

ADAM SCHWARZ

WORLDLY FLESH
OR HOW NIKLAUS VON FLÜE
DISCOVERED AMERICA

Sample Translation by
Alan Robinson

Ranft Ravine, January 1474

“There are too many stories doing the rounds. Down in the valleys, people sit around and cook up all kinds of lies. On the mountaintops, the three archangels cough up nothing but accusations. They all think they know Niklaus von Flüe. But the truth? They don’t care about that. The truth has never interested anyone. You won’t like it either, my dear Amgrund.”

“But I have to hear it,” Amgrund said. “I owe it to him.”

“Well, if he means that much to you, then that’s all the more reason to leave now.”

“I came here to talk to Klaus. Instead I find you. Don’t you think that makes me suspicious?”

Hans von Flüe rubbed his dark brown beard and sized up Amgrund, without saying anything.

“Where is he?”

“Not here. You can see that for yourself. And that’s all you need to know.”

“When will he be back?”

“That could take some time.”

Heimo Amgrund closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. Pastor of Kriens since the age of nineteen, he’d hardly dared to trust what he’d heard after the last Christmas mass: Brother Klaus had returned home to Ranft and the hermit’s cell he’d left three years earlier. The LORD GOD had commanded him to do so, people said, just as back in ’67 He had commanded him to leave his family

to become a hermit. Amgrund had wanted to pursue the matter, so he'd undertaken the long journey, leaving before dawn and walking south all day through the cold and snow, past Lake Lucerne, then Lake Sarnen, staff in hand, and head full of questions. When they'd asked him in Sachseln where he was heading and he'd replied, "to Ranft, to Brother Klaus", the peasants had bombarded him with stories: how he'd healed the lame, restored peace, and always ensured they'd had good harvests. But an old washerwoman had maintained that the fellow was possessed by the Devil. How else could he have abandoned wife and family to spend his days in the forest, staring into empty space? "His heart," she had insisted, "is as cold as the river Melchaa in winter." And now, she said, Brother Klaus had gone completely mad. Not only had he quarrelled bitterly with his family, but he wouldn't even open the door to his cell. Even the peephole was covered over. You could only tell he was there again by the smoke that sometimes rose from the hermitage. The closer he had got to Ranft, the more Amgrund could feel himself tremble. But it was doubtless just the cold. When, at last, he could make out the cell down below on the valley floor, he had quickened his pace. He had walked past the chapel with its little red belfry, ignoring it completely. The hut beyond it was where Niklaus lived.

The pastor knocked on the sun-baked door, softly at first, then more and more forcefully, until a voice inside called out:

"Who's there?"

“It’s me, Niklaus – Heimo!”

A man opened the door a crack. Two eyes flashed at Amgrund, a face, drawn and grave, the lips soft, the brows severe, the hair long and matted. It was Niklaus – and yet not Niklaus. Amgrund extended his hand towards the man, who hesitated, then shook it.

Brother Klaus was half a head taller than most men. But the fellow behind the door was short, shorter even than Amgrund, whom the LORD GOD had not blessed with height. He had, it was true, the same features as Niklaus, but his skin was far too smooth, despite some furrows of care and anger in his forehead. Brother Klaus had already been in his mid-fifties when they’d last met; the man facing Amgrund, however, could be no more than twenty-eight or twenty-nine, scarcely older than the pastor himself.

“His son, you must be his son!”

It suddenly dawned on Amgrund.

The hermit erupted into deep-throated laughter.

“That’s right, I’m the wrong von Flüe!”

Amgrund attempted to smile, knowing it must be obvious that it wasn’t heartfelt.

“So you’re Hans, then?”

He nodded.

“Is your father in there too?”

“No.”

“Can I come in anyway?”

“You’d best leave, as quick as you can. If you set off now, you’ll make it to the village before it’s pitch-dark and you’re stumbling over tree-roots. You can knock on my mother’s door.”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I have to see him.”

“There’s nothing to see here.”

“Nor to hear?”

“Nothing you’d want to hear.”

Amgrund could feel his jaw tensing.

“Look, I’ve been walking all day, so I’m certainly not going to turn back now.”

Hans sighed.

“Alright, then. Get inside before your toenails drop off in this lousy weather.”

Hans flung open the door. Amgrund saw into the cell. Foul air streamed towards him. It was stuffier than Amgrund had expected. An oil-lamp flickered on a small bench. Beside it lay a large, striped stone. The pillow. It was cramped in the cell, as dreary as a ship’s cabin, except that the peephole looked onto bare trees rather than the ocean. Hans sat down on a milking stool.

