

THE THREE HERMITS

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But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do : for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of,— before ye ask him. (Matt. vi. 7-8.)

A bishop was sailing in a ship from Arkhangelsk to Solovki. On this ship there were pilgrims on their way to visit the saints. The wind was favourable, the weather clear, and the vessel did not roll. Of the pilgrims some were lying down, some eating, some sitting in groups, and some talking with each other. The bishop, too, came out on deck, and began to walk up and down on the bridge. He walked up to the prow and saw there several men sitting together. A peasant was pointing to something in the sea and talking, while the people listened to him. The bishop stopped to see what the peasant was pointing at: he could see nothing except that the sun was glistening on the water. The bishop came nearer and began to listen. When the peasant saw the bishop, he took off his cap and grew silent. And the people, too, when they saw the bishop, took off their caps and saluted him.

" Do not trouble yourselves, friends," said the bishop. " I have just come to hear what you, good man, are telling about."

" The fisherman is telling us about the hermits," said a merchant, who was a little bolder than the rest.

" What about those hermits ? " asked the bishop. He

walked over to the gunwale and sat down on a box. "Tell me, too, and I will listen. What were you pointing at ?"

" There is an island glinting there," said the peasant, pointing forward and to the right. " On that island the hermits are living and saving their souls."

" Where is that island ?" asked the bishop.

" Please to follow my hand ! There is a small cloud ; below it and a little to the left of it the island appears like a streak."

The bishop looked and looked, but only the water was rippling in the sun, and he could not make out anything with his unaccustomed eye.

" I do not see it," he said. " What kind of hermits are living on

that island ?"

" God's people," replied the peasant. " I had heard about them for a long time, and never had any chance to see them; but two summers ago I saw them myself."

The fisherman went on to tell how he went out to catch fish and was driven to that island, and did not know where he was. In the morning he walked out and came to an earth hut, and there he saw one hermit, and then two more came out. They fed him and dried him and helped him to mend his boat.

« What kind of people are they ? " asked the bishop.

" One is small and stooping, a very old man, in an old cassock; he must be more than a hundred years old, the gray of his beard is turning green, and he smiles all the time, and is as bright as an angel of heaven. The second * is taller; he, too, is old, and wears a ragged caftan; his broad gray beard is streaked yellow, and he is a powerful man: he turned my boat around as though it were a vat, before I had a chance to help him ; he also is a cheerful man. The third man is tall; his beard falls down to his knees and is as white as snow; he is a gloomy man, and his brows hang over his eyes ; he is all naked, and girded only with a piece of matting."

" What did they tell you ? " asked the bishop.

" They did everything mostly in silence, and spoke little to one another. When one looked up, the others understood him. I asked the tall man how long they had been living there. He frowned and muttered something, as though he were angry, but the little hermit took his arm and smiled, and the tall one grew silent. All the little hermit said was: ' Have mercy on us,' and smiled."

While the peasant spoke, the ship came nearer to the island.

" Now you can see it plainly," said the merchant. " Please to look there, your Reverence! " he said, pointing to the island.

The bishop looked up and really saw a black strip, which was the island. The bishop looked at it for quite awhile, then he went away from the prow to the stern, and walked over to the helmsman.

"What island is this that we see there ? "

"That is a nameless island. There are so many of them here."

" Is it true what they say, that some hermits are saving their souls there ?"

" They say so, your Reverence, but I do not know whether it is so. Fishermen say that they have seen them. But they frequently speak to no purpose."

" I should like to land on that island and see the hermits," said the bishop. " How can I do it ? "

"The ship cannot' land there," said the helmsman. " You can get there by a boat, but you must ask the captain."

The captain was called out.

" I should like to see those hermits," said the bishop. " Can I not be taken there ? "

The captain began to dissuade him.

" It can be done, but it will take much time, and, I take the liberty of informing your Reverence, it is not worth while to look at them. I have heard people say that they were foolish old men: they understand nothing and cannot speak, just like the fishes of the sea."

" I wish it," said the bishop. " I will pay you for the trouble, so take me there."

It could not be helped. The sailors shifted the sails and the helmsman turned the ship, and they sailed toward the island. A chair was brought out for the bishop and put at the prow. He sat down and looked. All the people gathered at the prow, and all kept looking at the island. Those who had sharper eyes saw the rocks on the island, and they pointed to the earth hut. And one man could make out the three hermits. The captain brought out his spy-glass and looked through it and gave it to the bishop.

" That's so," he said, " there, on the shore, a little to the right from that big rock, stand three men."

The bishop looked through the glass and turned it to the right spot. There were three men there: one tall, a second smaller, and a third a very small man. They were standing on the shore and holding each other's hands.

The captain walked over to the bishop, and said:

" Here, your Reverence, the ship has to stop. If you wish to go there by all means, you will please go from here in a boat, and we will wait here at anchor."

The hawsers were let out, the anchor dropped, the sails furled, and the vessel jerked and shook. A boat was lowered, the oarsmen jumped into it, and the bishop went down a ladder. He sat down on a bench in the boat, and the oarsmen pulled at the oars and rowed toward the island. They came near to the shore and could see clearly three men Standing there: a tall man, all naked, with a mat about his loins; the next in size, in a tattered caftan ; and the stooping old man, in an old cassock. There they stood holding each other's hands.

The oarsmen rowed up to the shore and caught their hook in it. The bishop stepped ashore.

