

Legend of Rada and Alexey

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This legend is about the aspiration of the soul to God and about what hinders and what helps on the spiritual Path.

The heroes of this story are not fictional. Rather here is described the true story of the lives of the spiritual Devotees — Rada and Alexey, Who have attained the Divinity. The story of Their spiritual growth and Their Service to God was told by Them.

The written methods of spiritual work, representing the tradition of *hesychasm*, can be successfully used in our time.

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Part one: Alexey

Chapter One: The Exile

The young Orthodox priest Alexey rode through a snowstorm in a sleigh towards the new place of his ministry, shielding himself from the wind and frost by a not too suitable for this canvas, which was once used for covering hay. Some of that hay, left in the sleigh, was very helpful, protecting Alexey from the fierce cold.

A man who had agreed to take Alexey to a village where he was to live and serve from now on from time to time threw scattered curses against the weather and heated himself with moonshine.

A small village at the foothills of Urals, where Alexey was sent, was for him a sort of place of exile.

... But so recently Moscow life was in the very center of the events taking place in the country; studying in the Spassky Monastery, and then in the Greco-Latin Academy of Semyon Polotsky, just created on the model of European universities. Then — ordination in the presence of priests close to the royal court... This promised a bright future...

... And now — everything had collapsed!

At first, his guardian educator died — the honest and wise man. He led all the property affairs of Alexey. And Alexey — an orphan from a noble and rich family — was free from all the fuss of managing estates.

Alexey directed all his aspirations only to the spiritual. He chose for himself the way of monastic service to God — because from childhood he had dreams and intentions only about this.

After the death of the guardian, without thinking twice, Alexey handed over all his property and money — to the church and then took monastic vows. After all, “it is difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven”¹. And very soon after that — everything happened: disgrace, exile...

It was painful for Alexey to remember this... After all, only considerable money and the lands that had belonged to him before — were very strongly needed by those who ordered the removal of his presence from Moscow... Each of them hastened to appropriate as much of this earthly good as possible...

And also — a young and passionate preacher for the transfiguration of spiritual life was disliked...

And now, everything has collapsed: all his dreams of transforming church life, all thoughts of doing good deeds to the glory of God at large, now so humiliated...

... Now he has become one of those who will never be able to change anything in the life of the church and the country as a whole...

¹ Matt 19:23.

... But it seemed... The bitter thoughts about his sad fate — like a gray fog — whirled in Alexey's head:

“Now I'm nobody... I'm like a snowflake in this blizzard... And what's the difference: will it melt now — or freeze in a snowdrift and wait for its end in spring?...”

“Maybe to stay in some county town? To start another life? And no one will ever know: where I disappeared, what became of me?”

“... But why? There is no reason!... Because not to that the soul rushed! After all, by its deep aspiration, I chose the monastic path!”

“Or, perhaps, God needs my bitter fate for some reason?”

“How many questions! And no answers!...”

From time to time Alexey mentally returned to the last weeks of his metropolitan life, remembered fiery speeches he spoke before many of his friends and mentors. It seemed to him that his words ignited other people's love for God and the desire to transform the spiritual life countrywide. Alexey was sure that he knew how it could and should be done! If only those, who rule the life of the church, could hear it, so that they will tell the king about this...

And that's — they heard...

... He recalled the last conversation with the one who announced to him the expulsion from Moscow. The mocking look on the speaker's face, his arrogant tone of the “winner” in this life, always knowing on which side to stand in the intrigues of the courtiers — for him both to survive and advance...

“Now you'll go,” — he said, — “to get liberation from your heretical thoughts and repent! That's

— the elder Nicholas also tried to reform everyone, wanted ‘to expel traders from the temples’... Nothing happened! He has come to reason! Even one word from him now is not heard each year...”

“What’s wrong in non-covetousness, if that is what Jesus commanded?”

“So we worry not about our own wealth! But about the richness of church! And you — blame! And it’s — a sin!”

... Alexey really caught himself on condemning thoughts, because he often saw the rich decor of the dwelling of the speaker, saw him eating food during fasts in great abundance: “with the blessing and for the correction of the weakness of the body”. Only what kind of infirmity it is? The abdomen is round, the cheeks are glossy with fat...

“Am I condemning? Was I offended?”

... “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who offend you and persecute you!”²

Alexey tried to go into prayer.

The wind died down, the snowfall was over, everything began to sparkle in the light of the sun that had struggled out from behind the clouds.

Beauty and silence are snowy!

... The driver stopped the sleigh:

“There’s no more road, walk on foot!”

“How is it no?”

“No and was not! In the summer here is a path, but now — so go!”

“But where is the village?”

² Matt 5:44-45.

“And the village is not! All the people have long been relocated to the iron-ore plant. There are only a few houses left. Those, who are unfit for work in mines and smelting furnaces, are the only ones who live out their days here.”

... The driver waved his hand towards the crooked and blackened huts that were visible in the distance.

Then he turned to the other side and pointed out the direction in which Alexey was to go:

“Do you see the cross over the treetops? So go to it! There — the skit. And the elder Nicholas lives there.”

... Alexey took the bag with his modest belongings, fitted it to his back and walked in the direction of that cross.

Chapter Two: Elder Nicholas

Alexey walked knee-deep and at times waist-deep in the snow. He hardly reached the hermitage. It was already dark.

He knocked on the door of a small hut where the light of a candle could be seen in a tiny window:

“Come in! Open!”

... Alexey entered, crossed himself before the only icon in the front corner, bowed.

... He knew a little about the elder Nicholas; only that he was from non-possessors. For public utterances, calling for the ethical purity of the servants of the church, to simplicity in life and decor, — he was exiled here many years ago.

Then the elder took a vow of silence for ten years — and kept it.

Through that — the attitude towards him has changed, and the holiness of him already was talked about very much.

Alexey was sent to him ostensibly to help in the elder's weakness. And — for training Alexey to live in silence.

... Alexey looked around. In the dim light of the candle, the interior looked small and almost empty. A table, a chair, a wide bench... There is not even a bed.

He looked with attention at elder Nicholas — and suddenly... calmed down! So much kindness, affection, and peace were in the eyes of the elder! Alexey was embraced and filled with this gentle calm!

