound, perhaps heaped there intentionally, Mykyta raised his hand. The beating ceased.

“Prepare yourselves for the way to Heaven,” Mykyta said loudly. “And may the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, may the Holy Trinity accept you!”

“O-o-e-e-ahhh!” the women’s voices groaned in unison.

“A bit longer, and you shall be the vessels of the Devil no more!” Mykyta shouted hoarsely, loudly. “As a sign of this you can follow me.”

“O-o-e-e-ahhh!” groaned the crippled, freakish women.

They rushed toward the bonfire, pulling burning sticks out of it. And clumsily limping, waddling, feet dragging, even hobbling they threw themselves at the gate which Marta had meanwhile opened. She herself scurried to where Mykyta stood with his disciples.

“I am your betrothed, St. Mykyta!” she wailed madly. “I am your betrothed!”

Trembling, she fell to her knees at the base of the mound.

Mykyta, meantime, moved forward. Symeon and Antonii lifted Marta by the arms, shoving her forward to walk directly behind Mykyta.

The procession blossomed with flames. Mykyta, his head glowing, led the way. Marta, upright, hair loosened, walked behind him. Bearing torches, Mykyta’s disciples followed, then Sozont and I, and in the rear—the noisy throng of the crippled, freakish women, prancing a little as they walked, each shouting something of her own, some trumpeting, mimicking the horn of Jericho. They waved their flaming torches in accompaniment.

A woman yelled hoarsely, in a strained voice: “We are coming to you, Holy Trinity! We are coming! Welcome us!”

Meantime, Mykyta headed to the other bonfire where the crippled and freakish men had collected. Here, too, stood a mound (we either had not noticed them before, or simply had not paid them any heed); Mykyta ascended serenely.

“Prepare yourselves for the way into heaven!” he shouted. “May the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, may the Holy Trinity accept you!”

“E-e-ahhh!” they all exhaled together.

Mykyta fell to his knees. His head now shone with a peculiar, dull phosphorescence, and lifting his hands heavenward, he droned a prayer. After a while, he bowed, almost prostrating himself, stretching his arms along the ground in front of him. He lay for a time, not moving, as if benumbed, coming alive gradually: slowly, he raised his torso, then paused, arms uplifted, beard thrust forward. What impressed me was that the prayer was recited in a precise rhythm: each bodily position was effected at a designated moment.

Dancing and singing (or was it bursts of verses), the crippled and freakish, meantime, had gathered in a circle around the bonfire: “Eech-ooch! Bin-bin-bin! Let us run from sin! Eech-ooch! Bin-bin-bin! We shall run from sin!”

As they stood motionless, holding torches above their heads, to me, for some reason, Mykyta’s disciples resembled not men, but gigantic candles. I even saw tears of tallow trickling down their bodies, at once thickening. My vision was, after all, not far from the truth, for these men truly were self-immolating, spiritually. Their expressions were stern, stiff. Here, too, Marta lay prone near the mound with her face to the ground. I thought to myself: we have stepped back into the depths of ages when paganism still clouded the minds of men. This is a merry festival taking place at the heathen temple. And there he is, Mykyta, the pagan high priest, praying for all. And here are the idols: the candle-men, with tongues of flames in place of heads. And the crowd: joyfully delirious, dancing, leaping. And this maiden: the sacrificial offering, to be stabbed as a gift to the gods.

“Have you noticed that Antonii had hinted at my peculiar acumen,” Sozont said to me, his voice subdued. “What can they know of it?”

“Perhaps he had in mind your countless inquiries?” I answered.

“That is natural with a duty such as I have,” Sozont said. “And in general, I try to behave in a way that accommodates their idolatry.”

“To me, too, Brother, this celebration looks much like a pagan feast.”

“For these men have forsaken the Church Body, severing themselves from the church like a

putrid finger,” Sozont said, his tone somehow morose. For the first time I noticed a strict devotion in him—not so long ago he had preached tolerance.

“ ‘Judge not, that ye shall not be judged,’ the Lord said. Hark, Brother, on the essence of Isaiah. ‘And he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: but with righteousness shall he judge the poor.’”¹

Sozont as if awoke. “Thank you, Brother, for helping me recover. It seems I had fallen into a stupor,” he murmured quietly. “It is not up to us to judge. Merely to observe.”

The circle of dancers broke then, each starting to sway independently in a peculiar way. They were vividly illuminated, and I was struck with their curiously puzzling, deformed features snatched out of darkness by the light of the bonfire: distorted, eyes bulging, mouths agape, drenched in sweat, madly inspired, stretched, flattened, full of self-abnegation, unbridled frenzy and excitement. At times they cried, shrieked, moaned, screamed, whined, trumpeted, yelped, whimpered. Several women fell to their knees wailing in a *pietà*, racking their fingers over their heads, as if in a lament, as if they sensed the end of the world approaching, hoping for it. It was a shocking, confounding scene.

Mykyta finished praying. He rose and proclaimed loudly (though not shouting): “Weep, my children, for all of earth is weeping! Weep, with fasting spirits! There is a time for weeping and a time for rejoicing. ‘The time is short...it remaineth, they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. But I would have you without carefulness.’”¹

Some wept and lamented to those words, others made merry, roaring with laughter. The laughter and weeping mixed so queerly and violently, that shivers ran down my spine. Some tore at their hair, sprinkling dirt over their heads, others pointed at them, tittering. Some convulsed in spasms of weeping or cackling, still others jumped around them, giggling.

Thereupon Marta sprang to her feet and squealed in a pitch so sharp, so shrill (as that fabled whistling Melancholy Thief), as if someone had pierced my ears with a nail. And at the top of her voice, she shrieked: “Stop! Stop! I cannot bear any more of this!”

And abruptly, everyone stopped. Not moving, they stood for a time as though they had been transformed into black pillars of salt. The fire alone thundered, spurting huge, acrid, voracious tongues into the air; the firewood and brush popped, shooting sparks. And a vast silence fell upon the island. My body, too, felt numb. I was powerless to even wag a finger. Marta stiffened, as if carved out of wood. The crippled and freakish, too, stood as if carved out of wood: an odd-looking garden of idols - dancing, licking flames reflected on these suddenly lifeless faces with tiny, blank eyes and hollowed bodies and empty skulls—all dead, all. And Mykyta, fading, and his disciples-candles, dimming, and I, and Sozont—all dead, all. For a chill had swept above our heads and across our faces. Sowing its dreadful seeds, the spirit of mortality, that ghostly spirit, had penetrated every one of us.

Tottering, Mykyta stepped off the mound directly towards us. Our bodies were rigid. “Judge not these people, Fathers,” he said, surprisingly gently, “for they are wretched. Do not judge me, for I am no less wretched. Behold!”

And he lifted the hem of his habit, showing his feet. We were horrified: his feet were covered with dark abscesses. Maggots stirred in those abscesses. They glowed. I turned my eyes toward Mykyta’s face and only now understood why his head shone: his beard and hair were full of those same maggots. It was not Mykyta’s face or head that radiated light, it was those glowing

¹ Note in margin: “Isaiah, Chapter 11, Verse 3.”

¹ Note in margin: “I Corinthians, Chapter 7, Verses 29-32.”

maggots.

Mykyta dropped the hem, raised his head and proudly walked away. Swaying a bit, Marta set out after him. His disciples, aroused, followed; stirring like those maggots, the crippled and freakish hustled, slowly streaming away from the bonfire. Sozont and I remained, alone, as if rooted to the ground, like forsaken idols. It suddenly became apparent that we are the blockheads, not those folks. Solitary idols of the desert we were, whipped mercilessly by the wind flinging prickly sand in our faces.

Leaving the spectacle Mykyta, his disciples and Marta withdrew quite swiftly along the path—we watched the procession of torches disappearing. Finally, in one instant the torches dimmed. The procession was out of our sight.

“Come, Brother Mykhailo, it is time for you to repose,” Sozont said. “Tomorrow will be a difficult day for us.”

“And will you repose?” I asked.

“I have no time for reposing,” said Sozont. “I will roam around here a bit longer. Stay with Pavlo. I have begun fearing for him, poor soul.”

“Fine, Brother,” I said. “Do as you see fit.”

“Not what I see fit,” Sozont stated evenly, “my duty wills me to do this.”

“What duty?”

“The one I have spoken of many a time: to seek the truth. I fear I will not be able to seek it to the end. My thinking is becoming muddled.”

“Mine, too,” I admitted. “And the farther, the worse.”

We walked silently for a time, whereupon Sozont delivered yet another sermon: “I sometimes think, Brother Mykhailo, that the Latinists, having introduced the idea of purgatorium, that is to say, atonement into their dogma, were to a degree right. Our Eastern church contradicts that, though some of our holy fathers believe that purgatorium exists, but not in the other world after death—rather, on earth—that the entire man-made world is purgatorium. For that is where man is challenged. And I sometimes think that at times man dies before his material form perishes—he dies in spirit. This does not occur the same for everyone. Does an animal possess a soul? It does not. Though it lives, moves in its body; therefore, a soulless existence of the body is possible. So then why cannot the same be true with man? For man is a creature marked by God. With man things are not as simple as they are with an animal. So it seems to me there exist all kinds of men: those, marked by God but beast-like, that is to say, soulless. Though men possessing a soul differ, as well: in some the soul abides until a natural death of the body occurs, in others, the soul does not survive, dying before its time. Darkness then pervades man, rendering him powerless in distinguishing good from evil, darkness from light, truth from falsehood. He exists soullessly (there is even an expression: a soulless man!), believing he is soulful, lives godlessly, considering himself to be godly—wishing to fool God and men, fooling only himself. Such people are dead before the demise of their material form. It is for them, I think, the Lord granted redemption as salvation—the possibility of atonement—this means that one spiritually dead can restore his soul in his body beginning once again to live in spirit. Thus a thief who stole and killed is soulless, but once repentant, can return soul into body; the same for the hypocrite, deceiver, conniver, thug, censurer, or any other kind of evildoer. So that in the purgatorium of the world, this peculiar place, each man possesses a will for either soullessness or soulfulness, though often man’s will is blind. And this is that abyss, Brother Mykhailo. The abyss of relativity, of uncertainty, of experiencing the world in disgrace; in short, a lack of abiding in spirit, and finally, in the immutability of truth. Upon each man the Lord bestowed a

lamp for his darkness, this lamp being man's reason. Thus Proverbs say: 'Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and that gotteth understanding.' Though Proverbs also say: 'Be not wise in thine own eyes.' And 'Wisdom is a fountain of life for him who has it,' and in Isaiah: 'The wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.' St. Paul declared: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.' That is why reason sometimes dwells in mindlessness, and mindlessness in reason, so that the human mind, like billows of the sea, is unsettled and changeable. This, then, is one of the deepest abysses in the purgatorium of the world. But in this abyss there is an eye—a sense that God knows you, hears you, sees you and steers you. And even here a not smaller abyss arises—the Lord, or the Devil draped in the image of the Lord as trial. Because of this, we must constantly test ourselves, diligently-urgently, Brother Mykhailo. Not self-assured and cautious must we be—this is the other eye of this abyss. This is where the Lord challenges us most."

