

Eye of the Abyss

Valerii Shevchuk

CHAPTER ONE

We met in Zhytomyr, in a monastery situated outside of town, down by the river Teteriv: I, Mykhailo Vasylevych, calligrapher and illuminator (he who had scribed and painted first in the village of Dvirtsi in the same region, and then in Peresopnytsia the Gospel, having transcribed it to the vernacular, which was edited, later, by Archimandrite Hryhorii from Peresopnytsia); Sozont, a deacon from Kyiv, and Pavlo, a friar from the Carpathian mountains, who walked to Kyiv to pay homage to the relics of the holy fathers of the Monastery of the Caves, which is where he encountered Sozont. Together they arrived in Zhytomyr, where we all met. In Zhytomyr, too, I set about scribing and designing the Gospel. The work did not progress with the same divine inspiration as it had in Dvirtsi or Peresopnytsia, however—it seems I was spent at that point, which means: I was drained. Here I toiled in languor. After each completed page I was exhausted, my fingers felt numb, my eyes would not stay open—it was as if my hand had lost its habitual ease in scripting and skill in painting. This obviously meant that I should put aside my work for some time, so that the well of my soul could be replenished with spiritual water. Without this spring, man becomes dried up and petty, incapable of any deeds or accomplishments; these thoughts I shared frankly with Hryhorii, who had arrived in Zhytomyr with me, since we worked well together.

“It is not fitting,” said Hryhorii, “that your work should bring bitterness into your life, as was the case for the Israelites in Egypt. For when one’s labor causes resentment, it is slave labor, not the God-inspired labor of love. What good can one glean from slave labor?”

“I feel hollow, like a vessel with no water,” I remarked.

“So replenish the water,” Hryhorii answered curtly, and with that he set me free.

That is when God brought Sozont and Pavlo to our monastery. Pavlo was on his way back to his native Carpathians but wanted to digress by way of Polissia, where a certain Mykyta the Pole-Sitter had recently taken refuge in the woods, so people said, in a hut fashioned atop two cut pines, and prayed unceasingly to God. The news of his miraculous deeds spread throughout the land; that is why people came to him from all directions.

And thus, on his homeward route, Pavlo planned to take a detour, to turn to the hermit Mykyta for advice about his malady, as well as to behold him. I believe he persuaded Sozont, who was in the process of compiling a contemporary *Cheti-Minei*, that is to say, he intended to write not about the venerable saints, but stories about real people, because he thought, as Sozont himself told me, that if the Lord, in fact, performs miracles with the hands of mortals, then those miracles should take place not only in ancient times, when faith in the Lord was being established and embraced entire realms, but also now, when miracles are referred to as fables and when beliefs have multiplied into such a variety of unorthodox philosophies; and all these tenets, claimed Sozont, are symptoms of an ailing soul. Men who espouse unorthodox philosophies dwell in vapidness, and therefore in uncertainty, and uncertainty is the first step in the destruction of intellectual constructs. Admittedly, these words impressed me, as I was such a one who often questioned the principal values of our existence. When this happens, I become ineffectual, listless, lethargic, unenthusiastic, everything in the world seems artificial and senseless, human activity appears ghostly, futility reigns. But I do not believe that Satan enters the soul at that point—for that is, after all, how Christianity wills us to perceive life: as transient mortality, as vanity of vanities, where everything is as fleeting and mutable as grass, as blossoms that wither at the end of the day, and where only one lady rules supreme—Death. She lies in wait every year: every year, every month, every day, every minute, to transmute us into ashes, and our deeds as well, as she bridges the span between existence and immortality.

Precisely at the moment when such thoughts occur to me, my work begins to poison my life, and from a fastidious craftsman of exquisite calligraphy and ornament I become a futile good-for-nothing, incapable of wagging a finger. That is when the Eye of the Abyss appears before me. It, that Eye, materializes in a horrible apparition, it takes aim at me, as if an arrow on the taut string of a bow poised to launch and, whistling, to enter my heart; it is the moon in the night, casting beams of light, each gleam like that arrow; it is the sun at noon, piercing my wretched body with golden spears; it watches my every move, every act, gliding behind me, guarding my every step; it is a spider that has spread its web, preparing to spurt poison at whoever will become entrapped; it invades my dreams and shatters them, scattering them like shards of a broken glass; it is, finally, like Death—that link between life and eternity; it is my heart, pumping blood through my veins ever and ever more slowly, until the blood thickens and gels. I become like jelly then, and my metamorphosed, gelatinous body might dissolve at any moment; the bones soften, the brain flattens like a cloud in the sky, wherein thunder hides, and lightning and rain, and the rays of the sun. It stares at me, that Eye of the Abyss, through female and male eyes, and their malevolent gaze begins to frighten me; it is like a window-pane, bleeding with a crimson sunset or sunrise; it is an animal that scares

by appearing suddenly before you; a dog, gnashing its teeth, glaring at you with blood-thirsty eyes; a hog, a bull, a rooster or a goose—in other words, it inhabits everything, everywhere. And I, jelly-like, am aware that only my calculated vigilance keeps me in this world, for otherwise I would melt and spill into a putrid puddle, never again possessing enough strength to collect my juices, that is to say, to be able to reason and create freely. It was at such moments that I would realize that I, the world, world events, and even spiritual affairs were all futile.

But other experiences defined me as well. There were moments, days, weeks, months, even years when I knew myself differently: as a being brimming with sun. It filled me with light and energy, as if with sparkling spring water. I felt it in every fiber of my being. At such moments the arrow on the bow of time did not target me, rather, I was the one aiming, and the drawn twine rang melodiously and warmly in my ears; the moon's luminosity did not frighten me then, for I, too, felt luminous, and the trees, drenched in moonlight, seemed to blossom; the grass, the earth and buildings cast a mysterious, blue glow; my entire being hummed, absorbing streams of radiance. Every muscle and extremity in my body sang, surrendering to my will without complaint. At such moments the ever-present seeker that followed me quietly in times of weakness disappeared, and I became the seeker, as the world awed me with its singular splendor. All around me, everything became beautiful: the bend of the path in the grass, the warm tones of the wildflowers, the glimmer of the lake, the leafy garb of trees, the dew, the line of a limb, the curious weave of branches, the shape of a leaf, the elegant sway of stalks, the earthen tones, the color of the sky, of clothes, women's eyes, their soft, tender voices, the gleam in men's eyes, and the grace in human and animal forms—at those moments I did not wonder about the transience of ever-changing existence, since beauty had so many unique, delicious yet elusive contours, so many permeations, endlessly and infinitely unknowable, that it was impossible not to see signs of immortality. And this eternity was not nonexistence, but existence. And I questioned the timelessness of nonexistence, because when you believe that that which is not is eternal, then the value of that immortality is conditional. At the same time, the timelessness of beauty was visible, visibly perceived and visibly understood. In a spider's web I observed a wondrous, exquisite design; I marveled at the gentle rotundity of its little form, the whimsy in the angles of its legs. What a delightful outline its form sketched. How miraculously a bird's feathers fit next to each other, and what brilliant patterns the colors create. It is then that I sensed that my eyes are fluttering, grazing on the shapes and tones of a living world; that my fingers are capable of astonishing creations and that my body is not gelatin that might dissolve, but a vessel for life-giving water. I was overwhelmed with this sensation in 1556 in the village of Dvirtsi, when I embarked on scribing and illuminating the Gospel. All those designs, weaves, ornamental frames, and

intertwining of lines were inspired by nature, and when I sketched, I first applied pigment to a panel of linden wood, following the dictates of the iconographers, while at the same time taking liberties with the placement of color. As a result, without overstepping canonical dictates, my icons were luminous and vibrant—I was careful to convey the presence of God in our resplendent world with its endless beauty. Thereafter, I copied the picture onto parchment, where it looked even better, since, while I drew, I felt an incandescence oozing from my eyes and fingertips, and that life-giving water, which filled me, spilled into the pigment, the design, the lines; each letter I scribed possessed, to me, its specific charm of endless beauty, and when, exhausted, empty-headed, and weak after a day's work, I fell into bed, I brimmed with happiness, my heart was washed with a cool, invigorating spring, continuously restoring my entire being; and my dreams were not torn apart, thrown asunder, like shards from a broken glass, but duplicated a likeness of a world visibly magnificent, luminescent—my dreams led me to sacred levels, where I saw silhouettes of lovely outlines. And a sacred truth unfolded before me: there is beauty in a tree, but there is also beauty in the shadow of a tree; there is beauty in grass, but also in the spaces between the blades; in solid objects, but also in the open air, defined by surrounding objects; there is likewise beauty in letters as well as in the spaces between them, in the margins between the lines, in the knots of capital letters and the proportions in them.

So what did I doubt? I challenged that which I could not prove adequately: does the spirit of the Lord inhabit me when I love the world, or when I despise it—that is, when I become inspired by beauty, or when I view beauty as compost and a vessel for mortality? Or was it when I burned with the lofty flame of fine art and myself became a creator of immortal beauty, or when beauty and the world seemed to me to be the embodiment of vanity? Or when the Eye of the Abyss stared at me, or when it was absent; or in the end when Death seemed to me to be that link between a futile and transient world and eternity, or was it when she seemed to be a servant to the one who despises the world—the devil? That is to say, this is what I doubted: is the devil God's adversary or His instrument to be used in testing us? And finally, who impregnated me with this uncertainty?

CHAPTER TWO,
which describes my fellow travelers

I called on Archimandrite Hryhorii to receive his blessings for a pilgrimage. I determined the course for the journey thus: visit Mykyta the Pole-Sitter and witness his wondrous deeds, then onward to Volyn—my father’s old archpriestly parish—to pay tribute to his and mother’s gravesites. From there I wanted to stop over in Dvirtsi and Peresopnytsia, and possibly in Ostroh. Thereafter, return to Zhytomyr, hopefully having gained strength in body and spirit, and having benefited from new insights, for what Father Hryhorii called replenishing the “wellspring.”

“Why are you so curious about Mykyta?” the archimandrite asked me a bit suspiciously.

“They say he’s a present-day miracle worker,” I replied.

“The Lord alone works wonders,” said Father Hryhorii, quoting Psalms, “not man, certainly.”

“Man’s steps are ordained by the Lord,” quoted I, from Proverbs.

“Do not let man prevail,” said Father Hryhorii, again referring to the Book of Psalms—this citing of Scriptures was our favorite method of discourse.

“There is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge, and skill,” I responded with a line from Ecclesiastes.

“Beware of evil persons,” said Father Hryhorii and proceeded to bless me, though from his words I concluded that he had little faith in Mykyta’s miraculous deeds.

Nevertheless, I wanted to satisfy my curiosity about Mykyta and his miraculous acts—this would serve to fortify my skeptical spirit, and in the end, to a degree, to restore me. To be more precise, I yearned for a wondrous event. I longed to be awed by something; since my soul, I avow, was weary and dimmed. Father Hryhorii, being wise, I believe, understood me. He smiled faintly and said: “Go ye with God, Brother! Standing water stagnates, becomes putrid. It transforms fresh water into mud, obstructing its streams. I am surprised that you seek clear springs amid the marshes. To be clear, water must flow.”

These words were full of import, though at the time I failed to comprehend them. Suffice it to say that the archimandrite did not forbid me to go. So gladly, with some trepidation, I dressed in pilgrim attire, exactly like my future fellow travelers Sozont and Pavlo. The linen mantle was black, capeless, that is to say, not sectioned in half; tightly stitched, with narrow sleeves, similar to a deacon’s cassock—pilgrims don this cloak over their usual garb, covering it. Over the chest a cross is hung; the waist is girded with a leather or cord belt, and a gourd, for water, is hung at the side. A pouch, filled with food and necessities, is carried over the shoulders. I added a short cape to protect my shoulders from rain. The burlap sack I

brought was coated with wax—it looked like black leather; my feet were shod in tightly-laced sandals, and on my head was a black helmet, with a wide, round brim. In our hands we held solid, shoulder-high blackened staffs. We needed to dress this way to be identified as pilgrims, and thus to be treated accordingly; this protected us from abuse by the authorities, and proved that we were not untrustworthy. A number of vagrants roamed the roads and not all of them were harmless. We hoped to be ensured a safe journey.

Deacon Sozont was a strongly-built fellow. At forty-two, his beard was already white around the edges, as was his thick, black hair; his head appeared unkempt. And from under this mop, a wide, bill-like nose emerged. His dark, fiery eyes gazed out, perhaps, too piercingly; their expression bespoke a considerable intellect. So that, outwardly, Sozont appeared to be a man of strict habits, possibly even saintly, and at first I thought he was one of those who place cruel demands not only on themselves, but even more so on others, so when others don't adapt to their terms, they are bitterly rebuked (I think that is sinful). Later, I realized how deceitful one's appearance can be. To be sure, his intent to write a *Cheti-Minei* was altogether virtuous, but as far back as Zhytomyr, after a series of conversations, I became convinced that it was more an *idée fixe* than a serious endeavor, based on a simple fact: though Sozont wanted to prove to himself that miracles occur in his day, and though he diligently collected evidence about miraculous incidents, recording them scrupulously, his attitude, nevertheless, was one of debilitating suspicion. He never, therefore, accepted the accounts of those parables as truth, and needed to travel to those places, where the purported miracle occurred, and, like a king's bailiff, conducted rigorous investigations and inquiry according to law—he practiced law prior to becoming a member of the clergy and served in municipal court, until he became sickened with the world and withdrew to serve the Lord. The thing is, having lived in a world of crime, transgressions, quarrels, attacks, lawsuits, and libel, his mind had become muddled, at which point an itinerant monk convinced him that it is selflessness that offers an escape from ineffectual deeds. Life, in other words, is a masterpiece of Christian existence. Christian virtue lies in imitating the life of Christ. And fulfillment, according to Christ, lies in selflessness.

Sozont obeyed Christ's teaching: "Sell your possessions, and give alms, and follow me." He sold and donated all his belongings, for as the wayfaring cleric said: "Selflessness perfects perfection and allows for perfect love, for whenever there is: 'This is mine, and that is yours;' there shall be no peace in peace." Sozont could not escape his character, however. He was a born lawyer, not a clergyman. Thus, he examined every incident of miraculous acts in detail: objectively interrogating and researching, delving for the core of truth, the result being that each of the recorded

miracles, having been subjected to harsh scrutiny, developed into a questionable matter. Lacking basic convictions, Sozont could not present it as something indisputable. As a result, I think his book will never be written, since each miracle should be perceived and understood not rationally, but through faith, and faith together with rationality is an unreliable combination. Such was the strange saintliness of Deacon Sozont. And here is where I believe he sinned before God: believing that man's intellect is a part of the great mind of God, and if so, then it is perfect, even though in Scriptures it is written not to lean on one's own understanding (Proverbs). Pavlo, on the other hand, rejected the intellect of the intelligent, and instead believed that man is confounded precisely through reason; for there is but one understanding—the understanding by virtue of faith, which means unquestionable servitude to God. I expressed my thought to Sozont in one of our conversations, to which he poured forth not a few quotations from Scriptures in defense of reason; that is, that thought and reason are divined from God, that understanding keeps us from evil (Job), and knowledge shields man (Proverbs), and blessed is he who has found understanding (also Proverbs), because through understanding the Lord established the heavens, and a reasonable man is one who learns from the Lord, inclining an ear to His teaching. After all, the Lord challenged fools to learn (again, Proverbs), claiming that by way of reason God is powerful. Man must, therefore, follow the path of learning, not of foolishness. It is not in vain that the learned are praised.

“How much better it is to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen above silver,” he said, again quoting from Solomon's Proverbs. “To the one who has it, understanding is a fountain of life and it adds learning to his lips.”

When he spoke thus, his eyes blazing, I realized that I would be incapable of persuading him otherwise, and so I ceased discoursing, although I had my misgivings even here. Knowledge can be real or imagined, and not always is man able to recognize where it is false and where real. Wisdom can be found even in foolishness, as Erasmus of Rotterdam wisely observed, and as St. Paul did long before him, and there can be foolishness in wisdom, and when the inscrutability of the world, the unknowingness of things, becomes manifest, man's intellect is simply a way, the first step in an everlasting, endless labyrinth of paths. Reason is merely a glimpse into infinity and the horror of it, since infinity cannot be comprehended, as God cannot be comprehended. The perpetual labyrinth of paths is, I believe, the definition of God.

My other debater was altogether dissimilar. Although not a youth (he was thirty), he was nevertheless child-like, with naïve, startled, kind eyes, excitable about everything; if he did not understand something, he remained silent. He doubted nothing. He believed everything. That is probably why Pavlo set out into the world: to be forever astonished and surprised. To

observe with wide-open eyes. He believed all that Sozont called tales and fables, summarizing his conviction simply: “After all, Father, all that exists is real. Even things contrived are real. The greatest nonsense, jokingly retold, is real for the simple fact that it is told. Man cannot speak about that which does not exist. For that which does not exist does not exist absolutely: one cannot even speak of it. Therefore miracles, as well as miracle workers, exist,” declared Pavlo.

He had his own odd and quixotic way of thinking, and perhaps that was why they had become friends, he and Sozont, in Kyiv; at any rate, they had embarked on this journey together, and had found me along the way. I was to stand between them, balancing their differences, although I later found that they weren’t that discordant after all; that this grown child was likewise quite wise.

I even thought that, walking together, our entire pilgrimage would evolve into an endless dispute. Along the way, however, both my fellow travelers remained silent; therefore I, too, was silent. Perhaps it was better that way. It was an arduous course, and it was hardly prudent to waste energy talking. A long, dusty path unwound before us, twisting through fields, forests, and clearings; in a strange way, we were drawn into it.

CHAPTER THREE,

which recounts our first stop in the town of Cherniakhiv

In Cherniakhiv we called upon the local priest: Father Ivan greeted us with open arms. His wife, a simple, round-faced woman, welcomed us with a warm, radiant expression. In front of the entry to the house, four grimy lads mustered themselves, staring at us with bewildered eyes, as if we were from the other world. A flock of well-fed geese waddled about in the yard. The parson's wife bid the boys to catch one of the geese. Screaming with delight, the children rushed to execute the command, scaring the poor birds to death. The geese darted about the yard in a piercing din. An unbelievable commotion ensued: each of the boys wanted to capture a goose on his own. The birds beat their wings, trying to flee. A hissing gander flew at his assailants, attacking them with his bill. Feathers scattered everywhere. Clamoring to fly, the geese flapped their wings. At last the boys cornered one of the birds, pressed it against the fence, quelled it, and wrung its neck. In a solemn procession, the boys carried the dead bird to their mother: two held it by its wings, one by its head, and the last boy by its legs.

"But Father," Sozont said, "We are simple pilgrims. Do not fuss over us."

"I do not accept guests without fuss," the priest proclaimed ceremoniously. "Once you have stepped into my yard, I will fuss."

We sat around a table in an orchard thick with cherries, plums, apples, and pears. While the goose was being prepared, glasses of milk with honey were set before us, as was a loaf of fresh, spongy bread. Here we could ask the route to Mykyta the Pole-Sitter.

"Aha! So that is where you are headed," the priest said in an enigmatic tone, gazing into the distance, over our heads. "Nowadays fewer people venture there. Before, let me tell you, we were inundated."

"Is something the matter, Father?" asked Sozont.

"Everything is fine," replied Father Ivan. "Once people are headed there, they have a need to go there; may the Lord help them in their need."

"Have you journeyed there?" I asked.

"I have no reason to go there," the priest replied. "To tell you the truth, I've known that Mykyta since he was in diapers. I christened him, in fact." We became curious.

"I am obeying a calling, Father," Sozont said. "To write a book about the saints of the day and about God-fearing, devout men. Share, if you will, what you know."

The priest put a finger in his mouth, and dug between his teeth with a fingernail.

"What can I know?" he said. "Growing up, he was, so to say, a lazybones; neither godly nor worldly. He didn't want to work, so he got it into his head that, Lord forgive me, he was, so to say, not of this world. Pray

tell,” the priest continued, squinting slyly, “are you going to, so to say, lead him out of the murky water?”

“I go to see what I can see,” said Sozont. “Who were his parents?”

“Semen and Varvara. Good people, I must say!” He slid a finger into his mouth again. “My tooth aches,” he explained. “Do any of you blessed men have anything that can help me with that?”

We did not have anything for a toothache.

“Did the boy attempt any book learning?” Sozont inquired.

“His education consisted of hogs... sheep,” the priest laughed, displaying yellow, broken teeth that stuck out every which way; they were obviously loose.

“The wisdom of the Holy Ghost often inhabits simple folk,” I said, “and chooses those unschooled to put to shame the erudition of our times.”

Pavlo, meanwhile, stood by the cherry tree, enjoying the fruit, spitting out the pits. He had the owner’s permission to pick cherries.

“Perhaps,” mused Sozont, “but one born slow-witted—will not become a sage.”

“Jacob, Moses, and David,” Pavlo shouted from the cherry tree, having just ejected a pit, “all attained divine enlightenment, though they began as shepherds.”

“I am a simple man, my learned guests,” the priest said, poking his aching tooth once again. “Ineffectual and weak in book knowledge. That he was lazy, however, I can swear on the cross. How his father used to beat him! The entire vicinage heard his screams.”

“Was he church-going?” Sozont inquired seriously.

