

Eye of the Abyss¹

Valerii Shevchuk

CHAPTER FOURTEEN,

which describes the island on which Mykyta and his disciples lived

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

“Wherefrom do you obtain food?” Sozont asked.

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

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

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

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

Asking permission first, Sozont at once besieged him with questions.

“Are we allowed to walk everywhere freely?”

“Everywhere, except past the fence. Climbing up to the saint is

¹ The first part of this novel appeared in Volume 1 (2004) of *Ukrainian Literature*.

forbidden,” Ievahrii answered in his bass voice.

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

“That is allowed.”

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

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

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

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

“The only one.”

“Will we be guided in our return?”

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

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

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

“So how does he heal the infirm?”

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

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

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

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

“Teodoryt remembers tales about the saint most credibly. Although, if Antonii agrees, we can tell quite a few stories as well. But Teodoryt must verify everything. That is why it is better for Teodoryt to tell the stories himself. Antonii can corroborate, as well.”

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

“Only Antonii.”

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

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

“How does Teodoryt know stories about the saint when he is blind? He did not see what transpired and he cannot read about it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ievahrii took his leave and departed. He let us know that if any questions arose, we could approach him or the other disciples of the blessed one, and query without reservation. Overall he made a fair impression. There was not within him that darkness such as we perceived in Teodoryt. He answered questions directly, clearly, without being suggestively abstruse—this was a simpler soul. In my thoughts I was astonished at Sozont’s composure after the frightful tragedy that had befallen Kuzma in the Eye of the Abyss—he behaved as if Kuzma had never existed and as if there were no terrifying puzzle concerning his death. Moreover, he had at once proceeded with his habitual probing, and had already questioned one of Mykyta’s acolytes. Whereas I could not suppress the tremor in my being. My ears still reverberated with Kuzma’s screams. Thus I listened to the exchange between Sozont and Ievahrii with only half an ear, so that perhaps I am not delivering it accurately now. Although my memory, I believe, is no worse than Teodoryt’s.

The cook was a one-eyed fellow. He was clad in peasant garb. His face and hands were almost black—from the smoke or from the sun. The kitchen had no enclosure: the kettle was set directly into the masonry of a fireplace

with a tall chimney. He took the food from us without a word. Lifting a wooden lid, which we had not noticed in the ground at first, he carried the food into a small cellar. Two rather large barrels stood there. For drawing water, there were spigots near the bottom of the barrels: a larger one, for pouring water into a bucket that stood right there, and a smaller one, possibly for filling a smaller container. Pulling out a small cup, Sozont asked the cook's permission to drink. The man waved his hand without replying. We drank water from the bucket using Sozont's cup. The water was indeed sweet, with no hint of mud. Sozont tried chatting with the cook, posing innocent questions, but the cook affixed his one, suddenly enlivened eye upon the deacon and signaled for us to leave. Clearly, he was either mute or had taken a vow of silence.

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

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

most, and what I wanted to consider first, was Ievahrii's statement that we would leave this place when we wished. What he had in mind, I could not fathom. I was surprised, too, that so far, aside from Mykyta's five disciples (the sixth was the blind one), we had met not a single normal person.

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

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

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

"First, we will pray to the saint," Sozont advised.

We quickened our gait. Upon reaching the peasants we kneeled, praying. Beholding us reciting prayers, the peasants began crossing themselves. After praying, we arose. Only now were we able to see what

was occurring in the yard: all of Mykyta's disciples were there. A pauper was holding on to one of the cut-pine posts. He was sobbing.

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

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

And we heard a rasping, high-pitched voice. A furry head, thrust into the opening of the blind in the door, spoke out: "Fresh arrivals are here! Evince who you are! Wherefrom, and why have you come to me?"

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

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

"We said that you, Reverend Father, should surrender this thief to us. We will try him in our people's court. He deserves to die a miserable death."

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

"We will not seize him without your will, Father, not to act against you," a peasant said. "But punish him with devout prayers—we have no other defense against him."

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

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

And the thief stopped crying. He stood, staring with eyes wide open: genuine horror burned in those eyes. The crowd was already going mad: it wept, howled, yelped in screeching, whining voices, some beating their bodies to the ground, some tearing at their hair, others thumping fists into

their chests so violently that an echo resounded, some scratching their already dreadful faces with their nails. I glanced at our Pavlo. Frightened, I nudged Sozont: Pavlo's face had turned blue, the hue of a corpse. Foaming at the mouth, he hit the ground as he stood. His teeth chattered, his body writhed, his spine bent like a bow. Sozont grabbed a stick and inserted it between his teeth. He then pressed him to the ground.

Meantime, the gate creaked. A calm and collected Antonii passed through.

"Let him be," he told Sozont. "The blessed one has taken notice."

Abruptly, he yelled at the freaks and the cripples who were still going mad: "Enough! Enough, I said!"

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

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

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

Another replied: "Yea, we should prob'ly go."

A third ventured: "Let's wait a li'l beyond the swamp. We can catch the thief when he runs out."

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

He left. Only now did I notice that the sun was getting hot. Pavlo lay unprotected, so I pulled him to the fence into the shade. Sitting next to him, I was able to look about the premises better through the openings between the poles of the palisade. Under one of the posts the thief stood, praying. From his shoulders hung the deer pelt. A grave, marked with a birch cross and covered with turf, rose under another pole. Evidently, Mykyta's mother was buried there. In the enclosure stood a small hovel, where Mykyta's disciples were probably now hiding—not one of them was in the yard. The yard itself was well-trampled. Grass grew only along the edges under the palisade. Unplastered, crudely fashioned of logs, the hovel stood under a roof thatched of reeds; the windows could be drawn shut. One of the window shutters was open and I saw the back of one of Mykyta's acolytes; actually, the linen of his habit. It wavered for a moment and disappeared from my field of vision. The door creaked open. Antonii appeared. He walked lamely across the yard, stepped through the gate, and stood next to me.

“He hasn’t awakened yet?” he asked calmly.

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

“Where is the third one?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He is not a friend of mine,” I stated, “since I am traveling from Zhytomyr while he and Pavlo, from Kyiv—I did not know either of them before I joined them in Zhytomyr.”

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

“A translation of the four gospels, arranged in chapters and headings, presented in compliance with the complete, twelve-month cycle of Orthodox sacred readings. I translated this book, copied it and designed many ornamental illustrations, headpieces, and illuminated initials. Next to these I lay miniatures set in adorned marginalia. And before that, back in 1554, I illuminated the Acts of the Apostles. Vasyl Zahorovsky, my patron, later acquired it from me. Oh, what a goodly piece of work that was! From morning ’til night, Monday to Saturday, month to month, year to year. Many years, Brother!”

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

“The work has drained me, like water drained out of a cup—it has sucked the strength out of me like marrow from a bone. My bones and the vessel of my being have dried up, cracked, and hollowed. The vessel is there, but no water. I know not if this interests you, Brother, but I do know

that I shall never scribe nor illuminate anything like it again: I do not wish to execute anything worse, and I am unable to produce anything like it.”

“No need to,” Antonii replied brusquely. “It means that you have effected that which you were to effect in this world.”

“You see, the thing is, Brother,” I smiled confidently, not knowing myself why I suddenly took to being frank with him, “I am incapable of anything any more. Do you understand? No-thing-at-all!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIFTEEN,

in which the wayfarer's communion is retold—their reflections about what had been revealed; Sozont's monologue about the game is presented; an evening repast at the island refectory is described

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

Not wishing to shock him after his seizure, I simply said: "The thief has died."

Pavlo's smiling face beamed. "I beheld his death in a dream."

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

"He Who brought him to me shall with a multitude of heavenly warriors take him—pure through repentance—away! Do not sadden me!" replied Mykyta.

Afterwards, the peasants had departed. "Was it not so?" Pavlo asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"That is true," Antonii said. "I can attest to it."

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

"By the rooster's crowing," Antonii replied. "At one crow—you go; two crows, the women go."

"Who was that maiden we saw in the women's camp?" Sozont asked.

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

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

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

“Is Marta also sick?” Sozont inquired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You cast him into it?”

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

“Are not children born of this?”

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

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

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

At once we set out to the refectory, since after only a light breakfast and no midday meal we were quite hungry. All the crippled and maimed

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

had turned out from behind bushes and trees, walking, crawling, limping onto the path, in an instant crowding it by forming a long line. We ended up at the tail end, not pressing close but standing a bit apart. As no one stood behind us (I do not think anyone could have heard us), Deacon Sozont delivered a sermon-lecture about the game. I shall recount it from memory, in my own words:

“I know not if what we are witnessing and attending seems peculiar to you, but I believe that these people are playing an intricate game which I have not yet been able to comprehend sufficiently. I see nothing evil in the game, as a man’s life, according to the will of God, is composed of two parts: work and play. Working, man earns his daily bread for sustenance, and at play man entertains himself. No wonder the ancient Romans demanded two things: bread and spectacle, that is to say, work and play. Bread sustains man through life, while games provide a fascination with life; work exhausts man, and play lures and captivates. Play, my dear Brothers, is more primeval than work. God created Adam while playing, and Eve was created for Adam’s entertainment. Children were conceived for the amusement of each and both of them; and it was a game that led their children to the slaying. Before arriving on earth, Adam and Eve knew only play; cast out of paradise they learned to work. Work is self-enslavement, while play is entertainment one need not be enslaved to. To make the drudgery of work less unpleasant, man masks it in play: singing while toiling, inventing, altering something, thus lending novelty to enslavement, which means: he begins playing at work—turning it into pleasure, enjoyment. All learned men, all inventors, all lovers of books and writers, dancers, gamesmen, storytellers are like children at play. So that the more one lives, the more entangled one becomes in the game. Soldiers ply battles and competition, bidding Death along with the implements of killing into their games; priests have transformed temples into play places, for where there is ceremony there is a game. All holidays are play, all festivities, weddings, funerals, families, spring rites, harvest rites, etcetera. Toying with ideas, philosophers erect thought structures, song writers—songs and rhymes, musicians—delightful sounds, builders—buildings; play captivates man ever more. Play, my dear Brothers, gives one the will to live; kings wield games, politicians, judges and pages play games while investigating a crime; heretics and schismatics, the originators of agnosticism and sects sport games. One game is sacred with tradition, another breaks all tradition; one game, my dear Brothers, is considered benevolent, as it bears no evil, while another is wicked because it spreads evil. Competition on Mount Olympus was a game, all Parnassi are filled with amusement. Evildoers, deceivers, tricksters, knaves, defilers, adulators, connivers, glorifiers and censurers, heretics and saints, tyrants, thieves, warriors, detesters, prophets, merchants, usurers, misers, money collectors, land barons—all play games,

because without play man cannot survive. And because the greatest of all players is the Lord, God, Who while amusing Himself created the world; all creation involves play. It was He who wove an earthly web, interlacing the world with threads of life-giving waters, enabling life to begin. And so heaven, hell, and life on earth are a game. Grand, incomprehensible to the human mind, but a game nevertheless. Play ends only where man toils for profit. Even a cat plays with the mouse before eating it, though often the game of prey and consumer lasts all too briefly. And Death, after all, dallies with man, snatching and releasing him, or hatching disease, which is a kind of match with Death. Death is instrumental in the nourishment of all living things: a bird kills caterpillars, insects; birds of prey—predators; insects and caterpillars kill plants, growing plants absorb the sap of decaying, dead plants or live creatures for nutriment, or from manure, and manure is dead life. The wolf ravages sheep, sheep eat grass, grass consumes the dead wolf and sheep—without killing and destruction, that is, without Death, there can be no existence, and therefore no game. Work, after all, is also the servant of Death, as it provides nourishment for man, and nourishment involves killing. Work, therefore, is the science of annihilation in the name of consumption. And so the sole instruments in the hands of God for His eternal, inscrutable game with us is the game itself and Death. These are the two incontrovertible pillars of existence, whether we like it or not.”

“And the evil spirit?” Pavlo asked.

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

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

““Not a pace without His grace,’ that is to say, God is in everything, and everything is in Him. The evil spirit is one of God’s gaming dice.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You mean St. Mykyta?” Pavlo said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And now let us remain silent, my Brothers,” said Sozont. “Mealtime is approaching.”

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

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

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

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

“Are they baleful?” asked Sozont.

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

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

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

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

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

“And how do these hapless ones survive winters?”

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

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

“Have faith!” Sozont responded connivingly.

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

As we walked past the enclosure to the women’s camp, we saw that Sister Marta had lined everyone up in pairs. Holding a bowl and a spoon, they all waited in front of the gate. Apparently, they were waiting for us to pass. Seeing Marta among the crippled and freakish once again, I recognized the power of the cook’s words: communing with such, one soon forgets what normal people are like. Marta was no beauty, but in this setting her ordinariness glowed with loveliness, captivating my eye even though I am far from youth and, due to my celibate way of life, have not desired a woman’s charms in some time. Marta openly gazed in our direction with ardent, glittering eyes. Obediently, patiently, with eyes humbly lowered, stood her subjects.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN,

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

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

“Have you noticed, my Brothers, that Mykyta’s disciples have chosen special names for themselves?” said Deacon Sozont. “Antonii was a disciple of Symeon the Pole-sitter, Teodoryt recorded his life story, Symeon Metafrast was the author of the notable ‘Lives of the Saints,’ Ievahrii the Scholastic likewise chronicled the life of Symeon the Pole-sitter, as did Nykyfor of Kalishten and Heorhii Kedry of Constantinople.”

“Your erudition is startling,” I remarked.

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

“Why did Mykyta not become Symeon?” I asked.

“If they really are symeonides, then a follower of Symeon should not bear his name, just as Christ’s apostles did not adopt the name of Jesus Christ,” Sozont stated. “Besides, every enlightened Christian is familiar with Symeon the Pole-sitter, yet only elected scribes know his chroniclers. This may, then, have been an act of hypocrisy. Though perhaps not.”

“But that means,” I responded, “that some among them are well acquainted with the writings of the holy priests of our church. That is, they are among the chosen scribes.”

“Either Teodoryt or Antonii,” Sozont reckoned.

“But Teodoryt is blind,” Pavlo countered.

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

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

“Let go my ear!” he wailed.

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

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

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

"What is your name?"

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

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

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

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

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

"We brought the millet," Pavlo said.

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

"Have you lived here long?"

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

"How old are you?" I asked.

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

"Why did you come here?"

"Oo-o-h, I did!" the dwarf said. "It's go-od here! They feed us. No-o-o need to beg f'r bread! You, to-o-o, don't want to beg f'r bread?"

"We wish to be healed," Pavlo explained.

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

"Mykyta said so himself?" asked Sozont.

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

"Do people come here often?"

"Nah, not o-often. It's hard to-o get here. Yup! But tho-ose who come do-on't always leave. Yup!"

"What becomes of them?"

"O-o-oh, St. Mykyta helps them..."

"How does he help?" Pavlo asked.

"Like this, by the tail into-o-o the sack, yup!" the dwarf grasped his throat. "Knock-knock—and gone, hee-hee! And into-o-o the Eye—whack, smack," and the dwarf gurgled as if rinsing his throat.

"He murders and drowns them?" Pavlo asked, surprised.

"Nah, no-ot murders...he helps them... yup!"

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

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

"So, those around him?"

But the dwarf had no chance to respond. His eyes suddenly widened: he lunged, fleeing headlong into the bushes. Looking toward the path, we

spied Mykyta's disciples heading in our direction, all six: Antonii, Teodoryt, Symeon, Ievahrii, Nykyfor, and Heorhii. They turned off the path toward us and made themselves comfortable on the ground.

"What did the dwarf tell you?" Antonii asked calmly.

"Nothing of note. That today's meal was good, thanks to our millet."

"We do not grow or harvest anything, except wild herbs," Teodoryt said, his lifeless eyes glowing. "So we serve and eat what is brought to us as alms. We have no gold, nor reserves of money. The donations we receive are spent on food, which sometimes needs to be purchased."

"Of course," Sozont said.

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

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

"He spoke the truth," Teodoryt said, his voice circumspect, easy. "St. Mykyta lives not for the corporeal. Why should he heal people for life in this world? He cures souls that are sorely vexed, flawed. He is a spiritual, not physical, healer. Things physical—crippling, freakishness, a feeble mind, as also health and strength—are endowed by the Lord and we ought not meddle in His will. Spiritually, one progresses on one's own, and here is where St. Mykyta can and does offer succor. But one must come to him in faith, as I have already said."

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

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

"Thus it was," I said.

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

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

"How did the thief learn of the path through the swamp and the Eye of

the Abyss?" Sozont asked.

"Local folk know of the path. They serve as guides for pilgrims. You yourself, Brother Sozont, walked with the peasants to the Eye of the Abyss and saw that they departed with no help from us. This same thief had been here before. He wanted to seize our gold and money, which we never possessed—at least not gold and valuables. He dug up the whole island, even climbed up to the saint and fell off the ladder, breaking a leg. That is when he left with his compatriots."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Has it claimed many?"

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

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

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

"Do you throw them in with a weight, or just as they are?" Sozont asked.

"As they are," Teodoryt said.

"And the cadavers never resurface?"

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

Nykyfor had a round face with slightly slanted eyes, a flattened nose, and full lips. He recounted how once he had ambled toward the Eye of the

Abyss while contemplating the ways of the Lord. He had stopped at the shore to reflect when suddenly the water churned and a round spine with angled fins surfaced. But this lasted only a moment—the spine disappeared with rings rippling the water. Then everything became still.

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

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

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

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

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

Surprised, Mykyta’s acolytes exchanged glances.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Fine,” Sozont began to speak. “His childhood and youth in Cherniakhiv, his respite at Zhydachivsky Monastery, his stay in the well and

on the mountain top, his departure to this island and his pole-sitting—these are the themes of his life, and I have recorded them. Now the miracles: his trials, the devil’s trick, the saint’s mother, Kateryna, his drawing sweet water out of the swamp; the woman who swallowed the snake along with the water, the boa constrictor with the injured eye; the deer slain by the pilgrims—here I have not yet recorded everything. I myself have witnessed two miracles: the death of our fellow-traveler Kuzma, who had failed to demonstrate faith in St. Mykyta; the death, and prior to that, the repentance of the thief; the prophecies of the saint regarding famine, the plague and locusts. That is all.”

Mykyta’s disciples listened to the list intently.

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

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

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

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

Antonii spoke about a soldier, one of Prince Konstantyn Ostrozky’s armed attendants, who brought—actually carried on his shoulders, for he was of gigantic build and quite strong—his sick brother. The soldier’s name was Spyrydon Chaika. He petitioned the saint for his brother to be cured. The righteous one declined, as he has no desire to cure physical ailments, only spiritual ones. Spyrydon Chaika then declared that his brother’s ailment was indeed spiritual, not physical, as in their old age their parents had been tempted by a demon to adopt Arian heresy, and he surmises that his brother suffered due to the sins of his parents. Both progenitors abided in sin. The saint then willed the afflicted one to be brought to the pole. He asked: “Do you renounce the improbity of your elders?”

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

The afflicted one confirmed that he did. Then the blessed one commanded: “Arise. Your brother carried you here, and now you shall have strength enough to carry your brother.”

