

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Wilhelm von Polenz (1861-1903)

The Bells of Krummseifenbach

(From: 'Village Stories,' 1901)

Christian Leberecht Fürchtegott Kumack, the Great Farmer of Krummseifenbach, sat in the dock. The trial lasted barely twenty minutes. The accused had, with conspicuous calm, admitted to the offence laid to his charge. Nothing had been able to disturb the old man's composure, not the questions from the presiding judge, nor the sharp words of the Public Prosecutor. All of that seemed to run off Kumack's state of mind like water off a duck's strongly-feathered back. He listened along to the case as if this entire trial were being conducted for his particular enjoyment, and yet there was "Up to three years in prison" at stake.

The Counsel for the Defence had just finished his plea, at the conclusion of which he requested extenuating circumstances to be taken into account for his client. The Public Prosecutor abstained from replying; for the case was clear-cut, every requirement in the articles of the law had been met. On account of the particular seriousness of this case, the Public Prosecutor had asked for the maximum permissible penalty.

The presiding judge, ready to rise and head for the conference room, asked the customary question, if the accused himself had anything else to state in his defence.

The accused did, indeed, quite contrary to the custom of the court, have something to state. "I think so, and I'd like to say it," he began, and

looked at the judge with that same divine calm he had evinced throughout the trial, “If I can get off with money, I’ll buy the new big bell, but if you acquit me, afterwards I’ll buy all three new bells.”

The presiding judge scrutinised the accused, astonished at his words, then looked at the assessors to help him out: Did they understand this?

“Accused, what are you talking about? What do you mean by ‘Bells’? – Do you have anything to state in your defence, that was my question!”

“It’s as good as signed, sealed, and delivered, Your Honour! The pastor knows it too, and the whole community knows it. I’ve the money all laid up; I could buy the bells tomorrow, I could...”

“You seem to be not right in the head!” the presiding judge cried angrily. “So you have nothing to state! The court will now retire.” And the judges went out.

In the courtroom, there now broke out an animated murmuring as heads were put together. There were many people present. On the witness-bench sat the priest of Krummseifenbach and Hermann Kumack, the son, a youth of some twenty years. Kumack junior looked, in contrast to his begetter, pinched and weedy; it would have taken several men of his calibre to balance the broadly-built, well-padded figure of the old farmer in the scales.

Many members of the community had come unsolicited; they wanted to see how the Great Farmer would fare before the court. The certainty with which Kumack had avouched, up to the last moment, that he

must be acquitted, impressed the people. Didn't the Great Farmer have money? And if a man possessed money, he could do anything!

Everyone was on tenterhooks to hear the court's verdict. This was no little matter at issue. If the Great Farmer really were punished with imprisonment, as the Public Prosecutor had called for, then his position as the kingpin was over once and for all. Prison! Locked up with common criminals! Such a man could not sit on the Parish Council or hold other honourable offices any longer!

Conversely, if the Farmer were acquitted, then the village would receive a new carillon. That wasn't to be sneezed at! The current bells were dilapidated: people in the villages all around jeered at the ting-a-linging of Krummseifenbach. And the big bell, in particular, had a crack. A new carillon had to be procured sooner or later.

So what a saving for the community if the Great Farmer bought one from his pocket! But would the judges take that into account as well? – A point like that must by rights be taken into consideration, one would have thought!

The pastor, in view of the fact that this was, to a certain extent, a matter of a "good cause," could have formulated his testimony rather differently. Why on earth did the man have to say everything that he knew?

The son of the accused, upon the judge's representation that he could refuse to give evidence, had declared that he would make use of this right. The man, who looked intimidated and anxious, was certainly only too glad not to have to testify against his father.

The accused still wore a self-contentedly defiant expression. He

nodded to those he knew in the courtroom, and, wanting to say something to one of them, beckoned him over; but the Court Usher gave him to understand in a brusque tone that that was not permitted here.

Well I never! Wasn't he Farmer Kumack, the richest man in Krummseifenbach? The officials here at the court really didn't seem to know whom they had to deal with.

Now the judges returned. "In the name of the King: the Accused, Christlieb Leberecht Fürchtegott Kumack, is found guilty of the charge of wilful disturbance of divine service and sentenced to one year's imprisonment, and also to bear the costs of the proceedings." The judge read the sentence amidst breathless silence. All eyes were turned towards the accused.