“On Sundays, through the winter months... And were it not for that godly man, who, like you, stopped in our town, he would probably still be herding pigs and sheep, instead of troubling people. I can see him now, standing in church, listening, as if he were dim-witted.”

Sozont’s eyes flashed darkly. “Of which godly man are you speaking? Why godly?”

“Because every beggar is godly,” said Pavlo, spitting out a pit, his lips reddened by the cherries.

“He stuck fast to that godly man for a reason,” the priest declared. “Wherever they walked, they gabbled. What their tongues wagged about, God only knows.”

“They spoke of the path to humble piety,” Pavlo said, putting a cherry in his mouth.

“How do you know that, young fellow?” the priest asked, surprised.

“Well, that is simple,” Pavlo replied flatly. “If after those conversations he became a pole-sitter, then that is what they talked about.”

He spit out a pit and placed yet another cherry in his mouth.

And so that was all that we could learn about Mykyta the Pole-Sitter, whom we were on our way to see, from Father Ivan. Dusk settled in by the

time the goose was roasted, and we gladly gathered around the goose, quaffing on mead and faring on barley meal. The pain in Father Ivan's tooth subsided, it seemed, for after glancing at one another in consent, he and his wife began to harmonize in enchanting voices. In the gentle twilight, I detected a blush blossoming on the round cheeks of the priest's wife. Pavlo's tenor poured out in concert, Sozont and I did not join in: Sozont, perchance, because he was so solemn, and I because the Lord endowed me with a skill in painting and scribing, but not in singing. Mellowed by the mead and roast, however, I harkened with great pleasure. A few neighbors and their wives appeared in the yard. Swaying slowly, they too, sang, their voices melding effortlessly. The music soared powerfully and melodiously into the shadows. All eyes were aglow. The priest seemed transformed; he appeared younger, tender. His four boys came out of the house and stood slightly apart. Interrupting the chorus, Father prodded the lads to sing a psalm. A hush descended as gliding descants curled into the evening stillness, surprisingly harmoniously, as far as I could tell. It was a simple melody, moving and sorrowful; the women's eyes welled with tears. With cherubic countenances the boys lifted up their voices, stretching up on their toes to reach the high notes. Everything seemed to fade, save for that heavenly singing, save for the tear-filled yet tranquil eyes of the women. Sozont pensively sipped mead from his goblet; Pavlo sat at the table, cupping his head in his hands, his pure blue eyes gleaming. God's grace embraced this virtuous place and all those gathered, even us, sinful wayfarers with pretensions of great wisdom. For why, after all, had we embarked on this road? Sozont for the purpose of conducting another investigation (how perceptive Father Ivan is!), to be once more convinced that the miracles of his day are really fables; Pavlo, to be inspired with the power of those tales, for after all, if they are so stirring, why not believe in them; besides which he was seeking a cure for his malady—he knew not yet what it was; while I was fleeing the Eye of the Abyss, which pursued me relentlessly. I set out on this journey to unshackle myself from its tether. It had not yet relinquished me. It ventured on this trip along with us: as we departed Zhytomyr I discerned it in the morning sun that attended us; it, that Eye, bore into our backs, floating behind us like a balloon—the Eye itself headless, formless, limpid, an umbra at its center, like a pupil; and only at eventide, when the lads were intoning the psalm, did I not sense its presence. Until then it gaped at me out of the fruits of the cherry, plum, pear, and apple trees, through the eyes of the priest's wife, out of window-panes; I believe I even got accustomed to its abiding presence. And always, when it was there, a tenseness developed in my torso and would not surrender me. Until, suddenly, in the midst of that divine singing, the Eye melted and dissolved, my breathing became effortless, and I felt a pleasant surge of energy. There was not yet enough vigor to revitalize me, to gladden me, to bid me to my beloved work, but at least I could breathe, and this was

something. And, to my own surprise, even though I had never heard the psalm before, I, too, sang, softly, so as not to bespoil the fine thread of the youths' voices with my shrill tone. Exhaling through my lips, I simply hummed, for the first time harmonizing perfectly.

Afterwards, we retired for the night in the hay. We covered ourselves with a thick linen cloth, lightly aromatic with the muskiness of roots and fields and paths, which was spread out for us. But slumber did not overcome us. It was then that Pavlo set out to recount his first story about one of the miracles that occurred in our day, which happened (so he said) to Sozont the deacon—but not this Sozont with whom we are traveling, but another, who lived in Lviv and who himself related this tale to the wayfaring monk Pavlo, when that monk arrived in Lviv for a sojourn in one of the local monasteries.

CHAPTER FOUR,
relating one of the miracles described by Sozont the deacon

There ministered in one of the churches of Lviv a certain Father Petro and his deacon, Sozont. They lived peacefully and harmoniously, so much so that the demon became vexed, for he had nudged them repeatedly and had often attempted to bore into their souls. And so one day, when Reverend Petro yawned and neglected to make the sign of the cross over his mouth, a little demon dove in, wriggled toward the heart, liquefied in his veins, and flowed through his body like a splinter in a stream. Upon reaching the brain, he spat. His spittle poisoned the priest to such a degree that he could not bear to look at the deacon, so repulsive and despicable had he become in his eyes. Once he thought he espied goat horns sprouting on the deacon's head, hooves on his feet, a wolf's demeanor in his look. Later this same demon, skilled in reproducing himself, wormed into Deacon Sozont's ear in another incarnation. He attempted to gain hold of the deacon and defile his brain. Thus, in a dream, the deacon beheld Father Petro not as a priest, but as a wolf-like creature with goat horns atop his head, and with hooves instead of feet. This is how their feud arose, Pavlo recounted. The priest wailed at the deacon, opening his mouth amply, while the deacon barked at the priest, stretching his lips widely. Cursing one another, they tussled and shoved, clutching one another's hair. Satisfied, the demon withdrew from them both, as he had no more to effect. He stood beside them, scratching behind his ear with his paw, and rejoiced, clapping and dancing. When the priest struck the deacon, the demon exclaimed, "Eh-oh-ooh-oh," stomping his hooves. He laughed and teased, aping first one and then the other; he was so delighted to see the deacon and the priest brawling, pushing, pulling each other by the hair, slapping each other across the cheek. Merrily he hopped about, exclaiming: "Eh-oh-ooh-oh!" He knew that it would take a long while for the demonic spirit to swarm out of the deacon at the priest, and out of the priest at the deacon. So when the next quarrel ensued, Father Petro expanded like a bubble, his face and ears turning crimson, his eyes popping like raspberries. He collapsed as he stood. His bubble-like head burst into a thousand fragments. Slowly, the deacon came back to his senses...

Out of the darkness, Sozont the deacon, not the one from Lviv, but the one traveling with us, raised his voice: "You are a great storyteller, Pavlo! Let us avoid any deceptions, since you are telling this story to Brother Mykhailo. There is no deacon in Lviv and this did not happen there, but in Kyiv. I am not even certain whether it occurred in Kyiv, or if it was a dream. I prefer truth to fables. Stories, as we can see from Pavlo's narration, are created by the false retelling of a true incident—each new narrator adds something of his own: a detail missed, another embellished and magnified. This is how deception spreads. Our lips are full of lies, as revealed in

Psalms; untruths are repeated because man loves lying more than speaking the truth. Repeating lies, the wicked go astray from the womb. No wonder it is written in Psalms that man is the son of him who lies, for man is falsity. I abhor any form of deceit, as I despise falsehood, for he with lying lips shall not be saved; he who speaks with a deceitful tongue is doomed.”

Still lingering in a state of bliss after that cherubic singing, I found listening to Sozont’s formal, slightly ironic tone somehow unpleasant.

“Therefore, let us weed out falsehood as weeds from the field. There were no demons, they did not assail us, and his head did not split into shards. The only truth is that we argued, and Father Pavlo died, not having had time to make peace with me.”

The deacon proceeded to relate the story himself. We listened. He described how his conscience gnawed at him, how his soul fainted within him. He, as the younger, did not initiate a truce with his superior; they did not cast out their anger in mutual forgiveness. As an honorable man, he left the monastery in Podil for the Cave Monastery in Kyiv, seeking a minister who could absolve him of his rankle. There he encountered a benevolent beggar (at least, everybody took him to be one) with whom he shared his sin of wrath and enmity.

The beggar harkened attentively and then proclaimed: “He who asks in faith shall receive; he who deliberates shall prevail. Your longing to rid yourself of sin I commend, for it is a good thing you are contemplating. May the Lord be propitious to you! It is not, however, my province to bring peace between you and the departed. Go ye to Kyiv, to the magnificent St. Sophia, stand at the entry in the middle of the night, and, whomever you shall see first, bow to him, tell him about yourself, about me, hand him the sealed envelope, and you shall be restored.” He then sat down to write a message.

Silence hung over us as the deacon grew speechless. Under the eaves, birds roosted; we heard the squealing of a baby bird.

“All this really occurred,” Sozont proclaimed. “The rest either did not transpire, or transpired in visions.”

“If it was a vision, so be it,” mumbled Pavlo.

For Deacon Sozont, that day had been an unusually toilsome one. He had scurried here and there on various errands. He so craved to rid his spirit of corrosion that he had no desire to postpone his departure for the gates of St. Sophia in Kyiv. And so he headed toward the exit, which opened onto the courtyard surrounding the church. The sanctuary itself was still largely in ruins, but some rebuilding had commenced and a few hieromonks had begun to hold services there. Some even sojourned there as in a monastery; the entrance gate to the courtyard was kept locked. A long time passed in waiting. Spent, the deacon sat on his haunches beside the wall. In his hands he held a folded piece of paper.

“And then I spied a man, cloaked in black, walking along the deserted

street. He was large. He appeared somber. A mysterious glow rendered him wholly visible. I was able to observe him in detail: his raiment, his legs, his hands; though not his face, which seemed lost in shadow...

The deacon fell into another silence, while I, as one with ample inspiration, detected a shape materializing out of the darkness: a phantasm out of oblivion, or a dream. And I witnessed Deacon Sozont rise to greet this apparition. Bowing before him, he kissed his hand and handed him the message composed by the beggar, whereupon he proceeded to recount his misfortune. This transpired at the same moment as the other Sozont, squatting on his haunches, slept soundly beside the wall. As the figure with the eclipsed face (or who was faceless) unfolded the letter (an identical letter stuck out of the hands of the one crouching, the one sleeping), the paper suddenly lit up, as if illuminated by someone, and words we already know were recited: "He who asks in faith shall receive, he who deliberates shall prosper. Aid him who asks, unshackle the spirit of him who cannot free himself, even if by way of a dream. Then ye shall succeed, and your quarreling shall cease. Not a man exists who quarrels not."

"You ask of me more than I can grant," the stranger declared. "I cannot ignore these written words, however, for they ring true. With the Lord's blessing, I shall attempt to execute that which is willed of me."

Looming like an impenetrable mass, he paused in front of the entrance gate. Behind him, and almost half his size, stood Deacon Sozont, while behind him—the other Sozont, who was half the size of the first Sozont, as he sat on his haunches, seemingly spiritless. Not a breath escaped him. It was as though he assumed the form of a lifeless membrane—endowing the upright Sozont with his quiddity. While not duplicating the motions of his actions, that Sozont appeared like a replica reflected in a mirror. Separated from his own casing, he became an independent entity.

And thus the stranger stopped before the gate of entry, and raising his hands heavenward, prayed in a whisper. With his face to the ground, he did obeisance. For a time, he remained motionless. Then he stood up, his voice bellowing, as if through a pipe: "Open the gates of Your mercy, oh Lord!"

Swaying, the cumbersome gate slowly rocked open of its own accord, its rusted iron hinges creaking, even as the other gate, beside the stooped, contorted body of Deacon Sozont, remained closed. Forsaking the torpid figure cowering on his haunches, they entered the church courtyard. They approached the sanctuary. In that same resounding voice, the stranger commanded Sozont: "Abide here, and do not move! Act not according to your will!"

Though Sozont attempted to observe the figure closely as it slid away, that was not possible: the shape was like a dense knot of darkness. Moreover, Sozont noticed that the stranger's gestures lacked the gracefulness of a living being. He moved like a warrior clad in armor. Even his steps sounded metallic, as if he were shod in iron boots.

Approaching the newly-installed oaken doors of St. Sophia in Kyiv, which stood half in ruins, though restoration had begun, he again raised his hands, this time, however, not heavenward in supplication, but in the direction of the entry. And with a piercing screech, the oaken doors swung open at the bidding of the stranger's hands. The stranger disappeared into the opaque darkness of the interior. As he reached the center of the nave (Sozont watched through the opened door), a burning candelabra detached itself from the crossbeam and, slowly gliding through the air, positioned itself above the stranger's head, glowing brilliantly, like a sinking star, scattering clusters of beams. The entire church quivered with light, especially one of the saints on the wall. The wide expanse of the immutable wall, depicting the Oranta in mosaic, glimmered. And Sozont became frightened: he espied two flames flickering in the Oranta's eyes. It was an ominous flickering.

As the stranger neared the altar, the doors noiselessly swung open. There he prayed, long and hard, as dew collected on Deacon Sozont, the one in the dream, standing before the opened door, as well as the one huddled beside the gate near the wall, holding in his hand a white shadow of the letter from the beggar.

Thereupon the stranger turned on his heels, like a soldier executing a military drill, and withdrew from the altar; the doors to the altar closed of their own accord. He left the church. The burning star of the lowered candelabra followed, hovering above his head, but only as far as the exit, where it stopped, suspended, as the stranger crossed the threshold. The doors to the church closed of their own accord, creaking loudly; as they closed, the light inside gradually dimmed. Obscure darkness filled the sanctuary the moment the doors clicked shut. But yet something else struck Deacon Sozont this time: the stranger's face did not appear black, but rather was awash in radiant incandescence. Still, it resembled a mask more than a living countenance, a reflection more than a face. More feminine than masculine, it was beardless, with no mustache, and with extraordinarily large eyes that emitted a glow much like the eyes of the Oranta on the Immutable Wall. And Sozont became alarmed a second time: the gaze of those eyes strewing dark sparks seized him. He sensed his body evanesce into gossamer: more ghost than human, he felt ripped from his marrow, set free to roam the world. (This was not so odd, as many a folk tale relates that even witches are capable of such feats.) He felt his heart slackening and hardening under this gaze, turning into a sack made of thick hide, drawn tightly with a string. And a thought suddenly flashed through Deacon Sozont's mind: this is not a living human before him; rather, perchance, an angel descended from heaven. Only now he discerned that the stranger's head was enclosed in a diaphanous glass sphere, as if in a hood, the face appearing mask-like beneath. And, as the thought was occurring to him, a voice thundered, as though through a pipe: "If you wish to fulfill your

desire, be not timorous towards me, my good man. Believe me, I am man begotten of man, born in a plain house, brought up in Kyiv..."

"But are you alive?" Deacon Sozont asked, moving only his lips.

"My soul is alive," the stranger bellowed. "I have been freed to roam among the living; for the blessing of the Lord embraces the weak, when it so wills... but we have no time for nonsense."

"Where shall we go?" Deacon Sozont inquired.

The stranger did not answer. His clanging steps headed toward the portal and I followed like a disconnected shadow. The gate opened of itself, without so much as brushing against the crouching deacon who was numb and still sleeping beside the gate, leaning against the wall. A letter, emanating light, stuck out from his hands, and his somnolent face appeared lifeless. The stranger walked a few paces, and Sozont could not tarry—a mysterious force pulled him. He felt as if he were tied to the stranger with invisible string. They strode from St. Sophia toward the Borychiv descent. A curious silence enveloped everything. The ghostly byways were deserted. Not a sound anywhere: not a dog barking, not a leaf rustling in the breeze. Only the metallic ring of the stranger's leaden gait was audible, a brief echo clamoring in pursuit. Sozont meandered behind him like a mute shadow (for what sounds can a shadow emit?), fettered with a string; like a Tartar taken prisoner. The clear cadence of a measured stride, duplicated with an echo, carved the night's silence.

Thus they arrived at the Church of the Tithes. The church stood in ruins, save for the one part that survived. Covered with a renovated shingled dome, it boasted freshly-installed doors (as at St. Sophia). The stranger halted and extended his arms—and the doors opened. He stepped inside the section that was preserved and not in ruins. And once again, a star lit up, illuminating the interior. The stranger prayed even longer here, and as he departed the doors closed of their own accord, as they had at St. Sophia. Sozont, standing outdoors here as well, with dew falling on him, whispered only this: "Lord, have mercy." For though his body felt evanescent, an inexplicable horror shot through him like a gust of wind.

Then the stranger led him down the curving Borychiv descent to St. Pyrohoshcha Church, and everything repeated itself as before. As they continued on their way along the similarly deserted alleys of Podil, Deacon Sozont realized that they were heading to the church and monastery where he had served as deacon with Father Petro, where their quarrel had ignited, and from where Father Petro had departed this world, not having made peace with Sozont. Upon reaching the entry, the stranger again stopped, motionless. In front of the door he raised his hands, even though a phantom key lay in the phantom robes of Deacon Sozont, which he could have used to unlock the door—the real key lay in the pocket of the forsaken, somnolent deacon. And here, too the doors swung open of their own accord, and the stranger, arresting the shadow of Deacon Sozont, proclaimed in a

bellowing voice: “Stand and behold. Observe closely, overlooking nothing!” And as he stepped into the church a radiance emanated, not from the star-candelabra but from an invisible source. And Sozont watched as a glowing deacon approached from the altar, much as he himself often had, as deacon (not he, that is to say, not in his likeness); he swung a silver censer, and incense wafted throughout the church. A string of priests in white vestments, unfamiliar to Sozont, filed out of the opened Royal Gates. Shuffling one after another, they arranged themselves in the left wing. Behind them, from the same source, yet more priests filed out, likewise one after another. Taller by a head than the first group, cloaked in scarlet vestments, they assembled in the right wing. And standing before them, gesticulating with his hands, the stranger directed them to sing. Their voices rose in mellifluous harmony:

The gates of hell were thrown open—
These blasphemous lips—
Mercilessly to swallow thy church,
But thou art our true one, lord-bridegroom
By the heavenly power of these bulwarks.
With broken heart we implore thee,
Reveal her promptly free from defilement—
She is thy virtuous church, ransomed by thine blood.

Thereupon the stranger turned toward him. In the vivid light the stranger’s head was clearly visible: it appeared encapsulated in a glass orb, the face more feminine than masculine, beardless, with no mustache, seemingly inert, though splendidly luminous. It was itself the source of light. The eyes exuded a dark, yet not doleful passion. Sozont’s ghostly form stiffened. Evenly, clearly and slowly, the stranger’s voice commanded: “Deacon Sozont, enter the church!”

And the deacon obeyed. He sensed that he was not walking, he was being carried: his feet did not touch the ground. And his body felt like parchment; his being—a leaf containing the Cave Monastery’s beggar’s handwriting.

“Behold the priests to your left,” the stranger said. “Perhaps you will recognize him with whom you quarreled?”

Swaying, as if floating, the deacon was swept in front of a row of faces.

And each face was lifeless, though each had skin, and eyes, and hair covering the head and face. And the eyes in those faces gleamed with an otherworldly glow. The priests appeared to be waiting to be released, they waited expectantly and imploringly. And he whom the deacon was seeking was not among them.

Then the stranger bellowed: “Behold the priests to your right!”

And the deacon passed along the right row of faces, and they all seemed oddly similar, save for one who stood out: not only was he robed in a scarlet vestment, but his face, too, was red. Sozont pointed at him: “This, servant of the Lord, is he!”

“Usher him outside!” the stranger ordered, and turned on his heels, like a soldier at military exercises, and exited the church, his heavy steps clanging like steel. Hieromonk Petro and Sozont drifted behind the stranger, not touching the ground, as if tethered with string, both shadowy ghosts. Sozont grasped the priest by the hand. He thought he held a fistful of bones: the priest’s hand seemed fleshless.

And that is when they espied the moon before them. It was enormous. Perhaps three times larger than an actual moon, it smothered everything in the death-like paleness of its diffused sheen: the trees, the buildings, the people therein, the streets, and the grass, which suddenly appeared coated with frost. As if sliding to earth, the increscent moon grew larger and larger, its surface displaying the face of Cain, twisted in anger, and that of Able, warped with suffering. Whereupon the stranger said in a quiet voice: “Cast asunder the enmity that existed between you!”

After bowing to one another, the deacon and the priest (really their shadows) embraced, acknowledging the spoken words. And to Sozont, it felt as though he were clutching a skeleton in his arms. The skeleton gripped him with bony hands so tightly that Sozont could barely breathe. The moon above, consumed in boreal flames, lashed elongated, fiery tongues, issuing ruby curves of streaming light that undulated over earth, the trees, the grass, the sanctuary, and across their countenances (though Father Petro was already faceless: his uncovered skull grinned crookedly, with bared teeth).

“Exchange kisses and dispel your enmity!” the voice bellowed.

And the deacon sensed his lips grazing frigid bones, those cold, bare teeth. He was unable to tear himself away from the kiss—the bones of the hands pressed into his shoulders, and though his lips and shoulders were phantasmal, they were full of pain and gnawing. As though winded by the chill of death, he could not inhale. His heart paused in his breast; blood stopped flowing in his veins. And he felt himself plummeting through a long and bottomless well, as if into the jaws of a beast, the head of which was the moon, and the body—a smooth, slippery, narrow pipe, like a wide intestine. And Sozont plunged through that pipe, like a cannonball which is to explode and scatter him into the dead space of night. Hurling himself into that void, he flew, frigid and burning at the same time, until he landed at the same St. Sophia in Kyiv, and next to him the one who squatted on his haunches, slumbering by the gate, leaning against the wall.

