

The Iurodivaia Dunia, Fool for Christ

by Hugh M. Olmsted

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dunia](#)

[Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

Foreword

The essay below is a brief work of historical fiction, the story of "Dunia," a Russian fool for Christ. Her biographical portrait is set in sixteenth-century Moscow – the time of Tsar Ivan IV 'Groznyi' ('the Terrible', 'the Dread'). The *iuródivyi* – as such fools for Christ are known in Russian – is a particularly radical and enigmatic type of ascetic who lives quite outside the norms of society. This narrative portrait was written for publication in the volume:

PORTRAITS OF OLD RUSSIA / ed. Donald Ostrowski and Marshall T. Poe. Armonk, NY ; London, England : M.E. Sharpe, 2011, where it appears on p. 252-69 as "Dunia, a Fool for Christ."

Space constraints in the printed volume led to a certain shortening of Dunia's story as it is published there. What is presented here is a fuller version; the author is grateful to the Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral in Boston, Massachusetts, for providing a niche on its website. Any comments, including critical observations and suggestions for improvement, would be most gratefully received; they may be addressed to: hugholmsted@holytrinityorthodox.org.

Only a few of the personages presented in the narrative are actual historical figures, viz.: Tsar Iván IV *Gróznyi* ('the Terrible', 'the Dread'), the *iuródivyi* Saint Basil the Blessed, and Father Antonii Chernoezérskii, a 16th-century Muscovite saint. All other characters, including Dunia herself,

her family, and other persons she encounters, though presumed to be plausible are fictional. For those interested a more detailed [Introduction](#) is also available, as are [Suggestions for Further Reading](#).

Among the people who have generously shared their advice at various stages of the development of this piece the author would especially like to thank Donald Ostrowski, David Goldfrank, Carolyn Pouncy, Dn. Theodore Feldman, Timothy Belk, Inga Leonova, Webmaster for the website of the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Boston, and the Most Reverend Father Robert Arida, Rector and Dean of the Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral in Boston. Most of all he is in the debt of his wife, Maria Stalbo Olmsted; it was at her urging that he undertook the piece, and her substantial and continuing advice, editorial contributions, and forbearance throughout the project have spelled for it the difference between nonexistence and life. The resulting text, with any failures of fact or interpretation, is of course the responsibility of the author alone.

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[Return to top of page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dunia](#)

Introduction

The traditional Russian term for a holy fool, or fool for Christ, is "*iuródivyi*".^[1] In old Rus^[2] and Russia "*iurodivye*" typically are radical ascetics – purifying themselves in introspection and prayer, leading a physically gruelling life, homeless, dressed in rags or in nothing at all – whose assumed simplicity or insanity puts them outside the normal range of commonplace ethics and etiquette. They are likely to behave outrageously by the world's standards, publicly challenging social norms, shaking average people out of their complacency, frequently offending them gravely, and revealing deeper truths to those open to receive them. In the best cases they are revered as bearers of the ideal light of Christ, serving and illumining the people and the world around them.

Georgii Fedotov, a Russian scholar known for his work on Old Rus' and on Russian saints and spirituality (see [Suggestions for Further Reading](#)), speaks of the "paradoxical exploit" of *iurodstvo*, which unites three feats. The *iurodivyi* :

1. Ascetically crushes his/her own self-importance by assuming the lowliest possible lifestyle and inviting people's anger and scorn.
2. Ridicules the world by highlighting the inherent contradiction between superficial, self-serving common sense, moral codes, or ethics; and deep Christian truth (cf. I Cor:I-IV).
3. Serves the world as a sort of living sermon, accomplished not so much by specific words or deeds as by force of Spirit, by power of personality, frequently clothed in enigmatic prophetic speech.

These three aspects are not always in easy harmony with one another. The first, for example, may involve provoking one's neighbors into the sin of anger and judgment, whereas the third calls the *iurodivyi* to help these same neighbors achieve the best that they are capable of. The problem of self-importance or pride always brings a dangerous temptation in the ascetic struggle, involving a classic vicious circle: the more you succeed in conquering your self-importance, the greater may be the temptation for you to feel smug or arrogant about it, which brings you back to the original problem. The *iurodivyi's* method of self-emptying involves a stance of insanity or idiocy which serves among other things to disturb and challenge people and draw their hostility and derision, and thereby enlist their help in keeping the *iurodivyi's* own arrogance under control.

There are many passages in Scripture which have helped serve as starting point or inspiration for those undertaking the path of "holy foolery" (*iurodstvo*). Some of these are cited in our text. They point to the model of Christ as Suffering Servant and as self-sacrifice for humanity, to many of the words and deeds of the apostle Paul, and to worldly wisdom as spiritual folly, and spiritual wisdom as folly in the eyes of the world.

The phenomenon of *iurodstvo* was particularly known both in Byzantium and medieval Rus', although it is not difficult to find antecedents and similarities elsewhere -- as in the Old Testament prophets, the early Christian ascetics, and in mystics and seers of many other places and times. *Iurodstvo* as such was particularly strong in Muscovite Rus', when the growing power of autocracy and the state brought flagrant abuses of power: the *iurodivye* of that period are

frequently portrayed as standing up fearlessly to the Grand Prince and Tsar. In this role the *iurodivyi* can be imagined as a sort of super whistle-blower, generally immune from normal retribution because of his perceived otherworldliness and sanctity, his special alliance with the Divine. Muscovy had quite a number of *iurodivyi* figures, many of whom became glorified as saints. A special category of sainthood was established for the *iurodivyi*: such a saint was called *blazhénnyi* 'the Blessed'.^[3] The behavior, role and public perception of the *iurodivyi* changed somewhat over the centuries, especially as it became more and more of an accepted cultural institution, sometimes inviting self-conscious manipulation, or false and calculating *iuródstvo* for personal gain – the public posture without the ascetic purification. Therefore people called *iurodivyi* might differ widely over time, and in later centuries the term may take on a sarcastic or derogatory meaning.

By necessity, among our major sources for the biographies of *iurodivye* are hagiographic works – the medieval "Zhitiiia," "Vitae," or Lives of saints. Such Lives were generally written after their subjects' death, with a definite purpose: to help the person achieve glorification in sainthood. In order for this to be effective, it was particularly desirable that the specific life being told maximally met the requirements of the genre, and the person described maximally represented the appropriate forms of sanctity. Therefore certain *topoi*, serving to stress this conformity, were all but obligatory. Posthumous miracles, for example, are generally required. Also typically expected and mentioned for *iurodivye* are: the gift of prophesy (either in seeing into the deep meaning of the present, or in predicting the future), refusal of any alms or gifts such as warm clothes that would make his or her own life easier (these are typically distributed immediately to the poor, or simply given away in gratuitously selfless fashion), and the practice of highly enigmatic speech and action – the statements and acts by the *iurodivyi* which seem to the casual observer to abound with nonsense or blasphemy but are in fact full of profound spiritual meaning. It may not be surprising that as a result these Lives generally include hagiographic embellishment of historical reality. Hagiographic and spiritual truth typically override the demands of literalistic historical truth. In some cases it is clear that stories told of one saint were imported from quite a different saint's Life where they first originated. All of this may be effective for devotional purposes, just as understanding it is be crucial for religious and

cultural history, but it can make much more difficult the task of discerning the concrete historical reality underlying the tale, if that is one's goal. In this essay, purely hagiographic legends of one famous 16th-century *iurodivyi* (Saint Basil the Blessed, *Vasilii Blazhennyi*) are introduced into our tale not as straight narrative, but in and through the perception of the fictional main character, Dunia. This device is used to allow us to present some examples of embellished hagiography here in a context which is supposed to represent plausible historical fiction. Therefore these episodes should not be taken as representing straight historical reality. In general, in this portrait the narrator's voice combines a sort of privileged all-knowing stance and a certain sympathy with the characters whose experiences and perceptions are being relayed – representing a sort of omniscient but "empathetic" narrator. Whether there may sometimes be a note of irony or sarcasm in this empathy may be left to the reader to judge.

The life of Dunia as related here is distantly patterned on the life of an historical *iurodivaia*, St. Pelagía Divéevskaia, who lived in quite a different place (Sarátov) and time (the nineteenth century – see "*Blazhennaia Pelageia...*" in the [Suggestions for Further Reading](#)). Although certain concrete events in the two narratives are similar, even at times identical, the two resulting lives and persons are very different. This is an individual story of one person, as all people's stories must be, and should not be taken as representing a pattern "typical" for *iurodivye*, for women of her time or others, or for any other category of person. Our Dunia was a *iurodivaia* for a limited period in her life, after which she progressed to quite a different condition. In many other cases, perhaps in most, once a person took up the life of a *iurodivyi* he or she remained in it until death (such was the case with Saint Basil the Blessed [*Vasilii Blazhennyi*], for example, whose hagiographic tales we meet in the narrative). About Dunia's subsequent life we are told nothing in this portrait – about her circumstances, deeds, or growth, or her fate in this life or beyond.