He stood with his mouth open, smiling stupidly. His bony fists squeezed the bar of the dock so hard that it creaked. The blood had suddenly shot to his head, colouring his lower brow and his bull-neck bluish-red up to his grey hair.

What was this? Surely they were playing a bad joke on him? Prison! – He, the Great Farmer, in prison? He, a year in ...

Kumack wished to say something, and moved his lips in a stammer; but the judge, who had sat down in the meantime, was busy explaining the particulars: why and how this sentence had been reached. Something about "extenuating circumstances" struck the accused's ears, about "inadequate education" and "innate unmannerliness." These had been accepted in his favour, it was said, and so he had been punished with only one year.

The judge wanted to make fun of him, did he? A year in prison! A year in a cell! Away from his house, from his land! Locked up, separated from his fields, his servants, his cattle! Almighty God!

He took his head in his hands and prodded it. There were bright drops on his brow, his lips twitched, he wanted to say something: the carillon, the new bells he had promised the church – didn't that count for anything at all?

Helpless, he looked over to the witness-bench. There sat the pastor, his son beside him. Couldn't they help him? Or the others from Krummseifenbach, wouldn't they speak up for him? He was their Great Farmer! He was the first man in the community! Could something like this be allowed to befall him? His people wouldn't stand for it! But nobody stirred in the courtroom. No sympathy, but rather malignant pleasure on their faces.

The Great Farmer convicted! – Now it was all up with him. His stashes of money hadn't helped him a jot after all! – Every one of his friends and fellow villagers was already secretly pondering what advantage might accrue to them from this turn of events.

"Do you submit to the sentence, Kumack?" the judge asked in conclusion.

The farmer failed to answer; he saw and heard no more of all that was going on around him. Only one thing filled him entirely: he had been sentenced to a year in prison.

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Through inheritance, Christlieb Leberecht Fürchtegott Kumack had

come into the possession of two large farmsteads; in this way, he became the largest landowner in his village. The extent of his estate exceeded that of many a manor.

Farmer Kumack had been a widower for some years. In the beginning, after the death of his wife, he had gone a-wooing; but nothing had come of it. None of the women whom he had surveyed had been suitable. There had always been one thing wanting: either bodily size and health were not there in the desired measure, or there had been a shortage of wealth. The Great Farmer absolutely insisted on these three qualities above all: that woman who was to have the privilege of sharing bed and table with him had to be imposing of figure, as fit as a fiddle, and rich. He placed less value on a pretty face; in the end, other people would have just as much benefit from it as he would. No, he required qualities which really gave the possessor something. She would have to be able to take a blow, like his late wife, who had never complained as long as she lived. He had often secretly wondered to himself how much a woman like her was capable of enduring. For that reason, Kumack would most have liked to espouse a widow; that kind was sure to have been through a fair bit and was not as weakly and prissy as maidens were. On the other hand, intellect and disposition bore little weight with him; for women were all stupid, that's just how it was, and if she was quarrelsome and unruly, it was no matter to him. He's been able to cope with everyone up to now. But there was one thing she must have: money! Marrying someone without means would have struck Farmer Kumack as a degradation; he knew what he owed to himself and to his estate.

And because he had not been able to find so much virtue and endowment united in one person anywhere, the Great Farmer of Krummseifenbach had remained a widower.

His marriage had given him three daughters and a son. The girls, being the daughters of rich Farmer Kumack, had been snapped up like hot cakes, and now lived well provided for in the neighbourhood, married to farmer's sons. Only the youngest child, the son, still lived in the farmer's house.

The old man's hand lay heavy on Hermann. Having a Herculean stature, Farmer Kumack was vexed that the boy was so small and weedy. The Kumacks, for as far back as one could remember, had always been fellows of one mould. But this one here really did not seem to be up to much; in the first place, he had come so late, only after three girls. And then he had been, ever since birth, such a "wuss." Hermann had never yet defended himself against his father, as Christlieb Leberecht Fürchtegott had done in his time against his. For it was an old-established custom that father and son measured each other's strength – similar to an old and a young cock habitually fighting in the hen-yard until the old one has no choice but to accept that the time has come for him to make way for the younger power. In this way, the Kumacks withdrew, after an honourable fight, into their retirement cottage.