Beside him towered the stranger: massive and motionless, like a mountain, his caped face glowing peacefully. And Sozont was impressed with the warm feminine beauty of that face—it was no longer a mask. The lips were timidly, gently smiling. And the stranger said (but not in a

sonorous voice, not in a thick man's voice as before, rather, in a soothing, woman's voice): "Redeem your soul, Deacon Sozont, and harness it in my benefit."

"I will that!" Sozont proclaimed.

"And to the beggar who sent you, impart this: 'The purity of supplication and an exalted yearning for God can raise one from the dead.'"

"It has come to pass," Deacon Sozont said.

"Are you free from the suffering of conscience?"

"With your aid and the Lord's," said Sozont. "But pray tell: who are you?"

Whereupon the lips on that feminine face, waxed into a masculine form, encased in the scaffolding of a body, smiled sadly. "I already told you: one accorded liberty to walk among the living! And in conclusion, I pronounce this: 'To receive everlasting life, always seek the truth.'"

And abruptly, the stranger's face faded, like a lamp snuffed out for lack of oil. The feminine face grew imperceptible, a round core, as if chiseled out of stone, appearing in its place. Like a soldier at military exercises, he reversed himself, and slowly retreated, his precise steps slicing through a hollow void dense with moonlight. Those steps were audible for a long while. But the farther they went, the quieter they grew, the shorter the clatter of their echo became. Sozont stood motionless, overawed. Only his lips soundlessly repeated: "Seek the truth, so that ye remain alive... Seek the truth!"

And when the sound of the steps receded, he turned to him who sat perched near the gate beside the wall, seeming to slumber. But he was awake. He stared with eyes wide open. The shadow of Deacon Sozont shuddered. It began to shrink, to roll, like paper, into a scroll, only to cave in, as if crumpled, like a sheet of paper, to finally coil into a paper ball. Streams of light, aglow with the glint of moonstone, splashed out of the ball. It split in half, and two gleaming globes drifted into the wide-open eyes of Deacon Sozont. Both lucent orbs penetrated his lifeless eyes, at once warming his rigid body. Flushed with heat, Deacon Sozont's heart fluttered and stirred in his breast, forcing blood through icy veins, thawing him gradually.

Over earth a new day, bespeckled in crimson tones, dawned.

CHAPTER FIVE,
which recounts the journey's progress

Indeed, Deacon Sozont narrated a remarkable story. He did not wish to discuss it, however, bidding us to sleep, since the following day would provide ample time to discourse about that which we harkened. Sozont himself fell asleep promptly, as did Pavlo, who had heard the story before. Pavlo was not impressed with it as was I: it was not new to him. I tossed and turned on my bed until finally I sank into slumber. And this is what I dreamed: I soared over Kyiv, I wandered through caves, I encountered strange people with dead faces, I visited dwellings where feasts were underway; at one there were soldiers, at another merchants, at a third townspeople, and at the fourth clerics. A cauldron stood in the center of each dwelling. Large chunks of meat were cooking in them; dipping their hands into the bubbling stew, those who were present fished out pieces of meat, tore them and wolfed them down greedily, juices dripping from their lips and down their chins.

Pavlo jostled me awake early, imparting that Sozont had risen long before and that we should set out, as the day ahead would be hot and it would be better to walk in the chill of daybreak, pausing in the shade as the day heated up. I sprang to my feet at once. Our hosts provided us with milk and honey and a loaf of bread for the road. They were kind, forthright people, and not without tears and emotion did we bid our farewells.

The Eye of the Abyss never assails me at morningtide; a day's beginning fills me with creative force. All around, everything is somehow different, as if enchanted. Oblique shafts of light transform the thick dew into shimmering precious stones, gold, and silver. Coated with moisture, the turf grows leaden and gray, while light brown seed pods of grass or wild sorrel blend softly with the ashen verdancy of grassblades and herbs. The crowns of trees seem rounder: every leaf exhales a mist into the air, as people do in winter, the gossamer vapor clinging around the tree's crown like a bubble—this is why trees appear rounder in the morning. Steam rises from tranquil waters as if they were burning under the sun's first rays; everything is wrapped in a dense, magical stillness. Mornings, all that breathes moves in slow motion, phantoms of dreams still lingering in the depths of the mind like dawn's veil: contourless, obscure. And then one begins to sense: as if saturated with the juices of herbs, one's being is permeated with a tingling pleasure, wafting through the eyes to caress the hues, the patches of light, the shadows, the dazzle. Stalks, weeds, flowers, and leaves effuse a distinct aroma. Earth itself is redolent with fragrance. The lines of branches, trunks, stems do not possess sharp, angular outlines—they appear muted, unperturbed. Even a bird glides in the sky differently than during the day—unhurriedly, smoothly. This is why at morningtide, one ought not to hasten, nor run. One should saunter slowly,

serenely immersing oneself in endless glorious space, assimilating nature's beauty into one's soul and heart. This is precisely why I believe God communes with nature at dawn. Infusing nature with fecundity, God tempts the spirit of every plant, every creature. The Eye of the Abyss closes, quiescent. Death, passions are not contemplated at morning's inception—mornings are for living, not demise; they are therefore divine, for God. This is exactly why I possess a singular attitude toward dawn: dawns are divined in resplendent fullness. And where there is resplendent fullness, there is lust for life, there is inner peace, harmony and mirth. Was that not why we did not discuss the story Sozont recounted before we fell asleep, why we ambled peacefully, silently, marveling at the world while absorbing its radiance into our souls. And only when the sun climbed higher, and the shrouded magic of dawn with its tones, its moistness dissipated, like smoke, did Sozont speak.

In a calm, amiable voice, the deacon recounted that he was acquainted with the servant of the Lord cited by Father Ivan from Cherniakhiv. This was that same beggar from the Cave Monastery in Kyiv who dispatched Sozont, with his message in hand, to meet with the stranger. Once a year he roams the land, Sozont informed us, as he is bound to convert at least one living soul onto the Lord's path, disentangling it from life's vagaries while infusing the heart with a yearning to serve God. It was the beggar who once happened upon Sozont in court, and it was owing to the beggar that Sozont, known formerly as Stepan, took his vows, was tonsured as a monk and consecrated as a priest. Gloomy and distressed with an unresolved dispute, evoked by the death of Father Petro, Sozont sought only the beggar. This same servant of the Lord encountered Mykyta (still named Matvii at the time) in Cherniakhiv. Once, while in church attending Mass, Mykyta (or rather, still Matvii) inquired: "Are those words written, and read?"—in response to which the venerable elder ushered him out of church and, settling in the graveyard, instructed Matvii at length on the way to humble piety. This is how, Sozont claimed, the longing to know God germinated in the simple fellow's mind. He determined to embrace the quest for a path leading to the Lord.

"You are mother and father to me," he declared to the beggar. "Instructor of good deeds and guide to my salvation."

And that is when Matvii forsook his pigs and his sheep to join the beggar in his wanderings. The beggar wished to bring him to the Cave Monastery, because he loved him dearly. One night, in a dream, Matvii felt impelled to build a home. He dug to lay a foundation. He dug deeply. He heeded a voice commanding: "Dig deeper!" Once more he dug, and the voice did not will him to stop. Listening to Matvii recounting his dream, the servant of the Lord, who believed that man communes with God through dreams, proclaimed: "Abide by your wayfaring! You are not yet prepared for a monk's life."

Thereafter, they parted company: the beggar returning to the Cave Monastery, while Matvii, who was later to become Mykyta, left to wander...

Exactly as we are now. In general, travel is stimulating, especially for me, whose toil is both sedentary and sedulous—calligraphy and illumination in manuscript scribing require not only mastery, but perseverance. Presently, even in our land, books that had not even circulated formerly are now printed. I am well acquainted with the Psalms and the Homiletic Gospel published by Ivan Fedorovych and Petro Mstyslavets in Zablud. Some of our books had been printed previously, but in Cracow. For the most part, however, I had not come across any of our printed books, though I saw German and Italian editions among the tomes of my benefactress, Anastasia Paraskeva, Princess of Zaslav. A proud noblewoman who fancied possessing a Gospel such as no other person possessed, she commissioned me to scribe the Peresopnytska Gospel. It was for her that I labored, devoting days, months, and years in a mad fever, while, at the same time, in profound spiritual serenity. I did not embark on this because it gave me pleasure: Princess Anastasia Paraskeva would surely vaunt her book of books before her noble neighbors; to be frank, I was not impressed or amused with her haughtiness. The fact that I had a chance to test my strength and skill had more meaning for me, that it was possible for me to fulfill the Lord's dictum—that talent not be buried underground. Granted, Scriptures speak not about skills, but about money that is not bringing benefits. Though the Scriptures should be read not at face value, but rather as uncovering in the texts the sacred, mystical meaning established by the Lord. Thus I, as calligrapher and artist, gained a limitless realm in which to exhibit my undertaking, and I believe that rather than creating a masterpiece, I was delivering myself from the Eye of the Abyss, which snipped at me as far back as my native Sianok, in Red Rus', whereupon I took a staff into my hand and set off. Yet even as I settled down to work in Dvirtsia near Zaslav and, later, in Peresopnytsia, the feeling that I am footloose did not forsake me: those rootless, with no ties to land, home, family, children, or property—whether on the move or staying in place—are forever journeying. And though I toiled at my book for years, I had no home, no family, nor children nor property; even the pigments and ink were not mine, neither was the book that I designed—I was, therefore, like a living tool, a pen, a paintbrush in the hand of the Almighty. That feeling, precisely, that the hand of the Almighty is guiding me, delivered me from the Eye of the Abyss. I had escaped my own home, after all, as that is exactly where it infested me with dread and chased me out into the world—I have not stopped since. I devoted five years to my work. And thus, I arrived at the Prechystynsky Monastery, for women are an unfathomable lot: Princess Anastasia Paraskeva lost interest in my work, discontinued her subsidies, and ordered me to leave Dvirtsia. That is when I set out to

Archimandrite Hryhorii, with whom I had been acquainted earlier. He brought me to Kateryna Chartoryska, holder of Peresopnytsia, and she, seeing the book, that is, my commenced, unfinished work, emitted an emotional “Oooh,” which pleased me not a little, and thus, urged by Father Hryhorii, she agreed to acquire the Gospel from Anastasia Paraskeva, who readily consented. Kateryna Chartoryska, pledging to fund all expenditures for the book, designated it for the Prechystynsky Monastery. So that once again, I was enabled to test my strength, and in 1561 my work was consummated. But when we departed for Zhytomyr, where I was to scribe the Zhytomyr Gospel, my strength abandoned me, as I have said, and I felt hollow and impotent. In spite of the leniency with which I was treated, Hryhorii admonished me by threatening to call upon his pupil Petro (who at one time assisted me in scribing and painting, that is to say, he was apprenticed in calligraphy and art under me, with great satisfaction, I might add), to entrust him with designing the Zhytomyr Gospel. But even that reproof did nothing to restore my strength—and that is why I ended up on this journey.

In the depths of my soul, I know not why, I was convinced that I would never return to Zhytomyr, as the Eye of the Abyss did not leave me there. In its focus, my body felt shackled, my motions—restrained, my spirit—gloomy, in my heart, I sensed a subtle ache, all desires vanished, in work I became lazy, in feeling, exhausted. One so debilitated is not suited for spiritual ventures. The thought that I have effected that which I was put on this wicked earth to do supervened at times. Therefore, I reasoned, I am no longer needed, and hence, I felt compelled to gather my thoughts, to probe, to deduce, and to arrive at some conclusion regarding myself and the world, that is to say, either to revitalize my spirit and embark on a new assignment, or prepare myself to meet the Lord, which is to say, start reflecting about death. Thus, the journey was to be a challenge. Man’s power is negligible. One is not always able or capable of feats.

The sun, meanwhile, climbed even higher. We sat in the shade of a large oak tree, which grew in the middle of a glade not far from the road, to relax and refresh ourselves a bit with water from a humble stone well. The cold, sweet water nipped our teeth as we drank it in shallow gulps, as one would imbibe a delicious beverage. That is when we discussed Deacon Sozont’s story.

“I cannot enter this story in my book,” Sozont said, furrowing his wide, blue-black, and overgrown brows, “because dreams are illusory, and miracles must happen in reality, not in dreams. Had I awakened with no letter sticking out of my fist (in the dream I had, after all, delivered it to the stranger), I would have believed in the miracle. This way—one can surmise anything!”

Pavlo’s face was shaded by the brim of his pilgrim’s helmet; his clear, blue eyes, mildly surprised, shone out of the shadow, like two springs.

“But, Father,” he said. “Earlier you agreed with me that saints and prophets beheld the Lord in their dreams and communed with Him.”

“But I am not certain that they really beheld such things,” Sozont stated stubbornly. “For what is the difference between dream as hallucination and dream as vision of reality?”

“The Scriptures teach,” I said, “that worldly life is a dream. Perhaps it is the Lord’s dream, or, perhaps, a dream shared by the Lord and the devil. And we perceive ourselves in that spectacle—shadows vivified by the imagination of a transcendent shadow. If you accept this, your dream can be interpreted as real.”

“But does the Lord need to dream?” Deacon Sozont asked.

“That we cannot know,” Pavlo remarked passionately. “The difference between us and God is that He knows all about us, while we know nothing about Him. We are knowable, while He is unknowable.”

Sozont smiled broadly. “Everything that we express about Him is a fable. The story of my dream, therefore, is another of a great number of fables devised in this world.”

“Why cannot a dream be prophetic?” I asked. “Is there no confirmation of that?”

“Let us approach the matter from a different angle,” Pavlo stated fervently. “After that dream, was your conscience subdued in regard to Father Petro, with whom you had quarreled?”

“To a degree,” Sozont replied pensively. “In spite of everything, part of my mind believed that dream.”

“Because everything that happens to a person,” Pavlo asserted, “be it in a dream, or in actuality, is, in its own way, real. Because it happens.”

“Perhaps,” Sozont reflected. “But the other part of my mind cannot accept it. Each of our acts is committed irreversibly. What I want to say is, that while I have, perhaps, been absolved of my sin, nevertheless I did sin; therefore, my sin is always with me.”

“So you do not believe in the purifying power of repentance?” Pavlo asked, surprised.

“My sin lies in my attempts to verify verity, rather than trusting in faith,” Sozont said.

And here I sensed an uncertain anxiety, the alarm one feels in the face of danger, or when one is being closely observed. I glanced into the forest and espied a monstrous Eye, the size of a field kettle, in the nearest tree. Framed in an equilateral triangle, it stood on the lowest branch of an oak tree. Reacting to the abrupt turn of my head, my fellow travelers involuntarily looked in that direction as well.

“Did you see or hear something, Brother Mykhailo?” Pavlo asked.

“A dry branch snapping,” I lied.

CHAPTER SIX,

which describes how the demon tortured Friar Pavlo

Once again we set out, though no longer chatting. We felt, in a way, dejected: I for obvious reasons, Sozont due to the indeterminacy of his doubts. Again, I thought that his intent to write a book about the lives of saints was illusory, what with his lawyerly habits and the weakness of his faith. I also believed that he was one of those people who readily discover some good intention through which they can help people, live only for this good intention, and develop it and let it flower, but who never manage to accomplish these goals, and this inability to complete their intentions becomes the substance of their spiritual anguish. And their good intentions arise, I mused, not because they are beneficent, striving for good will, but because deep in their heart they are afraid that they actually may not be benevolent. It is a simple truth that existence is divided into day and night; that life is shadowed by the night of non-existence—Christianity teaches us to be continually prepared for death, as it perpetually shadows us in our daily lives. Man is capable of both good and evil: desiring to the one, he is impelled to the other. Concealing one, he wishes to expose the other. But there are people of another ilk, I thought. They perform neither good deeds nor evil deeds. Any effort seems evil to them, and they suffer in discontent, perceiving action as impiety—thus they cannot do good, fearing lest good deeds be witnessed. In society, such people are nonentities. They wrench themselves from daily, worldly affairs, seeing no sense in them, and proclaim inactivity to be pious, even seeking it for themselves. Although searching for those who live devoutly, in the depths of his soul Deacon Sozont did not believe in a pietistic life. In fact, he was not actually pursuing people living a saintly life; he wished, rather, to examine and verify, as he himself said, whether such a life is not, in fact, deceitful, and if miracles performed by such individuals are not delusions for the purpose of elevating themselves in the face of society, or even in front of God. That is to say, by purportedly devoting themselves to God, do they not wish to satisfy their own vainglory, escaping the routines of daily life and transcending it for that unfulfillable vainglory. Or, more simply: while relinquishing the world, they live, nevertheless, within worldly measure. What would Mykyta the Pole-Sitter have achieved, for example, had he remained a herder of sheep and pigs, while abiding an honest, God-fearing, Christian life? Even having renounced the world, he became, in this world, famed throughout Volyn, in Polissia, and in adjacent regions, as people from everywhere streamed to behold him, exaggerating his glory. And thus, having attained renown, he pledged himself to that which he is. The unfortunate, the crippled come to him, those who have dropped out of life's ebb, or those who are glaringly discontent, downcast, and irresolute—that is to say, spiritually fractured. About the curious I shall not speak, as their

interest is likewise a manifestation of a life lived in deficient impressions. But enough of this surmising about the future, as I will become like Deacon Sozont, with his unwritten book and his lawyerly inquiries. I did not know as much about Pavlo. He had not yet expressed himself sufficiently. Outwardly, he appeared to be a simple friar, observing with naïve eyes, although his knowledge of Scriptures was remarkable, and, to be sure, he had perused many a book at the monastery library, for he was quite articulate. But he, like Deacon Sozont and me, was uprooted from his native domicile, from that innate place in the garden of life where he was designated to grow, to mature and procreate; instead he had set out on a journey, seeking wind in the field, like others. Though not talkative, he spoke wisely and grandly, which meant that questions to which he had no answers occupied his mind. And so, all three of us, being smart fellows who had outsmarted themselves, ended up on this road, seeking the way, while not having determined where we wished to go. Thus we experienced the Biblical truth about a narrow path and a wide one. But we lacked the courage to tread either one: we understood the ambiguity of all definitions.

We walked and walked. The sun had ascended almost to its apex; above us, skylarks pealed incessantly, with the birds of the forest chiming in. The sun cast such light and heat that our dark attire could not protect us adequately—it is well known that black absorbs heat, while white deflects it. We were awash in sticky sweat. Our faces were covered with tacky rivulets of perspiration. And it was then that Pavlo suddenly stopped. His eyes opened widely, bulging out of their sockets. His body tensed and stiffened. He collapsed as if hewn, cramping and writhing in the dust. Deacon Sozont, who knew Pavlo better than I did, as they had traveled together longer, rushed to help, pressing on his arms and torso, which convulsed madly, yelling at me to fetch a twig or the staff. I ran to a tree, found a branch, and brought it back to Sozont, who inserted it between Pavlo's teeth though he had already bitten his tongue: blood was gushing out of his mouth. His head twisted peculiarly. His eyes appeared mad. Though plainly weak, he heaved and tossed, pitching Sozont so that the deacon could barely stay on top of him. This lasted a while. Finally succumbing, Pavlo's stretched body lay motionless. Removing the twig from his mouth, Sozont instructed me to grasp his legs. He grabbed Pavlo under his arms, and together we pulled him into the shade—the road passed through a forest, so we did not have to haul him far. We laid him in the grass. Soon, Pavlo's breathing subsided—he was asleep. Meantime, we refreshed ourselves in the stream, washing and drinking. Tired, we reposed. Soon after, Pavlo sat up, leaning against a tree. Not yet wholly conscious, he watched us mutely with a sentient expression. Deacon Sozont prayed over him. Fitful cramps rolled over Pavlo's body, as if shaking out of him. With a sleeve, Sozont wiped his face, wet with trickling sweat.

“Forgive me, Brother Mykhailo,” he said, “that I failed to warn you

about Brother Pavlo's affliction. At Maniava Hermitage, from where he hails, the holy fathers not only did not rid him of his curse—judging him to be possessed, they mocked him. Thus he arrived in Kyiv, at the Cave Monastery, renowned for its miracles and priests who practice exorcism. The Patericon of the Cave Monastery describes just such a healing, proving that this skill has been practiced since ancient times. Convinced by the priests of the Cave Monastery that the demon would not return, as he had been definitely exorcised, I felt at ease, and did not wish to perturb you with this matter. Pavlo himself was satisfied that his misfortune was over.”

“But it has not ended, Brother Sozont,” Pavlo uttered feebly.

“As you can see, Brother,” Sozont stated calmly. “And this is another example confirming the fact that it is not a demon that afflicts you, but rather a malady for which the holy fathers discern no remedy. It is known as the convulsions.”

“I think,” Pavlo continued, still feebly, “that it is a demon. I perused the Patericon of the Monastery of the Caves in Kyiv. It describes St. Lavrentii healing a possessed man. Three times I read the story, and it seems to me that my ailment is similar.”

“It is in vain that you think that, Brother Pavlo,” Sozont said. “Mind verse twenty-six about ‘Hermit-Monk Lavrentii.’ The possessed did not lose consciousness, nor did he thrash about or suffer a fever. Perchance he spoke in tongues, but in general he was fully cognizant. That is precisely why, Brother,” Sozont said gently, “this might be something other than possession.”