Our narrative is set against a background of real places and cultural realities as best they can be reconstructed. All Moscow streets, churches, and other public structures mentioned are historical (in many cases an Internet search under the Russian names as transliterated in our text will bring up photographic views of their actual present appearance). Among specific personages we encounter in

the narrative, Father Antonii Chernoezerskii (of *Chërnoe ózero*, 'Black Lake') is an historical 16th-century Muscovite saint, known to have founded the *Chernoezerskaia Rozhdestva Bogoroditsy muzhskaia Pustyn'* (the Black Lake men's "Birth of the Virgin Mary" Monastery; the Black Lake is in northern Russia, off the road between Cherepovéts and Vólogda); he died in the Lord in 1598, and his Feast day is celebrated January 17. In this narrative he is represented as also having founded a women's monastery (convent), the Holy Intercession Black Lake Monastery (*Chernoezerskaia v chest' Pokrova presviatyia Bozhiei Materi zhenskaia Pustyn'* or *Sviato-Pokrovskaia Chernoezerskaia pustyn'*). Tsar Ivan IV *Groznyi* ('the Terrible', 'the Dread') and the *iurodivyi* Saint Basil the Blessed are also historical figures, as is the architect Aloisio Lamberti da Montagna [known in Russia as Alevíz Friázín] of the St. Barbara Church. All other characters are fictional.

[Return to top of page](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Dunia](#)

The Iurodivaia Dunia, Fool for Christ

In the time of Tsar Ivan IV "the Terrible,"^[4] in Moscow's Kitai-Gorod^[5] there lived a merchant, Makár Shesták Petróv syn (Makar Sixth-born, Son of Peter).^[6] Makar was hardworking and moderately prosperous. He even had his own leather factory. He provided quite adequately for his family – his wife Praskóv'ia and three children: the youngest, little Dúnia, and her brothers Andriúsha and Vánia, who were respectively five and three years older than she.^[7]

In 1575, when Dunia was just two years old, our Lord delivered one of those unfathomable blows which we His servants must sometimes suffer for our sins. Makar was a sober and peaceful man, not one to pick a fight. But one day as he was walking past the new tavern down on Varvárka Street,^[8] he was swept into a drunken brawl that had spilled out into the street, and was suddenly killed. Praskovia was wild with grief. She was completely at a loss as to where to turn, and how to care for her family. When within a few days an attentive and forceful man appeared at her door and earnestly promised stability, comfort, a safe haven – she could not resist. Two months later she was remarried. Her new husband, Alekséi Mukhomór Nikítin syn (Aleksei the

toadstool,^[9] Nikita's son) was himself a widower man with four children of his own. Like Makar before him, he was a leather merchant; he had actually been a competitor of Makar's in the marketplace, and for some time had also had his eye on Praskov'ia.

Alekséi Mukhomór's ruddy face was adorned with as many pimples and pockmarks as the flecks on a crimson-capped "mukhomór" mushroom,^[10] a similarity which was the direct inspiration for his nickname (though there were those who suspected that the connection might also have been suggested by his character). Old Mukhomor was a man who held his own in the rough society of Moscow. He was short of breath and caustic of tongue and walked with a limp, supporting himself ponderously with a stout walking staff. His uneven footfall and thumping stick resounded over the wooden floors as he made his way through his house on Nikita Lane.^[11] And it was here that he and his offspring were joined by Praskov'ia and her three children.

"Now my dear little bunny rabbits, you listen to me," she told them. "We are the luckiest and happiest of God's creatures. Your new father will provide for us wonderfully. Just remember, obey him in all things and all will be well."

The household move was simple, just a few streets over from their old house and downhill towards St. Barbara's Gate, not far from the eastern edge of Kitai-Gorod above Varvarka Street. And it promised regained security and stability for Praskov'ia and her family. But in other respects the family merger was not easy.

Mukhomor's children took poorly to the intruders in their domestic space, and the mistrust and distaste was mutual. Family life for the younger generation was mostly fights and squabbles, with younger ones constantly harrassed and bullied by their elders. Dunia, youngest of all and easy to take advantage of, had no friends or allies in either brood. And she always was different from the others. She never fought back or even rewarded the attacker with any sign of interest. This frustrating indifference enraged her siblings, invariably provoking escalations as they tried harder and harder to get her attention. Nor did she find much protection with the parents. When her siblings were after her, they always endeavored to make the disagreement look like Dunia's fault. The parents, preoccupied with other concerns and therefore gullible, seemed

generally to be taken in – particularly Mukhomor, who was inclined from the start to judge her harshly. Only Praskóv'ia would sometimes instinctively take pity on her daughter. No thought of an outright challenge to Mukhomor was imaginable, but quietly, privately she would sometimes offer Dunia a word of comfort.

Dunia's family did provide her one important service: the church service. Saint Nikita on the Claypits^[12], their local church, was just a few minutes' walk from their big gate downhill along Nikítnikov Lane. They regularly attended the Divine Liturgy on Sunday mornings and some other services on the great Church Holiday Feasts. It was an unquestioned tradition for the family, a custom they practiced because everybody had always done so; they maintained it routinely as part of the everyday course of life and because it was the way the Lord's world ran. They felt no need to give it much more thought.

But for Dunia, entering church meant entering a completely different world. It was the eternal and perfect Kingdom of Heaven, the holy uncreated light, the Lord on earth here and now and His sacrifice to redeem humanity; it was heavenly peace, the holy images, the smell of incense, the holy drama, the colors, the vestments, the sung and chanted Word, the music, all the senses rejoicing. It was the pure voice of God in His infinite love, and Holy Communion with Him. It became the dominating center of her life: to live in and for that world, to love the Lord above all things. She was viscerally repelled by any urge to put anything else first – whether her own individual safety or comfort, the opinion of others about her, any hint of pride or smugness, any material possessions, any family ties, any friendships or earthly romance.

She grew into a tall, strong, and attractive young woman – somewhat to her own dismay, since her appearance drew constant unwanted attention from strangers, most typically attempts on the part of burly young men to draw her into flirtatious banter. She manoeuvred her way past all this without batting an eyelash and without being drawn into any entangling contacts. She somehow had not the slightest interest.

Now Praskov'ia, devoted to Dunia's best interests as she firmly saw them, had her own plans for her handsome young daughter. She began to cast her eye out for an advantageous marital match. One day she sat Dunia down and said, "Now you listen to me, my dear. It's about time we're gonna have to find you a suitable, presentable young man. You know, one we can be seen with in public, from a good family – gotta find somebody who'll do credit to our own family, you know!"

"O, mámočka! Do we really have to worry about such things?" – said Dunia. "Maybe we can live without all that?" Letting herself be taken over by her mother's plans would be quite impossible. It would mean opening herself to precisely the sorts of snares and temptations she most needed to shun, from which she most recoiled.

Praskov'ia saw no room for question. She told her daughter self-assuredly, "Don't you worry, my little bunny, my dove! I know what's best for you!" And she proceeded to invite a young man whose family she knew through the St. Nikita Parish, and whom she considered a worthy potential catch, to come and make Dunia's acquaintance.

The would-be suitor, Mityúkha, tall, gangly, self-conscious, came calling with his mother. Praskov'ia had gone out of her way and prepared a fine table of mushroom and meat pie, savory pickles, fresh vegetables and fruit, and a tasty infusion of raspberries and honey on the finest fresh-baked sieve bread,^[13] all washed down with kvas and *braga*.^[14] Dunia sat silently at the edge of the table. She felt so sorry for that poor young man, set up through no fault of his own, led on, and dragged along; all for nothing. For a few moments she studied the visitors attentively, then leaned back and spent a good long time with her head dangling over the back of her chair staring intently at the ceiling, her mouth wide open, a trace of drool creeping down her cheek. Then she suddenly sat bolt upright and started slowly pouring kvas on each of the flowers in the fabric of her dress, methodically rubbing it in with her finger in careful circles. Her mother's eagle eye darted sideways; she sped to intervene and cut this nonsense short, quietly ordering Dunia's older step-sister to pinch her. Dunia overheard this and confronted her mother directly: "Mamochka, what's the

matter? Maybe you're specially fond of these flowers? That's all right, let them go: these are no flowers of paradise!"

Mityukha's mother later quietly told her son: "Don't make any difference her family's well provided for. Everybody's right: she's just plain stupid. Did you see her staring at the ceiling? My God! And her poor dress! We gotta avoid her like poison!" Mityukha shrugged his shoulders and looked plaintively at his mother as if he wanted to object, but said nothing. They didn't call again, or respond to further invitations.

After a few more such efforts by Praskov'ia, all of them neatly turned aside by Dunia, Praskov'ia and Mukhomor called Dunia in for a family council.

"What is this I hear?" – said Mukhomor, "that you're resisting all attempts to find you a good husband?"

Dunia was silent.

"Come come, Dunechka, are you trying to flout your mother's authority?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then! Are you going to accept your mother's word and marry whom she chooses for you?"

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid not, sir."

"What? How can you possibly justify such impudence?"

"I'm very sorry, sir, I mean no impudence. I just can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"I can't jeopardize my immortal soul that way. It would be wrong before God."