With Hermann, things were different. He was a good scholar at school; which no Kumack before him had ever been. He had no thoughts of using his fists to get his rights from his father. He rather humbly bowed to the old man's rule.

But it was not only in his own house that Farmer Kumack ruled as absolute Lord and Master; he was also the person who set the tone in the village and the community.

In disputes over rights of way, in tax issues, in matters concerning the poor, in church affairs, his words strongly tipped the scales, as became the words of a man who had to bear a quarter of the rates and local taxes on his own.

Farmer Kumack possessed the will and also the talent to rule. Above all, he was helped in this by one maxim that he had followed all through his life: if he were asked for his opinion or somebody requested something, he would say, "No!" He had never yet seen any good come from saying, "Yes." Just don't concede anything, don't let yourself be persuaded or even convinced! If you gave somebody something that you did not have to give, then you were an ass; such was the quintessence of his worldly wisdom.

So the Great Farmer had ruled in Krummseifenbach for many a year, without finding any opposition worth mentioning; all who had dared to rise up against him had been quickly and thoroughly put down.

That changed when, in place of the old priest, who had officiated in Krummseifenbach up to that point, and who finally agreed to retire for reasons of poor health, a younger gentleman came. The new clergyman unearthed many things that seemed in need of reform. Whenever he put forward a suggestion for improvement, he found what certainly appeared to be willing ears among the fathers of the village, but when it came to the matter of approval, he ran into resistance. The leader of this opposition, he

very soon realised, was none other than ostentatious old Kumack, whom the villagers, in their timid reverence, never spoke of by any other name than the “Great Farmer.”

And things were to take a similar course now, when the priest petitioned the united Parish– and Church Council of Krummseifenbach for a new carillon for the church tower.

The young clergyman hoped to achieve his wish by appealing to the people’s ambition. The inhabitants of Krummseifenbach were vain, in no small degree, of their village and its institutions. It therefore seemed no bad idea to represent to them that they should not stand for having the worst bells of all the parishes in the surrounding region. The new shepherd also knew another way to make his suggestion palatable. The old bells should be given in part payment. Perhaps a high regional consistory would make a contribution. For the musically-minded of the village inhabitants, he mentioned, as though in passing, that one could get a euphonious ring tuned to A flat major for a weight of twelve hundredweight, whereas the current F sharp major weighed full twenty hundredweight. This change would lower the purchase price.

After having explained the business and technical aspects in this way, the clergyman now turned to the ideal side of the matter. He painted a rousing picture of how edifying it would be when the new bells called down from the high tower on Sunday morning to summon the community to church service, how dignified and moving when the death-knell tolled at funerals, how joyful when the big bell was rung at weddings, or how festive when all three bells were rung simultaneously during the confirmation of

the confirmands on Palm Sunday. And then, the memorial peals, in triad, after a sermon to pay particular honour to a departed soul.

But this time also, the priest suffered a disappointment. When he had finished his speech, silence reigned for a long time, then one after another of the Fathers cleared their throats, and they looked at the Great Farmer, reverently waiting to hear whatever he had to say on the matter.

Christlieb Leberecht Fürchtegott Kumack placed his clenched fist on the table before him, then regarding his fingers with a fixed eye, as if he were talking to them, he began: Everyone had been content up to the present in Krummseifenbach. Everything had gone well up to the present, and all would, no doubt, continue to go well, in spite of the new pastor. He, for his part, went to church every Sunday, whether the bells were new or old did not matter to him at all. The old ones had done their duty all this time, and he supposed they would outlast him; as to what happened after his death, he was indifferent. But while he was alive, no new bells would be bought – that's what he had to say...

The venerable councillors signified through nods of their heads that this opinion expressed their feelings exactly. But the young, temperamental man of God became livid. What was to be done with such stubborn mules! It was like persuading a wall to shift itself. But he wanted to tell it to the company the once – what he thought! He could not help it. And so he thundered forth on the narrow-mindedness and pettiness and miserliness which ruined all his good intentions.

Farmer Kumack replied to the priest's heated words with superior composure: It might well be possible they had not learned as much as the

Reverend, but as regarded “narrow-mindedness” there were also “educated oxen.” And as for “miserliness” – when you are employed by the community and receive your salary year in, year out, then it is certainly easy to demand that others part with their money. He was a good Christian and gave to God what was God’s, and he went to church every Sunday and listened to the Reverend when he stood in the pulpit...

