

## **The Three Hermits**

by Leo Tolstoy

A bishop was sailing from Archangel to the Solovétsk Monastery; and on the same vessel were a number of pilgrims on their way to visit the shrines at that place. The voyage was a smooth one—the wind favorable, and the weather fair.

The bishop came on deck, and as he was pacing up and down, he noticed a group of men standing near the prow listening to a fisherman who was pointing to the sea and telling them something.

The bishop asked what the fisherman was saying.

"The fisherman was telling us about the hermits," someone told him.

"What hermits?" asked the Bishop.

"Why, that little island you can just see over there," answered the man, pointing to a spot ahead and a little to the right.

"That is the island where the hermits live for the salvation of their souls."

The Bishop looked carefully, but he could make out nothing but the water shimmering in the sun.

"I cannot see it," he said. "But who are the hermits that live there?"

"They are holy men," answered the fisherman. "I had long heard tell of them, but never chanced to see them myself till the year before last."

Then the fisherman related how once, when he was out fishing, he had been stranded at night upon that island, not knowing where he was.

In the morning, as he wandered about the island, he came across an earth hut, and met an old man standing near it. Presently two others came out, and after having fed him, and dried his things, they helped him mend his boat.

"And what are they like?" asked the Bishop.

"One is a small man and his back is bent. He wears a priest's cassock and is very old; he must be more than a hundred. He is so old that the white of his beard is taking a greenish tinge, but he is always smiling, and his face is as bright as an angel's from heaven.

"The second is taller, but he also is very old. He wears a tattered peasant coat. His beard is broad and of a yellowish grey color. He is a strong man. Before I had time to help him, he turned my boat over as if it were only a pail. He too, is kindly and cheerful.

"The third is tall, and has a beard as white as snow which reaches to his knees. He is stern-looking, with over-hanging eyebrows; and he wears nothing but a mat tied round his waist."

"And what did they say to you?" asked the Bishop.

"For the most part, they did everything in silence and spoke but little even to one another. One of them would just give a glance, and the others would understand him.

"I asked the tallest whether they had lived there long. He frowned and muttered something as if he were angry; but the oldest one took his hand and smiled, and then the tall one was quiet.

"The oldest one only said: 'Have mercy upon us,' and smiled."

While the fisherman was talking, the ship had drawn nearer to the island.

"There, now you can see it plainly," someone said pointing.

The Bishop looked, and now he saw a dark streak—which was the island. Having looked at it a while, he went to the stern of the ship and said to the helmsman: “I should like to land on the island and see these men. How could I manage it?”

“The ship cannot get close to the island,” replied the helmsman, “but you could be rowed there in a boat. You had better speak to the captain.”

The captain was sent for and came. “Of course you could be rowed there,” said he, “but we would lose much time. And if I might venture to say so to your grace, the old men are not worth your pains. I have heard say that they are foolish old fellows, who understand nothing and never speak a word, any more than the fish in the sea.”

“I wish to see them,” said the Bishop, “and I will pay you for your trouble and loss of time. Please let me have a boat.”

There was no help for it; so the order was given and the ship’s course was set for the island.

The passengers all collected at the prow, and gazed at the island. Those who had the sharpest eyes could presently make out the rocks on it, and then a mud hut. At last one man saw the hermits themselves. The captain brought a telescope and handed it to the Bishop.

The Bishop took the telescope and saw three men standing on the shore holding each other by the hand.

When the ship could get no nearer the island, a boat was lowered, the oarsmen jumped in, and the Bishop descended the ladder and took his seat.

The boat moved rapidly towards the island, and when it arrived, the bishop got out.

The old men bowed to him, and he gave them his blessing, at which they bowed still lower. Then the Bishop began to speak to them.

"I have heard," he said, "that you godly men live here saving your own souls, and praying to our Lord Christ for your fellow men. I, an unworthy servant of Christ, am called, by God's mercy, to keep and teach His flock. I wished to see you, servants of God, and to do what I can to teach you, also."

The old men looked at each other smiling, but remained silent.

"Tell me," said the Bishop, "what you are doing to save your souls and how you serve God on this island."

The second hermit sighed, and looked at the oldest, the very ancient one. The latter smiled, and said: "We do not know how to serve God. We only serve and support ourselves, servant of God."

"But how do you pray to God?" asked the Bishop.

"We pray in this way," replied the hermit. "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy on us."

And when the old man said this, all three raised their eyes to heaven, and repeated: "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy on us!"