“But I feel it in me, I feel it!” Pavlo exclaimed. “When I am in its clutches, I can sense bony hands, overgrown with red hair, tearing at my heart with sharp claws. At times it fuses into me: feet into feet, arms into arms, head into head, shaking me like a tree. And then a red face appears, its cavernous, bloody mouth laughing, its ogling eyeballs shooting like nuclei out of orbits, dangling down cheeks on thin white veins.”

“You might be hallucinating in your fever, Brother Pavlo,” said Sozont calmly.

“And what does your wisdom state, Brother Mykhailo?” Pavlo turned towards me.

“Each of us has his own dark cloud, Brother Pavlo! And each of us must know and contend with his own dark cloud.”

Pavlo smiled an innocent, child-like smile: “I thank you, Brother Mykhailo!”

“For what?”

“For not being terrified of me. For not judging me. Besides Brother Sozont, you are the only one.”

“That is why we became fellow travelers,” Sozont smiled.

We did not walk any further. We decided instead to eat some bread, drink a bit of water, and rest a while. Pavlo declined. He lay in the grass,

motionless, silently contemplating the sky while we ate. “Curious thing, the sky,” he said, suddenly. “Sometimes it seems that the bottomless depths exist up above, not here below. Are not my thoughts sinful, Brother Sozont?”

“Where there is eternity, there are unfathomable depths,” Sozont declared. “But as with everything in this world, duality dwells here, as well. One depth is radiant, full of sun; overflowing with luminosity, it bids our souls to refinement. The other is dark, opaque, likewise calling our soul, but to abasement. And so we choose.”

“Do we choose, or are we chosen?” I asked.

“That is in the will of God,” Sozont replied curtly. “But He did endow us with the will to act.”

“But I am afraid,” Pavlo said quietly. “If I am really possessed, I did not invoke the demon. He is, therefore, in me not of my will. And if God willed it, then what good is my will?”

“Your will is part of God’s will,” I said. “If you have ardent faith in Him.”

“Is it possible for me to be any more devout?” Pavlo asked, suddenly bursting into tears. And his tears were so unusual: out of his azure eyes flowed azure tears.

CHAPTER SEVEN,

which recounts the meeting with another fellow-traveler, Kuzma

At last Pavlo announced that he felt strong and able to proceed. Indeed, there was no trace of any infirmity—he appeared exactly as he had before. And so we continued along our way. In the meanwhile, I questioned Pavlo about his sickness: when did it commence, how often he was afflicted.

“You can aid me with my attacks, is that why you are inquiring?” Pavlo asked.

“I am not a doctor, but I am curious about disease,” I replied.

He proceeded to relate that the convulsions come upon him suddenly—they strike, and that is all: that is to say, he does not remember anything after that. Sometimes severe headaches precede the attacks by several hours: he has endured headaches since childhood, when he fell from a pear tree and injured himself badly. He becomes irritable at such times, and it is better not to disturb him then. Often he feels chilled, or feverish, or he desperately needs to eat, or an otherworldly terror smites him. At times he envisions flames sweeping around him, fire engulfing everything: trees, grass, fields, even earth itself.

“I then feel as if an abyss is swallowing me. It is so frightening that every follicle of hair on my body quivers or stands on end. It is then that I sense the demon awakening within me. But this lasts only a moment and I know not what occurs next.”

“Does this happen often?” I asked.

“It depends,” Pavlo replied. Sozont was silent. Pavlo had likely shared this with him before. “It can be several times a day. Sometimes once a month, and there are times when nothing occurs for a long while. When this happens to me,” Pavlo continued, “I die, at least it seems that way to me, and then I rise from the dead. Perchance, one day I might not rise from the dead. At times I fall into a stupor, or I tread as if in slumber. I do not remember any of this—I have only heard about it from others. And this is most distressful to me: I do something, I do things, but unconsciously and without thinking, as though I were functioning somewhere outside of myself.”

“All sinners live outside of themselves,” said Sozont. “And evildoers.”

“But I do not wish to be a sinner, nor an evildoer!” Pavlo exclaimed.

“Do you expect St. Mykyta to aid you?” I inquired.

“That is what is left for me—to hope,” Pavlo replied.

So Pavlo had set out to Mykyta the Pole-Sitter hoping to be healed of his affliction. What struck me: he had spent time with the priests of the Cave Monastery, who seemed to have cured him (at least, they convinced him that the demons were rebuked)—so why, if he considered himself restored, was he seeking a new healer? I asked this of Pavlo directly.

“I wish to behold him, the righteous one, beloved by the Lord,” Pavlo said. “Besides, the priests at the Cave Monastery and others treated me and persuaded me that they cured me of possession—yet the demon has not vanished.”

“Have you ever attempted to deliver yourself of the evil spirit on your own?” I asked. “By fasting, by submission, by praying to God and the Mother of God?”

“That is why I became a monk, Brother,” Pavlo spoke woefully. “But for some reason the Lord is not releasing me from this infirmity... And you know, I sometimes think, Brother Mykhailo, I know not if this is sinful, that the Lord is displeased with excessive supplication. There is a limit to it, as there is to everything in the world. One should not overstep that limit. Greater prayers, fasting, and devotion to service do not necessarily mean one is drawing nearer to God. Often even the opposite occurs...”

And here we came upon a marvel: on a slope beside the road, with feet immersed in a runnel of green water, sat a quaint figure. He wore such a tattered, dingy, rent frock that it was impossible to guess its original color. Protruding atop his head was something like an abbot’s hood, already shapeless. The hood framed an unnaturally elongated face. His features were arranged over fine, well-defined bones encased in leathery skin, as if he were one of the Cave mummies, escaped from its eternal resting place and out on a journey to view the world. His hair, brows, beard and mustache were ruddy, or possibly a dirty gray; he had tiny eyes, wondrously round like a bird’s, and string-like lips set over sunken cheeks. This creature was most likely toothless. Actually, he did have at least one tooth: I glimpsed it as he responded to our greeting. The man had no sack, nor boots, nor even bark sandals.

“Have you set out to Mykyta the Pole-Sitter, Brother?” Sozont asked, for that was his fate, to interrogate everybody about everything.

“Is that the only destination there is?” the apparition retorted, showing a single, dandelion-yellow tooth.

“If you are a monk, then from which monastery?”

“The one from which Mykyta embarked on his wanderings,” the man said.

This immediately piqued Sozont’s curiosity: I noticed how piercingly his eyes blazed. “Why are you soaking your feet in a puddle?” Sozont asked.

“So that leeches attach to my skin. They’re good here.”

“But what for?” I was surprised.

“To suck the bad blood out of me.” His little round eyes gazed at us, darting from one to the other—he appeared either blessed or mad.

“And after they suck it out, then what?”

“Then I will become kinder and lighter, able to tread better.”

“And are you walking barefoot?”

“God created feet for man—boots are man’s creation. Human inventions are trivial!”

“So why not tread naked?” Pavlo asked.

The man examined his raiments; patches of bare skin were visible. “God willed man to be robed,” he asserted, his voice cracking, “after the fall of Adam and Eve. Garments cover what is sinful on our body. Shoes do not hide anything sinful—they are, therefore, not essential.”

“And winters you go barefoot, too?”

“Barefoot,” the man replied, emotionless.

“What is your name?” Sozont asked.

“Kuzma—and as for a surname, I have none,” the man replied.

“Have you ever considered,” Sozont ventured a smile, curling his lip, “that God created Adam as a lustful being, and Eve with an erotic anatomy, because He knew that they would sin? Thus, He devised them for sinning or, more precisely, not for sinning, but for future propagation.”

“Pharisee! Scribe!” Kuzma shouted in a shrill voice, pointing a withered, mummy-like finger at Sozont. “God created them in their bodies not for sin, but as probation. Since they failed the test, they were willed to wrap themselves in garments—there!”

“I see you are a wise man,” remarked Sozont, sitting in the grass, holding his staff in front of him. “Let us reflect. If God wished merely to test, He would have equipped Adam with a simple little trout and Eve with a tube, and no more. But to Adam’s little trout He added a semen-producing sac, and provided Eve with a place to carry a fetus. So that He foresaw their sin, if sin it is, and, therefore, He willed their fall from grace...”

Kuzma’s small eyes grew large while retaining their roundness—they simply widened to twice their size. His lower lip hung open, the lone tooth revealing itself, like a yellow blossom, from under his upper lip. Crossing himself with exaggerated breadth, he uttered: “Die, perish, Satan! Lead not my spirit, my reasoning astray, as they are infirm.”

“I am no Satan! I am a Christian, as are you,” declared Sozont, with his peculiar half-smile. “Behold!” And he proceeded to cross himself as Kuzma had a moment before.

“What do you want from me?” Kuzma exclaimed.

“I am testing your wisdom. ‘Understanding seeks knowledge,’ it is said in Proverbs.”

“One does not need reason to find wisdom,” Kuzma proclaimed categorically.

“But with wisdom everything must be tested; so it is stated in Ecclesiastes.”

“Stop pursuing me, stop!” Kuzma cried. “Why have you affixed yourself to me?”

“Do you not want leeches to attach themselves to your skin to drain your bad blood? I am that leech, sucking out your foolishness.”

Kuzma's round eyes again expanded to twice their size, his lower lip hung open once again, his single tooth standing erect. "So you wish to make fun of me?" he asked, his voice quavering. "If so, you are Satan twice over. Die! Perish!"

We spied a swarm of leeches fastened to his legs as he jumped out of the green pool. They were globular and black and obviously engorged with blood. He ran off toward the trees, where he stopped and eyed us.

"You are sinning, Brother Sozont, poking fun at an impoverished mind," Pavlo said remorsefully. "It is not him you are testing, but rather yourself."

The smile faded from Sozont's face. "You are right, Brother, though I doubted that his mind was impoverished," he replied. "Forgive me, if you can!"

"May God forgive you. Let us be on our way, and let us leave this blessed man."

Sozont rose with difficulty and we proceeded on our way. Glancing behind me, I noticed Kuzma following us at a distance. And suddenly I was filled with horror: though I saw no leeches on his bare calves, they were red with blood.

"Kuzma is following us," I whispered.

"Do not frighten him," Sozont replied calmly. "If he so wishes, let him. I must ask him about the monastery Mykyta the Pole-Sitter comes from."

It was already evening when that encounter took place. All around, everything was deserted. We intended to reach a nearby village, hoping to spend the night there, so we walked until the shadows had grown quite dense, with Kuzma trailing at a safe distance. Eventually we decided to stop on the outskirts of a forest, or rather, in a glen hidden from the road by a cluster of trees. And as we kindled a fire, placing over it a small kettle to cook porridge, Kuzma, who had been hanging around out of sight behind the trees, finally drifted toward us. Without a word he sat down cozily by the fire.

"Forgive me, Brother, if I have offended you," Sozont said gently.

"I want to ask you," Kuzma said in a high-pitched voice, "if God created man with carnality, such as you mentioned, then that means He knew that man would sin and it was He who sent the serpent to tempt Eve?"

"Everything in the world happens only with the will of God," Sozont answered evenly and as if reluctantly.

"So He wished to cast man out of paradise?" Kuzma inquired sharply.

"Not to cast man out, but to give him free will," Sozont replied calmly. "As does every father who, separating his children from himself, gives them the chance or even aids them in building a home for themselves."

"So what, then, is original sin? Is it not the curse of mankind?"

"Not a curse, but a father's principal lesson, Kuzma. 'He gave man

eyes so that he could see the great works of the Lord,' as is stated in Deuteronomy. Thus, He cast man out of paradise, but gave him commandments to strengthen him, to allow him to possess and rule the land he was entering, to inhabit and populate it for years to come. To sow, as Adam did in Eve, his seed and the fruits of the earth, and with the sweat of his labor to water his garden, which is replenished with heavenly rain. To create a place cared for by the Lord, as the eyes of the Lord are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. And if man harkens diligently to the commandments of the Lord, He will provide his land rain in due season, the first rain and the latter rain, so that man may gather in his grain and grapes for wine. But people must be vigilant, that their hearts be not deceived or they turn aside out of the way which God commands—that is why God conferred original sin upon man. Man must know: once the wrath of God is kindled against you, He will shut up the heavens, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit. Lay up these words in your hearts and minds, and teach your children that they meditate on them, so that the days of man, and the days of his children may multiply as the days of heaven upon the earth. For this God gave man His blessing and His curse: blessing if man obeys the commandments of the Lord God, and curse if man obeys not His commandments and turns aside from the righteous path.¹”

This was the first sermon delivered by Deacon Sozont that I attended—later there would be more. I admit that I was impressed with it, as was Pavlo, and Kuzma even more. His little round eyes flickered like two flames, and he drank the spoken words more than he listened to them. The air whistled as he inhaled through his single-toothed mouth. Suddenly he dropped down at Sozont’s feet, kissing them. “Forgive me, Brother,” he exclaimed in a shrill voice, “that I called you Satan. You really are a leech, sucking out my foolishness. Nay, you are no Satan!”

“Amen!” Sozont said, and a scant, barely noticeable smile appeared on his face, illuminated by bursts of flame.

¹ Sozont based this sermon on Deuteronomy 11:7–28

CHAPTER EIGHT,

which recounts a miracle purportedly witnessed by Pavlo with his own eyes in the Carpathian Mountains

This happened, narrated Pavlo as we sat around a fire in the glen, when I arrived at the Eremite Monastery, known also as the Maniava Monastery, where I was admitted as a lay novice. And so, as I entered the orchard tended lovingly by the holy fathers, I spied birds alighting on boughs laden with fruit. Breaking them off, they bore them away. And I asked a holy father-gardener: “Why do you not chase the birds away, as they cause damage?”

“The orchard is good,” he replied, “bountiful—for us and for God’s creatures. The Book of Genesis states: ‘And out of the ground the Lord God formed every fowl in the air,’ and the book of Leviticus states, ‘Do not transgress the spirits of birds.’”

Then I asked the gardener-priest: “Why is it that, instead of consuming the fruit, the birds snap off branches heavy with fruit and carry them off somewhere?”

“They have been doing that for ten years now.”

“Could it be, perchance, that somewhere in the mountains there are holy men, and they carry this fruit to them?” I inquired.

“If so, then such is the will of God,” the gardener-priest replied. “No need for us to intrude. If it is thus, so be it.”

I was young at the time, as yet unable to restrain my curiosity. And so once, being free of chores, I sat in the orchard. I witnessed a raven breaking off fruit and flying away. I decided to trail him. That was easy to do, for the raven’s load was awkward for him to carry, and he had to fly from tree to tree, alighting on each to rest. Quietly, persistently, not taking my eyes off him, I followed. I arrived at a wide ravine. There were no trails. The raven flew down with his apple and I thought that I would not see him again. I sat at the edge of the chasm to relax a bit and to admire the magnificent gorges. Before long the raven flew out of the gully without the fruit. I idly picked up a stone and tossed it into the ravine. It rolled down clamorously, landing somewhere in the chasm. I shuddered when I heard a woman’s voice echo out of the depths:

“If you are a Christian, do not slay us.”

“Who are you?” I shouted into the abyss.

“If you wish to behold any of us, disrobe, as there are three of us here and we are all naked.”

I took my cassock off. I wrapped it around a stone and hurled it down. The woman’s voice instructed: “Walk along the gully to the right. There you will find a path along which you will be able to descend.” Treading along the edge of the ravine, I soon spied a barely visible, narrow path. It led into a crevice. Grasping boulders, I descended. The passage was quite

narrow, so much so that I nearly tumbled several times. Reaching the base, I noticed a fissure which created a hollow, and in the entry stood a shape wrapped in my cassock, cloaked in such a way that the face was hidden. When I approached closer, the woman—that it was a woman I surmised from the voice I harkened earlier—bowed to me and requested that I stop some distance away, since she had hidden her impure body but her sisters had not: they were stark naked. Perched on a rock not too far away so that I would be able to hear her well, I asked:

“Where did you come from? How long have you been here?”

“We have been here ten years, and where we hail from—that is a long story. If you wish, I can tell you, but do not step any closer.”

I inquired why she did not wish to come near, to avoid the need of raising her voice, to which she replied that she was not assured that I was not harboring any cunning schemes. Invoking the Lord, I swore that I had no evil, scheming thoughts, and in fact I had not, but suddenly, without warning, my ailment gripped me. I sank to the ground. Convulsions wracked my body. I lost consciousness, and know not what transpired. When I awoke and regained my senses (I am told I sleep after a seizure), I saw that I lay inside their cave, covered with my cassock. Three nude women were tending me: one, older, with sagging, withered breasts was bending over me, offering me a drink, while two younger women stood nearby, observing me with curiosity.

“Where am I?” I asked, quite overwhelmed by this strange sight.

Shocked, the younger women shrieked. They cowered, bending themselves into mounds, concealing their nudity by pressing their knees into their chins while embracing their legs with their arms. The older woman cautiously regarded me.

“The Lord has punished you,” she stated. “You did harbor evil, cunning thoughts about us. So He smote you down.”

Only now I realized that my legs were girded with something rough, as were my hands. “I had no evil, cunning thoughts towards you,” I said, “but I am afflicted with the convulsions. Untie me! Do not be afraid: I wish to aid you, not to commit evil. Besides, I am completely exhausted.”

Removing my cassock from me, the older matron handed it to the most beautiful of the women, who wrapped herself in it. I recognized her as the one with whom I conversed. The other woman rose, no longer hiding her flesh. They both proceeded to untie me—I had been bound with winding roots. Leaning me against the stone wall, they helped me to sit. The women were no longer ashamed. The one cloaked in my cassock sat, cross-legged, hiding her face no more.

“We want to believe that you were sent to us by the Lord. Last night, all three of us dreamed the same dream: as I was fetching water from the stream, a gigantic raven on human legs approached me and said: ‘Look into the jug—that is our only possession, the jug—is the water therein clear?’

“I peered in and saw that the water was murky. ‘It is murky,’ I announced.

“‘That means,’ the raven said in a human voice, standing on human legs, ‘that your time has arrived. Expect a guest.’

“My sister-servants dreamed the same dream: the raven and the jug and the muddy water. And so when morning came, as we recounted our dreams one to the other, you appeared. Garbed in your cassock you strongly resemble that raven, and nude, you resemble my late husband. And from that I conclude: it is you who had to come. But when, all of a sudden, you turned blue, and fell, convulsing, we reasoned that you were a substitute. That is, that you were not he whom we were expecting, and that you harbored wicked, devious plans concerning us. That is why we tied you up. I must tell you, one such with wicked, crafty thoughts did assail us.”

“And what became of him?”

“Are you a priest that we can confess everything to you?” she inquired.

“No. Merely a novice,” I responded.

“Then we will divulge our sin to a priest, whom you are to bring here.”

For a moment she was lost in thought, as if considering something. Meantime, the older sister-servant approached with a tankard and gave me drink. The jug was charred—apparently the women used it for cooking as well as for storing water. And whether the water was extraordinary, or my seizures had not yet run their course, or perchance I fell into slumber again, as often happens: I beheld a gigantic, human-like raven enter the cave. His plumage gleamed like armor, and a small hand, overgrown in feathers and clutching a flaming sword in its plumed fist, revealed itself from under a wing. Lapping tongues of flames now and then rippled off the blade to the ground, blazing uninterruptedly in a blue, completely smokeless fire.

“Will you, saintly matrons, command me to decapitate him?” the raven inquired in a rasping tone. “It seems to me he is no different than the ruffian I punished.”

“And if he is a messenger rather than a ruffian?” the older woman asked.

“Then seduce him. If his member engorges, he is an evildoer—if it remains flaccid, he is a messenger.”

“Fine,” declared the matron dressed in my cassock. And in the next moment, she disrobed. Her sister-servants rushed towards me, one pulling off my shirt, the other my breeches. There I was, as naked as the women. Rejuvenating before my eyes, they instantly became tender, lovely—I had not seen such comely maidens in my time. And then they danced before me, swaying their lustrous bodies voluptuously, shaking their sumptuous, pendulous breasts, thrusting their loins toward me with quivering, distended labia beckoning. The raven, meanwhile, stood at the entry to the cave. His iron plumage flickered in variegated tones. Holding the fiery, torch-like

sword before him, with head held high, he pointed his beak upward and seemed to cluck, or snicker, or croak, in some kind of harmony, as if providing accompaniment to that libertine dance. And leaning against the wall, with legs spread open, I sat: cramped, cold, as if gelid. Not a muscle twitched. Nor was I shaking, as usually happened when I was gripped by my debility. Blood ceased to circulate in my veins. I breathed not. I could not lift a finger. My member did not rise. I was completely dead before their beautiful, graceful, and alluring bodies. Only my eyes served me, though even they seemed to have frozen into icy balls, for though my eyes could see everything, no import passed from my eyes to my body, nor to my head. I was not, after all, beholding naked women, but rather flaming tongues in female shapes. The stone walls of the cave glowed. The raven and his sword glistened, his body enveloped in plume-like flames. And all this afflicted me with tribulation: who am I in the world? Who are these matrons? Who is this raven with the blazing sword? What is the meaning of all this, why is it occurring? Who is testing me, and to what end? Why did I succumb to that insatiable curiosity? I do not know, after all: was this a demon dallying with me, were these his tricks, his antics? Why was I so infirm before him? Why did prayers not aid me? Would I remain among the living after this challenge?

