

THE OLD VERGER

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Translated anonymously – XIX century

It is growing dark.

The little village, sheltering under the pine forest above the distant river, is bathed in that peculiar twilight of starry spring nights when thin mists, rising from the ground, deepen the shadows in the woods and cover the open space with silvered azure smoke. . . . All is still and sad. The village is quietly dozing.

The dark outlines of the wretched huts are scarcely distinguishable; here and there a light twinkles; occasionally a gate creaks; an alert dog barks; now and again, from out the dark mass of gently rustling woods, the figures of pedestrians stand out; a horseman rides by; a cart scrapes along. The inhabitants of the forest villages are about to go to church to celebrate the Easter Festival.

The church stands on a little hill in the middle of the village; its windows are illuminated by candles; the belfry, old, high, and dark, stretches into the azure.

The staircase creaks . . . the old verger Mihaitch is mounting to the belfry tower, and soon his lantern is hanging in space, like a fallen star.

The old man finds it hard to climb the winding stairs. His old legs refuse to carry him; he, too, is worn out—dimly see the eyes. . . . It is quite time for him to rest, but God does not send death. The old man has buried sons and grandsons, accompanied the young and the old to the grave, but himself lives on. How hard it is! Many times he has heralded the Easter Festival, so many that he has lost count of the number of times he has waited at the appointed hour in this same belfry. And God has brought him again. . . . The old man leans his elbows on the rail and looks down from the belfry. Below, the graves in the churchyard are just discernible in the darkness; the old crosses seem to guard them with their outstretched arms. Here and there, birches not yet covered with leaves, bend over them. To

Mihaitch is borne aloft the fragrance of young buds; all seems enveloped in the calm stillness of eternal sleep. . . .

What will happen to him next year? Will he again mount up here under the copper bell and wake the night with resounding blows or will he lie down . . . there, in a dark corner of the church-yard under a cross? God knows. . . . He is ready; in the meantime God has granted him to meet another festival. " The Lord be praised! " The old lips whisper the habitual formula, and Mihaitch looks up at the millions of bright fires in the starry heavens, and crosses himself. . . .

"Mihaitch! Mihaitch! " another old, quavering voice calls from below. The aged deacon looks up at the belfry, shading his blinking tearful eyes with his hand, but does not see Mihaitch.

" What do you want? Here I am," the verger replies, leaning out of his belfry. " Can't you see me? "

" No, I can't. Don't you think it's time to strike up? What do you think? "

Both looked up at the stars. Thousands of God's candles twinkle down on them. Fiery Venus is already high in the sky. Mihaitch ponders a moment.

" Not yet; I'll wait a little. . . . I know when to begin."

He knows. He needs no clock; God's stars tell him the hour. . . .

The earth and the sky, the white cloud softly floating in the azure, the dark forest inarticulately murmuring, the lapping of the unseen river down below—all this is familiar to him—all this is akin to him . . . it is not in vain that he has passed his whole life here. . . . Before him the distant past comes to life. . . . He recollects how he mounted to the belfry for the first time. . . . Good God! How long ago that was . . . how long ago. . . . He sees himself, a fair little boy with sparkling eyes; the wind—not the kind that raises the street dust, but a peculiar wind blowing high over the earth, flapping its unseen wings—ruffling his hair. . . . Below, far far away, little people were walking to and fro . . . the village houses looked so small, too, and the woods had receded into the distance. The round glade on which stood the village had seemed so big as to be almost limitless. " Ah, there it is! All there! " smiles the grey old man looking out at the small glade.

" Such is life! . . . In youth you see no end to it. . . . Ah, there it is! " He sees it vividly, from the beginning to the very grave he has chosen for himself in the churchyard. . . . Well . . . God be praised. . . . It is not time for rest yet. . . . The weary road has been trodden honestly and the moist earth is his mother. . . . Soon, oh soon!

However, it is now time. Looking up at the stars, Mihaitch straightens himself, takes up his hat, crosses himself, and collects the bell ropes. . . . In a moment the night air vibrates with the resounding stroke . . . another . . . a third . . . a fourth . . . one after another flow the slow, powerful melodious notes, filling the expectant night

The ringing ceases, and in the church the service begins. In former years Mihaitch always went down and stood in a corner by the door to pray and listen to the singing, but now he stays up above. It is hard for him—and besides, he feels a kind of weariness. He sits down on the bench and, listening to the dying vibrations of the copper bell, becomes lost in thought. Of what is he thinking? He himself could not say. The belfry tower is lit up faintly by his lantern; the deep resounding bell is merged into the darkness. Below, from the church, a faint sound of singing can occasionally be heard; the night wind stirs the bell-ropes. . . .

