



*Rachoff*

a true story

Karl Josef Friedrich

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*Der Fall Rachoff* (“The Case of Rachoff”) was first published by the FurcheVerlag, Berlin, in 1919. Though based on historical fact (the original source is a summary of Rachoff’s life in *Hefte zum Christlichen Orient*), the story was fleshed out by the author, and similar liberties (including a few abridgments) have been taken in preparing this translation. The anecdotes and spirit of the story remain unchanged.

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Frank S. S. S. S.

## *Rachoff - A True Story*

**READER, BEHOLD YOUR HAND.** Sometimes I watch my own as I write; or as I hold it up, fingers spread, so that it gleams like a pale star against the dark background of books piled on my table. The human hand –this bundle of bones, flesh, and nerves – think of all it can do. It can bless or curse. It can draw blood or bind a wound. It is gentle, agitated, vicious; supplicating, ardent, tender. It can weld an iron bridge or caress a child’s head. It possesses the power to both harm and heal

**RACHOFF WAS FOURTEEN** when the devout old Timofei, a dealer in wheat and a guest in his father’s house, laid a blessing on him. Taking the young man’s hands in his, Timofei reverently made the sign of the cross on them and said, “Vassili Ossipovich Rachoff, I hereby set a seal on your two hands, that you may never use them for anything evil, impure, or shameful, but only to comfort, give, and heal. Your hands shall rest tenderly on brows furrowed with pain and care; they shall gently rub weary backs. They shall carry

food, drink, and warm clothes to the poor. They shall be a blessing to everyone.”

Deeply stirred, Rachoff knelt before the old man for a long time, his large, earnest eyes searching the wooden floor, his ears reddening with a sense of inadequacy. Timofei’s words had struck him and sunk quickly to the depths, and yet he could still hear their echoes, their strange and wonderful sound. What did they mean?

Timofei turned and went, and not long afterward he died. But his words did not die. “Your hands shall be a blessing to everyone.” That was at once a consecration and a call. God himself had put the words into Timofei’s mouth, and they had power. Power to change and to purify. Power to grant a vision that grew ever clearer.

Rachoff was born in 1861, the son of a respected citizen in Archangelsk, a city far in the North between the vast Russian tundra



The restored villa of a 19<sup>th</sup>-Century German merchant in present-day Archangelsk.

and the White Sea. Like Timofei, his father was a grain merchant, though well-to-do. Rachoff grew up in his father’s large, stone town-house near the harbor and was expected to follow

in his father’s footsteps. After he turned seventeen he was apprenticed to a family friend, a merchant who owned a large German export firm, and every day he went to this man’s house to learn all he could about commerce.

Though successful, Rachoff's master was not a worldly man but a sincere believer who was more concerned with inner, rather than outer, things. On Rachoff's eighteenth birthday, he presented the young man with a Bible. Looking at him intently he said, "You are as a son to me, dear Rachoff, and I have long wished to seal your eyes as a father would. See clearly when you read this book. Everything depends on it. If your eyes are not truly open, you may as well be blind." Then he blessed Rachoff, saying: "I seal your eyes as a father would, so that God's Word is not an obstacle to you but a source of comfort, wisdom, and peace. Your eyes shall see nothing in this holy book but Jesus' power and great love." Rachoff stood there, startled and perplexed as the strange word "seal" rang again in his ears. What could it mean?

Soon Rachoff was reading the Bible almost every evening. He had to read it secretly, for his father, an Orthodox believer who felt that the study of God's Word was better left to priests, would not have approved. But that did not matter, for the merchant's words were true: Jesus spoke to him from every page – and not only spoke, but turned his life upside down, robbing him of complacency and setting him on edge. And that is how it should be, because it is written, "He who draws near to me draws near to the fire."

The next winter a distant cousin moved into the city with his family. He was a poor man and did not wait long to inform Rachoff's father where he lived and how he was related, so one Sunday after dinner, Rachoff's father, who was tired of his pestering, set out with his son to visit the man and see for themselves whether something could be done.

As they entered the house – really a squalid, cavern-like cellar – they saw that the entire family of seven lived in one room. The

children huddled in it were famished and half-naked, and the floor so dirty it made Rachoff's skin creep. The man motioned them to take seats in two peeling painted chairs, and as he did, his wife darted forward to wipe a brown smear from one of them. Rachoff grimaced, then sat down anyway. What else was there to do? He looked around. There was one window, a small, high opening in one wall, but the light it let in was wan, and the draft that seeped from it sour and chilly.

Rachoff's father sent for food from a nearby inn, and meat was brought. As soon as it came, the man, hunger-crazed, thrust his fingers into it, snatched up a piece, and devoured it. The rest of the family followed suit. It was a dreadful sight, one Rachoff would never forget. What filth – what degradation! His heart tightened at the sight of such broken, animal-like beings. And to think that they were his own relatives!

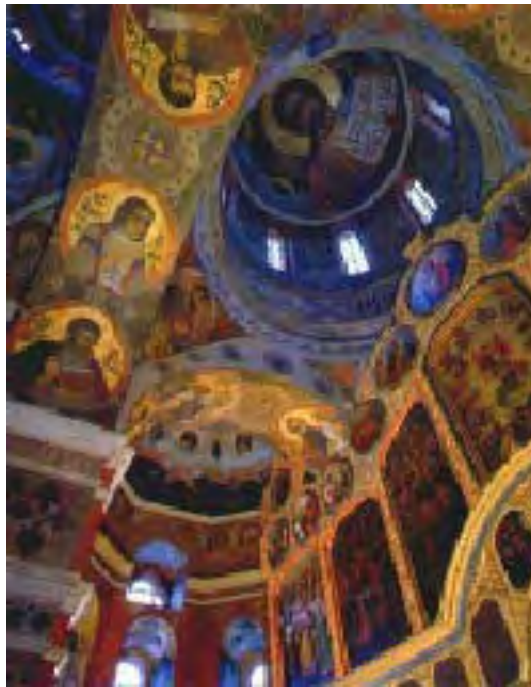
That evening his thoughts kept turning to Jesus. For was it not Jesus who had forced his eyes open, searing them as if with sparks flung from a burning fire? He broke down, weeping. What would Jesus have done? Waves of shame rolled over him, for he knew the answer. His hands would have soothed and healed and given blessing.