And then I spied the Eye. The raven vanished from the entry to the cave. In its place an enormous, kettle-like Eye materialized; a ball, with an iris and a pupil, incrusting in white ice. I sensed the Eye watching only me, searching my soul. Under its scrutiny, I grew smaller and smaller; I was reduced to a dwarf, the height of a forearm, then smaller still. Whereupon one of the women, the one robed in my cassock (the mistress of the other two), placed me onto the palm of her hand, her palm becoming like a stage for me. And there I danced, kicking my tiny legs in leaps and squats, prancing and cavorting, sweat rolling down my miniature face, flooding my eyes. Merrily I danced as anguish consumed me.

“He passed his challenge,” the woman proclaimed. “Dress him!” Whereupon the servants approached me, one pulling on my shirt, the other my breeches. As she pulled them on, she tugged at my limp stick, laughing scornfully. They then grasped me by the arms and hauled me to the stone wall, leaning me against it. I opened my eyes and beheld the one wrapped in my cassock sitting before me, legs folded beneath her in the Turkish style. Flanking her on both sides, behind her, sat her motionless servants, likewise in the Turkish style. Her expression became melancholy as she gazed somewhere above my head. She spoke in a strained voice:

“Now I can tell you everything, for I am convinced: you have not been sent here by the devil. I, young fellow, hail from near Lutsk. We lived rather well, my husband and I, though we had our share of misery: a familial feud with our neighbor, who filed a claim against us for governance over our village. As he was unable to attain anything legally, he resorted to

intimidation, threatening to evict us from our homestead. An unfortunate accident befell my husband: he was bitten by a viper in the woods and he died, suffering horribly. I was twenty at the time. His death affected me profoundly. Days and nights I wept—firstly, for my uncompensated loss, and secondly, because I remained childless.”

She wiped her eyes, leaning slightly. Her two servants tottered momentarily, yet their visages seemed as if chiseled in stone.

“Then our neighbor dispatched servants to our homestead. They surrounded our farmyard. A message was relayed: ‘We must either set your roost on fire, or deliver you to our master, as he fancies you.’”

“Leave me to mourn,” I replied. “And when my grief passes, I shall await his match-maker.”

The messenger burst out laughing, showing large teeth. “My master desires you as his concubine. With no conditions or promises.”

In my thoughts I prayed to our Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from the violent assailant, desirous of cleaving my body and spirit. I was well aware that that odious aggressor would keep his word: should I fail to appear, he would send my late husband’s village up in smoke; should my servants intervene, he would kill them. That would forever hang like a stone around my neck. Becoming a concubine was unthinkable to me, as there is no greater shame for an honorable woman than being a kept woman in the home of an enemy of her clan, although I was actually an outsider who had only married into this family. But my husband loved me, was kind to me, and I found happiness with him. In the other world he would not have endured it, if I would have shared my body with his attacker. He would have punished me weightily...

Looking down, she grew silent once again; the servants, meanwhile, moved not a muscle.

“So how did you escape your distress?” I asked.

“I said to the messenger: ‘Order everyone out of the room, and to you I shall divulge my secret.’”

“And when his and my servants stepped out, I proclaimed: ‘Your master has been on my mind. I would will that after my mourning he should dispatch his matchmakers to me. But if he does not agree, I will gladly join your master, as I am smitten with his good looks and courage. Presently I am burdened with female problems, that is to say, I am impure, menstruating incessantly. Let him wait five days, while I cleanse. Thereafter, I will gladly join your master. I will be loving and obedient to him. If he wishes to consolidate our properties, let him suffer to wait, while I grieve. Afterwards, I shall agree to marry.’”

“Again the messenger laughed, flashing his large teeth. Then he said: ‘I believe my master will wait a week. But do not even consider fooling him, for when he is duped he becomes enraged.’”

“I am well acquainted with your master’s mettle,” I replied firmly.

“Go and report what you were told.”

“He departed, leaving me in peace for a week. And here is what I did: I dismissed all my servants, paying them well with a goodly portion of the money left with the property, retaining only the two you see here with me, as they did not wish to leave me. The rest of the assets I distributed among the villagers under my governance, and among beggars. I summoned my relative and called dreadful curses upon him, compelling him to sell my property and to give all the profits to a monastery for the erection of a sanctuary, for which I had drawn up a will and testament, registering it in the municipal records in Lutsk. I executed all this secretly, so as not to alarm my foe and not cause him any panic, lest he rape me. Again I questioned these two servants whether they wish to go with me wherever the Lord leads me and again they agreed of their good will not to forsake me. We stole away at night just in time: our furious foe suspected something and dispatched a group of his servants to capture me that same night. They very nearly caught us—we were just barely able to hide in a roadside ditch. So that the servants found my home and property sealed by the king’s page, in the name of His Highness. Meanwhile we headed for the Carpathian Mountains, and God brought us to this desolate place, where we have abided for ten years until we dreamed that dream we described and fate brought you to us. Over the years, our raiments faded and fell apart. Thus we live as God delivered us.”

“And what did you eat?” I asked.

“Summers, God provides us with whatever we can forage. Some things we gather, other things birds bring us. Some items we consume fresh, others we dry. We collect honey out of tree hollows. We eat no venison, as we have no implements to hunt with, so we have given up meat.”

“And in those ten years, no one has visited you here?”

“We already told you: we had one visitor, who was evil. The Lord has punished him.”

“The Lord has, or you have?”

“The Lord. But we carry the sin. We shall confess not to you, but to a priest.”

“Why did you not withdraw to the monastery, to which you had wanted to will your property. You would have been accorded honor and respect there.”

“The Lord brought us here,” the matron replied curtly.

“How did you survive the cold and frost, naked?” I asked.

“The Lord covers our nakedness and warms us with His blessedness. We do not dread the cold in winter, nor the heat in summer. We live like the inhabitants of paradise, glorifying the Holy Trinity. In paradise there are no garments.”

“And you have never wished to leave this place?”

“Being naked, we have had no possibility of doing that. How could we

appear in public, bare? And, to tell you the truth, we did not wish to.”

Then I said: “If you would allow me, and if you wish, saintly matrons, I will report about you at the monastery. I can bring clothes, whatever you request. Then you will be free to leave. If you do not wish that, I will ask the abbot for permission to supply you with whatever you may need. And you, being in such proximity to the Lord, and having spent so much time in His grace, pray for me! Pray that my infirmity forsakes me.”

“We see that you have a kind soul, young fellow,” the woman said. “So if you desire to do good and receive our prayers, come back with a priest who can serve Holy Mass with the Holy Eucharist in Communion. We have not received the sacrament since we have been here. Food we do not need. We have grown accustomed to what we have. Clothes you can bring, so as not to embarrass the priest.”

I left astonished and in shock. When I recounted all that I witnessed and what transpired (excluding the manner in which I was tested, how the women tempted me with seduction; for that was a dream, it had not really occurred) to the abbot, he did not believe me. I swore on the Gospel that I was avowing the truth. He willed me not to impart any of this to anyone, and since he himself was a priest, collected everything he needed to execute the requests. We included some clothes and food. Making it known that we were setting off to take care of some of the abbot’s affairs, we headed deep into the mountains. I feared only one thing: that after my departure the women might flee to another desolate location, and then my swearing on the Gospel would be blasphemy. But I consoled myself with the thought that I would at least show the abbot the cave; signs of their having been there would remain.

When we reached the abyss, I called out into the depths, and the women immediately responded. The matron willed us to throw down the clothes we had brought, and then to descend to them. We found them dressed. The abbot served Divine Liturgy with Holy Communion, first for the mistress, and afterwards for her servants. Then we set the food out. They ate reluctantly—probably they really were unaccustomed to ordinary food. On the whole, they seemed immeasurably sad. The abbot inquired about their lives, and they recounted what I already knew. Then each confessed individually in the cave. What they divulged to the abbot, I did not learn. After confession, the matron said: “I ask one thing of you, Father: abide here three days.” The abbot promised he would. She then expressed a wish to retire to the stream which flowed nearby, to bathe and to pray for my sickness. Her servants, actually her sisters, chatted with us, inquiring about worldly affairs. Meanwhile, the matron did not return. Her sisters rushed to the stream. Hearing their doleful lament, we ran to the stream and saw the woman lying naked in the water, her head on the bank. The clothes we had brought for her lay, neatly folded, near her head. She had not drowned in the stream. Having washed, she departed this world peacefully, still immersed

in the purifying water. The abbot and I joined in the weeping. Her sisters dressed her in the garments we had brought. Sorrowfully, we chanted dirges—a veritable canon for the departure of a soul. The abbot intoned:

According to Your Divine will, Lord
 Death was established.
 Have Mercy on the soul of Your servant
 Which has separated from its body
 We beseech You, Savior.
 And disregard all her transgressions,
 And through Your redemptive suffering
 As One who is good, receive her
 Among the righteous.

And I, along with the sister-servants of the deceased, sang “Glory”:

In fear and trembling,
 The humble soul separates from its body.
 Recalling its deeds
 And anticipating Your benevolence,
 Through us it appeals to You, weeping:
 Have mercy, Oh, benevolent Savior
 Through Your redemptive suffering
 Receive me, as One who is good, in eternal life.

Thereafter, all together we sang “And This Day”:

She, who gave birth to the Creator of life,
 Oh, Mary, Mother of God,
 To the soul that separated from its body
 At this dreadful time today arise,
 Repel the legions of shadowy demons,
 Heartfully implore Thy Son and God
 That He, as One who is good, absolve her of sin
 And accept her in His domain.¹

And our cries reverberated strangely in those dark and frightful caverns, echoes beating like the wings of a bird, shattering our voices. Tears streamed down the faces of not only the women, who wept unreservedly for their soul-mate and mistress, but down our faces, as well. A grave and woeful terror smote us...

¹ Note in the margin of the manuscript: “This song, and the next, Pavlo rendered rather heartily and sorrowfully in several tones.”

Only now did I learn that the deceased's name was Anastasia Zahorovska. She was of good stock, from the same Zahorovsky lineage that married into the family of your patron, Kateryna Chartoryska, at whose cost and benevolence you, Mykhailo, as you yourself recounted, designed the Peresopnytska Gospel. Her servants and soul-sisters were Hanna and Olena.

We buried her that same day, according to Christian tradition. I had to dig the grave using rocks and my staff. We passed the time until nightfall in prayer and silence. And, effecting the will of the deceased, we did not depart, but stayed the night, the women sheltered in the cave, while the abbot and I lay outdoors. The abbot, spent from the road and all that had transpired, fell into slumber quickly, while I gazed at the stars in the sky. Never again in my life did I behold such large sprawling stars, each of which seemed like a living Eye. A raven on human legs appeared. He sat next to me, sighed sorrowfully, and covered my face with a black wing.

At morningtide, after breakfast and a commemorative observance for Anastasia Zahorovska, Hanna, the older of her soul sisters, related that throughout these ten years she had not heard a single complaint or regret from Anastasia for the life she had renounced. Moreover, at a time when they still had raiment of some sort, she told them to leave, and was prepared to suffer loneliness. But they did not comply. Instead, fashioning a single frayed though passable dress out of three worn-out garments, they decided to send Olena away. Finally, Olena was persuaded to leave, and so she left. Along the way, she was attacked and raped by some rogues. She returned. God was propitious—Olena did not become pregnant. And that was the only instance when their triad of sisterhood was disturbed. Since then departure was never mentioned. They lived heart to heart.

“What will you do now, sisters?” the abbot asked.

Hanna was silent for a time and Olena, as if mute, did not open her lips. At last Hanna said, “We shall uphold the testament of our mistress,” sighing as tears rolled down Olena's cheeks, “and remain here two more days.”

Afterwards she informed us that she wished to pray at Anastasia's grave alone, and willed Olena to cook a meal for the guests. I gathered kindling and started a fire, all the while adding tinder. Olena cooked porridge in their only pot. The abbot, meanwhile, withdrew to pray for them and the deceased. When it was time to eat, Olena went to the grave to call Hanna. And again we heard a piercing shriek. Rushing over, we beheld Hanna slumped over and strangely contorted near the grave. Olena stood next to her, wringing her hands, and we knew that the Lord had summoned the second of the saintly women. And again I dug a pit in the rocky soil. Using my stave, I dug out the stones and scooped the soil. Sweat rolled down my face, and a kind of quiet horror flooded my soul: I was experiencing something unique and still incomprehensible. Whimpering soundlessly, Olena washed her soul sister's body. Once again we sang dirge-hiermos:

The abbot set the tone:

The ghost of mortal, temporal life
 A picture of this useless world—
 Let us behold our sister, at this time deceased,
 Let us bow, let us weep onto the Lord:
 Have mercy, pity upon this soul, O Lord,
 That departed from its body, grant her blessed peace.

Sister Olena and I joined in:

Ghosts of slumber, haze and smoke,
 Grasses and blooms, that on this earth grow—
 Thus we see our lives.
 The sorrows of life we forsake,
 Into celestial abode let us ascend.
 Let us repent, let us wail unto the Lord:
 Have mercy, pity upon this soul, O Lord,
 That departed from its body, grant her blessed peace.

And then all together we chanted:

Behold, all ye gathered here,
 How uselessly man bustles,
 The temporary sorrow of life we forsake,
 Let us lift up our thoughts into the heavens,
 Let us repent, let us weep unto the Lord,
 Have mercy, pity upon this soul, O Lord,
 That departed from its body, grant her blessed peace.

Then Olena said to the abbot: “Tomorrow, Father, shall be my turn. Judge us not. Pray for us. And I shall pray for you—most of all, for Pavlo to be rid of that dreadful ailment.”

And thus it came to pass. On the morrow, Olena passed on, exactly as Anastasia had, that is to say, while bathing in the stream. We buried her as well. With sorrow in our hearts, we prayed over their tri-mounded grave and departed from this abyss.

And I remained malady-free for an entire year, until it smote me again, even though I oftentimes thought of the holy women, imploring them to pray for me before the majesty of God.

Pavlo narrated at length while we listened, enchanted. As he ended, Deacon Sozont stirred on his bedding—we had lain down to sleep under an oak tree—and said: “It seems to me, Brother Pavlo, that your sins caused

the recurrence of your affliction. Just as when you were recounting my story you invented a Deacon Sozont from Lviv, likewise here you altered and embellished the tale, and it was Pavlo's tale, but another Pavlo—Paul, the bishop of Monembasia. I do not know if the story of Paul the bishop is true—perchance it is, as it contains nothing implausible. But your account, Pavlo, is false—you adapted it to your own life, and your life included no such incidents.”

“I related a true story, Father!” Pavlo exclaimed passionately, tears in his eyes. “And I do not know any Pavlo of Monembasia! Abbot Manasia witnessed everything, and everyone at Maniava Monastery knows the story.”

“Is your Reverend Abbot Manasia living?” Sozont inquired, wearily.

“Unfortunately, he has died.”

“You are, therefore, unable to substantiate the veracity of your story. It is not possible for the account of your own experiences to correspond so closely to a well-known story from a book.”

Pavlo laughed curtly. “And your story, Brother Sozont, is it not about Mykyta Chartulari of Constantinople?”

Sozont was silent for a long while. “Forgive me my sin, Brother! You have found a good way to lead me onto the way of truth! Thank you for a sound lesson.”

“But we have committed no evil, Brother, by teaching one another through parables—even Jesus did that.”

“True! But the thing is, in lands ruled by the Roman church storytelling is not considered sinful, but honorable, instead. Recall Giovanni Boccaccio's novels *Filocolo*, *Fiammetta*, or *Decameron*. They have tens, perhaps hundreds, of such books, the writers of which are well respected. In the Greek church, it is the opposite—those who amuse themselves with storytelling are judged, and reproved as sinners.”

“Is play sinful, Brother?” asked Pavlo. “Sin is devised evil. But what evil is there in our God-inspired amusement?”

“You are both deceivers, and that is sinful,” Kuzma remarked hoarsely. “And I think Satan does abide in you—pew, pew, and again pew! If he were not in you, Pavlo, you would not be telling such ribald tales. I don't know what you talk about among yourselves—I am too simple for that—but your thoughts are impure. A fine diversion you found, may the Lord forgive us. Naked wenches! Phew!”

“Pavlo described naked wenches, as you call them, but they were in fact saintly women and this story is included in the chronicles of the lives of the saints. And what do you see in my thoughts that is indecent, Brother Kuzma?”

“That you know everything so well! That you play with your mind—that you exalt in your intellect,” Kuzma said bitingly. “Man's reason is perhaps his greatest sin.”

“So too is man’s foolishness, Brother Kuzma,” Sozont stated. “Just as much!”

I was struck by something else in the story: Brother Pavlo had mentioned the Eye of the Abyss in his narration—he said it had appeared to him. I do not know whether he got it from Pavlo of Monembasia’s narrative. I have not read it, nor am I a bibliophile, as were these two, but that is less important. I was struck by the fact that the Eye of the Abyss appears not only to me, but to others, at other times. I am, therefore, neither the least nor the greatest in my troubles. Nothing unusual in that, after all!

CHAPTER NINE,
which describes the continuation of the journey

Overnight the rain caught us, though we slept under an oak tree. Our mantles did not save us, though we covered ourselves with them. Kuzma in his tattered frock was thoroughly soaked.

Yesterday Sozont tried to get him to tell more of what he knows about Mykyta the Pole-Sitter, but Kuzma behaved like a fickle and capricious lass who makes secrets of the simplest things. So that when Sozont first tried to question him, Kuzma shut his eyes—actually, half-closed them, like a chicken, lowering his upper eyelid—and replied: “Curiosity killed the cat,” and his drawn, string-like lips pursed even tighter.

And when Sozont attempted to do the same today (as I have said, his mission was after all to investigate), that is to say, when he directed the conversation to the subject of Mykyta the Pole-Sitter, Kuzma took such figurative twists in his replies that in spite of myself I thought: he is not as simple as he pretends.

“Sozont, are you Satan, that you are constantly testing me? You know what I do not know, and what I know, perhaps you don’t need to know. And when I do know something, let it be mine—a man must own something! If I know nothing, of what use is this chatter?”

“But what can you possibly know about Mykyta that is so special, to keep it a secret?” Sozont asked, unable to restrain himself.

Kuzma regarded him almost cheerily while mysteriously keeping silent.

“Oh well,” Sozont sighed, “I respect your pledge of silence.”

“Thank you, Brother,” Kuzma responded politely, but not without a spark in his round eyes, “that you respect my attitude and will pester me no more. Otherwise, I would have had to part from you.”

His tone implied that if we were to lose his friendship we would forfeit Lord knows what. Sozont, therefore, troubled him no more, and as fickle and capricious lasses (such as Kuzma feigned to be) do not like being ignored, he began to tease Sozont, provoking him to inquire further. But, for some reason, Sozont did not wish to play games, possibly because as a former lawyer he was well acquainted with human nature. He was, therefore, aware that his persistent curiosity would accomplish nothing, that Kuzma’s string-like lips would close even tighter around his single tooth, as if it were golden, while in the face of plain indifference his lips would part with no prompting. And thus it came to pass. After a nourishing pause for bread and water (the kindling was damp, not conducive for starting a cooking fire), we set off, walking a considerable distance. The morning sky cleared, and glowed in vestal blue, the dappled verdure aglitter with raindrops. Inadvertently, I harkened back on how while scribing the Peresopnytska Gospel, I would venture outdoors on such mornings, hoping

to capture the play of light and shadow amid the blending of shades, which in Mother Nature can be so startling and dramatic, though never jarring. Perchance this majestic, sumptuous morning had its effect on Kuzma and flushed the querulousness out of him: without any prompting, he volunteered all he knew about Mykyta, since he himself was from the same monastery where Mykyta arrived after leaving the Cave Monastery beggar. But as a bit of quirkiness and peevishness remained in him, Kuzma refused to divulge the name of the monastery where this transpired, or even who the abbot was, though he related enough for Sozont to be able instantly to surmise the monastery's name. So it was that Mykyta had joined one of the large monasteries of Volyn. Falling at the monastery gate, he lay there with no food or drink.

“And he lay there for seven days?” Sozont asked.

“How do you know?” Kuzma shuddered.

“I know the magic of numbers: three, seven, twelve, twenty-one,” Sozont replied. “Three days is a few, twelve is many; besides which, seven days make a week, a holy number, determined by the Lord during creation.”

“Well, as you know everything, there is nothing for me to say,” said Kuzma, balking once again. “This is the second day that I am observing all of you. And do you know who you are?” he paused, then added jauntily: “Scribes and pharisees! And the Lord instructed against scribes and pharisees.”

For a time he held himself proudly as we walked, his string-like lips tightly sealed. And when the mire descended to the bottom of his agitated little well, filtering the water after Sozont's inappropriate utterance, Kuzma once again sallied forth, as if nothing happened. So on the eighth day the abbot had emerged, inquiring of Mykyta where he hailed from, where he was headed, and what his name was. Had he not committed any evil? Was he not absconding from his masters?

Dropping at the abbot's feet, with tears in his eyes, Mykyta had proclaimed: “I have committed no evil, Father. I am seeking a place where I may labor for the Lord. Lead me to your monastery and will me to serve all.”

The abbot had then taken him by the arm and ushered him into the monastery.

“I witnessed that with my own eyes,” Kuzma said haughtily, his round eyes glowing triumphantly.