And despair due to the sorrow of his present fate, which squeezed like a vise and was weighing him to the ground — suddenly let Alexey go.

... The elder Nicholas was tall. It was evident that in the past his body was very powerful. But years did not break the soul, did not bend his back!

Gray beard framed his face filled with kindness. Each wrinkle on the face was like a shining ray of love.

Silence and kindness enlivened the space around his body.

... In the evening they had a talk:

“And why did they send you here, sonny?”

“For freethinking...”

“Clear.”

“Have you lived here alone for a long time?”

“For a long time... — yes. But I'm not the only one here! I live with God!”

* * *

So for Alexey came a new era in his life.

Gradually, Alexey told the elder Nicholas everything about himself: about how he grew up and was raised, how he chose the spiritual Path as the only right way for him.

Since childhood, Alexey had not only a zeal for prayers, but he aspired to cognition of God. He read a lot, had learned Latin and Greek. And in these languages, he read the spiritual books in the original.

However, even those books only encouraged the further search: they did not give answers to questions, which became more and more...

He told his dreams about striving to reach those states of the soul that the closest disciples of Jesus had found: to hear the Voice of God, to see God's Light, to fully understand the Will of God!

Alexey said that he was reproached for pride, wisecracking, which are "from the devil"! They offered him to repent and live "like others".

Alexey then repented a lot, carefully peering at himself as the soul.

But he could not live not seeking Truth, did not want and could not live "like others".

Alexey said a lot about his understanding of Christian life. He, first, studied diligently the writings of the first Christian communities. And how different was the life of the first Christians in those communities — from that which now is led by people who call themselves Christians!

He was trying to understand: why is everything so hard and gloomy — in the organization of the pre-

sent spiritual life in the Russian state?! And — is it possible to change something? And — how to change?

Elder Nicholas listened to him in silence, letting out everything that had ripened in Alexey...

Alexey also told about what caused him to be here: that his suggestions on transforming life in the church resulted in him being sent away from Moscow — so as not to disturb people's minds with his ideas, so as not to start new troubles in church life!

... He told all to the elder Nicholas. He also revealed bitter thoughts and torments about ignorance of the present — how and why to live further?

* * *

Elder Nicholas spoke rarely. They ate in silence and spent time in prayers and simple usual matters, necessary for life.

Alexey did his best to devote as much time as possible to prayers. But there was not for him that quiet joy, with which the elder Nicholas was always replete.

And little by little, he began to ask questions about faith, about prayers, about understanding monastic life.

Each such conversation with elder Nicholas opened for Alexey the new vision of his own life before God and His Help.

And the elder Nicholas not only consoled Alexey but could also shame:

“Strong pride, sonny, is still in you! Many monks consider monastic seclusion in the hermitage — as the great happiness! And you — call it an exile! Spiritual seekers search for it! God sent such a gift into your fate! And you — are grumbling!”

“But it’s not about myself...”

“If it were not for yourself, then you would not grumble at fate!

“If you live here now — then will be less God near you than in Moscow?”

“You yourself — namely voluntarily — accepted monasticism! And such a hermitage — you must esteem with joy! Through that — many prophets and hermits had found the holiness!

“You are not thankful for God’s Help and His Care about you! You do not see them!

“You here comprehend, sonny:

“Humility — heals the soul! Humility — soothes thoughts!

“While in the mind, chaos reigns, and thoughts seem to struggle among themselves for capturing your emotions and desires — hesychia, inner silence, — is like an unattainable shore!

“But into the calm of the spiritual heart, onto the other side of vanity and prideful thoughts — only the path of humility and the heart love leads!

“Humility — cleans the soul, fasting — heals the body!

“And efforts in the affairs — both earthly and spiritual — strengthen the will of man!

“Very much depends on the personal aspiration: all that, which happens to man, will go for the benefit of the soul — or to the detriment!

“Here — look: it happens that people suffer from hunger, they even get sick. But when one strictly observes a fast due to one’s own free will and for God, — something else happens: purification and health for both the body and the soul!

“And despondency — worse than any disease destroys a person’s life, as if rust eats away the soul!

“Soon the world’s fuss will leave you — and the heart will be filled with warmth! But you for this must leave the vanity of thoughts!”

“But how?”

“On God, not on your own problems and sorrows, you must direct your thoughts!

“That is the first small step!

“If thoughts are directed to God, then from God help comes!

“Through that — cleansing of mind comes up!

“If you start thinking about the sorrows of your own or about the bustle of the world — you must reject them and learn to think about God!

“And then — you will learn how to fill the soul with love and gratitude to God for everything!

“Ability to voluntarily subordinate yourself to the Will of God — this is the freedom that is obtained in the monastic life!

“There are deeds which are done for the body. And there are the labors of the soul.

“And these labors are not idle, they are not vain hot thoughts about something sublime!

“We live before God!

“Before Him is opened — in every moment — everything that happens in us!

“And it is possible to live rightly — under any external conditions! Our sins result not because of

what is happening around us, but especially from our own vices that are inside!

“For example, it is quite possible to not allow in yourself sinful thoughts, empty talk, melancholy, and idleness!

“Prayers do not help in this — when only the words are said over and over again. Prayer is to become a living one! And it comes to life — in the spiritual heart, right here!”

... Elder Nicholas touched with his hand Alexey’s chest — so that for a brief time Alexey’s breath was caught. And Alexey saw with his inner gaze in his chest — light and space! But he could not keep it...

The elder continued:

“It may be if you only pronounce the name *Jesus* in the silence of the spiritual heart — it will be more than all prayers!

“You learn to pray — in your heart! Like if your mouth is located in the chest! And — like a candle in the spiritual heart is lit! Every word — let it sound from the heart! Then — the warmth in the heart will appear soon, the grace of God will begin to be felt, the presence of Him will become visible!”

Chapter Three: In Humility, the Soul Is Healed

Time passed, and the ordinary life of Alexey did not seem to have anything meaningful... Day after day passed...

Alexey used to, but still craved for more in the feat of monastic life.

Once he asked the elder:

“Why do we not see Jesus? Why cannot we hear His words?”