"How dare you talk like that? I'll show you what's right and wrong before God!" He raised his walking staff, took a full arm's length swing, and with all his might struck her across her back. She staggered and fell, uttering not a

sound. From where she lay sprawling on the floor she just looked up at Mukhomor with eyes the size of carriage wheels. Silently she got up and made her way to her bed, and lay there shaking. "Put not your trust in princes, in sons of men in whom there is no salvation,"^[15] she thought to herself. "Only the Lord is always true; people are all flimsy reeds." She felt a great wave of sympathy for her poor perplexed raging step-father. She began praying for him: "Oh Lord Jesus, please forgive him. He just doesn't understand; he has no idea what he's doing." And then she felt a great wave of shame and guilt for her own having dragged him into his all-too-predictable fit of rage. She added a fervent prayer for forgiveness.

As far as those around might judge, from this moment Dunia seemed to find a new tranquility. Now, when accused of some household transgression, much as before she would cross herself and stay quiet; but her face would relax into a new expression of peace and even tenderness, as if she were occupied in some silent internal prayer for those who harassed her. All attempts to control and tame her by arguments or shame or the occasional beating had no effect whatever.

Out in the city, hanging incessantly over the streets and lanes like a great beast poised to strike, was the constant threat of fire. Especially in winter, when all heated their houses,^[16] everyone was at risk. Dunia was haunted by the thought of being caught in the street – or even worse, at home – in the middle of the night. Moscow was just a well-laid stack of kindling waiting for the torch. The houses and other structures belonging to normal residents – barns, sheds, stables – were all of wood. Properties lay nestled tight against one another along the narrow streets and passageways. They were hidden behind the owners' tall wooden stockade fences, confronting anyone in the street with long unbroken stretches of wall on either side. When an errant spark touched off a blaze, it would spread like wind rushing through the trees. And when all these wooden structures burst on fire, in those streets there was no escape. Regularly, every few decades, great sections of Moscow were destroyed in catastrophic storms of flame with heavy loss of life, and smaller local fires leveled houses every week. The moment a fire was spotted, the great bell of the local church would burst out in the dreaded nervous warning peel reserved for dire emergen-

cies. It could wake you at any moment out of the deepest sleep into a mortal panic.

Fire brigades would come rushing to fight the flames. Special supplies of water were kept in strategic locations, and the wooden and thatched roofs would be hastily covered with wet animal skins and ship-sails, and continually wetted down. But the main defense against the fires was the axe: the fire brigades would mercilessly hack apart and forcefully clear away any structures that were in the path of the fire, in hopes of stopping its spread until the next cross street or lane. In general, of the total number of houses destroyed in a fire, only two-thirds fell victim to the flames themselves; the other third was demolished by the fire brigades.

One early April night in Dunia's sixteenth year, in Bright Week^[17] just after Pascha (Easter), when in daytime the streets were aswim in mud and in the frosty night their surface grew a crust of ice, all were jolted awake by the baleful fire signal of the great bell: boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom, ominous inexorable peals in urgent succession. Through the window, over the top of their fence along the lane uphill, they could see flames against the sky. The family scrambled to get wet coverings for the roof. A great commotion arose all around – sounds of people yelling and running up and down the lane, the chopping and crashing of properties being cleared, and over it all the terrible roar of flames. Mukhomor stepped out into the yard to peer through the front gate into the lane, and came charging back into the house shouting "Everybody out!" Even though they were downhill from the flames at the moment, prospects looked grave. Properties all round were scorching and exploding into flame, and the heat was nearly unbearable. "No time to grab anything, everybody out! Now!" And all the family rushed out the door – except Dunia, who stood in the icon corner^[18] gathering up the holy images in her shawl. "That's right, Dun'ka!" shouted her brother Andriusha over his shoulder as he bolted out the door. "You stay and look after everything here!" And the cry was taken up by all her siblings: "Dun'ka stays to look after things! Dun'ka stays! Dun'ka stays!" And they all dashed out into the ankle-deep slush and mud, the icy crust long since gone beneath dashing feet, and headed downhill to St. Nikita's.

Dunia did remain, abandoned and determined. Hugging the icons to herself, she prayed to the Holy Theotókos,^[19] Virgin Mother of God, to intercede and save them all from the fire. All around, the crashing of the fire brigade's devastating work continued unabated. But could it be that the thunder of the flames was just a bit quieter or further off? She suddenly came to her senses and ran to get more water for the roof coverings. As she leaned out of the upper window to splash the water on the roof, she could see that the flames really were receding, racing off uphill, driven faster by a sudden easterly wind. Falling to her knees, Dunia crossed herself, her face streaming with tears, and thanked the Virgin: the Theotokos had heard her prayers!

When the rest of the family returned to the house, some of them looked at Dunia sheepishly or avoided her gaze, others sullenly stared her in full in the face as if in silent challenge, but nothing was said about their having abandoned her to her fate with the flames. She somehow felt a great outpouring of warmth and sympathy for her fellow family members, so enslaved to their jealousies and accusations. She said nothing to them about her prayer and the Virgin's intercession.

She thought of how the Mother of God so graciously, so often, interceded for those in need of Her protection. She remembered the Virgin's great feast on October 14, the Protection or Intercession of the Most-Holy Theotokos (*Pokróv Presviatyia Bogoróditsy*),^[20] when the Mother of God had descended to the earth amidst a throng of saints and spread out Her protecting veil to save those beneath from catastrophe. The miracle had occurred in tenth-century Constantinople, when the Byzantine Orthodox Saint, Andrew the Fool for Christ, had seen this vision in the Blachernae Church as he was praying for salvation from enemy forces attacking the great city.^[21] She thirsted to learn more about St. Andrew: she had heard mention of his name in connection with the Holiday of the Intercession, but what about St. Andrew himself? What does it mean to be a Fool in Christ? She found it a mysterious epithet: somehow it picqued her curiosity and tugged naggingly at her attention. She went to St. Nikita's and diffidently asked Father Aleksandr, St. Nikita's Priest. He said,

"Dunia, my dear, don't ever be embarrassed to ask. This is a deep question: to ask about such foolishness for Christ is not at all foolish. First, remember the

ultimate example of our Lord Himself, with His own saving "foolishness" of self-sacrifice and death on the Cross. By the normal rules of the world this all makes no sense whatever. And remember also His words in the Beatitudes:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you for my sake.

Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in Heaven.^[22]

"And the words of St. Paul:

"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." And:

"If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God."^[23]

And Dunia said, "Yes, Father, I understand the folly of worldly wisdom. But why would anyone strive to become a fool himself? It seems right, in a way, since so much is backwards in the world. But why does becoming a fool actually mean becoming wise?"

"Ah, my child. Not just any kind of fool. It seems to me you already understand: it means a fool in the eyes of those who take the ways of the world, and themselves, too seriously. Is there anything holy about being "wise" in that self-serving, calculating kind of way? Is it a wonder that some are called to follow Christ's self-emptying sacrifice in their own lives, even to the extreme?" Then he added, "You know, Dunechka, we in Moscow had the precious gift from God of such a *iurodivyi* right here, in our very midst, quite recently: the blessed Vasilii, Fool in Christ. He fell asleep in the Lord just some thirty-plus years ago, in the year 65 of the seventh thousand.^[24] In the Lord's ineffable grace, I, most sinful among men, was granted God's gift of seeing Vasilii with my own unworthy eyes. Dunia, my dear; just imagine! You could just see that

the light of Christ was in him. You could feel it like the sun on your face! And now many wondrous stories are being told of him, and of miracles around his grave. He has just recently been glorified in sainthood. You have heard something in my sermons and in the teaching of the church, of course. You might be interested to learn more of him."

"Oh, yes, Father! Of course I know of him. But how could I become worthy to hear more of these stories?" Dunia asked.

"Easy as biting a radish. You know old Guri the beggar who hangs around our church – you could ask him. Or down among the crowds that mill around the St. Barbara Gates. Or better still, at the Church of the Virgin's Intercession (*Tsérkov' Pokrová Presviatyiá Bogoróditsy*, or *Pokróvskaia tsérkov'*) on Market Square, the very place where the Blessed Vasilií is buried.^[25] I should have mentioned that first of all. But really, any place where people gather: everybody is talking about him." And Dunia, ashamed not to have gotten wind of these tales before, but more grateful to Father Aleksandr than she could say, took her leave of him with thanks and a reverential request for his blessing.

Dunia had no trouble finding people knowledgeable about Vasilií the Fool, and more than willing to tell her about him. The Lord had prepared her to receive the word, and now was bringing it to her.

The stories told of how young Vása^[26] had been blessed from the start with the Lord's gift of prophesy: he was able to look into men's hearts and read their fates. As a boy Vasia was given by his parents into apprenticeship to a boot-maker. Soon his gift of prophecy became manifest. One day a prominent boyar appeared, making his condescending way into their workshop, carefully avoiding contact with anything that might brush against his elegant and spotless gown. He had come to order a pair of special boots custom-made, superior to all others; he said he needed them for a year hence. He gave detailed instructions down to the smallest stitch as to how they were to be measured, cut, and sewn. Young Vasia, who was standing listening, suddenly burst out laughing but then just as abruptly collapsed in tears. After the boyar had completed his order and stridden out, Vasia answered his master's stern demand for an explanation. He explained that, for all the fuss, this proud man would be quite unable to wear the boots he had ordered, since on the very next day he was going to be stricken dead. The master boot-maker did not believe him, and rebuked him harshly, but the next day it came to pass just as Vasia had said.