“Was not that abbot sharp-tongued?” Sozont asked nonchalantly.

“No! He was sweet-tongued, like Chrysostom,” Kuzma replied proudly.

“Then he had a scar across his forehead from a Tartar saber.”

“But how do you know that!” said Kuzma, jumping into the air.

“I guess this occurred at the Zhydachivsky Monastery,” Sozont stated flatly and calmly.

Kuzma eyed him with terror, his round eyes gone mad. “You are beginning to scare me,” he said—or rather, shouted. “What kind of a man are you?”

“Sinful, as is every person,” Sozont replied simply.

“But why are you so curious about saints?”

“I want to write a book about them, *Cheti-Minei*,” Sozont said. “That is to say, a book of fable-like stories that will not be frowned upon by the Eastern church.”

“You consider the lives of saints fables? Is this what makes you sinful?” asked Kuzma, lowering his head mischievously.

“I want them not to be fables,” Sozont said.

“So, are you looking for hypocrisy? It seems to me that you should seek glory among saints, instead of hypocrisy. The Lord shall bless you for that.”

“I wish to write the truth about them,” Sozont stated firmly. “The Lord does not punish for truth, as He does not bless for false glorification. Jesus said: ‘It befits man to fulfill the whole truth,’ and in His sermon on the Mount, He proclaimed: ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.’ One ought to seek not only human truth, but divine truth, to serve Him piously in truth, for he who serves in truth is pleasing to Him. Why are you angry with me, Kuzma?”

“Because you suspect my veracity. And I am relating what I witnessed with my own eyes.”

“So tell me without jumping up and down, Kuzma.” A barely visible smile appeared on Sozont’s face again.

But the puny well of Kuzma’s soul became muddied once more, and he had to wait for the mire to settle to the bottom.

Pavlo and I walked on in silence. I surveyed the enchanting world around me: my eye caught the fanciful angles of lines, the daintiness of leaves, of stalks, the delicate contour of the trampled path alongside the road. I was most amazed by the dry, sapless trees that appeared here and there. They stood like gnarled shapes of droll, imaginary creatures, frozen in supplication to the unfathomable depths of heaven. It felt, moreover, as if the dry trees were not lifeless as long as they were standing, as long as they suggested something to someone, as long as they were worshipping. Tender summer shoots—thick, juicy, bulbous and oddly protuberant—wound around above the roots of some of the tree trunks, awarding them solace for their prayers. Pavlo walked lost in his own introspection, and I became anxious that his seizures might strike today. As if hearing my thought, he glanced at me, smiled, and nodded.

“Is everything all right?” I asked him.

“Everything is fine,” he replied. “I feel a bit chilled.”

“Probably because we were drenched during the night.”

“Mykyta was accepted at the monastery,” Kuzma suddenly started

talking. “He acquiesced to everybody. He served, learned to read and write. He had memorized all the Psalms by ear beforehand. He was seventeen years old. In the solitude of his monastic life, he reached a point where he surpassed us all.”

“He should have been eighteen years old, for that is how Teodoryt wrote about Symeon the Pole-Sitter, whose successor Mykyta was,” Sozont claimed.

“Why do you corroborate everything with books, Brother?” Kuzma again spumed. “I know nothing of Symeon the Pole-Sitter, and I doubt that Mykyta knew of him.”

“That is what I would like to find out,” Sozont said.

“But why, Brother, can there not be similarities beyond bookish stories?” Kuzma disputed hotly. “So-and-so were monks, therefore they both came to live at monasteries. Cloister life is alike everywhere. So-and-so set out on a life of Christian asceticism, which is done from a common base—the teachings of Christ. When people live similar lives, a repetition of events can occur.”

Sozont laughed.

“You are laughing at my foolishness, Brother? Are you not afraid of the sin of arrogance?”

“I am!” Sozont declared. “But I am not laughing at you—I am glad that the Lord willed me to leech out your foolishness. I am glad for the wisdom in your words.”

Suddenly, Kuzma puffed up saucily, like a young lad or a fickle lass. He actually seemed younger, and his string-like lips opened for the first time. He smiled kindly. “So you know it all. But I vow before God: I am not recounting this from a book someone wrote,” he said softly.

“Teodoryt,” Sozont said, smiling.

“All right. I am recounting what I witnessed. We ate once a day, in the evening. The better among us—though I did not belong to that group—every third day. Mykyta did not eat for an entire week.”

“How do you know that?” Sozont asked sharply. “Did you see it yourself?”

“No, I did not, but that is what everybody said.”

“In rumors truth is merely topical,” Sozont muttered. “There are true rumors, and false ones. Did his parents look for him?”

“Two years they searched, but the Lord sheltered him. Then his father died of grief, so they say.”

“Who said?”

“He told me himself. A man came to our monastery from Cherniakhiv asking for Matvii, that is to say, Mykyta, and told me.”

“I know a bit about his life in Cherniakhiv. We walked through that town.”

“And you inquired about him?”

“As much as I could.”

“You really are a dreadful man,” Kuzma said, regarding Sozont with his round little eyes. “A leech.”

“Yes, yes,” agreed Sozont, sighing. “A leech leeching human foolishness.”

“If you know everything, why should I talk?”

“I am not insisting on it. The journey is easier to endure in banter,” Sozont stated amiably.

“It seems to me, on the contrary, that you are constantly insisting, though imperceptibly, with no verbal prodding. And this distresses me—even though I did not want to divulge anything, here I am, wagging my tongue. In his writings, did Teodoryt mention the fact that Symeon bound himself with a cord from a well?”

“Yes,” Sozont replied. “But Symeon used a cord made from the shoots of a fig tree, which are very coarse. In our land we don’t have fig trees.”

“It was a simple cord, used for drawing buckets out of wells,” Kuzma said. “I saw him, fettered, with my own eyes. The gangrenous sores that developed from the chafing of the cord stank atrociously.”

“Were there maggots?”

“Maggots I did not see. But we, his cloister brothers, became indignant. Because a monk is to serve the Lord in purity, sublimation, and good worldly deeds. Bringing useless torment upon oneself is iniquity. Besides, all of this occurred not on the instructions of the abbot, but on his own. That is disobedience. And what good deeds could he perform while dormant like a butterfly in a cocoon? So we approached the abbot and inquired: ‘Wherefrom did you bring this man? Were he a saint, he would not stink; he would have a pleasing odor. It is impossible to even stand next to him. His putrid linens are covered with bloody stains, as he is himself.’”

“The abbot was not aware that Mykyta had bound himself with rope and he did not believe us when we told him. He instructed us to rip his clothes off. His hair shirt was bloody, and as we loosened the cord, pieces of skin fell off. It was very difficult to do. He howled like a wolf as we undressed him: we even thought that he had succumbed to a werewolf’s curse. Everyone was unreasonably terrified. The stench was unbearable, as if from a dog carcass, may God forgive me. Everything transpired as I describe. Eventually he stopped howling, and his whole body began to shake. After recovering a bit, he said: ‘Release me, like a stinking dog! My sins contribute to my being honored with such a label.’

“To which the abbot said: ‘You are only seventeen years old! What are your sins?’

“And Mykyta replied: ‘Father, it is written: “I was born in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me...”’”

“Is this how Teodoryt describes Symeon the Pole-Sitter?” Kuzma asked.

“Yes, exactly,” Sozont said.

“In that case, he emulated Symeon,” Kuzma reflected. “I can swear I saw it with my own eyes. What else does Teodoryt write?”

“He writes,” Sozont said evenly, “that the abbot healed his sores, but he continued to inflict torture on his own body and was cast out of the monastery.”

“In our case it was different. He left the monastery on his own immediately after we violated him. Actually, he ran, and since he was feeble, he ran not only on his two legs, but on all fours. That is why we assumed that he had become transformed into a werewolf.”

“So why are you heading to him now, when he has fame as Mykyta?” Sozont asked.

“At the time of this episode, I felt a dread. That dread has not been purged from my soul to this day. And I cannot cease wondering who was guilty of sin: he with his self-torture, or we, for revealing his acts?”

“Do you know what happened to him thereafter?”

“There weren’t even any rumors about him, he simply vanished. Until his renown as a pole-sitter spread.”

“Curiosity is urging you on?”

“Not so much curiosity as fear of sin. I was, after all, among those who exposed him.”

At this time, we were caught in a downpour. Engaged in conversation, we had not noticed the small dark cloud appearing in the middle of a clear sky, from which water poured forth in torrents. We sprang off the road under the trees for shelter—the path ran through a forest at this point, having just crossed a valley. Suddenly, we heard the clatter of hooves. We hid behind the trees. A convoy of captives was being driven along the road in the rain by a Tartar detachment—men lassoed to horses, lads and women; several bound maidens were being transported on horseback. The captives ran more than walked behind the horses. Water streamed down their faces. Yelling, whips lashing, the Tartars were winding up a raid. Thus, the rain saved us! Otherwise, engrossed in conversation, we could have found ourselves in their cords and belts. Then our journey would have ended too soon and in grief—possibly forever. That is why we stood behind the trees, afraid to breathe. The rain rendered us less visible to the Tartars. Besides which they were in a rush and passed without noticing us.

“Where did the Tartars come from?” Pavlo asked. “We weren’t aware of any attacks.”

“Tartars are Tartars! They fall upon one like snow on one’s head,” Sozont said.

Mindful, we tread along the edge of the forest, not returning to the road. Evidently they had attacked Turchynka, the village where we had planned to spend the night before plunging into the thickets of Polissia.

The rain soon abated and we stopped to repose a bit, having entered

the forest deeper to wait out the danger. Apparently only that one detachment had wandered this far in search of captives, and it was now hastily retreating. A journey really is full of unforeseen danger!

Nothing happened to us all the way to Turchynka. Upon reaching the village, however, we saw that our assumption was correct: the village was partly burned. The part of it that still stood was deserted. Some of the villagers were taken captive, others were slain—we saw hacked corpses near houses, mostly old men and women. The survivors were apparently hiding in the forest—it was unlikely they would return to spend the night here. Walking around the village, we spied not a soul. Even dogs and cats were struck down and cows slashed. A few chickens wandered about in yards, having hidden in the brush during the attacks.

We approached the remains of the small, scorched church, and prayed for the souls of the hapless victims. Afterwards we cooked ourselves some porridge in one of the houses, not disturbing any of the utensils left behind. We ate in silence and then settled for the night. Each of us was to take a turn at guard duty in the yard. Our mood was solemn. No one talked before falling asleep. We slept fitfully, but the night passed uneventfully.

In the morning, villagers on horseback began returning from the forest. The few who had managed to save a cow now led the animal tied to the saddle. We aided in the collection of the dead for burial, and Deacon Sozont, though not a priest, intoned burial hymns for the slain. The village priest was among the dead. Hosting us as best they could, in somber receptions, the villagers expressed their gratitude. Thus, we stayed in the village another night. We did not designate a sentry this time—the village was guarded by its inhabitants. Lamenting and weeping resounded throughout the village all day. Cattle bellowed frightfully. A strong, acrid smell filled the air.

Tired and fearful we could not fall asleep. Kuzma volunteered to tell a tale he knew and had experienced about a saint. It transpired at the Zhydachivsky Monastery. Sozont admitted that he had not read anything like it in any books, thus validating its authenticity, though perhaps he said that not to ruffle Kuzma's fiery temperament.

CHAPTER TEN,

which describes the heavenly adventures of the cook Kalistrat

Kalistrat was a simple man, the son of simple folk. He labored in the monastery kitchen. Meager in talk, he was humble and hardworking and further distinguished himself in that he offered his help to anyone, for which he was exploited like a slave by a few evil-spirited monks, wearying him; yet he performed all their requests without refusal, and this in addition to his usual work. Out of habit, he even thanked those who took advantage of him. He never neglected prayers nor fasting. He walked with a slight stoop, thrusting his beard forward as if he did not want it to rub against the clothing on his neck. He was often the brunt of jokes, the object of insults; at times he was beaten for minor things, and then a bird-like cawing escaped from his throat. But he never defended himself. Meek and kind, he never responded to his assailants with sharp words. In this cruel world it is accepted that the kinder one is, the more misfortunes befall one; the more defenseless, the more one is taunted—as is the case among animals and birds: the weak are killed, the strong flourish. Such was Kalistrat. Though always helpful and servile, he was invariably spurned. He was mocked and slighted. The Gospel axiom “many that are first shall be last, and the last first” was forgotten, as were the words of Christ willing his followers to sit in the lowest place, since “he who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”¹

Kuzma heard this story from Hieromonk Avtonom, who abided in their cloister with but a single petition to the Lord: that the Lord in some way convey whether heaven and hell really do exist in the other world. It was not so much hell he was curious about as heaven, which is to say that Avtonom wanted to know if his monastic feats, seclusion from the world and from life, his austerity and ascetic existence would really procure for him eternal recompense after death, or would all his exploits go to the wind. Even in his conversations with Kuzma, Avtonom would say: “A single detail sustains the ascetic—the belief that paradise is not the invention of a human being afraid of death. Aside from this, nothing is important. Because if stories about paradise are myths of man, then the rejection of the temporal makes no sense. One ought then to be loving this world and this life, instead of eschewing it, penetrating it rather than abstaining from it, not shunning people, but living among them; rather than contemplating a posthumous paradise, one ought to be envisioning a paradise constructed with sagacity and benevolence in the living world, shutting all the monasteries, expelling all the monks.”

“So you wish to serve people, not God?” Kuzma asked. “And if you do not believe in God’s paradise, is that not a lack of faith in God?”

¹ Note in the margins of the manuscript: Matthew 19:30 and Luke 15:10–11.

“Only a crooked mind can fail to believe in God,” Avtonom declared. “For the world exists according to someone’s will and according to laws created by someone. Not only man submits to this will, but every insect, plant, every useless weed, each conceiving of a fetus, which causes the continuation of life—each of these occurs through human effort, but not from human will, but by Divine will. For in a developing seed a future plant is stored, with not only its leafy stalk but its new germ. And all this in an incomprehensible variety of fruits and species. Was it not a warped mind that proclaimed that pursuing benevolence and fostering reason and worldly order are not servitude to God? So that when I am tormented with uncertainty,” Avtonom continued, “is it not the devil whispering into our ears to despise the living world, God’s creation, the great feat of greatness, and to love God, renouncing and repudiating the world, culminating in a grace unseen and unknown by the living?”

Hieromonk Avtonom meditated on this so much that a vision came to him one night: he beheld a valley, peculiarly beautiful, decked with forests of fruit trees, fields of assorted edible flora, and flowers of which there were so many that they smothered all available space. And he spied a road traversing that abundant land, and walking along it, leaning on a stave, the cook Kalistrat, scorned by everyone. Avtonom himself seemed to soar above that wondrous land, but on encountering Kalistrat, he descended to him on his wings (he had the form of a bird) and inquired: “Brother Kalistrat, where are we? Is this not paradise?”

“It is paradise, Father. We are in God’s paradise,” Kalistrat said.

“I flew here in a dream,” the hieromonk said, “and you, being alive, how did you arrive?”

“I was bid here by a great benevolence,” stated Kalistrat, treading along the road while Avtonom, bird-like, fluttered above him. “This is the dominion for those chosen by God.”

“So you have died?” Avtonom asked. “The living cannot come here.”

“Though I have,” Kalistrat replied calmly, leaning on his staff.

The trail led into a grove. Here apple trees grew, their limbs bent under the weight of splendid, succulent, and ripe fruit.

“Can you pick anything here?” Avtonom asked.

“Anything I wish,” Kalistrat responded, walking.

“In that case, pick an apple for me,” Avtonom bid, pointing at the reddest.

Kalistrat plucked three apples, placed them in a small sack which hung around his neck, and hung it on Avtonom the bird.

“Receive and enjoy!” he said.

And then a tide of slumber rolled over Avtonom, spinning him as if on a whirling wheel. Avtonom was seized by a sense of being hurled into boundless depths, falling endlessly. He transformed gradually from bird to man, spreading his arms and legs. He flew in circles, his speed slackening,

surrounded by streaking colors scattering in space like a shattered rainbow. He heard music, each tone matching a tint, sounds transfusing into hues, shades into inflections, and below, far in the distance, he spied a round globe, which he approached incredibly fast, although he was gliding slowly. And on that globe he spied azure waters and verdant bands of forests, mountain ridges, golden squares of fields, and strips of road; gleaming beautifully in the sun, the Earth, wrapped in a haze, tipped and rotated as the heretic Galileo had claimed. It was then that Avtonom's eyes involuntarily shut, as he continued flying in darkness, a darkness glowing in pearly luster, a darkness shimmering with ether. And then it all vanished and he heard the clangorous toll of a bell bidding him to matins.

Hieromonk Avtonom awoke but did not immediately regain his senses. His head reeling and dazed, he thought he was still spinning, along with his bed. He touched the sack hanging on his chest. He inserted his fingers into it, retrieving a golden apple, which shone and glowed mysteriously, and smelled even more wondrously. His disorientation dissipated completely, the bed stopped spinning and he sat up, holding the apple in his hand. He pulled two more apples out of the sack and set them on his bed. He gazed at them at length, lacking the strength to comprehend what had transpired. But he had to hurry to church, so leaving the apples on the bed, he rushed to matins. He was indeed curious whether Kalistrat, the cook, would attend. And so he did not walk to the service, but ran. Upon entering the church, he grew numb with shock: there stood Kalistrat at the choral matins. Avtonom approached him and demanded in a whisper: "Evince where you were last night, Kalistrat."

Regarding him calmly, Kalistrat, also whispering, replied: "Forgive me, Father, I was where you saw me."

Then Avtonom said emphatically: "I warn you, I shall curse you if you do not share the truth and announce the glory of God."

Kalistrat quietly said: "Father, you asked God to show you the posthumous recompense for benevolence. The Lord willed enlightenment to come through me, undeserving though I am, and so I was there."

"Why you, the lowliest in this abbey?" Avtonom asked.

"Perchance because I am lowliest," Kalistrat said humbly.

"What was delivered to me from paradise, when I asked, Father?"

"That which is lying on the bed in your cell. But it is not good to defile the service with prattle, Father. Let me pray, and do not interrupt your own prayer. And forgive me, for I am a worm, not a man..."

Avtonom stayed for the entire service, praying raptly. When he looked around towards the end, he did not see Kalistrat in his place. After the service he approached the abbot and said: "Father, come to my cell. I have something to show you."

They departed. Several monks hung behind, Kuzma among them. Upon entering Avtonom's cell they beheld on his bed three large, beautiful

apples emitting an ephemeral radiance. Their hearts fainted sweetly in their bosom from the otherworldly fragrance that wafted throughout the dwelling.

Avtonom recounted his dream, his meeting with Kalistrat, their conversation in church. All were astonished mightily, even more so because no one had seen Brother Kalistrat in church at the matin service. But that could have been because as someone regarded as the lowliest in this world, he was usually ignored, unless he was required to perform some service, or was an object on which anger could be vented. And they all, Kuzma included, burst into the kitchen, to bow to him, servant of the Lord. But he was not in the kitchen. The other cooks said that he had been absent yesterday, as well. They rushed to his cell. There they found his torpid corpse. He appeared to be alive, a smile frozen across his inert face. And they were all unduly horrified, especially Hieromonk Avtonom, for he had conversed in church not with a living but a deceased Kalistrat.

Later he described how he had gone back into the church and found, on the spot where their conversation had taken place, an unsightly red worm still coiling on the stone slabs. Placing it in his hands, Avtonom brought it into the light. And he carried it to the monastery orchard, burying it under one of the apple trees. Ever since, that apple tree has been bearing fruit consistently and generously.

Silence descended as we relived the story.

“What became of those apples?” Pavlo asked.

“Nobody saw the apples afterwards,” Kuzma replied. “The elder monks may have hidden them, or, perchance, Avtonom took them with him.”

“Took them where?” Sozont asked.

“Perchance to where he got them from,” Kuzma said, “for nobody has seen Avtonom since. He either left the monastery or something happened to him. Immediately after Kalistrat’s funeral he vanished from the monastery, not saying a word to anyone. Thereafter nothing is known of him. He himself said: a living man cannot enter heaven, not even in a dream, transformed into a bird. So, perchance, he became a bird in this world. Do you doubt what I have told you, Brother Sozont?”

“I do,” Sozont said. “The story is too nice to be true. All pleasant things in this world are short-lived and fleeting. Therefore, your story, which I have really not come across in any books, is as elusive as it is sublime.”

“For heaven’s sake, Brother Sozont,” said Kuzma, who was angered for some unknown reason. “Hark on the words of Jacob: ‘He who doubts is like a billow of the sea, tossed and chased by the wind.’ And about beauty the Psalms say: ‘Gird thy beauty upon thy thigh, O most mighty.’ And Zion was considered the perfection of beauty.”

“So you composed the tale, Kuzma, since you are protecting it so?” Sozont asked.

“Satan!” Kuzma hissed. “You are a real Satan.”

“No, Kuzma,” Sozont remarked sadly. “Unfortunately, I am like that billow of the sea, chased and tossed by the wind.”

“And you are boasting of it?”

“I am harrowed by it,” Sozont said, as sadly as before. “I suffer because the worm of uncertainty nibbles at me and smolders in me no less than the worm of faithlessness. And where worms nibble, who shall speak of eternity or immutability? We are human, our thoughts, our bodies, affairs, dwellings, our feelings, even our stories or fables are fodder for worms. Though there is another truth.”