Reflections of flames flickered across our faces. All listened with rapt

attention. Behind us, something snapped: out of the gloaming in the thicket the crippled, the freaky appeared, their forms like imitations of humans carved out of wood by a master with aberrant taste, stiffening mutely. While observing those still specters in the twilight, I suddenly realized what I had sensed before but was unable to express or voice, though perhaps the idea sounds strange: beauty dwells in orderly, harmonious arrangements, and the better and finer an image is arranged, the more beautiful it is. Embellishing the Peresopnytska Gospel with representations, say, of the Evangelists, I played with white, blue, yellow, red, and green, that is to say with pure pigments, twining ornaments, shapes, depictions of mountains or edifices into a knot of wondrously connected and interlaced lines, containing nothing superfluous or contradictory, attesting to the existence of an eternal truth, which is everlasting beauty. And now, watching these freakish figures—benumbed, nearly dissolved in the dusk while illuminated strikingly with flames, I thought that one can seek and find beauty not only in the youthful, pleasant, pure, perfect, harmoniously blended, but in the old, ruined, monstrous, broken, clashing—and this would not be a mutilated shadow or the converse of beauty; it would, instead, be its surprising variegation. Was this not, I mused, why the Lord sends not only the healthy, the pleasing, full of beauty and strength, the full-blooded and comely into the world, but also the freakish, the maimed, the sick, the clumsy, the feeble, the ugly, the crippled—all this is necessary for one to be able to grasp the multidimensionality of the world: in this way a uniquely profound understanding of it is imparted. This is what I was thinking as my ear harkened the conclusion of a parable recounted by Antonii: gigantic Spyrydon Chaika, a-straddle on his brother's shoulders, a stalwart fellow, was carried by the youth as if he were stuffed with straw instead of weighty flesh and bones. So that in his unfitness a strength was summoned, in some way reminding one of the beauty of the deformed: might is often borne of impotence, while strength is consumed like cloth by moths. Whether this was a miracle or not is not important to me. I was awed by the singularity of the parable itself, concealing a truth which could be interpreted two ways. Spyrydon himself, Antonii continued, crossed the entire swamp on his brother's shoulders, holding in his hand a missive to their parents from the saint. Their parents, upon reading the letter, were ashamed and repented, dispelling the Arians from their property and erecting a new church.

"The power of a spiritual utterance can be immeasurable," Antonii said.

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

"From the village of Ryzhany," Antonii said. "They still live there. Their parents have met their righteous end."

"I will stop in that village on my return. As I recall, it is in the vicinity of Turchynka."

“So it is,” Antonii said. “Do stop in.”

“Your turn now, Symeon,” Teodoryt said.

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

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

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

Sozont was intrigued by the story. “How many years have passed since?” he asked.

“About five,” Symeon said.

“Has any of you seen the children?”

“Yes: Antonii, Ievahrii and I,” Symeon spoke.

“So that at that time there were three disciples with the saint?”

“We were all together already. But Teodoryt could not see, and Nykyfor and Heorhii were wandering from village to village for alms.”

“Do you still seek charity?” Sozont asked.

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

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

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

“Bearing children is man’s destiny from God,” Sozont said. “It is

stated in Psalms: ‘Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!’”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And he recounted how from his long standing an abscess developed on the righteous one’s other leg. It oozed blood, completely staining one of the pine trunks. The blood flowed and flowed as if the blessed one’s body were an inexhaustible source. Yet this did not divert him from his godly intentions: he suffered bravely. He was forced to show his abscess for the following reason: one day a priest from Zhytomyr arrived at the hallowed

place. He was a kind man, inspired by God. He said, “I seek the truth—that truth, to which mankind is drawn. And so, I ask, pray tell: are you a man or a fleshless being?”

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

And the priest said: “I heard about you. I heard that you do not eat and did not drink for a long time. That only now do you drink a bit, but very little, and that you do not sleep. All of these are natural things for man. Man cannot exist without food, sufficient drink, and sleep.”

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

And the priest was astonished—how could this martyr stand on his own with such wounds?

“Why do you not heal your abscesses? You possess such power of prayer!” the priest asked.

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

“You are not afraid of dying of those wounds?” the priest asked.

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

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

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

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

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

And those words uttered by the saint shocked the priest, and he descended, recounting all he had heard to the disciples. And he proclaimed that he would not return to the terrible world, the vale of misery, but would remain forever in that hallowed place.

“And he stayed?” Sozont asked calmly.

“And he stayed,” Ievahrii said proudly.

“Was it you?” Sozont asked.

Ievahrii looked down modestly.

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

The fire blazed, bursts of flame reflecting in the faces of those

gathered. I noticed that the crippled and monstrous drew soundlessly closer, almost pressing in on us in a closed circle, walling us in. Now I heard their hushed breathing, as if the tales told here bewitched them. Mykyta's disciples, meanwhile, acted as if they did not notice that crowd, and were conducting a discourse only with us.

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

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

"He has been performing feats as a pole-sitter for twelve years," Antonii said.

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

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

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

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

And Nykyfor narrated a story about a marsh wolf. This was a beast of extraordinary proportions and merciless ferocity. It lived in the marshes, so that it was impossible to cross the swamp summers or winters. It ravaged everyone. People stopped coming to the sacred place. It was said the Devil himself transfigured into the beast to besiege the sacred place, to root it out. Hunters hunted it, a few perishing, but the wolf could not be slain. It vexed not only those at the sacred place, but in surrounding settlements as well, ravaging cattle, at times people, especially children. They pursued him with

dogs, but even a herd of dogs, trained for hunting, was unable to weaken it—it savaged them while escaping unharmed. It could tread the swamp and hide in water. It would leap out at one while crossing the swamp, appearing like a pillar of water—one would die not from the wolf’s teeth, but of fright. It was ubiquitous, as if flying from place to place. Though it eluded our island, it finally got the courage to attack even here, each night attacking and devouring some of the crippled and monstrous.

That is when they asked to be permitted to spend nights inside the enclosure, close to the pole.

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

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

“Have I told the truth?” Nykyfor yelled to the crippled and the monstrous.

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

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

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

“They have seen mud wolves, but never such a large or ferocious one,” Nykyfor said. “At the time we had a few peasants on our island.”

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

“Fish suddenly appeared in the swamp, though not in the Eye of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Last summer, when this occurred, Heorhii was spending time in Volodar. While visiting the Puliavsky estate he inquired whether the diamond had been preserved. And Lord Vasyl showed it to Heorhii set in an

icon of the Mother of God. If one wishes, one can see it to this day at the estate in Volodar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“One ought not utter shameful words, Musii!”

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

“All six?” Pavlo asked, horrified.

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

“But she’s dumb!” I said.

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

“Married?” Sozont asked, surprised.

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

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

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

“Do they know that?”

“Indeed! But they say: unwedded therefo-o-ore unmarried, yup! And I can’t screw her, yup! And we’ve been to-o-ogether lo-o-ong, but here it’s no-o-ot allo-owed, yup!”

“Be careful with this, Musii,” Sozont said, concerned.

“Why do-on’t they let me screw my o-own wife?” Musii whimpered.

“Why?”

“Such is the custom here, Musii: no co-habitation here, you know that yourself.”

“I kno-o-ow. But I’m quiet abo-o-out it, and at night, yup!”

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

“Indeed! Don’t sleep at night. Co-o-ome to the po-ole. You hee-hee will see so-o-omething, yup!”

“What will we see?”

“So-o-omething ’teresting, hee-hee! I’m running alo-o-ong! Yup!”

“Be careful, Musii,” Sozont cautioned once again.

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

“Is what Musii said true?” Pavlo asked. “They explain everything so finely and rationally. Is not Musii’s thinking unfounded?”

“Musii has a child’s mind,” Sozont said, slowly. “The lips of babes utter truth. In Psalms it is stated: ‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise.’ And Jesus said: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers...all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries ... but be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ.’¹ Did you, Brother Mykhailo, scribe these words in your Peresopnytska Gospel?”

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

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

“The Eye of the Abyss has descried you, Pavlo,” Sozont said sadly. “Consider this, from Psalms: ‘Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man; preserve me from the violent man.’ ‘Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips.’ ‘Incline not my heart to any evil thing, to practice wicked words.’ The

¹ Note in margin: “Matthew 23:1–10.”

² Note in margin: “Genesis 42:11.”

rest our evangelist Mykhailo can recite. Speak, Brother!”

And I said: “‘And lead us not into temptation.’ ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it.’ ‘When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that receiveth the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while.’”¹

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

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

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

“Amen!” Pavlo and I said.

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

And I dreamt that I sat at a table. A sheet of parchment lay before me. Rulers, brushes of various thicknesses, and inkhorns with pigments were arranged along the table. And I rendered the Eye of the Abyss as a shiny, milky substance shaped like a clear ball with a pupil like a shaft. And in that ball I painted two pine trees, or rather trunks, and Mykyta the Pole-sitter atop them with bat wings instead of arms, impatient to take off, even as his legs are girded with cord to the trunks. And I painted Kuzma in that Eye—Kuzma being devoured by an invisible dragon-beast—and the mud-wolf, both eyes aflame, and the dwarf Musii stuck in its outstretched jaws, desperately grasping at the wolf’s teeth, wrenching himself out of its jaws. I painted tens of the crippled, the monstrous, dancing while embracing crippled, monstrous women, and amongst them a beauty holding a lash, with an exuberant twining of stalks arrayed in an image of a child sprouting from a pea in her womb. Around her I painted six youths, arms wreathed, and a worm with a diamond on its head, its luster scattering, and I painted yet another youth carrying a stout soldier on his shoulders. I painted Mykyta’s mother Kateryna frozen in a pietà, arms raised, tears of blood streaming down her cheeks, and a woman with a serpent in her belly. I painted Olena Puliavska as a modern Eve holding in her hand not an apple but a sprouted pea, Mykyta’s face gracing the surface of that pea. I encompassed all of them with the long form of a serpent, on whom instead

¹ Note in margin: “Matthew 6:13; 12:39; 13:19–20.”

of a serpent's head I devised a human skull. Everything stirred in that transparent form of the eye, everything shimmered and moved as if alive, not painted. Still, something was missing in it. So I painted Pavlo wracked with convulsions, and he really was convulsing. Then I painted Deacon Sozont glued to the round side of the Eye, a blade in his raised hand, and as I painted, Sozont began beating and stabbing the milky membrane of the Eye with his knife. Blood seeped out of the bruises and incisions, even flowing like a stream. And the blood collected at the bottom of the Eye into a round lake, and in that lake I painted a second pupil in which a splinter was stuck, like a Tartar saber. And finally I rendered the Eye as the head of a youth draped in a linen tunic, shod in bast shoes, wrapped in linen swatches, laced with linden fibers.

I studied this strange picture for a long time and suddenly realized that I had failed to render one of the participants in this vision. Of course the missing participant was I. But then, that worm, with the diamond on its head—was that not I?

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

"Time for what?" I asked.

"To see what dwarf Musii was talking about."

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

"No, let him sleep. He's tired."

"Do we need to see it, Brother Sozont?"

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

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

"We did not come here to judge, brother Mykhailo," Sozont whispered, "but, as that same Matthew says—and these are Christ's words: 'Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.' And further: 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst for righteousness.' There is, Brother," he said, in a whistling whisper, "nothing accidental in the world. Once God brought us here, let us fulfill His will."

And I submitted. Cautiously attentive, we set out along the path, heading toward the fence near the pole. All was quiet. We detected an indistinct, light figure next to the fence. We hid behind tree trunks. We did not have long to wait: we heard nimble steps along the path. In an instant, a female shape sprang out—it was Marta. She headed directly toward the guard at the gate. In their linen raiments, flooded with moonlight, they were

¹ Note in margin: "Psalms 58:11."

both clearly discernible. They whispered something to each other, and Marta strode across the yard to the hovel. The hovel was illuminated. The shutters were shut.

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

Marta entered. The door closed.

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

Taking a shovel from behind the gate, the gatekeeper went over to the bush. Mykyta, meantime, headed to the hovel. The door opened, and light vividly illuminated the linen garb, the shaggy head.

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

“Were they eating supper?” I asked.

“Certainly,” Sozont said. “I wonder, Brother Mykhailo, if you noticed that all those stories we were entertained with are also bookish tales?”

“About the mud-wolf too?”

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

“And Olena Puliavska and her husband?”

“That, too, is from the Life, though without the pea. The pea comes from the folk tale about Kotyhoroshok.”

“So they have adapted the bookish tales to their life here?”

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

But I could not fall asleep. To me it seemed for some reason that

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

My spirit was alarmed and full of sorrow at such thoughts, for I already knew: this journey would not renew a right spirit within me nor fill my being with the fire I burned with while designing the Peresopnytska Gospel. The reason is simple: to burn with the lofty flame of spirituality, one must be spiritually whole—and my spirit is broken, like a vessel. My misfortune lies in that I began fearing the hypocrisy of creative inspiration,

so I became incapable of inspiration. Hence I thought: what would man be if he rejected the improvising of stories? Would he be capable of elevating himself above a brute? Would he know God, even though his God is often one of his tales? For the composing of tales is likewise creation. Everything born must live and requires nourishment. The essence lies, obviously, in how man lives; in breaking the boundaries of his destiny, does he remain beneficent? And if he is not beneficent, is he worthy of acclaim? If he is beneficent, is his benevolence genuine? And how can one recognize the true beneficence to avoid creating eyes of the abyss in this world? This, I thought, is where we need God. Not an imaginary, definitive God, but One who would lead us firmly along His narrow path. So that a pure, open soul must lead us to Him, not rational constructs. Then He will find in us a vessel in which to place a kernel of His mystery. But the vessel of our soul must be prepared for this. And I fancied: there is no genuine or disingenuous faith predicated upon ritual and service, in other words, upon games of faith, be they eastern or western, be they sects, such as these symeonides, or even Islam, or any other. Only faith or the lack of faith are important, since every faith is genuine, while faithlessness is disingenuous; only that mystery which exists or does not exist in a man's soul is significant. I knew that I would not have the courage to herald these thoughts any time soon, as those for whom faith is a game of rituals will condemn and revile me. But on that night they—those thoughts—sprouted within me and I was convinced that they bore no evil: they were founded on tolerance. And evil appears where intolerance reigns.

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

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

"What happened?" Pavlo sprang up.

"Sleep, Brother, sleep," Sozont said. "We shall go see a bit of nocturnal diversion."

"What diversion? What is happening?" Pavlo could not shake off his drowsiness.

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

We set out toward the path. Indeed, Pavlo, too, came with us. We heard an odd pounding from the camp, as if timpani were being struck, though the sound was hollower. The pounding drew nearer, so we stepped off the path and stood behind trees. And in the pale, diluted morning air we saw a crowd trudging slowly along the trail like a flock with Musii the dwarf leading the way. Bearing a torch, a strange person with an enormous head on a small torso and even shorter legs walked beside him; behind them streamed the crippled and monstrous women led by a female dwarf—evidently Musii's wife. Marta was not visible among them—the crippled and freakish walked without their sister-guardian. Except for Musii, the

woman dwarf, and the torch bearer, everyone held a wooden bowl in their hands (the one they ate out of) and beat it with a spoon—that was the source of the timpanic noise. We heard crashing sounds. The crippled and freakish men tore through the bushes toward the path. They stood and stared, as did we.

Stepping onto the path, we joined the procession. We let the women pass, and the crippled and freakish men clambered onto the path behind us. The procession arrived at the gate, where all six Mykyta's disciples stood. There was no sound from Mykyta's hut on posts, which stood as if melting in the mist. The round opening was covered.

"We have caught the debaucher and ripped a piece of cloth off him," a squeaky voice announced. We could not see who was speaking.

"I am no-o-o debaucher! I was visiting my wife," Musii screamed. "Everyone kno-ows she's my wife, yup!"

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

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

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

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

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

A gloomy silence descended.

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

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

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

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

"Are you his wife?" Antonii asked.

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

"Are you no-o-ot my wife?" Musii the dwarf shrieked.

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

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

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

eyes glowing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a deep silence. Observing the creatures standing around me, I was shocked—they were peculiarly freakish, perhaps the curiosity consuming them made them so. I wondered, painfully: what are we doing here, among these unfortunates, why did we have to end up here? What are we seeking, and what do we wish to find? Why did we come to this pool? Was it not malicious curiosity that brought us here, as it did the crippled and freakish? Then how do we differ from them? By being scribes and Pharisees?

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

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

Rings rippled across the surface and they rolled to the bank where we stood, slapping it with a splash.

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

And her animal-like wailing trumpeted painfully.

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

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

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN,

in which Mykyta's sermon is recounted, as well as his conversations with us

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

"Where do they keep the rooster?" Pavlo asked.

"Either in the hut below or the one atop the pole," Sozont said. "We've measured the entire island and did not find a place for a rooster, nor the rooster. Perhaps Mykyta himself crows like a rooster?"

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

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

Again, I thought: in everything, everywhere, Sozont remains a lawyer, a prober, an investigator. God bestowed this talent on him and it is an indispensable trait.

As it was early, we returned to our mats. Even though I was stunned by all that I had seen, having had an utterly sleepless night, I sank into deep, dreamless slumber, as if I had fallen into a bottomless hole. I was led out of this hole by Sozont, who shook me awake.

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

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

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

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

"I think we should leave here as soon as possible," Pavlo declared. "What do we expect to find here?"

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

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

"So that we are altogether under the will of Mykyta's disciples?"

Pavlo asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The same as with you. Cats are clawing at my soul.”

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

And with confidence he set off on the path.

Many of the crippled and freakish had gathered around the enclosure, although only men. Parting before us, they let us approach the gate; Heorhii stood there. The rest of the disciples huddled together near the fence, their heads raised up toward the hut on poles. The entry and side curtains were open. In the opening we saw Mykyta standing with his back to us, every so often lifting his arms—he was praying. “Glory to Jesus!” we greeted Heorhii. Responding politely, he swung the gate open, bidding us to enter.