After that night new insights burst upon Rachoff at every turn, driving him forward and dismantling every cherished and long-held assumption. Even the church brought him no peace. Previously the bells had rung out sweetly, dispelling all his troubles and inspiring him to prayer. Now their chimes unsettled him, reminding him only of the bishop's endless wealth, and the grinding poverty of the peasants who flocked to hear him. Previously the statues of the saints had awed him, as did the candles (some weighing a hundred pounds and costing a thousand rubles apiece), the gilded images,

and the wall hangings. Now, however, he saw that such beauty was really a pious distraction from reality – from the wretchedness of the poor who sought comfort in its intoxicating veil.

At length, driven by his disquiet, Rachoff attempted his first act of charity. It was a gray, rainy day in February, and from his window

he saw a ragged old man along the street. Without a word he went out and called the beggar into his room, bathed him, dressed him in clean clothes, fed him, and offered him his own bed. The man stared at Rachoff, then at the tapestries on his walls. He shook his head. Rachoff, tied, let him go



The ornate domed ceiling of a Russian orthodox cathedral.

his gold watch, as he was embarrassed to discover the next morning.

After this incident, a period of disillusionment set in, and Rachoff began to doubt the value of generosity. For a while he even adopted his father's way of thinking, whereby the poor were all classed as one kind: cheats and liars responsible for their own plight; undeserving riffraff who had no sense of what it meant to earn money.

Yet Jesus continued to work in him, and soon Rachoff was again restless and unable to find peace. In his turmoil he went to a Marxist, a

ged old man along the street. Without a word he went out and called the beggar into his room, bathed him, dressed him in clean clothes, fed him, and offered him his own bed. The man stared at Rachoff, then at the tapestries on his walls. He shook his head. Rachoff, tied, let him go

preacher who believed that the State would one day be replaced by a just economic system and a citizenry of equals. Such was his dream. At first Rachoff was attracted by his oratory, but when he realized that the man was intent on seizing political power, by armed struggle if necessary, he turned away. The Jesus he knew was a humble man.

**IN 1881, WHEN RACHOFF WAS TWENTY,** his old master, the merchant, sent him to manage a sugar-beet factory in a village not far from the city. Rachoff was happy to go, but after a year and a half the desolate, unending landscape began to depress him, as did his employees, many of them uncouth peasants given to heavy drinking and wild behavior. Rachoff tried hard to reform them, but nothing he did seemed to work.

Then he met Irina Nesterova. The wife of a peasant farmer and dealer, Irina was a kindly, bespectacled little woman of about fifty, and a devoted disciple of Jesus. When she spoke her eyes shone, and her warmth of heart and kindly voice won over everyone who met her, including Rachoff. Four families lived in Irina's house, and though they had once been rough and disorderly, their manners had gradually yielded to her steady calm. Irina belonged to a small group of believers, and once a week (on Fridays, the day Jesus died) she gathered its members at her house, where they frankly confessed their sins, encouraged one another, and prayed and sang.

Unlike the upper half of the village, where Rachoff's factory stood, Irina's half – the so-called lower village – was transformed by her. When someone was sick, she visited him. On cold days she brought tea to the laborers in the fields; on hot days she carried

them water. When a woman was beaten by her drunken husband, Irina would be the first one at the house, mellowing him with friendly gestures and then admonishing him with firm words. In Irina, the spirit of Jesus was at work.

“Little mother,” Rachoff asked her one day, “What are your teachings? What are your beliefs about God, about the rich and poor?”

“In my eyes they all live in bondage,” Irina replied, “the rich just as much as the poor.”

“The rich!” exclaimed Rachoff. “How can they be, when they live in such warmth and comfort?”

“No one is free just because he has possessions,” said Irina. “And money does not necessarily mean wealth. Yes, even the richest man is poor. And so is every other being. The whole creation moans under the weight of a terrible sadness. The earth itself cries out as if in pain. There is sighing among the animals and the trees, in the springs and the rocks, in the fire and the stars. But Jesus will come. He hears every groan, and he will come to rescue us from our grief. His spirit heals and reconciles and blesses; it comes to us and dwells in our midst, and it can – through grace and hard work – pry us free from our bondage and make us like children.”

“Children?” Rachoff puzzled.

“Yes, children.” Irina repeated. “True children are joyous, whether they are fed with a hundred rubles or three kopeks a day, for the spirit of Jesus lives within them.”

“You are right, Mother Irina,” said Rachoff. “I remember my friends, the Lupkins of Archangelsk, whose son is ill all the time. He suffers from a chest infection and has undergone surgery many

times, but nothing will help him, so wrapped up he is in his own misery. His sister is healthy, but just as unhappy. Spoiled and bored, she stands hour after hour at the window, dreary and sullen, though surrounded by comforts and possessions of every kind. Their parents are both given to bad moods and violent quarrels, and even on the best days they live in a state of continual nervous tension."

Irina nodded. "There is coldness wherever people are not yet healed by the Spirit. But how different it can be with Jesus! You know my Natasha. She's been bedridden for three years with tuberculosis, but never cries or complains. She's rarely unhappy, for she is filled with hope and love."

Rachoff listened to her words, and longing for the same spirit, asked her, "Give me your blessing, Mother Irina."

"Gladly," she answered, "I will set a seal on your heart." And with that she made the sign of the cross over his heart, saying, "Jesus alone shall rule in this heart. Away with all sadness and complaining! Come, spirit of God, dwell here within this man, and grow until he is filled with your purifying love."

Rachoff trembled and his eyes welled with tears, for it was now three times that he had been thus blessed. A threefold seal! And now it was clear to him what it meant. His hands must become like Jesus' hands: tender, and eager to serve. His eyes must become like Jesus' eyes: clear, loving, and sincere. Finally, his heart must become one with Jesus' heart, finding peace in the Father with the same trust and certainty that Jesus had.

Youth is never clear sailing, however, and many storms still lay ahead for Rachoff. He confronted greed and cruelty, self-righteousness, lust,

and deceit, yet still he did not fully accept the task that had been laid on him. And though he knew he must serve Jesus, it seemed as though the Master did not welcome his attention, but stood constantly at his shoulder, wielding the whip of another exacting demand, calling him to sacrifice and give still more. What torment it brought him! For Rachoff did not yet see how *everything* that opposes God must be destroyed within a man before he can find peace, and before there is release from the anguish of unanswered searching.

Back in Archangelsk, Rachoff was consumed both with a feeling of restlessness and a premonition of approaching fulfillment. He was twenty-two now, and his mother meant to find him a wife. In fact, she claimed to have found one – a kind *and* well-off woman. But things turned out quite differently.