Throughout the sermon, Sozont's tone was sad, slow, drawling, unsettled. And then he became still, as if he had draped himself in darkness.

We arrived, meantime, at our place of sleeping. "I will go check on Pavlo," he said.

Pavlo was asleep. Bending over him, the deacon listened. "He is breathing," he said. "But with difficulty, fitfully. You, too, repose a bit, Brother. Lie down."

"Perhaps you, too, will repose," I suggested again.

"No! I have too little time," Sozont replied sternly.

I lay down and fell asleep, I think, and had no dreams. Screams suddenly woke me. It was completely light. I sprang to my feet. In horror, I saw a serpent writhing over the prone body of Pavlo, fiercely pecking at his face. I grabbed a staff, hurled the serpent off Pavlo, and, as had Sozont earlier, stabbed it until it became mush. Pavlo's throat rattled. Dropping the staff, I dashed over. His blue eyes were bulging, his face turned blue, his mouth foamed. And he began convulsing. I fell next to him trying to grasp his arms, to hold him down. He grunted and became limp. I let go. I stood next to him, kneeling. Pavlo's eyes cleared, as if he had regained his senses.

"She ca-ame for me-e!" he jabbered. "Run-n-n! Rrr..." And he died.

I felt tears streaming down my face. Everything around me appeared swaddled; Pavlo's hand, which I still held, began to grow cold.

At that moment, something crashed in the brush—it was Sozont running towards us. "What happened?" he asked, out of breath.

Silently I nodded towards the mashed serpent.

"There are too many serpents on an island that does not harbor them," Sozont said. He kneeled next to me, stroking Pavlo's hair. "My poor, poor brother!" he said. "After all that, I could not save you!"

We sat on the ground immersed in a profound, dark silence. The eastern sky was afire.

"Why did they kill him?" I asked.

"To execute Mykyta's prophecy," Sozont answered shortly.

"What will we do with the corpse?"

"We will try to take it with us. I do not want them to cast it into the Eye of the Abyss. I want blessed Mother Earth to receive him, as is proper for man."

And here, next to Pavlo's dead body, Sozont wearily described what he was able to observe and learn.

Upon approaching the fence and pole, he saw that the hovel was alit. He did not notice any guards anywhere. He was able to creep up to the hovel. Through a crack in the shutter he saw

them all sitting around a long table. Marta was there, too, eating. Sozont saw bread, meat, honey being drunk. Symeon sat at the head of the table, not Mykyta. Though they spoke quietly, Sozont was able to grasp that they were sharing observations about the spectacle which had just passed. They especially talked about the fact that during the spectacle several of the crippled and freakish men had copulated with the women. They spoke of it quite joyfully, laughing.

Then Symeon said: "And now let us serve a last supper! Come, Marta, let us be on guard, for I do not like that deacon. He is so nosy!"

Sozont was forced to recede from the hovel. Marta stepped out. Circling like a watch dog, she observed closely and listened carefully. Sozont lay quietly on the ground, having retreated past the fence. This lasted some time, until the door creaked and Mykyta came out. He walked up to Marta and pinched her skirt. Marta defended herself quite feistily.

"Leave me be!" she said. "You rotten foundling!"

Mykyta laughed, climbing up his pole.

Then Symeon came out of the hovel. Marta threw herself at his legs. Embracing him by the knees, she kissed his raiment. Symeon pushed her aside so forcefully, that she rolled completely around. He approached the fence. Ignoring the maiden, he lifted his habit and urinated.

"Stepan!" Marta moaned. "Why don't you want me?"

"I am dead to this world," Symeon said, adjusting his raiment. "And I have not been Stepan for some time. Go to sleep!"

"Don't drive me away, Stepan," the maiden whimpered. "I will do everything you say, everything you desire, I will do for you. Only don't cast me away! I will please you, caress you, pamper you—I will be your slave!"

"I have said this many a time, and I will say it again: I am dead to this life and this world. Go away!"

"But on account of you I came here!" Marta groaned.

"I am not driving you from the island," Symeon said coldly. "If you are willing to serve in my cause, that is, the Lord, then serve! Mortify your body, as I am mortifying mine. All of you gobbled meat here, while I ate only bread and water—you eat thus. Become the betrothed of the Lord, not mine! Douse the devilish fire ravaging you, and you will find peace."

"I desire no one else, only you, Stepan!" Marta wailed. "My fire burns for you. Here! Look!"

And she tore her tunic off, lying naked in front of him "Take me! Take me! I am on fire! I cannot bear it! I have been reduced to ashes!"

"It is the Devil burning in you!" Symeon said coldly. "You will not seduce me."

"The Devil consumes me!" the maiden yelled. "You are my Devil, Stepan, you!"

And Symeon became enraged. He attacked her, kicking her.

Writhing like a snake, she oohed and moaned longingly. "More, more, my love!" Beat me, kill me!"

And again he struck her with his feet, saying in a hoarse voice: "You vessel of the Devil! Bitch! You will not seduce me, I will sooner really kill you! Die, perish!"

Again she moaned, submitting. "End! The Devil has surrendered me, Stepan!" she said, her tone hollow.

"Get up, then! Get dressed and get out of my sight!" Symeon said menacingly, breathing heavily.

Marta got up, dressing herself slowly, her motions languid. She threw herself around his neck, kissing him passionately. "I love you, Stepan!"

“Perish, Satan!” Symeon exclaimed.

A second time she threw herself at his feet, kissing his bast shoes. “You are my Satan, you! I am your slave!”

“If you are my slave, I command you to leave! Compose yourself! And do not call me Stepan any longer, I am Symeon!”

Marta rose obediently and, head lowered, walked toward the gate. Symeon spat three times, crossed himself and entered the hovel.

“You did not beat her enough, the bitch,” Mykyta remarked from the pole.

“You, too, perish!” Symeon said, glancing upward. Suddenly, he moaned. “Lord, how hard it is for me with all of you!”

“Take my place, then,” Mykyta said. “Try how easy this is.”

Symeon kneeled to pray in the middle of the yard. Drawing the curtains shut, Mykyta disappeared from sight. It began to grow light.

Sozont lay still, afraid of being uncovered, though it was time for him to slither out, for Mykyta could notice him from above—being unoccupied on the pole, he could busy himself watching. Finally Symeon sighed affectedly and withdrew to the hovel. As carefully as he could, Sozont crept away from the fence and then nearly running he set off for the lake to check that which I was not able to, that is, whether there was a cord connecting the plank to the shore. But a surprise awaited him here: amid billows of fog rising off the Eye of the Abyss, he saw a fixed shape—one of Mykyta’s disciples. They continued guarding the shore. Only it was not clear how he, and it was Nykyfor, appeared here. Sozont thought he had not let a single disciple out of his sight, except for the moment of departure from the spectacle and whilst delivering his sermon to me. It even seemed that Nykyfor had sat at the table when Sozont peered into the hovel, though he could not be certain of it...

“This same Nykyfor could have set the serpent onto you, though this time it chose kind-hearted Pavlo,” Sozont said plaintively. “Most likely, Nykyfor had broken away from the others at the spectacle.”

“You have witnessed and described peculiar things, Brother Sozont,” I said, thoughtfully.

“This proves,” Sozont said, “that truth truly lies in the middle. Musi the dwarf did not lie about Marta that the demon of wantonness smote her, though he lied about her copulating with Mykyta: when he pinched her, she had repulsed him quite vehemently and rudely. She does not mate with Symeon, nor with any of the other disciples, feeling passionate only towards Symeon, whom she loves madly. Moreover, she knew Symeon in the other world. That is why she had called him by his secular name, and why she came here. So that these people are not debauchers. Symeon treats Marta like an indifferent man to whom the overly clinging female is repugnant, while Marta, due to her self-degradation seeks satisfaction through lasciviousness, which one could label debauchery. But she is devoted only to one. She is willing to suffer everything only from one. The other result,” Sozont whispered feverishly, “their chief really is Symeon, as I had surmised.”

“Perchance, shunning human glory he acts thus?”

“More likely responsibility,” said Sozont, “for their sermons are in the name of the Lord, while their deeds are dark. Actually, it all stems from their preaching about death and the desire for death as judgment. So that when Death is so elevated, it is desired, and serving it is no sin. Hence, they circumvent the Lord’s commandment: ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ generally not killing with their own hands, though favoring death. Kuzma was swallowed by the Eye of the Abyss. Pavlo was poisoned by a serpent—not by them.”

“And the thief?”

“The thief himself sought death. They as if aided him. So that they are holding fast to their strict rules, commandments, similar to the Lord’s, exceeding all measure by elevating their own truth or its interpretation over the Lord’s. That is evil. Having done it once, they have undertaken to weave an artfully clever lattice languishing in it while enslaving themselves to it. They became like fish in a net. This is the most certain solution to this puzzling Abyss with its Eye.”

“Before dying, Pavlo had advised us to flee this place as quickly as possible,” I said. “Did he know?”

“He not so much knew it, as sensed it. He was a warm soul,” Sozont whispered, his breath whistling. “We are wholly in their hands, however. Without them we will not cross the Eye of the Abyss. Being afraid of that, they have placed a guard on duty.”

“I fear, Brother, that your musings are too full of surmising,” I said, “even as we have more evidence.”

“You speak the truth, Brother Mykhailo. I myself am tormented with this. But we will not learn anything more precisely. What I saw tonight, while wholly confirming their hypocrisy has not confirmed their villainy. Pretense and villainy are not the same. Even Pavlo’s death can be attributed to chance, for serpents live in or near mud—and we did not catch anyone in the act of setting the serpent up. So that one thing remains to expose the truth—my death in the Eye of the Abyss.” And he grew silent, dark. “Should I die there, it will undoubtedly mean: they grew afraid of my discoveries. They want to protect themselves. So then they are guilty of Kuzma’s death as well. I believe they are steered by a mind not seeking blood for blood, but acting out of necessity: Kuzma was killed as a lesson, the thief to assure the miraculousness of Mykyta’s words. I’ve presented myself as author of their glory, and only out of fear that I had learned something, that I will record it or carry it out do they wish to kill me. For they are aware of their own villainy, and fear being exposed. It is not a Divine mind directing them, rather, a Satanic one.”