The old men bowed to him. He blessed them, and they bowed lower still. Then the bishop began to talk to them:

" I have heard," he said, " that you are here, hermits of God, saving your souls and praying to Christ our God for men. I, an unworthy servant of Christ, have been called here by the mercy of God to tend His flock, and so I wanted to see you, the servants of God, and to give you some instruction, if I can do so."

The hermits kept silence, and smiled, and looked at one another.

" Tell me, how do you save yourselves and serve God ?" asked the bishop.

The middle-sized hermit heaved a sigh and looked at the older, the stooping hermit. And the stooping hermit smiled, and said:

" We do not know, O servant of God, how to serve God. We only support ourselves."

" How, then, do you pray to God ? "

And the stooping hermit said:

"We pray as follows: There are three of you and three of us, – have mercy on us! "

And the moment the stooping hermit had said that, all three of them raised their eyes to heaven, and all three said:

" There are three of you and three of us, – have mercy on us! "

The bishop smiled, and said:

" You have heard that about the Holy Trinity, but you do not pray the proper way. I like you, hermits of God, and I see that you want to please God, but do not know how to serve Him. I will teach you, not according to my way, but from the Gospel will I teach you as God has commanded all men to pray to Him."

And the bishop began to explain to the hermits how God had revealed Himself to men: he explained to them about God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, and said:

" God the Son came down upon earth to save men and taught them to pray as follows. Listen, and repeat after me."

And the bishop began to say, " Our Father." And one of the hermits repeated, " Our Father," and the second repeated, " Our Father," and the third repeated, " Our Father."

" Which art in heaven." The hermit repeated, " Which art in heaven." But the middle hermit got mixed in his words, and did not say it right; and the tall, naked hermit did not say it right: his moustache was all over his mouth, and he could not speak clearly; and the stooping, toothless hermit, too, lisped it indistinctly.

The bishop repeated it a second time, and the hermits repeated it after him. And the bishop sat down on a stone, and the hermits stood around him and looked into his mouth and repeated after him so long as he spoke. And the bishop worked with them all day; he repeated one word ten, and twenty, and a hundred times, and the hermits repeated after him. They blundered, and he corrected them, and made them repeat from the beginning.

The bishop did not leave the hermits until he taught them the whole Lord's prayer. They said it with him and by themselves. The middle-sized hermit was the first to learn it, and he repeated it all by himself. The bishop made him say it over and over again, and both the others said the prayer, too.

It was beginning to grow dark, and the moon rose from the sea, when the bishop got up to go back to the ship.

The bishop bade the hermits good-bye, and they bowed to the ground before him. He raised each of them, and kissed them, and told them to pray as he had taught them, and entered the boat, and was rowed back to the ship.

And as the boat was rowed toward the ship, the bishop heard the hermits loudly repeating the Lord's prayer in three voices. The boat came nearer to the ship, and the voices of the hermits could no longer be heard, but in the moonlight they could be seen standing on the shore, in the spot where they had been left: the smallest of them was in the middle, the tallest on the right, and the middle-sized man on the left. The bishop reached the ship and climbed up to the deck. The anchors were weighed, the sails unfurled, and the wind blew and drove the ship, and on they sailed. The bishop went to the prow and sat down there and looked at the island. At first the hermits could be seen, then they disappeared from view, and only the island could be seen ; then the island, too, disappeared, and only the sea glittered in the moonlight.

The pilgrims lay down to sleep, and everything grew quiet on the deck. But the bishop did not feel like sleeping. He sat by himself at the prow and looked out to sea to where the island had disappeared, and thought of the good hermits. He thought of how glad they had been to learn the prayer, and thanked God for having taken him there to help the God's people, - to teach them the word of God.

The bishop was sitting and thinking and looking out to sea to where the island had disappeared. There was something unsteady in his eyes: now a light quivered in one place on the waves, and now in another. Suddenly he saw something white and shining in the moonlight,- either a bird, a gull, or a white sail on a boat. The

bishop watched it closely.

" A sailboat is following after us," he thought. " It will soon overtake us. It was far, far away, but now it is very near. It is evidently not a boat, for there seems to be no sail. Still it is flying behind us and coming up close to us."

The bishop could not make out what it was : a boat, no, it was not a boat; a bird, no, not a bird; a fish, no, not a fish! It was like a man, but too large for that, and then, how was a man to be in the middle of the ocean ? The bishop got up and walked over to the helmsman.

" See there, what is it ?"

" What is it, my friend ? What is it ?" asked the bishop, but he saw himself that those were the hermits running over the sea. Their beards shone white, and, as though the ship were standing still, they came up to it.

The helmsman looked around and was frightened. He dropped the helm, and called out in a loud voice:

" O Lord ! The hermits are running after us on the sea as though it were dry land !"

The people heard him, and rushed to the helm. All saw the hermits running and holding each other's hands. Those at the ends waved their hands, asking the ship to be stopped. All three were running over the water as though it were dry land, without moving their feet.

Before the ship could be stopped, the hermits came abreast with the ship. They came up to the gunwale, raised their heads, and spoke in one voice:

" O servant of God, we have forgotten your lesson. So long as we repeated it, we remembered it; but when we stopped for an hour, one word leaped out, and then the rest scattered. We do not remember a thing, so teach us again."

The bishop made the sign of the cross, bent down to the hermits, and said :

" Even your prayer, hermits of God, reaches the Lord. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinful men!"

And the bishop made a low obeisance to the hermits. And the hermits stopped, turned around, and walked back over the sea. And up to morning a light could be seen on the side where the hermits had departed.

