

EASTER



THE EASTER CHIMES.

A Tale from the Russian of Kovalenko.

IT WAS the night before the Easter morning. The little village by the murmuring creek was half hidden in the mystical, vapory, starry gloom of a Russian night in springtime. The neighboring wood hung blackest shadows on the fields beside it. All was silent. The village slumbered.

Hours passed, and long before the night was gone its still charm was broken. Lights began to glimmer in the windows of cottages whose wretchedness was disguised in the bewitching springtime gloom of night. A gate creaked. The tread of a foot was heard here and there. Moving figures, darkly outlined, emerged from the shades of the wood. A dog barked, and then another and another.

Then a horseman clattered along the village street. A passing cart groaned and creaked under its early morning burden. The darkly outlined figures increased in number. The villagers began to gather in their church to bid welcome to the spring holiday.

It was a quaint little church. It stood upon a hillock in the middle of the village. All at once its windows glowed dimly among the shadows. Then their brightness increased. The church was all alight.

High into the darkness overhead reached the old belfry tower. Its top was lost in the azure gloom.

Then the rickety belfry stairs began to creak. Old Micheich, the bellringer, was clambering aloft. Soon his lantern hung in the bell window, shining like a new star in the sky.

It was hard for the old man to climb those steep and crooked stairs. His old eyes no longer served him, and he, like they, was worn out.

As he climbed, he pondered. It was time indeed, he thought, that he should rest. But God would not send him death. He had seen his children buried. He had stood by the open graves of his grandchildren. He had followed the old to their last resting place. He had



THE BELLRINGER WAS CLAMBERING ALOFT.

followed the young there, too. But still he lived and lived. It was hard.

Many a time had he welcomed the Easter morning—so many times that he could not recall them all. He had even forgotten how often in later years he had hoped for death in this same old belfry, as now he hoped for it. And yet this early morning God had brought him there once more.

It was not yet time for him to ring the merry peals and the old man tottered to the belfry window and leaned out over the railing. Below him in the darkness he could dimly see the neglected graves. The white wooden cross-

es at their heads seemed to be guarding them with their widestretched arms. Here and there a few birch trees bent naked branches forlornly over the mounds and the aromatic odors of their young buds arose on the silent air to Micheich's nostrils. They bore to him a tale of tranquil, eternal sleep.

Where would he be a year from that moment? Would he be there again? Would he have once more climbed into that tower under the clamorous copper bells to awaken the slumbering night with their sharp, resounding strokes? Or would he lie out there in a dark corner of the cemetery with a white cross guarding his everlasting sleep?

God alone knew. He was ready to die—but in the meantime God had brought him into the belfry once more to welcome the Easter morning.

"To the glory of God!"

His old lips repeated the oft spoken



HE SEIZED THE BELL ROPES.

formula, and his old eyes gazed into the deep sky above, burning with its millions upon millions of stars.

"Micheich! Oh, Micheich!"

The voice came from below. It was the old sexton, who had come from the church into the graveyard beneath the tower and who was gazing upward, with his hands shading his blinking, tear moistened eyes in vain effort to make out the form of the bellringer in the darkness overhead.

"What do you want?" answered old Micheich, bending over the railing. "I am here. Can't you see me?"

"I do not see," cried the sexton. "Is it not time to ring? What do you think?"

Both gazed upon the stars. Thou-

sands of God's lanterns were blinking at them from the firmament. The night was waning. Micheich thought.

"No, not yet," he said. "Wait awhile. I know when."

But it was time to salute the Easter morning. Old Micheich gazed at the stars once more, and then arose. He removed his hat, crossed himself and gathered up the bell ropes. A moment more and the night air shivered under the first resounding stroke. Then came the second, the third, the fourth. The lightly sleeping Easter air quivered with the joyous music of the shouting, singing bells.

Then the bells ceased. The solemn service began in the church below.

In bygone years Micheich had always gone down to the service and stood in a corner near the door, praying and listening to the music. But it was hard for him to do this now. He felt tired. So he sat down on the bench beneath the copper bells and listened to their waning resonance.

He thought. About what? Micheich himself could hardly answer the question. His glimmering lantern scarcely lit up the belfry. He could not make out the droning bells. They were lost in darkness. From the church below his old ears caught the singing now and then. The old man's gray head

sank upon his chest. Disconnected scenes from the past swarmed in his mind like bees in the hive.

"Ah!" he said as the music of the Easter hymn drifted up the tower stairs, "they are singing the troparion."

In his imagination he sang that hymn, again a youth, in the old church below. The little old priest, Father Naum, many years dead and buried, once more was intoning the end of a prayer, while children's voices united in the responses. Hundreds of peasants bowed and arose like corn before the wind. Now they crossed themselves devoutly.

The old familiar faces were of those long since dead. There was the stern visage of his father. There stood his elder brother at the old man's side, sighing deeply and crossing himself again and again. There he himself stood, young, healthy, strong, joyful, full of expectation of a life's happiness.

Where was that happiness now?

The old man's thoughts flickered up like a dying flame. Recollection illumined all the nooks and corners of his life. And all he saw was endless, ceaseless, merciless labor—labor far beyond his strength. He saw sorrow, too—much sorrow—and suffering unutterable.