“We apparently do not deserve it yet... When it’s necessary, the Lord says that He will be heard by the deaf too!

“Jesus said that ‘if two gather in My Name, then I am among them’. You do not believe Jesus? Do you not believe that He is now with us here? And — that He hears every word?”

“I believe, but...”

“Weak is your faith so far!... You — work on yourself-soul! And the result — belongs to God!”

“What is needed for hands to not fall and continue the efforts?”

“Faith, hope, love!

“The most important thing is not to receive a rank in the hierarchy of the church... But — from God — we must strive to get the rank of purity and approach to Him!

“And when that time will come — that depends on His Grace!”

“What do you think: why has God placed us here?”

“I don’t know that... But if we obey the Will of the Lord, then maybe we’ll find out about it!”

“But how to know it, if we do not hear the Voice of God? And how to pray — to receive an answer?”

“God understands everything, and He hears and sees! Don’t be afraid to tell Him! You by our usual words can tell Him about your love for Him!

“Prayers that we now repeat someone once said the first time from the heart... And then those prayers were written down and are repeated...”

“The main thing is that words should come from the heart!

“Pray for all people!...”

“But do these prayers really help them?”

“It was not for nothing you were exiled here!... You surely would embarrass all minds with your questions! Faith in you is not enough, there are many doubts!...”

“Let’s go watering the garden, otherwise you will grumble in winter that God did not send us food!”

*** * ***

Alexey was overcome by longing for God. He was now eager — through prayers zealous and persistent — to reach sublime states. Work on the household — he considered as an annoying hindrance.

But he had to work a lot on the farm. All their survival was dependent on their simple work.

Alexey was not used to rural work. He lived from childhood in a rich house, surrounded by servants who performed all the simple economic work. He was not lazy, and he was always ready to work with zeal. But for him, the work was — in studying, in reading books, in prayers, and not digging ground and chopping wood...

And here — so much time and effort he needed to spent on “dirty” work, and not in an elevated state to pronounce prayers!

And this was very saddening for Alexey. But, the more he was sad, the more orders elder Nicholas gave him. Even the repair of the temple, which was dilapidated, he started, although people had not entered it at all for a long time...

Alexey did not grumble, tried in everything, obeyed the elder, but he was often subject to discouragement...

Unable to withstand, one day he asked the question:

“How can we approach God, if we dig the earth like peasants, if we like carpenters repair the temple?...”

The elder Nicholas answered with a soft smile:

“They say that Jesus also was trained in carpentry...”

After a pause, he added:

“God can be felt not only by preaching from the pulpit the words of God to parishioners. You can feel Him — when digging a garden, if being with Him in your heart!

“You can fulfill this way any other work!

“You understand: self-pity is destructive!... You seem to tie yourself to the sin of despondency! From self-pity — you lose strength, and you cannot feel the joy of God! But those forces could be sent both to love for God, and the righteous deeds of work!

“I went through it myself sometime...”

“Do you want me to tell you how God taught me humility?”

... Alexey happily nodded. They sat down on the bench, which was recently repaired. The elder began to speak — and in his eyes the sparkle of mirth lighted up, which Alexey did not often see in him:

“Monastic obedience can teach a lot!

“It teaches to humble pride and fulfill the will of another person. It can be done with a help of, for example, an elder — instead of one’s own will.

“Who has learned this, having obtained subdued pride and subordinated mind, this one can take God’s Will — in exchange for one’s own will!

“If the elder is holy or, at least, reasonable, then great is the benefit!

“If the mentor is not wise, but only tyrants the novice, flaunting his authority, — even in these conditions obedience can teach a lot.”

... Elder Nicholas smiled in his memories:

“There was with me such a test from the Lord, through which I began to obtain humility.

“My instructor edified me, giving the assignments, contradicting common sense! He was the first, to whom I was assigned as a monk to serve his needs.

“Then, I just came to the monastery, and everything was new for me. And the books of the wise, I did not read much yet...

“And my ‘mentor’, like a man who has lost his mind, sprinkled his spittle in anger at me, often attacked with shouts, or even beat if I tried to say a word of disagreement... He made me do work completely senseless...

“At first, I was all burned with outrage... But what to do — I did not know... Not to obey — I was

afraid, because I could be exiled for that from the monastery. And such exile seemed to me more terrible than death, because I thought that by this I would be exiled forever also from God.

“And to understand, how to fulfill necessary for nobody work, spending time and effort in it — instead of bringing benefit to the brethren and the monastery, or to spend the time in prayer, — I could not...

“I did that work through overcoming the indignation of the mind and the fatigue of the flesh...

“Now it’s ridiculous for me to recall... But then — it was hard!

“Telling you this story, I do not mean that — in humility — it’s necessary to do stupid jobs! Because by adherence to foolish tasks according to the will of some religious leaders, who order to obey them, — a lot of evil in this world is committed. Distinction — it is necessary! Otherwise, there are those who ‘have left their will’, fanatics, who can kill ‘for faith’, burn in bonfires... And in that they see their spiritual feats...

“You are not such insane, but you are lacking humility!

“I had to understand all this for a long time...

“Then — the wise elder had appeared in the monastery who freed me from that tutor. Then I began to learn to feel heat in the heart, to immerse the mind into heart. He taught me how to aspire to God by soul and thoughts, how — in our humility — God can change everything that comes into our lives. Because, if God sees humility, not pride, — then the Grace of God is revealed!³

³ James 4:6 (the note of the corrector).

“But in monastic life, even when the elder is intelligent, it is not always that the novice gets pleasure by what happens... When you prevail over reluctance and restraint in work on the household, then the work will give you joy! And prayer will be to help, will fill with strength!”

... For sure! The more Alexey understood instructions of his elder, the easier everything became. Sometimes — as if heart was singing when he was sawing and planning boards for church repair, or when he was mowing hay, digging the vegetable garden, chopping wood...

And prayers sometimes became different. Like — all the same words, but they — like a song of the soul to God were exalted! And — like God is near! Truly, not always it turned out, but more often the Presence of invisible God enveloped with Love and Peace!

Increasingly, the prayer in the heart — as if became alive!

One winter frosty day, the ringing silence filled the space — and Alexey saw the Shining Light!