The Bishop smiled. "You have evidently heard something about the Holy Trinity," said he. "But you do not pray aright. You have won my affection, godly men. I see you wish to please the Lord, but you do not know how to serve Him.

"That is not the way to pray; but listen to me, and I will teach you. I will teach you, not a way of my own, but the way in which God in the Holy Scriptures has commanded all men to pray to Him.

"God the Son came down on earth," said he, "to save men, and this is how he taught us all to pray. Listen and repeat after me: 'Our Father.' "

The first old man repeated after him, "Our Father," and the second said, "Our Father," and the third said, "Our Father."

"Who art in heaven," continued the Bishop.

The first hermit repeated, "Who art in heaven," but the second blundered over the words, and the tall hermit could not say them properly. His hair had grown over his mouth so that he could not speak plainly.

The very old hermit, having no teeth, also mumbled indistinctly.

The Bishop repeated the words again, and the old men repeated them after him. The Bishop sat down on a stone, and the old men stood before him, watching his mouth, and repeating the words as he uttered them.

All day long the Bishop labored, saying a word twenty, thirty, a hundred times over, and the old men repeated it after him. They blundered, and he corrected them, and made them begin again.

The Bishop did not leave off till he had taught them the whole of the Lord's Prayer so that they could not only repeat it after him but could say it by themselves. The middle one was the first to know it and to repeat the whole of it alone. The Bishop made him say it again and again, and at last the others could say it, too.

It was getting dark and the moon was appearing over the water, before the Bishop rose to return to the vessel. When he took leave of the old men, they all bowed down to the ground before him. He raised them and kissed each of them, telling them to pray as he had taught them. Then he got into the boat and returned to the ship.

As he was rowed to the ship, he could hear the three voices of the hermits loudly repeating the Lord's Prayer. As the boat drew near the vessel their voices could no longer be heard, but they could still be seen in the moonlight, standing as he had left them on the shore.

As soon as the Bishop had reached the vessel and got on board, the anchor was weighed and the sails unfurled. The wind filled them and the ship sailed away, and the Bishop took a seat in the stern and watched the island they had left.

For a time he could still see the hermits, but presently they disappeared from sight, though the island was still visible. At last it too vanished, and only the sea was to be seen, rippling in the moonlight.

The pilgrims lay down to sleep, and all was quiet on deck. The Bishop did not wish to sleep but sat alone at the stern, gazing at the sea where the island was no longer visible, and thinking of the good old men.

He thought how pleased they had been to learn the Lord's Prayer; and he thanked God for having sent him to teach and help such godly men.

The moonlight flickered before his eyes, sparkling, now here, now there, upon the waves. Suddenly he saw something white and shining on the bright path which the moon cast across the sea. Was it a seagull or the little gleaming sail of some small boat? The Bishop fixed his eyes on it, wondering.

"It must be a boat sailing after us," thought he, "but it is overtaking us very rapidly. It was far, far away a minute ago, but now it is much nearer. It cannot be a boat, for I can see no sail; but whatever it may be, it is following us and catching up with us."

He could not make out what it was. It was not a boat or a bird or a fish! It was too large to be a man, and besides a man could not be out there in the middle of the sea.

The Bishop rose and said to the helmsman:

"Look there, what is that, my friend?"

"What is it?" the Bishop repeated, though he could now see plainly what it was—the three hermits running upon the water, all gleaming white, their grey beards shining, and quickly approaching the ship.

The steersman looked and let go the helm in terror.

"Oh Lord! The hermits are running after us on the water as though it were dry land!"

The passengers hearing him, jumped up and crowded to the stern. They saw the hermits coming along hand in hand and the two outer ones beckoning the ship to stop. All three were gliding along upon the water without moving their feet.

Before the ship could be stopped, the hermits had reached it, and raising their heads, all three as with one voice, began to say: "We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God.

"As long as we kept repeating it we remembered, but when we stopped saying it for a time, a word dropped out, and now it has all gone. We can remember nothing of it. Teach us again."

The Bishop crossed himself, and leaning over the ship's side, said: "Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners."

Then the Bishop bowed low before the old men; and they turned and went back across the sea. And a light shone until daybreak on the spot where they were lost to sight.

Slightly condensed from Tolstoy: *Stories and Legends*, Pantheon Books, (old book, no date given, pp.67-77). The story was written in 1886.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) is considered one of the greatest writers who ever lived.