Ah, where indeed was that happiness of which he had dreamed?

The burdens of life had wrinkled his young face, had bent his powerful back before the time had come. They had made the joyous boy sigh as his elder brother had sighed.

There on the left, among the women of the village, with her head humbly bent, he saw his sweetheart. She was a good woman. May the peace of God be with her soul!

Oh, the pain that she had suffered! Want and work and woman's woes had withered her glowing womanhood. Her eyes had grown dim with years and weeping. The shocks and blights of life had painted a dull fright upon her comely face.

Ah, where was her happiness?

God had given them one son, their joy, their very soul, and he was ground to his death by men's injustice.

The picture broadened and grew vivid in the old man's mind. He saw standing in his pew the rich enemy of the family, bowing his head to the very ground, glossing over in his prayers the wrongs of the widows and orphans whose lives he had blighted in his selfish greed. Micheich felt his heart grow hot within him now, as it had done then, while the dark faces of the holy



HAD FALLEN HELPLESSLY.

Images on the altar frowned sternly upon man's sorrows and man's injustice.

But all this was long, long passed. All this was far away in the old times. And now all the wide world for him was this dark tower, where the wind sighed gently among the swinging bell ropes.

"Let God judge you! God will judge you!" whispered the old man, thinking of his enemy. Silent tears ran down his cheeks.

"Micheich! Ah, Micheich! What is the matter with you? Are you asleep?"

The voice came from the churchyard without. "Good God!" cried the old man, remembering the further duty that awaited him. "Did I really fall asleep?"

He seized the bell ropes and pulled them with skillful hand.

Far below the people swarmed from the church, as ants swarm from the anthill. Golden standards reared themselves in the air of the unborn Easter morning. Forming as a cross, the procession began to move around the church, amid joyful cries of "Christ has risen from the dead!"

The words went to the old bellringer's heart, and glancing out he was exalted in spirit. It seemed to him that the waxen candles that the people bore blazed with suddenly increased brilliance in the gray darkness, that the throng moved more and more swiftly, that the standards waved the more joyously, and that the awakening wind lifted up the joyful chorus from below and turned it to the bell's brazen peals with a sweetness superhuman.

Never did Micheich ring the bells with such joy and spirit.

It seemed as if his old heart had been welded into the dead copper of those bells, which laughed and sang and wept at the entrancing melody that rose to the stars above. And the stars seemed to fairly blaze with joy of it as the music poured upward into heaven and fell backward to caress the earth.

What a hymn of joy it was those bells pealed forth. The great bass deafened the sky with the grand brazen cry of "Christ has risen." And the tenors, struck to their hearts, shouted sonorously, "Christ has risen!" while the clanging sopranos, as though fearing their lesser voices should be lost to the grand chorus, hurriedly, like gleeful children trying to outstrip each other, screamed a thousand times, "Christ has risen!"

And that sad old heart forgot its cares, its sorrows, and its insults.

The gray bellringer heard only the brazen music, now singing, now weeping, now floating to the starry sky, now sinking to the wretched earth; and it seemed to him that he was surrounded by his children and his grandchildren and that these were their happy voices—the voices of old and young together pouring out in one grand chorus a hymn of joy and rapture.

So the old bellringer pulled the ropes with strong, nervous arms while tears poured down his cheeks and his heart ran fairly over with a happiness he had never known before. And below the people listened, and they said to each other that Micheich had never rung so wonderfully before.

Then suddenly the great bass bell hesitated—and was silent. For a moment the others sang an unfinished, uncertain harmony. Then they, too, ceased, and there was silence save for the low, sad, trembling droning of their stilling but still resonant throats.

The gray bellringer had fallen helplessly on the bench beside the ropes, and two tears silently rolled over his pale cheeks.

Send a substitute! The old bellringer has rung himself out.



For Easter.

RISE! This day shall shine for evermore, To thee a star divine on Time's dark shore!

Till now thy soul has been all glad and gay; Bid it awake and look at Grief to-day!

But now the stream has reached a dark, deep sea; And sorrow, dim and crowned, is waiting thee.

Each of God's soldiers bears a sword divine; Stretch out thy trembling hands to-day for thine!

Then with slow, reverent step and beating heart, From out thy joyous day thou must depart—

And, leaving all behind, come forth alone, To join the chosen band around the throne.

Raise up thine eyes! Be strong! Nor cast away The crown that God has given thy soul to-day!

Easter Hares.

About Easter time hares are almost as common as eggs in the shop windows, and many boys and girls may wonder why this is so. It is plain why the egg should be used. The life which comes, after so long a time, from the lifeless-looking egg, makes it especially typical of the resurrection. It is not so clear what the hare has to do with Easter Sunday.

Easter is a feast regulated by the moon. That is, it is appointed by the church that Easter should fall "upon the first Sunday after the first full moon which fell upon or after the vernal equinox." Now, the hare is the animal which the ancients considered sacred to the moon, and proper to be used at all feasts regulated by the moon.

So among the old customs which have been handed down to us from the old, old days is that which still uses the hare as well as the egg in the pretty fanciful decorations suitable for our great spring festival.—Easter Sunday.

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