“But then they ought kill me, as well,” I asserted.

“I know not, Brother, I do not wish to lie,” Sozont declared. “But I hope they will deal with you lightly. You do not meddle in their affairs, and Mykyta has treated you most kindly.”

“And you agree so easily to die?” I asked, horrified.

“What is there left for me? Were I to repent before them they will not release me from here all the more, though they have mere suppositions regarding me—no proof.”

“A frightful, fatal game is being played,” I murmured.

“Indeed, Brother Mykhailo! And it will be won not by the one who perishes, for the Lord shall judge, not men. The truth He prophesied shall prevail. And I was, am its pagan priest. Though for victory one condition must be met: you must become such a pagan priest carrying out not the chronicle recorded on paper—it is worthless and may it perish along with me, but the one recorded in my mind—that I entrust to you.”

“And if they destroy me?”

“This is that extreme case when God’s help must be sought. I have faith that He heeded my prayer.”

“So that you had prayed for me, not for yourself?”

“Indeed, for I feel I am destined to be sacrificed. I expect, too, that they have not completely lost their sense of balance in keeping the Lord’s commandments. To them, you have arisen as one who has died for the world.”

“The thread is indeed weak?”

“Weak, though it exists. I have faith in it. And even more in God.”

“And if you successfully cross the Eye of the Abyss?”

“That question has been posed,” said Sozont. “Then I will accept my defeat, my surmising as fruit of an afflicted mind, and them as devout mimes. And I shall disseminate the written chronicles of the life of Mykyta as genuine.”

“Though you yourself said: they copied it from the Chronicles of Symeon the Pole-sitter.”

“They follow that chronicle in their lives, and the Chronicle of Symeon the Pole-sitter has been recognized by the church as genuine. I will not raise a hand against its dictates. After all, all chronicles are copied from older chronicles, dressed in native raiment and enlisted in contemporary life—I have had opportunity to ascertain it. They are, to a degree, credible. And I repeat, even as I have spoken of this: following the dictates of Christ, we do not become Christ, rather, Christians, and as they follow the dictates of St. Symeon, they are not Symeon, merely symeonides.”

Immersed in reflection, I felt my head splitting from it all. “And what if Mykyta’s disciple Symeon’s mind is so profound that he understands this and will release us freely?”

“In that case there is hope for his atonement,” Sozont said. “But the nature of an evildoer is such, that having embarked upon effecting evil, he cannot stop.”

We heard steps then. Mykyta’s disciples were approaching along the path, all six: Nykyfor, who was supposed to stand guard at the Eye of the Abyss, included.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE, in which our crossing the Eye of the Abyss is recounted

Catching sight of us next to Pavlo’s supine corpse on the ground, the visitors stopped in shock.

“What happened to Brother Pavlo?” Antonii asked.

“He died of a serpent’s bite,” Sozont replied calmly.

“Serpent?” Teodoryt asked, surprised. “But there are no serpents here, in view of the power of the saint’s words. Not even snakes.”

And here Sozont uttered something I believe he should not have: “If his words can repel serpents, why can he not summon them?”

Mykyta’s disciples frowned.

“Why did you say that?” Antonii asked.

“For it was the saint who had vowed death for Pavlo,” Sozont said.

“The saint does not summon death,” Antonii said coldly. “He can merely foretell it, so that the doomed one has time to repent.”

“Can not a foretelling be a summons?” Sozont inquired.

“Not at all! The saint cannot violate one of the greatest commandments,” Antonii said.

“Where is the serpent?”

“Over there, by the bush,” Sozont said. “This is the second one, by the way. I took the first off the chest of sleeping Brother Mykhailo.”

“Strange,” Antonii said, overturning the dead serpent with a staff. “Was the first killed, too?”

“We thought we had killed the first one, but it has vanished. Probably it slid away,” I said. “Perhaps this was the same one.”

“We will have to ask the saint,” Antonii said fearfully to his fellow disciples, “to repel this

filth from the sacred island.” Then abruptly he asked: “Perchance, you harbor secret, evil thoughts, and that drove the snakes here?”

“Were we the cause of the snakes’ encroachment, they would not be killing us,” Sozont said.

“Well, that is in the will of God!” Teodoryt said.

“Snakes are the devil’s kin, and were we malefactors, we would abide in the Devil, so that we would be at one with snakes,” Sozont declared, and, thought I, he ought not have said that, either.

“Perhaps it had slithered here by chance,” Symeon said indifferently. “This has happened before. What will you do with the body?”

“We will attempt to take it with us. You have no cemetery here.”

“That is true. We have only one grave—the saint’s mother—you know that,” Teodoryt said.

“How will you carry it?” Antonii asked.

“Across dry land in a stretcher, and across water in a dragnet.”

“Fine,” Antonii said. “That is how others who claim the departed do it. We do not forbid it.”

Sozont raised his face towards me. In the morning light, it appeared gray. He hadn’t slept for two nights, after all. “Chop down two small trees, Brother Mykhailo.”

I set out for the thicket, searching for stakes suitable for a stretcher; the others continued talking around Pavlo’s corpse. I prepared the stakes, then chopped smaller ones for crossbars and brought everything to the camp. Sozont tied the shorter poles to the stakes. We lay Pavlo’s body on it. As his face had become bloated and blue, almost black, we covered it with a large bur leaf. Then we set out in the lead, with Mykyta’s disciples, wall-like, behind us.

“You are uselessly laboring,” Sozont, walking behind the stretcher, said. “We are not such important personages that all of you need to accompany us. A guide would suffice.”

I understood why Sozont said what he said: he was being careful.

“You are not insignificant guests to us,” Antonii said. “So we wish to honor you in not a small way. Everyone came to escort you of their own will.”

“Fine, then,” stated Sozont. “We thank you for the honor.”

Neither we, nor Mykyta’s disciples chatted. Several times while resting briefly I glanced at Symeon—he seemed indifferent and as if aloof. And for some reason I thought: how could this balanced, rational, taciturn man with pleasant features savagely beat a woman who loved him so madly? So that indeed, a beast lurks within him.

I walked ahead of everyone. I had to search out the path. The stretcher with Pavlo was heavy, so I could not look around especially well, nor could I think about anything more involved.

Oddly, we met not a single crippled or freakish along the way to the Eye of the Abyss, even though before, while rambling about the island, we had stumbled upon them without fail: wandering, sitting, reposing, As if following some signal, they had cleared the path for us, withdrawing from it.

High above, swathed in clouds, the sun spurted tips of beams; the sky, too, was covered with thin clouds. Though it was steamy early in the morning, there was no dew—the grass rustled dryly underfoot. Sweat rolled over my face, streaming down my forehead into my eyes, down my cheeks; we paused from time to time to wipe the sweat and to catch our breath. Silently, Mykyta’s disciples paused, too, not offering any help; their faces were as gray as was Sozont’s, evidently, from a sleepless night. All this caused a transparent barrier to rise between us and them, we on one side of it, they –on the other. An invisible tension grew, as if we and they wished to free ourselves one from the other as quickly as possible. Symeon remained calm

and reserved throughout, though his eyes expressed sadness. And I sensed that they were all, as were we, in their own way doleful, in their own way resigned, weary, dissatisfied with something. Perchance, the presence of a corpse among us, its face covered with a bur leaf contributed to that?

Finally, we arrived at the Eye of the Abyss. The water fumed, though only the milky part, the part Symeon had designated as dead. The dark circle in the center of the pool appeared covered with a clear icy glaze—it did not fume. And again we smelled a peculiar odor, existing only here. This time it contained not only the stench of cadavers, but a blended odor of rot and an aroma akin to that of swamp flowers, though we saw no flowers nearby.

“Brother Symeon will guide you,” Antonii said as we lay the stretcher by the water. “Go with God! If something had made you unhappy here, forgive us! You have been fine guests.”

He approached Sozont, embraced him, kissed him thrice; he did the same with me. I smelled acid on his breath—probably from the digested honey he had drunk. The rest of the disciples simply bowed to us, except Symeon, who was to continue accompanying us along the way. They retreated as if to some signal, positioning themselves along the curved shore of the Eye of the Abyss at set intervals one from another, exactly as they had when welcoming us: two at the left, two at the right. Antonii remained in the middle, which is to say, at the source of the path. Three staves lay there, evidently prepared in advance, and a thought suddenly pierced me, like an arrow: if these staves were prepared in advance, let us say, by Nykyfor, whom Sozont had found here at dawn, then there should have been four staves. How did Nykyfor know that Pavlo would be bitten by a serpent, that it would kill him? Hence, he must have known that three of us would be crossing the Eye of the Abyss, not four, so that was it not Nykyfor who set the serpent onto us? Sozont, too, noticed that there were three staves, not four, for he looked at me demonstratively. And a second thought pierced me: if that, which Sozont had foreseen was to occur here, at the Eye of the Abyss, and if the one who was to die was to be the one last, that is, if that conjecture was correct, then should not I tread last? Sozont, after all, believed that they do not kill for no reason. Hence, they would not touch me, and they would be unable to cut Sozont off along the path. That is why I said:

“I prefer to be last. I will hold on to the stretcher, feeling more confident.”

“What will you say to that, Brother Symeon?” Sozont asked, in an instant understanding what I had in mind.

“Do as you see fit,” Symeon said indifferently. “My duty is to accompany you.”

At the same time I noticed him exchange looks with Antonii.

“You decide,” Antonii said to Sozont. “According to me, the one lacking confidence should be placed in the middle.”

“I, too, think so,” Sozont said, utterly calm. “That is why I shall be last.”

My heart grew heavy. I gave Sozont a chance to save himself. After considering his intentions, if our suppositions prove to be right, he openly chose death.

Symeon descended into the water, walked along the tract a bit then stopped. Climbing off the bank, I faced Sozont to pick up the stretcher, meantime feeling with my foot for the start of the plank. This time our assumption proved correct: the tract was suspended, for I stumbled onto two wooden pegs driven into the shore one next to the other.

Sozont pushed the stretcher on me while I stepped back, backwards, pulling it along. The bur leaf slipped off Pavlo’s face. It was dreadful: bloated and black, no one would ever be able to recognize his features. I fished the leaf out of the water, and covered him again. Sozont slid into the water right off shore and obviously felt the pegs too, for he again glanced at me

demonstratively.