Here the clergyman could contain himself no longer.

“Yes, you go to church, Mr. Kumack, every Sunday – that is true! But what do you do there? Do you think I have no eyes nor ears, Mr. Kumack? Why do you come into the House of God? To sleep! Yes indeed, I have seen it. You sleep, why, you are so uninhibited as to snore during the sermon. I call upon those present to give the truth its due! Did Kumack snore during last Sunday’s sermon or not?”

The Fathers looked taken aback by this unexpected question. The Reverend was of course right; the Great Farmer had his little church-nap. And he had snored on Sunday; for sure, the whole community had heard it, and it was not the first time either. The Reverend was entirely right! But they had no clean consciences in this particular; for all of them indulged, more or less, in a church-sleep, only they did not dare to do so as openly as Kumack. Snoring during the sermon was, to a certain extent, the Great Farmer’s privilege.

The Great Farmer had turned purple in the face. The nerve of the young man! Dictating to him how he had to behave! He had been going to church for fifty years and he had slept during the sermon for as long as he could remember. No priest had found any fault with that, and now this one

came along! – Kumack felt it: there was a test of strength here. If he gave in, then that was the end of his authority in the community. The pastor or he! Only one could rule in Krummseifenbach.

His answer, therefore, left nothing to be desired in terms of clearness. In conclusion, he rose and left the parsonage in protest. His cronies followed him.

From that day on, there was open discord between the priest and the village fathers.

At first, Farmer Kumack had been victorious. He boasted not a little of this success. The pastor would learn to eat from his hand yet, he told everyone who wanted to hear. He was not going to allow the good old customs and institutions of Krummseifenbach to be overturned by impertinent innovators. He further declared that he would sleep wherever it suited him and as loudly as it suited him. But should it occur to anyone to disturb him... He indicated the rest with signally eloquent movements of his hand.

On the next Sunday – it was Oculi¹ – Farmer Kumack was sitting in his church pew once again, his son Hermann beside him. The farmer looked defiantly at the pastor as he entered the pulpit, as if he would say: “Here I am! *Now we’ll see!*”

The farmer sang the sermon verse standing up with the rest of the community. Then he reached into the back pocket of his blue coat, fetched out his snuff-box, and took his two pinches – one for each nostril – all as

¹ The third Sunday in Lent.

he had been accustomed to do for years; for him, that just happened to be part of divine service, and not the least important one. Then he carefully repocketed the box, sneezed, and leaned back, fixing the pastor, who had in the meantime begun the first part of his exegesis, with staring eyes, which gradually began to blink, until his lids shut.

The Great Farmer was asleep. The congregation soon noticed this from the drawn-out rattling sounds that nobody could fail to hear.

His neighbours respected the mighty one's sleep. They had not forgotten what prospect the farmer had held out to anyone who might take it into his head to wake him. He was just the man to make his word true.

The snoring went on. It was not an inharmonious sound, but rather like a rhythmic accompaniment to the sermon. Here and there, people stretched their necks, knowing smiles were exchanged, or neighbours were nudged, with malignant joy. So the Great Farmer had got his way after all!

The pastor had turned pale to the lips, and his voice trembled. Suddenly he broke off and said not a word. Deathly silence in the house of God! Only the snoring continued, now doubly audible.

Then the Great Farmer's son rose from his seat – Hermann Kumack was at that moment at least as pale as the whitewashed church wall – and touched his father on the arm, softly at first; and this doing no good, again but more firmly. The gurgling sounds suddenly stopped.

The farmer sleepily opened his eyes and stupidly looked into his boy's face. "You're in church, father!" he whispered.

Then a resounding slap, and another one – Farmer Kumack had

boxed his son's ears.

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That this affair would do the old man no good was clear to everyone, only not to the perpetrator himself.

What was it that people actually wanted? Talking of legal proceedings, of court and prison? – Sleeping in church, was that a crime? And his having boxed the boy's ears, didn't he have every right to? His own flesh and blood! – Hadn't he said beforehand that nobody should dare to wake him – and in spite of that, the greenhorn had taken it into his head to do it.

Could anyone forbid him to chastise his child? His father had thrashed him; God had ordained things so.