One autumn night, after hours of inner striving, Rachoff had a dream. In it he saw a fallow field stretching far into the distance, sloping gently upward until it met the sky. Suddenly a shining light appeared above the horizon and began to move slowly toward him. He saw that the radiance surrounded a simply dressed, yet noble figure, a man in a brown robe, guiding a plow and coming down the newly turned furrow. The man was not alone, but accompanied by an adoring throng.

All at once the air was pierced by a sound – the thin, steady tone of a bow being drawn across the string of a violin. Or was it the muted cry of a baby? The man at the plow looked up and listened. The crowd held its breath. The sound was coming from a nearby hut. The man walked over and entered it.

Rachoff followed, and saw that the sound *was* coming from a baby. Silent, he watched as the man gathered it up and kissed it, at

which the crying stopped. A natural gesture, one might think. But it was so tender, so infinitely compassionate, that Rachoff was moved to tears. Stumbling blindly back out of the hut, he returned to the crowd. It had changed to a mob, and the cheers to contemptuous scoffing.

Rachoff was unable to stop weeping. He could not have explained it, but he had just seen what he had longed for through all the years of his unrest. He had seen Jesus – Jesus, stooping to pick up a little child

Suddenly Rachoff was wide awake. Jumping from his bed, he knelt down on the floor and gave fervent thanks for his dream; then, with nothing but the clothes on his back, he slipped silently out of his parents' house.

The moon was bright; a soft breeze tousled his hair. He strode down the road with a light, glad step. Once he stood still for a moment, contemplating the meaning of his vision, but then his heart rose high within him, and he stepped out again, even more briskly. This was no time to interpret a dream. He had seen Jesus – that was all that mattered – and Jesus was no longer a goad, a piercing arrow, a source of unrest. He was a well of peace, a fire of love, a sun of joy. He was cause for unbroken praise.

Gratitude and exultation swept over Rachoff. He broke into a run, and ran on and on toward the dawn, shouting into the darkness and the springing wind, "Brother Jesus, here I am. I am coming! I am coming!"

**FOR FIVE DAYS RACHOFF TRAVELED** eastward, until he reached the district capital of Pinega, and on the sixth day he walked further, to Radinovka, a village of poor workers. Twilight was falling when he came, and a light autumn rain stirred the dust of the unpaved streets.

In front of the first house Rachoff passed he met a rough-looking woman with untidy red hair, driving a herd of pigs.

"Is there a holy man in the village?" he asked.

"Yes, there's a dear old father here," she replied. "He usually prays and sings, but he's lying sick just now. Come with me."

The woman brought Rachoff into a nearby house, and there he found an old man with swollen feet, lying near a brick stove with



A 19<sup>th</sup>-century cabin in a village outside Kiev.

his legs wrapped in a fleece. "Tell me, dear brother, are you a man of God?" Rachoff asked him. "I greet you with joy in the name of Jesus Christ. What is your name? Mine is Rachoff."

"My greetings to you, too, wandering brother," replied the man. "But how sad that you have a name. I have no name; I am nameless."

"What do you mean by that, my brother?" asked Rachoff.

"The one who is above is nameless," the man returned, pointing upwards. Then, pointing to himself, he went on, "And the one who

is above is the one who lives here. The two are one and the same. I am a part of him, a part of the nameless one. That is what Gregor Petrov told me when I was in Tambov with the army. Gregor was a God-fearing peasant, and he read this in a holy book, written in the holy language and given to him by a venerable man.”

“Come here to me, and I will make you better, dear Father Nameless,” Rachoff said.

The old man obeyed, and Rachoff took a bucket of warm water from the stove and washed and massaged his legs. He was like a child, Rachoff thought.

“What else was written in the holy book, dear Father Nameless?” he inquired.

“It said, my dear friend, that true faith is a daily fight, and fasting a good aid in overcoming the flesh. It said, too, that men should live singly and pure, like the angels in heaven. Even if they are married, they ought to abstain, praying until every desire is conquered, and doing so with the help of a copper cross around their neck. Look, here is mine!”

At this the old man tugged at his crucifix, then went on: “One day judgment will come, and God’s people will be counted, and only those will be saved who wear a cross, like I do.”

The old man rambled on, talking now wisely and now foolishly, while Rachoff finished tending to his sores. Night had come, and the room was filling with curious women and children. The men were at the tavern. Later Rachoff knelt and prayed with his listeners, and read to them from the gospels.

Afterward the women returned to their shacks, and then the men returned, stumbling in the dark, beating their wives and children,

and causing one petulant outburst after another. Rachoff sat in the darkness and listened to their angry shouts, waiting for the uproar to subside. He knew now that this was the place for him to stay.

Rachoff stayed two years in Radinovka, going from house to house and sharing in the work of the villagers. Above all he chose jobs that no one else wanted to do. He helped care for the sick, scrubbed dirty wooden floors, scraped molding walls and white-washed them, cleansed neglected animals, and shoveled out overflowing stalls.

He taught the children to speak Russian, for they knew only the local dialect, and how to read and write. He also read the gospel to them and told them stories about Jesus, saying, "It is not enough to have his image in a little shrine in a corner of the house. We must keep him in our eyes and hands, and in our hearts."

In the evenings he gathered the villagers and strengthened them in faith, teaching them that not asceticism – not fasting or abstaining – but Jesus alone is the power that overcomes the world. They took his words to heart, and as they did, the men were weaned from their drunken ways, and the women from their gossip and backbiting. Eyes became gentler, hands more peaceable, and words kinder and more understanding. Husbands stopped mistreating their wives, who in turn showed new respect to them, and children began to honor and obey their parents.

Before long Rachoff was accepted as a friend throughout the village. Even the smallest children were entrusted to his care, and though he was only twenty-four, they fondly called him Father Vassili.

But there was one exception. When Rachoff had arrived in Radinovka, the Orthodox priest had kept to his home, suffering from an infectious disease. No one was willing to look after him, not even his wife, so frightened was she of contagion. Only Rachoff was courageous enough to visit him, and he brought hot compresses and eased his inflammation. Eventually Rachoff's attentive care cured him.