“Take the staff,” said Sozont, giving it to me. “Now turn around.”

I was forced to turn around holding the staff in one hand and the rod in the other—the stretcher was afloat.

“We’re off!” Sozont’s said behind my back.

I could not see how he held the stretcher and how he was able to manipulate with the staff. The stench of cadavers increased in the muddled water masking the aroma which before we could at least discern. Symeon tread confidently ahead of me, though slowly, feeling for the tract with his staff. It felt as though he had crossed the Eye of the Abyss many a time.

“We forgot to bring water,” we suddenly heard Sozont’s voice in back. “Could we stop by the fresh water, Symeon?”

“Watch me,” Symeon turned his head. “I will signal!”

Once more he moved confidently ahead. Our feet mired the milky water. I felt a bit dizzy from the fumes that enveloped us; breaking off the broad surface, the haze rose in swirling tufts. We plunged deeper and deeper into the water. The mist reached our faces.

“Do not breathe deeply!” Symeon yelled to us. “The haze can make you dizzy!”

I already felt dizzy. I was, after all, short, especially compared to Sozont and Symeon; colorful, twirling rings appeared in my mind’s eye, I felt faintly nauseous, my eyes seemed veiled in a mist. Even as I barely breathed, I felt sick, though not enough to lose consciousness. And as always happened with me in times of danger, I ignited a flame of watchfulness in my mind, which is to say, I concentrated all my attention on this tiny taper stuck in my mind, and this taper burned, its flame flickering, and it did not die. Then the nausea began receding, though the vivid rings still spun, still shimmered. My mind seemed clouded, as was this pool.

Slowly we approached the dark circle where there truly was no haze and where we would be able to catch our breath. No mist swirled at the rim between the milky and dark water. It seemed a transparent shaft, like a well, had formed. An invisible force held the haze beyond the circle. I felt an unbearable urge to run along the tract, to reach the spring water sooner, but Symeon’s tall, slender, impenetrable figure towered in front of me, and he tread slowly. I was dizzy, and my grip on the stretcher rod weakened. Suddenly, I felt it slipping away. In that moment a horrible shriek echoed behind my back. Yes, it was an inhuman shriek. A shriek full of dread and despair. The plank wavered under me, and in that instant something splashed. Out of the corner of my eye, I was only able to notice the rod, which I held, fall steeply backward.

“Do not stop!” Symeon yelled. “Let us hurry!”

Underfoot, the tract swayed. Symeon was practically running. Unconsciously, as if fettered to him I followed, my feet barely touching the swaying plank, balancing and counterbalancing with the rod I grasped in both my hands. We leaped into the stretch of dark water, and I inhaled deeply. The air was pure, brisk and fragrant; it dispelled my dizziness. I wanted to stop to look around.

“Do not stop!” Symeon yelled once again, not slowing his gait, and I did not stop and I did not look around. Once more, I inhaled deeply and once again I dove into the suffocating billows of gray vapor. Now the tract stopped swaying. The water’s depth decreased. Vivid streaks again floated through my head bending, whirling, and with a force of will I once again ignited my taper of caution. Symeon, too, did not once look around, though he did slow his gait, and that was to the point, for I felt faint. I sensed fear filling me, not a malodorous vapor - not fear, but horror, which drove me, snapping a whip over my head, and I, nearly blind, seeing nothing around me, saw only the bright spot of Symeon’s hopping back before me. The water was no longer chest-

deep, it reached the armpits. The nausea increased. I retched the remains of the scant food still in my stomach—it was yellow, acid liquid. It brought a bit of relief, and I was able to withstand the rest of the course, which brought us to a hillock emerging out of the water. Several feeble birch trees with small, pale leaves grew here. Evidently, this was where pegs holding the tract from this side of the Eye of the Abyss were driven in.

Symeon leaped onto dry land and handed me his staff. I grabbed it with one hand. With the other, I leaned against my staff, even though it had no firm base, climbed onto dry land and fell to the ground. But I did not let myself rest: I sat up and turned toward the pool. It was still, unmoving. The milky water fumed quietly. Congealed, the dark water stood untouched, the stretcher floating in the milky part around the dark circle. Pavlo's body was not there. There was no sign of Sozont, either. Spasms rolled through my body and I wailed like a child, tears large as peas rolling out of my eyes.

"Did you so love those men that you cry so, Brother Mykhailo?" Symeon asked with a chill in his tone. "Perhaps, you knew them earlier, not only having met them along the way?"

"I did not know them before," I said, "and I am crying because they were human: Pavlo, a blessed soul, and Sozont with a great mind and knowledge."

"A great mind and knowledge cause harm," Symeon stated sadly. "They lead one into misthinking."

"What do you know of these men?" I asked plaintively.

"Less than do you. Do not grieve over death, for though it is full of sorrow, it is not to be feared," Symeon answered. "What is life in this world, Brother Mykhailo? Merely a step between birth and death. Yesterday you arrived, today you depart. Horrible is not the demise of the flesh, but of the soul. Our lives are a passage into the domain of death, a mercurial breath of those who seek it. Death peers into our windows every minute and what are we before Death? Like grass before the scythe."

"Is what these men effected deserving of death?" I asked through tears.

"Perhaps they did, and perhaps not—I am not well enough familiar with them," Symeon continued in the same tone. "Death arrives when she wills and takes whomever she wills. We are miserable creatures! For who shall save us from the flesh's demise? Fear of death keeps us in bondage. Earthly life is that bondage."

He became quiet, and we surveyed the broad surface of the Eye of the Abyss. The shore was visible on the other side along which stood Mykyta's disciples, like fixed props. They appeared phantasmal through the haze, suspended above the water. And again I was gripped with fear; I was flooded with it, it seized me, swallowed me—I wanted to leave this accursed place as quickly as possible. I had no strength left for suffering. I wanted to hole up in a pipe, in a niche, to shut my eyes and once again to reflect about all that had occurred. To ponder, to tie up the loose ends of those threads that remained untied. Will I comprehend anything? That, which Sozont had feared, has happened, so that with his death he has confirmed his surmising. Though presently, I was incapable of reflecting upon it. I was too exhausted, too weary, too tormented. Now I longed for one thing: solitude and peace.

I had not looked at Symeon during our exchange, but now I did. He stood speechless, motionless, like another pole, as if imitating those stupefied followers of his, or standing as an example to them. More likely the latter. His expression bespoke of grand inspiration, as if he were shameless; or he felt like a chief, or military leader who victorious in a great bloody battle, bore no sorrow, only gladness for all the enemy corpses. Presently this poor fellow did not know, did not gather that his victory is a sign of his defeat, that one taken by death often triumphs over

death, that Jesus was not vanquished by His crucifiers, rather, He—them, that even in weakness dwells a power greater than is evident, and humility is more honorable than is arrogance. This poor fellow did not know that having stepped over the line, his mind became lame, became crippled and freakish. It was dreadful for me to hear him say; ‘A great mind and knowledge harm man, leading him into misthinking,’ for it was himself he spoke of, not Sozont. That is, he recognized this truth—not testing himself with it, but the one by him defeated, not realizing that damaged truth holds no truth, that damaged good is no longer good, and damaged reason is no longer reason. This is what horrified me: seeing that self-inspired victor. In my mind’s eye my guardian flame ignited again, like a candle.

“Thank you, Brother Symeon, for having led me across the Eye of the Abyss,” I said. “Go back. After reposing a bit, I shall go on.”

“Will you be able to cross the swamp on your own?” Symeon asked.

“You had volunteered to guide us only across the Eye of the Abyss,” I answered.

“I said that, thinking that you would be on your way with quick-eyed Sozont,” Symeon said. “For you I fear. And you are dear to my heart.”

I wanted to ask: “Did you not know that Sozont would perish?” but the guardian flame in my mind burned brighter, and I said something other: “Why am I to your liking?”

“Because you are almost dead to this world—St. Mykyta had spoken of this to you, as well. That your great skill is lost and you will not reclaim it. Though you have not yet reached higher perfection and this wicked world still has a hold on you. Return into it once again to become convinced: it is foreign to you, hostile. There is no place in it for you, nor will there ever be.”

“What then, Brother Symeon?”

“Your flesh will then be mortified, finally, And once you recognize that, you can think of us, dead to the world, and you will want to return here. I say onto you: we will gladly accept you. But we force no one, we bid no one—it is all in your will.”

“Is this why you want to lead me across the swamp?”

“Exactly, Brother Mykhailo. It would be a shame if you did not pass along the way fitting for a soul—and you have stepped onto it.”

And I became altogether sad—this man was convinced in his truth and superiority. So that he believed that he will triumph over me as well, the single visitor left alive. I sensed and recognized that I was the weakest of all, the most spiritually fractured—there is no need to break it in me—I can render that myself. And here he was wholly right. But he failed to reckon one thing, that is, that in my mind I bore the paperless, parchmentless modern Gospel, recorded and deposited there as if into a treasure chest by Sozont. Hence, I am his adversary, even as he was entirely convinced that he had not only triumphed over his enemy, Sozont, but that he has swallowed him, like a shark swallowing a small fish.

“I will consider you words, Brother Symeon,” said I. “But why agonize over my destiny? Neither birth nor death is in our will, therefore why fear danger? Let us leave it to the will of the Lord, not ours, worms of earth. If the Lord’s will wills to take me, not wholly dead to this world, who can stop Him in that? If He wills to place me onto the path of which you speak, I shall walk that path, for I am accustomed to submitting to His will.”

“So you are not afraid to die?” Symeon asked with interest.

“I am not afraid,” I answered. “Ought one fear the irreversible?”

“You have spoken well, Brother Mykhailo,” Symeon smiled amicably. “St. Mykyta and all of us pray for you. After, you will surely cross the swamp. Let it be as St. Peter said: ‘Temptation.....’ I hope that we will see you among us soon.”

“And returning, how will I cross the Eye of the Abyss, alone?” I asked.

“You will find a way. If you will will it, you will cross.”

I rose. We embraced. We kissed three times. And I sensed a strange thing: it seemed, in fact, that I am embracing and kissing a corpse. His flesh was as cold and lifeless as was recently deceased Pavlo’s. I shivered.

“The water has chilled you, Brother Mykhailo,” Symeon stated warmly, turning away. “Warm yourself in the sun. It is out already. Regain your senses. A fine day is predicted for today.”

Indeed, the sun shone above us. Not bright, not hot, but wrapped in gray clouds, as if in a woolen scarf. And the day, I thought, was unlikely to be foreseen fine. The morning grass was, after all, not bedewed—earth’s greenery had not been rinsed with its usual sacred drops.

