

Three Oaks

A pilgrim, blind, was walking from Solovki. In how many monasteries he had not been, before how many icons and relics he had not prostrated himself, yet his eyes did not open. The pilgrim walked, raising dust with his bast shoes, tapping the road with his staff. He did not know where to go, where to seek a miracle.

The time was leaning toward evening. The pilgrim grew tired; he wanted to eat. He stepped aside from the road, felt around with his staff. The staff struck a stone.

The pilgrim sat upon it, took out a crust of stale bread from his knapsack, crossed himself, and began to eat.

At that place where the pilgrim sat stood three oaks. They stood side by side, their branches intertwined like own brothers. They were sturdy, tall, and broad-crowned.

The pilgrim sits, eating his crust, and suddenly hears:

"Again, brothers, a man has come to us. Let us ask him to pray for us."

"He will not. So many have come... Everyone goes about his own business; who would pray for us?"

"If I did not have to tell of my sin, then perhaps someone would pray, but now everyone thinks: such a sin cannot be prayed away."

The pilgrim was amazed: what, he thought, is this wonder? Who is speaking? The voices were so muffled, as if from beneath the earth.

"It is we, God's man—the oaks. Three of us stand here by the road, three little robbers. The Lord punished us, enclosing our souls in wooden flesh... We will confess to you, and you pray for us, God's man."

"I would gladly pray," said the pilgrim, "but my prayers do not reach God. For so many years I have prayed, yet I remain blind."

"Pray, pilgrim," beg the robbers, "and we will tell you our sins."

"Well, tell them."

The right oak rustled, as if shaking its head:

"Heavy it is for me... oh, how heavy!" he began, and told how for nearly thirty-three years he had roamed with a wild band along the Oka River. How many souls destroyed, that was not counted; a whole sea of blood spilled... Of all sins, one sin remained most vivid: he destroyed a maiden in the forest... She was gathering sweet raspberries. He violated her, then drove a sharp knife between her white breasts, and hung her by her braids on a high branch.

The middle oak rustled so that leaves fell down.

He told:

He robbed on the Volga River. How many souls destroyed, that was not counted; a whole sea of blood spilled. One sin above all was most memorable: once he came to a skete to a hermit, and the hermit began to instruct him:

"No," he said, "there is no forgiveness for you." These words seized his heart. He struck him with his flail and walked away...

The left oak trembled, swayed:

"My sin is terrible; there is none heavier in the world. You will not pray, pilgrim. You will leave without hearing it to the end." And Vasily told how he was captured by a voivode. The voivode tortured him, asking about comrades, yet all the comrades he ever had were his flail and his steel knife. The voivode promised him that if he betrayed others by name, his right hand would be cut off and he would be set free. And out of fear, he began to slander anyone at random, and to make the voivode believe his words more firmly, he slandered his own mother.

"Yes, heavy are your sins," sighed the pilgrim, "yet still I will pray for your sinful souls."

The pilgrim fell to his knees and began to pray. He prayed for fifteen years. Crows brought him water and bread. He wore through the flint stone with his knees...

First fell the right oak. Out of it came the robber's soul.

The soul said: "It is bright and joyful for me."

Second fell the middle oak. Out of it came the robber's soul. The soul said: "It is bright and joyful for me."

But the third oak still stands, just as it stood.

The pilgrim prayed until tears of blood flowed; still there was no forgiveness for the third robber.

"Lord!" the pilgrim once cried out in despair, "I asked You to open my eyes. If there exists such a sin that You cannot forgive, then I do not wish to look upon the white light, and it is better for me to remain blind until death."

And then the third oak fell. Out of it came the robber's soul, saying: "It is bright and joyful for me."

And the old man's eyes opened, and he glorified the Lord for His wisdom and mercy...