

THE THREE HERMITS - A STORY BY LEO TOLSTOY

A bishop was sailing from the city of Arkhangelsk to the Solovetsky Islands. On the same vessel there were pilgrims sailing to visit the holy shrines. The wind was favorable, the weather fair, the sea smooth. The pilgrims--some were lying down, some having a bite to eat, some sitting in groups--were talking to each other. The Bishop, too, came out on deck, began to pace the bridge. They approached the bow, saw a group of people gathered together. A peasant was pointing out something in the saw and speaking, and the people were Listening. The Bishop stopped, looked where the peasant was pointing; there was nothing to be seen, only the sea gleaming in the sun. The Bishop came Closer, and began to listen. The peasant saw the Bishop, took off his cap and fell silent. The people also saw the Bishop, also took off their caps, and paid their respects.

"Don't mind me, friends," said the Bishop. "I have also come to hear what you, good man, are telling them."

"This fisherman was telling us about the hermits, said one merchant who was bolder than the others.

"What about the hermits?" asked the Bishop, camp up to the rail and sat down on a box. "Tell me, too. I'll listen. What were you pointing at?"

"Why, that little island you can just make out," said the peasant and pointed forward to the starboard. "On that very island the hermits live, and seek salvation."

"But where is the island?" asked the Bishop.

"Here, please look in line with my hand. See that could? Just a bit to the left of it, below, showing like a thin streak."

The Bishop looked and looked, the water rippled in the sun, and, for want of practice, he could see nothing.

"I cannot see it," he said. "So what kind of hermits live on that island?"

"Godly men," answered the peasant. "I had heard of them long ago, but never chanced to see them, and then the summer before last I saw them myself."

The fisherman began to recount his once more how he had gone out fishing, and how he had run aground on that island and didn't know himself where he was. In the morning he wandered off and came upon an earth hut and saw a hermit by the earth hut, and then two more came out; they fed and dried him and helped him repair his boat. "And what do they look like?" asked the Bishop.

"One of them tiny, bent, quite ancient, in an old little cassock, must be more than a hundred years old, the gray hairs in his beard turning green already; but he keeps smiling and is bright as an angel from Heaven. Another, a little taller, also old, in a torn coat, his beard broad, yellowish white, but he is a powerful man; he turned my boat over like a tub, I didn't have a chance to lend him a hand--also joyous. And the third is tall, his beard long, down to his knees--and white as a blue kite, himself gloomy, eyebrows hanging over his eyes,

and all naked, only girded with a piece of sacking."

"What did they talk about with you?" asked the Bishop.

"They did everything mostly silently, and they don't talk much to one another. But one looks up and the other understands him. I began to ask the tall one whether they had been living there long. He frowned, began to say something, seemed to get angry; but the little ancient one at once took him by the hand, smiled and the big one fell silent. The ancient one just said 'Have mercy on us' and smiled."

While the peasant spoke the vessel drew still nearer to the island.

"Now you can really see it," said the merchant. "Be so good as to look, your lordship," he said, pointing.

The Bishop looked. And indeed he saw a black streak--the little island. After looking for a while the Bishop went away from the bow to the stern and approached the helmsman.

"What is this little island here?"

"It's nameless. There are many of them here."

"Is it true what they say, that some hermits seek salvation there?"

"So they say, your lordship, but I don't know if it's true. Some fishermen, they say, have seen them. It may be just idle talk."

"I should like to land on that island, to see the hermits," said the Bishop. "How can this be done?"

"The ship cannot come near," said the helmsman. "You can come near in a boat though, but the Captain must be asked."

They called the Captain.

"I should like to have a look at those hermits," said the Bishop. "Can't you row me over?"

The Captain tried to talk him out of it. "It could be done, but we would waste a lot of time, and if I may mention it to your lordship, they are not worth looking at. I have heard from people that these are foolish old men who live there, they understand nothing and can say nothing, like some kind of fish in the sea."

"I want to," said the Bishop. "I'll pay for the trouble, take me there."

There was nothing to be done; the shipmen gave orders, and sails were trimmed. The helmsman turned the ship, and they sailed toward the island. A chair was brought to the bow for the Bishop. He sat down and watched. And all the people gathered at the bow, all looking at the little rocks on the island and pointing out the earth hut. And the Captain brought out a spyglass, looked through it, handed it to the Bishop. "True enough," he said, "there on the shore, a bit to the right of the large rock, there are three men standing."

The Bishop looked through the glass, trained it in the right direction; true enough, there were three of them standing there: One tall, another a little shorter, and the third quite small; they were standing on the shore, holding hands.

The Captain went up to the Bishop. "Here, your lordship, the ship must stop. If you so wish, you can go on in a boat, while we stand here at anchor."

At once they let out the cable, cast anchor, furled the sail--the ship jerked and shook. A boat was lowered, the oarsmen jumped down, and the Bishop began to descend the ladder. The Bishop descended, sat down on the seat in the boat, the oarsmen pulled at the oars and rowed to the island. They rowed up within a stones throw; they saw; there stood the three hermits--the tall one, naked girded with a piece of sacking; the shorter one in a torn coat; and the ancient little bent one, in a little old cassock. They stood, all three of them, holding each other by the hand.

The oarsmen put to the shore, and held fast with a boathook. The Bishop got out.

The hermits bowed to him, he blessed them, and they bowed to him even lower. And the Bishop spoke to them.