Symeon plunged into the water and set off, not looking back, across the Eye of the Abyss. He tread lightly, swiftly, unguardedly. Deeper and deeper into the water he plunged, which, by the way, had abruptly stopped fuming—the high sun ate away the vapors. The benumbed forms of Mykyta’s disciples (actually Symeon’s), became clearer, no longer appearing dissolved.

Sitting in the grass, I trailed my palm across it: no dew here, either. Neither did the shriveled birch leaves glow.

“A fine day is not predicted, Symeon,” I said sadly. “It is not predicted!”

But Symeon was already far away. I sat and watched. There he was, approaching the spot where Pavlo’s stretcher was floating. He caught it with his staff, dragging it behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR,

which describes how I crossed the swamp

I sat atop the hillock until Symeon crossed the Eye of the Abyss. Antonii helped him pull Pavlo’s stretcher out of the water. Huddling, Mykyta’s disciples chatted about something. Then they set out into the thicket, in a moment disappearing. Only then was I able to pray for the repose of the souls of Kuzma, Pavlo and Sozont, my fellow-travelers, whom the Eye of the Abyss had swallowed. As I prayed, I felt immeasurable sorrow. I nearly wept. Those men, Sozont most, clung to my soul.

The sun got hot, warming me. It popped out from behind clouds into open space, and this space was round, as was the Eye of the Abyss. I turned my back on the pool and prayed a second time, this time for God’s aid in my uncertain way. Boundless space, awash in water with outcroppings of cattails, brambles and sparse saplings, lay in front of me. I had to cross it on my own. The sun showed where east is. Mykyta’s island lay to the north. And I had to head south.

I began considering what I knew about the course across the swamp. It would take half a day to reach the small island where we had slept and cooked our last kulish, possibly, a bit longer, and from the island to dry land—one day. Symeon had said that curious Sozont would have found the way without his help; if this was derision, then that remark was meaningless. If he had stated the truth, however, the course should then be marked somehow.

Just then, a magpie screeched overhead. I remembered how Teodoryt had related that this magpie guides him. This needs to be verified.

Feeling for the path with my staff, I stepped onto it, and moved slowly ahead. The magpie, indeed, flew ahead and alighted upon a small birch which grew out of the hillock. In my mind, I sketched a straight line between myself and the outcropping, then set out: the path did not disappear from under my feet. Mosquitoes swarmed overhead. I have no food, I thought, nor potable water; though I did have a small kettle and some salt in a tightly bound leather pouch

which might have gotten wet, as I had not opened that pouch in a long while. Too, I had a piece of steel and a flint stone—all in the pouch. So that my goal was to reach the small island, where I will be able to light a fire, gather herbs: sorrel, for example, or orach and cook it for myself, even if in muddy water. There I will spend the night and consider the next step.

I was so immersed in thought that I stepped off course, falling headlong into a hole. My feet touched slimy bottom. I knew how to swim. Beating with my arms, I surfaced. The magpie took off from the birch, screeching madly above me. I swam up to the staff I had let go, thinking that is where the path should be, but I was unable to feel it with my foot. Swimming in clothes was awkward, so I decided to find the line between the small birch onto which the magpie had alighted again, and the outcropping which I had left. God favored me. I fumbled onto the path. Pushing ahead slowly, I did not get lost in thought.

The magpie flew off from the small tree and chattering, headed out farther. I noticed that one of the branches on the birch sapling was broken, hanging—is this not a sign? My pouch, fastened to my shoulders, too, helped me this time. Tightly bound and waterproof, it was like a bubble, pushing me to the surface.

I clambered onto the outcropping, falling heavily to the ground. My heart pounded loudly in my chest—I was tired. Catching my breath I could consider how and where lies the next portion of the path. Though I observed no more broken branches on nearby trees, my eye caught a rod, stuck by a small outcropping—I detected no other markings.

The magpie circled over me, chattering. This time it did not show me the way. I decided to tread very slowly: if we had walked the course from the spot where we had spent the night to Mykyta's island in a bit more than half a day, I can spend one day on it. Of course, it would have been much better, had Symeon guided me at least to the place where we had spent the night, but I was glad that I had gotten rid of him: for one thing, it would have been difficult to endure him next to me, and secondly—I was afraid of him. Who knows what could have stirred in that mad mind? This fear was not well-reasoned, for in truth, Symeon did not wish my demise; if he had, the Eye of the Abyss could well have swallowed me, too. Terror springing within us is not always commensurate with common sense.

I peeled the poncho-like mantle off, wringing out the water. I did the same with the habit. Then I got dressed. Throughout, mosquitoes stung me mightily. I began probing for the tract with my staff. I finally found it, and descended into the water. I walked directly toward the rod—the direction was right. This time I was not mistaken.

The magpie left me, flying far ahead and alighting on a small tree. I paid it no heed, though I made a note of the tree. It stood in the center of an outcropping, larger than the others, overgrown with grass. This time I tread very cautiously, foot behind foot, successfully reaching the rod. And here I saw a dark linen ribbon tied to it—our raiments were of this same cloth. Now I understood that only Sozont could have tied the ribbon, so that along the way he was thinking about our return—that is why Symeon had hinted about his keenness. I sighed with relief: once the course is marked, I should not come across any great misfortune. I must only watch for the markings carefully.

I glanced at the little tree on which the magpie had alighted before, but now it seemed to me that a similar little tree stands to the left of this one. It was impossible to tell them apart. I continued along the tract, splashing chest-deep in water, straining at those trees so that my eyes hurt. The ribbon was on the tree to the left of the one on which the magpie had sat. Tied low, nearly at water level, it was not easy to spot.

I steered myself in that direction. And here a frantic thought entered my mind: if Symeon

was aware of Sozont's markings, could they not have confused them deliberately? But I smothered that thought with another: to accomplish that, they would have had to step off the firm path.

"But how did it happen," I thought, "that, heading here I did not notice the tying of ribbons, and I was treading behind Sozont? Though it's true, not behind him, behind Pavlo."

I had no answer to that. By the way, Teodoryt was blind. He, too, could not have seen any of it.

I was approaching the little tree with the mark and here, swerving off the path, I felt my foot caving into thick, sticky mud. Leaning heavily on my staff, so that it cracked, I pulled my foot out of the mud with great effort; I was glad that my sandals were tightly fastened. Had I been in boots, I would certainly have lost one. Stars burst in my eyes from the exertion. I had to stop.

The magpie, meantime, again flew ahead, circled the outcropping on which only grass grew, and flew to the middle of the swamp. The water emitted a dense fetidness, and I became dizzy again. Large bubbles rose from the bottom, popping with a dry cracking sound. I could not find any markings in this spot, so I had to tread as if I were blind, fumbling for the path. A cold sweat dripped down my eyes. Mosquitoes, darting at my face, increased.

I rinsed my face with the foul water and moved on, steering toward the outcropping on which the magpie had alighted. Though this time the magpie had deceived me and I barely restrained myself from sinking off the path into the mud. At least my staff went under water and got stuck somewhere. I found it with my foot, inclined it towards myself and barely plucked it out, for it practically grew into the bottom during this pause.

I moved on and finally saw a small birch tree with a broken branch—this was a credible indicator. Overhead, the magpie cackled loudly at me, satisfied with her game. I headed in the direction of the little birch tree; here the outcropping was such that I would be able to rest. I sat, a cloud of mosquitoes surrounding me, their tiny, moth-like wings shimmering madly before my eyes. With these it was easier: they did not sting. They did not need my blood.

And abruptly, I wondered: where am I going? I have no elders in this world. They died of an epidemic while I was still young. I had no brothers, nor sisters. I was their only child. With my skill I was needed. What am I now: alone, abandoned by all, for whom only this is left: to hark back on times of inspired impulse, when I designed the Peresopnytska Gospel. My soul ached to see it again, that massive volume bound in ocher leather with eight coils along the spine where it was sewn together. I myself was the bookbinder. I stitched it, I selected the leather, I prepared the wood panels, shaving them, I glued the leather on, and was the first to lovingly unfold the book. I poured all my strength into it, so that the book drank me, like a cup of spring water or milk—only the potsherd remaining.

And before me I saw Sozont's pale, washed out face. It was as if rendered in fog.

"You must cross this swamp," it said. I heard his voice quite clearly in the stillness. "For only you will be able to preserve me and Pavlo and Kuzma, innocently slain, from oblivion. May this be your new Gospel. You must find strength! Rouse your own spirit onto it."

And I sensed something stirring within me, as if in the depths of my viscera a fresh sprig sprouted, slowly budding, developing even slower. And in me a blossom began growing, a blossom known as kryn (white lily), and it sprouted amid the dark, half-dead brambles (Symeon described it thus) of my being. And I harkened the words of Matthew, words I once scribed with such love: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin," so that even Christ had looked upon that lily of the field as necessary in life, for He had used it as an example. My soul was overgrown with these same lilies of the field while I scribed and

painted—that grand, magnificent book became such a lily of the field—my child, into whom the Lord had breathed life, and now it lives independently of me—its manure—out of which that white flower had blossomed. May the Lord receive praise for it, not I: He Who bestowed upon this lily growth. And I sensed in me an unfamiliar flux of energy. When such a force appears I can not and must not perish in this not entirely endless swamp.

I think I fell asleep. I thought that it had all been a dream, but regaining my senses, I felt truly stronger. I glanced back to where I had come from, and everything I had experienced seemed like a distressing, phantasmal dream, a dream I ought not forget once awake. I shall carry that dream within me, its unexplained mysteries, all the spoken words, all the transpired events—I shall forget none of it. Precisely this is my duty of the day.

And I trekked more boldly, briskly, penetrating this muddy flood further and further amid dwarf trees reminding me of the dwarves on Mykyta's island, in the midst of monstrously withered vegetation, which reminded me of the crippled, the freakish—the alders and birches—like Mykyta's disciples; seemingly surrounded from all sides by all of them, as if I was leading them out of the abyss, though they themselves were the abyss. And my brethren I was leading out of the abyss, though they remain forever in it. Here I am, carrying their words, their thoughts like a sack, or a cross on my back: I myself am full of them. Slogging through the putrid, watery wastes of our lives, I can always pause to behold pure, celestial springs amid white clouds—lilies of the sky, for the creation of which I had set out onto the journey of life. O, I was not dead, I was not hollow, for one who senses the presence of divine lilies in one's soul is never hollow. It is not a foul fluid flowing through my veins, but a spring. I am spilling my old blood, as had naïve Kuzma, letting leeches suck his living flesh. Crossing the swamp, I was effecting something similar. My pain, though, was the leeches: my grief, my sorrow for those who had perished, my uncertainty, my numbness, my despair, my aloneness, my disillusionment, my doubts, my accursedness—there were so many of those leeches craving my blood. And I surrendered my body to them. Not to be ravaged—I let them suck only my dead blood—I still needed my living blood.