Soon thereafter Vasilii left his apprenticeship to seek out a holy man who might teach and lead him on the path of silent contemplation and constant prayer. He was fortunate to find a spiritual father, who taught him the prayer to Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,"^[27] which, his teacher told him, had been known since the earliest days of Christianity, and should constantly be in his heart and on his tongue.

At the age of 16 he began to live as *iurodivyi*. Once he made up his mind, he did not look back; he broke all ties with his former life as lightly as if he were brushing off spiderwebs. He tore his garments off his body, shredded them to bits, and flung them on the ground; and thereafter went about naked. He began creating outrageous scenes, scandalizing unsuspecting citizens by doing improper, offensive, and seemingly senseless things. As thanks for this he was constantly beaten and kicked and spat on. He was dragged by the hair, and insulted and scorned and humiliated. People would mock him, ridicule him, shun his company. By day he would roam as *iurodivyi*. By night he would pray secretly, out of view of witnesses.

In the merchants' stalls on Market Square and in Kitai-Gorod he would demonstratively destroy perfectly good food and drink being offered for sale – such as kvas and the best sieve-bread – and dash them from the merchants' tables into the mud. This caused great outrage. But in fact, he was actually attacking only the property of dishonest merchants who were tormenting their customers with exorbitant prices, though he did not call attention to this fact.

Walking the streets of Moscow, sometimes he happened past the dwellings of particularly good and pious people who loved their neighbors and cared about their souls. Here Vasilii would stop and gather up stones and start throwing them at the corners of those righteous people's houses, and would beat the walls with sticks and make a great commotion. In other cases, startled passers-by would report, if he passed by a house where there was drinking and fighting and cursing within, and all sorts of hatred and blasphemy and violence, he would stop there too, but there he would kiss the corners of the house and seem to be conducting sweet conversation with gentle invisible companions.

This caused confusion among the good citizenry who chanced to witness it. But there was hidden reason here as well. At the houses of the righteous, demons would be scrambling outside, trying to get in. And they would gather in their vile flocks and hang around the house-corners, unable to enter. Vasilii, who could see them perfectly well, was helping dislodge them and distract them, so they wouldn't interfere with the righteous who might want to come and go. In the houses of the evil-doers the demons rejoice and celebrate, but God's guardian angels, set at the moment of holy Baptism as protectors of people's souls, found they had no place within. These angels, weeping despondently outside the house, would be kissed by Vasilii, and it was with them that he would conduct his sweet discourse.

He retained his gift of prophecy. One day in early summer of 1521 he was in the Kremlin Dormition, or "*Uspenskii*," Cathedral,^[28] praying continually for Moscow's salvation from the Crimean Tatars. And as he did so he saw a vision. A terrible noise arose, and flames streamed from the icon of the Theotokos, proclaiming God's wrath on the Muscovites with an impending attack by the Crimean Khan Mekhmet-Girei. Vasilii prayed with all his might that this be averted. The Tatar attack really did ensue, with an incursion deep into Moscow's territory, but after camping in the fields outside the Moscow city walls the Tatar forces abruptly turned about and left. And what could have caused this but Vasilii's prayers for intercession by the Theotokos?

At other times, even though he could clearly foresee some impending doom, he felt powerless to forestall it. In 1547 he prophesied a major tragedy for Moscow in the form of a great fire. On June 23, he came to the Monastery of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross "On the Island" (*Monastyr' Krestovozdvízhenskii na Óstrove*); he entered the main Church of the Holy Cross, knelt in prayer before the icons in the church's nave, and began weeping bitterly. The very next day a great and terrible fire arose in that same church, spreading out from the Holy Cross Monastery to devour half the city, bringing catastrophic damage both to the old walled city of the Kremlin, including the chambers of the Tsar himself, and to the recently walled-in Kitai-Gorod. There was fearsome loss of life – the victims were estimated at 2,000 to 4,000 souls.^[29]

Once at the eastern edge of Kitai-Gorod in a church by the St. Barbara Gate, not far from where Dunia later was to live, Vasilii suddenly attacked and destroyed a miracle-working icon of the Virgin Theotokos, Holy Mother of God. He dashed it to the ground and hacked it to pieces with an axe. All who saw or heard were shocked, and subjected Vasilii to no end of abuse. But it turned out that once again Vasilii had discerned a disguised truth, for beneath the holy image of the Mother of God had been concealed the image of a ghastly demon.

The holy man came to the attention of the proud and terrible Tsar Ivan IV himself, who was dreaded for his merciless reprisals against his subjects, and some of the most memorable stories of Vasilii told of how he fearlessly stood up to the frightful tyrant. Once on an important church feast-day the Tsar was looking forward to seeing Vasilii at the Divine Liturgy service in the Uspenskii Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin. But Vasilii was nowhere to be seen. The Tsar managed to find the holy man afterwards, and he asked him why he hadn't been there. "You simply didn't see me," said Vasilii; "I was there. Actually it was you who were absent." Although the church was physically packed with people attending the service, he said, only three people were really there: the Metropolitan,^[30] the God-fearing Tsaritsa, and Vasilii himself. The Tsar, he said, was absent, absorbed in thoughts about the opulent new palace which he was having built for himself in the Sparrow Hills (*Vorob'ëvskie góry*) overlooking the Moscow River to the South-West of the city, and completely heedless of the Divine Liturgy proceeding around him. Taken aback by this unexpected criticism, he nonetheless accepted it humbly from Vasilii. "Pray for me, holy one," was all he said.

Vasilii repeatedly castigated Ivan for his repression of his subjects, whom God had put on earth for him to care for and protect. One such encounter occurred during Great Lent, when all Orthodox Christians observe the fast and abstain from meat and other rich fare including dairy products. Vasilii came to visit the Tsar and presented him with a huge piece of raw meat. The Tsar marveled, "How do you give me meat during Great Lent, when all know it's quite forbidden?" Vasilii answered "And does little Vania think it wrong to eat the flesh of beasts in Lent,^[31] but not worry about the vast quantities of human flesh that he has already devoured?"

The stories told of other such encounters of Vasiliï with the Tsar, and presented many other examples of the holy man's provocative and prophetic behavior, and his uncompromising witness to the truth. Dunia bowed her head at his exploit.

She heard repeatedly that it was just recently, around the time of the Blessed Vasiliï's glorification as a saint and his reburial in the Church of the Virgin's Intercession (*Tsérkov' Pokrová prechístyia Bogoróditsy*) on Great Market Square, that his wondrous miracles had begun to rise in a fountain of God's grace. People were gathering more and more frequently and in greater numbers at Vasiliï's grave. Miraculous cures were seen for the lame, the blind, and those most variously afflicted in body or in mind. One monk, Gerasim whom everybody called "the Bear," for many years had been unable to walk and had had to crawl on his knees, living as a beggar near the Frolóv Gate;^[32] until suddenly he was healed by Vasiliï's posthumous prayers. The miracles continued to accumulate, more and more of them. Places far away were affected: as the protector of sailors he saved a ship from storm in the Caspian Sea.

And Dunia continued to ponder all these stories and the many more which she encountered. There was much in this treasure-house for her to learn. She began leaving home more and more frequently at unpredictable times, praying until all hours at night, and initiating peculiar conversations with strangers, with a wild look in her eye – and the gossip made its way back to her mother and stepfather.

And so Dunia's parents decided they must take decisive measures. In hopes of bringing her to her senses, they took her on a chastening many-day pilgrimage far to the North, beyond Vólogda, to visit Father Antónii Chernoezérskii (Anthony of the Black Lake) in his Monastery of the Virgin's Birth (*Antónieva chernoezérskaia v chest' Rozhdestvá Bogoróditsy Pústyn'*). Father Antonii was renowned for his sanctity of life and his gift of vision, and was the sort of figure to whose authority Dunia's parents felt they could appeal.^[33] They traveled together with a party of other pilgrims. When they arrived, Praskov'ia could not help but notice the dilapidated condition of the few modest buildings. Hm! This was supposed to be a respected monastery, run by a man

with a wide reputation! Father Antonii came out at once to greet them, and accepted them all simply and graciously. He respectfully blessed Aleksei and Praskov'ia, and sent them to their local lodging in the village, but talked with Dunia for four hours. Their pilgrim fellow travelers, hanging around the monastery, were most offended by Antonii's paying so much attention to Dunia, and said among themselves, "What's he doing spending so much time with her? I mean, we're no poorer than her family; we can make just as good a contribution to his Pustyn'. How come he isn't spending any time with us?" Father Antonii, watching them pass the door of his cell, sensed their discontent. Stepping outside, he said to the pilgrims, "The riches I seek are not of this world but of the spirit." He released them in peace, and hurried back to his cell to continue his conversation with Dunia.