“Why did Kalistrat call himself a worm of the Lord?” Pavlo asked.

“A worm is God’s creature, created by God, as are we. It transmutes us into manure, and in this compost our seeds germinate and grow, our seeds along with a new generation of all-eating worms. And on this, my dear scribes and pharisees, eternity is based. This, I believe, is that other truth.”

“If so, then our parables, no matter how false they may seem, are the seeds of that eternity,” Pavlo said.

“‘In the multitude of my thoughts within me,’” recited Sozont sadly, “‘thy comforts delight my soul.’ Psalm 94.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN,

describing a youth who was our guide and how we set off with him on a trek to the swamp

Very early, at sunrise, someone knocked steadily at the house where we were sleeping. As I lay closest to the door, I came out first. I saw a youth, draped in a peculiar habit of bleached peasant linen, coarsely stitched with sinewy thread, and shod in moccasins. His face was quite handsome, angel-like, the skin waxen, as if dead. I was most struck by his eyes, which were also seemingly lifeless.

“I was told,” he said in a high, nearly feminine voice, “that you are pilgrims on your way to St. Mykyta. Am I right?”

“Yes,” I said, yawning, for I was not yet fully awake.

“There is no direct route from here to the saint. One must go cross-country without a path, and later through a swamp,” the youth said.

“So we have been told,” I replied.

“You need not hire a guide, as I am headed there. I can guide you. But we must depart early.”

Sozont, meanwhile, had stepped out, and was listening to our exchange, standing on the threshold with a disheveled head of hair. “How much will you charge us?” he inquired.

“Hired guides take payment. As a disciple of St. Mykyta, I shall guide you at no charge.”

“Why do you refer to Mykyta as a saint?” Sozont asked. “Saints are canonized by the church after they die.”

“One becomes a saint not through canonization, but through deeds and miracles performed. The church merely recognizes the saint, or does not. Mykyta lives the life of a saint,” the youth proclaimed categorically. Not a muscle on his face twitched.

“You are right,” Sozont agreed, stepping into the yard. Kuzma appeared in the doorway.

“Why are you clothed thus?” the deacon inquired, inspecting the youth. “Are you a monk, or a postulant?”

“I am a disciple of St. Mykyta,” the youth said. “My raiments are what they are. We have no tailors. We sew for ourselves, out of linen donated to us by the peasants.”

Pavlo, too, appeared, scratching himself. There were fleas in the house and they must have been vexing him. My body, too, itched all over.

“Do many people visit Mykyta?” Sozont asked.

“Enough—sometimes more, sometimes fewer. But we do not allow everyone to see him; especially not women seeking ministration—they must remain at a distance from the hallowed place. Not one is allowed to enter the gate.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because according to St. Mykyta, a woman is a vessel of the devil. Besides, we do not admit those who come with hollow intent, wishing merely to behold the saint. Those coming here ought to have a need. Whoever comes to the saint with impure motives might as well not come—the swamp will swallow those. Therefore, before I lead you I must question each of you individually, and you must avow the truth. Who are you?” The youth raised his lifeless eyes to me and chills ran down my spine.

“Scribe and artist,” I answered. “I transcribed the Gospel in Peresopnytsia, embellishing it with ornaments and representations. People claim there are few that can match it in beauty and effort.”

“What is your name?”

“Mykhailo Vasylevych.”

“Why are you headed there?”

“I came to Zhytomyr to scribe and design a new Gospel, but my will to work has faded. I am unable to draw or write. My hand shakes. I am lacking in imagination. It seems my skill has vanished.”

“St. Mykyta will aid you,” the youth said, “if you approach in faith. And what is your name?” he turned toward Pavlo.

“Pavlo Hutiansky,” he answered.

“What brings you to the saint?”

“I am afflicted with convulsions,” Pavlo said. “I spent time with the holy priests of the Cave Monastery, who promised to heal me, but they did not succeed.”

The youth became still. He regarded Pavlo with expressionless eyes. “It is not a disease, but a demon that is depleting you. St. Mykyta can aid you. But remember: he does not heal physical ailments, but only spiritual ones. And what brings you?” he said, turning toward Kuzma.

“I was with him at the Zhydachivsky Monastery,” Kuzma said, “that is, we lived like brothers in Christ. I wish to meet him as a brother.”

“That does not suffice,” the lad declared. “St. Mykyta has dissociated himself from the sinful mortal world and no longer attends to relatives, former friends, or acquaintances. He has no brothers in this world. Are you spiritually distressed in any way?”

“What distresses me is that I see Satan in every person,” Kuzma said, his tiny eyes becoming completely round.

“For that is how it is,” the youth stated brusquely. “Satan dwells only in the souls of men, no place else. The sins of man are the deeds of Satan. Men with no sins do not exist. If that is all, you shall not go to the hallowed place.”

“So Satan dwells in him, as well?” Kuzma inquired, surprised.

The lad stiffened a bit. For the first time an expression appeared on his passionless countenance. “St. Mykyta struggles with Satan,” he said bitingly.

“So why does he not wish to battle with mine?” Kuzma asked.

“According to the Lord, every man must contend with his own fiend.”

“But why are you taking him with you?” Kuzma pointed at Pavlo. “You yourself said his sickness is demonic.”

“Demons and Satan are not the same,” the lad continued evenly. “The demon possesses, that is why he is rebuked, while Satan is something man is born with from his primary sin. Each person must struggle with this alone.”

One of Kuzma’s little round eyes seemed to shrink, or its lid partially closed down, like a chicken’s, while the other remained unchanged. “And if I say that I am infirm in my faith?” he asked.

“All the more reason why you should not go to the saint,” the lad proclaimed. “He who treads there faithlessly is devoured by the mire along the way.”

“You believe that mud has a mind?” Sozont asked, observing the lad closely.

“The will of God acts here. Through St. Mykyta.”

“And what if I say,” Kuzma interjected, keeping one eye half-shut, “that I am consumed with anguish?”

“Anguish is demonic,” the youth said, turning toward him. “You can set out, but consider it, first. I am afraid for you—that you will not be able to cross the swamp.”

“I am one who can cross even a sea!” Kuzma declared.

“I warned you,” the lad said curtly. “What is your name?”

“Kuzma Lopata, surname—Indykokur,” he stated proudly.

“May the Lord protect you,” the youth said. “And what brings you?” he turned to Sozont.

“Something a bit unusual,” a half-smile appeared on Sozont’s face. “I am obeying a duty to chronicle the lives not of saints of yore, but of saints of today. Thus I have been dispatched to record the life of Mykyta.”

The youth remained silent for a while. Something seemed to flash in his lifeless eyes as he stood across from Sozont. “A venerable effort indeed. But I am chronicling the life of St. Mykyta.”

“If you would allow me to utilize your notes, I will compare what I have collected up to now.”

“I have no notes. I am compiling it orally. But it is factual, as it came from the mouth of the saint.”

“Then I will gladly record your stories and confer with St. Mykyta.”

“What is your name?”

“Sozont Trypilsky. Deacon from Kyiv.”

“You may go,” the lad said, “but...”

“But what?”

“You must chronicle the life story word for word, as I tell it, not doubting anything, not verifying anything. If you should need to verify, you can confer with me or with Antonii, the saint’s leading disciple. You will

record everything together, letting us review it.”

“You do not trust me?” Sozont asked.

“The Scriptures say that every man is deceitful. Those close to a saint must insure that falsehood about the saint is not strewn about the world,” the youth proclaimed harshly.

“And if I were to doubt something?”

“Beware of this Satan,” Kuzma suddenly interrupted, rounding his eyes incredibly. “Last night he himself admitted that he is like a sea swell, chased and tossed by the wind. And he said that the worm of uncertainty nibbles at him.”

“Then it is imperative that he go to the saint,” the youth said calmly. “The worm of doubt is also a demon. Once he is rid of it, then the Life of St. Mykyta he produces will be completed veritably, without lies or embellishments. Because if something were not right, I fear the swamp would stretch into an abyss for him, as well.”

“Has your swamp swallowed many?” Sozont asked.

“All those who went to the saint without faith and who bore lies or evil thoughts to him or about him.”

At this point, he recounted a parable about a group of people journeying to the righteous one, so that he would pray for them. They spotted a deer along the way, walking past in its need. They shouted after the deer: “By the prayers of St. Mykyta, we command you to stop!” And the deer stopped, as if rooted to the ground. Lunging at it, they slew it and ripped off its hide. Famished from the road, they prepared a meal from its flesh. After they had their fill, the wrath of God smote them: they were dispossessed of their human voices. One of the men covered himself with the pelt for protection from rain and it grew onto him. Others became overgrown with furry skin and ran into the forest, grunting like deer. They wandered about like this for a long time. Wolves devoured some of them, and the rest—the one cloaked in the pelt included—made their way, staggering, to the saint; there they sojourned with him for two years until they took on human form and were able to speak in human voices.

“And that hide,” the youth said, “still hangs on a pole near the fence surrounding the hallowed place, as a frightful reminder to violators. And when you arrive there, you will be able to view it.”

I felt an unfamiliar dread, though the tale resembled a fable. Glancing around at my fellow travelers, I observed that they all, except Deacon Sozont, felt the same way. Kuzma’s round eyes bulged. Pavlo racked his fingers. The youth narrated the story calmly, his eyes and face remaining expressionless—he looked at no one. Interestingly, Sozont did not compare the parable to stories in books as he was wont to do, especially to the life of Symeon the Pole-Sitter, written by Teodoryt, though later, when we found ourselves face to face, having stepped aside to relieve ourselves, he muttered that the story with the deer was false, taken outright from

Teodoryt—evidently, the deacon understood that putting the youth on his guard too soon was unwise, since he was too laden with certainty. Besides which, he was unlike simple and fiery Kuzma, whom it was easy to ruffle in a discourse. The youth possessed a kind of impenetrable, rock-hard gloom, and disturbing it was clearly dangerous. Perhaps it was a sense of that gloom that aroused the dread in us, and not the telling of the tale. For indeed, there was something otherworldly about that youth. A force flowed out of him: powerful, puzzling and inscrutable. And I recalled the words of Prophet Amos: “He is darkness, not light.” If truth be told, I always measured others by the bearing of light or darkness, and throughout my life I became convinced that conveying only one is impossible: each of us has his darkness, though none of us is without light. Some possess more light, others more darkness. Not a day exists without shade or dark nooks, nor a night without light: candles, the moon, stars, fireflies—all this is elementary. And only infrequently does an individual appear from whom stream currents of radiance that generously fill those around him, like empty vessels. Also infrequent are those who are full of blind darkness, who likewise fill the souls’ receptacles of their fellow man, but with shadow. Much later I learned that the cause of the lad’s gloom was easily elucidated; I was mistaken in the dimensions, the magnitude of the darkness he bore. But more about this later.

So we followed him into the forest, along a lightly trampled path. We could converse freely, though the lad advised us to look under our feet, especially barefoot Kuzma. We were in a land of poisonous vipers: their bite paralyzes and kills swiftly. This added to our dread. In a voice that was calm and lifeless, as was everything about him, he related two stories about serpents from the life of Mykyta.

One day a green-faced woman was brought to Mykyta. Her face was green as grass, or as leaves. Later it turned out her entire body was that same green, as were her hands. The women claimed she was green all over. The reason, said the lad, was that one night, quenching her thirst, she swallowed a baby snake along with the water she drank. As the snake grew in her belly, her skin turned green. Village healers and soothsayers could do nothing for her, though they tried very diligently. The saint was her only hope.

“When I told him about this woman,” the youth said, “without looking at her or examining her, since he feels an indescribable aversion to women, he said: ‘Have her drink water from the hallowed place, and she must pray from morning till night.’”

The woman was offered a drink in the morning. She prayed all day, with no food or drink, and at eventide, as the sun set, her body began to twitch. Mouth agape, she dropped to the ground. People spied a snake’s head in her mouth. Hissing, it crawled out. It was three elbow lengths long. The green hue faded from the woman’s complexion; her skin assumed its

natural color. Slithering to the gate near the sacred spot, the snake coiled up and died.

The second story was about a serpent that lived in the local marsh. It was twelve elbow lengths long. Grass wilted in its wake and where it nested, grass did not grow. It attacked people and cattle, choking them and sucking out their blood. A wood splinter fell into its left eye. The eye became inflamed, causing it great pain. It crawled out of the marsh to the fence enclosing the holy place. Swerving, veering its head, it seemed to beg for mercy from St. Mykyta. Though he comes down from the pole very rarely, the saint descended to behold the serpent and touched its eye with his finger. The wood splinter dropped out of its eye. Winding itself into an erect posture, the serpent bowed to the saint. For a few days it lay at the gate, not harming anyone, until its eye cleared of pus. It then slipped into the marsh, never again attacking innocent people or cattle, only those who set out to the saint faithlessly or with ill thoughts. Those it drowns in the mud, so they say.

Sozont could not resist and asked: “How do you determine whether a person is approaching the saint with faith or faithlessness, with ill will or without it?”

“That is how we determine it,” the lad replied shortly. “The faithful come and go freely. Those who are malicious are devoured by the swamp and its serpent.”

“Do you employ other measures?”

“Malice is a spirit within a person,” the lad announced. “Blessed is he,’ according to David, ‘with no malice in his soul.’ Man carries this spirit in his breath. The serpent senses this spirit and divines it according to the teachings of the Lord.”

“But that same David stated,” Sozont said, “‘Cease from anger and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil.’”

“That is a commandment for man,” the lad replied. “We do not judge, nor does St. Mykyta, though he is a weapon of the Lord. God himself judges. ‘The wicked shall be cut out,’ that same David said, ‘and those who wait upon the Lord shall inherit the earth.’ And a bit later: ‘The wicked shall not be!’”

This was uttered in an even, offhand voice, though it resounded with a note of steel. Once again I felt a touch of fear. An indefinable dread clenched me. Regaining his senses, Deacon Sozont remarked amicably: “Your parables are truly enlightening!”

“Have you recorded them in the life of St. Mykyta that you are compiling?” the youth asked.

“No. I did not know all that.”

“What do you know?”

“Not much. In Cherniakhiv I learned about the early years of the saint from Father Ivan, the local priest. From Kuzma, who is with us, I heard of

his sojourn at the Zhydachivsky Monastery. If you so wish, before we reach the marsh, tell me what transpired before the saint found this place?”

“I am obliged,” the lad said, “to recount the life of the saint to everyone, everywhere.”

CHAPTER TWELVE,

describing the youth's tale about Mykyta the Pole-Sitter, that is, about how he became a pole-sitter

And the lad narrated how, upon being cast out of the monastery, Mykyta roamed desolate places amid clefts of rocks. He came upon a dry well, where serpents and evil spirits nested. There he settled, praying to God. Snakes bit him. Evil spirits tested him, attempting to turn him away from God by whispering flattering words into his ear. One spirit became alcohol, another—delectable food, and a third—a woman. At first the saint was not aware of what was occurring, believing that the woman hid the food and alcohol, for she appeared after he had consumed these other two. Sliding down the well to the saint, singing in a sweet voice along with the serpents while baring her body in front of him, she beguiled him with her dancing. Dazed, intoxicated, and on the verge of demise, Mykyta was impelled by the Lord to make the sign of the holy cross across his chest. And thus Mykyta was saved: the snakes were transformed into faggots, the alcohol into urine, the food into waste, and the woman, who nearly triumphed over him with seduction, vanished as vapor. After that, the saint swore a terrible oath: not to drink, not to eat, and to reckon woman to be a vessel of the devil, for that is how it is. And again he wandered through forests and caverns, until he came upon a mountain cave, wherein for three years he secluded himself, drinking and eating nothing. Word about Mykyta spread. Multitudes gathered, seeking cures for their infirmities, and Mykyta was seduced. He refused no one his help, not taking into account that flesh is mortal, destined to rot and perish, and that diseases of the flesh are the beginning of that demise. One of the Chetvertynsky princes heard of him. Doubtful that the saint neither ate nor drank, he brought him choice food and beverage. He spoke thus to the saint: “A person ought not to kill himself with excessive fasting. That is more sinful than virtuous.”

And the righteous one said: “Place, O Prince, the food and drink beside me. If need arises, I will fortify my body. Shut me up in the cave for forty days and nights. Then you may return.”

The prince did as he was asked and ordered his servants to block the entrance with earth and rocks, leaving but a small breathing hole.

When forty days had passed, the prince returned with his servants and opened a passage into the cave. He found the righteous one on the ground, lying as if dead. The food, unspoiled and untouched, lay beside him, likewise the beverages and water. The great abstainer had not taken even a bit, not even to taste.

And Prince Chetvertynsky was aghast. He appealed for a blessing. The righteous one rose, his body steadfast. He declared to the prince and those present: “I can no longer remain here. I do not desire human glory. I do not consider my sojourn in the cave a feat. I wished to pass the time standing,

but I floundered and permitted myself to sit. After sitting, I wanted to lie down, and when I lay down, I could neither sit nor stand. This means that I have failed to fortify my spirit.”

Once again he roamed the forests and caverns. He found an even higher mountain, and a rope left behind by someone. He girded his leg with one end, tying the other around a boulder. Standing thus atop the mountain, he contemplated the heavens, penetrating the nether heavens with his mind. Once again word about him spread and multitudes thronged, seeking cures for sickness. A priest from a local town visited. Beholding the fettered saint, he said: “A man is not a dog and does not need to be bound. Man is bound to a place by will and reason.”

Harkening, the righteous one unfettered himself and from that moment only his free will bound him—he wished to be a willing captive of the Lord. He did not sit, nor lie. He only stood, gazing at the sky, praying and making obeisance.

His glory spread across entire regions of Volyn and Polissia. Multitudes followed from as far as Podillia and Red Rus', carrying the sick and bearing their own afflictions, woe, and pain. Those who were grievously tormented, and those who were possessed with demons, they all received help. The saint healed all, regardless of who they were, restoring some, bringing joy or some other aid to others. And as he healed, to each of them the righteous one said: “Glorify God who restored you. Tell no man that Mykyta cured you, as the cure will lose its power...”

“But man is sinful in this world,” the youth said emphatically. “On their homeward journey, they glorified the propitious one instead of God, and his word came to pass: those who had been healed of sickness again became afflicted, those who had been possessed with demons saw demons again enter their souls, those who had been full of pain and grief were again tormented with pain and grief.”

In spite of everything, the righteous one's glory spread. Still multitudes came unto him, even from foreign lands. They all wished to touch him, to receive his blessing. And the saint sensed a great yearning, a quandary from such attention, for he had not a moment of peace day or night. He had no time to pray in solitude, and that was all he desired to devote himself to.

“Thus, he vowed not to heal any more diseases of the flesh, only spiritual ones. He accepted a few of his favorite from among the followers who wished to abide near him and permanently serve him. Among them was I, who had been blind, and thanks to him, could see again. We left through the thickets of Polissia, traversing the marsh, finding a peaceful place amid swamps overgrown with giant trees. We cut the tops off two pine trees standing close together and fashioned a floor. To that we leaned a ladder. Then the site was fenced. The pole was thirty-six elbow lengths—to bring the propitious one closer to the heavens and to allow him to submit

himself to holy prayers. He suffered mightily in that supernal realm, soaked with rain, scorched by heat and frost. He needs no food. He drinks only water, since he has become weak of late. Before, he did not even imbibe water.”

Jealous men of the cloth with no faith in his saintliness heard about him and, wanting to lead the spirit in him to temptation, sent two men from among their number. The first secretly harbored faith in the saint. The other wished to dishonor him by revealing him as a deceiver. So one was able to cross the swamp, while the other was swallowed. He was the first on whom God showed vengeance. The visitor who believed in Mykyta, meanwhile, conversed with the righteous one privately, marveled at his life, performed a liturgy and served the Holy Eucharist to him in Communion, and then returned home safely. And thereafter, the propitious one was left in peace. He has lived on that island in the midst of marshes for twelve years, rarely descending from his pole.

The lad stopped and turned toward us abruptly, his lifeless eyes glowing. And suddenly we realized that his eyes looked the way they did because he really was blind, though he claimed that Mykyta had restored his sight. And we were frightened mightily: we would be led across the swamps by a blind guide. Sozont alone remained calm.

“Can you see us?” the deacon asked.

“I cannot see you, but I can feel you,” the youth replied calmly. “The righteous one allowed me to see with my soul, not with my eyes. Guided by my spirit, I learn and discover. That is to say, the saint replaced my physical eyes with spiritual ones, explaining that with such a skill I will have no need for physical eyes.”

“And indeed, you do not need them?” Sozont asked.

“Not a bit,” the lad said. “Spiritual eyes are more perceptive than physical eyes. There are those who have eyes yet see not. Physical eyes are insatiable, inclined to err, while the eyes of the spirit know no malice nor enticements. ‘Though man has eyes, he cannot see,’ said Isaiah; for a spiritual man, his whole body serves as eyes. I know this better than anyone.”

“Is it far to the swamp?” asked Pavlo.

“Not far. But first we are obliged to proclaim again: He who believes what has been recounted, let him follow me. He who believes not, ought to return.”

“I believe,” Pavlo said. “Had I no faith, I would not have embarked on this journey with such expectations. I hope to be healed.”

“You can accompany me,” the youth said. “You shall be allowed to approach the hallowed one.”

