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EASTER EVE

Translated anonymously – XIX century

It was Holy Saturday, one year in the 'eighties.

Evening had long since enfolded the silent earth. The ground, warmed during the day by the rays of the sun, was now cooling beneath the invigorating influence of the night-frost. It seemed as if sighing, while its breath, forming a silvery mist, rose glistening in the rays of the starlit sky, like clouds of incense, to greet the approaching feast.

All was still. In the cool night-breeze the small provincial town stood silent, waiting to hear the first stroke of the bell from the high cathedral tower. But the town was not sleeping; a spirit of expectancy brooded beneath the veil of darkness, breathing through the shadows of the silent and deserted streets. Now and then a belated workman, who had just escaped from his servile task ere the festival began, passed, hurrying on his way; once in a while a cab rattled by, leaving silence behind it. Life had fled indoors and hidden itself, in mansion and hovel, from whose windows the lights shone far out upon the street, while over the city and the fields hovered the spirit of Resurrection.

Although the moon stood high above the horizon, the town still rested in the broad, deep shadow of a hill, crowned by a gloomy and massive edifice, whose peculiarly straight and severe outlines were sharply defined in the golden atmosphere. The sombre gates were hardly to be distinguished amid the gloom of its deeply shadowed walls, while the towers on the four corners stood out boldly against the azure sky, and gradually over all the moon poured its flood of liquid gold.

Suddenly on the sensitive air of the expectant night came the first stroke from the high cathedral belfry; then another,

and still another. A minute later and the whole air throbbed and swelled, as the countless bells rang out, uniting in one harmonious peal. From the gloomy building overshadowing the town came a faint, broken harmony, that seemed to flutter helplessly in the air, and thence to rise into the ethereal light, and join the mighty chorus. The singing ceased, the sounds dissolved in air, and the silence of the night gradually resumed its sway; a faint echo seemed to hover for a while, like the vibration of an invisible harp-string. Now the lights were gradually extinguished, the church windows shone forth brightly, and Earth seemed ready to proclaim once more the old tidings of peace, love, and good-will.

The bolts of the dark gates in the gloomy building creaked, and a band of soldiers, with clanking arms, sallied forth to relieve the night sentinels; on approaching the corners, they would halt, and a dark form, with measured steps, would detach itself from the rest, while the former sentinel took his place in the ranks, and the soldiers went on their way, skirting the high prison wall, that glistened in the moonbeams.

As they reached its western side, a young recruit stepped forward from the ranks to relieve the sentry who was posted there; a rustic awkwardness still showed itself in his movements, and his young face betrayed the absorbed attention of a novice who was to occupy for the first time a responsible post. He faced the wall, presented arms, made two steps forward, and shouldering his rifle, stood beside the sentry he was to replace. The latter, turning slightly toward him, repeated the usual formula, in the sing-song tone of discipline:

" From corner to corner. Keep watch! Do not sleep or doze! " He spoke rapidly, while the recruit listened with close attention, and a peculiar expression of anxiety and sadness in his grey eyes.

" You understand? " asked the sergeant.

" Yes, sir! "

" Then, look out! " he added sharply; but, suddenly changing his tone, he said, good-naturedly:

" Don't be afraid, Faddeyef; you are not a woman! I hope you are not afraid of the Lyeshy! "

" Why should I be afraid of him? " replied Faddeyef.

Then he added: " But I tell you, boys, I have some misgiving."

This simple and almost childish confession made the soldiers laugh.

" There's simplicity for you! " exclaimed the sergeant, in tones of contempt. Then giving the order, " Shoulder arms! March! " the sentries, with measured tread, disappeared around the corner, and the sound of their footsteps was soon lost in the distance. The sentinel shouldered his rifle, and began to pace along the wall.

Inside the prison, at the first stroke of the bell, all was in motion. It was long since the sad and gloomy prison night had witnessed so much life. It seemed as if the church bells had really brought tidings of liberty; for the grimy doors of the cells opened in turn, and their occupants, clad in long grey garments, the fatal patches on their backs, filed in rows along the corridors, on their way to the brilliantly lighted prison church. They came from all directions —from right and left, descending and ascending the stairway; and amid the echoing footsteps rang the sound of arms and the clanking of chains. On entering the church, this grey mass of humanity poured into the space allotted to it, behind the railing, and stood there in silence. The windows of the church were protected by strong iron bars.

The prison was empty, except in the four towers, where, in small, strongly bolted cells, four men, in solitary confinement, were restlessly pacing to and fro, stopping once in a while to listen at the keyhole to the snatches of church-singing that reached their ears.

And, beside these, in one of the ordinary cells, in a bunk, lay a sick man. The governor, to whom this sudden illness had been reported, went into his cell as they were escorting the prisoners to church, and, leaning over him, looked into his eyes, that were gazing fixedly before him, and in which shone a peculiar light. " Ivanof! Ivanof! " he called out to the invalid. The convict never turned his head, but continued muttering something unintelligible, moving his parched lips with difficulty.

" Carry him to the hospital to-morrow! " said the governor, as he left the cell, appointing a sentry to guard the door. The latter, after a close examination of the delirious patient, shook his head, saying as he did so: "A

vagrant! Poor fellow! you are not likely to tramp any more!" The governor continued his way along the corridor, and entered the church, taking up his post by the door, where, with frequent genuflexions, he listened devoutly to the service. Meanwhile the mutterings of the unconscious man filled the empty cell.

