

FROM THE GLASS RIVER

by Emil Andreev

translated from the Bulgarian by Zhivka Ganeva

Father Peter met them in the church. Unlike the one in Gradishte, this was older and smaller. The church was half way underground, located several yards away from the clock tower. It was quiet and cool inside.

It was called The Church of the Assumption – a typical Orthodox construction from the early nineteenth century, looking more like a large chapel.

"This is the oldest church in the region, that's why it's the main one," Victor clarified. "Correct, Father?"

The priest nodded and said in Bulgarian: "The coffin will be ready within half an hour." Hélène left them talking in the middle of the building. She walked to the altar and started viewing the fretwork and icons, which she could not help but admire. The interlaced design of floral motifs, zoomorphic figures and spirals resembled exquisite embroidery. The walnut tree, deftly hewn, exuded a mysterious soft light.

Hélène indulged in its scent, intermingled with the whiff of wax and incense. She stopped at the right side of the altar door and stroked the icon of the Virgin Mary. Then she ran her fingers across the golden arch above her head in order to feel the movement of birds and flowers, dashing towards the double-headed eagle in the centre. A feeling beyond description.

She took a few steps backwards and leaned against the bishop's throne so that her gaze could encompass the entire iconostasis. Hélène contemplated it for a few minutes until roused by a slight pain, caused by the arm-rest of the throne. She turned and saw the reason – the protruding head of a dragon with its tongue hanging out. Underneath a predatory bird with a crown, sharp beak and a tail coiled in a spiral. They were carved out of the same tree as the altar, the same style and exquisite touches.

Hélène sat on the throne and put her hands on both heads of the dragon. "How comfortable," she said to herself and half-closed her eyes. Her mind was empty. She was simply relaxing in the embrace of the throne and the blissful coolness inside the church.

"The dragon is a symbol of paganism." She was startled by the voice of Father Peter. "Although a real creature, according to pagan beliefs, the dragon is only a symbol in Christian ideology."

"Yes, sure!" H el ene replied automatically, without getting his point.

Victor gave her a hand. He obviously wanted to hint to her she did not belong there. She stood up and apologised, just in case.

"Not a problem, time is ticking away," Victor said.

"Let me show you the books!" Father Peter led them to a small bookcase to the right of the southern wall window. "Don't have any great expectations! This shelf contains everything that was taken from St Nicolas Church."

There were no more than ten printed leatherbound books: two Bibles, an old Book of Psalms, a prayer-book and several gospels. And a shabby notepad – resembling a diary or a chronicle. It caught H el ene's attention first.

"Do you need help?" Victor approached her.

The priest left them alone and withdrew to the altar.

I will do, no doubt, H el ene thought, while turning over the yellowed pages. She had studied so-called Church Slavonic for two semesters and could partly decipher texts, but was totally unfamiliar with Old Bulgarian. She caught a word or two, if they were legible, relying more on her intuition. She was going to take a photo of a really unique document, if she came across one, of course, and decipher it later in France with the assistance of her colleagues – Bulgarian scholars. Yet now H el ene was clear about what she was looking for and was ready to ransack all the books in order to find it. She had initially planned to take a photo of the title pages and certain parts of the books available in St Nicolas Church, so that she could enclose them in a separate list with her paper. She had not imagined she would come across Victor and obtain additional information from him. Her new viewpoint on the supposedly late Bogomil stone sculptures went beyond her initial objectives. The two letters were a real discovery, which changed her initial intentions. If they were inside the church, on the frescoes, she might be able to find them somewhere in the books. She sought this mysterious signature and could decipher it without Victor's help.

"I discovered the excerpt from the Apocrypha in this very Bible," he mentioned, and took the book from the shelf. "The piece of paper was folded and was used for marking the pages already read out."

"Have you reviewed the others in detail?" "Several times, especially after I found the excerpt."

"What about the letters N and D – did you spot them anywhere else except on the stone outside?"

"No. Why should I search for them here?"

She did not respond. Victor was evidently unaware of the image of Jesus Christ, or simply concealed it.

"Could you explain to me what this book is all about?"

Hélène handed him the notepad. Victor left the Bible, took it and without focusing too much on it, stated:

"Something like a diary of the church. Starting from its construction, then dwelling on key events, described from the perspective of various priests. I've read it – nothing special!"

"Will you translate for me the excerpt about the construction?"