What a miracle it was!

The silence had filled with the Presence of Living God! There cannot already be doubted!

But this did not last long. And again, Alexey could not return to this state, no matter how hard he tried.

Alexey told the elder about that.

And the elder Nicholas answered him in reply:

“The Holy Spirit’s wonderful touches — change us, but not immediately and forever...

“For me — it needed ten years of work to experience this. And for you — two years have not

passed, how quiet and warm heart has been cognized!

“And thank the Lord for this Grace!

“A grateful soul easily is in a humble state!

“But for a proud person — humility is mastered hard!

“Thank God for everything! Through that — salvation from pride will come! And humility will be mastered easier!”

Chapter Four: Old Believers

Once in the hermitage, a woman came with three small children. Emaciated, with eyes full of despair and fear, she could hardly stand on her feet in fatigue. She held in her hands one of the babies, tied to her chest with a kerchief. Two other children — a boy and a girl 6-7 years old, themselves clung to her clothes.

Before the elder Nicholas, she fell to her knees, told the children to do the same. They obediently stood next to the mother. The first baby cried feebly, as if already desperate to cry for something. The woman gave this baby to her daughter. The girl habitually took the baby and, rocking, began to say: “Take it easy, calm down, quietly you...”.

The woman raised her eyes full of fear to the elder and said:

“Baptize us into your faith! Save us! Our confessor, father Kalistrat, will burn everyone, and if he does not, the strelets will burn. Save the children: they are innocent!... I am not learned to speak... We

are of the old faith, that of Christ and the Apostles... Forgive me if I say not so... The servants of anti-Christianities came to burn us — as heretics... And our confessor Kalistrat said, that he himself will burn us with his prayers, so that we would not run anymore, but immediately — to the Lord in Heaven... And I went down, not for myself, for children: small ones yet!...”

“Where is your home?”

“Up the river... Half day — out of there we ran...”

The elder suddenly rose abruptly. He came up to Alexey. The voice has changed from the inner tension:

“Do you understand what is happening?”

“Yes...”

“So run, stop the madmen! Run there with all your strength! Christ is with you!”

... The elder blessed Alexey.

Already leaving, Alexey heard again the calm and tender voice of the elder:

“And you wait, dear, catch your breath, get up from your knees! You have nothing to fear, you will be saved!”

* * *

Alexey ran off-road, branches lashed his face, his feet stuck in the sand, then in the marshy soil, the wet underside of the monastic clothes hindered, clung to the branches, got tangled in the legs...

Alexey stopped to catch his breath and tied the underside of the cassock with a rope. But breathing could not be recovered. It seemed that everything was burning inside and bursting outward with a hoarse wheezing, and his heart was beating somewhere in the larynx...

He ran again with the last of his strength...

He prayed Jesus — and ran..., ran..., ran...

... And then he saw a huge column of black smoke behind the turn of the river. The singing of prayers came to Alexey with gusts of wind. Then all this grew into screams of horror and pain... The glow of the flaring rose up to the sky... After — the screams began to subside...

Alexey ran out of the corner and realized that he was late...

Far away on the hill the log-house was burning down, in which, apparently, all were already dead....

The strelets, leaving the village of the Old Believers, set fire to the remaining buildings... Everything was enveloped with smoke...

Alexey fell to his knees and prayed.

Desperation, fatigue, unbearable pain from all this horror!

“Jesus, why do You allow this? How to change all this?”

Alexey climbed the hill.

He stared at the hot ashes for a long time, where people have been burned alive:

“Who set it on fire? Their confessor — theirs..., alive..., women..., little children...? Or strelets-punishers — in execution of the decree? What difference does it make — who?... Some people, believers in Jesus, were doomed to the martyrdom by

others, in Jesus the believers... How is this possible?!”

... Alexey returned to the hermitage when it was already dark. He was staggering with fatigue. From the emptiness of the inner, it was as if he has blinded by the soul... Emptiness and darkness inside... How to live? How to pray?

“I did not have time...,” — he whispered it in a barely audible voice, and maybe there were no words at all, but only his lips, cracked in blood, moved.

But the elder Nicholas understood everything.

He did not become to console. He said with a caress in his voice:

“Wash! Pour over from the bucket, put on clean! Pray and go to sleep!”

Alexey listened.

He poured a bucket of water on the body... It was as if water had burned the body with cold. But after that it seemed to be easier... Then he put on a clean...

He could no longer pray, nor sleep too...

Alexey again went to the elder Nicholas, who was sitting in the courtyard near a small fire. In the only common cell where they before slept, the woman and her children, whom the elder had probably already baptized today, were sleeping.

Alexey sat down beside him.

They were silent for a long time.

Alexey looked at the flames and thought about those who died in the bonfire today...

He tried to imagine himself in their place: “Would I be afraid of death for faith — or not? How to know that — until the hour of death has approached, and I passed this test myself — before God?”

Then, all the same, he could not stand it and started to say:

“I knew before that the Old Believers were baptized forcibly, and that from their settlements they were drove out, and that they could be executed by those who accuse them of heresy... But, like that...”

“You, sonny, do not kill yourself, because you did not have time. There is no fear in the death of bodies... Souls are immortal! It’s scary only for those who doom others to death!

“How many martyrs for the faith in Christ — had accepted death!... Now we are worshiping their holiness!...

“And whether it’s a two-fingered crossing oneself or three-fingers crossing — that’s worldly, so I suppose.

“You already no longer had time when all were crossing with a two-finger crossing. And I — did this...

“This schism had brought to people terrible misfortunes! And many more misfortunes will bring the foolishness and cruelty of human beings, in which God’s Will is interpreted in their own way.”

“And God — why does He allow this?”

“I do not know... Maybe God hopes that people, to whom freedom of will is granted, will become wiser... And — that He not for nothing had sent His Son Jesus to the Earth! Perhaps, the Teaching of Jesus — that people are brothers and sisters to each other, that they can live in love of the Heavenly Father and their neighbors — it not for nothing had been given to people... Perhaps, God is waiting for people, seeing such horrors, to fulfill this Teaching of Jesus...

“Okay, it’s enough about that!

