

A SONG WITHOUT WORDS

A Story Reminiscent of the Tsarist Rule in Ukraine

In the little village of Krestchnti Ynri under shady willows and slender poplars, we had gathered for refreshment. It was an unusually beautiful day. The trees swayed gently in the breeze, and their leaves rustled as if they were whispering to one another some awful tale of mystery. Behind the willows, within a verdant grove, could be seen a little old schoolhouse, near which newly-clad children, bearing colored Easter eggs in their hands, were romping about, making a queer indistinguishable noise.

"Do not pluck those buds," shouted an older boy to one of his younger companions; "they will grow into blossoms and then into fruit."

"What's that to you?" retorted the youngster, spitefully tearing the buds from the branch of a cherry tree and quickly running away.

A group of men and boys were stretched out on the grass lawn in front of the schoolhouse, pleasantly chatting about something. Suddenly the curly-headed schoolmaster appeared in the open window and announced that it was time to sing. The children rushed into the weatherworn little building with great enthusiasm, pushing and jostling one another in their excitement; while the elders followed in a more dignified way.

Soon the entire grove resounded with their singing of a most delightful melody. The music passed through various phases, now swelling into an ocean of passion, now flowing gracefully like a lazy summer rivulet, and at times dying down until it was barely audible. Captivated by its exquisite beauty, I approached the window that I might hear it more distinctly. The whole assemblage was humming the song "Oi, Hai, Mahti." With his hair disheveled and his arms swinging like the wings of an eagle in full flight, the schoolmaster conducted the humming with surprising vivacity. When all of the song had been thus strangely rendered, the nearly exhausted teacher came to the window to get a bit of the cool, fresh air.

"What song were you humming?" I asked abruptly.

The schoolmaster was not a little startled, but replied graciously, "Oi, Hai, Mahti."

"But why don't the choir sing the words?"

"It is forbidden to sing Ukrainian songs in school; hence we do not sing the songs — we only learn their tunes. I have taught the people many airs; for I believe that if they know the music, they will supply their own words."

"And is also the singing of Muscovite songs forbidden?"

"No," answered the schoolmaster, "Muscovite songs may be sung. But my pupils do not wish to sing them; they do not like them."

After a short rest the singers assembled again, and the crafty instructor had them rehearse another song, "Oi, Seev Peohach." Manly and boyish voices united in one mighty sound, which bore to the Creator their complaint of the injustice on earth.

In the early evening, when it was still twilight, we resumed our journey. The peasant singers were just leaving the schoolhouse. They walked along the bank of the River Ross, singing,

"Not well, Zaporozhian Cossacks, not well have you managed."

The magic words of the song, full of despondency and melancholy, cut sharply into my heart and gave rise to many thoughts of the past. We were well beyond the outskirts of the village, and still the words of that song rang in our ears and reproved us in our hearts:

"Not well, Zaporozhian Cossacks, not well have you managed;

The Steppe was broad, the land was fair—

Through neglect you lost them."