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

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

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

“Love is twofold: Divine and human. Love of God and love of mammon, or flesh. These two cannot unite, my children, for as the Lord said: ‘No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other’; or according to the Apostles; ‘Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.’ To love things is to be covetous; love of flesh is wantonness. Despise, therefore, the lust of the flesh, as

yourself, the world, and things in it, otherwise ye shall not hold, preserve, or find God. They that are after the flesh despise God with that love, and where there is hatred therein dwells enmity; lovers of the world, too, hate God, for the world is the incarnation of the Devil whom we must flee and despise. Lovers of beauty despise God, for beauty is decay's adornment, and where there is rot, there is abomination. The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God; one beloved by God must renounce the world, beauty, property, possessions, home, family, father and mother, his children, and firstly, his wife, the vessel of the Devil, for in begetting children man soils rather than draws closer to the Divine. It is not life God wills for the world, but death; therefore love death and nurture death, while learning a single lesson—the lesson of dying beautifully. There is death from God as punishment, as the beginning of our judgment—those of us who let our spiritual life shrivel—and there is death in God, bringing joy, freedom from mortality and putrid flesh, with an exit into joy and happiness everlasting, for the only soul that knows joy is the one that draws closer to God. So perish, my children, die with God, and may the damned, depraved world become forever extinct. Thence will man, cast out of paradise—that is, from the eternal into the temporal, mortal—return into that which he was cast out of, from a realm of rot into the kingdom of the immortal. So he who returns into the world like a dog into its vomit mocks the Lord, Who, through His crucifixion directed man onto the righteous path towards death, conferring the lesson of dying onto us to be crucified alongside with Him. For only those who suffer together with Him, who have adopted His lesson on dying, who have elected death, renouncing worldly enticements, only they shall inherit His kingdom. Our life is in Him, He is our praise, He is our crown; to die for Him is happiness and revelation. Therefore die to the world every hour, every day, every month, every year—this, then is the path to God; death is its guide. As one cannot cross the Eye of the Abyss without a guide, so without dying one cannot reach God Who awaits, expecting one thing from us: for us to step onto this path, to enter death with death, cursing the world and all that glimmers in it; thus escaping man's eternal original sin. Love death, my children, instead of life. Give no thought to what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink, as flesh is your enemy. Death, when she is your guide along the narrow path across the Eye of the Abyss, is your benefactress, for he who loves the world instead of God is devoured by the Eye, never reaching the promised shore. He is devoured, my children, by a strange beast, unseen, horned, with big teeth and mouth; he devours mortal flesh along with the afflicted spirit. Beware of that death! Shun it! It leads into the Abyss, not to the Shores of Redemption, where our great Lord awaits you with His angels and archangels, with the saints and the righteous, Who loves only those who curse this mad, wicked world, this Abyss, wherein the sun is darkness, and moonlight perdition. If we find gladness in

privation here, know submission and obedience, suffering along with God; and if we renounce the world—in glory in His kingdom shall we be, for ye cannot serve God and mammon. Whatever one is taken with, to that will he devote himself. Should Divine love triumph over us, we shall be God's workers, and from Him shall we receive honey in life everlasting. Should we heed the voice of flesh and greed, passions shall rule, casting us to the enemy, the overseer of evil, and with him there shall be eternal recompense and eternal labor in Hell. Amen!"

Mykyta bowed deeply to all around and grandly fell silent, raising his beard haughtily.

Mykyta's disciples and all the crippled and freakish filled their lungs with air and shouted in unison: "E-e-e-ahh!"

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

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

"Come first, Brother Pavlo," Antonii said. "You need the saint's aid most."

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

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

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

"The demon abides in you, then," proclaimed Mykyta.

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

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

"So that you are advising me to die, Reverend Father?" Pavlo asked,

horrified.

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

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

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

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

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

I stepped forward and genuflected.

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

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

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

“Your sin,” Mykyta stated sharply, “lies in that you love the splendor of the world and serve that mammon. The beauty of the world is one of the Devil’s most favored demons. And, even though you were scribing Holy Scripture, it was not God lighting your candle: it was the Devil. Holy Scriptures do not need calligraphy, exquisite illustrations and ornaments—they are fine and grand in their content, and that suffices. God has made man’s beauty consume away like a moth, as ‘surely every man is vanity,’

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

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

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

“Now you go, Brother Sozont,” Teodoryt chimed.

Sozont stepped forward, bowing to Mykyta. He did not genuflect, as had Pavlo and I. “I have not come to you for a spiritual cure,” he said evenly. “I have come as a duty. The holy fathers of Kyiv entrusted me with

¹ Note in margin: “Ezekiel 28:7.”

writing a new Cheti-Minei, as an addendum to the Patericon of the Caves, which I am to copy. And so, heeding the advice of the holy fathers, I wish to tell about you, to present your teaching.”

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

“Not for earthly glory am I embarking on writing my Cheti-Minei,” Sozont said. “It is for the edification of the Christian faithful. Do you consider sacred preaching to be worldly, useless, as well?”

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

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

“Why should I believe you?” Mykyta asked.

“Why should you not?”

“It is stated in Psalms: ‘They speak vanity every one with his neighbor: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak.’”

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

“I said: ‘All men are liars.’ ‘The proud have forged a lie against me.’”

“‘I hate every false way.’ ‘I hate and abhor lying.’”

“‘He that speaketh lies shall perish,’” Mykyta said.

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

For a time, Mykyta stood, gazing intently at Sozont. “The holy fathers of Kyiv have elected a wise man to effect their duty,” he said finally. “We can manage to check what you have written, but departing from here, will you not bear forth the misthinking that stems from your own particular views?”

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

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

“Amen!” Sozont said and retreated toward us.

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

Some time passed. Pavlo, at least, had managed to regain his senses, since he was no longer as red. The same was true of me, though I still lacked the strength to counter rationally the words of Mykyta—that would require quiet respite. We could have departed but, as it seemed everyone was awaiting something—Deacon Sozont, whom we silently acknowledged as our elder, did not budge—we continued to stand like posts in the yard.

And then we saw Mykyta shudder. He bowed once. Twice. Thrice. At first, he bowed slowly, but the more bows he bowed, the faster he bowed. Impulsively, who knows why, I counted: forty bows already, fifty, and he was still bowing and bowing, bending, unbending, as if he was doing this not of his will, as if a force similar to the one smiting Pavlo with seizures convulsed him. Producing a distinct, flat rhythm, like a clock pendulum, Mykyta bent and unbent; already I counted one hundred fifty-three. I felt stabs of pain in my neck from staring up the pole, while he bowed and bowed, seemingly not at all tired from bowing, bending and unbending, up and down; now I had counted two hundred bows to my amazement: how many more would he be able to endure? My eyes watered, my neck hurt—I counted to three hundred ten and had to stop. I lacked the strength to keep track. He bowed and bowed, bending and unbending, up and down. I glanced at Pavlo and Sozont. Pavlo appeared surprisingly sad, gazing at his feet rather than up. Sozont looked up, counting the bows, of course, as I had before. But finally he too, grew weary. Only Mykyta was unspent, bending and unbending, up and down. The sun overhead was scorching. Sozont’s eyes met mine and I noticed his half-smile. He winked at me, who knows why, perhaps cheering me up—probably, for soon after, he took Pavlo by the arm, pressing him lightly: he truly was cheering us up. Mykyta bowed and bowed, bending and unbending—there was no end to that continual bowing. I looked at the crippled and freakish: they were as if bewitched.

They stood beyond the fence, so watching the saint was easier for them—they did not have to crane their necks as we did. Standing erect, like soldiers, Mykyta's disciples were not watching: likely they had witnessed this more than once. And, wickedly perhaps, I thought to myself: while transcribing the Gospel first in Dvirtsi and later in Peresopnytsia, illuminating it, did I not resemble this hermit and pole-sitter, was I not prostrating myself in one-dimensional bows with my endless toil for long years. But there was a difference between us: my bows had yielded a result. I saw this result in the image of a wondrous book, the creation of which I do not consider my reward, but rather the Lord's, as He inspired me to it. God was in my thoughts while I toiled. With my artistry I glorified Him. What was the outcome, I wondered, of Mykyta's bowing, other than the astonishment that resounds briefly in the unthinking minds of the crippled, the freakish, or our own, the visitors'? For what and for whom is Mykyta effecting this? To impress the Lord? Does the Lord need such feats? More likely, he is demonstrating his dexterity, no less an artistry, though he himself condemned artistry, in front of those watching. And if so, then is he not bending and unbending himself for vain, fleeting glory? What does the Lord need more, I mused: our beneficent deeds, bringing forth fruit, with the help of which the Lord sustains life on earth: the fruit of grasses, herbs, trees, insects, fowl, animals and men, visible as well as invisible fruit, corporeal and spiritual, on the basis of which further beneficence is conceived, or, on the other hand, idle depletion, such as this buffoonery, these peculiar games, the effect of which is useless sweat that will evaporate like dewdrops? And, I thought, does the Lord wish man to disregard all the grand, wise, earthly inventions, including his own creations, desiring to devastate life in oneself, around oneself, striving to remake the world into a desolate desert? So to whom is Mykyta bowing endlessly: the Living God, the Creator of life, or the Angel of Death, ravenously devouring, obliterating everything?

And Mykyta bowed and bowed, bending and unbending, bend here and bend there, endlessly, unchangingly. Suddenly I was sorry for the enormous power and vigor he was tossing into the Eye of the Abyss, as if he wanted to dam it up with the stones of his feats, his visions—was he not doing it out of fear of that Abyss? This unfortunate man tore his feet away from mother earth and placed them atop a pole, supposing that in this way he would be closer to the firmament. His feet, though, remained bound to the floorboards of the poles and even if the pines were ten times taller, would his feet be anchored any less to the base? And the obeisance he continued to perform endlessly, was it not a hopeless effort to conquer gravity, to trample his nature, to soar into the heavens? But we all know that only what was designed for flight is capable of flying—for something designed to crawl, attempting flight is futile: it is not in its nature. He can

climb a pine tree, he can ascend a mountain to its highest peak, but earth will still pull him back. Even a bird cannot fly higher than its wings will permit.

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

CHAPTER NINETEEN,

in which another of Sozont's conversations with Mykyta's disciples is retold as is his attempt at understanding Mykyta's judgments

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

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

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

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

"Is your memory that good that you can record word for word what was said yesterday?" Symeon asked.

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

"Do you harbor suspicions about any of what you have seen or heard?" Teodoryt asked.

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

"Musii the dwarf saw and told you?" Antonii asked.

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

"Your frankness delights us," Antonii stated.

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

"Does the saint descend to her?" Sozont asked.

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

"She is tormented by a demon?"

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

"The dwarf said she moans and squeals with desire."

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

"How does the saint expulse demons?"

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

“How is the ritual performed?”

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

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

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

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

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

“She wishes to leave?”

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

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

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

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

“Of course,” Teodoryt said. “If the demon should assail her during your stay at the sacred place, we shall summon you. In Deuteronomy it is said: ‘And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go over to possess it.’”

“I have no more doubts,” Sozont said.

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

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

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

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

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

“And if you do not record what you witness tonight,” Antonii added.

“And if I do record it?”

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

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

“That means, Brother, that he is incapable of healing your affliction.

After all, is he to be more powerful than the fathers of the hermitage or the holy fathers of the Lavra? Sadly though, he is right: the dead feel no pain.”

“No one can help me, then?” Pavlo sniveled. Sometimes he was childish.

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

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

“Go to sorcerers, then.”

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

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

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

“Truth regarding what?” Sozont asked.

“Regarding Christian teachings.”

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

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

“You are right, Brother Mykhailo. They are substituted with the words ‘love’ and ‘hate’ and sometimes ‘patience’ and ‘impatience.’ And some excessively fervid Christian minds—not without the help of the Devil, who muddles man’s thinking—interpreted patience as a need to perish, to suffering torture. That is why two schools of thought have emerged in Christianity; the misanthropic, and what is known today as the humanitarian. Mykyta avows the misanthropic point of view based not on love, as his love is likewise misanthropic, but on a hatred towards God’s great creation—mankind and his world. And it is between these two points of view that the great abyss lies, not between the incidental differences in

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

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

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

"Oh, that is a large subject!" Sozont stated. "I've told you already: either one of Mykyta's disciples or perhaps Mykyta himself obtained considerable learning in this world, which he has grown to hate so much. Most likely he studied not in our lands. Have you heard of *ars moriendi*?"

"The art of dying?" I asked.

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

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

"Everything that exists is rooted in what was," Sozont stated.

¹ Note in margin: "Luke 21:19."

“Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, who lived in the third century after the birth of Christ, in his treatise ‘De Moralitate’ taught that death is not to be feared if one wishes to become one with Christ. Only through death can one enter the Kingdom of Heaven. St. Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and St. Augustine wrote about the art of dying. Rupert of Deutz, too, wrote of it in the eleventh century; the thirteenth-century pseudo-Augustinian treatise ‘Speculum morsis’ also comments on this, and it is treated in an especially detailed manner in the form of questions and answers in Anselm of Canterbury’s tract ‘Admonitio morienti.’ Anselm advises the one who is dying to strive for repentance for his sins and to seek remission, attributing his salvation to Christ’s death. This tract can be considered the first in which the art of dying is presented. St. Joseph wrote of it, as did, later, the German Dominican Henrik Seuse in ‘Horologium sapientiae,’ and especially Joannis Gerson in the tract ‘Opusculum tripartitum.’ There is also a Polish treatise, ‘Ars Moriendi,’ penned by Matteus of Cracow. And if this does not suffice for you, I can also mention Domenic of Karpanika and his book *Speculum artis bene moriendi*—he lived closer to us, in the last century.”

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

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

“It is impossible to pursue such learning in our insular land.”

“So where did you study?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I am ready for that,” Pavlo said.

“Summon the doctor called Truth and Good Sense. Let him feel your pulse and ask what you understand.”

“What am I to understand?” Pavlo asked.

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

“Tell me what it is.”

“In recognizing your vices, take a very humble view. Add to that the idea of a true conversion to the Lord and three handfuls of the herbs of penance. To that apply a pound of genuine spiritual repentance. Mix well with tears generously shed while bewailing the sins you have committed. Thence, with heavy moaning and beating of the chest, awaken your conscience, filter it all through the sieve of justice, so that God may have mercy and your neighbors may ignore what was impure in you. With this clear potion of conscience, douse the spirit to absolve it of old sins.”

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

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

“That would be a favor to me, Brother,” Pavlo said.

“Expect Death, prepare yourself for it, but do not yearn for it nor summon it—Death itself knows when to come. When you are ailing, do not wish for all around you to ail, and be joyous not because you are dying, but for the health of those around you. Do not wish for the world with its beauty and creation to perish, as you are perishing, but pray for those who bear darkness and night within them to be able to cross over into daylight, that is, to grow into goodness and love. Do not hate the haters—but pity them because it is not you who have been despoiled by their hatred: it is they who are despoiled by it—they were incapable of seeing the light within you, seeing only darkness. Consider whether what they perceived in you was in fact just, and if you find yourself incapable of judging, repent for that which evoked their hatred and hostility towards you. Know that your kindness triumphed over evil, light over darkness, love over hatred and may intolerance grow into tolerance. Know that the loving kindness you effected in the world is that burgeoning shoot sprouting out of decaying matter into a future bud, and that your mortality is darkness, evil, and non-love. Know that mortality must be relinquished, although without it a germ cannot sprout. Your mortality is God’s creation, as is the world, humanity, and all life. Trust that the beauty of the world is God’s image in it, that monstrosity is the background against which it is made manifest, and that the fleetingness of beauty is the background against which eternity is perceived. Amen.”

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

“In the middle lies the abyss, Brother Pavlo,” Sozont said, “out of which the eye gazes at us. That eye shall test us and judge us. ‘The truth shall set us free,’ Ivan Bohoslov says. May the Lord recompense us

according to our truth.”

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY,

which recounts how we spent our second day on the island

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

The beast had a long, sinuous body, like a gigantic lizard, with a lizard-like head, though with enormous eyes, like two encased mirrors reflecting everything it saw. Now the beast was looking at me, and I saw two refractions of myself. One eye cast me as I was while scribing the *Peresopnytska Gospel*: still young, full of verve, buoyant, burning with a great passion to design the book of books, the likes of which existed nowhere, with which I longed to glorify not so much myself as the Lord—He inspired me to this feat. The other eye mirrored me as I was now: older, lean, the right side of my head and beard gray, the left side still dark, though with gray hairs here and there appearing. In this second me the eyes were dimmed, emanating sadness and weariness, and where the lips in the first were smiling provocatively, in the other they were tightly pressed and a bit twisted. Thick wrinkles laced my forehead—in the first my high forehead was glowing. And these two images, reflected in the eyes of the beast from the Eye of the Abyss, began a conversation: “Do not languish in yourself,” the young I said. “Do not roam the world vainly, do not seek wind in the field, do not waste time, do not rack your brain with ideas your mind cannot fathom. Return to deeds you can and are able to perform, and the less free time you will have, the less confused and distraught you will be.”

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

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

“Strength requires vitality,” said today's I. “And that is what I lack. When one is drained, is it not honorable and sound to stop creating rather than effecting pretense?”

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

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

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

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

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

I described my dream.

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

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

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

“Does that explain something to you?”

“No,” Sozont declared thoughtfully. “Somehow they are effecting it. The track could have shaken from Kuzma’s motions, or it could have moved of itself, throwing Kuzma off. A question: who moved the track? How? It is obviously suspended, artificially constructed.”

“I thought so too,” I said. “I drove my staff in and it stuck so tight that

¹ Note in margin: “Jonah 2:5–7.”

I was barely able to yank it out.”

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

“And what about the dwarf?”

“In the dwarf’s case, the matter is simpler. For him it was too deep and he did not know how to swim. Mykyta’s disciples, by the way, were absent.”

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

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

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

“I have thought about that as well,” Sozont said. “Two things are possible: either a section of the walkway is pulled out from under someone along the track, or circumstance played a role and was used to good advantage. I repeat: these are bare, bare, bare suppositions.”

“What have we, then?”

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

“Is it Mykyta’s, or his disciples’?”

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

“Teodoryt and Antonii are chief among them.”

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

“Why are you considering Symeon?”

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

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

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

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

“The dwarf, of course,” Sozont stated. “Mykyta transgresses with Marta. Perhaps even the disciples, or just one of them, too.”

“Do you know this or are you surmising?”

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

Sozont began writing again.

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

Sozont glanced at me in surprise. “I would be a fool to write as I think,” he said. “Otherwise, we would never leave this island, Brother. We would be fodder for their beast. Though I am chronicling not one life, but two: one on paper, and the other in my mind. On paper, the evident version, and in my mind, the real version.” All at once, Sozont chuckled quietly. “At any rate,” he said, “the manifest is wholly uninteresting. It is copied word for word from the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter, as I have said. Some things about that impress me here, as well.”

“What, exactly?”

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

“Could it be coincidental?” I asked.

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

“And if this was a staged show, similar to those performed by skomorokhy actors?” I asked.

“In that case, a truly diabolical mind is devising it all,” Sozont stated emphatically.

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

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

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

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

“No,” Pavlo replied quietly. “I shall not live to the morrow.” He looked around in fear, checking if anyone was eavesdropping. “And you, Brothers, steal away quickly, as soon as you can. Horror gripped me the moment I stepped onto this island. And that horror has not left me. I know

not its cause, but it is in me like a lump of soil. And all the while, a scent of soil lingers around me. Brother Sozont, you have a great mind, do not delay—think how to get out. Do not tarry!”

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

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

“Fine, Brother Sozont. May it be as you say,” Pavlo said agreeably. “But I do not wish to leave this spot. I will repose after prayer, only to begin again later, following your wisdom and that of the learned men.”

