

"Sergius wanted to get rich. He knew that the Russian Church was immensely rich. The pope had told him that these riches came because God loved the church. 'Now,' thought Sergius, 'if I can only get God to love me, then I too shall be fat and comfortable.'

"So to win God's love Sergius began carefully imitating the village pope in all his habits. He began to go to every service in the church, Sundays and week-days too; he scraped together his spare kopecks and spent them all on masses; he even paid the pope to perform more masses in his hut; and, to be unusually polite to God, he bought four sacred ikons, instead of one, and hung them all up on the log walls of his hut. Every time the pope came out of his house and walked to the little white church, out of his hut came Sergius and walked behind, very close, that God might not fail to see him. He shrewdly imitated the pope's every gesture. The pope was lame; Sergius grew just as lame—he used to practise at night in the one room of his hut. Later he made his voice deep and solemn; he spoke in monotonous; he knelt in exactly the same way as the pope. He was almost always kneeling. And so three years passed piously away.

"Then Sergius saw that while he had been kneeling, his little poor strip of land had grown hard and poor from neglect, and his children had grown thinner and thinner because all the spare kopecks in the hut had gone to the pope to buy love from God. As the two tiniest children grew weaker they grew more fretful; they used to cry drearily all night from the ache in their stomachs. The wife would hush them, but in ten minutes they would begin again the same whining cry—over and over, hundreds of times through the night.

And because God might be listening, Sergius could only swear in whispers.

"Once, toward dawn, Sergius lay up on top of the broad brick stove, hearing the whines, and whispering more and more earnestly. Suddenly the smallest child gave an extra loud whine. Then down from the stove leaped Sergius.

"'Devils!' he roared. 'Devils! Devils! Devils! Pigs! Bugs!' He looked up through the ceiling and shouted to God:

"'Listen all you want—if you are there. I don't believe you ever were there! I say this God is no good at all! Anyway he gets nothing more from me! Wife! Pig! Wake up! I was very religious—yes—you know I was! Well—now look at us! Oh, shut up, you little devils, quit your bawling! Wife, gather all this holy rubbish and pitch it into the creek! I say now! Right away! Before morning! I can't sleep when I see these ikon women laughing at the way they have cheated me!'

"In vain his wife sobbed and shook with fear and told him that God would surely kill them all.

"'Bosh!' shouted Sergius. 'Woman, be quick! I have my club ready for your back. I have not beaten you for three years, but I will beat you three years without stopping if you don't tear these things out of the hut!'

"So Sergius began his strike against God. That was five years ago. And now the whole village is with him.

"The peasants have grown to despise and ridicule the church. But it is against the Czar's other village officials that they feel the deepest, deadliest hatred.

"Some years ago, while zemstvo statistician, I went to investigate a certain village from which had come