Late in the day, Dunia's mother, waiting for her in the village and seeing that it was high time to begin their trip home, lost her patience and went back to the monastery with her husband to fetch her daughter. Just as they approached Father Antonii's cell she and Mukhomor saw him lead Dunia out by the hand, bow to the ground before her, and say to her, "My dear and respected Avdot'ia, go now in the Lord's peace. You are on a holy and difficult path which you must see through to the end. But we send you home with a request. Some day when you are ready, please consider coming back to the Black Lake, to my other Pustyn', my women's Monastery of the Most Pure Virgin's Intercession (*Chernoezérskii zhénskii Pokróvskii monastyr'*), and help take care of the sisters. I expect this will not seem possible to you now; first you have other important work before you. But when you are ready we will be waiting for you with open arms, to help with the work of the Lord."

Mukhomor was already angry at having been kept waiting so long, at having his pig-headed and crazy step-daughter paid the honor of such a lengthy audience, and then at having to listen to such infuriatingly misplaced words of praise and respect. When he heard the strange declaration from Father Antonii, he said to his wife loudly, "Holy man! "Visionary!" Just a bit off his nut, is all!"

For Dunia, her conversation with Father Antonii, on top of what she had learned of the Blessed Vasilii, Fool in Christ, had a decisive effect on the further course of her life. Back home in Kitai-Gorod she made friends with a

merchant's wife, Sofia Ivan's daughter, who was already living the life of a *iurodivaia*. Under Sofia's tutelage Dunia learned more about the unceasing Jesus prayer, the prayer of the heart, which the Blessed Vasilii had found so valuable, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Had not the holy apostle Paul himself enjoined his Christian followers to pray constantly?^[34] She herself began to practice it, and this developed so far that she would spend entire nights absorbed in the prayer. It was clarifying and lightening, a tremendous aid in her struggle for self-purification. And as it became more and more habitual it seemed to enter ever more deeply into her heart. It became a constant activity and remained so for the rest of her life.

With her prayer and contemplation, chiefly by night, she began to feel more and more that she must perform exploits of *iurodstvo*, chiefly by day. There was no choice: it was an absolute imperative. If she loved the Lord, and loved His creation, she must bear witness to this love. She must bring people to their senses, shock them out of their comfortable commonplaces, help save their souls.

Daytime: people were up and about. They would be on the street, or out in the shops and market stalls, or in government offices – whether normal, productive, upstanding citizens or hopeless idlers and brawlers, whether busy with their practical, breadwinning, civic lives or foundering in some drunken stupor – every one of them completely absorbed in affairs of the moment. And all of a sudden a wraith-like figure, wild-eyed, matted-haired, rag-clad, would rise before them and make some sort of outrageous, loud, uncomfortable demand upon their attention. On the one hand it was clearly patent nonsense, but on the other, was there some haunting connection with their worries or dreams, or perhaps an uneasy conscience? In the face of these outrages, most people would turn away or flee, and many would attack her. But some would approach and ask for her prayers.

Once a stylish lady was out promenading in an elegant linen shawl. She was stopped by Dunia, who started grasping and tugging at the fine shawl with her filthy fingers: "Hey Auntie! Khriúki khriúki khriúki KHRIU!^[35] Come on, darling, let me have my rag back! Remember? You swiped it from me just

when I had my poor dead baby pig all wrapped up in it for burial!" This lady was not among those who asked Dunia for her prayers.

Her parents understandably grew increasingly scandalized, pained, and shocked. For them her behavior was a complete mystery. They pleaded and argued for her to return to reason and act like a normal person; but she remained altogether indifferent to their wishes. Mukhomor decided that he must undertake other serious measures to bring this behavior decisively to an end. He resolved first to try beating her back to her senses. And he thrashed her so mercilessly that despite her natural healthy and sturdy constitution her health began to suffer. Dunia made up her mind to stay away from his house as much as she possibly could. And she ran off into the city, to one church after another.

Once, in the dark of night in the dead of winter, half-naked, she sought shelter on the porch of a large church in Kitai-gorod. She found an empty coffin which had been prepared for a soldier who had succumbed to a current plague. She nestled inside it; and here, half frozen with the cold, she waited for death. A church guard caught sight of her. At first he took her for a corpse, but then he saw her move and heard her groan. He was so terrified by this ghostly apparition that he raised the huge fire-bell alarm – a deafening warning through all Kitai-Gorod, across Market Square, and to the Kremlin itself, waking the population panic-stricken in the conviction that another fire was upon them.

People would sometimes press alms upon Dunia for some modest support, but whatever came to hand she gave all of it away to the poor, or spent it on candles to light in church. Her parents would sometimes catch her, and her mother would try her best to talk sense to her: "My darling little Dunechka! Why do you resist so fiercely? You know we only want what is best for you. Please, for the love of God, just understand and accept it! I just go wild with the thought of how dangerous it is for you out in the streets all alone and unprotected like that, poor dear!" But no matter what enticements and arguments her parents used, or how often they dragged Dunia back to the house and locked her up, or punished her with cold and hunger, she would not relent: "Let me go;" she would cry – "I've been spoiled by Antonii and Vasili for any

normal life." She just wouldn't submit to her parents – even as she prayed constantly for their souls.

And her stepfather pressed ahead with his measures of constraint. He obtained a stout rope, and fastened it to an iron ring which he welded shut around Dunia's ankle with his own hands, tied her to the wall and admonished her with lengthy lectures about obedience and common sense. Sometimes she managed to break loose and burst out of the house, chain clanging, half-dressed, and would run through the streets to the consternation of all. Everyone she met was afraid of sheltering her, feeding her, or in any way protecting her from her stepfather's persecution. And so she would again be captured and be subject to new and harsher torments.

Praskov'ia was at the end of her resources and her patience. She had completely run out of ideas for possible solutions, and was quite tormented with worry about her daughter. She decided that she herself would once more go to pay a visit to the holy man, Antonii, in a desperate search for any ideas that might help. She made the trip, met with him and said, "Father, my daughter Dunia, remember we visited you not long ago? She's gone clear out of her mind! She's completely out of hand, she keeps running wild, she's impossible, she won't listen to any kind of reason. We've tried everything! But nothing helps! She makes all kinds of problems for our family, all the time! All our other girls want to get married: but poor dears, nobody will come near them out of fear they might turn out like Dunia. No one can talk any sense into her: she just won't listen. The problem_is_is, she's so awful strong; there's no way of keeping her under control by any normal means. So we did the only thing we could do: the only solution is, we've had to tie her up and lock her in."

"What!?! How is this possible?" – the elder's voice had never sounded so piercing. "How could you have done that? Release her this instant! Let her go free! If you don't, you will be horribly punished on her account by God! Let her go! Let her go! Don't you lay a finger on her! And of course she's strong: the Lord doesn't call weaklings to pursue her kind of path. For this sort of exploit He chooses only the strongest and most courageous. Don't you even think of restraining her by force, or else the Lord will wreak a terrible revenge on you."

In real fear of the wrath of God, Mukhomor and Praskov'ia immediately eased up on Dunia. They stopped tying her up, and no longer forbade her to leave the house. By day she was again abroad in the streets of Moscow: the picture of a *iurodivaia*, dressed in rags, challenging people in unexpected ways. She spent practically every night on the porch of one or another of the Churches in Kitai-Gorod, and she would pray to God for nights on end.

And so she spent a year and more, seldom appearing at her step-father's house. She never did cease visiting her teacher, the *iurodivaia* Sof'ia Ivan's daughter, the same one who had taught her the constant repetition of the Jesus prayer . She grew in confidence in her calling. Her zeal for the Lord matured and strengthened – for spreading His truth, for emulating His self-sacrificing and self-emptying example, for challenging the proud and powerful.

Early one fateful Sunday morning she visited the white stone church of the Holy Great-Martyr Barbara at the far end of Varvarka Street, towards the Kremlin.^[36] She arrived while it was still dark and few people were on the streets, and as she approached the church she witnessed a strange scene. Ahead of her, already at the top of the steps to the church's porch, was the ponderous corpulent figure of the church's Deacon,^[37] Father Feofan.^[38] Right in his path was one of the beggars who frequented the entrance to the church, old blind Pasha, kneeling on the porch, hunched over with his hat spread open before him. At the sound of approaching footsteps he straightened up and said with an appealing smile, "God save you for your mercy!" And here Deacon Feofan did something completely unexpected. He looked around hastily to see if anyone was watching, and not noticing Dunia he proceeded quietly to scoop up all the coins that lay in Pasha's cap, and then noisily and demonstratively threw a few back in. This made it sound as if he had actually made a contribution, probably quite a generous one. Pocketing his gain, Deacon Feofan disappeared into the church.

Dunia could scarcely believe her eyes. She crossed herself with a gasp and rushed up the steps to Pasha, fumbling in her ragged skirts for the few coins that she had brought with her to donate to the church. She dropped them in Pasha's cap and hugged him and cried at the top of her voice: "God bless you,

brother! You will get your reward in Heaven!" Not quite sure what had prompted this outburst, he simply said, "Bless you, sister. God save you!"