I waded through the swamp the whole day from pointer to pointer, seeking them, examining them. Not without incident I searched: I fell into the water several more times. Once I sank in quagmire which began to swallow me, but I was able to pull a floating log to me, using it to wrench myself out of the sucking spring; once I lost track, swimming a good hour searching for signs, until weakened, almost exhausted I did not find it. But during this entire trek my flaming passion did not dim, the guardian candle in my head did not fade, the lily blossoming in my soul did not wither. I was wet, full of mud, full of mosquito stings, filthy, famished, but I continued to firmly hold on to the thread—and that thread was the lily blossom, lowered to me for renewed strength. It even rained on me along the way, and I was splashing in water below and above; the rain whipped my head and shoulders mercilessly—not a dry thread was left on me. Then, when the sun reappeared, I steamed, as if on fire; but teeth clenched, I walked, walked, walked, for I had to arrive, I had to prove to myself: I am still fit for something in this life. So that when I finally spied the small island on which we had spent the night, I was not glad, for I had no energy to be glad. With parched lips I merely thanked the heavens, and half-conscious, half-dazed, half-extinguished, pushing my benumbed legs, collecting myself into a hard fist, painfully compressed, I did not clamber onto shore, I crawled. Pulling my body a bit into the grass I lost consciousness, falling into a cold, dark pit, while being steadfastly aware that this pit is no abyss, only a dark cave one can enter as into a temporary refuge.

I came to towards evening. Looking around, surprised, only now I allowed myself to be

glad: I have weathered one half of my trek. Rolling over onto my back I lay staring at the sky with wide eyes. It rained again. I rinsed my face. Opening my parched mouth I drank, licking the drops off my lips. That rain, brief but generous, unexpectedly poured new energy into me.

Sitting up, I saw a family of dense, shiny mushrooms growing by a tree. The Lord had sent them to me. I prepared kindling. Scooping some old, dry leaves and yellowed grass among roots, I set about striking a flame. The brushwood was damp and it was hard to ignite. It took me a good while to start a fire. From the swamp, I drew some water, cooked the mushrooms in it, then I strained the water, boiling it once more. Again I strained it—it smelled too strongly of mud—and retrieved salt from my sack. Though the salt in the pouch was damp, it had not dissolved. I was able to salt my meal. The food fortified me. I was almost without strength. My eyelids drooped with fatigue, which increased after the evening meal. My body wilted—it was hard to even wag a finger.

This did not trouble me, though. I lay on firm ground, and even though I was surrounded from all sides by swamps, they no longer scared me. I gave my last bit of strength to praying, for I could not not thank him who saved me.

“I was excessively distrustful, Brother Sozont,” I whispered, lying supine, gazing at the rapidly darkening sky—large stars, like apples alighting in it. “Miracles occur in the world with God’s will. Not all of them are recorded, not all of them are noted by men. But without the Lord’s miracles, what are we in the world? Today, Brother Sozont, another has occurred, and they will continue to occur. In my life, this is the second,” I whispered, falling asleep, “the first being the Peresopnytska Gospel. I am saddened that you are unable to record this in your Cheti-Minei. But I have learned one thing: they are performed not by mortal, corruptible men, even if they lead a pious life, but by the Lord. Beyond God, Brother, there are no miracles, never were, never will be. But you, too, had somehow expressed this.”

“Amen,” Sozont’s voice, invisible in the darkness and in the world, said. “Now you have recounted your miracle to me...”

I awoke in the morning wholly refreshed. I foraged some more mushrooms on the islet. I cooked them and was invigorated. Then I stood on shore, gazing.

Before me stretched an expanse of limitless morass. I gazed upon it already fearlessly: I was certain that I would be able to cross it. Though I would be dishonest if I did not admit: a small worm of fear did, indeed, nibble at me. The source of the path was marked: here the grass was trimmed and a small stick stuck out. My raiment had not so much dried overnight, as stiffened—I was covered in muddy slime. I prayed before setting out: “I praise You, Benevolent One, I glorify You, Almighty, that You did not disgrace me above others, undeserving, sinful servant though I am. Heeding my prayers, You plenish my spirit with Your presence. Bless my further trek, which I chose, but upon which You directed me, for in life You dwell, not in death. Grant me strength to overcome this morass of life which has sullied me, and out of which I will to emerge with a cleansed spirit. Underfoot, lay a firm path for me, so that I, a small worm of this earth, will not doubt and will not waste the strength by You endowed. I have faith in it, as I do in You, and in Your Guiding Light!”

And again I stepped into the mud, but with greater confidence and persistence. And though the route was longer than yesterday’s, it was easier. And even as not once I lost my way, fell, got stuck, swam, searching for support, but the farther I got, the greater the joy that embraced me. And only now I understood: being close to the Eye of the Abyss, I felt its gravity, its proximity, it was behind my back, breathing at me, stretching its gauzy tentacles towards me. I felt some of them, like leeches sucking at me, not releasing me; in pain I detached them, they were like

clinging leeches. Blood flowed out of me, as did my strength. But the farther I retreated from it, the less I felt the Eye of the Abyss after me, especially that which breathed poisonous vapors into me, stupefying me, captivating me, stripping me of my faculties, luring me into its endlessness, pulling me therein forcefully: it was so reluctant to lose yet another sacrifice. But I did not wish to become its victim. I scrambled out of it, like out of quagmire. The farther I retreated, the more I tore myself from its feelers, and my feet from its countless mouths hidden in the mud. Puking its essence out of me I walked, walked, walked stubbornly, drearily, with a flame burning in my head and a sprouted lily in my soul. I could not, nor did I want to stop, or look around, for were I to look around, I know not, if I would not have turned into a salt pillar. That is to say, I would not be able to overcome the force, which I do not understand, the gravity, which is unknowable. I walked because I had to walk and I had faith in my “have to.” I walked because I did not believe in the endlessness and bottomlessness of the abyss, believing, instead, that the Eye has a bottom. It is not omnipresent. It is limited. Even its power is not limitless. And if it is, it can be vanquished.

So that I looked around only after I definitely succeeded in crossing the swamp and when my feet stepped not onto an island in the midst of the swamp, but onto firm ground, larger than this swamp. Still, looking around, I could not suppress a scream. Horror wrenched it out of me.

In the middle of the swamp stood an enormous globe: milky, half-limpid, a black, obscure pupil in its center. It appeared to me that that lake, known as the Eye of the Abyss and which lay flat over earth had flopped over, standing upright. With its endless darkness that Eye stared at me, smoky tufts rising from its milky surface, as if it were on fire. Perchance, it was on fire, for I believe I saw flashes of flames in it. My hair stood on end, and I screamed. It was not a scream of horror, but a scream of damnation. And my shriek became like a sharp lance cast by a warrior. And that lance flew through the space which divided us, striking the transparent black pupil, becoming stuck in it. And blood trickled out of that Eye. Lifeless blood, of which I wished to be free.

EPILOGUE

I was able to muster enough strength to reach the village Turchynka, that same Turchynka which had been ravaged by tartars. Here I was laid up with swamp fever, as it was known among the peasants. I shivered. I hallucinated. Each succeeding morning washed most of the phantoms away, and I welcomed three such mornings in Turchynka. Slowly, I regained my senses. The peasant who out of Christian compassion took me in was very surprised to hear that I had crossed the swamp alone, with no guide, saying simply that God preserved me.

Barely mended, I set out for Zhytomyr. I walked the route not three days, as we had before, but a good five—I had little strength. When I counted all the days, I was surprised to note that since we undertook our journey, amazingly few days had passed: three days of trekking to Turchynka, two days crossing the swamp, two days on the island. So that with my fellow travelers Sozont and Pavlo, we had spent only a week journeying together. It had seemed to me that long years had passed. But if you take into account that it took me two days to cross the swamp, four days I was laid up in Turchynka, five days - to reach Zhytomyr—four I walked and a fifth was spent at Father Ivan’s, at whose place we had stopped, in Cherniakhiv—here I was talked into resting a bit. So that all together I had spent eighteen days journeying. In Cherniakhiv I briefly recounted to Father Ivan what had transpired. He was horrified. I asked to confess my sins to him, and he granted absolution saying that I had not sinned. I considered that to be not so—at the time Sozont and I had embarked upon our return across the Eye of the Abyss, it behooved me to insist on my walking behind the stretcher. Perhaps in that way, I would have

been able to save Sozont. Recounting to Father Ivan what had happened to us, I laid out only credible facts, not touching upon Sozont's surmising and not undertaking a more detailed description or availing my own conjecturing, nor blaming anyone. So that I said that the Eye of the Abyss had swallowed Kuzma and Sozont, while Pavlo was bitten by a viper. But in his simpleness, after lending an attentive ear, Father Ivan asked me anyway: "Was there no one's ill will in all of that?"

"I fear judging, Father," I said, "not to fall into greater sin. Besides, I must still reflect upon it all in good faith."

Both Father Ivan and his plump panimatka were determined to capture and butcher a goose for me, but I dissuaded them, explaining that I was quite exhausted, that lately I had been taking only morsels. Rich food might harm me. Upon thinking a bit, Father Ivan agreed, though his lads were ready for the chase. So that on that day I was given milk to drink, honey, bread, and light foods to eat. I was sufficiently fortified and the road from Cherniakhiv to Zhytomyr was easier to endure. Father Ivan was so amiable, that he accompanied me along with his lads to the edge of town. Parting, he embraced me and said: "May the Lord protect you! I had always considered that Mykyta to be a frivolous man!"

A second time I related what had happened face to face to Father Hryhori in Zhytomyr already, copiously this time, not concealing Sozont's suspicions and conjectures. That is to say, I recounted what the deacon had willed me to—Sozont's mental record which I had carried in my mind, not offering any of my own suppositions this time, either.

Father Hryhori said that he needs to reflect thoroughly about that, which he has heard, dismissing me to regain my strength. It turned out that the abbot, not waiting for my return ("Why?" I wondered in my thoughts), had summoned his pupil Petro to Zhytomyr either for a trial or to assist me in scribing the Zhytomyr Gospel. Petro had already begun working ("Did Father Hryhori expect that I might not return," I asked myself in my thoughts, "or had he lost all faith in my skill?"). The abbot as if overheard me thinking, saying that if I wish, I would be able to design the Zhytomyr Gospel, but my successors must be taken care of. My considerable training and artistry are not to remain only in me, but must be handed down to apprentices for it to endure through time.