Others might have thanked him, but the priest did not. Jealous of Rachoff's popularity and suspicious that his kindness was really a ruse to get him out of bed and back to work, he looked on the young man with growing mistrust. As for the young man's condemnation of strong drink, it made him fairly bristle, for there was little he loved like the bottle. "Have you any idea, little brother," he would complain, "what a sacrifice it is for me to sit here year after year in this godforsaken place, toiling and half starving, stranded with a wife and children, surrounded by nothing but the frozen wastes? Over in Pinega, my hometown, I was a man among men. Here I am a man among swine, and drinking is my only salvation. With it I can at least escape this miserable hole for a while and fly back to my good friends – back to the days of my youth. Wine is the gift of a good God. Why, it is even praised in the Psalms!"

To which Rachoff replied, "That may be so, but if you would stop drinking and turn Radinovka from the hellhole you describe into a place of warmth and love – into a garden for Jesus – you would no longer hate your life, or want to flee it in a drunken fog."

"A garden for Jesus?" retorted the priest, rolling his eyes. "That's just what infuriates me about you. You talk of nothing but Jesus. Always Jesus! It's enough to make one think you're from a sect. Can't you see that the peasants are too thick-headed for him? Find

me one who's not a shameless rascal. The two don't go together. Praying is religion enough. Anyone can do it."

"No," insisted Rachoff, "it is not enough. A Jesus who is only there for people to pray to is an idol in the clouds, and what good is that? We must help each villager to receive him into his heart, his eyes, his hands. We must let his love live right here among us. He is already at work. Look at Taras, or at Anissa. Look at almost every other. Jesus has made his home with them; they have become sons and daughters of God."

But the priest continued to mistrust him. It didn't help much that the peasants now recoiled from him in disgust as he staggered along the street, cursing or guffawing, and reeking of cheap wine. In earlier days they had hurried to him, confiding in him as one of their own. They had drunk and joked with him; they had kissed his hand. And now—now they turned to Rachoff, that intruder from Archangelsk. Oh, what wouldn't he give to be rid of him!

One day about half a year later a government order arrived from Pinega, forbidding Rachoff to remain in the village. The women wept, and the men, too, broke down when they heard the news. Only Rachoff remained calm. "It is only I, a twenty-five-year-old man of no consequence, who has been banned. Jesus still remains in Radinovka; he can still work among you. Only I am journeying on."

Rachoff set out for Archangelsk again, and when he arrived back home, it was May. Everywhere the wintry tundra was carpeted in green. Alder catkins nodded along the water, and flowers bloomed; the fresh-turned furrows breathed with new life. In later years Rachoff's mother would look back on it as a heavenly spring: her

son was home, and she could once more care for him. And what was more, Rachoff, who had previously resisted every gesture, now allowed her to show love to him.

Then, as suddenly as he had come, Rachoff disappeared. He did so without a word, leaving only a terse note: "Jesus is calling, and I must answer." And then: "Jesus is still with you." That was all he wrote.

When his mother found the sheet of paper Rachoff was already long gone. His gait was confident and upright; his bearded face weathered, creased by sunshine, wind, and rain. He crossed new vistas daily, for he aimed to wander all of Russia. Everywhere, people were drawn by his love, and loved him in return. And whether they admitted it or not, everyone felt his blessing who returned his earnest gaze.

Rachoff demonstrated his love in practical ways. In each village he came to, he pulled out his cache of tools – hammer and nails, hand-saw, knife, and string – and offered his services to any who would take them. When a goat broke into a widow's garden, he mended the fence for her; when a cripple ran short of winter fuel, he split firewood for a day. Once he cared for a sickly young woman until she was strong enough to hold her newborn child. Another time he sat with a dying old man until his last breath. Rachoff told him so vividly about the joys of the world beyond that the man thought an angel had come to him.

"You are sure it is not a place of darkness and decay?" he asked about death.

"Oh no!" Rachoff reassured him. "You are about to enter the fullness of life – a glorious, bright morning as brilliant as the sun at

Easter." And as Rachoff went on to describe the beauty of the heavenly realm, the man grew more and more peaceful, so that at the end he was happy, even eager to pass into the land of eternal spring.

**SOMETIMES PEOPLE JOINED RACHOFF** for a stretch along the road. Once two devoted young women, friends who had heard his call to serve, even followed him for several weeks. They begged food and cooked for him, washed his tunic and mended his cloak. They might never have left his side, had he not shaken himself loose from them. Crowds often came after him as he left a village where he had stayed, but though kindly and gentle, he always evaded them. Before long a rumor was circulating that Jesus himself was journeying through Russia. And truly, his behavior and speech were so selfless, so pure, that Jesus' spirit did shine from him, penetrating many a heart and bearing good fruit.

Once in the far southern reaches of Russia, Rachoff came upon a sect led by a certain Jacob Istomin, who asked him, "Are you one of us?"

"That depends who you are, dear brother," replied Rachoff warm-heartedly.

"We are wanderers, travelers, pilgrims," said the man. "We go from place to place. An ascetic named Ivan taught us that a true worshipper of God is continually on the run from the Antichrist. And so we move on ceaselessly, for the whole world is ruled by the Antichrist, our enemy from the beginning, and all priests and ministers and soldiers are his servants. We are unable to resist them in battle, so we flee on and on, across the endless plains of our native land, and through the vast and kindly forests.

“We have broken all ties with church and state, and disdain all excuses for contact with the world. We refuse to pay taxes, to serve in the army, to obey government authorities, to respect bishops or priests. We have no use for documents such as passports, but tear them up or burn them. Money is meaningless to us, and we never keep any on hand. We depend on the devout. They give us food and clothing enough.

“The only thing we honor is the small cross that each of us carries. See, here is mine. Look what is written on it – it was endorsed in Jerusalem itself. That is the only real passport, for what are true Christians but pilgrims and strangers in this life? And is it not so, that only those who escape the world will not be condemned to destruction with it?”

Rachoff listened quietly until the man was finished. Then, humbly but passionately, he began to speak, reminding Jacob Istomin of the simple love of Jesus, and showing up his own complex ideas as delusion: “Jesus is the true king over the earth, and it is he, not the Antichrist, who shall have the final say. Jesus reigns wherever people welcome him, and wherever this happens, the Antichrist will sense his active, living presence, and turn and flee.

“It is not the disciples of Jesus, but the followers of the Antichrist, who are always on the run. No, Jesus’ disciples hold their ground with valiant and determined hearts. Jesus builds up, gathers, and affirms. You tear down; you scatter; you run and hide. Jesus blesses; you curse. Jesus unites; you divide. Jesus heals and comforts; he brings peace, joy, and love; and wherever he rules, the Antichrist gives way to him. Kneel down, proud man! Kneel to Jesus! He alone has power!”