I had doubts, but inwardly I sensed that now was not the time to reveal them. I needed first to witness and to discover, then to reflect. That is why I

said: "I, too, believe."

"You shall come with me," the lad said.

"And I wish to believe," Sozont said. "Will you allow me to ask what is unclear to me?"

"Of course. Forthright directness is better than concealed enigmas of the mind."

"Can man cross the boundaries determined for him by God?"

"When God wills it," the lad said. "God devised the boundaries, God can expand or remove them."

"Can man retain his humanity, crossing those boundaries?"

"He becomes chosen by God," the youth stated.

"Why does one chosen by God, sent to abide among people, flee those same people?"

"One chosen by God serves as an example to humanity, not as a mortal healer or as an urban pastor."

"Was not Jesus Christ a pastor, a healer?"

"He was. But even He fled into the desert. Besides which, St. Mykyta heals spiritual ills, and this is the same as being a pastor. He has disciples, as well. He is both a healer and a spiritual shepherd, but not a worldly one."

"This suffices for my faith," Sozont stated. I detected an ambivalence, that is to say, he expressed himself not like we did, Pavlo and I, but wryly, though he did not allow himself to forthrightly reveal what it was that seemed false to him in the story about Mykyta. The lad, it seemed, did not notice. He was already turning toward Kuzma, who stood a bit to the side (was he really blind, I wondered).

"And now you are last, Kuzma Indykokur," he said.

"Well said! I am last," Kuzma declared, while gawking, bug-eyed. "The Lord prefers those who are last. Moreover, I am no pharisee nor scribe, as are some." Kuzma cast an oblique glance toward Sozont. "But if he could inquire, allow me to do the same."

"Ask," the youth said.

And here Kuzma blurted something which, to my mind, he ought not have. "Is man guided by God or Satan?"

"Some by God, others by the impure one," the lad replied.

"Can Satan appear in the image of God?"

"He can appear as whoever he wishes."

"How can one test whether God is guiding, or Satan?" Kuzma asked.

"The same way St. Mykyta did," the lad said. "Do you know this story?"

We did not, so he proceeded to tell it.

The devil, jealous of kindness, transformed himself into an angel of light appearing before Mykyta in a blazing chariot with blazing horses. And he proclaimed in a bellowing voice: "The God of heaven and earth sent me, as you can see, to carry you into the heavens, like Illia. According to the life

you have led, you are due such honor. And the time has come for you to have the fruits of your labor—plentitude from the hand of the Lord shall be yours. Go, linger not, and do not be like Zakharii, who trusted me not. Fall to the ground and make obeisance to Him—may the angels and prophets, apostles and martyrs behold you.”

And the saint did not recognize his adversary’s deceit. He thrust his right leg towards the chariot, while extending his right arm to make the sign of the cross, and at that moment the devil and the chariot with the horses vanished, like smoke. Then the righteous one realized the devil’s bewitchment. Repenting, he punished the leg with which he was prepared to step into the chariot. He stood on that one leg for an entire year. Meanwhile, as revenge, the leg was beset with a rash by the devil, and the flesh on it began to rot. It became infested with maggots. Maggot-filled pus slid down the pole to the ground. One of our lads, a disciple, a follower named Antonii, collected the maggots that fell to the ground, and as the saint willed, carried them to the pole. The righteous one, suffering like a second Job, applied the maggots to the sore, saying: “Consume what God has provided for you!”

“Stop, stop!” Kuzma shouted, raising his arms. “Not what God provided—not God! You yourself said: the devil issued the rash, not God! How could he label the devil God?”

And for a second time we observed the youth stiffen, or at least his face twitched—Kuzma had zeroed in on him so precisely. Sozont turned to him; a smile he was unable to hold back flashed across the deacon’s face.

“Even the devil acts according to the will of God,” the youth said.

“Stop!” Kuzma cried in a falsetto, waving his arms. “If the devil acts according to the will of the Lord, then He transformed him into an angel with a chariot. And if so, how could Mykyta have resisted the will of God?”

“Through the devil, God was testing the saint,” the youth pronounced evenly. His face became inert once again. “But He, by His own will, informed the righteous one by raising his right hand for the sign of the cross.”

“If the Lord was testing him,” Kuzma continued caustically, “why did He not bring him to his challenge in the chariot? Why did he retreat from the challenge so swiftly?”

“Do not judge the acts of the Lord!” resounded the youth’s steely voice. “Man cannot know or comprehend them.”

“But you said yourself they were the acts not of the Lord, but of Satan. Why do you accept God and Satan as allies? Did not Lucifer rebel against God, freeing himself of the Lord’s supremacy? Did he not create his own realm, antagonistic and opposite to God’s? Does God not battle with Satan, while keeping him as His tormentor? Does He not have enough of His own warriors? Did not God cast Lucifer out with his black angels of His own will, was He not dismayed by them? Is not the world a stage for the great

battle between God and Satan, a war also fought in the souls of men, with no end as long as man exists? Why did you fail in discerning which is God, and which is Satan and why did you confuse them?"

The youth stood as if thunderstruck, his face as pale as the linen habit he wore. Kuzma was enthralled. His elongated face blushed, his eyes blazed with an otherworldly fire, his mouth expanded from button-size to full capacity, his single tooth glistening like chivalrous copper. "That is why I maintain," his voice thundered, "that God and Satan dwell in every man, and there they wage war. But an end does come! That occurs when Death smites man with a sword or with a scythe. Then judgment begins!"

Finally, the calm and even voice of the youth resounded: "I see that the demon has possessed you. You speak with his lips. You doubt the all-mightiness of God, and that is demonic. If so, you can come with us, but heed the Eye of the Abyss! If you cross the swamp, you will be allowed to behold St. Mykyta."

I shuddered: the lad spoke of the Eye of the Abyss. I felt shivers down my spine: what does he know of the Eye? It turns out that he knows as much as Pavlo does, who beheld it in a vision while visiting the holy women. And even though he admitted that his story was devised—actually, that he had read it in a book and simply retold it in his own words—he could not have invented the Eye of the Abyss. He knew that it exists, as do I, and as does this peculiar young lad—blind or not, it is impossible to ascertain. But to him, it seems, the Eye of the Abyss was the swamp; therefore he might be employing it metaphorically. I was struck this time by both Sozont and Kuzma: Sozont led a fruitless discourse with the youth, though earlier he had expressed himself quite passionately and cuttingly, as had, surprisingly, Kuzma. It was evident, therefore, that Sozont had sensed, as had Pavlo and I, the danger or threat ahead, the nature of which we could not sufficiently comprehend. Perhaps he was brushed by fear of a mystery we could not fathom, or perchance, as the youth had related, of the dreadful journey on which we embarked and which none of us wished to forsake. We trod like blind men, following a blind leader, after all, and only this blind man knew the way. It seemed that an unfamiliar force was propelling us, obscuring all reason, not letting us stop or return, which none of us even considered.

Kuzma surprised me by suddenly revealing a sound intellect, though previously, in debates with Sozont, he had pretended to be a simpleton and a fool. The lad, similarly, was of sound mind, so that it seemed that we were all to a like degree bookmen, but were we pharisees? At least Deacon Sozont exhibited himself a pharisee: earlier he had praised the merit of authenticity, but now, when he sensed a whiff of danger, suddenly he did not wish to be genuine. So he was to an extent dishonest, but is not dishonesty in some instances wisdom? St. Paul, at least in his epistle to the Ephesians, compared cunning artifice to deception, which leads to contrived misunderstanding. Were Pavlo and I pharisees? Undoubtedly so, for neither

Pavlo nor I chose candor with the youth who expressed intolerance to uncertainty. We therefore refused to dispute. Whether the lad was a pharisee is impossible to say at this time; we knew him too little, although after our last discourse I began to feel respect towards him. While the youth revealed a powerful mind during the discussion with Sozont (this is what the deacon wished, since he was a pharisee), in the argument with Kuzma, at the end only Kuzma remained on the field of battle.

And so we continued on our journey, for a time walking silently. Before reaching the swamp, our silence was broken only once, by Sozont.

“Forgive me, Brother,” he said. “We have walked together so long, yet we know not your name.”

“Teodoryt,” the youth replied shortly, without stopping and without turning around.

But Sozont, deeply shocked, stopped as if rooted to the ground. We were likewise shocked: the hagiographer who wrote about Symeon the Pole-Sitter was a bishop of Cyrrhus and also named Teodoryt, that is, Theodore. As mentioned before, he recounted the saint’s life in chapter 26 of his *Philotheos Historia*. Our present Teodoryt also mentioned Antonii, one of those close to Mykyta. There was a hagiographer and disciple of Symeon the Pole-Sitter named Antonii, as well. I gather it was precisely this that shocked Deacon Sozont so forcefully: it appeared that a devised, chimerical game was being played out, in which we were unwitting participants. If my presumptions proved true, then this new Teodoryt could undoubtedly be considered, as we all could, with the exception of Kuzma, a pharisee. But I shall not rush ahead, so as not to be a worse sinner than I need to be.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN,
which describes our crossing the swamp

This chapter needs to be the thirteenth because the number thirteen is the number of the devil. At the swamp we experienced a spiritual shock, the horror of which has still not washed out of me, even as I spin out these lines. Earlier, when we had rambled through labyrinths the egresses of which we knew well, our rambles—being reflections, mental games and stories—were merely a challenging game in which we participated like grown children. There, at the swamp, we experienced a horror not imaginary, but real.

The marsh itself was curious; an endless surface of aqueous sheen, with islands and outcroppings overgrown with short, sparse saplings—birches, alders—and thick with cattails. A dense odor of stagnant water hung over it.

A magpie screeched overhead; this same magpie escorted us the entire way. Before stepping into water, Teodoryt picked up a long, solid stave, evidently one he had left in the reeds and directed us to cut similar poles for ourselves, as our walking staffs were inadequate for crossing the marsh—they were too short. In his sack Sozont carried a small axe, and we easily effected what was needed. Teodoryt fell to his knees to pray, as did we. We prayed raptly, earnestly. Each of us sensed an anxiety. I know I did.

“The path might be narrow and unstable. Follow me step by step. First feel for solid ground, then set a foot down. Move the free foot only after you can stand solidly on the other foot.”

Here is how we set out: Teodoryt first, with Deacon Sozont behind him, then Pavlo. I followed Pavlo. Kuzma was last. Being heftier than the rest of us, Sozont tread ahead of Pavlo, wanting to test the course with his weight; I was instructed to watch Pavlo so that, heaven forbid, his seizures not strike along the way. I believe Sozont placed Kuzma last to keep him from Teodoryt, mindful of the lad’s threatening boasts. The lad did not meddle in our preparations. He stepped into the water confidently, and we followed as if on a string, one after the other, setting our feet down deliberately. The path turned out to be quite firm. The water, agitated by our passing, bubbled and emitted a musty stench, intoxicating me and possibly the others. Teodoryt trod confidently, though carefully, not once glancing in our direction; of course, we did not talk. Occasionally we scrambled atop small outcroppings to rest a bit. Overhead the screeching magpie doggedly accompanied us, to our annoyance. That screeching was curiously unsettling, though on one of the isles Teodoryt informed us that this magpie was his primary guide in the places where extra care was required.

The forest from which we emerged soon vanished from the horizon. We found ourselves in the midst of a sea of mud, no edges of which were visible in any direction. Half-limpid, scrawny saplings or mounds of cattails were all we could see. A cloud of mosquitoes swarmed above us, painfully

stinging our faces and our hands. We rinsed the irritated places with water from time to time, as Teodoryt advised. A muddy flavor lingered on our lips. So far, no adventures had befallen us. The path supported us. Pavlo was calm, but not Kuzma, who was clad in humble, torn raiments that did not protect him from the mosquitoes as ours did. Every time we clambered onto an island, Kuzma tore leeches off his bare feet and shins, from which his calves bled. He was accustomed to such discomfort and he seemed even to enjoy it, still believing that leeches suck only bad blood, never good. He held no such notions about mosquitoes, however. His face and neck were swollen from mosquito bites, even though he rinsed his skin with water. Time dragged incredibly slowly. The sun stood over our heads. The sky was clear, with not a cloud, yet the heat did not bother us. We were steeped in water. Though warm, it refreshed us sufficiently.

Thus we plodded along the entire day. Finally we climbed atop a larger island. We gathered twigs, chopped branches from dead, standing trees, and ignited a flame over charred remains where pilgrims on their way across the swamp to St. Mykyta had doubtlessly set many a fire. We cooked porridge and ate it, all except Teodoryt, who told us he consumed only bread and water. Thus we offered him bread, which he ate reluctantly. Oddly, mosquitoes did not sting him, even though his arms, neck, and face were unprotected. After faring on bread, he fell to the ground and did obeisance, praying silently: his lips moved, his lifeless eyes widened. His complexion appeared waxen, like the parchment on which I scribed countless words and painted ornaments and pictures.

The magpie that screeched over our heads relentlessly was joined by another, so now we were accompanied by two magpies on our trek. During this long period of rest, Sozont asked Teodoryt to share a few more stories about St. Mykyta. He nodded in agreement and recounted the story of Kateryna, mother of the righteous one. After the death of her husband, she resolved to search for her son. He was her sole progeny and there was no one to run the Cherniakhiv homestead. She roamed far and wide and eventually decided to seek the help of St. Mykyta, whom she did not know to be her son. At first, after she had crossed the swamp, Mykyta was unwilling to speak with her, to admit to who he was, remarking that this was no place for a woman. Removing herself from his sight, the mother sat and wept, her maternal heart not letting her leave. Then the saint decided to admit who he was and dispatched Teodoryt to tell her: "I am your son, whom you are seeking. Do not expect me to return, as I have relinquished the world. Do not worry about me, my mother. If we are deserving, we shall meet in another, better place, in heaven."

And she, learning that she had found her son, wailed and howled and lamented, begging to behold him. Upon which the righteous one sent Teodoryt a second time with the following words: "Wait a little while, O mother, in silence. You can behold me from the enclosure."

Thus she lay near the gate of the fence, not accepting any food nor drink for three days and three nights. On the morning of the fourth day, she sent word to her son that if he did not descend to her to see her and talk to her, she would die. But even then the propitious one did not descend to her, and quietly and wordlessly she gave up her soul to the Lord. When the righteous one learned of this, he willed her body to be brought to the pole, and gazing upon her from above, he prayed, weeping. And his tears fell upon his mother's lifeless face, and her body quivered and her lips smiled, an otherworldly radiance shining from her face. She was buried, Teodoryt reported, in front of the pole. Everyone can view the grave. To this day the saint prays for her twice a day.

Kuzma rose, asking: "So what about the Lord's commandment? Solomon said: 'A foolish son is a calamity for his parents: the house and riches become their only legacy.' And Paul proclaimed that those who are disobedient to their elders are like deceivers, haters of God, attackers, braggarts and evildoers. And in his epistle to the Ephesians, he plainly said: 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is right! Honor thy elders—this is the first commandment along with your vows.'"

Teodoryt stood on his knees as on an immovable pole. "St. Mykyta honored his mother," he said, gazing with expressionless eyes. "But he did not forget Christ's words: 'And everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.'"

"So that one must overstep the first commandment for greater advantage?" Kuzma asked sharply.

"The words of Christ should be your response: 'Oh, ye of little faith, why do you doubt?'"

"Because I have a mind that can reason," Kuzma said. "And it is evident to me that here one truth is excluding another."

"Your reason is the darkness of heresy," said Teodoryt, and sighed. "The truth lies not in reason but in faith."

"What is faith without reason?"

"Everything!" Teodoryt exclaimed. "Look how mosquitoes, God's creatures, feast upon your intelligent face. They do not touch me! I abide in faith. You are filled with doubt."

"They do not eat you because you are dead," Kuzma declared. "I am alive!"

"You have stated the truth," Teodoryt agreed calmly. "I am dead to this world, while you are alive in it. You are, therefore, more dead than I am."

And he smiled maliciously. This alarmed me, as it did all of us, I believe. I sensed danger once again—and perchance something more grave.

In the morning, we set out and walked until noon. Finally, Teodoryt

said: “The end of our journey is near. This part is the most precarious. Be alert! Only faith will carry us through.”

Then he stopped and gestured with his hand toward a pool. “This is it. The Eye of the Abyss.”

“Why is it called that?” Sozont asked.

“Because we believe it to be bottomless.”

In front of us lay a seemingly unconnected pool, peculiarly round in form. The water in the pool was milky, as if stirred with white clay—not tinted with brown, as it was in other places. But something else impressed me: in the middle of the large circle, a clearly defined smaller circle was discernible, the water there was dark, with shades of ocher. It looked like the pupil of an eye. Shivers ripped through me. Inadvertently, I thought: those visions of the Eye I mentioned, were they not premonitions of our journey here, and thus a warning prior to our encounter with this wondrous place? If so, what was providence cautioning me about? I received no omens not to head in this direction. A wish to turn back from the journey likewise did not surface; therefore, all was beholden to my will, my will being simple—to go on. Did I expect to recoup my skill after meeting Mykyta, and is that why I set out on this journey? Perchance, that is what I expected, perchance not; I have, after all, written enough about what prompted me to undertake this journey. Let me remind you, I craved not so much a healing of my spirit as its revival, an invigoration and fullness. That is, I was seeking a powerful rouser who could entice my soul to crack open the bark that had begun gradually to cover it, as if a chick hatching from an egg, to allow me to view the world with a fresh eye, renewed and rejuvenated. If this did not happen, my soul, encased in the membrane of my anatomy, would begin to suffocate from the weight, the longing to escape. And the meaning of that was evident. To be completely honest, then, it was a fear of death that chased me onto this, as I see it, irrational journey, because the Eye of the Abyss which hounded me was, perchance, its image. Another thought occurred to me as I followed Pavlo into the milky turbulence of that pool: was I not game for an unknown hunter, invisible to me except for his watchful eye, attending me relentlessly, and was he not chasing me cleverly into his snares, like an unthinking wild animal? Stalking not only me, a single buck, but an entire herd and chasing us in a direction chosen not by us, but by him who is craftily devising this peculiar hunt? And if so, who is he, that hunter, I wondered as I stepped onto something unsteady under my feet, something narrow and tottering, which nevertheless held not only me, but all of us. I was under the impression that we were treading over a submerged plank, secured to the shores of the pool, because when I attempted to plumb the bottom along the sides, my staff did not meet any resistance, sinking easily. The depth of the pool could be considerable. My pole did not reach the mud at the bottom as it did in other places.

I glanced at Teodoryt, who took his staff into both hands much like itinerant minstrels do, walking on a stretched cord. Sozont held his pole the same way, as did Pavlo, so I did likewise. Teodoryt inched along quite slowly, shifting his feet deliberately. Attempting to duplicate his motions we gradually approached the small, dark circle, which was very clearly defined. The murky water appeared to be cut off at the edges, not mixing even slightly with the brown water in the center.

Teodoryt stepped into that brown ring and stopped, losing his balance for a moment; we all stopped as well. Finally the youth again set out, now even more alert and careful. He exited the small circle. Sozont crossed steadily, as did Pavlo. As I approached it, I observed that although we were stirring up the water (we were submerged in it chest-deep), the milky water was not mixing at all with the brown water, which I could in no way explain. I had not yet crossed the smaller circle, when suddenly I felt the track under me waver, and in back, where Kuzma was walking, I heard a sharp, anguished, inhuman cry suddenly echo. Something plunged into the water behind me. Instinctively I drove my staff into the track, like a peg into soil. It held fast. I leaned on it, successfully using it to retain my balance. When I turned around to see what had happened to Kuzma, I saw ripples spreading, as happens when one throws a stone into water. The rings rippled precisely from the dark circle in the middle of the pool. I had, it seemed, stepped out of it in time.

”Do not stop! Do not stop!” Teodoryt yelled, and I saw that he was striding briskly, almost running, Sozont and Pavlo at his heels. Tugging at my staff, I, too, walked as swiftly as I could. The track began to shake lightly underfoot—it felt as though I was walking along the spine of a frightened beast which, while still standing in place, was ready in a moment to tear away in terror, and I would plunge off it exactly as had Kuzma.

Teodoryt was approaching land, and I noticed the shoreline was round and that young lads, looking much like Teodoryt and garbed in similar linen habits, were standing along the arc of the shore. They had positioned themselves at definite intervals. One of them, the one in the middle, extended his hand to Teodoryt, pulled him onto the bank, and then helped each of us clamber out of the pool. We immediately turned around to survey the swamp. The surface was flat, void and completely calm. It occurred to me that at least Kuzma’s staff should be floating in the place where he fell—but he had probably held on to it so tightly that it had gone under with him. The milky mass of the pool was clear and still, the sharply defined circle of ochre at its center.

“I warned you,” said Teodoryt, out of breath. “I warned your fellow traveler. I warned all of you: only in faith can one cross. He dishonored God!”

Pavlo and I were anxious, Pavlo to such a degree that his teeth rattled. I was gripped by a sickly feebleness. Sozont alone remained completely

calm and balanced. Surprisingly, he renounced Kuzma much like Apostle Peter had renounced Jesus. “You must know,” he said, “that that man was not our fellow traveler. He joined us not long ago along the way. I know not that man!”

And from the depths of the island where we were heading we heard the crowing of a rooster.

Translated by Olha Rudakevych

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Look for the second half of this novel (pp. 82–196) in the next issue of *Ukrainian Literature*.