Right away I wanted to look at pupil Petro's work, but a fainting spell suddenly overtook me—I still hadn't rested from the road. The abbot sent me away to sleep soundly, to restore my strength, that is to say, I was entirely free until I regain my senses. Meantime, he will rightly reflect about what I had recounted—there was abundant time. I had nowhere to hasten. He helped me get to my cell, summoning a novice, for it became apparent that I could not walk unaided. They led me, holding me under my arms. They put me to bed. At once I sank into the dark abyss of sleep. I slept so soundly, that I dreamed no dreams, as if had I vanished off this earth. I slept thus two nights and two days. Towards evening, I awoke. Golden evening light filled my lodging.

The abbot was sitting next to my bed. He smiled joyfully when I opened my eyes.

"You are finally awake," he said. "I began worrying about you."

And he gave me a refreshing herb to drink. It helped. It cleared the stupor after my long repose. I was able to sit up on my cot.

"Is everything alright?" the abbot inquired.

"Yes, Father," I replied. "It seems, though, as if that journey had been a difficult, freakish dream."

"I've had time to reflect upon all you related, and here is what I believe: you must execute

Deacon Sozont's testament."

"In what way?" I asked.

"By recording all that you have seen and experienced, concealing nothing, to the last detail. I shall convey that document to the metropolitan, to confer with him."

"It would take a long while," said I. "What about scribing the Gospel?"

"Are you prepared, have you the strength for scribing and painting the Gospel?" Father Hryhori asked.

"I know not," I said. "I am wasted and spent. How is the apprentice, Petro?"

"I am astonished at Petro's ability and artistry," the abbot said. "You could encourage him with advice."

So that I had been as if deterred from scribing and painting the Zhytomyr Gospel. I felt no bitterness, however.

"I would like to look at Petro's work," I said.

"On the morrow you shall see," the abbot said. "Don't get out of bed today. You will be brought food directly."

Food was brought, and after eating, at once I sank into slumber, and when I surfaced out of it in the morning, I felt wholly refreshed and rested, though I felt a mild tremor in my hands and torso.

The first thing I did, I went to look at Petro's work. And here again I was stunned: Petro was sitting in a spacious, brightly lit cell, completely immersed in his work. When he raised his head to the creaking of the door, it seemed I saw myself in a strange looking glass, for that was me, exactly, but not the I of today, rather the I of the day when I had embarked upon scribing the Peresopnytska Gospel. I had seen this pupil in Peresopnytsia once. He had eagerly observed me at work, assisting me a bit, so that he was familiar with me. Springing to his feet, he rushed out from behind the table and bowed to me, pressing my hand.

"I am so fortunate, Master," he said, "that you have dropped in on me, unworthy though I am!"

I then looked through his illustrations and proof sheets for the prospective book. They were designed in my style, though his hand was evident, as was his sensibility and way of seeing.

"Do you remember the Peresopnytska Gospel?" I asked.

"How is it possible to forget?" the apprentice said enthusiastically, besides which, his enthusiasm was genuine. "According to me, it is heaven in artistry!"

"Do not blaspheme!" I cut him off. "Things devised by man are imperfect, insignificant."

"Forgive me, Master!" Pavlo bowed meekly. "I wanted to say: your work is an example of perfection for me, and I do not say this as flattery. I wish to achieve your mastery at least in small measure."

"That is what is wrong!" I said. "In imitating you will not attain a high standard, reaching only a low grade. The pupil who does not aspire to surpass his master is a poor pupil."

"Is it possible to surpass the Peresopnytska Gospel in artistry?" the pupil asked, moving only his lips.

"Everything can be surpassed," I said, "for man, as I have said, does not know perfection. But to reach heights, be yourself, not somebody's copy."

"I have thought about this," Petro said. "But without superior exemplars, one cannot establish oneself."

"You speak well," I said. "But do not extol those models. For models are not to be exalted—God is. Follow Him, heed Him, and from models learn not to imitate anything nor anyone."

“About this, too, I have thought,” the pupil said. “But my hand and senses are still fragile. Models are like supporting canes for me.”

“The faster you get rid of supporting canes, the faster you will stand on your own feet, standing firmer.”

“I shall do as you say, Master,” he bowed lightly. “At least I have a great desire for that.”

I gave him a few more recommendations, pointed out defects in his illustrations, in the way he scribed letters, and departed, satisfied. And not because he had flattered me, but because he had reminded me of my youth so acutely. My conversation with him in fact reminded me of my conversation with my instructor, the great master of calligraphy and drawing Ihnati, with whom I had studied, and, too, because I sensed in this lad power and perseverance, not sufficiently demonstrated yet, though palpable. I knew from Abbot Hryhori that Petro toils all day, forgetting to eat, even his duty at divine office, for which the abbot had reprimanded him more than once, though he did not punish him. Father Hryhori was a wise and benevolent spiritual father. He knew how to value and support talent, as he had at one time with me. That is why I believed that under the abbot’s guidance, this youth could develop into an adept artist, and may the Lord aid him in his indefatigable labor. I had always considered myself an unworthy instrument in the hands of God; He sees my sins, and may He forgive them, though one sin, spread widely among men, possessed especially among artisans, I did not possess—envy towards others. I had always considered envy to be a mark of spiritual paltriness. Zoil envied Homer because he was incapable and did not expect to reach his heights; Homer had no basis to envy Zoil.

At once I went to Abbot Hryhori, sharing my thoughts about Petro. I spoke about the fact that I am resigning from scribing the Zhytomyr Gospel, for I am not ready to work, and the matter cannot wait. So that I agreed to execute another duty—to record everything I had experienced along the journey and what Deacon Sozont had deposited in my mind. But I had two requests of the abbot: before embarking upon this not insignificant piece of work, to allow me, after adequate rest, after my strength is restored, to go to Peresopnytsia. Ten years have passed since I completed the Gospel, and my soul ached to see it yet once more. The reason is quite simple. I said to Abbot Hryhori: every artist is afflicted with exaggerated estimations of his creations and often is unable to evaluate himself accordingly, dispassionately, thus falling into the sin of arrogance, having no basis for that. Hence, my brethren need from time to time to in all modesty examine ourselves, for if something dishonorable had been created, and the deficient is elevated to eminence, he deserves pity; when he becomes persuaded that his work is imperfect, his spirit will be fortified. Before embarking on my own work, my spirit needs, by all means, to be fortified. Once I feel that my labor into which I had invested all of myself and into which I had expended all my energy and strength is undeserving, may I be excused from my duty: I shall enter sacred indolence, repenting before the Lord for my arrogance, ending my dishonorable life in prayer.

“Go, my son,” Father Hryhori said, “and may the Lord bless you. I expect you will return with your spirit restored. But do not fall into useless self-degradation, which can be worse than arrogance.”

“May the Lord’s will prevail, not yours,” I stated.

And I went to Peresopnytsia. I cannot say this route was easy for me. I was still weak. Thus, I did not hasten. Fortunately for me, I came across a caravan driving steers to Poland, and I joined them—I continued in a carriage.

Princess Kateryna Chartoryska greeted me graciously, saying that fame about my Gospel had spread throughout the land. Distinguished nobility comes to view it, and that is why for a

time she had taken the book out of the monastery to hold it. Besides that, a trained calligrapher and illustrator is working for her now, copying it for one of her kin.

I met the copyist—this was Father Dymytri, a serious, capable man. I was, by the way, briefly acquainted with him earlier; peculiar to his skill was his great ability to accurately imitate what had been scribed and painted by others, being entirely incapable of creating anything of his own.

Thus, the moment of standing fact to face with my offspring ensued, and slowly, attentively, I leafed through the book, reviewing, examining myself and attempting to view my work through the eyes of a stranger, a spirit aloof. And what I saw astonished me. What is more, it gladdened me, saddening me just a bit: I found insignificant faults, as I mentioned, though in general, the work was worthy. This is what gladdened me. Something other saddened me: I saw and sensed, in fact, that I will never effect anything better, finer, more perfect. I will, that is, be unable to muster such might—erupting in such a flood of colors, lines, and ornaments. I will never again scribe such letters, each possessing inconceivable beauty and refinement. There were moments when I could not believe that this marvel in front of me is an achievement of my hands; indeed, it was not I who had created it—I was an instrument in the Lord's hands. Thus, sitting by a window flooded generously with sunlight, I suddenly heard the voice of Mykyta, hoarse but powerful, full of inner conviction and acrimony: "Your sin lies in that you love the beauty of the world, serving that mammon; the beauty of the world is one of the Devil's most favored demons: and though you scribed Scriptures, it was the Devil lighting your candle, not God. Holy Scriptures do not need calligraphy, splendid illustrations and ornaments. It is grand and fine in its content, and that suffices!"

Listening to that voice, I gazed at this remarkable achievement of my hands. And the voice faded and faded and not completing the accusation, it failed in mid-word, then vanished.

And then I heard Sozont's voice saying: "The abyss forms when man stops seeing white as white, black as black, instead naming white—black, and black—white, love is labeled hate, and hate—love, that is to say, dishonors the Lord's commandments, substituting them with this own. That is when blasphemy and profanity set in. As you die, do not wish for the world, with its beauty, its creatures to perish—pray for the blind, those bearing night within them to cross over into day, that is, to mature into loving kindness. Believe that earth's beauty is God's image in it, and freakishness—the background over which God is perceived, and the fleetingness of beauty—the background over which eternity is discovered."

I sat, rigid. Those words echoed clearly, distinctly, wholly opposite to each other, Mykyta's and Sozont's, and I could not place a pebble on one or the other plate of the scale. And again my eyes fell upon the Peresopnytska Gospel, and I whispered: "Who darkness is, may he be darkness, who light is, may he be light; nocturnal birds have no desire to fly in daylight, the fowl of light sleeps when darkness falls. For the nocturnal bird the moon is its sun, and for the bird of day, the sun, not the moon. Day would be indistinguishable without night, and the other way around. All is strangely inter-connected in an odd dependency, illuminating and overshadowing one another. In this lies not the abyss, but the truth, though man's reason cannot reach the bottom of that truth. For the mystery of God lies at the bottom, and it is unknowable."

I felt stronger in spirit. Not a useless thing I created—it is indispensable for goodness. That is why Father Dymytri is copying it, and apprentice Petro is inspired by it, and refreshed, is producing the feat of his life. Which means that the remains of my achievement are nourishing a newly-roused bud.