But in the church! – Well, perhaps that wasn't quite right. When he thought about it, he would have preferred not to have done it. But punishment for that? It was surely not such a dangerous situation as people were making out. What was he the Great Farmer for? Nothing had ever happened to him! He would contrive to get out of this too. Just keep a firm grip on the reins; that was the main thing!

But when he was summoned before the judge, and when other people from the village were actually examined in this case, then the farmer began to have a sense of foreboding that the matter might just be more serious this time than he had thought possible.

But he still did not throw in the towel. There was always a way out.

Christian Leberecht Fürchtegott Kumack smiled mischievously when he hit upon this idea. Then he put on his cassock and went to the

parsonage.

The pastor was astonished to see the Great Farmer pay him a visit. Aha, here comes the penitent sinner! he thought, already inwardly triumphant.

The clergyman had let go of all grudges against the farmer long since; he knew that he would fare badly before the court. And he was not comfortable with things having gone so far. At heart, he felt himself to be not entirely free from guilt in this whole affair. He was therefore ready to reach out a helping hand to the man, should he show himself repentant.

But he had taken the wrong measure of Farmer Kumack. Repentance was something the old man had never learned. He came before his spiritual father with entirely different thoughts and intentions.

“Your Reverence thought, and you talked about, bells in our recent meeting, you’d like to have a new carillon. I’ve thought the matter over; actually, you’re quite right, Your Reverence: we’d like to have a new carillon. And it’d be fine by me, if we just had the money for it in the community. For, three new bells at one time, they cost a pretty penny. So I thought to myself: now how about you buying the new bells, I thought. And so I’ve come here to hear your opinion, Your Reverence, what you’d think if I got the bells for you now.”

The clergyman looked at his visitor in astonishment. Gracious me, how the man had changed: so courteous and so generously-minded all of a sudden! – He assumed, nevertheless, that there must be something more behind this. A farmer who offered a present of his own free will, from pure, sheer idealism, really would be one of a kind.

He eyed the man sharply and asked what amount, and in which manner, he intended to donate.

“No, Your Reverence, it doesn’t happen as suddenly as that! Steady now, steady now! Nobody’s said anything about a donation yet. First we’ll wait for the court trial, what the witnesses will testify against me. After that, we’ll put things down on paper. Today I’ll say only this: if the court acquits me, I’ll give our church a new carillon. I reckon that’s quite enough! At the end of the day, the slap isn’t worth as much as that. But as I say, if the court acquits me, I’ll give the money, but not before.”

The farmer was greatly astonished when he saw that the clergyman did not grab the suggestion with both hands but rather rejected it straight-out, indeed, with a certain indignation.

These pastors! And they were supposed to be educated? A man such as this never saw the practical advantage of a thing, even though it was perfectly obvious here.

But even if the pastor were stupid, Kumack still placed his hopes on his fellow villagers; they would better understand the advantage that was being offered them here. And the judges had to see how sensible his suggestion was in the end, didn’t they?

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When Farmer Kumack returned to Krummseifenbach from prison, people hardly recognised him. In the course of a year, the vigorous man had become a geriatric.

He had been compelled to obey, to bend his neck in the institution, and that had come a little late for the stiff old tree which nobody had tied to

a prop in its youth. But the most terrible thing of all was his having had so much time to reflect. Thought, terrible thought! He was not used to that.

When he stood rubbing tobacco or tearing wool, among a crowd of likewise occupied prisoners, his thoughts flew away to his village, to his estate. What were they doing now, he wondered? This day last year we sowed the oats. Had they planted the potatoes yet? Or: the weather's dry today, so they're bound to be cutting the corn. And so his thoughts and reflections always took him outside, while the strong hands, which would have been much better driving a plough or wielding a scythe, mechanically carried out the prescribed work. And it was certain that the boy Hermann would do everything wrong! What did the callow stripling know about running a farm? He would turn everything upside-down, in the farmyard and the stables and the fields.

That was the most grievous thing, to think that the son he had treated worse than a farmhand could now reign and ordain just as he pleased.

Meanwhile, Hermann had known how to make the most of the time. He undertook many kinds of changes on the estate during his father's absence. The neighbours were astonished at the young man's drive and activity; he seemed to be an entirely new man now that the old one was no longer behind him putting him down. Indeed, Hermann carried out a stroke he would hardly have dared in his father's presence, that is to say, he went wooing and took a pretty, strong, healthy young woman to wife.

