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Father Sergius

Leo Tolstoy · *written 1890–98; published 1911 · Louise and Aylmer Maude translation (1911)*

Prince Stepan Kasatsky, a handsome and ambitious officer of the Tsar's Guards, learns on the eve of his wedding that his bride was once the Emperor's mistress. Wounded in his pride, he breaks the engagement and becomes a monk. Tolstoy's late story follows him through years of discipline and fame to a fall that teaches him what he lacked.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a man become holy by his own effort, and what is the difference between seeming to be a saint and being one?

Kasatsky tries to make himself perfect and to rise by humility. He ends as famed Father Sergius, and his reputation grows as his prayer grows empty. After his fall, he finds in his childhood friend Pashenka a plain goodness without pride, and he goes on as a pilgrim. Tolstoy's answer is that holiness is a way of serving others, and that pride, even spiritual pride, is the enemy.

KEY CHARACTERS

Stepan Kasatsky / Father Sergius
A proud officer who becomes a monk.

Countess Mary Korotkova
His betrothed, whose past wounds him.

Makovkina
A woman who bets she can tempt him.

the merchant's daughter
The occasion of his fall.

Pashenka
His childhood friend, a woman of service.

Grades 10–12
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01

The Officer and the Engagement

CHAPTER I

Kasatsky, an ambitious officer of the Guards, is about to marry a countess when he learns that she was once the Emperor's mistress. His pride is wounded, he breaks off the engagement, and he decides to become a monk.

- His career had been brilliant.
- The discovery is a blow to his image of himself.
- The decision to be a monk is made in pride.

02

The Monk

CHAPTER II

He enters a monastery on the feast of the Intercession, submits to a starets, and tries to achieve every Christian virtue. His director tells him that his anger comes from pride. Sergius is sent to another monastery and later to a hermitage.

- His discipline is severe.
- The starets sees the pride behind his zeal.
- The hermitage is a way to be alone.

03

Makovkina and the Axe

CHAPTER III

A party of town revelers drives out to see the famous hermit, and Makovkina bets she will seduce him. Sergius resists by cutting off his own finger. The deed makes his reputation greater, and a year later she enters a convent.

- The bet is a game at his expense.
- The finger is an extreme act.
- His fame grows from the act.

04

Fame and the Fall

CHAPTERS IV–V

Crowds seek his blessing and his cures. His own prayer grows empty and he longs to escape. A merchant's daughter, sick and attractive, is brought to him, and he falls. He leaves the hermitage in disgrace.

- The healing brings crowds.
- His inner life grows empty.
- The fall is quick and plain.

05

Pashenka and Siberia

CHAPTER VI

He seeks out his childhood friend Pashenka, whose life of service to others has been quiet, tireless, and without pride. He goes on as a pilgrim, is arrested without a passport, and ends in Siberia as a gardener and teacher.

- Pashenka's life is the true saintliness.
- He sets out again, humbled.
- The ending in Siberia is a quiet one.

Pride | Holiness | Temptation | Service

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Notice how Kasatsky's pride changes form without going away.
2. The starets tells him his anger comes from pride. Ask whether that is true.
3. Pashenka's life is told briefly. Ask why Tolstoy ends with her.
4. Tolstoy wrote this late in life. Think about his own search for a plain faith.

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