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Master and Man

Leo Tolstoy · *1895 · Louise and Aylmer Maude translation (1910)*

Vasili Andreevich Brekhunov, a prosperous merchant of about fifty, sets out in winter to buy a grove at a good price, with his laborer Nikita driving the sledge. A blizzard comes up, they lose the road, and the story follows the two men through one terrible night. Tolstoy's late short work carries the questions of his whole later life.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is a life worth, and what does a man owe to the person he thinks beneath him when death is near?

At first the master thinks that his own life is worth more than a laborer's, and he leaves Nikita to save himself. He circles in the storm and comes back to the sledge. Seeing Nikita nearly dead, he lies down upon him to warm him, and a joy he has never known comes over him. He dies in the night and Nikita lives. The story is a plain statement of Tolstoy's view that love, not property, makes a person's life.

KEY CHARACTERS

Vasili Andreevich Brekhunov
The master, a prosperous merchant.

Nikita
The laborer who drives the sledge.

Mukhorty
The horse.

Petrushka
A young guide who leaves them at the turning.

the peasants of Grishkino
Villagers who offer help.

Grades 9–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Bargain in Bad Weather

CHAPTERS I–II

Vasili Andreevich, church elder and innkeeper, is eager to buy a grove from a landowner before a competitor can. He orders Nikita to harness the horse Mukhorty, and Nikita goes, though the wind is rising.

- The master's pride in his business is plain.
- Nikita is a calm and quiet laborer.
- The wind is already rising.

02

Through the Village

CHAPTERS III–V

They reach Grishkino, where a rich peasant household offers tea and lodging. Vasili Andreevich refuses to wait. Isay and then the young Petrushka lead them on, and Petrushka leaves them at the turning.

- The refusal to wait is the first mistake.
- Peasants offer help and are refused.
- The guide disappears at the turning.

03

Lost

CHAPTER VI

They lose the road and cannot find it again. They stop to wait for morning. Vasili Andreevich is frightened, thinks that his own life is worth more than a laborer's, and rides off on Mukhorty.

- The ravine keeps appearing before them.
- The master's fear shows his true character.
- He leaves Nikita behind.

04

Two Minds in the Storm

CHAPTERS VII–VIII

Nikita considers death calmly and prays. Vasili Andreevich rides blind, finds the same wormwood again, and sees that he has gone in a circle. He follows the horse's track back.

- Nikita's calm is Tolstoy's picture of peace.
- The master's ride is a circle.
- Each man's thoughts are followed in turn.

05

The Master Lies Down

CHAPTERS IX–X

Vasili Andreevich finds the sledge again, sees Nikita nearly dead, and lies down on him to warm him. A joy and tenderness he has never known comes over him, and he dies in the night. Nikita is found alive and lives twenty more years.

- The master's change is sudden and complete.
- Nikita loses three toes and lives on.
- The ending is plain and without comment.

Death and Meaning | Pride and Money | Love | The Storm

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Notice how Tolstoy moves between the two men's thoughts.
2. The blizzard is a force in the plot. Watch how it changes the two.
3. Compare the master's decision to leave with his later act.
4. The story is short. Ask what Tolstoy gives you in so few pages.

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