Dunia made her way into the church's great central space, the nave. It was a large, imposing building in its cool stone sturdiness, not like the more usual homely warmth of wood. Inside the nave, the church was opulently decorated, the walls covered with colorful icon-like frescos of all the familiar scenes from Holy Scripture, great Church holidays and lives of the saints. To the East, opposite the entrance, was the towering wall of the iconostasis, with its ascending row upon row of icons, mostly hiding from view the altar inside.^[39] All around were icons in jeweled metal frames, golden chandeliers, candlestands crowded with candles. Shining gold was everywhere, but the interior seemed somehow dark and heavy. Dunia found a spot off to the side and near the back. She stood there for some time, still shaken by what she had seen, praying for Deacon Feofan. People began arriving. Among the crowds of worshippers Dunia still stood in a daze. The Divine Liturgy began. The Antiphons, the Great and Little Litanies, the Little Entrance, the Trisagion and the Epistle succeeded one another in turn, and the moment came for the Gospel Reading. Deacon Feofan, large and imposing, beautiful in his gleaming vestments, in his golden *stikhár'* with his *orár'* over his shoulder,^[40] swayed slowly as he ascended the readers' platform.

"The reading is from the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew," he chanted in Church Slavonic.^[41]

"Glory to You, O Lord, Glory to You," sang the chorus, and from inside the altar came the answering Slavonic intonation from the priest, "Let us attend."

The altar boy held up the huge, heavily adorned Gospel with its shining metal frame and clasp and its precious stone inlays, faltered slightly under its weight, and then regained his balance in time for Feofan to find his place in the text. The Deacon began to intone the reading. He chanted the Gospel passage in a booming, didactic, condescending voice, the nails on his plump manicured fingers gleaming as he stroked his well-groomed beard:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where

neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. ...^[42]

And he looked around condescendingly at the parishioners. He seemed convinced that the sorry souls milling around him in the church were precisely those preoccupied with laying up treasures for themselves on earth.

But Dunia thought, "Poor, poor Father Deacon Feofan. May the Lord help him realize where his true treasure is!" And she crossed herself, became absorbed in the litany of prayers that followed, and soon had lost herself in the service.

But in the days that followed, Dunia continued to suffer over Deacon Feofan and the scene she had chanced to witness. One morning not long afterwards out in Kitai-Gorod she spotted the Deacon's substantial figure in street dress, leaning slightly forward elbowing his way disdainfully through the crowds and past the merchants' stalls along Varvarka. Without thinking, she rushed up to him, stood directly in his way, and shouted right in his face,

"Let us ATTEND!:

..Do you lay up for yourself treasures on earth? Just who is the thief that breaks in and steals?

He jumped and started back, involuntarily raising his arm in front of his face. He blurted out, "Why, you raving bitch! How do you dare teach *me*? Are you possessed?"

"Yes! Yes! Father Deacon Feofan, I am! I'm completely possessed! I'm possessed with mourning for the world!"

At this, Deacon Feofan rushed at her roaring, with fists flying and boots kicking, and knocked her to the ground. But just as suddenly he came to his senses, looked quickly around, and hastily withdrew from the scene, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. Dunia dashed off around the corner. Passers-by stood with their necks twisted in the direction of Dunia's disappearance, and crossed themselves.

Around the corner, behind the *Aglitskii Dvor* (English Merchants' Court) off Varvarka Street, Dunia knelt on the ground with tears streaming down her cheeks, convulsed with spasms, her whole body shaking uncontrollably, and prayed sobbing for Father Deacon Feofan and the whole poor broken world. For the first time she wavered, wondering if the exploit of *iurodstvo* was the best vehicle for her love for the Lord, – or, rather, if she was the right one to draw her neighbor into the sin of hatred and wrath by calling him so harshly to repentance.

It was not long before word of Dunia's shocking encounter with Deacon Feofan reached Praskov'ia's ears. Her own daughter! Such scandalous disrespect for the prominent and universally admired Father Deacon Feofan: everyone knows he is an outstanding member of the clergy in one of the most important churches in all Kitai-Gorod! It was impossible to take! How much can a long-suffering mother bear from her children? You suckle them and raise them and devote yourself to them completely and selflessly, and this is how they repay you? And the shame! It reflected so hideously on her, Dunia's poor anguished and self-sacrificing mother! Why would her little Dunechka want to do this to *her*? She racked her brain for some explanation, or for some solution that she hadn't tried before.

Suddenly she remembered their first visit to Father Antonii's Black Lake Convent, and Dunia's desire to go live there.

Maybe she should let her go to a convent, after all. But of course it must be somewhere better than that poor shabby Black Lake Pustyn', way off in the middle of nowhere! She hunted Dunia down in the city and tried earnestly to talk her into going to a more convenient or prestigious monastery. She especially stressed, most reasonably, that this would be, naturally, in Dunia's own best interests, of course: that was the main thing. She even offered her money. But Dunia had her heart set on the Black Lake Pustyn'. She answered firmly, "I am destined for Father Antonii's Convent, and will settle for nothing else."

By chance, one day not long afterwards a small party of three nuns from that very Convent happened to be in Moscow on monastery business. The group was led by Sister Ul'iana, a senior resident in the convent and a protegee of Father Antonii. As the three sisters from the Black Lake rode through the city, all of a sudden Dunia came running up to them out of nowhere, slipped into their carriage, and said to Ul'iana, "Dear sister, pray for me!" Sister Ul'iana without a moment's hesitation said, "My dear! Of course, dear sister! And for our beloved Lord Jesus' sake, will you pray for me, unworthy one?" They fell to talking. Dunia introduced herself, told Sister Ul'iana something of her life, and of her most recent encounter with the unfortunate Deacon Feofan; and she discovered where the sisters were from. She immediately invited Ul'iana and her traveling companions to come home with her for a brief visit. "Let's go to my family's house! We haven't a moment to lose. My step-father has no love for me, but he's well off and has plenty of everything. And I will welcome you with open arms. Let's go! Please! I need you to come!" The three nuns willingly accepted her invitation.

As they all sat around the table drinking kvas and eating fresh-baked bread, Sister Ul'iana recounted to Dunia's family how they had met. And she made a suggestion. Ul'iana said, "The life of *aiurodivyi* is a difficult and holy exploit, but Dunia is ready for a different path. Perhaps you might consider letting her come with us?" Everyone's gaze turned to Praskov'ia, who sat for a moment as if struck by thunder. But as the idea sank in, in the face of this actual concrete invitation her former reluctance to permit Dunia go to the Black Lake began to melt, and then quite disappeared. And she said, "Why, I suppose I'd actually be relieved for you to take her with you. It would be a real solution to my problems. Because we're just fed up with her, the Mother of God knows how we're at the end of our rope, it's been just terrible. Take her, for the love of Christ; we will pay you to help cover your extra expenses." To which Ul'iana said, "No; we don't need your money. We'll just consider ourselves blessed if she comes with us."

Dunia listened to this conversation in silence. At Ul'iana's last words she stood up and bowed before her visitor's feet like a normal, respectful, gracious lady and said, "Dear sister! I am ready to go, although I am completely unworthy. If

you think I can be of service I will be eternally grateful to be taken under your care!"

All the family members present were amazed at the change in Dunia. They were so used to her behaving like a lunatic that they had long since been convinced she actually was one. Mukhomor snorted, "My God! Look at this LADY! But I gotta warn you! You better be ready: if you take her, she'll just run off wild again."

Everyone in the room was even more surprised when Dunia turned and bowed humbly before her stepfather's feet, and answered him in a quiet voice, addressing not only him, but the entire family. "Please forgive me, for the sake of Christ, for all I've put you through. I've always loved you and prayed for you, but I have not made your lives easy. Now you will be quite free of me. Till my grave I'll never again return here. I humbly beg you to pray for me, all of you." She felt as one with all sinful humanity, including her stupid, coarse, selfish, violent family. So what if they were sinful? Who was without sin? Certainly not she, the first of sinners.

And so they set out for the Black Lake, Dunia with the three nuns. As they rode out of Kitai-Gorod through the St. Barbara Gate, Ul'iana turned to Dunia and said, "Dunechka. Do you know how we happened to be in Moscow?"

"Not really. I know you had some business for Father Antonii and the Convent. Some special obedience?"

"Yes, yes," said Ul'iana. But do you know what?"

"No," said Dunia, looking blankly across at her.

"Why my dear! Our task was to bring to fruition one of Father Antonii's most cherished dreams: to go to Moscow to find you, and bring you back with us to the Black Lake! The object of our trip was you! Father Antonii instructed us not to accept 'no' for an answer: actually, we were prepared for you to refuse us

at first, and even offer some resistance. But see how perfectly God prepared His plan: it seemed to work all by itself – we scarcely had to say a word!"