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

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

The sun stood high in the sky. In the heat herbs, grass, and leaves effused a particular pungency. Perhaps the earth too—as it seemed to Pavlo. I have always loved the sun. It made me eager to work, filling me with vigor. Back when I scribed the Peresopnytska Gospel, I would, when weary, stroll out into the sun, wallowing directionless in the flood of herbs, grass, flowers, and trees, wandering, nearly blinded by the dense shafts of sun, scented with rye, the suffocating fragrance of blossoms, the heady scent of weeds. That air, that aroma intoxicated me, oddly diffusing my spirit—I felt spilled around the air, I felt mellow and a bit unraveled in the sun, and my heart radiated a kind of sacred solemnity. My gaze soared into the deep yonder, alighting upon a faraway tree or upon a cloud; my feet barely touched the ground. I waded across the meadow, aglitter like emeralds; a delightful effervescence blinded me with its dazzle. Looking around to see if anyone was about (there are many among our folk who look askance at baring one’s body, or swimming), I undressed slowly, my body humming beneath the sky, a golden intensity filling me like spring water filling a vessel. Then I plunged off the bank into the water. I dove, not shutting my eyes, into green tallow—and all around me a strange world undulated, a world of algae and fish, the fish floating up to me, fearless, lips grazing me, as if kissing. Planting my feet in the sand and maneuvering my arms for support, I exploded through the surface, the sun once again blinding me, once more blessing me. Through a watery film I saw the world laughing—grand, miraculous, spacious, green, full of sap, of life; in the thick of grass

there was not a patch of soil on which something did not crawl, did not move; in the air above, agile birds hovered loosely—I, too, was a part of this life, this world. Floating easily, I felt my flesh shivering in the coolness of the sun-mingled water. After, I climbed out of the water sensing the last morsels of fatigue trickling out of my mind, evaporating into clouds on high. I dressed and lay facing the sky. My being flowed into the azure air, and the azure air poured into me. I became light, almost formless. All around me crickets sang in a maddening, rapturous chorus. Larks' windpipes burst with inspiration in the blue vastness. Tufts of grass surrounded my head, my arms, my torso, its pods, full of seeds, swaying. Picking a blade of grass, I tasted it, savoring its cool sweet juice, while searching for shapes among clouds. Closing my eyes, I felt the sun's rays kissing me all over my skin, like the intrepid little fish in the water. Peace fell upon me then: inviolable, cherished. My mind and heart full of tranquility, with peace on my lips, eyes shut, I envisioned a fresh page, still clean and light and glossy, on which I was to sprinkle seeds of letters, of words, embroidering it with lines and renderings of plant life. In my imagination, I sketched a frame with flora twining around it, for even though I was scribing a most woeful of woeful stories about Him Who in imparting to the world a lesson of love was to suffer an onerous, tyrannical death, that story was not in praise of death, but in praise of life. The Aggrieved One sowed seeds of love not as homage to non-existence, but as triumph over death. That is why across a field of white I sowed seeds of letters, each of which sheltered a germ for sprouting. It would, inevitably, burst forth, and nowhere but in this world, in these people, once sent here by God—in their minds and hearts. And I thought then as I think now that if the Lord willed death for the world, it, this world, would have ceased to exist long ago. Then it would be the shoots that would rot, not the germ, and the germ would harden like stone, no longer producing these endless profusions of shoots that the human mind is incapable of enumerating, or examining. Prescient possibility and Divine law would not be concealed in each seed with the sun warming it like a bird its egg, and that sun and seed—those birds' eggs and animal and human seeds would parch and wilt transforming the living world into a barren desert. Thus, I thought, I too am like a seed cultivator, a planter of spiritual fruit, of an egg and the warmth required for it to develop cannot come from death, but only a life-giving force. Thus the Peresopnytska Gospel, which I designed and copied, is also like one of these seeds amidst the stalks of the grass of life, like a seed in the apple of the world, while I myself am a simple tool creating it, not the creator—it is created by Him Who functions within the law of timelessness. No Mykyta can convince me that it was not the will of the Almighty that impelled me to produce the fruit of my life—that I was urged by the will of the evil spirit; for a pure intent, an act of Divine creation, cannot harbor the

evil spirit. So that it is not God, not the Creator that wills to level, to destroy this world, into which He invested so much of His love, but the impure one who has no need of the world, or of lofty ideas, of beauty, of the mystery of eternity.

With these thoughts I arrived at the lake. I stopped and stared at the pool. The immense eye lay with one half surrounded by the island's shore, the other half with sparse, arched saplings growing on hillocks, resembling eyelashes above the eye. It gaped dejectedly into the pale blue flood of the sky. The sun did not sparkle or frolic in it as it does in pure water. No ripples or bubbles formed in the lake or pool; there was no play of colors. It appeared congealed in a timeless, grim lifelessness, and a nauseating, fleshy odor, the feeble stench of carcasses emanated from it. Looking at that Eye I felt the joy and rapture that I had just experienced gradually fading within me, along with the warm memory of happy days—my vivid, hearty plenishment. I sensed myself becoming rigid, dark, out of focus, twisted, hollow. Denser and denser smoke filled my empty viscera. I glimpsed the grass under my feet: it was sparse, half-wilted, its ends shriveled, dry. Similarly the leaves on the trees were limp, they did not shine with polish—instead they hung mutely, not yet withered but not succulent either.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” I admitted. “It emits an unfathomable force. What does it consist of?”

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

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

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

“Probably the same thing you feel,” Symeon said. “A revelation of the world of death.”

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

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

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

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

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

“They became pilgrims without any goal or direction, trusting the Lord’s guidance instead. That is what brought them here. They tread simply: forward, forward, without digressing, not turning back, not looking around—they knew what had happened to Lot’s wife. You must know, Brother Mykhailo, Sodom and Gomorrah are, after all, a symbol of our time, and the Lord chose to lead only Lot and his family out of it. Lot’s wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt. They walked for a long time, so they said, stopping only when darkness fell, never in towns or villages, but wherever else they happened to be.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You reason well, Brother,” Symeon said. “Seeing the pole the saint lives on must always remind us of the salt pillar Lot’s wife turned into.”

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

“A few of Mykyta’s disciples did just that, though not returning to secular life, but into self-reliant hermitism. We do not keep anyone here forcibly. We do not compel anyone to assist us. One cannot follow our path without free will. And our will has a good watchman—there he is,” and

Symeon nodded at the Eye of the Abyss. “When one’s spirit is enfeebled, this is a good place to come for solitary reflection, as you did, and as did I.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The story about the creation of a wellspring is described in the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter, though there the spring broke through a cliff. So, as with other so-called miracles, the fable has been dressed in today’s clothing.”

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

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

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

“One who performs miracles during one’s lifetime as well as after death, and whose relics become imperishable, is considered a saint by our church. So a person is not proclaimed a saint while still alive,” Sozont declared, reflecting for a moment. “Christ is the Lord, and about God’s miracles, there can be no doubt. His apostles, having entered into a direct relation with God, became His instruments. Whether other saints were similarly instruments of God or whether they were sorcerers, as was Simon from the Acts of the Apostles, I am not firmly convinced. There may have

been those among them chosen by God, or they may have been hypocrites. Hark back on the Acts of the Apostles: ‘But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.’ So, Brother, it is difficult to designate who among them was an instrument of God, and who a sorcerer. I have embarked on this journey to examine Mykyta. Only God can confirm the saints from the past, but among the living, today, even I, a sinful man can authenticate those who plot into sainthood.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You have resolved something?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE,

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

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

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

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

“But I am suffocating!” I jabbered.

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

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

“Therein lies your sin,” Marta hissed. “Did not God provide this for you?” she shook my engorged rod. “Why is it withering uselessly? Why do you kill your semen with your evil will rather than coupling it, as intended, with the seed of a woman?”

“Because my destiny is to cultivate the fruit of the spirit,” said I.

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

“Die! Vanish, you devil!” I shrieked. “I am old for earthly fruits! Benumbed!”

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

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

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

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

And I saw Sozont beating his staff against the ground.

“What happened?” I shouted, frightened.

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

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

“Do not trouble yourself with nonsense,” Sozont said. “Were it after you, it would not have erred. And remember, Brother, superstition, too, is a sin.”

Sozont twirled his staff, winding the dead serpent onto it. But it fell off, dropping into the grass.

“Coincidences everywhere,” he grumbled. “The crippled and freakish sleep on the ground and they’re not afraid of serpents. Therefore there should not be any around here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The saint cures serpents?” Sozont asked.

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

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

“Sent by whom?”

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

“Muster your strength,” Sozont said squeezing his arm by the elbow. “You are bound by a fear you have brought on yourself. Neither Mykhailo nor I are bound by it.”

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

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

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

“Probably you did not kill it,” Pavlo stated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whereupon branches snapped and there was rustling in the bushes—

the crippled and freakish were peeking out at us. Just as yesterday, they stood, encircling us, watching silently.

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

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

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

Dusk was setting in by the time Sozont finished reading.

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

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

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

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

“In my view, that is the miracle,” Teodoryt said. “When the saint deprives one of his protection, is that not his will?”

“Let the other Brothers speak,” Antonii said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can he be approached for a talk?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Then may Ievahrii and Heorhii confirm it.”

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

“And I do too,” Heorhii said.

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

“Does it contain other notes?” Antonii asked.

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

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

“If everything goes well, will we be able to depart here in the morning?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And we too dispersed so that alone we could surrender ourselves to earnest prayer.

In my prayer I said: “Lord! Following Your will I found my way here.

Be it Your will that I depart safely from here. Preserve, oh Lord, my fellow-travelers Pavlo and Sozont, so that together we can wrench ourselves out of this swamp. For all my sins, voluntary and involuntary, I repent. The voluntary I know and ask forgiveness for. Put the involuntary ones before my eyes, so that I can repent for them. Heed these folk among whom we find ourselves: if they tread along a righteous path, may righteousness be theirs, if they tread along an evil path, may they recognize it, turning onto Your path of righteousness, not theirs!”

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

The rooster’s crowing echoed from the enclosure. It reverberated loudly in the stillness of the night, and I rose off my benumbed knees. Lifting my face I beheld the star-strewn sky, grand and mysterious. The twinkling, iridescent stars seemed to be sprinkling us with their dust.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO,

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

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

"Well, my Brothers," Sozont said, "let us go view the spectacle."

"I will not go," Pavlo said. "I feel faint."

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

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

"Rest, Brother," Sozont said, almost soothingly. "Gain strength for the morrow. A difficult journey awaits us."

"Indeed!" Pavlo said. "I will lie a bit. Worldly spectacles do not attract me any more."

"You have said it well, Brother," Sozont said. "Perhaps, we should stay with you, so as not to abandon you alone?"

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

"This, too, is well said, Brother," Sozont said.

And we set out for the path. In a short while we arrived at the fence surrounding the pole. A fire blazed in the middle of the yard. Encircling the pyre, as if intentionally positioned there, stood all of Mykyta's disciples, holding thick sticks. Atop the pole, in the hut, the curtains were thrown open and we saw Mykyta bending and unbending, bowing innumerable times. This time it did not last long. As Mykyta came down the ladder, we noticed a radiance around his head, though perhaps it was the fire illuminating him. He descended, turning his face. No, I was not mistaken: his head as well as his face, indeed the hair that stuck out of his habit, truly shone. The moment he stepped onto the ground his disciples thrust their sticks into the flames, in an instant raising processional torches that burned brightly above their heads.

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

"Where is your third?" Mykyta asked.

"He has fallen ill, Reverend Father," Sozont said.

"In a while he shall be free," Mykyta declared, and blessed us as we bowed.

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

The disciples sang:

Love us, oh, Lord,
Thou pure, Thou holy,
From a life of passion
Unto You us receive—
 Have mercy.
From all calamity deliver us,
The sacred hour approaches.
This world have we accursed
With our intent—
 Have mercy.
Fearsome wolves are poised
With jaws outstretched,
Claws toward us straining,
To devour us they crave—
 Have mercy.
Along a narrow path we tread,
Through mire sinking—
This accursed world—
We come to know you—
 Have mercy.

“There are songwriters among them,” Sozont whispered to me.

I pressed his arm above the elbow, cautioning him.

Mykyta shuffled along very slowly, his body barely swaying, as if keeping time with the melody, or devising in this way some kind of dance—his disciples did the same.

Thus we reached the women’s camp. A fire blazed in the center. The crippled and freakish women arranged themselves in rows of four, a guarded distance between each. The moment they spotted the procession, and following a signal from Marta, who stood at the front, they began beating their wooden bowls with their spoons. Stepping up onto a small mound, perhaps heaped there intentionally, Mykyta raised his hand. The beating ceased.

“Prepare yourselves for the way to Heaven,” Mykyta said loudly. “And may the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, may the Holy Trinity accept you!”

“O-o-e-e-ahhh!” the women’s voices groaned in unison.

“A bit longer, and you shall be vessels of the Devil no more!” Mykyta shouted hoarsely, loudly. “As a sign of this you can follow me.”

“O-o-e-e-ahhh!” groaned the crippled, freakish women.

They rushed toward the bonfire, pulling burning sticks out of it. And limping clumsily, staggering, teetering, waddling, dragging their feet, even hobbling they threw themselves at the gate that Marta had opened in the

meantime. She herself scurried to where Mykyta stood with his disciples.

“I am your betrothed, St. Mykyta!” she wailed wildly. “I am your betrothed!”

Trembling, she fell to her knees at the base of the mound.

Mykyta, meanwhile, moved forward. Symeon and Antonii lifted Marta by the arms, shoving her forward to walk directly behind Mykyta.

The procession blossomed with flames. Mykyta, his head glowing, led the way. Marta, upright, hair loosened, walked behind him. Mykyta’s disciples followed, bearing torches, then Sozont and I, and in the rear—the noisy throng of the crippled, freakish women, prancing a little as they walked, each shouting something of her own, some trumpeting, mimicking the horn of Jericho. They waved their flaming torches in accompaniment.

A woman yelled hoarsely in a strained voice: “We are coming to you, Holy Trinity! We are coming! Welcome us!”

Meantime, Mykyta headed to the other bonfire where the crippled and freakish men had collected. Here, too, stood a mound—we had either not noticed them before, or simply had paid them no heed—and Mykyta ascended it serenely.

“Prepare yourselves for the way into heaven!” he shouted. “May the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, may the Holy Trinity accept you!”

“E-e-ahhh!” they all exhaled together.

Mykyta fell to his knees. His head now shone with a peculiar, dull phosphorescence, and lifting his hands heavenward, he droned a prayer. After a while he bowed, almost prostrating himself, stretching his arms along the ground in front of him. He lay for a time without moving, as if ossified, and came to life gradually: slowly he raised his torso, then paused, arms uplifted, beard thrust forward. What impressed me was that the prayer was recited in a precise rhythm: each bodily position was effected at a designated moment.

Meantime the crippled and freakish had gathered in a circle around the bonfire and started dancing and singing or chanting: “Eech-ooch! Bin-bin-bin! Let us run from sin! Eech-ooch! Bin-bin-bin! We shall run from sin!”

As they stood motionless, holding torches above their heads, for some reason Mykyta’s disciples seemed to me to resemble not men, but gigantic candles. I even saw tears of tallow trickling down their bodies, thickening at once. My vision was, after all, not far from the truth, for these men were truly self-immolating themselves spiritually. Their expressions were stern, stiff. Here, too, Marta lay prone near the mound with her face to the ground. I thought to myself: we have stepped back into the depths of the ages when paganism still clouded the minds of men. This is a merry festival taking place at the heathen temple. And there he is, Mykyta, the pagan high priest, praying for all. And here are the idols: the candle-men, with tongues of flames in place of heads. And the crowd: joyfully delirious, dancing,

leaping. And this maiden: the sacrificial offering that has been or will be stabbed as a gift to the gods.

“Have you noticed that Antonii had hinted at my peculiar acumen,” Sozont said to me, his voice subdued. “What can they know of it?”

“Perhaps he had in mind your countless inquiries?” I answered.

“That is natural, given the duty that I have,” Sozont said. “And in general, I try to behave in a way that accommodates their Divine Praise¹.”

“To me, too, Brother, this celebration looks very much like a pagan feast.”

“For these men have forsaken the Church Body, severing themselves from the church like a putrid finger,” Sozont said, his tone somehow morose. For the first time I noticed a strict devotion in him—not so long ago he had preached tolerance.

“‘Judge not, that ye shall not be judged,’ the Lord said. Consider, Brother, the wisdom of Isaiah. ‘And he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: but with righteousness shall he judge the poor.’”²

Sozont seemed to awake. “Thank you, Brother, for helping me recover. Apparently, I had fallen into a stupor,” he murmured quietly. “It is not up to us to judge but merely to observe.”

The circle of dancers broke, each starting to sway independently in a peculiar way. They were vividly illuminated, and I was struck by their curiously puzzling, deformed features snatched out of darkness by the light of the bonfire: distorted, eyes bulging, mouths agape, drenched in sweat, madly inspired, stretched, flattened, full of self-abnegation, unbridled frenzy and excitement. They cried, shrieked, moaned, screamed, whined, trumpeted, yelped, whimpered. Several women fell to their knees wailing in a pietà, raking their fingers over their heads as if in a lament, as if they sensed the end of the world approaching and hoped for it. It was a shocking and confounding scene.

Mykyta finished praying. He rose and proclaimed loudly (though not shouting): “Weep, my children, for all of the earth is weeping! Weep, with fasting spirits! There is a time for weeping and a time for rejoicing. ‘The time is short ... it remaineth, they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. But I would have you without carefulness.’”³

Some wept and lamented at these words; others made merry, roaring with laughter. The laughter and weeping mixed so queerly and violently that

¹ Divine praise—paganism, worship of idols.

² Note in margin: “Isaiah 11: 3.”

³ Note in margin: “I Corinthians 7:29–32.”

shivers ran down my spine. Some tore at their hair, sprinkling dirt over their heads, while others pointed at them, tittering. Some convulsed in spasms of weeping or cackling; still others jumped around them, giggling.

Thereupon Marta sprang to her feet and squealed in a pitch so sharp, so shrill—like that of the Nightingale Thief in the fable—as if someone had pierced my ears with a nail. And at the top of her voice she shrieked: “Stop! Stop! I cannot bear any more of this!”

And abruptly, everyone stopped. Not moving, they stood for a time as though transformed into black pillars of salt. Only the fire burned, spurning huge, acrid, voracious tongues into the air; the firewood and brush popped, shooting sparks. And a vast silence fell upon the island. My body, too, felt numb. I was powerless to even wag a finger. Marta stiffened, as if carved out of wood. The crippled and freakish, too, stood as if carved out of wood; an odd-looking garden of idols. Dancing flames licked all those suddenly lifeless faces, faces with tiny blank eyes, with hollowed bodies and empty skulls—all dead, all. And Mykyta, fading, and his disciples—candles, dimming, and I, too, and Sozont—all dead, all. For a chill had swept above our heads and across our faces. Sowing its dreadful seeds, the spirit of mortality, that ghostly spirit, had penetrated every one of us.

Tottering, Mykyta stepped off the mound directly towards us. We were numb.

“Judge not these people, Fathers,” he said, surprisingly gently, “for they are wretched. Do not judge me, for I am no less wretched. Behold!”

And he lifted the hem of his habit, showing his feet. We were horrified: his feet were covered with dark abscesses. Maggots stirred in those abscesses. They glowed. I turned my eyes toward Mykyta’s face and only now understood why his head shone: his beard and hair were full of those same maggots. It was not Mykyta’s face or head that radiated light, it was those glowing maggots.

Mykyta dropped the hem, raised his head and proudly walked away. Swaying a bit, Marta set out after him. His disciples, aroused, followed; stirring like those maggots, the crippled and freakish bustled, slowly streaming away from the bonfire. Sozont and I remained, alone, as if rooted to the ground, like forsaken idols. Suddenly it became clear that it was not these people who were blockheads—we were. Solitary idols of the desert we were, whipped mercilessly by the wind flinging prickly sand in our faces.

