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The life to come

Morning

The narration moves forward to the last five years of Paul's ministry: the focus is on Paul's perturbed soul. By now aging, and having obtained the power on Vithobai's valley, Paul is tormented by the thought of the "dark erotic perversion" that he has implanted in Vithobai's soul. He is obsessed by the memory of the episode at the grove when the chief, no longer a handsome youth but a thin and bony native with a cold voice, had jumped from the cart. This image is impressed in Paul's memory as a sign of his own sin. Not even the Christianity of the valley can offer Paul any consolation, being the product of a "reaction against sin", and therefore somehow unnatural and artificial.

Vithobai, for his part, has become quite useless to the missionaries, having already "served their purpose". Still a Christian, at least from the formal point of view, he now lives in a semi-European style and even takes care of his garden, a "menial labour", he once regarded as degrading.

Paul feels that "the same curse has infected them both" and, in this state of distress, cannot feel really grieved when he learns that Vithobai is dying with tuberculosis, a disease "imported" by one of the workers in the mine.

The last week before Paul and his wife's departure from the valley, Vithobai gets worse, as if his heart were broken (the allusion is that Vithobai's heart is **really** broken by Paul's lack of love). The couple hurry over to pay him a last visit, even though (as the writer ironically suggests) they have matters of much greater importance to care for.

The scene that follows highlights that Vithobai, in the moment of his death, has gone back to the "custom of his ancestors", though not to his pagan religion, lying naked on the ground on the roof of his house. "A curious skein of blue flowers" (blue being "the colour of despair in that valley") lies near him. In his short sentences to Paul the reader is made aware that Vithobai has regained all the dignity that he had lost for Paul's sake.. On the other hand Paul, still incapable to understand Vithobai and the depth of his love, is only moved by the selfish desire to finally discharge his soul of his burden by sharing it with the chief. Incapable of the true charity of a real Christian, Paul cannot but follow the empty rhetoric and the shallow conventions of religious ritual, when he says: "You must have some covering", "You are not lying upon a mattress, even" and especially when he expresses the irritating remark "He must not be left alone" (not realizing that he has left Vithobai alone all his life).

Vithobai is now in a sphere where not words but only deeds count. All his life he has experienced the ambivalence of words like "love" and "forgiveness", "good" and "evil". Because of this ambivalence he has lost everything. What Paul calls "sin" and to him was simply "joy" is now a deed like any other "gone before me with the others to be judged".

Paul's religious zeal suggests him the biblical image of "the life to come" where Paul and Vithobai can still be united and triggers the paradoxical ending: "he stabbed the missionary through the heart".

In Vithobai's mind, inclined to perceive every experience in concrete, and not abstract or symbolic terms, "the kingdom of the dead" is more real than the signs of his disgrace, which are "flying like mist".

He can finally feel “he was again a king, he had sent a messenger before him to announce his arrival in the life to come, as a great chief should”.