

The Golden Chain of Saints

Who walks down this dusty road?

Antonis put his pen down. “Who walks down this dusty road?”

It had resonance. The present tense gave it a sense of immediacy; the interrogative a whiff of mystery. He searched the line for clues which might lead him to its successor. Who is the who? Where is the dusty road? Why is the who walking down it? Pushing his chair back from the cluttered table which served as his work-space, he shook a cigarette from a shiny packet, clasped his hands behind his head and stared out of the window.

The office of Ayiomamitis Transport overlooked the Palodia waterfront, the custom-house and Venetian fort guarding the entrance to the harbour. Out in the roads an Adriatica steamer was discharging cargo to the lighters bobbing under her skirts. Beyond the Kersonisos headland the Mediterranean glistened in bright spring sunlight to the horizon. Beyond that the desert shores of Egypt. Alexandria – a Greek city one thousand years before the infidel prophet was born – its wondrous Pharos, its library and royal palaces celebrated throughout the ancient world. Alexander – Antonis saw a fair-skinned youth, a student, a poet, an uncompromising loner, travelling to the ends of the earth in search of his destiny.

A brief examination of his ancestry leaves one unsurprised that Antonis Ayiomamitis, who at this point of his life was an aspiring writer, should be remembered, if at all, for his lawless rather than his literary exploits. The name Ayiomamitis suggests that one’s ancestors inhabited the hill village of Ayios Mamas, which takes its name from one of the island’s most illustrious saints. Before he became a saint, Mamas was a poor hermit who lived in a cave. One day the Duke sent soldiers to arrest him for non-payment of taxes. Mamas offered the exquisitely reasonable argument that as he lived in a cave, did not use the public highroads or take part in any aspect of community life, he should be exempt from tax liability. But the soldiers said they were just doing their job, and took him

under arrest. On the road to the capital a lion sprang out and made as if to devour a woolly lamb which was gambolling in the path. The terrified soldiers ran away, but Mamas gathered up the lamb and mounted the lion as if it had been a gentle ass. And so he rode all the way to the capital, up the steps of the Duke’s palace, and into the throne room. The Duke was so amazed that he announced that Mamas need never pay taxes for the rest of his life. In his icon St. Mamas is shown riding the lion with the woolly lamb in his arms. It is much revered by those unfortunates suffering at the hands of ruthless tax-collectors.

But the name Ayiomamitis, for those who still remember, has another, not so benign connotation. It is a name which, in the early days of British rule, when the hill villages were still lawless places, struck terror into the hearts of many. Antonis’ great-grandfather, Evagoras, and his five brothers waged a blood feud against certain families from the village of Masari which lasted for thirty years, and ended only when the antagonists were dead or had been deported. Evagoras and his brothers came from a long line of yidovoski – tough ruthless herdsmen who drove their flocks of yellow-eyed, rangy goats over the countryside, devastating not only the natural ground cover, which kept the soil from being washed away, but the crops of villagers who were too intimidated to retaliate. It was only when one of the brothers seduced a girl from Masari and refused to marry her when she became pregnant that the men of that village plucked up enough courage to challenge the Ayiomamitis family. Invoking the *lex talionis*, five of them abducted Evagoras’ little sister Iris, and returned her three days later with a letter pinned to her blouse. The letter extolled Iris’ charms, and declared that if she became pregnant, any one of the five undersigned would be prepared to claim paternity. The Ayiomamiti were swift to exact a terrible revenge. Lying in wait at a place called Kopsimo, they took hold of one of the Masari rapists, and cut off his genitals with a piece of broken glass. They nailed their trophy over the door of the village coffee-shop, and swore that their vendetta would not cease until the other four offending appendages were nailed beside it.

How one branch of the family transformed itself in the space of two generations from being virtual outlaws to respected Palodian businessmen is a feat of social evolution for which Antonis' grandmother Ipatia, with a little help from Eros, could claim the credit. The only child of a Palodian wainwright, Ipatia fell hopelessly in love with Evagoras' second son Sotiris, who was trying to break into the haulage business with a pair of stolen mules. Such was the strength of her passion for the handsome ruffian that she challenged her father's authority, and declared that if he would not allow Sotiris' name to be added to the list of her suitors, she would renounce her dowry and run away. After weeks of her cajoling the doting parent reluctantly acceded. The marriage, to the confusion of the sceptics, was a glorious success, proving to Ipatia, at least, that love really does conquer all. After Sotiris was killed fighting the Turks at Gallipoli there were very few who dared to allude to his disreputable family connections. Although he left Ipatia a widow in the midst of her blazing beauty, she never again looked at another man, claiming that Sotiris had given her all the loving a respectable woman needed.

Flesh and blood evidence of some of this loving existed in the forms of Giorgos and Thekla. Giorgos was taken into the family business, which by this time had sensibly adapted to the spread of mechanisation, and consisted chiefly in the hire of motorised wagons, although Ipatia's father continued to practise his ancient skills for special customers until the day he died. Thekla married a Maronite who went to fight for the British in World War Two and was killed by the Germans in the battle for Crete. Thekla did not wear widowhood as elegantly as her mother. She became withdrawn, obsessed to a morbid degree with the upbringing of her only child, a robust little extrovert called Tassos. By the end of the war Giorgos had a fleet of four Commer trucks which handled a large portion of the haulage business centred on the port of Palodia. He had married Cleopatra, youngest and prettiest daughter of the town's leading oenologist. They lived in a two-storey house in fashionable Gladstone Street with their three children –

Maroulla, Antonis and Elli. On the day when Antonis penned the first line of his story he was twenty-eight; Maroulla, who had offended her family by marrying a socialist, was twenty-nine; Elli, who could offend no-one, was barely twenty.

The smell of coffee insinuated itself into Antonis' creative flow.

"Your Pa wants yesterday's fuel docket and says not to forget about the baptism." Pavlos Pavlou placed a battered tray among the overflowing ashtrays and helped himself to one of Antonis' cigarettes. Although a mere messenger-cum-teaboy, Pavlos Pavlou felt justified in taking such liberties because of his family connections. He was first cousin to Nicos – Elli's husband, father of Constantinos, whose baptism was to be solemnized that day.

"Name a port on the Black Sea."

"Varna."

"A Russian port."

"Odessa."

"Thank you." Antonis made a note in his exercise book.

School-children in blue pullovers and white shirts were massing on the seafront. It was March 25th, Greek Independence Day. Antonis noticed something missing. "Didn't we use to carry Greek flags in the parade?"

"The English have forbidden Greek flags this year."

"Asikteer! Do they think the kids are going to chase them out of Kythrea with little paper flags? Pezivengi!" Antonis returned his attention to the work in progress. "When was the Bolshevik revolution?"

"Fucked if I know. Have to ask that brother-in-law of yours. He'll be attending the baptism, I suppose." Pavlos Pavlou was feeling miffed because he had been delegated to look after the shop while everyone else was in church.

Philip's mother was a Russian princess, descended from a branch of the Czar's family who, in fear of their lives, had fled St. Petersburg and were trying to reach Odessa.

"Aday koumbari! Drink your coffee and go. Your Pa is waiting."