When the old man returned to his nest at last, he found a young couple cosily settled in there. Initially, he tried to strike the earlier tone

against his son, but only to make the discovery that the young cock had grown its spurs in the meantime. He himself was no longer the man he had used to be.

The world had changed in that one year. In the village also, everything looked different now; no longer did people tremble before the Great Farmer.

The honorary offices he had held in the community in bygone days had long been occupied by other lights. He would never succeed in playing the old role again. For he had done time; every snot-nosed scamp could throw that against him.

Was he not the Great Farmer any more? The people had not called him that for a long time now. Even on the farm, with the labourers, who had grown accustomed to heed the young man's commands, he met with derisive looks, grumbling, and rebellion. No, he was not the Great Farmer any longer; he saw that himself.

So he made a decision: he moved into the retirement cottage on the estate and handed the farm over to his son.

Who would have said this to him a few years before? He voluntarily abdicate! He move into the old farmer's cottage! – There had not even been the usual trial of strength between the old man and the young one.

Every now and again, he still went out into the fields, but he was no real use to man or beast now.

The way in which his son carried on the farming work, with all kinds of machines and with artificial fertilisers, vexed him. But as the young man would not listen to advice and pushed him aside, he gave up interfering

with time, henceforth restricting himself to grumbled soliloquies.

In defiance of his prognostications, the young people's farm prospered splendidly. And the daughter-in-law saw to it that the Kumacks in Krummseifenbach would not be dying out any time soon.

The old man went to church every Sunday, as before. But now that he had nothing more to do, his need for sleep had become slight; indeed, he positively longed for divine service and the sermon as a diversion in his empty existence. And so, with time, he weaned himself completely off sleeping in church.

The church still did not have new bells; for in Kumack's place, other skinflints had entered the district council, who would not grant the necessary monies.

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One day – it was in March – Kumack walked into the parsonage. He had not set foot there since that day on which he had wished to bring about his acquittal through the offer of a new carillon.

The clergyman, who had also learned by this time that ramming your head against a wall gets you nowhere, was sincerely pleased to see the old man enter; he had always secretly been expecting him. There was still an old score to settle between him and the man.

Christian Leberecht Fürchtegott Kumack stood at the door, turning his cap in his hand. The pastor urged him to enter the room and sit down on a stool, then he asked: To what did he owe this honour?

The old man needed some time to clear his throat and blow his nose, then he burst out:

“I’ve come to you, Your Reverence, and I’d like to – we’re March the eighth again, and so I just thought, as the church doesn’t have any new bells yet, so I thought, I could present the bells after all, I thought. – What would you think of that, Your Reverence?”

Something seemed to have stuck in the man of God’s throat, he swallowed and choked. Then he walked up to the old man – whose hair was now all as white as hail – laid his hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eye.

“You see, today’s the eighth of March, Your Reverence! It was a Sunday then, when it happened – you know what I mean! It’s five years ago today, Your Reverence!”

“That’s right, that’s right, Kumack! It was on Oculi Sunday five years ago.”

“There’s one more thing I wanted to ask you, Your Reverence; if I give the bells, all three of them, could I give the bells names afterwards, whichever I wanted, or won’t that do?”

“Names! Of course! And why not? That is, if they are good Christian names, Kumack!”

“Well, I was thinking, because it’s exactly three bells, and I have three names, I thought: you could, in the end, christen the big one Christlieb, the middle one Leberecht, and the third, the little one, Fürchtegott. That’s what my names are, Your Reverence.”

“That will certainly cause no difficulties, dear Kumack! They really are wonderfully fine names, they will only do credit to the bells – In God’s name, be it so! Now we are on the right way.” –

So the new bells were bought, and Krummseifenbach received a carillon such as no other community for miles around in the region possessed. Old Kumack did not live to see the christening of the bells; he died very suddenly from a stroke. And so the words he had spoken when he was still absolute dictator in Krummseifenbach came true – that the old bells would have to do while he was alive.

But the pastor reached an agreement with the venerable councillors that on Oculi Sunday every year, after the sermon, there would be an honorary pealing of all three bells in memory of their donor.