“You’ll have to sit on the bench. There’s no second stool, I’m afraid.”

“Your father manages without.”

Hans was bent crookedly, with one hand dangling between his legs. He gave a lopsided grin, as if making fun of Amgrund. It made him seem even younger.

“In this freezing weather your father won’t stay out for long,” said Amgrund. “When will he be back?”

Hans shrugged his shoulders.

“You’ll probably have to be patient for a while yet.”

His voice sounded tired.

“That’s no problem. If necessary, I’ll stay all night.”

“I don’t know if that’ll be long enough.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I happen to like long stories.”

“You won’t like this one.”

“Oh, just get on with it!”

Hans sighed.

“If I had a wish, Amgrund, just one, then I’d wish Father hadn’t continually looked up to the LORD GOD. Nor I to him. Then I wouldn’t be stuck here now, putting up with your nosiness, but at home in bed with my wife. For the last seven years he’s given me no peace.”

“Since he went to his cell, you mean?”

“He didn’t go by choice. If GOD needs something, he fetches it. And he needed Father. That’s why he sent him visions, over and over again. Until he couldn’t stand it any longer.”

“Careful, you’re committing a sin.”

“One more or less doesn’t make any difference now. You know, Father wasn’t at home much. Preferred speaking to GOD rather than to us. We were only allowed to see him four times a year.”

“At least you had that! It must have been exhausting enough for him as it was.”

“That I can well believe. At any rate, he suddenly turned up one day and said we should go on a pilgrimage, he and I, father and son.”

“I’d advised him against it,” said Amgrund.

“Well, then he didn’t take your advice either.”

Neither said anything.

They could hear the lamp flickering and the wind roaring outside. As night fell, the snowstorm seemed to have become even fiercer. It was too dangerous to return to the village. Amgrund would have to spend the night in the hermitage. The thought of remaining alone with Hans until sunrise aroused a vague fear in him.

“Are you going to stay for a bit, Amgrund?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Listen: I don’t want to keep it secret any longer. It’s throttling me from inside. Sometimes I think I’ll choke to death.”

Amgrund looked towards the door. Hans, sitting right beside it, had bolted it shut.

“I have a request.”

“Which is?”

“I beg you to hear my confession.”

“Then will you tell me where I can find your father?”

“Yes.”

They crossed themselves.

II.

The story begins in the forest. I'd only gone there to fetch some firewood. Almost three years ago. It wasn't fully spring yet, so it'll have been in March, mid-March. By then my father had already been living in his cell for four years. I missed him a lot, even though I had plenty of other cares and responsibilities. Since the previous summer I'd been married to Elsi. Our farm lay on the other side of the Melchaa, near St Niklausen. I hadn't only got my own farm to look after, I also helped Mother and my younger brothers and sisters. But still I often thought of him. I would so much have liked to know what he thought of Elsi. Whether he'd agree that I'd been right to marry her. And whether he'd regard me as an upstanding man and be proud of me. But although he didn't live far away, I hardly saw him. Just a few times a year, together with the family, when we visited him. I had no real chance to talk to him, not at any rate like when I was a boy and he'd shown me how to milk cows and butcher chickens. Before long I turned into the steep path down into the Ranft ravine. Ahead lay the massive boulder below which Brother Ulrich lived, Father's fellow hermit. I could see Ulrich's legs peeping out beneath it, sprawled on the meadow like two gnarled staffs. Father had advised him to look for a boulder further back in the valley. If he left everything behind then the Devil, who'd been pursuing him for years, would finally leave him in peace, Father had told him. He used to be a nobleman, this Ulrich, and if you ask me he'd have been better off remaining one.

I descended further into the ravine. I love days like that, when I can be completely by myself: you have your axe slung across your back, and the sweat on your forehead cools off once you're among the trees. Lower down the Melchaa flows by, and the water foams over the rocks. Usually it doesn't take long to select a tree. I always took ones that had already fallen. This time it was a young beech that hadn't survived the last thunderstorm. It was still small, no thicker than my upper arm. I hacked off the side branches, then split the trunk into logs.

Once I'd got enough wood to fill my basket I sat down on a tree stump for a bite to eat. I'd just unpacked a goat sausage and some bread from my knapsack, when I heard a crack behind me. I turned around. A pale hand shot out from a group of fir trees and clenched the needles as if it could feel no pain. Then a filthy cowl, a long beard. Father in his cowl. His toenails curled into the moss. He was so gaunt and lanky you could have taken him for a ghost. And his eyes! Pinched and cavernous, with no sparkle left in them at all. He must have retired into the forest to pray and then recognised me by how I chop wood. He'd always told me not to swing the axe so high above my head.