In the end, Jacob Istomin saw the truth of Rachoff's words and followed after him, though eventually Rachoff threw him off his trail.

Down by the Sea of Asov, at the mouth of a great river, Rachoff met a withered old hermit named Abrossim. An anchorite who made his home in a cave, Abrossim was well versed in the lives of the saints and, after the manner of one of them, believed that peace was found only by withdrawing from the daily affairs of men.

Abrossim went down to the river each day to catch the fish he lived on; otherwise, he spent his hours in contemplation and prayer. At midday he danced in the gray-green grasses of the steppe, circling slowly on the top of the hill, long beard streaming, cloak fluttering in the wind. That symbolized the dancing of the saints and friends of God on the holy meadows of Paradise. At evening he knelt down in front of his cave, gazing in rapture at the eternal movement of the stars. That symbolized the adoration to come, the holy time when all men will behold God. At midnight he lay down in a grave that he had dug for himself. That symbolized dying, and the importance of readiness for death. Then, on the following morning, he began the day by bowing, then running toward the sunrise, his hands uplifted in prayer. That symbolized resurrection. So every day Abrossim lived in expectation, acting out a parable of man's passage from this life to the next.

When Rachoff found the anchorite, however, he lay sick, so Rachoff stayed in the cave for several weeks, caring for him and learning a great deal. When they parted, the old man wept and said: "You have been like a mother to me, dear brother. Ancient as I am, I thought of my own mother when you tended me with your

gentle hands. I thank you for your love. Oh, how I wish my life were still before me, so I might go out as you do and, in the strength of Jesus, fill the whole world with his spirit! But I cannot. So receive my blessing, and give me yours."

Rachoff traveled on, learning, teaching, and healing as he went. Finally he left Russia and made his way to Jerusalem. Once there, he wandered the city and took in its storied sights, but though deeply moved, he was at the same time heartbroken. Everywhere the poor pilgrims were shamefully exploited, and it wasn't the hucksters but the priests who cheated them the worst. With deep pain, he recognized that, holy as it was, Jerusalem had no room for Jesus. Just as the city had rejected him in the past, so it did now. Judas, the betrayer, would have felt right at home.



A procession of Greek orthodox churchmen makes their way through present-day Jerusalem.

One day, while watching a great procession, Rachoff could hold back his indignation no more. A Greek patriarch, seated on a white, silken throne borne aloft by four strong priests, was making his way down the street. Trumpets sounded, and the procession moved like a white cloud toward a magnificent church.

Following the throng inside, Rachoff watched as the patriarch was reverently lowered in front of the gold-encrusted altar. Then, rising to his full height, he cried out, "You on the white throne, Jesus is calling you! If you are a shepherd, then take care of your flock! Look how your sheepdogs are treating the sheep: they are scattering the ewes and devouring the lambs. Woe to such dogs! And woe to the shepherd who cannot control them!"

Everyone stood petrified by this outburst. Blood reddened cheeks; faces burned with shame. But the bold young stranger's words hit home to many. How many of them had traveled from great distances, simple, perhaps, and poor, but devout in their longing? And how many more pinched and scraped for years, hoping to nourish their souls by walking where Christ had walked on earth? And here, at the end of it all, what awaited them other than greedy priests who demanded coins for every foolish rite: gold to touch the hole where the cross had stood, silver to kiss the place where the sacred body had lain, copper to have a candle lit, or to place a hand in the crack of some holy temple wall! It was a just denunciation, they knew, and they began to tremble.

Meanwhile the rash heckler was seized by guards who pulled him from the gaping crowd and dragged him outside and away. Throwing Rachoff in a fortress room, they left him imprisoned for a day and a night, with nothing but a jug of water to sustain him.

Yet he was not forgotten. At morning, as a cool breeze ran through the alleys, a young woman stood under his barred window – a pilgrim who had found him after many hours of searching. Craning her neck to see into the dark opening, she pled, "Oh, where are you, my Jesus? If only I might see you, here in this city where your feet once trod!" Rachoff did not answer, but fell on his knees in the gloom, shaken and humbled to his very depths.

**BANNED FROM THE HOLY LAND**, Rachoff traveled north again, until he reached the great city of Odessa on the Black Sea. Everywhere, lavish displays of wealth met his eyes: imposing mansions on broad, tree-lined boulevards; expensive cafes filled with laughing women and haughty men; luxurious hotels for travelers from faraway places such as Paris and Berlin.

There were magnificent parks, too, bright with roses and oleanders and freshened by fountains and pools. In one square Rachoff passed a towering glass sunroom. Behind its windows, elegantly attired visitors strolled among potted date palms and orange trees, plucking ripe fruit as they went. In another he passed a well-tended garden in which a maid sat grooming a miniature dog. Beside her, exotic, fan-tailed fish swam in a tiny pond whose sides and bottom appeared to be painted with gold leaf.

But that was not all he saw. On the outskirts of the city, only half an hour's walk away, he found coal yards and slaughterhouses, and beyond them, shacks, tents, and mud. Here lived Odessa's homeless poor on bare fields allotted to them by the authorities.

Drunken men stumbled through puddles, and bitter-eyed women hauled pails of brackish water. Gaunt children and wizened crones poked about in steaming garbage heaps (the city's daily refuse, carted out by horse) and stuffed their pickings into sacks. The food was scanty and only remotely edible – vegetable peels, meat bones and other half-rotten scraps – but they hoarded it as if it were gold. Rachoff was horrified.

Still, despite the acrid odors and the raucous, tattered crowds; despite the grubby boys and girls who flung themselves at Rachoff, vying for his attention and clamoring for coins; despite the clouds of mosquitoes, and the mangy, yapping dogs – or was it because of all these? – he knew he must stay.

At first the squatters stared when they saw he meant to take up quarters with them. Then they mocked him, especially when he spoke of Jesus, whom they scoffed at with foul gestures and jeers. But Rachoff was not easily discouraged. Knowing that God's love is best shown in deeds, he did not try to convince them with words.

Eventually he stopped talking altogether. For the next half year, he said almost nothing to anyone. Diligently, silently, and simply, he brought Jesus to the people through his hands, eyes, and heart.

Rachoff helped here, there, and everywhere. In spring he begged planks and nails, rakes, hoes, and seeds from a kindly woman of means, and with her gifts built sheds and straightened paths, dug gardens and sowed vegetables. Soon even the most suspicious no longer looked at him askance, but offered their time and help.