He did not seem old; on the contrary, he looked strong and muscular. He was delirious, apparently living the past over again, while a look of distress disfigured his face. Fate had played him a sorry trick. He had tramped thousands of miles through the Siberian forests and mountains, had suffered countless dangers and privations, always urged onward by a consuming home-sickness, and sustained by one hope—that he might live to see his native place, and be once more with his own people, if it were but for a month, or even a week. Then he would be resigned, even if he had to go back again. But it chanced that, when only a few hundred miles from his native village, he had been recaptured and confined in this prison. Suddenly his mutterings ceased. His eyes dilated, and his breathing became more even. Brighter dreams flitted across his fevered brain. The forest moans. He knows it well, that moaning; monotonous, musical, and powerful. He can distinguish its various tones; the language of each tree: the majestic pine, dusky green, rustling high overhead; the whispering cedars, the bright, merry birch, tossing its flexible branches; the trembling aspen, fluttering its timid, sensitive leaves. The free birds sing; the steam rushes across the stony chasm; and a swarm of gibbering magpies, the detectives of the forest, are soaring in the air over the path followed by the vagrant through this almost impenetrable thicket.

It seemed as if a breeze from the free forest were wafted through the prison cell. The invalid sat up and drew a long breath, gazing intently before him, while a sudden gleam of consciousness flashed into his eyes. The vagrant, the habitual fugitive, beheld before him an unaccustomed sight—an open door!

In his frame, enfeebled by disease, a powerful instinct sprang to life. His delirium either disappeared or centred itself on one idea, which, like a ray of sunlight, illumined the chaos of his thoughts. Alone, and with an open door! In

a moment he was on his feet. It seemed as if the fever had left his brain, and was only perceptible in his eyes, which had a fixed and menacing expression.

Some one had just come out from the church, leaving the door ajar.

The strains of the harmonious singing, subdued by the distance, reached the ear of the vagrant, and then died away. His face softened, his eyes grew dim, and his imagination reproduced a long-cherished scene: A mild night, the whisper of the pines, their branches swaying above the old church of his native village, a throng of countrymen; the lights reflected in the river, and this same chant! He must make haste with his journey, that he may hear this at home, with his family!

All this time, in the corridor, near the church door, the governor prayed devoutly, kneeling, and touching his forehead to the ground.

Meanwhile, the young recruit paced to and fro on his beat along the prison wall, which glowed with a phosphorescent light. A broad, level field, recently freed from snow, lay before him.

A light wind rustled through the tall grass, inclining him to a sad and pensive mood.

The moon hung high above the horizon; the expression of anxiety had vanished from Faddeyef's face. He stopped by the wall, and, setting his rifle on the ground, rested his hand on the muzzle, on which he leaned his head, falling into a deep reverie. He could not yet wholly grasp the idea of his presence in this place, on this solemn Easter Eve, beside the wall, with a rifle in his hand, and opposite the vacant field. He had by no means ceased to be a peasant; many things clear to a soldier were to him incomprehensible; and he was often teased by being called "a rustic." But a short time ago he was a free man, had the care of a household, owned a field, and was at liberty to work when and where he pleased. Now, an indefinite, inexplicable fear beset his every step and movement, forcing the awkward young peasant into the groove of strict discipline. At this moment he was alone. The bleak landscape before him, and the wind, whistling through the dry grass, made him dreamy; and memories of familiar scenes passed through his mind. He seemed to see his

native village! The same moon shone above it, the same breeze blew over it; he saw the lighted church, and the dark pines tossing their green heads—

Suddenly he became conscious of his present surroundings, and surprise kindled his blue eyes, as though he were questioning, " What are these—this field, this wall, and rifle? " For an instant he realised where he was, but in another moment the whistling breeze wafted him back to familiar scenes; and again the soldier dreamt, leaning on his rifle.

All at once, close beside him, appeared a head over the top of the wall, the eyes glimmering like two coals. The vagrant peered into the open field, and beyond it to the shadowy line of the distant forest; his chest expanded as he greedily inhaled the refreshing breath of " mother night." He let himself down by his hands, gently gliding along the wall.

The joyful ringing had awakened the slumbering night. The door of the prison church was opened, and the procession moved into the yard. In waves of melody the singing poured forth from the church. The soldier started, lifted his cap, and was about to make the sign of the cross, when he suddenly stopped, with his hand raised in the act of prayer, while the vagrant, having reached the ground, swiftly began to run toward the tall grass.

" Stop, pray, stop, my dear fellow! " exclaimed the soldier, in a terrified voice, as he raised his rifle. At the sight of this grey figure fleeing from pursuit, all his shapeless and terrible fears took a definite form. " Duty—responsibility! " flashed across his mind, and, raising his weapon, he aimed at the fugitive. But before pulling the trigger he pitifully shut his eyes.

Meanwhile, above the town there rose, hovering in the upper air, a harmonious and prolonged chime, marred only by the prison bell, that trembled and fluttered like a wounded bird; and from beyond the wall the sounds of the joyous chant, " Christ is risen," reached far into the field. Suddenly, above all other sounds, came the report of a rifle, followed by a faint, helpless groan, like a plaintive and dying protest. Then for a moment all was still; and only the distant echoes of the vacant field repeated with a sad murmur the last reverberation of the shot amid the silence

of the terror-stricken night.