Here is how Sozont expressed it: "Know that the loving kindness created by you in the

world is a sprout developing from rotted flesh into a future bud. Know that your matter shall be cast out, but without it a seed shall not sprout, for your matter is God's creation, as is the world."

The power of those words was confirmed as I reviewed the Peresopnytska Gospel.

I had nothing further to effect in Peresopnytsia. Thus, I returned to Zhytomyr. After, for long months I secluded myself from the world, writing this book. But before this, I asked Father Hryhori permission to write it not in simple entries, but artistically, with illustrations, ornaments. So that I entered one section of it as a draft copy, later copying it calligraphically, coloring it. And the flame of creation rekindled in me: I not only wrote this Gospel of the new day, but painted much and inspired. I rendered the Eye of the Abyss which I had envisioned on Mykyta's island. I included my fellow travelers, Mykyta with his disciples, Marta, Musi the dwarf, the crippled and freakish, the imaginary beast that had supposedly lived in the lake was there, devouring the sacrifices cast it; birch trees, aspens in the mud, snakes, outcroppings, clumps of cattails, the hut atop the pole—everything, everything my eye had seen, that had solidified into an image was in it. So that I burned with ardor exactly as I had while designing the Peresopnytska Gospel, even as the likenesses, paintings, lines and ornaments were dissimilar. As if here, another man created.

Apprentice Petro burned with similar ardor while creating the Zhytomyr Gospel.

I visited him at times, and we led long discourses about creativity. Petro displayed intelligence; he absorbed my instruction as if imbibing it; in the end, I could no longer label him a pupil—in front of my eyes a genuine master was developing—this truly was a fresh sprout—it really did grow out of my matter. This not only gladdened me, it inspired me in my own work. Not only he quenched his thirst through me, I did likewise; his youth had an advantage over me.

So that finally I wrote my book. And at this time, one clear morning, not yet having awoken completely, I beheld a dream, or a vision. Sozont would have said it was a dream.

And I fancied that I had resolved to heed Symeon, Mykyta's disciple. I returned to the Eye of the Abyss to spend the last days of my life on the island. Already I crossed the swamp, again glimpsing the peculiar, puzzling broad surface of the lake, or pool, or eye, immersed in a flood of mud. But when I groped for the suspended tract that crosses it, I could not find the pegs which held it. Hence I decided to swim across the lake, and as I was afraid that it would swallow me as it had my fellow travelers, I cut a bunch of dry cattails, tying two bundles to my body, as the tartars did traversing rivers—and thus I swam—the bundles kept me afloat. I was approaching the dark circle in the center of the Eye of the Abyss, when blind Teodoryt stepped out onto the curving shore. On him was the same habit, though torn, worn out, through which his body shone; much like the one Kuzma had. He turned his blind eyes towards me and as if sniffed. He was tense and nettled.

"Who is there, aswim?" he shouted, excited.

"Brother Teodoryt, it is I," I responded. "Mykhailo Vasylevych, who had visited you the summer past."

I noticed, for I was close now, that the tension and arousal vanished from Teodoryt—as if he had expected something else.

"Not me you were awaiting, Brother?" I asked, approaching shore.

"Not you," Teodoryt said. "Though I am glad for any visitor."

"Why did you say: 'I am glad, not we are glad?'"

"For I am the only one here," said Teodoryt dejectedly.

"And St. Mykyta?" I asked, clambering out of the water and untying the bundles of cattails.

"St. Mykyta has died," answered Teodoryt. "If you wish, I will describe how it happened?"

“I am glad to listen,” I said, catching my breath. For that, I stooped in the grass.

“He died when Symeon and Marta abandoned the island. Actually, Symeon abandoned it, and Marta set off after him. For some reason, he had feared you, Brother Mykhailo...”

“Was he afraid that I had not perished in the swamp, that I would reach land?”

“You know of it?” Teodoryt asked, smiling sadly. “He did not expect you to return. He feared his artifice would become known... Several days later, Heorhii and Nykyfor set off after him, for they were not Mykyta’s disciples, but Symeon’s. Ievahrii, Antonii and I were Mykyta’s. But Ievahrii did not last with us, and left, as well.”

“Is that when Mykyta died?” I asked.

“Has someone told you the story already?” Teodoryt asked.

“No, Brother,” I said. “But I am aware that Mykyta was very ill last summer already.”

“But no one knew of that!” Teodoryt exclaimed.

“He showed us his body covered with abscesses,” I said, “the night of Pentecost, when he came down.”

“One day, on Friday, the rooster crowed to rouse us at morningtide; for the sermon it did not crow.”

“For Mykyta was that rooster,” I said.

“You know that, too?” Teodoryt shuddered.

“Sozont had surmised it and had told me about it.”

“Symeon was much afraid of your Sozont... He thought he was sent here to spy.”

“I know,” I sighed. “That is why the Eye of the Abyss swallowed him. Continue.”

“The crippled and freakish assembled,” Teodoryt recounted, “and Antonii and I, but Mykyta remained silent. He had not thrown back the curtains. Then I climbed up the pole. But it was quiet. ‘Father, bless us,’ I said, ‘for folks are waiting below.’ He did not answer. And again I said: ‘Why, Father, do you not answer your child?’ He was quiet. A wild thought flashed through my mind. Being sinful, I thought the righteous one had fled the island with his spineless disciples. I started groping around and came across the blessed one. He stood, as if in prayer, his arms folded across his chest. I was gladdened, for I thought, he is standing, therefore, if he is standing, he must be alive. And I said: ‘Have I offended you, Father?’ He was silent. Then I said: ‘At least extend your hand, let me kiss it.’ But there was no answer. And I thought: could it be, that he had departed to the Lord? I inclined an ear, there was no breath, a dense odor of decay emanated from him, though that should not have been: at morningtide he was still crowing like a rooster. Then I realized that he had reposed in the Lord, so I laid his body which had been propped up against the pole, down, and wept bitterly. This, Brother Mykhailo, is how he departed...”

“Was he buried or cast into the Eye of the Abyss?” I inquired.

“You see, this you do not know. We buried him next to his mother.”

“Sozont doubted that there had been a mother.”

“Why did he doubt?”

“For the story about the mother, as all the other stories about his life were taken from the Chronicle of Symeon the Pole-sitter of yore.”

“I do not know,” Teodoryt stated. “Being blind, I did not see his mother, but everyone said she existed, died and is buried here.”

“What happened next?” I asked.

“After, the crippled and freakish left the island. Antonii guided them across the Eye of the Abyss and across the swamp. He told me to go, too, but I decided to stay.”

“Why did you decide to stay?” I asked, feeling sadness, too.

“I expect Marta to return here.”

“Why do you expect that?”

“Symeon was brutal and merciless towards her. I said to her: once you recover your senses, come back. I shall wait for you.”

“What would happen then?”

“Then I would build a home here, and we would live in love and harmony.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes!” Teodoryt replied succinctly.

“Being blind, how would you be able to build a home?” I asked sorrowfully.

“I would build, while she, seeing, would direct me.”

“Do you know that the tract across the Eye of the Abyss is broken off?”

“Yes. Antonii told me he would disconnect it.”

“What would you eat here?”

“Oh, I would think of something. I own fishing tackle, which I have set up on the other side of the island. I have dug a well, and though the water stinks of mud, it is potable. We had grain, I planted it in spring. Orach, mushrooms grow here.”

“And in winter, what would you eat?”

“Winters, I would trek to the villages for alms, bringing them for her, the children. Not a year we have lived here—we have learned what to do.”

“And how would Marta be able to cross to you without the path, Teodoryt?”

“This, too, I have considered,” he said cheerfully, “I am building a boat—see?”

And he escorted me into the thicket. There stood a bulky object, a trough or a barrel gouged out of the trunk of an old pine tree.

“It’ll roll over,” I said.

“I will tie sheaves of cattails to the side—and it won’t roll over,” Teodoryt stated proudly. And then abruptly he asked, “Does it look like Noah’s ark?”

“Who knows, what Noah’s ark was like,” I answered evasively.

“I care only that the vessel can carry the two of us: her and me,” Teodoryt said.

“And if she does not wish to come here? How long will you wait?”

“As long as I have hope,” said Teodoryt evenly. “I believe she will come. Where can she go in that accursed world?”

“Why are you cursing the world, not having learned enough about it?” I asked. “Perchance, it is better to return into it?”

“No,” Teodoryt declared calmly. “I know the world, and have found nothing good in it. That is why I shall not return into it. And if I did, I would never be able to find Marta in it, and she would not know where I am. This way, I have hope.”

“You could wait for her here, returning into the world together. You could build a house among people—it is easier to live collectively.”

“Into the world of enticements and blunders? No! I wish to be a new Adam, settled on uninhabited land, bringing forth new men. Not Abel and Cain, who introduced discord, but beneficent semen.”

“Fine,” I said. “Your intent to build a home, to establish a benevolent family is charming to me. You will at the same time bring life into this dead place. And when you cease hoping?”

“For that, too, I have an answer,” Teodoryt smiled. “Then I will ascend Mykyta’s pole awaiting disciples while praying to God and mortifying my loathsome body. And once disciples

arrive, folks will visit here with their offerings. But I will not do as Symeon had done—the Lord will punish me.”

And he straightened out proudly in front of me: handsome, like an angel, though with inanimate eyes and an inert face. He stood, glowing in the sun, as if hewn out of a golden-barked pine tree, confident in himself, and therefore, lifeless.

“If you wish,” his lips moved importantly, “and once you are here, let us leave Marta be. You can become my first disciple.”

And he stretched his hand towards me, pointing at me pompously...

I awoke. Actually, I emerged from the vision. I know not, whether it was real and if on that island near the Eye of the Abyss everything transpired as I had fancied. Likewise I know not, whether this was a voice or summons for me, but I had no desire to embark onto that island. But then, I thought, perchance I should take advantage of the vision’s effect, becoming Teodoryt’s disciple, but in something other: to find somewhere in the world a suitable location and build a home for myself, awaiting the moment when a creature dear to me will cross the threshold. She must, like I, be wandering somewhere. For every person, they say, has a pair? And though I firmly did not wish that, it captivated me in its own way.

I shut my eyes, hoping to envision my own home. Instead, I beheld the Peresopnytska Gospel. Once again slowly, admiring each page, I leafed through it in my mind. And my soul was at peace. The kind of peace that ensues when upon awakening in a room awash in sunlight, you suddenly realize that each newborn day is a gift from God.

I opened my eyes. My cell was brimming with a flood of brilliant morning sun.