Then, in one night, it all came to an end. Vandals burned his lumber, broke his tools, and scattered his supplies. They even uprooted his seedlings and plants. Heartbroken, Rachoff went back to the donor and threw himself at her feet. This time she refused to help him. Meanwhile the squatters lost confidence in him as well, and on his return they treated him with contempt.

That night Rachoff sequestered himself and prayed for hours. He remained alone the next day too. Then, in the evening, he went into Odessa, to the grandeur: the Rachoff could more out of brightly lit opening night, he turned, there be seen. Ornate, carriages came bursing smiling gowns. Trim es- in tails and top tapped paving



The marble foyer of the Odessa Opera House, a stunning example of baroque architecture.

heart of its opera house. not have looked place in the square. It was and everywhere was wealth to horse-drawn and went, dis- ladies in evening corts breezed by hats; ivory canes stones; jewels

glinted; glasses clinked. But he did not hesitate. Mounting the imposing marble steps, he climbed them, bought (with his last savings) a ticket for a front seat, and walked boldly into the great baroque hall.

Inside, the splendor almost overwhelmed him. Upholstered red seats were filling with well-to-do patrons, and from the velvet-covered balcony boxes above them, cologne wafted down. The air vibrated with titters of anticipation.

Near Rachoff's chair, it is true, the mood was decidedly different. As he seated himself, there was silence, and then looks of revulsion and disbelief. Who was this filthy scoundrel, this unwashed tramp? Who had let him in? Why didn't someone throw him out? Tongues clicked indignantly, and someone called for an usher, but it was too late. Already the lights were going out, the curtain lifting. The performance had begun.

Rachoff sat quietly, praying, through the first act. Then, as the curtain fell, he rose suddenly to his feet. Stepping calmly onto his chair, he turned to the audience and spoke in a strong, clear voice.

"Hear me, for Jesus' sake! Rich brothers, rich sisters, for his sake listen quietly to a poor servant of Jesus. If you knew half of what I have seen outside this city, it would bring tears to every kind eye, wrench every compassionate heart. What misery there is; what destitution! Your fellow humans there – no, your brothers – they live like wild animals. Your lapdogs live better than their children! But it need not be so, and wouldn't be, if you shared even a smidgen of your food and clothing, your warmth, comfort, power, or education with them."

There was silence in the great hall, and then a commotion as several guards entered from the back and began to make their way toward Rachoff. He went on, louder: "In a moment I will be removed.

But let me beg you to take this simple message to Jesus is crying out in grief. He is waiting for you to act. May Jesus plant his seed of love within every man and woman of good will!"



The grand proscenium of the Odessa Opera House, with private balcony boxes on both side walls.

first beg this simple heart: Jesus in grief. Jesus plant love within every man of good

Then, turning to the guards, who had just surrounded him, Rachoff stretched out his arms. "Here are my hands," he cried. Until this moment, the audience had remained as still as death, but now an astonished murmur rose. Opera glasses were trained on him, and hundreds stood. Few saw his face as he was led away, but those who did said it shone with joy. And those nearest him heard him whisper, as if to himself, "Thank you, dear Jesus, for standing by me."

After his arrest, Rachoff was dragged off to prison, and for weeks nothing more was heard of him. But the uproar he had already caused animated dinner parties and made headlines for days. "A Blow Struck for Jesus." "Madman at the Opera." "Lunatic, or Early Christian?" "A Conspirator for Christ." It was mostly nervous excitement, and after a while the papers lost interest in the story. Some first exploited it shamelessly, of course: one

reporter investigated the squatters' camp and wrote the most twisted piece, praising its primitivism and waffling about the "serenity of life untouched by modern complications."

Yet here and there the seeds Rachoff had planted took root and began to grow. Certain reform-minded citizens were so horrified by the poverty they found on the outskirts of town that they rallied the city fathers for measures of relief, pressed local merchants for building supplies and food, and continued to agitate until housing was improved, filth cleared, streets paved, and schools established.

Rachoff never saw the fruits of their work. Charged with inciting a riot, tried, convicted, and banned, he was long gone from Odessa, and out on the steppes, alone with the grass and the sheltering sky, and the songbirds in the clear, blue air.

**TURNING UP SOME TIME LATER** in Kiev, or rather in the slums on its outskirts,



One of the many churches that make up Kiev's ancient Lavra Monastery.

Rachoff, who was now about thirty, continued to work with the poor. He still spoke of Jesus, too, though his words mostly fell on deaf ears. "Here in Kiev we don't need your Jesus," people told him, shaking their heads or elbowing him good-naturedly. "We have the saints;

they're good enough to save the likes of us."

It was true. Kiev did have saints, and plenty of them, as Rachoff soon learned. His guide was Mironoff, a steward in the Lavra Monastery, and one of the only men in the city interested in Rachoff's stories of Jesus.

"Deep in the cellars," Mironoff told him, "lie the saints in which the poor have such great faith. There are hundreds of them. But they are not really saints. They are the embalmed bodies of dead pilgrims and monks, or effigies with heads of wax, and clothing stuffed with wood shavings or straw. The bodies lie one apiece on biers covered with black altar cloths; they are dressed in fine silk, embroidered with silver and gold." Rachoff shuddered. But the next day, after gathering his courage, he joined a troop of worshipers as they entered the underground vaults.



A passage in the Caves of Lavra, where entombed saints still draw throngs of tourists and pilgrims.

At the entrance stood a corpulent monk with a whip in his hand, demanding the so-called offering without which no one could go in. After pocketing the pilgrim's coins, the monk instructed them not to touch the saints, not to do this, not to do

that. The only thing they could do was kiss the saints on the soles of their feet.

Rachoff burned with anger. He looked around at the peasants kneeling everywhere. He breathed in the clamminess of the morgue-like air. He peered at the motionless figures, a cross in each pair of ashen hands, hair combed severely back, a hood drawn stiffly over each lifeless head. A colored lamp swung above him, casting dismal, quivering shadows; a burning censer moved in slow, steady arcs.

Suddenly Rachoff knelt down and called on Jesus in a loud voice, beseeching him to reveal the trickery and put an end to the vile show. Then he sprang up, snatched the whip from the gaping monk, and turned towards the pilgrims. With one kick he knocked a stuffed figure from its platform. "Look!" he cried, as it fell apart in a cloud of shavings. "Here's a good idol for you! Out with you, poor blinded creatures! Out of this cavern of lies!" And he cracked his whip so furiously that the pilgrims fled in terror, the fat monk screaming at their heels.