“A lot of blood was spilled and much more will be shed!...”

“So have we to do something?!”

“Many had been executed among those who tried...”

“And I tried, and you, like, also tried...”

“Strelets — they the decree of princess Sophia are performing, and not just because they like this — they are looking for villages of Old Believers in uninhabited forests!...”

“You better think about what papers we should write for Efimia with the children, so as not to be touched more...”

*** * ***

The next morning the elder Nicholas filled Alexey’s shoulder bag with all sorts of provisions. Alexey even watched with some anxiety — how much their bins were emptied, then he as if “jumped to conclusion”, turned away the sinner thoughts and rejoiced at the generosity of elder Nicholas, who did not think about himself and his needs at all...

The elder ordered Alexey to accompany Efimia with the children to the village and to help settle them in some empty house.

There were many such houses there, because people were moved from here to work in mines where iron and copper were mined.

While they were going, Efimia told that she was a widow, that their confessor Kalistrat ordered her

husband to be flogged for his disobedience. And they whipped him to death...

She told it calmly, mundane, without tears.

She explained that in their community all lived in fear.

She told afterward that in another community — her own — where she lived until her marriage, this was not. All with faith “escaped”, it was friendly and well between people... And here, at Calistrat, in the community, everyone was afraid. They were afraid of “antichrist”, “the end of the world”, persecutors for the faith, also to be in the disgrace of the confessor...

And when she was left without her husband, who was called “the devil’s servant”, it had become a terrible life for her and her children. She so suffered from this fear that she decided to run.

And then the strelets came, they read some paper. It turned out to them, wherever you look, death is inevitable... So she decided to change the faith and through this save her children.

Then about the new faith she began to ask with caution:

“Will the Lord forgive that I changed the faith of fathers and grandfathers? Will He have mercy on children?”

... Alexey reassured her as best he could.

... In the village, he helped to choose the evacuated house which was stronger...

Then he said to people, who came out to see what was happening here, that, by God’s Grace, now a widow with children will live here. He said that they would help each other in a Christian way. Then he began to speak more words about Jesus, about His

commandments of kindness... He recalled how he before uttered the fiery speeches...

All listened to him in silence... But suddenly he had seen their looks... — empty and incomprehensible... And he stopped...

He asked them if they needed anything from him.

He wrote two petitions for those who appealed to him for help...

... Going back, he thought about the people living in this village: beggars, illiterate, and there is no place for God in them!... They want only to survive, to pay taxes, and not die of hunger!... Is such a life necessary? And they all want to live with their last strength, clutch at such grievous existence!...

“Help me to understand, Jesus, how can I help them?” — with this request, Alexey went deep in prayer and walked faster to the hermitage.

There, like the light of a candle in front of an icon, it shone smoothly and calmly all around — the soul of the elder Nicholas. Beside him, it was easier for Alexey to endure all life’s trials, as if the little corner of the “promised land” was created around the elder by his calmness and the depth of his unshakable faith in any trials.

Chapter Five: On Faith Indestructible and Faith Destructible

Alexey thought a lot about what he had seen and learned lately. He thought about the schism in the church, about the multiple divergences in beliefs

even among those who were now called “schismatics”, about how the decrees on “eradicating heresies” are written and how they are interpreted and even more terribly hardened by the people endowed with power to execute them, about the weak-willed and thoughtless obedience of some people and about the incomprehensible cruelty of others...

He thought about a person’s willingness to accept death for their faith...

He also thought about how the ongoing persecutions could be stopped: “Is only one faith necessary for all? Is it possible to be so that there will be no hostility and intolerance in the faith among people? And what is faith in general?”

Once Alexey asked the elder Nicholas:

“Why is there so much hostility between people, so much hatred due to faith?

“And what is faith in general?”

“Faith is a great power! This power grows out from the mind — into the soul.

“Who has strong faith — it’s easy for such man to live! It is — as a small leaf on a tree branch feels the same as the whole tree!

“Faith is the power that holds this leaf together with the twig and the tree itself. And if faith is weak, then this man is like a leaf which was separated from a branch and is driven by wind: to one disastrous place it will be brought, then to another...

“Our monastic happiness is simple: we must always live by the soul — with the Lord! The soul joins with God — through deep faith and pure love!

“And God’s Love is the wonderful Power that feeds the soul and as if knits with the Creator!

“The human body is like a leaf on that Tree of God.

“Time is given to this little leaf-body to blossom, turn green, turn yellow, and perish... And the soul — remains inseparable from God, if it has become filled with love for the Lord during its life, if it has grown fast to God! And if the soul has not grown fast to the Lord — then it, as well as the body, is perishable like a fallen leaf may perish...

“And what benefit the tree had from that leaf — it is no longer your concern.

“At your hour you were born, at your hour you will accept death! And God will judge by merit: are you worthy of the Heavenly Kingdom — or not...”

“And how to know: what is good for God — and what is not?”

“Namely for this — is the secret of the heart prayer! When you feel God in your heart — then you understand His Will! That’s why joy comes — when you obey Him! You yourself have already experienced this many times...

“And if you have conceived something not smoothly — then like the sky is darkly clouded. That — you also will feel: not efficient, it means, you has planned, the Lord does not want that!

“Above all us, He is: including, above your life and above all our destinies!”

“And does it mean that nothing depends on the person in his or her destiny? Can’t one change anything, can’t help anyone else? Has one just to believe, to love — and that’s all? So — like a plant — only both to live and to die?”

“How does it ‘not depend’? Depends! To abase pride in oneself, to eradicate vices, not to sin due to

weakness of will, not to give way to one's own wrong desires, yet to learn the heart love, to apprehend the Will of God! It depends on just a person! And it befits to live so — that everything is only for God! And the rest — He will rule!

“Joyful is such a life with God, when by His Will you live!

“Joy happens when God is in your spiritual heart! It's already more than just faith...

“When God's Love overfills the soul, then you are not separated from God: He is with you and you are with Him! And your life — belongs to Him completely!

“Let everything be with us — according to His Will! And nothing is sad at that time, everything is joyful, if you understand that everything comes from Him! And it is inappropriate for us to resist His Will!”