"It's quite short and almost the same as the inscription on the stone above the main entrance. 'In the year of our Lord 1825, in the month of June, this church was erected in the name of St Nicolas to glorify our Lord...' Shall I go on?"

"Are any names of builders and artists mentioned?"

"Only the name of the master-builder – Mitko Popzlatev from Debar and the sponsors, including Marko, the father of my great great grandfather Parvan Mishin. My grandfather's name was Parvan. They wanted to call me after him, but my mother preferred Victor."

Hélène recalled what Father Peter had told her. Absolutely the same. "Which is the oldest book here?" she asked.

"The Psalter, dating back to the sixteenth century. It's the most valuable, considering that it was the first book printed in Old Bulgarian. All the rest were either taken from museums or

stolen. The piece of paper, which I found, was accidentally forgotten – they simply did not notice it. Why are you interested in the builders?"

"Father Peter mentioned to me that an Italian and a Bosnian were among them, according to the legend. The letters are Latin. In my opinion they are someone's initials. Do you know they are featured in one of the frescoes?" Now H el ene was going to find out if Victor was pretending. She anticipated his reaction intently.

"Really? How did you know?" His sincere surprise was evident.

"Marie showed them to me."

She told him how that had happened and where exactly the two letters were to be found. She highlighted the scene, in which Jesus was scribbling with his left hand.

"Incredibly interesting," Victor commented, and remained silent. His penetrating eyes started roving about the wooden floor. "The same, you say..." he murmured. "Then we have every reason to look for them here as well."

We can look for them. He used the we form again, involving her again. H el ene sensed a slight excitement in him. Then... What was going on with him? Out of the blue, Victor was transformed and suddenly became more alive. He took the Psalter and feverishly leafed through it page by page.

"This book dates back long before the construction of the church. According to me, it was printed in Venice in the period 1569-70, but how did it get here?! I assume it is similar to the Psalm book with liturgy, printed in 1569 in Venice by Iakov Kraikov from Sofia for the printing house of Ierolim Zagurovik. Both of them might have been Jews, judging by their names. The title page and the end are missing. As if they tacitly agreed to destroy all traces. Nevertheless, the language and the drawing are the same – Middle Bulgarian, Western Bulgarian version. The book itself is unique, but no one showed the slightest interest or they just did not pay proper attention. Then you could take a photo of it. It probably contained the greatest number of marginal notes and remarks. I can't remember if I've come across the letters N and D, but..." He paused at one of the pages and started reading. "No, that has no relation whatsoever!" He continued turning over the pages.

Hélène watched him with astonishment, without grasping what he had in mind. He looked like a man possessed by a gambling frenzy. He was focused on the Psalter, as if it was a slot machine, which any moment was about to eject a pile of coins. He was obviously struck by an idea and was in a hurry to check if he was on the right track. Hélène made up her mind to devote herself to searching, relying on her intuition.

Father Peter stopped in front of the altar, glanced at them both and a faint smile crossed his face. Then he passed under the arch with the doubleheaded eagle and entered the space where the Ark of the Covenant was placed and women were not allowed. He pulled out several yellowed pages, hidden under his cassock, and slipped them into the table drawer – the communion table, destined for the Ark. He had managed to take them from the bookcase in time.

"Here it is!" Victor said. "I've found it."

Hélène lifted her head in anticipation. Victor moved closer to her, his finger pointing at the page.

"In the margin opposite Psalm 93 you can see the following written by hand: 'God rest the soul of Deacon Nicola. He left this world innocent. But God sees everything and will take revenge.'

"I don't understand!" Hélène peered at the content of the margin. "What's the connection?"

"Deacon Nicola, DN or ND reversed, Nicola Deacon is the name, hidden behind the initials."

"How did you work this out?"

Victor stared into Hélène's puzzled eyes. He found her especially attractive now, in her exhilarated state. He could not take his eyes off her slim breasts, well outlined under the T-shirt, rising and falling with her breathing. She was not wearing a bra. He was impressed by their tight and exquisite lines. How could he not have noticed them before! He sensed he was beginning to feel attracted to Hélène and quickly moved his glance away.