Rachoff fled the ensuing confusion, but during the night he was found and seized. Lying in prison, he awaited the day of his trial. He planned to defend himself with Holy Writ itself: "Jesus instituted the lash as a sacrament," he would say. "It is a tool with which to drive out hypocrites and liars. And Jesus' disciples, too, must wield it. That is all I have done."

Rachoff spent many days behind bars, but he remained courageous and full of cheer. He knew that the seeds he had planted would remain in the soil of every open heart, and in time they would grow into healing herbs. He planted seeds in the prison too. Formerly the

guards had treated the inmates as wild beasts. Now a few, softened by Rachoff's kindness, and made vulnerable by his love, began to see them as brothers – fallen, but still their own kind.

Some even approached Rachoff in his cell, wanting to know how they could find happiness for themselves. But he only said: "We must be hated for Jesus' sake. Suffering is a badge of honor to me." And this was true, for whenever Rachoff met with new humiliations or indignities, he did not grumble, but laughed: "Another medal, then!" That was the secret of his indestructible joy.

Rachoff was never brought to trial, for in order to avoid the shame of public exposure, the monastery decided to suppress the incident. Eventually he was released and banished to his hometown, Archangelsk.

At first he stayed at his father's house. Then he moved into the city, where he walked the poorest districts from morning till night, listening and comforting, teaching and offering a helping hand. In this street he bought books and taught the people to write; in the next he gathered the children and read to them from the Gospels. In one alley he made peace between a quarrelling couple; in another he found decent work for a prostitute. Wherever he went he spread Jesus' love, though also His sharpness against lust and deceit. That never earned him praise, of course, but only angry kicks and blows.

With money given him by his parents, Rachoff rented two rooms in the worst place he could find, converted them, and opened a simple restaurant. Even his admirers were skeptical of this venture, for he had no steady source of income. But he did have faith, and that proved sufficient. "Do something for Jesus," was all he ever

asked. And he rarely made such an appeal without receiving enough to buy food and fuel, and pay his monthly dues besides.

No meat or alcohol was served at Rachoff's table – no alcohol because it led to drunkenness; no meat because he opposed the



The seaport of Archangelsk, Rachoff's hometown.

slaughter of animals for food. Meals began only when everyone present was seated, and then with a prayer or a few verses from the Bible. Afterward, Rachoff said a blessing: "May this food keep you strong in body and soul. And may it not feed anger or a cruelly lifted arm, but only the hand stretched out in love, only the heart lit by Jesus. May your limbs be turned solely to compassionate and selfless deeds. May your spirit reflect solely the spirit of Jesus."

Rachoff was undeterred. "I may be defeated," he said, "Yet Jesus never is. He goes on from victory to victory, and no one can hinder him." And so he went on as confidently as ever.

It was winter now, but he was up with the sun every morning,

loading a large sled with provisions and making his way through the drifts. "Perhaps I cannot gather the hungry for food," he explained, "But no one can stop me from carrying it to them." From one wretched house to another he went, pausing to unpack whatever the inhabitants needed most – bread, flour, wood, or coal; sugar or salt; tea or blankets – and then leaving again before they could ask his name.

In one place Rachoff found the men especially coarse and given to drink. Staying with them, he soon found out why: a tavern near the sawmill where most of them worked sold liquor on credit. Many families had been destroyed, and many more faced ruin. He decided to intervene. Arriving at the mill each day before the first shift began, he gathered the workers and led them in prayer. He also set up a fund for mutual aid, organized the purchase of allotments for gardens, and encouraged those who could to further their studies.

Later, with a sizable contribution from the owners of the sawmill, who were impressed by Rachoff's influence on their workers (and by their increased productivity, now that they no longer drank), he founded an orphanage. Or so people said. Rachoff himself insisted, as he did about everything, that Jesus was behind it all: "I only oversaw construction."

Word spread, and soon Rachoff was feeding more than a hundred people every day. Many came not only to satisfy their physical hunger but also because they sought comfort, and found it in his words.

Before long, however, shop owners made nervous by the down-trodden hordes alerted the authorities, and citing failure to comply with city regulations, they closed the little restaurant, and then shuttered it for good.

At first the orphanage took in only street urchins, of whom there were plenty in the city; later it also welcomed children from families who couldn't make ends meet. Eventually it held some forty boys and girls. Rachoff cared for his charges day and night: teaching and tending them, feeding them, and lulling them to sleep. He sang with them, told them stories, sorted out arguments, and helped them with their chores. He played and laughed with them; he taught them finger games and rhymes. Visitors remarked at his tenderness and patience – at how a man could be both father and mother at once.

Rachoff encouraged the older children to do at least one good or chivalrous deed every day. "Go out into the streets," he would say, "and see if there is anyone in need of love. Look out for the old, the weak, the poor, the ill-treated. Do not go by yourselves, but in small groups, and be sure you are back at sunset."

By evening they were traipsing back in twos and threes, glowing with pride, and eager to report everything they had done: "We helped a granny stack firewood for her stove." "We washed bad words off a harbor wall!" "We helped a drunk find his way back home." One had run errands for a housewife; another had sat and stroked a wounded dog; these two had swept glass from a shooper's floor; those two had carried coal for a sickly old man. All had wished every person they met a good day, and told them that they brought greetings from Jesus.

**"EVERYTHING FOR OTHERS,** nothing for myself," and, "Fear no one, love everyone." These were Rachoff's mottoes, and he truly lived by them. He shared *everything* he had with the poor – with "those dearest to Jesus," as he called them. Once his father gave him a fur coat, but the next day Rachoff met a half-dressed beggar shivering

in the street, and gave it to him. And he never wore gloves, even though he was always receiving them from people who noticed his red hands. "Don't worry about me," he would say, accepting them, but telling the donor that he planned to pass them on. "The poor hardly know what gloves look like. I can always beg a pair if I really need to."

There were two other mottoes Rachoff followed as well: "Do not eat if you know of someone who needs the food more than you do," and, "Do not go to sleep before everyone you know has found a bed." That is why he could often be seen at night, roaming the streets and making sure that there was no one without shelter.

By this time there was hardly a citizen in the area who did not know of Rachoff. Most admired him, though some affirmed his goodness secretly, for he was (how should they put it?) so mystical, so eccentric, so naïve. To the poor, of course, he was nothing less than a saint. A few even took him to be the Savior himself, and now and then an old woman would try to kiss his hand. When that happened, it took all Rachoff had to keep from exploding. "How could I be Jesus?" he would passionately exclaim. "I am only a man, whereas Jesus is both man *and* God. He is eternal. Yes, he lives within me, but I am only a house of clay. I will perish, and when I crumble into dust, Jesus will travel on until he finds a new heart in which to make his home."