“Good day, Father,” I called, putting the sausage and bread back into my knapsack, because Father found them revolting.

I looked up at him. For a few heartbeats we said nothing. Somewhere a woodpecker was drumming its solitary march.

Then his thin lips parted.

Did I love him, he asked.

I said: “Naturally”.

Would I follow him?

I nodded. But then, of course, I didn’t yet know what he would demand of me.

Without pausing, he began his story. Like a trickle that after rain becomes a raging torrent. What he disclosed was a new vision.

The tower had moved on, he said, to the edge of the horizon. It was in the north-west now. It was the same tower that had appeared to him before, when it led him on his pilgrimage and afterwards to the Ranft ravine.

“I know,” I said, “you told us about it. In the days when you still used to visit us.”

Father ignored my remark. He described the tower to me – a tall tower, a tower made of white marble. Three times as wide as our farm, five times as high as the church tower in Sarnen. With a golden dome that shone so brightly even at night that the light still blinded him when he was lying on the floor of his cell with his eyes shut.

“And where do you want to go now?”

Father rested his left foot on the new tree stump. His skin disgusted me, it was so dry that it was flaking. He raised his hand and pointed north.

He could see the tower, he said. Beyond the hills and the mountaintops. If only he knew what GOD wanted to convey to him.

“Perhaps he wants you to come down and give us a hand. No time could be better. Lisi has

just calved and the Spichtigs' second-oldest is coughing blood. We've promised to help them out tomorrow."

Father lay down on the ground and gazed up at the clouds. He didn't know. He couldn't fathom it.

The collar of his cowl slipped, it was too large. I could see his corpse-like chest stretching up towards the treetops.

"And how am *I* supposed to know what He wanted to say?", I said. "What's the use if GOD speaks through someone, but no one understands His language? Why not come round to Mother's later on? She's invited Elsi and me for supper. I know it's not something you usually do, but we'd all be glad to see you, believe me."

Father sprang up suddenly. He looked like a bear in his soil-caked, dark-grey cowl and his shaggy dark-brown beard. That's what the wilderness does to you.

He would not surrender to the tempter, he roared.

His face flushed scarlet. I'd never heard such a loud voice. It reverberated in my belly and made the leaves rustle. I stumbled backwards, tripped over a root and, as dirt sprayed into my eyes, it seemed the forest wanted to engulf me. Whoever dies in the forest, they say, is doomed to roam the wilderness until the Last Judgement.

He would indeed pay us a visit that evening, I heard him say, for the first and last time, and only because he needed to talk to me.

Then the receding sound of his footsteps.

When I got up, he'd vanished. All that remained was the cord from his cowl, which must have

fallen out when he fled. I picked it up – a worm stained brown with sweat, grease and dirt – and went back to my wood-chopping.

III.

Shortly before sunset I had gathered enough wood. I returned to our farmhouse, went in, put the basket down in front of the stove and gave Elsi a kiss. Was I mistaken, or had her belly grown even larger during the day? I washed quickly at the well, then we set off down to Mother's. The rest of the family were already waiting for us.

At twilight the farmsteads seem deceptively imposing. Our dark block lay on Schiblochmatte meadow like a pregnant wild sow. The window openings faced towards Ranft. Grass all around, towards the village our byre, and much further back, in the direction of Sachseln, the Spichtigs' farm. The cows were just ambling back to the byre. Their bells tinkled sluggishly. My brother Welti was driving them indoors, whacking their arses with his stick. Whose stupid idea had it been to let the cows graze outdoors? It was far too early, two weeks ago the ground had still been frozen. Father, I thought, would never have let the animals out so early. I counted them, it's a habit I find soothing. Sämi, our dog, ran towards us and kept jumping up at me until I ruffled his fur. He followed us to the front door, stopping outside. All at once he began snarling. When the door opened a lanky fellow was standing in the shadows inside. It was Father. He looked sombre. Only when he caught sight of Elsi did his manner become more welcoming.

So this was my wife ... lovely ...

He held out his hand towards her, something he otherwise never did. Elsi smiled. I felt I could

hear her heart pounding, now that she was finally getting to meet my famous father. Unfortunately, he'd already disappeared again.

In the hallway there was no sign of Father's visit. No shoes, no coat. No smell even. I hadn't noticed that before. He didn't smell of pine needles, of moss, of soil, of leaves, not even of the rotting wood of his cell. It must be because he didn't eat like the rest of us. Someone like that doesn't stink. Like an angel, almost.