Leaving the spectacle, Mykyta, his disciples, and Marta withdrew quite swiftly along the path—we watched the procession of torches disappear. Finally, in an instant the torches dimmed. The procession was out of our sight.

“Come, Brother Mykhailo, it is time for you to repose,” Sozont said. “Tomorrow will be a difficult day for us.”

“And will you repose?” I asked.

“I have no time for reposing,” said Sozont. “I will roam around here a bit longer. Stay with Pavlo. I have begun fearing for him, poor soul.”

“All right, Brother,” I said. “Do as you see fit.”

“Not what I see fit,” Sozont stated evenly. “My duty wills me to do this.”

“What duty?”

“The one I have spoken of many a time: to seek the truth. I fear I will not be able to seek it to the end. My thinking is becoming muddled.”

“Mine, too,” I admitted. “And the farther we go, the worse it gets.”

We walked silently for a time, and here Sozont delivered yet another sermon:

“I sometimes think, Brother Mykhailo, that the Latinists, having introduced the idea of purgatory—that is to say, atonement—into their dogma, were right to a degree. Our Eastern church contradicts that, though some of our holy fathers believe that purgatory exists, but not in the other world after death—rather, on earth—that the entire man-made world is a purgatory. For that is where man is challenged. And I sometimes think that at times man dies before his physical form perishes—he dies in spirit. This does not occur the same for everyone. Does an animal possess a soul? It does not, though it lives and moves in its body; therefore, a soulless existence of the body is possible. So why cannot the same be true with man? Man is a creature marked by God, and thus for man things are not as simple as they are with an animal. So it seems to me that there exist all kinds of men: there are those that are marked by God but are beast-like, that is to say, soulless. Though men possessing a soul differ, as well: in some, the soul abides until a natural death of the body occurs, in others the soul does not survive, but dies before its time. Darkness then pervades man, rendering him powerless in distinguishing good from evil, darkness from light, truth from falsehood. He exists soullessly—there is even an expression: ‘a soulless man!’—but he believes that he is leading a soulful life. He lives godlessly but considers himself to be godly. Wishing to fool both God and men he fools only himself. Such people are dead before the demise of their physical form. It is for them, I think, the Lord granted redemption as salvation—the possibility of atonement: this means that one who is spiritually dead can restore his soul in his body and begin once again to live in spirit. Thus a thief who stole and killed is soulless, but once repentant, can return his soul to his body; the same for the hypocrite, deceiver, conniver, thug, censurer, or any other kind of evildoer. So that in the purgatory of the world, this peculiar place, each man possesses a will for either soullessness or soulfulness, though often man’s will is blind. And this is that abyss, Brother Mykhailo. The abyss of relativity, of uncertainty, of experiencing the world in disgrace; in short, a failure to comprehend one’s

own soul and, consequently, the immutability of truth. Upon each man the Lord bestowed a lamp for his darkness, this lamp being man's reason. Thus Proverbs say: 'Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and that gotteth understanding.' Though Proverbs also say: 'Be not wise in thine own eyes.' And 'Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it.' And in Isaiah: 'The wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.' St. Paul declared: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.' That is why sometimes there is wisdom in folly, and folly in wisdom, so that the human mind, like billows of the sea, is unsettled and changeable. This, then, is one of the deepest abysses in the purgatory of the world. But in this abyss there is an eye—a sense that God knows you, hears you, sees you and steers you. And even here an abyss arises, no smaller than the former—the Lord, or the Devil draped in the image of the Lord, as trial. Because of this, Brother Mykhailo, we must constantly test ourselves, diligently and urgently. Not self-assured and cautious must we be—that is the other eye of this abyss. For this is where the Lord challenges us most."

Throughout the sermon, Sozont's tone was sad, slow, drawling, unsettled. And then he became still, as if he had draped himself in darkness.

We arrived, meantime, at our place of repose.

"I will go check on Pavlo," he said.

Pavlo was asleep. Bending over him, the deacon listened. "He is breathing," he said. "But with difficulty, fitfully. You, too, rest a bit, Brother. Lie down."

"Perhaps you, too, will repose," I suggested again.

"No! I have too little time," Sozont replied sternly.

I lay down and fell asleep, I think, and had no dreams. Screams suddenly woke me. It was completely light. I sprang to my feet. In horror, I saw a serpent writhing over the prone body of Pavlo, fiercely pecking at his face. I grabbed a staff, hurled the serpent off Pavlo, and, as Sozont had earlier, kept stabbing it until it became mush. Pavlo's throat rattled. Dropping the staff, I rushed over to him. His blue eyes were bulging, his face had turned blue, his mouth was foaming. He went into convulsions. I fell next to him, trying to grasp his arms and hold him down. He grunted and became limp. I let go. I stood next to him, kneeling. Pavlo's eyes cleared, as if he had regained his senses.

"She ca-ame for me-e!" he jabbered. "Rrr-un-n-n! Rrr..." And he died.

I felt tears streaming down my face. Everything around me appeared as if in a soft, murky haze; Pavlo's hand, which I still held, began to grow cold.

At that moment, something crashed in the brush—it was Sozont running towards us. "What happened?" he asked, out of breath.

Silently I nodded towards the mashed serpent.

“There are too many serpents on an island that does not harbor them,” Sozont said. He kneeled next to me and stroked Pavlo’s hair. “My poor, poor brother!” he said. “After all that, I could not save you!”

We sat on the ground, immersed in a profound, dark silence. The eastern sky was afire.

“Why did they kill him?” I asked.

“To execute Mykyta’s prophecy,” Sozont answered shortly.

“What will we do with the corpse?”

“We will try to take it with us. I do not want them to cast it into the Eye of the Abyss. I want blessed Mother Earth to receive him, as befits a human being.”

And here, next to Pavlo’s dead body, Sozont wearily described what he was able to observe and learn.

Upon approaching the fence and pole, he saw that the hovel was alit. He did not notice any guards anywhere. He was able to creep up to the hovel. Through a crack in the shutter he saw them all sitting around a long table. Marta was there, too, eating. Sozont saw bread and meat. They were drinking mead. Symeon sat at the head of the table, not Mykyta. Though they spoke quietly, Sozont was able to grasp that they were sharing observations about the spectacle that had just passed. They especially talked about the fact that during the spectacle several of the crippled and freakish men had copulated with the women. They spoke of it quite joyfully, laughing.

Then Symeon said: “And now let us serve a last supper! Come, Marta, let us be on guard, for I do not like that deacon. He is so nosy!”

Sozont was forced to recede from the hovel. Marta stepped out. Circling like a watch dog, she observed closely and listened carefully. Sozont lay quietly on the ground, having retreated past the fence. This lasted some time, until the door creaked and Mykyta came out. He walked up to Marta and pinched her skirt. Marta defended herself quite feistily.

“Leave me be!” she said. “You rotten foundling!”

Mykyta laughed and climbed up his pole.

Then Symeon came out of the hovel. Marta threw herself at his legs. Embracing him by the knees, she kissed his raiment. Symeon pushed her aside so forcefully that she rolled over completely. He approached the fence. Ignoring the maiden, he lifted his habit and urinated.

“Stepan!” Marta moaned. “Why don’t you want me?”

“I am dead to this world,” Symeon said, adjusting his raiment. “And I have not been Stepan for some time. Go to sleep!”

“Don’t drive me away, Stepan,” the maiden whimpered. “I will do anything you say—everything you desire, I will do for you. Only don’t cast me away! I will please you, caress you, pamper you—I will be your slave!”

“I have said this many times, and I will say it again: I am dead to this

life and this world. Go away!"

"But I came here on account of you!" Marta groaned.

"I am not driving you from the island," Symeon said coldly. "If you are willing to serve in my cause, that is, the Lord, then serve! Mortify your body, as I am mortifying mine. All of you gobbled meat here, while I ate only bread and water—you eat thus too. Become the betrothed of the Lord, not mine! Douse the devilish fire ravaging you, and you will find peace."

"I desire no one else, only you, Stepan!" Marta wailed. "My fire burns for you. Here! Look!"

And she tore off her tunic and lay naked in front of him. "Take me! Take me! I am on fire! I cannot bear it! I have been reduced to ashes!"

"It is the Devil burning in you!" Symeon said coldly. "You will not seduce me."

"The Devil consumes me!" the maiden yelled. "You are my Devil, Stepan, you!"

And Symeon became enraged. He attacked her and kicked her.

Writhing like a snake, she oohed and moaned longingly. "More, more, my love! Beat me, kill me!"

And again he struck her with his feet, saying in a hoarse voice: "You vessel of the Devil! Bitch! You will not seduce me—I would, indeed, sooner kill you! Die—perish!"

Again she moaned, enervated. "It's over! The Devil has left me, Stepan!" she said, her tone hollow.

"Get up then! Get dressed and get out of my sight!" Symeon said menacingly, breathing heavily.

Marta got up, dressing herself slowly, her motions languid. She threw herself around his neck, kissing him passionately. "I love you, Stepan!"

"Perish, Satan!" Symeon exclaimed.

A second time she threw herself at his feet, kissing his bast shoes. "You are my Satan, you! I am your slave!"

"If you are my slave, I command you to leave! Compose yourself! And do not call me Stepan any more. I am Symeon!"

Marta rose obediently and, head lowered, walked toward the gate. Symeon spat three times, crossed himself and entered the hovel.

"You did not beat her enough, the bitch," Mykyta remarked from the pole.

"You, too, perish!" Symeon said, glancing upward. Suddenly, he moaned. "Lord, how hard it is for me with all of you!"

"Take my place, then," Mykyta said. "Try how easy this is."

Symeon kneeled to pray in the middle of the yard. Drawing the curtains shut, Mykyta disappeared from sight. It began to grow light.

Sozont lay still, afraid of being uncovered, though it was time for him to slither out, for Mykyta could notice him from above—with nothing else

to do on the pole, he could occupy himself watching. At last Symeon sighed affectedly and withdrew to the hovel. As carefully as he could, Sozont crept away from the fence and then nearly ran for the lake, to check what I had been unable to ascertain, that is, whether there was a cord connecting the plank to the shore. But a surprise awaited him here: amid the drifts of fog rising from the Eye of the Abyss, he saw one of Mykyta's disciples. So they continued to guard the shore! It was Nykyfor. Only it was not clear how he had arrived here. Sozont thought that he had not let a single disciple out of his sight, except for the moment when they were leaving the spectacle and Sozont was delivering his sermon to me. It even seemed that Nykyfor had been sitting at the table when Sozont peered into the hovel, though he could not be certain of that.

"This same Nykyfor could have set the serpent on you, though this time it chose kind-hearted Pavlo," Sozont said plaintively. "Most likely, Nykyfor broke away from the others at the spectacle."

"You have witnessed and described peculiar things, Brother Sozont," I said, thoughtfully.

"This proves," Sozont said, "that the truth truly does lie in the middle. Musii the dwarf did not lie about Marta that the demon of wantonness smote her, though he lied about her fornicating with Mykyta: when he pinched her, she repulsed him quite vehemently and rudely. She does not mate with Symeon, nor with any of the other disciples, and she is passionate only towards Symeon, whom she loves madly. Moreover, she knew Symeon in the other world. That is why she called him by his secular name, and why she came here. So these people are not debauchers. Symeon treats Marta like an indifferent man to whom the overly clinging female is repugnant, while Marta, owing to her self-degradation, seeks satisfaction through lasciviousness, which one could call debauchery. But she is devoted only to one man. She is willing to suffer everything from him alone. The other conclusion," Sozont whispered feverishly, "is that their chief really is Symeon, as I had surmised."

"Perchance he acts thus to avoid human glory?"

"More likely, responsibility," said Sozont, "for their sermons are in the name of the Lord while their deeds are dark. Actually, it all stems from their preaching about death and the desire for death as judgment. When Death is so elevated, it becomes desirable and serving it is no sin. Thus, they circumvent the Lord's commandment 'Thou shalt not kill!' by generally not killing with their own hands, although they assist death. Kuzma was swallowed by the Eye of the Abyss. Pavlo was poisoned by a serpent—not by them."

"And the thief?"

"The thief himself sought death. It was as if they only aided him. So that they are holding fast to their strict rules or commandments, which are

similar to the Lord's. But they have gone too far by elevating their own truth or its interpretation over the Lord's. That is evil. Having done it once, they began to weave a specious web of arguments in which they have been caught and whose slaves they have become, like fish in a net. This is the most likely explication of this puzzling Abyss with its Eye."

"Before he died, Pavlo advised us to flee this place as quickly as possible," I said. "Did he know?"

"He not so much knew as sensed it. He was a warm soul," Sozont whispered, his breath whistling. "But we are wholly in their hands. Without them we cannot cross the Eye of the Abyss. Fearing that, they have placed a guard on duty."

"I fear, Brother, that your musings are too full of conjecture," I said, "although we also have more evidence."

"You speak the truth, Brother Mykhailo. I myself am tormented by this. But we will not learn anything more definite. What I saw tonight wholly confirms their hypocrisy but not their villainy. Pretense and villainy are not the same. Even Pavlo's death can be attributed to chance, for serpents live in or near mud—and we did not catch anyone in the act of setting the serpent. So that one thing remains to expose the truth—my death in the Eye of the Abyss." And he grew silent, dark. "Should I die there, it will undoubtedly mean that they grew afraid of my discoveries. They want to protect themselves. Then they are guilty of Kuzma's death as well. I believe they are steered by a mind not seeking blood for blood's sake, but acting out of necessity: Kuzma was killed as a lesson, the thief was killed to confirm the miraculousness of Mykyta's words. I've presented myself as the author of their glory, and they would kill me only from fear that I may have learned something untoward and that I will record it or carry it out of here with me. They are aware of their own villainy, and fear being exposed. It is not a Divine mind directing them, but a Satanic one."

"But then they ought to kill me, as well," I asserted.

"I know not, Brother, I do not wish to lie," Sozont declared. "But I hope they will underestimate you. You do not meddle in their affairs, and Mykyta has treated you most kindly."

"And you agree so easily to die?" I asked, horrified.

"What is there left for me? Were I to repent before them they will not release me from here all the more, though they have mere suppositions regarding me—no proof."

"A frightful, fatal game is being played," I murmured.

"Indeed, Brother Mykhailo! And it will be won not by the one who perishes, for it is the Lord who shall judge, not men. The truth He prophesied shall prevail. I was and I am its high priest. But for victory, one condition must be met: you too must become such a high priest and carry out of here not the chronicle that is recorded on paper—it is worthless and

may it perish along with me, but the one recorded in my mind. That I entrust to you.”

“And if they destroy me?”

“This is precisely that extreme case when God’s help must be sought. I have faith that He has heard my prayer.”

“So that you have prayed for me, not for yourself?”

“Indeed. I feel I am destined to be sacrificed. I expect, too, that they have not completely lost their sense of balance in keeping the Lord’s commandments. To them, you appear as one who has died for the world.”

“That is a thin thread!”

“Thin, but it exists. I have faith in it. And even more in God.”

“And if you successfully cross the Eye of the Abyss?”

“That question has been posed,” said Sozont. “Then I will accept my defeat, and understand that my conjecture was the fruit of an afflicted mind, and I shall call them devout actors. And I shall disseminate the written Life of Mykyta as genuine.”

“Though you yourself said: they copied it from the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter.”

“They follow that chronicle in their own lives, and the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter has been recognized by the church as genuine. I will not raise a hand against its dictates. After all, all chronicles are copied from older chronicles, only dressed in local garb and adapted to contemporary mores. I know this from experience. Thus, they are, to a degree, credible. And as I have said before: following the dictates of Christ, we do not become Christ, but Christians, and as they follow the dictates of St. Symeon, they are not Symeon, but Symeonides.”

Immersed in reflection, I felt my head splitting from it all. “And what if the mind of Symeon, Mykyta’s disciple, is so profound that he understands this and will release us freely?”

“In that case, he hopes for atonement,” Sozont said. “But the nature of an evildoer is such, that having begun, he cannot stop.”

Then we heard steps. Approaching along the path were all six of Mykyta’s disciples: Nykyfor, supposedly standing guard at the Eye of the Abyss, among them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE,
in which our crossing the Eye of the Abyss is recounted

When they caught sight of us next to Pavlo's supine corpse lying on the ground, the disciples halted in shock.

"What happened to Brother Pavlo?" Antonii asked.

"He died of a serpent's bite," Sozont replied calmly.

"Serpent?" Teodoryt asked, in wonder. "But there are no serpents here, in view of the power of the saint's words. Not even snakes."

And here Sozont uttered something I believe he should not have: "If his words can repel serpents, why can he not summon them?"

Mykyta's disciples frowned.

"Why did you say that?" Antonii asked.

"It was the saint who vowed death for Pavlo," Sozont said.

"The saint does not summon death," Antonii said coldly. "He can merely foretell it, so that the doomed one has time to repent."

"Cannot a foretelling be a summons?" Sozont inquired.

"Not at all! The saint cannot violate one of the greatest commandments," Antonii said. "Where is this serpent?"

"Over there, by the bush," Sozont said. "This is the second one, by the way. I took the first off the chest of Brother Mykhailo as he slept."

"Strange," Antonii said, turning the dead serpent over with a staff. "Did you kill the first one, too?"

"We thought we had killed it, but it vanished. It probably slid away," I said. "Perhaps this was the same one."

"We will have to ask the saint," Antonii said anxiously to his fellow disciples, "to repel this filth from the sacred island." Then abruptly he asked: "Perchance, you harbor secret evil thoughts, and that is what brought the snakes on?"

"If we had brought on the snakes, they would not be killing us," Sozont said.

"Well, that is in the will of God!" said Teodoryt.

"Snakes are the devil's kin, and were we malefactors, we would abide in the Devil, so that we would be at one with snakes," Sozont declared, and I thought he should not have said that either.

"Perhaps it slithered here by chance," Symeon said indifferently. "That has happened here before. What will you do with the body?"

"We will try to take it with us, since you have no cemetery here."

"That is true. We have only one grave, that of the saint's mother, as you know," Teodoryt said.

"How will you carry it?" Antonii asked.

"Across dry land in a stretcher, and on water we'll pull it in tow."

"Fine," Antonii said. "That is how others who claimed their departed

have done it. We do not object.”

Sozont raised his face toward me. In the morning light, it appeared gray. He hadn't slept for two nights, after all. “Cut down two small trees, Brother Mykhailo.”

I set out for the thicket in search of poles suitable for a stretcher; the others continued talking around Pavlo's corpse. I prepared the poles, then cut smaller ones for crossbars and brought everything to the camp. Sozont tied the shorter sticks to the poles and we lay Pavlo's body on this stretcher. As his face had become bloated and blue, almost black, we covered it with a large bur leaf. Then we set out in the lead, with Mykyta's disciples, wall-like, behind us.

“You weary yourselves needlessly,” said Sozont, walking behind the stretcher. “We are not such important personages that all of you need to accompany us. A guide would suffice.”

I understood why Sozont said what he said: he was being careful.