But if the masses in Archangelsk looked up to Rachoff, the authorities (especially the heads of the Orthodox Church) lost little love on him. Unnerved by his growing fame, they shook their heads and muttered of heresy. Then they approached the secret police. After that spies kept watch over his daily activities, though try as they might, they could find no grounds for arrest.

Some people said he spoke against the saints. Yet there stood every icon, displayed in the prescribed way, in a prayer corner hung with red cloth. Others said he used only the Bible, and dismissed all other holy books. Yet when they searched his simple room, nothing heretical could be found; indeed, every book in it bore the seal of official approval.

Nevertheless the evil intrigue continued. Forget the particulars: it was clear to anyone that Rachoff was a deserter of the Church, that his teachings were unorthodox, that his charisma was dangerous, and that he confused all who listened to him with his endless talk of Jesus.

One bright autumn morning Rachoff was unexpectedly seized, charged with heresy, and thrown behind bars. News of his arrest spread like wildfire, and when word got out that he had declined the assistance of a lawyer – “God will represent me,” he reportedly said – the entire city buzzed.

Fortunately for him, his judge (one Engelhardt, the chief officer of the district administration) was a broad-minded man. His sympathies lay with Rachoff, and he believed him to be innocent. Indeed, he considered dismissing the case and letting Rachoff go, if only to shake up the “lazy, drunken priests.” Yet the law was the law, and proceedings were proceedings, so he brought Rachoff before the bench, duly questioned him about his faith, and demanded that he enlighten the court as to the teachings he espoused.

“My teachings?” Rachoff asked, as if surprised. “I advocate nothing but the teachings of Jesus. My sole aspiration is to follow him. That is my life task, and it is in fact every man’s. That is all I have ever taught. But do with me as you like; I do not matter. Jesus has lived in my heart for many years, and from the moment he entered it, I

ceased to exist. Rachoff is long dead, though he must yet die a thousand deaths. What of it? Jesus lives, and he is always victorious.”

Engelhardt was so deeply moved by these simple words that he sat tongue-tied in his chair, and later he sent wheat cakes and milk to Rachoff’s cell, and ordered him released. Yet even this was not enough to save Rachoff, for the same day he was recaptured by the spies of the powerful ecclesial court.

To satisfy the indignant people of Archangelsk, a statement was issued by the Orthodox Church: Rachoff was a revolutionary, and on top of hat, insane. He was confusing the faithful and disrupting their lives. None of these charges would have stood the glare of truth, had they been held to its light, but that did not prevent the church authorities from pressing them.

On the one hand it was sloth. As Rachoff himself had once put it, “The wind from the heights is too strong for those who prefer to drowse amid votive candles.” On the other, it was guilt, that burden with which the mildest spring breeze takes on an unkind edge. Finally it was fear: they knew they were hypocrites, and sensed judgment was near. In short, every churchman in Archangelsk knew exactly what drove Rachoff, and it rattled and stung him. It was the spirit of Christ, which those who serve falsehood can neither fathom nor bear.

**ON OCTOBER 20, 1894,** at eight o’clock in the morning, Rachoff was secretly removed from the city. He was not allowed to bid farewell to anyone. Like his Master he was thirty-three years old. One month later and a thousand kilometers to the south, the forbidding dungeon of the Susdal Monastery received him into its silence.



A view of the Susdal Monastery from outside the perimeter walls.

Tears were shed in Archangelsk when word of his banishment reached those who loved him. For his parents, the news was a mortal blow. Three months later his mother died of grief, and soon afterward his embittered father, who made repeated unsuccessful petitions on his son's behalf, gave up and died of a broken heart too.

As for Rachoff, he suffered a living death. Held in solitary confinement, he was denied all companionship except that of the vermin who shared his damp cell. All creaturely comforts were denied him, too, save for a musty leaf pile that served as his bed. A small barred window, set high in the wall and impossible to open, let in a small pool of filtered light by day, but otherwise there was none. It was aching cold. There was food, but it came only at uncertain intervals, and consisted of unappetizing scraps.

Soon fever wracked Rachoff's wasted body. He lay and dreamed a great deal. Often he was delirious, and the visions that tortured him made sleep a descent into hell. "Turn back, you deluded fools!" He would cry in great distress, as if seeing the world's tormented about to fall over a cliff. "You are headed for the Pit. Stop, before it is too late. Stop! Stop!" And then, with muffled screams, "It is arrogance! murder! lust! deceit! Turn away, and follow Jesus! Let Jesus come to you!"

Eventually the warden, a troubled old man made uneasy by Rachoff's words, arranged for him to be transferred to a small stone shed in the monastery garden. The move came almost too late. Rachoff's limbs, once strapping, were now wasted and white, and though he had once brimmed with confidence, his spirit now seemed utterly crushed.

Sunlight, fresh air, and regular food worked wonders, however, and soon Rachoff turned a corner. His emaciated body grew slowly stronger, his dreams became less oppressive, and a new radiance – an ethereal, innocent expression of joy – transfigured his face and did not fade. His mind was now like that of a little child, incapable of anything but simple speech. He was mad, one might say, mentally deranged. Yet who is to say how such matters are viewed in the world beyond?

Rachoff spent the last days of his life sitting in a corner of a small enclosed garden, his eyes closed, a smile playing on his face, his hands folded, his stooped shoulders warmed by the sun. On occasion he circled or swayed with slow steps. "I am dancing," he explained, "for I shall soon see God." He said this almost incredulously, as if not quite able to apprehend such happiness.

Then one day at twilight, in the middle of such a dance, he was seen to stop suddenly and kneel down. Opening his eyes wide, he cried loudly, "Jesus!" Then he slumped forward, his head sinking gently into the thick, deep grass. He saw God.

But that is not all. For though every man's life must come to its end, God's spirit can never be quenched. And even as Rachoff was readied for burial, others were setting out across the land, leaving their plows and nets to follow Him who said, "I am the Way." Thus

Jesus wanders on, over steppes and through forests, into hearts and homes. He looks into the eyes of beggars; he blesses children. No spies can prevent him, no magistrates can arrest him, no prison can hold him fast. He can cross every frontier, and walk among us, too. Pray that he may, for we have long had need of him.

Jesus wanders on. So ends the story of every Rachoff.