The old man lowers his grey head on to his breast. Disconnected pictures float before him. They are singing the " Tropar," he thinks, and sees himself also in the church. There are many young voices in the choir; the old priest, gentle Father Naum, intones the prayers in a trembling voice. Hundreds of peasants' heads bow repeatedly like ears of corn before the wind . . . the peasants cross themselves . . . all familiar faces and yet there are dead. . . . Where is it, this happiness? . . . The aged brain quickens, like the final flicker of a dying fire; his thought glides in bright, swift rays lighting up all the by-paths of his past life . . . unbearable labour, sorrow, care . . . Where is it, this happiness? The heavy burden bends the powerful back, wrinkles the young face, and teaches how to sigh. . . .

He seems to see his sweetheart, standing, with humbly bent head, to the left among the village women. She was a good woman. . . . Peace be to her soul! and she had suffered much sorrow and pain. . . . , Want and work, continual

womanly sorrow, withers a woman's beauty and dims her eyes; a constant expression of dull fear of the unexpected blows of life is visible midst her immense beauty. . . . Where is her happiness ? . . . Only one son remained to them—their hope and joy, and he had suffered human injustice. . . .

Here he was, his cup overflowing with sorrow, pressing down the earth on her grave, watering it with his bitter orphan's tears; quickly he crosses himself and bows his head in the dust. . . . Mihaitch's heart overflows in the clearness of his memories, and the dark images of the ikons look down austere from the walls on human sorrow and human injustice. . . . It has all gone. . . . It is all in the past. . . . And now the whole world for him is centred in this dark tower where the wind blows in the darkness stirring the bell-ropes. . . . " God will judge you. . . . God will judge," whispers the old man, lowering his grey head; and the tears course softly down his cheeks. . . .

" Mihaitch! Mihaitch! Have you gone to sleep? " they call from below.

" What? " he asks, quickly jumping to his feet. " Lord, I have been asleep. What a disgrace! " . . . With unusually quick movements he gathers together the ropes. Below, the peasants are moving about, like a colony of ants. The choir, sparkling in their golden gowns, are filling the air with song. They have passed the cross near the church, and to Mihaitch is borne the joyful cry " Christ is risen from the dead! " The call penetrates the old man's heart like a wave . . . and it seems to him that the tall candles burn brighter in the darkness; the crowd is more excited; the choir sings louder. The wind seizes the waves of sound and lifts it on high, mingling it with the loud, triumphant bells. . . .

Never before has old Mihaitch rung as he does now. The old overflowing heart seems to have entered the inanimate copper, and the bells seem to sing, laugh, and cry; they form a wonderful crown of sound carried on high to the starry heavens. The stars shine brighter, and the trembling sounds mingle together and fall to earth again in loving embrace. . . . The big bass calls loudly, drowning the earth with its powerful tones: " Christ is risen! "

The two tenors, trembling with the alternate strokes of the iron clappers, ring out joyfully: " Christ is risen! " The

small bells, as though in a hurry not to be left behind, chime in between the larger ones and sing after them like little children: " Christ is risen! " The old belfry seems itself to vibrate, and the wind, fanning the old verger's face, flutters its wings and repeats: " Christ is risen! "

The weary heart forgets about life so full of sorrow and care . . . the old verger forgets that life for him means only the cramped belfry tower, that he is alone in the world like an old tree beaten down by rough weather. . . . He listens to the sounds as they cry and sing, rising to the sky and falling to the pale earth, and it seems to him that he is surrounded by sons and grandsons, that their voices, young and old, mingle in one chorus, and sing to him of the joy and happiness that he has never seen. . . . He pulls at the ropes and the tears flow down his cheeks and his heart beats with the illusion of happiness. . . .

And below people listen and say to one another that never before has Mihaitch rung so beautifully. . . . Suddenly the big bell vibrates uncertainly, then ceases. The accompanying bells, confused, trill out in an unusual peal and break off as though listening to the long sad note that, trembling and crying, gradually dies away in the air. . . .

The old verger drops helplessly on to the bench, and two last tears roll gently down his cheeks.

" Hi, send for a relief, the old verger has finished his task!. "