“You are not insignificant guests to us,” Antonii said. “We wish to honor you accordingly. Everyone came to escort you of his own will.”

“Fine,” stated Sozont. “We thank you for the honor.”

Neither we nor Mykyta's disciples made any further attempts at conversation. Several times, while resting briefly, I glanced at Symeon—he seemed indifferent, and as if aloof. For some reason I thought: how could this balanced, rational, taciturn man with pleasant features have beaten so savagely a woman who loved him so madly? Evidently, a beast did lurk within him.

I walked ahead of everyone and so had to keep my eye on the path. Furthermore, the stretcher with Pavlo was heavy, and I could not look around especially well, nor could I focus on any complex thoughts.

Oddly, along the way to the Eye of the Abyss we met not a single crippled or freak, though before, while rambling about the island, we had always stumbled across them either wandering, or sitting, or reposing. As if following some signal, they had withdrawn and cleared the path for us.

High above, the sun, swathed in clouds, spurted sheaves of sunbeams; the sky, too, was covered in thin clouds. From early morning it had been steamy, but there was no dew—the grass rustled dryly underfoot. Sweat rolled down my face, streaming down my forehead into my eyes and down my cheeks. We paused from time to time to wipe off the sweat and to catch our breath. Silently Mykyta's disciples paused too, not offering any help; their faces were as gray as Sozont's, evidently from a sleepless night. A transparent barrier seemingly arose between us and them: we on one side of it, they—on the other. An invisible tension grew, as if both we and they wished to free ourselves from the other as quickly as possible. Symeon remained calm and reserved throughout, though his eyes expressed sadness. And I sensed that they were all in their own way doleful, as were we, and in

their own way resigned, weary, and dissatisfied with something. Maybe, the presence of a corpse among us, its face covered with a bur leaf contributed to this feeling?

Finally, we arrived at the Eye of the Abyss. The water emitted a mist, though only the milky part, the part Symeon had called dead. The dark circle in the center of the pool appeared to be covered by a clear, icy glaze—it did not fume. Again we smelled a peculiar odor, which existed only here. This time it contained not only the stench of cadavers but a blended odor of rot and an aroma akin to that of swamp flowers, though we saw no flowers nearby.

“Brother Symeon will guide you,” Antonii said as we laid the stretcher down by the water. “Go with God! If something here has made you unhappy, forgive us! You have been dear guests.”

He approached Sozont, embraced him and kissed him thrice. He did the same with me. I smelled something acidic on his breath—probably from the mead he had drunk. The other disciples simply bowed to us, except Symeon, who was to continue accompanying us along the way. They retreated as if on some signal, positioning themselves along the curved shore of the Eye of the Abyss at set intervals from one another, exactly as they had when welcoming us: two at the left and two at the right. Antonii remained in the middle, which is to say, at the foot of the path. Three sticks lay there, evidently prepared in advance. Suddenly, a thought pierced me like an arrow: if these sticks were prepared in advance, let us say, by Nykyfor, whom Sozont had found here at dawn, then there should have been four of them. How did Nykyfor know that Pavlo would be bitten by a serpent, that it would kill him? Hence, he must have known that three of us, not four, would be crossing the Eye of the Abyss—so was it not Nykyfor who set the serpent onto us? Sozont, too, noticed that there were three staffs, not four, for he looked at me meaningfully. And a second thought pierced me: if what Sozont had foreseen was to occur here, at the Eye of the Abyss, and if the one to die was to be the last one, that is, if that conjecture was correct, then should not I go last? Sozont believed, after all, that they do not kill for no reason. Hence they would not touch me, and they would be unable to cut Sozont off along the path. That is why I said:

“I prefer to be last. I will hold on to the stretcher and feel more confident.”

“What will you say to that, Brother Symeon?” Sozont asked, understanding in an instant what I had in mind.

“Do as you see fit,” Symeon said indifferently. “My duty is to guide you.”

At the same time I noticed that he and Antonii exchanged glances.

“You decide,” Antonii said to Sozont. “I think the one lacking confidence should be placed in the middle.”

“I think so too,” Sozont said, utterly calm. “That is why I shall be last.”

My heart grew heavy. I had given Sozont a chance to save himself. After considering his options, if our suppositions were right, he had openly chosen death.

Symeon got down into the water, walked along the track a bit then stopped. I climbed down the bank and faced Sozont to pick up the stretcher. In the meantime, I had a chance to feel around with my foot at the start of the path. This time our assumption was correct: the track was suspended. I felt two wooden pegs driven into the bank one next to the other.

Sozont pushed the stretcher toward me while I stepped backwards, pulling it along. The bur leaf slipped from Pavlo’s face. It was dreadful: bloated and black, no one would ever again be able to recognize his features. I fished the leaf out of the water, and covered him again. Sozont slid into the water right off shore and obviously felt the pegs too, for again he glanced at me meaningfully.

“Take the staff,” said Sozont, giving it to me. “Now turn around.”

I was forced to turn around holding the staff in one hand and the stretcher pole in the other—the stretcher floated on the water.

“We’re off!” Sozont’s voice sounded behind me.

I could not see how he was holding the stretcher and what use he could make of his staff. The stench of decay increased in the muddled water masking the aroma which we discerned previously. Symeon tread confidently, though slowly, ahead of me, feeling for the path with his staff. Apparently he had crossed the Eye of the Abyss many a time.

“We forgot to bring water,” Sozont’s voice was suddenly heard behind us. “Could we stop by the fresh water, Symeon?”

“Observe what I do,” Symeon turned his head. “I’ll signal!”

Once more he moved on confidently. Our feet stirred the milky water. The smoky haze enveloped us. I felt a bit dizzy from the fumes; breaking off from the broad surface, the haze rose in swirling tufts. We plunged deeper and deeper into the water. The haze reached our faces.

“Do not breathe deeply!” Symeon yelled to us. “The fumes can make you dizzy!”

I was already feeling dizzy. After all, I was short, especially in comparison to Sozont and Symeon. Colorful, twirling rings appeared in my mind’s eye, I felt faintly nauseous and my eyes seemed veiled in a mist. I kept my breaths shallow, but nevertheless I felt sick, though not enough to lose consciousness. And, as always happened with me in times of danger, I lit a watchfire in my mind, that is to say, I concentrated all my attention on this tiny candle in my mind. The candle burned, its flame flickering, but it did not go out. Then the nausea began receding, though the vivid rings still spun and shimmered. My mind was hazy, as was this pool.

Slowly we approached the dark circle, where there truly was no haze and where we would be able to catch our breath. No vapors swirled at the edge between the milky and dark water. It seemed a transparent shaft, like a well, had formed. An invisible force held the haze beyond that circle. I felt an unbearable urge to run along the track, to reach the spring water sooner, but Symeon's tall, slender and impenetrable figure towered in front of me, and he walked slowly. I was dizzy, and my grip on the stretcher pole weakened. Suddenly I felt it slip away. At that moment a horrible shriek echoed behind my back. Yes, it was an inhuman shriek, full of dread and despair. The plank beneath me shook and in that instant something splashed. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the pole, which I had been holding, shoot steeply backward.

"Do not stop!" Symeon yelled. "Hurry!"

Underfoot, the track swayed. Symeon was practically running. Unconsciously, as if fettered to him, I followed, my feet barely touching the swaying plank, balancing and counterbalancing with the staff I grasped in both my hands. We leaped into the stretch of dark water, and I inhaled deeply. The air was pure, brisk, and fragrant; it dispelled my dizziness. I wanted to stop and look around.

"Do not stop!" Symeon yelled once again, not slowing his gait. I did not stop and I did not look around. Once more I inhaled deeply, and again I dove into the suffocating billows of gray vapor. Now the track stopped swaying. The water's depth decreased. Vivid streaks again floated through my head, bending and whirling, and with a concentrated force of will I once again ignited my candle of caution. Symeon, too, did not once look around, though he did slow his gait, and that was fortunate because I felt faint and sensed not malodorous vapors filling me, but fear — horror, actually—and that horror drove me on like a whip jabbing my head. Nearly blind, I saw nothing around me but the bright spot of Symeon's back bounding ahead in front of me. The water was no longer merely chest-deep—it reached my armpits. The nausea increased and I retched the remains of the scant food still in my stomach—it was a yellow, acid liquid. That brought a bit of relief, and I was able to withstand the rest of the course, which brought us to a hillock emerging out of the water. Several feeble birch trees with small, pale leaves grew here. Evidently this was where the two pegs holding the track on this side of the Eye of the Abyss were driven in.

Symeon leaped onto dry land and handed me his staff. I grabbed it with one hand. With the other, I leaned against my own staff, though it had no firm support, climbed onto dry land and fell to the ground. But I did not let myself rest: I sat up and turned toward the pool. It was calm and still. The milky water steamed quietly and the dark water was motionless as ever. The stretcher floated in the milky water near the dark circle but Pavlo's body was not on it. There was no sign of Sozont, either. Spasms rolled

through my body and I wailed like a child, tears large as peas spilling from my eyes.

“Did you so love those men that you cry, Brother Mykhailo?” Symeon asked with a chill in his tone. “Perhaps you knew them earlier, before you set out on this journey?”

“I did not know them before,” I said, “and I am crying because they were human beings: Pavlo, a blessed soul, and Sozont who had a great mind and great knowledge.”

“A great mind and knowledge cause harm,” Symeon stated sadly. “They lead one into misthinking.”

“What do you know of these men?” I asked plaintively.

“Less than you do. Do not grieve over death, for though it is full of sorrow, it is not to be feared,” Symeon answered. “What is life in this world, Brother Mykhailo? Merely a step between birth and death. Yesterday you arrived, today you depart. It is not the demise of the flesh that is horrible, but of the soul. Our lives are a passage into the domain of death, the fleeting mercurial breath of those who seek it. Death peers into our windows every minute, and what are we before Death? Like grass before the scythe.”

“Did these men deserve death for what they did?” I asked through tears.

“Perhaps they did, and perhaps not—I am not familiar enough with them,” Symeon continued in the same tone. “Death arrives when it wills and takes whomever it wills. We are miserable creatures! For who shall save us from the flesh’s demise? Fear of death keeps us in bondage. Earthly life is that bondage.”

He became quiet, and we surveyed the broad surface of the Eye of the Abyss. On the other side along the shore stood Mykyta’s disciples, like fixed props. They appeared phantasmal through the haze suspended above the water. And again I was gripped with fear. I was flooded with it, it seized me, swallowed me—I wanted to leave this accursed place as quickly as possible. I had no strength left for suffering. I wanted to hole up in a hole of some kind, in a niche, to shut my eyes and once again to reflect on all that had occurred. To ponder, to tie up the loose ends of those threads that remained untied. Will I comprehend anything? What Sozont feared had happened, and so through his death he confirmed his own surmising. But at the moment I was incapable of reflecting upon this. I was too exhausted, too weary, too tormented. I longed for only one thing: solitude and peace.

I had not looked at Symeon during our exchange, but I did now. He stood speechless, motionless, like a pole-sitter’s pole, as if imitating those stupefied followers of his, or standing as an example to them. More likely the latter. His expression bespoke grand inspiration, as if he were shameless; or he felt like a chief or military leader victorious in a great bloody battle, knowing no sorrow, only gladness at all the enemy corpses.

At that moment this poor fellow did not know, did not gather, that his victory was a sign of his defeat, that one taken by death often triumphs over death, that Jesus was not vanquished by His crucifiers, rather, He vanquished them—that in weakness there dwells a power greater than is evident, and that humility is more honorable than arrogance. This poor fellow did not know that in stepping over that line, his mind had become lame, had become crippled and freakish. It was dreadful for me to hear him say; “A great mind and knowledge harm man, leading him into misthinking,” for he was speaking of himself, not Sozont. That is, he recognized this truth, judging not himself with it but the one by him defeated, not realizing that damaged truth holds no truth, that damaged good is no longer good, and damaged reason is no longer reason. This is what horrified me: seeing that self-inspired victor. In my mind’s eye my guardian flame ignited again, like a candle.

“Thank you, Brother Symeon, for having led me across the Eye of the Abyss,” I said. “Go back. After resting a bit, I shall go on.”

“Can you cross the swamp on your own?” Symeon asked.

“You volunteered to guide us only across the Eye of the Abyss,” I answered.

“I said that thinking that you would be on your way with quick-eyed Sozont,” Symeon said. “I fear for you. And you are dear to my heart.”

I wanted to ask: “Did you not know that Sozont would perish?” but the guardian flame in my mind burned brighter and I said something else: “Why am I to your liking?”

“Because you are almost dead to this world—St. Mykyta spoke of this to you as well. Because your great skill is lost and you will not reclaim it. Though, Brother, you have not yet attained higher perfection and this wicked world still has a hold on you. Return to it once again to become convinced: it is foreign to you, hostile. There is no place in it for you, nor will there ever be.”

“What then, Brother Symeon?”

“Then you shall finally die to the world. And once you recognize this, you can think of us, dead to the world, and you will want to return here. I say onto you: we will gladly accept you. But we force no one, we bid no one—it is all in your will.”

“Is this why you want to lead me across the swamp?”

“Exactly, Brother Mykhailo. It would be a shame if you did not traverse the path of the salvation of the soul—and you have stepped onto it.”

And I became completely sorrowful—this man was so convinced of his truth and superiority that he believed he would triumph over me as well, the only living survivor of those who had come to visit. I sensed and recognized that I was the weakest of all, the one with the most broken spirit—there was no need to break it in me, I could do that myself. And here

he was wholly right. But he failed to reckon one thing, that is, that with me I bore the modern Gospel, written without paper or parchment, recorded and deposited in my mind as if into a treasure chest by Sozont and thus I was his adversary, even as he was wholly convinced that he had not only triumphed over his enemy Sozont but had swallowed him, like a shark swallowing a small fish.

“I will consider your words, Brother Symeon,” said I. “But why agonize over my destiny? Neither birth nor death is in our will, therefore why fear danger? Let us leave it to the will of the Lord—not ours, worms of earth as we are. Were it the Lord’s will to take me, not wholly dead to this world, who can stop Him in that? Were it His will to place me onto the path of which you speak, I shall walk that path, for I am accustomed to submitting to His will.”

“So you are not afraid to die?” Symeon asked with interest.

“I am not afraid,” I answered. “Ought one fear the inevitable?”

“You have spoken well, Brother Mykhailo,” Symeon smiled amicably. “St. Mykyta and all of us pray for you. Surely, you will safely cross the swamp. Let it be as St. Peter said: ‘Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.’ I expect that we will see you among us soon.”

“And when I return, how will I cross the Eye of the Abyss, alone?” I asked.

“You will find a way. If you have the desire, you will cross.”

I rose. We embraced. We kissed three times. And I sensed something strange: it seemed that I was actually embracing and kissing a corpse. His flesh was as cold and lifeless as Pavlo’s had been earlier, after he died. I shivered.

“The water has chilled you, Brother Mykhailo,” Symeon stated warmly, turning away. “Warm yourself in the sun. It is out already. Regain your senses. A fine day is predicted for today.”

Indeed, the sun shone above us. Not bright, not hot, but wrapped in gray clouds, as if in a woolen scarf. I thought it was unlikely to be a fine day since there was no dew on the morning grass—earth’s greenery had not been rinsed with its usual sacred drops.

Symeon plunged into the water and set off across the Eye of the Abyss without looking back. He tread lightly, swiftly, unguardedly. Deeper and deeper into the water he plunged, which, by the way, had abruptly stopped fuming—the high sun had swallowed the vapors. The inert forms of Mykyta’s disciples (actually Symeon’s) became clearer, no longer appearing dissolved in the haze.

I sat down again on the grass and trailed my palm across it: no dew here, either. Nor did the shriveled birch leaves shine.

“A fine day is not predicted, Symeon,” I said sadly. “It is not predicted!”

But Symeon was already far away. I sat and watched. There he was, approaching the spot where Pavlo's stretcher was floating. He caught it with his staff and dragged it off behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR,
which describes how I crossed the swamp

I sat atop the hillock until Symeon crossed the Eye of the Abyss. Antonii helped him pull Pavlo's stretcher out of the water. Mykyta's disciples huddled together and chatted about something. Then they set out into the thicket and disappeared a moment later. Only then was I able to pray for the repose of the souls of my fellow-travelers, Kuzma, Pavlo and Sozont, whom the Eye of the Abyss had swallowed. As I prayed, I felt immeasurable sorrow and nearly wept. These men, Sozont most of all, clung to my soul.

The sun got hot, warming me. It emerged from behind the clouds into an opening and this opening was round, as was the Eye of the Abyss. I turned my back on the pool and prayed a second time, this time for God's aid in my uncertain way. A boundless space, awash in water with outcroppings of cattails, brambles and sparse saplings, lay in front of me. I had to cross it on my own. The sun showed where east was. Mykyta's island lay to the north. I had to head south.

I began considering what I knew about the course across the swamp. It would take half a day or possibly a bit longer to reach the small island where we had slept and cooked our last kulish, and a whole day to get from that island to dry land. Symeon had said that the inquisitive Sozont would have found the way without his help; if that was a derisive remark, then it was meaningless, but if he had spoken the truth, the course should be marked somehow.

Just then, a magpie screeched overhead. I remembered how Teodoryt had related that this magpie guided him. That had to be verified.

Feeling for the path with my staff, I stepped onto it and moved slowly ahead. The magpie, did indeed, fly ahead, and it alighted on a small birch that grew on the hillock. In my mind I sketched a straight line between myself and the outcropping and then set out: the path did not disappear from under my feet. Mosquitoes swarmed overhead. I have no food, I thought, or potable water; but I did have a small kettle and some salt in a tightly bound leather pouch, which might nevertheless have gotten wet—I had not opened it in a long while. I also had a piece of steel and a flint stone—all in the pouch. So my goal was to reach the small island, where I would be able to light a fire and gather greens—sorrel, for instance, or orach—and cook them for myself, even if in muddy water. I would spend the night there and consider the next step.

I was so immersed in thought that I stepped off course, falling headlong into a hole. My feet touched a slimy bottom. But I knew how to swim and, beating with my arms, I surfaced. The magpie flew up from the birch, screeching madly above me. I swam up to the staff I had let go,

thinking that was where the path should be, but I was unable to feel it with my foot. Swimming in clothes was awkward, so I decided to find the line between the small birch on which the magpie had alighted again and the outcropping that I had left. God favored me. I fumbled onto the path. I pushed ahead slowly and did not get lost in thought again.

The magpie took off from the small tree and, chattering, headed farther out. I noticed that one of the branches on the birch sapling was broken and hung down—was this not a sign? My pouch, which was fastened to my shoulders, also helped me this time. Tightly bound and waterproof, it was like a bubble pushing me to the surface.

I clambered onto the outcropping and fell heavily to the ground, my heart pounding loudly in my chest—I was tired. I caught my breath. I considered how and where the next portion of the path lay. I noticed no more broken branches on nearby trees, but my eye caught a rod, stuck into the ground by a small outcropping—I detected no other markings.

