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FATHER CHARITON

I.

It was an early Pascha in 1894 — just the day after Annunciation. There was plenty of snow, a light frost, and on the riverbanks the ice was beginning to melt.

A young landowner, Balayev, who had been living for two years on his estate — fifty *versts*¹ from the provincial capital — had used the sledge-way to make his customary visits on the second day of Pascha. The following morning the weather changed and a south wind began to blow. The thermometer showed 15 degrees above zero C, and in two or three days the snow was gone. Balayev would have to hurry home before the ice broke, for five versts from town he had a broad river to cross, either on planks of wood laid over the ice for safety, or by ferry once the ice broke up and moved downstream. There was no bridge. But business kept Balayev in town until Monday of Thomas Week.

On the evening of St. Thomas Sunday, a rider was sent to the riverbank to get the wood ready to cross the river on foot.

The next morning, Balayev rode to the crossing. The ice on the already swollen river was cracking. Water near the banks, about twenty *sazhens*²

¹ One verst = 1.06 kilometers (0.7 miles)

² One sazhen = 2.13 meters (2.33 yards)

wide, was turbulent, forming separate rivers that flowed over the flat banks onto the fields. It was impossible to cross; the ice could begin moving at any moment. There was a small eating-house on the opposite bank. Someone wearing a short coat girded with a rope at the waist came out of the eating-house several times. He had a bag over his shoulder and would stand for awhile looking up and down the river before returning to the little house.

Suddenly a muffled crack was heard. The river seemed to give a loud sigh and suddenly the ice rose up as if it was jumping out of the water, covering the wet banks with its solid mass. For a moment or so there was to be an indistinct struggle, and then the whole river of ice began to move with a little “*whoosh*.” Large pieces of ice like huge rafts calmly occupied the middle of the river. Smaller pieces fidgeted at the sides, jumping onto one another in heaps until they broke into a thousand pieces and scattered in every direction like diamonds.

The fellow came out of the eating-house again. This time, besides the bag on his shoulder he had a basket over his left arm and a staff in his hand. He stepped to the edge of the bank, looked around, ran about ten *sazhens* upriver, and stopped. Taking off his cap, he crossed himself several times and jumped onto a distant piece of ice... Balayev was stunned; his breath caught at the incredible sight. Making his way to the opposite shore, he rapidly jumped from one piece of ice to another, and in two or three minutes landed on a huge frozen continent floating placidly in mid-stream. Using his staff, he strode fearlessly up the ice, soon approaching the place where Balayev stood. Balayev’s heart sank at the thought that in a few moments he would see the desperate madman’s seemingly inevitable death. Grabbing a wooden plank, he ran down the bank in case his help was needed. The fearless one was about fifteen *sazhens* from Balayev’s side of the river, jumping over the small pieces that jostled one another for a place on the bank. A loud crack, and the wind began to blow: bright sunlight reflected off the dazzling ice. Balayev was dizzy and feverish with watching.

Suddenly, the adventurer flew from the icy chaos onto the bank like a bomb, and as if challenging someone, crossed himself rapidly and cried out: “Christ is Risen!” Hysterical, as the strain on his tortured nerves gave way, Balayev dashed towards the boy — for it was a boy — and with tears pouring down his cheeks, seized him with both hands and began to kiss his face, exclaiming, “In Truth He is Risen.” It turned out to be a youth of fourteen, the student of an ecclesiastical school who was walking back to town after

his Pascha vacation. Knowing that the ice would continue to break for several days, he had decided to cross the river just as it began moving, when the water on the banks was still covered with small ice islands.

When the boy was at last freed from Balayev's arms, he held out the basket, shaking the water and ice slivers from his clothes. His bast shoes were also filled with silver shards, but he behaved as if nothing extraordinary had happened, only checking to see that he had not lost anything. The basket was covered with a white cloth tied with a cord. He inspected it carefully, but everything was in its proper place. He groped through his pockets and jacket with both hands and then rearranged the cord by which the bag hung on his back. Satisfied, he looked at Balayev.

"Well, friend, were you in terrible fear crossing the river? How did you dare to face such danger? The ice is so weak, it could give way any moment..."

"Why be afraid? I knew I would cross it, otherwise I wouldn't have started," the boy answered quite seriously.

