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The Sealed Angel

Nikolai Leskov · *1873 · Beatrix L. Tollemache translation (1913)*

On a Christmas night in a crowded post-house in a snowstorm, a plain stone-mason named Mark tells the other travelers a story about his guild of Old Believers building a bridge over the Dnieper. Officials seize and seal their holy icon of an Angel, and the community sets out to get it back. Leskov's novella is among the most admired Russian tales of faith.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does faith do for plain people, and can a miracle be explained away by those who were not there?

Mark's story is a story of a community's love for a holy image and of the lengths they will go to keep it. They find a painter, make a copy, and bring about a swap on Christmas night. The bishop absolves them. In the last chapter the listeners offer natural explanations, and Mark answers them quietly and goes. Leskov lets both sides stand, and the tale carries more feeling than argument.

KEY CHARACTERS

Mark
The stone-mason who tells the tale.

Luke Cyrilov
The pious contractor who leads the guild.

Michaela
Luke's wife.

Pemen
The foreman who lets the officials in.

Levontia
A youth who goes on the search.

Jacob Jacobovitch
The English contractor.

Sebastian
The painter.

Pamba
A hermit.

Grades 9–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Post-House

CHAPTER I

In a snowstorm on Christmas night, travelers crowd a lonely post-house. A man in a corner begins to tell a story.

- The storm traps strangers together.
- Mark is the plain storyteller.
- The frame makes the tale a Christmas story.

02

The Bridge and the Icons

CHAPTERS II–IV

Mark describes his guild of Old Believers, led by Luke Cyrilov, who are building a bridge on the Dnieper and keep their holy icons, among them an Angel, in a chamber.

- Luke is a strong and pious leader.
- The icons are the guild's treasure.
- The bridge is a great work.

03

The Seizure

CHAPTERS V–VIII

The foreman Pemen accepts money for prayers, and the officials discover the icons. The Angel is sealed with burning wax and taken.

- The bribe lets in the officials.
- The sealing with wax is a violation.
- The community's grief is deep.

04

The Journey

CHAPTERS IX–XII

Mark and Levontia go in search of an artist. They meet a hermit, and Levontia dies. They bring back the painter Sebastian.

- The search is a pilgrimage.
- Levontia's death is a loss.
- Sebastian is a skilled painter.

05

The Exchange

CHAPTERS XIII–XV

With the help of the English contractor, the community plans to replace the Angel by a copy, and Luke carries it out on Christmas night. The seal is found gone, and the Bishop absolves Luke.

- The copy is a sacred deception.
- The English contractor helps.
- The bishop's verdict ends the case.

06

The Listeners

CHAPTER XVI

The listeners suggest natural explanations of the events. Mark gives a reply and leaves.

- The skeptics offer easy answers.
- Mark answers without anger.
- The story ends with a departure.

Faith | Community | The Icon | Miracle and Doubt

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The story is told by Mark. Ask how that colors what you read.
2. The Old Believers are a minority community. Notice how Leskov treats them.
3. The bridge and the icon are two kinds of work. Compare them.
4. The skeptics have the last word, and Mark has the last act. Think about why.

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