"A very good evening," Mother called to us. "Isn't it nice that Father is visiting us for once?"

We took off our shoes and went in to join the family, who were all sitting around the dining table: Mother, Father, Welti, Dorothea, Heini, Anna, Verena, Sepp, Toni, Katharina and Klaus. They were bunched together. Toni and Klaus sat on one chair, clinging to the table, which was still too high for them. At our gatherings I'm always the last to arrive, although I was the first to crawl out of Mother.

"Good evening, Elsi. Good evening, Hans," said Mother.

"Evening," muttered my brothers and sisters.

"Mother, who's that?", I heard Klaus ask. He was pointing at Father. Klaus had been born only a few weeks before Father left, of course.

Naturally Father didn't think to introduce himself. He had a bowl of porridge in front of him and was staring at the swollen grains, as if afraid the Devil might force him to eat some. I don't know why Mother had even given him a bowlful.

"You don't know who that is?", I asked. "It's your Father!"

Father shoved the porridge to one side and folded his hands. He probably thought we'd now all pray with him, as we used to do when he still lived with us.

“Aha,” mumbled Klaus, shovelling porridge into his mouth. A few dribbles stuck to his chin. He wiped them away, not minding us.

One after another, my brothers and sisters also began to shovel in food, as if a winter of famine was in the offing. Welty didn't even bother with a spoon. He dipped his hand into the salty mass, stuffed his cheeks full, then stood up and disappeared. He doubtless had no desire to listen to the quarrel which – he'd have sensed – was imminent. Mother and I looked at each other. She took a large swig of beer.

“What brings you here, Niklaus?”, she asked. “Do you need something? Or ...” – I can still see her hesitating and taking another swig: “... or are you considering coming home again?”

Father shook his head and said he'd only come because of me.

“Do you know what he's talking about, Hans?”, Mother asked.

I explained it had to do with the tower he'd always talked so much about before. A tower with a golden dome, like in Constantinople. And now it was in the north.

“I don't know what it means.”

Mother knew: “Off to foreign parts again, are you? Don't you remember the last time? Even then it wasn't His will that you went off. Otherwise He wouldn't have called you back in Liestal.”

Ah, but then he'd been following the confusion of his own heart, Father said. He'd persuaded himself that the LORD wanted him to leave the Ranft ravine,

when in fact He had simply wanted him to go further into it. This time was different. He knew the Saviour was on his side. And Ranft was something he would always carry with him in his heart. But he could not go alone. The Devil was lying in wait for him. I could tell Mother how the Devil incarnate had scourged him by flinging him down the hill into the thorn-bushes.

He'll doubtless have told you the story too, Amgrund. I can still remember it well. At the time I was still a child, seven years old at most. We'd climbed up Holdermatte meadow, to clear it of thorns, when Father suddenly started to roar, so loudly and so intensely that you might have thought he was being tormented with red-hot tongs. With his mouth gaping wide, he fell backwards and rolled a good thirty yards down the hill, right into the thorn-bushes. As he writhed around there, it looked as though he was wrestling with someone. I ran down and shook him until he calmed down and could crawl out. His face was covered with bloody welts, he was foaming at the mouth, his eyes were engorged and black, as though someone had been punching them. I cried, I think. It was Satan, he told me. Who gave him no respite. "But I didn't see anything," I said. No, no, he insisted, Satan was everywhere and nowhere – and first and foremost in our hearts.

He wanted me to go with him, Father said. It wouldn't take long, he was sure.

My brothers and sisters had all finished eating and asked to leave the table. Mother nodded. They disappeared up into their room.

“You should accompany your Father,” she said. “You’ll doubtless not be away for long. Make sure he finds a safe place. You know what it’s like in foreign parts.”

She was deceiving herself, I think. It must have hurt her that yet again he wanted to leave. Just imagine: You marry a decent, righteous man and then he abandons you for the LORD GOD.

“I thought you wanted to return to us,” I said.

But Father said I should stop behaving like a fool. He could never return to us. But if I was a good son, I should accompany him on his journey. It would also be good for my soul.

Mother laughed. However, it came out more cheerlessly than she’d presumably intended.

“You yourself know well enough that Father will never return to us. He can’t. That’s just the way it is. We’ll manage anyway, GOD is with us.”

“But I can’t abandon my wife,” I said.

Elsi had kept out of things so far. Now she placed her hands firmly on the table and looked at us all.

“I can take care of the farm for a while on my own,” she said. “You men can go ahead and hunt for GOD! That’s all well and good.”

“I’d prefer to stay here,” I said, pouring out more beer.