"You see," he went on, "'Deacon' isn't a name, but a nickname, something like a rank of the lower clergy, God's servant. Deacon Nicola died in 7333 from the creation of the world, that is in 1825 – the year when the church was built. The old system of chronology was used,

otherwise the figure 7333 is pointless. In my opinion Deacon Nicola was murdered. The marginal note reads that he died like a dog and God saw everything and would take revenge. Psalm 93 starts with an appeal to the God of vengeance. The person who wrote these three lines chose him for a reason." Victor translated the first few verses, conveying their overall meaning. "The author of this note was obviously seeking retribution. The year is mentioned, we know the month – June, we may assume the day was Thursday, as A Psalm of David refers to the fourth day of the week. Jews considered Wednesday the fourth day, whereas the Orthodox Christians counted the days after Sunday – resurrection. The Russian word for Sunday is Voskresenie, or Resurrection, even today. As you know, Bogomils recognised only the Psalter. This book was printed in Venice – a town inhabited by various nationalities at the time. If we trust the legend that the builder who fell off the scaffolding was Italian, then he might have brought the Psalter to Gradishte about two hundred and fifty years after it was printed."

"But isn't the book in Cyrillic?" H el ene interrupted him.

"Well, there is another option – he might have been Bosnian. The legend doesn't specify... Yet either Italian or Bosnian – he's the creator of the stone sculptures. Wait..." Victor reflected. "He's definitely Bosnian!"

"How do you reach that conclusion?"

"Well, do you remember the standing stones, the so called stechki in Bosnia? They were considered to be decorated by a special master – pisach, called a dyak. The murdered Deacon Nicola wasn't a deacon, but a stone-mason – 7333"

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"Well, do you remember the standing stones, the so called *stechki* in Bosnia? They were considered to be decorated by a special master – *_pisach[ital]*, called a *_dyak[ital]*. The murdered Deacon Nicola wasn't a deacon, but a stone-mason – *_dyak[ital]*, but the diphthong 'ya' is written with one letter 'я' in Bulgarian, therefore the word *_dyak[ital]* is spelled with a capital letter. Yes, the name of this Nicola Deacon is hidden behind the monogram ND. The Bosnian, who came from far-off Venice and was taken for an Italian by the locals. The late Bogomil sculptures, to be found in Gradishte, were carved by him. That's why he was killed by a zealous Orthodox priest, who had discerned the heresy in his art."

"Sounds reasonable, but aren't you jumping to conclusions? How do you explain the fact that the letters appear in the fresco as well? What about the casket, if it actually exists, and the apocryphal excerpt you read out to me?"

"Everything falls into place. Nicola carried with himself the casket in question. Besides the Psalter, it contained other valuable manuscripts, probably the original Secret Book of the Bogomils and the respective Apocrypha, the only remaining part of which is the piece of paper I discovered. In all probability the author of the marginal note was a friend of Nicola Deacon. He probably hid the casket somewhere and unleashed his threat in the margin of Psalm 93. Furthermore, he might have been one of the icon-painters of the church, and perpetuated his friend in the image of the scribbling Jesus. The root of the word *_pisach*[ital], or scribbler, comes from the Slavonic *_pisati*[ital, or to write, draw, paint. The scribbling Jesus, drawing on the ground, is the scribbler himself, the artist Nicola Deacon, an ancestral Bosnian Bogomil, who came to Gradishte to continue the mission of his ancestors. And the choice of this village wasn't accidental. He found the soil for his 'heresy' here. That's why the letters N and D are placed under the index finger of Jesus Christ-Nicola (Nicola was simply left-handed), as well as upon the main stone used in the construction, perhaps the very first place where he put his signature. We just have to find the casket! My version will be proved by the casket and its contents."

Hélène was astounded. What quick thinking, combined with a wild imagination! Even if it wasn't true, it was cleverly invented, at least. Victor's assumptions sounded reasonable, but little evidence was available.

"Don't you set too great a store by legends? They are word of mouth, more or less. According to Father Peter, the myth about the walled-in shadow is just that, whereas the stone sculptures are entirely steeped in the Christian traditions and don't contravene Orthodox views. I did not dare ask him about the casket, certain that he was going to laugh at me. I wonder if he knows about the letters?"

"I guess not. This place is thickly overgrown now, while he has been in Gradishte for only a few years. But, Hélène...both the letters and the marginal note are real facts. As far as legends are concerned – true, they are word of mouth, but it doesn't mean they are fictitious. My grandfather told me about the murdered foreign master, as well as about the casket. All the old

people in Gradishte knew about it. Why do you think people came all the way from Poland to steal from the church? Everything happens for a reason. You'll figure out that I am right."

Or you really want to be, H el ene thought. She was overwhelmed by a feeling of affection for him.

At this point Father Peter drew closer to them and spoke to Victor in Bulgarian:

"I think the coffin is ready. Let's go and load it."