The magpie circled over me, chattering. This time it did not show me the way. I decided to tread very slowly. We had taken a little more than a half day to walk from the spot where we had spent the night to Mykyta's island. I could spend a whole day on it. Of course, it would have been much better if Symeon had guided me at least as far as the place where we had spent the night, but I was glad that I had gotten rid of him: for one thing, it would have been difficult to endure him next to me, and secondly—I was afraid of him. Who knows what could have stirred in that mad mind? This fear was not well-reasoned, for in truth Symeon did not wish my demise: if he had, the Eye of the Abyss could well have swallowed me, too. The terror that springs within us is not always commensurate with common sense.

I peeled off my mantle and wrung out the water from it. I did the same with my habit. Then I put them on again. All the while, mosquitoes were stinging me profusely. I began probing for the track with my staff. I finally found it, and descended into the water. I walked directly toward the rod—the direction was correct. This time I was not mistaken.

The magpie left me, flying far ahead and landing on a small tree. I paid it no heed, though I made note of the tree. It stood in the center of an outcropping, larger than the others, overgrown with grass. This time I walked very cautiously, one foot after the other and reached the rod successfully. Here I saw a dark linen ribbon tied to it—our raiments were of this same cloth. I understood that only Sozont could have tied the ribbon, so that along the way he was thinking about our return—that is why Symeon had hinted about his keenness. I sighed with relief: if the course was marked, I should not come across any great misfortune. I had only to watch for the markings carefully.

I glanced at the small tree on which the magpie had perched earlier, but now it seemed to me that a similar tree stood to the left of it. It was

impossible to tell them apart. I continued along the track, splashing chest-deep in water, staring at those trees so intently that my eyes hurt. There was a ribbon on the tree to the left of the one on which the magpie had sat—tied low, nearly at water level, it was not easy to spot.

I steered myself in that direction. And here a frantic thought entered my mind: if Symeon was aware of Sozont's markings, could they not have jumbled them deliberately? But I smothered that thought with another: to accomplish that, they would have had to step off the firm path themselves.

"But how did it happen," I thought, "that heading here I did not notice the tying of ribbons, and I was walking behind Sozont? Though it's true, I was not behind him, but Pavlo."

I had no answer. It also occurred to me that Teodoryt was blind. He, too, could not have seen any markings.

While passing the small tree with the mark I swerved off the path and felt my foot caving into thick, sticky mud. Leaning so heavily on my staff that I heard it cracking, I pulled my foot out of the mud with great effort; I was glad that my sandals were tightly fastened. Had I been in boots, I would certainly have lost one. Stars floated before my eyes from the exertion. I had to stop.

Meantime, the magpie flew ahead again: it circled the outcropping on which only grass grew and flew off into the depths of the swamp. The water emitted a dense fetidness, and I became dizzy again. Large bubbles rose from the bottom, popping with a dry cracking sound. I could not find any markings in this spot, so I had to tread as if I were blind, fumbling for the path. A cold sweat dripped down into my eyes. Mosquitoes in increasing numbers were darting at my face.

I rinsed my face with the foul water and moved on, heading toward the outcropping on which the magpie had alighted. This time the magpie deceived me! I barely kept myself from falling off the path and sinking into the mud. My staff went completely under water and got stuck somewhere. I found it with my foot, inclined it towards myself and could barely pluck it out. In the brief time I was searching it seemed to have set roots in the bottom.

I moved on and finally saw a small birch tree with a broken branch—this was a credible sign. Overhead, the magpie cackled loudly at me, satisfied with her game. I headed in the direction of the birch; here the outcropping was such that I could rest. I sat down and a cloud of mosquitoes surrounded me, their tiny moth-like wings shimmering madly before my eyes but with these it was easier: they did not sting. They did not need my blood.

Abruptly I wondered: where am I going? I had no parents in this world: they died of an epidemic while I was still young. I had no brothers, nor sisters. I was their only child. While I had skill, I was needed. What was

I now? Alone, abandoned by all, I had only this left: to hark back on the times of inspired impulse, when I had designed the Peresopnytska Gospel. My soul ached to see it again, that massive volume bound in ocher leather, with eight coils along the spine, where it was sewn together. I myself had been the bookbinder. I had stitched it, I had selected the leather, I had prepared the wood panels, I had shaved them, I had glued on the leather, and I had been the first to lovingly unfold the book. I had poured all my strength into it, so that the book had drunk me, like a cup of spring water or milk—only the potsherd remained.

And before me I saw Sozont's pale, washed-out face. It appeared as if in a fog.

"You must cross this swamp," it said. I heard his voice quite clearly in the stillness. "For only you will be able to preserve me and Pavlo and Kuzma, innocently slain, from oblivion. May this be your new Gospel. You must find the strength! Rouse your spirit!"

And I sensed something stirring within me, as if in the depths of my viscera a fresh sprig was sprouting, slowly budding, and ever so slowly developing. A blossom began growing within me, a blossom known as kryn or white lily, and it sprouted amid the dark, half-dead brambles (Symeon had described it thus) of my being. And I recalled the words of Matthew, words I once scribed with such love: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin," so that even Christ had looked upon that lily of the field as necessary in life, for He had used it as an example. My soul was overgrown with these same lilies of the field when I scribed and painted. That grand, magnificent book became such a lily of the field—my child, into whom the Lord had breathed life, and now it lives independently of me, its manure, out of which that white flower had blossomed. May the Lord receive praise for it, not I: it was He Who bestowed growth upon this lily. And I sensed in me an unfamiliar flux of energy: when such a force appears I cannot and must not perish in this not wholly endless swamp.

I think I fell asleep. I thought that it had all been a dream; but regaining my senses, I felt truly stronger. I glanced back to where I had come from, and everything I had experienced seemed like a distressing, phantasmal dream, a dream I ought not forget once awake. I shall carry that dream within me, its unexplained mysteries, all the spoken words, all the transpired events—I shall forget none of it. This is now my duty.

And I moved on more boldly and briskly, penetrating this muddy flood further and further amid dwarf trees that reminded me of the dwarfs on Mykyta's island, amid monstrously withered vegetation, which reminded me of the crippled and the freakish, past the alders and birches that were like Mykyta's disciples. Surrounded thus on all sides, it was as if I were leading them out of the abyss, though they themselves were the abyss. And I

was leading my brethren out of the abyss also, though they remain forever in it. Here I was, carrying their words, their thoughts like a sack, or like a cross, on my back: I myself was full of them. Slogging through the putrid, watery wastes of our lives, I could always pause to behold pure, celestial springs amid white clouds—lilies of the sky, for the creation of which I had set out onto the journey of life. O, I was not dead, I was not hollow: for one who senses the presence of divine lilies in one's soul is never hollow. It was not a foul fluid flowing through my veins, but a spring. I was spilling my old blood, as had naïve Kuzma, letting leeches suck his living flesh. Crossing the swamp, I was effecting something similar. My pain was like the leeches: my grief, my sorrow for those who had perished, my uncertainty, my numbness, my despair, my aloneness, my disillusionment, my doubts, my accursedness—there were so many of these leeches craving my blood. And I surrendered my body to them, but not to be ravaged. I let them suck only my dead blood—I still needed my living blood.

I waded through the swamp nearly the whole day, from marker to marker, seeking them, examining them. The search was not without incident: I fell into the water several more times. Once I sank in a quagmire that began to absorb me, but I was able to pull a floating log to me, and used it to wrench myself out of the all-consuming mud; once I lost the track and swam about at least an hour searching for signs, until weakened, almost exhausted, I finally found it again. But during this entire trek my flaming passion did not dim, the guardian candle in my head did not fade, and the lily blossoming in my soul did not wither. I was wet, caked with mud, covered with mosquito bites, filthy and famished, but I continued to hold on firmly to a thread—that thread was the lily blossom, bestowed on me for renewed strength. It even rained on me along the way, and I was splashing in water below and from above; the rain whipped my head and shoulders mercilessly. There was not a dry thread left on me. Then, when the sun reappeared I steamed as if on fire. But, teeth clenched, I walked, walked, and walked: for I had to arrive, I had to prove to myself that I am still fit for something in this life. So that when I finally spied the small island on which we had spent the night, I was not glad, for I had no energy to be glad. With parched lips I merely thanked the heavens. Half-conscious, half-dazed, half-extinguished, dragging my benumbed legs, collecting myself into a hard fist, painfully compressed, I did not clamber—I crawled onto shore. I pulled my body a short way into the grass and lost consciousness, falling into a cold, dark pit, all the while steadfastly aware that this pit was no abyss but a dark cave one could enter as a temporary refuge.

I came to toward evening. Looking around in surprise, only now did I allow myself to be glad: I had weathered half of my trek. Rolling over onto my back, I lay staring wide-eyed at the sky. It rained again and I rinsed my face. Opening my parched mouth I drank, licking the drops off my lips. The

rain, brief but generous, unexpectedly poured new energy into me.

Sitting up, I saw a family of dense, shiny mushrooms growing by a tree. The Lord had sent them to me. I prepared kindling. Scooping together some old, dry leaves and yellowed grass with its roots, I set about striking a flame. The brushwood was damp and it was hard to ignite. It took me a good while to start a fire. From the swamp I drew some water, cooked the mushrooms in it, then strained the water, boiling it once more. Again I strained it—it smelled too strongly of mud—and then got the salt from my sack. Though it was damp the salt in the pouch had not dissolved. I was able to salt my meal. The food fortified me. I was almost without strength. My eyelids drooped with fatigue, which increased after my meal. My body wilted—it was hard even to wag a finger.

But this did not trouble me. I lay on firm ground, and even though I was surrounded on all sides by swamps, they no longer scared me. I gave my last bit of strength to praying, for I had to thank the One who had saved me.

“I was excessively distrustful, Brother Sozont,” I whispered, lying supine, gazing at the rapidly darkening sky where stars as large as apples were alit. “Miracles do occur in the world with God’s will. Not all of them are recorded, not all of them are noted by men. But without the Lord’s miracles, what are we in the world? Today, Brother Sozont, another has occurred, and they will continue to occur. In my life, this is the second,” I whispered, drifting off into sleep, “the first was the Peresopnytska Gospel. I am saddened that you are unable to record this in your Cheti-Minei. But I have learned one thing: they are performed not by mortal, corruptible men, even if they lead a pious life, but by the Lord. Beyond God, Brother, there are no miracles—there never were and never will be. But then you, too, had expressed this in your own way.”

“Amen,” said the voice of Sozont, invisible in the darkness and in the world. “Now you have recounted your miracle to me...”

I awoke in the morning wholly refreshed. I foraged some more mushrooms on the islet. I cooked them and ate them. Then I stood on shore and gazed out.

Before me stretched a limitless morass of mud and water. But now I gazed upon it fearlessly: I was certain that I could cross it. Though I would be dishonest if I did not admit that the worm of fear was, indeed, nibbling at me. The beginning of the path was marked: here the grass was trimmed and a small stick stuck out. Overnight my raiment had not so much dried as stiffened—I was covered in muddy slime. Before setting out I prayed: “I praise You, Benevolent One, I glorify You, Almighty, that You did not disgrace me above others, undeserving sinful servant though I am. Heeding my prayers, You plenish my spirit with Your presence. Bless my further journey, which I chose but onto which You directed me, for You dwell in

life, not in death. Grant me strength to overcome this morass of life that has sullied me, and out of which I want to emerge with a cleansed spirit. Lay a firm path beneath my feet, so that I, a small worm of this earth, will not doubt and will not waste the strength You gave me. I have faith in it, as I do in You, and in Your Guiding Light!”

And again I stepped into the mud, but with greater confidence and persistence. And though the route was longer than yesterday’s, it was easier. And though I lost my way more than once, fell, got stuck, swam, searched for support, even so, the farther I got the greater the joy that embraced me. And only now did I understand: being close to the Eye of the Abyss, I felt its gravity, its proximity; it was behind my back, breathing at me, stretching its gauzy tentacles towards me. I felt some of them, like leeches, sucking at me and not releasing me—in pain I detached them, they were like clinging leeches. Blood flowed out of me, as did my strength. But the farther I retreated from it, the less I felt the Eye of the Abyss behind me, especially that which had breathed poisonous vapors into me, stupefying me, captivating me, stripping me of my faculties, luring me into its endlessness, pulling me therein forcibly, so reluctant was it to lose yet another sacrifice. But I did not wish to become its victim. I scrambled out of it, like out of a quagmire. The farther I retreated, the more I tore myself from its feelers and my feet from its countless mouths hidden in the mud. Puking its essence out of me, I walked, walked, and walked stubbornly, drearily, with a flame burning in my head and a sprouting lily in my soul. I could not and did not want to stop, or look around, for were I to look around, I know not if I would have turned into a pillar of salt. That is to say, I might not have been able to overcome the force that I did not understand, whose attraction is incomprehensible. I walked because I had to walk, and I had faith in my “had to.” I walked because I did not believe in the endlessness and bottomlessness of the abyss, believing, instead, that the Eye has a bottom. It is not omnipresent. It is limited. Its power is not limitless and therefore it can be vanquished.

So that I looked around only after I had completely succeeded in crossing the swamp and when my feet had stepped not onto an island in the midst of the swamp, but onto ground that was firm and larger than the swamp. Nevertheless, when I looked back, I could not suppress a scream that horror wrenched out of me.

In the middle of the swamp stood an enormous sphere: milky, half-limpid, a black, obscure pupil in its center. It appeared to me that the lake called the Eye of the Abyss, which usually lay flat on top of the earth had rolled over and stood upright. And that Eye with its endless darkness was staring at me, smoky tufts rising from its milky surface as if it were on fire. Perhaps it was on fire, for I believe I saw flashes of flames in it. My hair stood on end, and I screamed. Only it was not a scream of horror but a

scream of damnation. And my shriek became a sharp lance cast by a warrior. And that lance flew through the space which divided us, striking the transparent black pupil and becoming stuck in it. And blood trickled out of that Eye—lifeless blood, of which I wished to be free.

EPILOGUE

I was able to muster enough strength to reach the village of Turchynka, the same Turchynka that had been ravaged by Tartars. Here I was laid up with swamp fever, as the illness was known among the peasants. I shivered. I hallucinated. Each succeeding morning washed most of the phantoms away, and I welcomed three such mornings in Turchynka. Slowly I regained my senses. The peasant who took me in out of Christian compassion was very surprised to hear that I had crossed the swamp alone, with no guide, and said simply that God had preserved me.

Barely recovered, I set out for Zhytomyr. I walked the route not in three days, as we had before, but in a full five—I had little strength. When I counted all the days that had passed, I was surprised to note that an astonishingly small number of days had passed since we undertook our journey: three days of travel to Turchynka, two days crossing the swamp, and two days on the island. So with my fellow travelers Sozont and Pavlo we had spent only a week journeying together. It had seemed to me that long years had passed. My return journey was longer: it took me two days to cross the swamp, I was laid up in Turchynka for four days, I took five days to reach Zhytomyr—four I walked and a fifth was spent at Father Ivan's in Cherniakhiv, at whose place we had also stopped earlier. There I was talked into resting a bit. All together I had spent eighteen days on my journey. In Cherniakhiv I briefly recounted to Father Ivan what had transpired and he was horrified. I asked to confess my sins to him, and he granted absolution, saying that I had not sinned. I believe that was not so: at the time Sozont and I embarked upon our return across the Eye of the Abyss, it behooved me to insist that I walk behind the stretcher. Perhaps in that way, I would have been able to save Sozont. Recounting to Father Ivan what had happened to us, I laid out only credible facts, not touching upon Sozont's conjectures or undertaking a more detailed description, or expressing my own surmises, or blaming anyone. So I said that the Eye of the Abyss had swallowed Kuzma and Sozont and Pavlo had been bitten by a viper. But Father Ivan, in all his simplicity, after lending an attentive ear, asked me anyway: "Was there no ill will by anyone in all of this?"

"I fear to judge, Father," I said, "lest I fall into greater sin. Besides, I must still studiously reflect upon it all."

Both Father Ivan and his plump wife were determined to capture and butcher a goose for me, but I dissuaded them, explaining that I was quite exhausted and that lately I had been eating only small morsels of food: rich food might harm me. On reflection, Father Ivan agreed, though his lads were ready for the chase. Thus, on that day I was given milk to drink, honey, bread, and light foods to eat. I was sufficiently fortified and the road from Cherniakhiv to Zhytomyr was easier to endure. Father Ivan was so

amiable that along with his lads he accompanied me to the edge of town. Parting, he embraced me and said: “May the Lord protect you! I always thought Mykyta was a frivolous man!”

I related what had happened face to face for a second time to Father Hryhorii in Zhytomyr, this time copiously, not concealing Sozont’s suspicions and conjectures. That is to say, I recounted what the deacon had willed me to remember—Sozont’s mental manuscript, which I had carried in my mind, but not offering any of my own suppositions this time either.

Father Hryhorii said that he needed to reflect thoroughly about what he had heard and dismissed me to regain my strength. It turned out that the abbot, not waiting for my return (“Why?” I wondered in my thoughts), had summoned his pupil Petro to Zhytomyr, either for a trial or to assist me in scribing the Zhytomyr Gospel. Petro had already begun working (“Did Father Hryhorii expect that I might not return,” I asked myself, “or had he lost all faith in my skill?”). The abbot seemed to have overheard my thoughts, for he said that if I wish, I could design the Zhytomyr Gospel, but to give thought also to my successors. My considerable training and artistry were not to remain only mine, but must be handed down to apprentices, to live on through time.

I wanted to look at the pupil Petro’s work right away, but a fainting spell suddenly overtook me—I had still not rested from the road. The abbot sent me away to sleep soundly, to regain my strength, that is to say, I was entirely free until my senses were restored. Meantime, he would carefully reflect on what I had recounted—there was abundant time and now I did not have to hurry anywhere. He helped me get to my cell, summoning a novice to assist as well, for it became apparent that I could not walk unaided. They led me, holding me under my arms and put me to bed. At once I sank into the dark abyss of sleep. I slept so soundly that I dreamed no dreams, as if I had vanished off this earth. I slept thus two nights and two days. I awoke toward evening. Golden evening light filled my lodging.

The abbot was sitting next to my bed. He smiled joyfully when I opened my eyes.

“You are finally awake,” he said. “I had begun to worry about you.”

And he gave me a refreshing herb to drink. It helped. It cleared the stupor after my long repose. I was able to sit up on my cot.

“Is everything all right?” the abbot inquired.

“Yes, Father,” I replied. “But it seems as though that journey was a difficult, freakish dream.”

“I’ve had time to reflect upon all you related, and here is what I believe: you must execute Deacon Sozont’s testament.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“By recording all that you have seen and experienced to the last detail, concealing nothing. I shall convey that document to the metropolitan, to

confer with him.”

“It would take a long while,” said I. “What about scribing the Gospel?”

“Are you prepared, have you the strength for scribing and painting the Gospel?” Father Hryhorii asked.

“I know not,” I said. “I am wasted and spent. How is the apprentice Petro?”

“I am astonished at Petro’s ability and artistry,” the abbot said. “You could assist him with your advice.”

So it appeared I was being deterred from scribing and painting the Zhytomyr Gospel. I felt no bitterness, however.

“I would like to have a look at Petro’s work,” I said.

“Tomorrow you shall,” the abbot said. “But today, don’t get out of bed. You will be brought food directly.”

Food was brought, and after eating, I sank immediately into slumber again, and when I surfaced from it in the morning, I felt wholly refreshed and rested, though I did feel a mild tremor in my hands and body.