Dunia timidly asked Ul'iana, "Are you really sure I can be of service in the Convent? What I said at our family table about being unworthy is completely true. My encounter with Father Deacon Feofan has shown me that it is not for me to continue rebuking my neighbor and provoking him to sinful wrath. What the Holy Apostle Paul says to the Romans, he is saying directly to me:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

So then, each of us will be accountable to God. Do Not Make Another Stumble.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another.^[43]

I feel I must abandon my *iurodstvo* and serve the Lord in other ways. But is that not a terrible failure, not to continue the path I began so confidently?"

Ul'iana turned again to look Dunia directly in the eye and said, "How often we don't know our own strength, nor understand our part in God's plan. Our neighbor may well benefit much more from rebuke and provocation than from flattery. You probably did a great service to that poor Deacon. And you didn't put yourself above him: it's clear that you judge yourself by the same standard. Remember the words the holy apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians: 'Let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin.'^[44]" And in this point you have not sinned.

And about your embarking on a new path: many are called to the exploit of *iurodstvo* only for a time, when it suits God's purposes best. Not all are like the Blessed Vasilii the Fool of Moscow, who once they enter that path never leave it. You have lived your life in the Lord and you have nothing to be ashamed of as you progress to another path of service. Or even – who knows? You may still be called to further exploits as *iurodivaia* among us!"

"But what prompted Father Antonii to choose this moment to send for me? He knows that I have been completely occupied here in Moscow. How did he know I was ready, when I wasn't yet sure, myself?" asked Dunia."

"Oh, he knew." And Ul'iana winked at Dun'ia with a mysterious smile. "The Lord told him that the time was ripe. And see how right He was!"

[Return to top of page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Foreword](#)

Suggestions for Further Reading

Much fuller bibliography will be found cited in some of the works listed below. We have included a few titles in Russian because of their importance in studying the subject. In the citations below, the Russian works are cited with an English translation of the title in square brackets; this is provided only as a guide to the subject of the book, and should not be taken to mean that the books themselves have English titles. These Russian-language titles are listed below with an asterisk ().*

**Blazhennaia Pelageia Ivanovna Serebrennikova : skazaniia o Khrista radi iurodivoi podvizhnitse Serafimo-Diveevskogo monastyria* [The Blessed Pelageia Ivanovna Serebrennikova : Tales about the *iurodivaia* ascetic for Christ's sake of the Serafimo-Diveevskii Monastery]. M. : Pravoslavnyi Sviato-Tikhonovskii bogoslovskii institut, 2003. 158 p.

The hagiographic work which suggested the life of Dunia, the subject of this portrait – although Dunia's story wound up very different.

*Fedotov, Georgii P.

Sviatye Drevnei Rusi [Saints of Ancient Rus']. Rostov-na-Donu :

"Feniks", 1999. 378 p. (Istoricheskie siluety)

Earlier editions, with various publishers: 1931, 1959, 1985, 1990, 1991, 1997 and others.

Chap. 13, "*Iurodivye*," is a classic introduction to the subject, including an analysis of the principles characterizing the exploit of *iurodstvo*.

*Ilarion (Alfeev), Episkop

Sviashchennaia taina tserkvi : vvedenie v istoriiu i problematiku imiaslavskikh sporov [The sacred mystery of the Church: introduction to the history and problems of the Name-worshipping controversies]. SPb. : Aleteiia, 2002. 2 v.

For those able to read Russian, this is a detailed and clear elucidation of

many of the central church-historical and theological issues in Eastern Orthodox ascetism, mysticism, and such particular points as the Jesus Prayer, Hesychasm, Silence, and Name-worshipping.

Ivanov, Sergei A.

Holy fools in Byzantium and beyond / Sergey A. Ivanov ; transl. by Simon Franklin. Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2006. xi, 479 p. (Oxford studies in Byzantium)

An English translation, with major additions and revisions, of the author's *Vizantiiskoe iurodstvo* [Byzantine *iurodstvo*] (M. : "Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia", 1994. 234 p.)

This is the most detailed history and study of *Iurodstvo* in English, with new original source material and analysis; represents an analytic social-scientific approach, without much claim to presenting or even confronting the spiritual and theological issues.

*Kovalevskii, Ioann

Iurodstvo o Khriste i Khrista radi iurodivye Vostochnoi Russkoi Tserkvi : istoricheskii ocherk i zhitiiia sikh podvizhnikov blagochestiia [*Iurodstvo in Christ and iurodivye for Christ's sake in the Eastern Orthodox Russian Church: an historical sketch and lives of these zealots of piety*]. M. : Donskoi monastyr', 1992. 284 p.

Originally published: Moskva : Izd. A.D. Stupina, 1902.

A study rich in detail, with Scriptural foundations and many excerpts and summaries from Lives of *iurodivye*, told from a traditional pietistic Orthodox perspective as of ca. 1900.

Mathewes-Green, Frederica.

The Jesus prayer : the ancient desert prayer that tunes the heart to God / Brewster, Mass. : Paraclete Press, 2009.

Murav, Harriet

Holy foolishness : Dostoevsky's novels & the poetics of cultural critique. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1992. 213 p. : ill. ; 23 cm.

*Preobrazhenskii, A. S.

"Vasilii Blazhennyi." [Article in:] *Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia* [Eastern Orthodox Encyclopedia], t. VII. M. : Tserkovno-nauchnyi tsentr "Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia," 2004. p. 123-128.

*Followed directly by companion article "Ikonografiia" on the iconography of Vasilii Blazhennyi by K. Iu. Erusalimskii, p. 128-131.

An authoritative recent summary of what is known concerning Vasilii Blazhennyi (St. Basil the Blessed).

The Way of a pilgrim and The Pilgrim continues his way / transl. from the Russian by R.M. French. New York : Seabury Press, [1974] x, 242 p.
Other editions: 1954, 1965, etc.

An autobiographical account of the life of an unknown 19th-century Russian pilgrim and wanderer, in whose life the "Jesus Prayer" plays a dominant role. Not directly representative of *iurodstvo* as such, this is still an absorbing and convincing introduction to the spirituality of the culture close around.

* Starred items in the list above are in Russian.

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[Return to top of page](#)

[Foreword](#)

^[1] In Dunia's case, the term should more properly be *iuródivaia*, which is the feminine equivalent of *iuródivyi*. The plural for either gender is *iuródivye*. The related term *iuródstvo* denotes the state, or condition, or exploit of living the *iuródivyi*'s life, and could be translated as something like 'holy foolery' or 'holy foolishness'.

^[2] The term "Rus' " refers primarily to the Medieval East Slavic-speaking territories whose successor states are modern Ukraine, Belarus', and Russia. It is anachronistic to use the term "Russia" for periods and territories earlier than the 14th-17th centuries, when it begins to be appropriate for the increasingly powerful Muscovy or Muscovite Rus'; and not ever appropriate to use it for Belorussian or Ukrainian territories outside Muscovy. "Russia" becomes particularly applicable from the period of the Russian Empire (chiefly from the 18th century) onwards. Sometimes the designation "Old Russia" is informally used to denote the Medieval period of what is now Russia. But it is preferable to call it "Medieval Rus'," and to reserve "Old Russia" for the 17th-19th centuries.

^[3] The term *blazhennyi* is also used for the two western saints Jerome [Slavonic *Ieroním*] and Augustine [Slavonic *Avgustín*]).

^[4] Ivan IV Vasil'evich "Groznyi" (the terrifying, the dread, the terrible), 1530-1584, Tsar from 1547 (note simplified transcription used in this essay).

^[5] Kitai-Gorod was the merchant section of Moscow – adjacent to the Kremlin on the East, and perhaps a third again larger; the two are separated by the large clear space now known as Red Square, then called the Market or Market Square. Like the Kremlin, Kitai-Gorod was surrounded by its own imposing brick fortress wall, in its case built in 1534-

1538, with heavy gates beneath guard towers where major thoroughfares passed through. The walls were demolished by the Soviet regime, but in today's Moscow the major streets and many historic buildings, and some consciousness of the region, still remain. A tiny remnant of the wall and a subway station bearing the region's name now mark a very small part of the formerly extensive region.

^[6] In this essay acute accent marks will be used to mark the stressed syllable in Russian words, and other foreign or uncommon terms, as they first occur. A reminder: although described in what may pass for straightforward declarative historical prose, most characters and events in this essay are fictional, "real" only to the degree that they ring true.

^[7] *Dúnia* (which rhymes with *petunia*), *Andriúsha*, and *Vánia* are the standard diminutive and affectionate forms of the canonical Christian names Avdótia, Andréi, and Iván, respectively.

^[8] Varvárka Street, 'St. Barbara Street,' was and is the southernmost of the main west-to-east running streets in Kitai-Gorod. From its western end, opening on Red Square (then called the Market, or Market Square) near what is now known as St. Basil's Cathedral, Varvarka ran East, parallel to and inside Kitai-Gorod's southern wall, on the north bank of the Moscow River. At the street's far end it passed out through Kitai-Gorod's eastern wall at the St. Barbara Gate (*Varvárskie voróty*). The St. Barbara Church (*tsérkov' velikomúchenitsy Varváry*), which gave the street its name, stands on Varvarka street to this day (see also fn. 33 below).