“Here is where I belong.”

“Thou shalt honour thy Mother and thy Father,” said Mother. Her nostrils swelled up like a lump of sourdough. As she spoke, she gesticulated with her hands, so that they cast wild shadows in the lamplight.

Obedience was the greatest honour both in heaven and on earth, Father added.

“Very well,” I said.

Father nodded. He discovered a beer spill on the table and pushed his dirty fingernail around in it.

That was right and proper, he said finally, then looked up and thumped the table.

Elsi gave a start.

Father said I should follow him.

He rose, turned round, strode out of the room, and disappeared outside without bidding farewell. Mother buried her face in her hands and began to weep. I stroked her grey hair.

“Don’t worry, Mother,” I said, “he’s bound to come back.”

I felt awkward, so I decided to follow Father’s example and leave the house.

The air outside smelt strange. Acrid in your nose. I didn’t know what to make of it. At that time, I didn’t yet know the smell. It was the sea. In the byre the animals were bellowing, as if expecting a thunderstorm. The beer had filled up my belly, so my first move was to have a piss in the field. The moon wouldn’t object. The stream arced nicely, steaming and hissing. I was just going to whistle a tune when – bang! My cheek burned. Someone whirled me round by my left shoulder. I stood agape. It was Father. His eyeballs gleamed in the moonlight.

“What the hell was that for?”, I asked.

He crossed himself. He was sorry. He wasn't usually like that. It had simply been what the LORD had wanted.

“Why should the LORD want to box my ears?”, I asked. “And even if it's true, what gives you the right to do it? I'm not a child anymore!”

Certainly not, said Father, I was the eldest and therefore the one to travel with him. It had been foreordained that way.

Foolish as I was, back then, I said nothing. I looked away and then he said that the Devil incarnate lurked within me. Ever since I was a child I had been too conceited and too indolent in heart. I should acknowledge my sins, he said.

Then he leapt at me. Almost threw me over. With so much strength, Father must truly belong to GOD, I thought! He pressed me back against the wall of the house, and his face blocked out the moon, which had risen above Huetstock. Not that you would have noticed much difference between them: both were chalky white.

He could see him yet again, he said. Standing right next to me. Satan! Devourer of hot coals! Beelzebub!

I tried to break free but he pressed with both hands against my ribcage.

“I've said I'm coming with you,” I said. “You can let go.”

Father believed that the Devil wanted to tempt me, out of malice towards him, the man of GOD. He was too strong for the Evil One. But I, I was weak, young and inexperienced. Levelling his index finger at me, he said he could see great affliction lying in store for us.

He spoke then of burning houses, of land left untilled, of peeling flesh and rotting bodies. Of how the eight cantons of the Confederacy would break apart,

how men from Zurich and Berne, Lucerne and Uri would cleave one another's skulls, consumed by envy and greed.

“Well, if that's the future, you're welcome to keep it!”, I exclaimed. “No one should have to know what fate's in store for him. If you tell someone he must starve to death, and he stops working and rots away in a corner, does that mean you were right?”

I had no right to contradict him, he claimed.

Our path had led us to St Niklausen and my farm. A light was flickering in the window. Elsi was home already. She was sitting at the table, staring into the dark. The bolt on the door felt as cold as a coffin-nail. I looked back. Father was standing in the meadow, waiting at a safe distance from my farm. His arms hung down, as if he didn't need them any longer. He couldn't again cross the threshold into a house. Just the visit to Mother's must already have drained much of his strength.

I opened the door. Inside it smelt of wood, of fire, of life. Elsi was holding a tankard in her hand. I sat down next to her on the chair.

“Have you spoken with him?”, she asked.

She handed me the tankard and I took a large gulp. I swilled it around in my mouth. Then I wanted to kiss her. But she pulled back her head.

“Are you going now?”, she asked.

At that moment the front door swung open. Probably a gust of wind. There was a creaking sound. Below the outside steps a shape was visible. Father. I couldn't look him in the face – gangling, dismal torment that he was. Hunger incarnate. I raised the tankard and toasted him.

“Just go, if you must,” said Elsi. “I’ll manage.”

Father advanced two steps towards us. Now he was standing before the threshold. But he didn’t come in.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll not be gone for long.”

I couldn’t have borne Father’s expression if I’d turned him down. I saw that Elsi was sad and couldn’t really understand why I was leaving. But she was too proud to show it. Had she known I’d be away for more than just a few days, she’d surely have got up and stopped me. But as it was she stayed sitting at the table and smiled.

What remained?

I stood up and walked out. Into the night.