“And how do we always know that we understand His Will right and that we are not mistaken? How many interpretations for every word of Scripture people have come up with! How much evil is done — ostensibly for God!...”

“You, Alexey, do not mind too much!... **You — feel by the heart!** You know already — how! So — you will always feel the Truth of God with your heart even when your understanding cannot be able to!

“Faith and love for God allow one to not fear death of the body. And — to pass worthily all tests falling out in life. And to do the good that is in your powers, but that, which you are not able to change, — to not have sorrow.

“And more importantly — always remember about the hour of death. Man should have under-

standing that everyone in one's own hour will give answer before the Lord.

“Life is of great value! This is the truth!

“And often a worldly man thinks that nothing is beyond the life of the body... But a spiritual person knows the reason to give bodily life for the sake of saving the soul. And many people did it!⁴

“There is a special state of the human soul, in which faith is so strong and deep, in which faith and love have so transformed the soul — that one does not fear for oneself anymore.

“To transcend the conventional dogmas and experience the Living God — that's the most important in the faith indestructible! It is only possible to feel — in the heart spiritual! Then the soul will not doubt that God exists and that God is Love, as Jesus taught!

“And then you can stop ‘being afraid for yourself’: fretting for the life of your body.

“You can stop being afraid for what people will think and talk about you... — be it fame, shame, condemnation of the crowd... Those, in whom pride is strong, are afraid of shame and reproach! Words of praise — are pleasant to our pride! And reproaches — cause it pain...

“All this is feared for one who has one's own main thoughts and concerns — about oneself! But the soul, strengthened by faith and love for God, is no longer afraid of it!

“There is a belief with which a person becomes so full-blown to God, so much accepts to oneself

⁴ Luke 9:24 (the not of the corrector).

God's Will that he or she is not concerned anymore for oneself!

"Jesus Himself died on the cross by a death which was determined for the atrocities of criminals. For us — He accepted it! So — we could see the possible Great Power of the Soul! For — His words to be remembered! For — us to know that there is no death for the soul, but beyond this threshold — the Heavenly Kingdom will admit the worthy ones!

"And — with joy, Christians were ready to accept the martyr's death — to follow the Lord!

"So faith can convert any suffering — into purification and transformation of the soul. That's the power of faith!"

"But why is necessary torture, suffering, death — the end of which cannot be seen?"

"... I do not know... For some reason, it does not happen otherwise in a sinful world... It is evident that through this, we receive the cleansing from sins, take our eyes off this material world — to look to Heaven, in humility try to get understanding of the Wisdom of God..."

... After a pause, the elder Nicholas added, as if answering the thoughts that had not been expressed aloud by Alexey:

"... Yes, you are right, Alexey, in your thinking that most people believe in a stupid... Living in a blind and fanatical faith, at times, they commit terrible crimes... And by what they call as their 'faith', they justify their atrocities..."

"Not to the Heavenly Father, the faith of such people is directed, not to Jesus, — but to rules and ceremonies *ostensibly* 'saving'..."

“Faith that results from fear — makes man a mindless slave, blind instrument of those who instill this fear!

“But faith that grows out of love for God — brings a person closer to the Lord!

“So, it turns out that troubles come because the faith of most people originates from fear. They think that, if the wrong ritual is performed, then death awaits them...

“Worse still, many people think that to execute those, who are of another faith, is a feat for which sins are forgiven...

“And there are those, who stimulate this folly in low-minded people, and through that strengthen their power over the riches of the world, over the vast lands. This is the terrible crime, the greatest sin!

“And not only among the Orthodox, such misfortunes multiply... And the Latins in their countries initiated the inquisition...

“A weak soul is afraid of ‘not so believe’ and for this to ‘burn forever in hell’! And therefore it is easy for these villains to command those who are overwhelmed by fears and prejudices!

“Such broken faith sometimes ruins all one’s life, turns into despair and meaninglessness. One was believing, believing — and then suddenly this one is told that it was untrue how he or she have believed, and that his or her faith was wrong and he or she have to believe in a new way... — and faith is broken...

“And people cling to at least some ‘saving’, in their opinion, ‘correct’ faith...

“Weak souls and scanty minds feel lost, if what they believed in is suddenly called ‘heresy’, delusion,

crime. It turns out that such one is facing an unbearable choice: he or she does not know whom to believe now?! It is because the faith of such a person was not deep. And such a person wants more quickly to follow another leader, to switch faith to a new one, to start believing in the 'salvation' *by new rituals...*

"Faith is easily broken if there is no love for God and no depth of understanding!

"And the Essence of indestructible faith — this is God Himself! With such faith — nothing is scary!"

Chapter Six: Robbers

Once a year, in the summer, Alexey went to the town, where there was a trade in salt. This town on the way to Siberia originated near the salt deposit, and therefore it had a commercial development.

Alexey bought here that little — which in his with the elder Nicholas' life — was necessary. Also he sent letters, which the elder ordered, and supplications from other people of the village if there were any to send. For these few days in the town, he stayed with the local clerk or the voivode. He made papers for various people coming with their problems, and for that he had a stock of ink, paper, and a little money — for their needs with the elder: the same salt, for example — so that mushrooms and vegetables should be preserved for the winter.

But this summer, it was not possible to do it.

It was already late autumn, when Alexey, having completed all the economic affairs in the hermitage, went to the town. Everything went well there.

Alexey returned in a joyous mood. It was easy in the heart because of the feeling that a small benefit was given to people by his advice and help, although not great. It was from deeds and his words to the people with which he had conversations.

The weather was clear, the first frost took hold of the roads that had been sodden from the rains, and it was easy to walk.

The sun — as if in a farewell caress — stroked by its rays the last golden leaves on the birches...

... Robbery on the roads was in those days unsurprising.

People fled to the forests from penal servitude, from conscription, from monasteries off the cruel foundations of the “new faith” or fanaticism of the “old faith”, fled both from the brutality of landowners and new factory owners of mining. They found shelter in the taiga distances, but some of them got into gangs and looked for livelihood on the roads of trade.

* * *

Four robbers attacked Alexey.

The robbers were angry because Alexey had nothing to steal... Salt and paper a bit — that was all. They began to brutally beat him, taking out their malice to the whole world and for their life — broken, hopeless...