The first thing I did was to go and see Petro’s work. And here again I was stunned: Petro sat in a spacious, brightly lit cell, completely immersed in his work. When he raised his head at the sound of the creaking door, it seemed I was looking at myself in a strange looking glass. For that was me, exactly, but not the I of today, rather the I of the day when I had embarked upon scribing the Peresopnytska Gospel. I had seen this pupil once in Peresopnytsia. He had eagerly observed me at work and assisted me a bit, so he also knew me. Springing to his feet, he rushed out from behind the table and bowed to me, pressing my hand.

“I am so fortunate, Master,” he said, “that you have dropped in on me, unworthy though I am!”

I then looked through his illustrations and proof sheets for the prospective book. They were designed in my style, though his hand was evident, as was his sensibility and way of seeing.

“Do you remember the Peresopnytska Gospel?” I asked.

“How is it possible to forget?” the apprentice said enthusiastically, and his enthusiasm was genuine. “For me, it is the heaven of art!”

“Do not blaspheme!” I cut him off. “Things devised by man are imperfect and insignificant.”

“Forgive me, Master!” Pavlo bowed meekly. “I wanted to say that for me your work is an example of perfection and I do not say this as flattery. I wish to achieve your mastery at least in small measure.”

“That is what is wrong!” I said. “By imitation you will not attain a high standard, but will reach only a low one. The pupil who does not aspire to surpass his master is a poor pupil.”

“Is it possible to surpass the Peresopnytska Gospel in artistry?” the

pupil asked, moving only his lips.

“Everything can be surpassed,” I said, “for man, as I have said, does not know perfection. But to reach heights, be yourself, and not somebody’s copy.”

“I have thought about this,” Petro said. “But without superior exemplars, one cannot form oneself.”

“You speak well,” I said. “But do not extol those models as heaven. Models are not to be exalted—God is. Follow Him, heed Him, and from models learn not to imitate anything or anyone.”

“About this, too, I have thought,” the pupil said. “But my hand and senses are still fragile. Models are like a supporting staff for me.”

“The sooner you get rid of the supporting staff, the sooner you will stand on your own feet, and the firmer you will stand.”

“I shall do as you say, Master,” he bowed lightly. “At least I have a great desire to do so.”

I gave him a few more recommendations, pointed out defects in his illustrations, in the way he scribed letters, and then I departed from him, satisfied. And not because he had flattered me, but because he had reminded me of my youth so acutely. My conversation with him in fact reminded me of a conversation I had had with my instructor, the great master of calligraphy and drawing Ihnatii, with whom I had studied. And also, because I sensed in this lad power and perseverance, not yet sufficiently evident, but palpable. I knew from Abbot Hryhorii that Petro toiled all day, forgetting to eat and even forgetting his duty at divine office, for which the abbot had reprimanded him more than once, though he did not punish him. Father Hryhorii was a wise and benevolent spiritual father. He knew how to value and support talent, as he had done at one time with me. That is why I believed that under the abbot’s guidance, this youth could develop into an adept artist, and may the Lord aid him in his indefatigable labor. I had always considered myself an unworthy instrument in the hands of God: He sees my sins, and may He forgive them; though one sin, spread widely among men, possessed especially among artisans, I did not possess—envy towards others. I had always considered envy to be a mark of spiritual paltriness. Zoil envied Homer because he was incapable and did not expect to reach his heights; Homer had no basis to envy Zoil.

At once I went to Abbot Hryhorii and shared my thoughts about Petro. I said that I was resigning from scribing the Zhytomyr Gospel, for I was not ready to work, and the matter cannot wait. So I agreed to execute another duty—to record everything I had experienced along the journey and what Deacon Sozont had deposited in my mind. But I had two requests of the abbot: before embarking upon this not insignificant piece of work, to allow me, after adequate rest and after my strength was restored, to go to Peresopnytsia. Ten years had passed since I completed the Gospel, and my

soul ached to see it once more. The reason was quite simple, I told Abbot Hryhorii: every artist is afflicted with exaggerated estimations of his creations and often is unable to evaluate himself accordingly and dispassionately; thus he falls into the sin of arrogance, having no basis for that. Hence, an artist needs to examine himself from time to time in all modesty, for if something dishonorable has been created and the deficient is elevated to eminence, he deserves pity; when he becomes persuaded that his work is imperfect, his spirit will be fortified. Before embarking on my own work, my spirit needs to be fortified. If I feel that the labor into which I had invested all of myself and into which I had expended all my energy and strength is undeserving, I should be excused from my duty: I shall embark on sacred indolence, repent my arrogance before the Lord and end my dishonorable life in prayer.

“Go, my son,” Father Hryhorii said, “and may the Lord bless you. I expect you will return with your spirit restored. But do not fall into useless self-degradation, which can be worse than arrogance.”

“May the Lord’s will and not yours prevail,” I stated.

And I went to Peresopnytsia. I cannot say this journey was easy for me. I was still weak and so I did not hasten. Fortunately, I came across a caravan driving steers to Poland, and I joined them—I continued on in a carriage.

Princess Kateryna Chartoryska greeted me graciously, saying that my Gospel’s fame had spread throughout the land. Distinguished nobility came to see it, and that is why she had taken the book out of the monastery to hold it temporarily. Besides, a trained calligrapher and illustrator was working for her, copying it for one of her kin.

I met the copyist—he was Father Dymytrii, a serious and able man. I was, incidentally, briefly acquainted with him earlier. His particular skill was his great ability to accurately imitate what had been scribed and painted by others, but he was entirely incapable of creating anything of his own.

And so, the moment had come to stand face to face with my offspring. Slowly, attentively, I leafed through the book page by page, examining and evaluating myself; attempting to view my work through the eyes of a stranger, and a disinterested spirit. What I saw astonished me. What is more, it gladdened me, saddening me just a bit. There were insignificant faults that I could observe, though in general, the work was worthy. This was what gladdened me. Something other saddened me: I saw and sensed, in fact, that I would never effect anything better, finer, more perfect. I would, that is, be unable to muster enough energy for it to burst in such a flood of colors, lines, and ornaments. I would never again scribe such letters, each possessing inconceivable beauty and refinement. There were moments when I could not believe that this marvel in front of me was an achievement of my hands; indeed, it was not I who had created it—I was an instrument in the

Lord's hands. Thus, sitting by a window flooded generously with sunlight, I suddenly heard the voice of Mykyta, hoarse but powerful, full of inner conviction and acrimony: "Your sin lies in that you love the beauty of the world, serving that mammon; the beauty of the world is one of the Devil's most favored demons: and though you scribed Scriptures, it was the Devil lighting your candle, not God. Holy Scriptures do not need calligraphy, splendid illustrations, and ornaments. It is grand and fine in its content, and that suffices!"

Listening to that voice, I gazed at this remarkable achievement of my hands. And the voice faded and faded and without completing the accusation, it failed in mid-word and then vanished.

And then I heard Sozont's voice saying: "The abyss forms when man stops seeing white as white and black as black, and instead names white black, and black white; love is labeled hate, and hate love: that is, when man dishonors the Lord's commandments, substituting them with this own. That is when blasphemy and profanity set in. As you die, do not wish for the world, with its beauty and its creatures, to perish—pray for the blind, those bearing night within them, to cross over into day, that is, to mature into loving kindness. Believe that earth's beauty is God's image in it, and freakishness is the background against which God is perceived, and that the fleetingness of beauty is the background against which eternity is discovered."

I sat, rigid. Those words echoed clearly, distinctly and wholly opposite to each other, Mykyta's words and Sozont's words, and I could not place my pebble's weight on either one or the other plate of the scale. But again my eyes fell upon the Peresopnytska Gospel, and I whispered: "Whoever is darkness, may he be darkness, whoever is light, may he be light. Nocturnal birds have no desire to fly in daylight, the fowl of light sleep when darkness falls. For the nocturnal bird, the moon is its sun, and for the bird of day, it is the sun, not the moon. Day would be indistinguishable without night, and the other way around. All is strangely interconnected in an odd dependency, each illuminating and overshadowing the other. In this lies not the abyss but the truth, though man's reason cannot reach the bottom of that truth. At the bottom lies the mystery of God, and it is unknowable."

I felt stronger in spirit. It was not a useless thing I had created—it was indispensable for goodness. That is why Father Dymytrii was copying it, and apprentice Petro was inspired by it, and refreshed by it, and was producing the feat of his life. Which meant that the remains of my achievement were nourishing a newly-roused bud.

Here is how Sozont had expressed it: "Know that the loving kindness you effected in the world is that burgeoning shoot sprouting out of decaying matter into a future bud and that your mortality is darkness, evil, and non-love. Know that mortality must be relinquished, although without it a germ

cannot sprout. Your mortality is God's creation, as is the world."

The power of those words was confirmed for me as I reviewed the Peresopnytska Gospel.

I had nothing more to do in Peresopnytsia and so I returned to Zhytomyr. Afterwards I secluded myself from the world for many months, writing this book. But before that, I asked Father Hryhorii's permission to write it not in simple entries, but artistically, with illustrations and ornaments. So that I wrote each section of it as a draft copy, and later copied it calligraphically, coloring it. And the flame of creation rekindled in me: I not only wrote this Gospel of the new day but painted it with inspiration. In it I depicted the Eye of the Abyss that I had seen on Mykyta's island. I included my fellow travelers, Mykyta with his disciples, Marta, Musii the dwarf, the crippled and freakish. Here too was the imaginary beast that had supposedly lived in the lake, devouring the sacrifices cast to it; there were birch trees, aspens in the mud, snakes, outcroppings, clumps of cattails, the hut atop the pole—everything, everything that my eye had seen and that had solidified into an image. I burned with ardor exactly as I had while designing the Peresopnytska Gospel, even though the likenesses, paintings, lines, and ornaments were as dissimilar as if another man had created them.

Apprentice Petro burned with similar ardor as he created the Zhytomyr Gospel.

I visited him at times, and we had long discourses about creativity. Petro showed intelligence and he absorbed my instruction as if imbibing it. In the end, I could no longer label him a pupil—in front of my eyes a genuine master was developing. This was truly a fresh sprout. It really did grow out of my dust. This not only gladdened me, it inspired me in my own work. Not only did he quench his thirst through me but I did likewise through him since he had the advantage of youth over me.

And so I finally wrote my book. And at this time, one clear morning, not yet having awoken completely, I beheld a dream—or a vision. Sozont would have said it was a dream.

And I fancied that I had resolved to heed Symeon, Mykyta's disciple, and returned to the Eye of the Abyss to spend my last days on the island. I had already crossed the swamp and was again glimpsing the peculiar, puzzling broad surface of the lake, or pool, or eye, immersed in a flood of mud. But when I groped for the suspended track that crosses it, I could not find the pegs that held it. So I decided to swim across the lake, and since I was afraid that it would swallow me as it had my fellow travelers, I cut a bunch of dry cattails, tying two bundles to my body, as the Tartars did when traversing rivers: and thus I swam, the bundles keeping me afloat. I was approaching the dark circle in the center of the Eye of the Abyss when blind Teodoryt stepped out onto the curving shore. He wore the same habit, though it was torn and worn out, through which his body shone. It was

much like the one Kuzma had worn. He turned his blind eyes towards me and seemed to sniff. He was tense and nettled.

“Who is swimming there?” he shouted in trepidation.

“Brother Teodoryt, it is I,” I responded. “Mykhailo Vasylevych, who visited you last summer.”

I noticed, for I was close now, that Teodoryt’s tenseness and anticipation had vanished—as if he had expected something else.

“It is not me whom you awaited, Brother?” I asked, approaching shore.

“Not you,” Teodoryt said. “Though I am glad for any visitor.”

“Why did you say: ‘I am glad, not we are glad?’”

“For I am the only one here,” said Teodoryt dejectedly.

“And St. Mykyta?” I asked, clambering out of the water and untying the bundles of cattails.

“St. Mykyta has died,” answered Teodoryt. “If you wish, I will describe how it happened.”

“I am glad to listen,” I said, catching my breath. For that, I stooped in the grass.

“He died when Symeon and Marta left the island. Actually, Symeon abandoned it and Marta set off after him. For some reason, he had feared you, Brother Mykhailo.”

“Was he afraid that I had not perished in the swamp and would reach land?”

“You know of it?” Teodoryt asked, smiling sadly. “He did not expect you to return. He feared his tricks would become known. Several days later Heorhii and Nykyfor set off after him, for they were not Mykyta’s disciples but Symeon’s. Ievahrii, Antonii, and I were Mykyta’s. But Ievahrii did not stay long with us and left as well.”

“Is that when Mykyta died?” I asked.

“Has someone told you the story already?” Teodoryt asked.

“No, Brother,” I said. “But I knew that Mykyta was already very ill last summer.”

“But no one knew of that!” Teodoryt exclaimed.

“He showed us his body covered with abscesses,” I said, “the night of Pentecost, when he came down.”

“One day, on Friday, the rooster crowed in the morning to rouse us but it did not crow for the sermon.”

“Because Mykyta was the rooster,” I said.

“You know that, too?” Teodoryt shuddered.

“Sozont had deduced it and had told me.”

“Symeon greatly feared your Sozont. He thought he was sent here to spy.”

“I know,” I sighed. “That is why the Eye of the Abyss swallowed him. Continue.”

“The crippled and freakish assembled,” Teodoryt recounted, “as did Antonii and I, but Mykyta’s voice did not sound and the curtains were not opened. Then I climbed up the pole. But it was quiet there. ‘Father, bless us,’ I said, ‘people are waiting below.’ He did not answer. And again I said: ‘Why, Father, do you not answer your child?’ He was silent. A wild thought flashed through my mind. Being sinful, I thought the righteous one had fled the island as his spineless disciples had. I groped around and came across the blessed one. He stood, as if in prayer, his arms folded across his chest. I was glad he was standing, for I thought if he is standing he must be alive. And I said: ‘Have I offended you, Father?’ He was silent. Then I said: ‘At least extend your hand—let me kiss it.’ But there was no answer. And I thought: could it be that he has departed to the Lord? I inclined an ear: there was no breath and a dense odor of decay emanated from him, though that should not have been, for at morningtide he was still crowing like a rooster. Then I realized that he had reposed in the Lord. So I laid down his body, which had been propped up against the pole, and wept bitterly. This, Brother Mykhailo, is how he departed.”

“Was he buried or cast into the Eye of the Abyss?” I inquired.

“You see! That you do not know yet. We buried him next to his mother.”

“Sozont doubted that there had been a mother.”

“Why did he doubt?”

“For the story about the mother, like all the other stories about his life, were taken from the Life of Symeon the Pole-sitter of yore.”

“I do not know,” Teodoryt stated. “Being blind, I did not see his mother, but everyone said she existed, died, and is buried here.”

“What happened next?” I asked.

“Afterwards, the crippled and freakish left the island. Antonii guided them across the Eye of the Abyss and across the swamp. He told me to go, too, but I decided to stay.”

“Why did you decide to stay?” I asked, feeling sadness, too.

“I expect Marta to return here.”

“Why do you expect that?”

“Symeon was brutal and merciless towards her. I told her: when you recover your senses, come back. I shall wait for you.”

“What would happen then?”

“Then I would build a home here, and we would live in love and harmony.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes!” Teodoryt replied succinctly.

“Being blind, how would you be able to build a home?” I asked sorrowfully.

“I would do the building, while she, as the one who could see, would

direct me.”

“Do you know that the track across the Eye of the Abyss is broken off?”

“Yes. Antonii told me he would disconnect it.”

“What would you eat here?”

“Oh, I would think of something. I own fishing tackle, which I have set up on the other side of the island. I have dug a well, and though the water stinks of mud, it is potable. We had grain—I planted it in spring. Orach and mushrooms grow here.”

“And in winter what would you eat?”

“Winters I would trek to the villages for alms, bringing them for her, the children. We have lived here for a number of years—we have learned what to do.”

“And how would Marta be able to cross to you without the path, Teodoryt?”

“This, too, I have considered,” he said cheerfully, “I am building a boat—do you want to see?”

And he escorted me into the thicket. There stood a bulky object, a trough or barrel gouged out of the trunk of an old pine tree.

“It’ll roll over,” I said.

“I will tie sheaves of cattails to the side, and it won’t roll over,” Teodoryt stated proudly. And then abruptly he asked, “Does it look like Noah’s ark?”

“Who knows what Noah’s ark was like,” I answered evasively.

“I care only that the vessel be able to carry the two of us, her and me,” Teodoryt said.

“And if she does not wish to come here? How long will you wait?”

“As long as I have hope,” said Teodoryt evenly. “I believe she will come. Where can she go in that accursed world?”

“Why are you cursing the world, without having learned enough about it?” I asked. “Perhaps it is better to return to it?”

“No,” Teodoryt declared calmly. “I know the world, and have found nothing good in it. That is why I shall not return to it. And if I did, I would never be able to find Marta in it, and she would not know where I am. This way, I have hope.”

“You could wait for her here and return to the world together. You could build a house among people—it is easier to live collectively.”

“To the world of enticements and blunders? No! I wish to be a *new Adam*, to settle on uninhabited land, to bring forth *new men*. Not Abel and Cain, who introduced discord, but beneficent semen.”

“Fine,” I said. “Your intent to build a home and to establish a benevolent family is charming to me. You will at the same time bring life into this dead place. And if you stop hoping?”

“For that, too, I have an answer,” Teodoryt smiled. “Then I will ascend Mykyta’s pole and await disciples, praying to God and mortifying my loathsome body. And once disciples arrive, people will visit here with their offerings. But I will not do as Symeon did—the Lord would punish me.”

And he straightened out proudly in front of me, handsome as an angel, though with dead eyes and an inert face. He stood, glowing in the sun, as if hewn out of a golden-barked pine tree, self-assured and therefore lifeless.

“If you wish,” his lips moved grandly, “and since you are already here, let us leave Marta be. You can become my first disciple.”

And he stretched his hand out towards me, pointing pompously...

I awoke. Actually, I emerged from the vision. I do not know whether it was real or if on that island near the Eye of the Abyss everything had transpired as I fancied. Nor do I know whether this was a voice or summons for me, but I had no desire to embark for that island. Then I thought, perhaps I should take advantage of the vision’s suggestion and become Teodoryt’s disciple, but in something other: to find somewhere in the world a suitable location and build a home for myself, awaiting the moment when a creature dear to me would cross the threshold. She must be wandering somewhere, like me, for every person, they say, has a pair. And though I firmly did not wish it, this idea captivated me in its own way.

I shut my eyes, hoping to envision my own home. Instead, I beheld the Peresopnytska Gospel. Once again, slowly, admiring each page, I leafed through it, page after page, in my mind. And my soul was at peace. The kind of peace that comes when you awaken in a room awash in sunlight and you suddenly realize that each newborn day is a gift from God.

I opened my eyes. My cell was completely flooded with brilliant morning sunlight.

Translated by Olha Rudakevych

Original publication: Valerii Shevchuk, *Oko pryvy*, Kyiv: Ukrains'kyi pysmennyk, 1996, pp. 82–196. The first half of this novel appeared in the previous issue of *Ukrainian Literature*.