^[9] "*Mukhomór*" was Aleksei's so-called *klichka*, his nickname. Such idiosyncratic, vivid, pointedly descriptive nicknames were very common in the Muscovy of the time.

^[10] A poisonous mushroom, the "*Amanita muscaria*," one of whose traditional folk uses in Russia is in a potion to kill flies; the Russian word "*mukhomór*" means, literally, 'fly-killer'. In old Muscovy it is known to have been used as a nickname, some of whose bearers have left descendents in today's Russia with the family name Mukhomórov.

^[11] In today's Kitai-Gorod section of Moscow the former Nikita Lane is now called Nikítnikov Lane (*Nikítnikov pereúlok*)

^[12] The church's full Russian name was "*Tsérkov' sviatágo múchenika Nikíty Vóina na Gliníshchakh*, its epithet *na Gliníshchakh* 'on the clay-pits' referring to the red clay hillside on which it stood. In Dunia's time the church was wooden; in the 17th century this structure burned down and the church was rebuilt in stone. This stone church still stands today, under the name the "Church of the Life-giving Trinity in the Nikitniki Region" (*Khram Zhivonachál'noi Tróitsy v Nikítnikakh*), with several chapels, including one still devoted to St. Nikita.

^[13] Sieve-bread (*sitnyi khleb*) was bread made of flour sifted through a fine sieve, distinguished from the coarser screen-bread (*reshëtnyi khleb*).

^[14] Kvas and *braga* were among the traditional drinks in old Muscovy, before the import of foreign beverages like vodka, tea, and coffee. Both kvas and *braga* are the result of fermentation: the former, from bread, non-alcoholic; the latter, from fruit or grain, mildly intoxicating, like a new raw wine or beer.

^[15] From Psalm 145 in the Greek Septuagint and Eastern Orthodox tradition (Ps. 146 in the Latin and western tradition), a passage very familiar to all Orthodox Christians since it is chanted as part of the Second Antiphon near the beginning of each Divine Liturgy service.

^[16] Most houses were heated in the "black way", without chimneys, whereby you lived with a careful balance of open windows for fresh air and a blazing stove for heat, and made sure to stay below smoke level in the house. This practice of course increased the danger of fire, for loose sparks often issued from the stove, unconstrained by pipes and chimneys, and ignited the roof from inside. At least Dunia's family's house had a chimney.

^[17] Bright Week is the first week directly following the Feast of the Resurrection, Pascha (Easter). It is normally highly festive and celebratory.

^[18] The Icon Corner is a small worship space prepared in the homes of Eastern Orthodox Christians, typically an eastern corner in one of the main rooms of the house. Here is where the icons that the family owns are concentrated, and it is the center of worship in the home.

^[19] Theotókos (lit. 'God-bearer', in the sense of 'birth-giver') is the Greek epithet of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is frequently used directly in English; in the Russian church the equivalent is *Bogoróditsa*.

^[20] This was and remains an especially beloved and revered holiday in Old Rus' and modern Russia, central in the cult of the Theotokos and her protection or intercession with her son on behalf of threatened and suffering humanity. The Slavonic word *pokrón* means 'veil', and sometimes the name of the holiday is rendered in English as the Holiday or Feast of the Virgin's Protecting Veil.

^[21] St. Andrew's Life was very popular in old Rus', – partly for his role in initiating the Holiday of the Intercession; partly since he was frequently thought to have been a Slav by origin, taken captive and raised in Byzantium; and partly since the institution of *iurodstvo* itself seemed to have a special attraction in Rus'. Andrew is known in Greek as *sálos*, the equivalent of 'fool' *oriurodivyi*.

^[22] The Beatitudes are sung as the Third Antiphon near the beginning of the Orthodox Liturgy; this selection comes from Mat 5:10-11.

^[23] The two quotes are respectively from: 1 Cor. 1:27 and 1 Cor 3:18.

^[24] In the year 7065 in the Byzantine & Muscovite way of reckoning, counting from the supposed creation of the world in 5508 BC, that is, the year 1557 A.D. by the Christian reckoning.

^[25] This cathedral, which stands prominently on Red Square (formerly Market Square), is now known as the Cathedral of St. Basil the Blessed (*Khram Vasiliia Blazhennogo*), or St. Basil's Cathedral, and is one of the most renowned churches in all of Russia. Although it is now primarily linked with the Blessed Vasilii the Fool, it was originally simply the Church of the Virgin's Intercession, built in 1555-1561 at Tsar Ivan Groznyi's command to celebrate Moscow's capture of the Khanate of Kazan' on the Holiday of the Intercession in 1552. When Vasilii died in ca. 1557 he was evidently first buried in another place (now unknown), but when he was glorified as Saint in 1588 he was reburied in the Cathedral, which subsequently became known by his name. It was then that the legends began their most active circulation and were recorded in written hagiographic form.

^[26] Vása is the normal familiar shortening of the name Vasilii. Vasia and Vasilii are the same person.

^[27] In later ascetic practice the phrase "...a sinner" was added to the end, so that in the nineteenth century "Way of a Pilgrim," for instance (see *Suggestions for Further*

Reading at end of this chapter), the prayer reads, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

^[28] The Cathedral's full Russian name is *Sobór Uspéniia Presviatyia Bogoróditsy* or *Uspenskii sobor* for short, 'the Cathedral of the Dormition, or the "Falling Asleep," of the most Holy Theotokos'.

^[29] Both the Tatar raid of 1521 and the fire of 1547 are events attested in the historical record. In the case of the 1547 fire, the Monastery and Church of the Elevation of the Cross (*Vozdvizhenie Zhivotvoriáshchago Krestá Gospódnia*) were located in what is now the Arbat section of Moscow on the present *Vozdvizhenka* Street. Although neither of these structures now survives, the street still bears their name.

^[30] The Metropolitan of Moscow was the chief Bishop in charge of the entire Muscovite Orthodox Church under the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Soon after Tsar Ivan's time, at the end of the 16th century, the Metropolitan was elevated to independent Russian Patriarch, a sign of the growing strength of Moscow.

^[31] The use of the familiar diminutive form *Vánia* instead of the normal formal *Ivan* denotes a shocking familiarity when addressing the Tsar – something like saying "And does little Johnny think..."

^[32] The Frolóv Gate was the main entrance into the Kremlin from Market (Red) Square, in the imposing Frolov tower – these are now known as the Spásskii Tower and Gate.

^[33] Father Antonii is a known historical 16th-century Muscovite saint, known as having founded the *Rozhdestvá Bogoróditsy Pústyn'* men's monastery; he died in the Lord in 1598, and his Feast day is celebrated January 17.

^[34] For example in 1 Thes 5:16-18 and Rom 12:12

^[35] This is the standard Russian representaton of a pig's snort, and could be represented as something like "Oinky oinky oinky OINK!"

^[36] This church was built in 1514 by the Italian architect Aloísio Lamberti da Montagna, known in Russia as *Alevíz Friázín* (Aloís 'the Italian') or *Alevíz Nóvyi* ('the New'). He was responsible for building a number of imposing white stone churches in Moscow, most celebrated among them the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael (*Arkhángel'skii sobór*) which still stands in the Kremlin. In 1796-1804 St. Barbara's Church was rebuilt on Aloisio's old foundation: while bearing the same name, the church that now occupies the spot is no longer the original structure.

^[37] Deacon is a special rank within the orthodox clergy, ordained in the sacrament of holy orders, as are priests and bishops. Serving under the priest, a deacon is responsible for helping celebrate the Divine Liturgy and other services. He leads the congregation in prayer, reads from Scripture, and sometimes participates in distributing the Eucharist to the faithful. Deacons may be married, subject to the same conditions as priests.

^[38] In Dunia's time the borrowed Greek personal name Feófan was pronounced "fe-O-fan," accented on the first "o" -- as its equivalent Theóphanes is in English still today. A century later many Russian names were changed under Ukrainian influence during the church reforms of the time. As a result, in modern literary Russian the name is pronounced fe-o-FAN. The old pronunciation is still reflected in one of the current informal spoken forms of the name, Fófan.

^[39] In an Eastern Orthodox church the entire space behind the iconostasis is called the "altar." The altar is considered the "holy of holies", for it is within it on the altar table that the Holy Mysteries are celebrated, together with the congregation standing in the

nave. Everything inside the altar is directly involved in this celebration, and only those having a leading role in celebrating the services normally enter the altar.

^[40] The *stikhár'* is the deacon's specialized robe or gown; the *orár'* is a stole, an ornate strip of cloth carried, worn and used by the deacon in the service.

^[41] Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of the Holy Scriptures and the entire church service, is like an ornate, old fashioned relative of the spoken Russian everyone used and uses in daily life. It is still the language of the Russian Orthodox Church services. And the entire service is in music, all chanted and sung without the use of any musical instruments. Only the priest's sermon is spoken, not chanted; and it is delivered not in Church Slavonic but in language closer to normal, everyday speech.

^[42] From Matt 6:19-21.

^[43] From Rom. 14:10-13.

^[44] Eph 4:25-26.