"And why did you cry out, 'Christ is Risen!' when you reached the bank — this and nothing else?" asked Balayev, amazed at the boy's remarkable calmness.

"But how else? It is Pascha. We say 'Christ is Risen!' for forty days until Ascension. And when one walks along the road he should sing, 'Christ is Risen...,' 'Today is the chosen and holy day ...,' 'It is the day of Resurrection...'. There are lots of Pascha songs! One should sing everything he knows. I know them all by heart...they made us memorize them at school and I sing them in our church at home and in the villages when we go there with icons..."

"And where is your home? Where are you walking from?"

"From the Church of the Mother of God at Malaya Sizma. Seventy-five versts from here. My father is the priest."

Relating this, the boy took off his cap with a bow and said, "Good bye! I must go..." Balayev was strangely interested in the unusual youth with his calm reasonableness and his religious feeling. He didn't want to part with him as simply as the boy seemed ready to do. "I will take you to town, at least. It is five more versts. Take off your bag and get in. You'll be tired if you walk the whole way and we'll be in town quickly."

"Thank you. I could walk there, it isn't far now. But if I go with you I have to change my shoes." He looked at his bast shoes.

"Well, change them and let's go," Balayev said. The lad sat on a plank, took off his bag, untied his leather boots and changed his footwear. Then they climbed into the tarantass and started.

"And what have you got in the basket?" Balayev asked.

"Fifty dyed Pascha eggs," the child replied in a business-like tone — "and *piroshki*.³ This will last me for ten days. And there is underwear in the bag. We won't get to go home till the haymaking after this — they always let us go on Kirik and Ulita."⁴

"Why do your parents allow you to walk such a long way? Anything can happen. You could have drowned, or an evil man might do you harm."

"What could happen?" said the boy confidently. "Drown? No. God will keep me safe. And what could an evil man want of me? I can run away from him."

"But if God doesn't 'keep you safe' and you start to drown against His will for some reason...?" Balayev asked provocatively. The lad did not answer, but looked at him with such eyes that he felt painfully ashamed.

"And when you've finished your studies, what will you do?" Balayev asked, to cover his embarrassment.

"I'll be a priest," the boy said, and looked at Balayev in quite a different way, with a barely perceptible smile. "And I will remember you... When Pascha comes I will tell you in my mind, 'Christ is Risen!' And you, when you hear, 'Christ is Risen!' for the first time on Pascha day, you will at once think of me and say in your mind: 'In Truth He is Risen, Father Chariton!' I will already be Father Chariton then."

The boy made a tremendous impression on Balayev. "He's like a prophet," he thought. "He can see what is in the future, he knows what will happen to him. He looks straight into your soul and you feel that he ties it to his own." Balayev had such a warm feeling that he was sorry to part with him.

They arrived at the town and the boy asked him to stop the horses. "My road is there." He waved his hand to show it. "And now, goodbye. Thank you. Christ is Risen!"

"Christ is Risen!" Balayev answered, and kissed the future Father Chariton. The child disappeared into a side-street between the houses.

3 Piroshki: small buns or turnovers filled with meat, fish, vegetables or fruit.

4 Feast of Sts. Kyricus and Julitta (July 15): Third-century martyrs under Diocletian. Julitta was a noblewoman, and Kyricus, her three-year-old son.

II.

Forty years passed. State Councillor Balayev, who now spent his winters in St. Petersburg, fell ill while making his official visits on the first day of Pascha and returning home, took to his bed. The doctor who was sent for prescribed medicines, and warned the relatives, "Nothing fearful has happened so far, but he may have a stroke. If he is a believer, you should send for a priest." One of the relatives spent an hour and a half looking for a priest, but the clergy had already left on the Paschal rounds of people's homes. Meanwhile, the patient was becoming worse; although there had been no stroke, he could no longer speak. Relatives gathered at the dying man's bed, but he only stared hopefully at the door, trying to utter something. Everyone felt the death agony had begun, but the cleric still did not come. Finally, the servant threw open the door and a thin, grey-haired priest with an *epitrachelion* around his neck rapidly moved toward the patient exclaiming cheerfully, "Christ is Risen." At that moment, as if a spark of electricity had run through his body, Balayev raised himself up and replied in a clear voice: "In Truth He is Risen, Father Chariton!" Another second, and the priest and landowner were clasping one another, warm tears running down their faces. †

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