Then they threw the body of Alexey, beaten almost to death, in the ravine...

“It would be necessary to kill him! He will report, an investigation will be done!” — the leader of the bandits said.

“Relax! As it is everywhere they patrol for! And I do not want to take the sin of killing on myself!” — replied a broad-shouldered, grim-looking robber, the tallest and strongest of the attackers.

“Are you righteous? Do you want to stay clean? It will not work!” — the leader spat with anger.

He held out the ax to the broad-shouldered:

“Do it!”

... Alexey calmly and clearly realized that here it is — the hour of death.

He was not afraid of death. He even somehow was delighted that now it will all end and he, perhaps, will see Jesus, he will know everything that he did not know, but would like to know, he would understand what has not yet been understood...

He said, speaking to the robbers, the words that he forgives them the pain and death that they cause.

Alexey began to say prayers for the forgiveness of sinners for their ignorance, for what they are doing. Understanding that now his prayer for these erring ones is something small that he can do, added calmness. About the enlightenment and salvation of the souls of sinners who have lost the ability to love in the spiritual darkness, Alexey’s words flowed from the depths of his being. He turned to Jesus, Who was, probably, the One Who knows how to help them, these unhappy...

The robber, standing with the ax in hand, listened in surprise, then dropped the ax:

“I cannot... You kill this blessed one...”

“What? Are you pulled back to ‘schismatics’? Where was it, your ‘faith’, when you came to me? Look, maybe his God will save him — for being a monk and ‘pincher’⁵ who does not cross with a double-finger? Or will not save? Well? To test? In my hands — now is his life!”

... The leader approached, took the ax, wanted to swing and... suddenly met by his eyes a clear, as if radiant and surprisingly calm look of Alexey.

He was surprised and did not finish off too...

The three accomplices silently looked on at what was happening.

The leader asked Alexey:

“If you are so brave, will you join our gang? Then I’ll save your life! I need courageous!”

“No, not for that life is given...”

“Do you know what for?”

“Right now — ‘in the world beyond’ — maybe I’ll find out...”

... The leader has spat, sworn..., but did not kill.

Alexey, bleeding, was left to die slowly in the ravine...

He crawled up to the road and went into coma.

⁵ “Old Believers” used this abusive nickname **for** the Orthodox believers of “new faith”, which crossed themselves with a *pinch*, i.e. with three fingers.

* * *

Unexpected, indescribable and blissful peace embraced Alexey. The sensation of the body with the pain disappeared...

Alexey saw in the waving flame of candles the Face of Jesus on the icon. This Face suddenly began to revive. Jesus smiled to Alexey and held out His Hands to him! Alexey reached out to Him, but could not touch... Like a transparent wall was separating...

He saw the movements of Jesus' moving lips: "I'm waiting for you, My son, but not now: you still need to cognize and do a lot!"

... Alexey heard or just understood these words... Jesus was watching — and the soul was filled with Love of Jesus! Alexey knew that this Love of Jesus is the Most Important!

Then he did not see or feel anything...

* * *

The elder Nicholas left the hermitage for the first time in fifteen years.

He came to that hut in the village, where the lame old man had the only horse in the whole district. Asked to harness:

"I'll go to search for Alexey: trouble with him was done! Harness, for Christ's sake!"

... The grim host of the horse harnessed his skinny mare to the cart without objection. He himself went with the elder.

... They found Alexey. The first snowstorm has already powdered the road with snow.

They found him — still alive. With difficulty they lifted the body and put it into the cart.

“Not a tenant,” — the lame old man shook his head gloomily... But he took off his quilted jacket and covered Alexey.

They started on the way back.

The elder Nicholas was silent. The head of Alexey rested on his laps. He carefully held his body: the cart shook violently on the frozen potholes.

Alexey’s deathly pale face was surprisingly calm and beautiful... The streaks of coagulated blood from the light-brown strands seemed to adorn the face...

Before the elder Nicholas, the Face of Jesus appeared with His Eyes penetrating into the depths of the soul. The elder Nicholas looked into Jesus’ Eyes and prayed: “May everything be according to Your Will, oh Lord!”

* * *

Alexey survived, but recovered slowly.

The elder Nicholas took care of him, like a small child. He fed Alexey with a spoon.

For a long time the elder stood before the icon, and tears glistened in his bright eyes...

Sometimes he sat next, and they were talking.

Alexey remembered that time as one of rest and happiness, despite the slow recovery of bodily health.

He almost did not feel the body, and the soul rejoiced because he was granted to see Jesus!

He told the elder:

“Maybe it’s just a vision, illusion of the disease... But as I recall — the heart is filled with happiness!”

“It’s not for me to judge about this... Here — Jesus saved your life, revealed Himself — and, therefore, there is good reason for that... He is aware of it, but not us, sinners...”

“And that you saw Jesus — save in the heart. And do not talk about it to people in vain...”

“Tests, including the infirmities of the flesh, are often given to us for the uplifting and strengthening of the soul!

“And to see your own death so close — this is a great gift from God!

“It’s good to summarize the results of the past and entrust the future to the Lord!”

Chapter Seven: Life without the Elder Nicholas

The life of Alexey passed in prayers and simple work.

Long winter, wonderful spring, short summer, autumn, after which the severe winter came again... Again and again, it was necessary to find in oneself more and more of God’s Light and less and less to be sad about the imperfections of this world.

Gradually more and more Alexey’s life filled with the Presence of God!

The elder Nicholas became very weak in body...

Sometimes, he asked Alexey's help to rise from bed and kneel before the icon. And it at times happened that he did not get up at all to pray.

He became — as if transparent, as if the soul did not hold on in the body anymore, but has moved to a completely different world.

A bright smile on the lips of the elder was all the time, as if he already saw his abode of paradise...

So, quietly, with a smile on his lips — he departed from this life.

... As if Alexey has been orphaned without the elder Nicholas.

He hardly got used to total loneliness.

While there was the elder Nicholas — everything was easier!

The elder guided the routine of their entire life. And there was a feeling that with each passing day, they were approaching the Heavenly Kingdom by souls.