"I have heard," he says, "that you, godly men, seek salvation here, praying for people to Christ the Lord, while I, Christ's unworthy servant, am here by God's grace, called upon to tend His flock, and so I wanted to see you, servants of God, and give you instruction if I can."

The hermits are silent, smile, and glance at each one another.

"Tell me how you seek salvation and how you serve God," said the Bishop.

"The second hermit sighed and looked at the oldest, the ancient one; the tall hermit frowned and looked at the oldest ancient one. And the oldest, the ancient hermit, smiled and said: "We don't know, servant of God, how to serve God; we only serve ourselves, feed ourselves."

"How then, do you pray to God?" asked the Bishop.

And the ancient hermit said: "We pray thus: three of You, three of us, have mercy on us."

And as soon as the ancient hermit had said this all three hermits raised their eyes to heaven and all three of them said: "Three of You, three of us, have mercy on us".

With an amused smile, the Bishop said: "You must have heard about the Holy Trinity, but you pray in the wrong way. I have come to love you, godly hermits, I can see that you want to please God, but do not know how to serve Him. That's not the way to pray, but listen to me, and I'll teach you. I'll teach you not in some way of my own, but I'll teach you according to the Lord's Scripture, the way God commanded all men to pray to Him."

And the Bishop began to expound to the hermits how God have revealed Himself to all men; he explained to them about God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, and said:

"God the Son came down on earth to save men and taught them all to pray thus. Listen and repeat after me."

And the Bishop began to recite: "Our Father." And the one hermit repeated: "Our Father," the second repeated, too: "Our Father," and the third, too, repeated: "Our Father"--"Which art in Heaven." The hermits, too, repeated: "Which art in Heaven," but the second hermit mixed up the words and said them wrong; and the tall naked hermit could not pronounce them: his mouth was overgrown with whiskers, he could not pronounce clearly; and the ancient toothless hermit mumbled indistinctly.

The Bishop repeated once again, and once again the hermits repeated. And down on a little rock sat the Bishop, and the hermits stood near him and stared at his mouth and repeated after him that which he was saying to them. And all day until evening, the Bishop labored with them; and ten and twenty and a hundred times he would repeat a single word, and the hermits would repeat it after him. They would get mixed up, and he would correct them and make them repeat it all over again.

And the Bishop did not leave the hermits until he had taught them the whole of the Lord's Prayer. They recited it after him and they recited by themselves. The first to understand it was the middle hermit and he repeated it all by himself. And the Bishop bade him say it again and again, and repeat again and the other recited the entire prayer.

It had already begun to grow dark and the young moon was rising out of the sea when the Bishop rose to return to the ship. The Bishop took leave of the hermits, they all bowed to the ground before him. He raised them and embraced each one, bade them pray as he had taught them and got into the boat and went back to his ship.

And as he was going back to the ship the Bishop still heard the hermits loudly reciting in chorus the Lord's Prayer. They were approaching the ship, the hermits' voices were no longer heard, but one could see in moonlight; standing on the shore, on the same spot, were the three hermits--the smallest one in the middle, and the tall one on the right, and the middle one on the left. The Bishop came up to the ship, climbed on deck, the anchor was weighed, the sails were unfurled, the wind filled them, set the ship in motion and sailed on. The Bishop went to the stern and sat down there and kept looking at the little

island. At first the hermits could be seen, then they disappeared from view, only the little island could be seen, then the island disappeared, too; only the sea shimmered in the moonlight.

The pilgrims lay themselves down to sleep and all grew quiet on deck. But the Bishop did not feel like sleeping, he sat alone on the stern, gazed toward the place where the island had gone out of sight, and thought about the good hermits. He thought of how they had rejoiced in having learned the prayer and he thanked God for giving them the word of God.

The Bishop is sitting thus, thinking, gazing at the sea in the direction of the vanished island. And his sight is blurred--now here, now there in the moonlight shimmers over the waves. Suddenly he saw something gleaming white in the path of the moon: is it a bird, a gull or a little sail of a boat showing white? The Bishop peers closer. "A sailing boat," he thinks, "speeding after us. But how fast is it catching up to us? Just now it was far, far away and lo, it is appearing quite near. And the boat is speeding after us and catching up with us." And the Bishop cannot make out what it is: neither a boat, nor a bird, now a fish! It looks like a man but is too big; and then a man couldn't be in the middle of the sea.--The Bishop rose and went up to the helmsman:

"Look," he said, "what is that?"

"What is that, my friend? What is it?" the Bishop keeps asking, but he can now see for himself--over the sea speed the hermits, their gray beards gleaming white, approaching the vessel as though it were standing still.

The helmsman looked round, was terror--stricken, let go of the helm and shouted in a loud voice:

"O Lord! The hermits are running after us over the sea as over dry land!"

The people heard him, rose, and rushed to the stern. They all see: the hermits are speeding, hand in hand, the ones on the outside waving their arms, bidding the ship stop. All three speed over the water as over dry land, without moving their feet.

The vessel had been barely stopped when the hermits drew even with it, came right up alongside, raised their heads and spoke in unison:

"We have forgotten, servant of God, we have forgotten your teaching!

As long as we kept reciting it, we remembered it. We stopped reciting for an hour, one word escaped us, and we forgot--everything fell apart. We don't remember anything. Teach us again."

The Bishop crossed himself, leaned over the side to the hermits and said:

"Your prayer, too, reaches God, godly hermits."

And the Bishop bowed to the ground before the hermits. And the hermits stopped, turned and went back over the sea. And until morning, a radiance shone in the direction in which the hermits had disappeared.