But in solitude — Alexey did not work even to maintain the normality of prayers before God and regularity in life.

Sometimes he was flushed with a burning love for God, life was filled with a sense of the Presence of God nearby! And it seemed that even a little bit — and all the unknown secrets will be revealed to him!...

But then again came the feeling that he misses the main thing which he must do, and that he is wasting his strength, and that good and love on the Earth does not increase from his spiritual labors, no warmth and light come to children of God!

Alexey undertook stricter fasts, all his life became more ascetic. He exhausted the body with hunger and unceasing prayers, eager to comprehend the World of God.

Thoughts about the meaning of his own life, about the purpose of being here on the Earth — filled Alexey again and again with dissatisfaction for the lonely feats of monastic life.

After all, he did not want to “save” himself alone when he accepted the monastic path! He dreamed for God and people to dedicate his life!

He read the Gospels again and again, trying to apply to his life what Jesus told His disciples.

And Alexey decided to start helping those who lived in the surrounding villages.

Before, he also wanted it, but the elder Nicholas dissuaded: “Do not force people to live by your faith, to have faith according to your thoughts! Everyone is responsible for oneself before God!”

Now Alexey decided not to instruct people in life with his spiritual preaching, but simply to help in what they needed: “Since you did this to one of these my lesser brothers, you did to Me” (Matt 25:40).

And he began to help widows, the elderly and infirm in their hard life. He repaired leaking roofs, cleaned the wells, chopped firewood, wrote petitions...

He himself defined this as his monastic obedience. And it was more joyful for him due to the joy and surprise of those people who did not expect help from anyone — either God or people.

Chapter Eight: Healing the Boy

One day, Timothy, the older son of the woman Efimia, whom the elder Nicholas baptized once, fell seriously ill.

The child was in coma. The body was blazing with fever, which did not subside for over one day.

The daughter of Efimia Dunyasha helped around the house and took care of everything, and Efimia herself seemed to have broken... She resigned herself to the death of her son and only blamed herself for her sins and lamented quietly, kneeling before the icon.

But Alexey resolutely fought for the life of the child...

He brought honey, ordered to infuse herbs, which the elder Nicholas dried and taught to cook for various ailments.

Alexey himself prayed tirelessly and tried to let through the hands that Light of God which he felt in the spiritual heart...

Sometimes it seemed to him that only his hands retained life in the body of the child... But miraculous healing by prayer did not happen...

Alexey saw the Divine Light and felt the Presence of God more than ever! All his strength he tried to put into prayers... But the boy continued to rave... He wheezed and gasped in coughing spells, moaned slightly, then fell into an even deeper coma, and it seemed that now the soul will part with the exhausted body...

The boy's life seemed to be held back by the efforts that Alexey applied, but all the time there was a feeling that a little more — and it would end...

Alexey continued to pray — intensely, out of last strength. He almost did not expect a miracle, but stubbornly persisted:

“Jesus! What am I doing wrong? Here — I see Your Light and I know that You are Omnipresent and Omnipotent, Caring and Gracious! Why do You not heal the boy? If the reason is my pride, in which I desired to be equal with Your apostles in the great skills — then punish me for it but not a child! For my imperfection — do not punish him! Or is my faith weak? But the child is not guilty — for my imperfections! Why do You not allow Your Power to heal him? Your Omnipotence knows no bounds!”

Alexey reproached himself when he diverted from the standard prayers — to a free speech to Jesus. Then he prayed again and again, then tried to direct his bold appeals to the Heavenly Father, tried to recall all the Saints, whose prayers, as they say, were miraculously healing... The Presence of God was so strong and bright!... It seemed to grow, approaching... But the miracle did not happen...

Suddenly there was a knock at the door.

Dunyasha, the sister of a sick boy, opened it without even asking “Who?”.

The surprisingly beautiful young woman stood on the threshold.

It seemed to Alexey that the Shining Light came from the stranger. Or was it simply that the fresh frosty wind burst into the hot air of the hut through the doorway — and the sunshine flashed around the newcomer?...

The stranger bowed to the owners with the earthly bow, touching the floor by the tips of the fingers.

Alexey thought she tensed for a moment, seeing his monastic clothes...

Then she spoke quietly by a soft heart voice:

“My name is Rada, I’m a healer. I’ll cure the boy.”

... Alexey, staggering with fatigue, rose from his knees, giving way to the patient’s bed.

Rada came. She took off her street clothes and remained in a light-brown shirt with red embroidery on her collar and on her sleeves; the attire was intercepted at the thin waist with a woven cloth. Her thick brown hair was braided into a braid below the waist. Eyes — gray-blue, calm and affectionate. Only for a moment, Alexey met her gaze, and remembered the smallest details the beautiful face.

Rada approached the patient, put her hands on his chest and on the head. She stood there for several minutes, her body seemed to be frozen.

Alexey saw the Divine Light: the bright Shining of the White-Golden Light filled everything. This Light streamed through Rada’s body and filled the body of the sick boy.

Alexey went out into the stoop and sat down on the bench... The immaterial Light was everywhere around and did not stop shining. Alexey seemed to have fallen into this Light. Everything disappeared from his perception — in the Peace and Bliss of Light... He knew that everything now would be alright...

Alexey woke up because Dunyasha was tugging his sleeve:

“Timothy has recovered! Very, very healthy! Look, look! God helped! You treated, then Rada cured all! Mama does not cry anymore! Just look!”

... On the bed sat smiling Timothy. Efimia wanted to spoon-feed him soup, but he himself began to eat... The woman was wiping tears of gratitude.

“And where is the healer, where is Rada?” — asked Alexey.

“She left in the evening. As the fever of Timothy was reduced — and broke... She said that she had cured. We were afraid that in the morning it could be bad again, but he is healthy all! She said that he will be healthy! The Miracle of the Lord was created!”

Mother of the boy Efimia crossed herself and passionately whispered prayers.

Alexey himself also knelt before the icon and thanked God for the revealed miracle.

* * *

Then he walked slowly to the hermitage and was still thinking about the one called Rada, about the one who easily healed the dying child — like Jesus and His apostles:

“So — this is possible! Who is she? Where from? Who taught her this? Is it possible to learn as well?”

