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The Bell

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

Towards evening, in the narrow streets of the big town, when the sun was setting, and the clouds shone like gold high up among the chimneys, there was often heard, sometimes by one person, sometimes by another, a wonderful sound like the toll of a church bell. But it was only for an instant that it was heard, for there was such a rumbling of carts and such a clamour of voices—and that distracts one. People would say: "There's the evening bell ringing! The sun's setting now."

Those who went out of the town, where the houses stand farther apart, with gardens and little fields about them, saw the evening sky in yet greater beauty and heard the sound of the bell far louder. It seemed to come from a church hidden deep in the still, fragrant wood; and people looked that way and became quite serious.

Well, a long time went by, and one would say to another: "Can there be a church out there in the wood? That Bell has a strange beautiful sound; hadn't we better go out there and look into the thing?" So the rich folk set off, driving, and the poor folk, walking; but they found the way uncommonly long, and when they got as far as a clump of willows that grew on the outskirts of the wood, they sat down there and gazed up into the tall boughs, and thought they had got right into the good green wood. A confectioner came out there from the town and put up a booth, and then another confectioner came too; and he hung up a bell, right over his booth; and a bell, moreover, that was tarred outside so as to stand the rain, and had no clapper. And when the people got home again they said how romantic it had all been—and that has a meaning of its own—quite apart from tea. Three people there were who insisted that they had forced their way through the wood, to the very end of it, and all the while they had heard the strange sound of the bell; but to them it seemed as if it came from within the town. One of them wrote a whole poem about it, and told how the bell rang like the voice of a mother singing to the dearest and best of children: no music was more lovely than the sound of the bell.

The Emperor of the country, too, had his attention drawn to the matter, and promised that the man who could really find out where the sound came from should have the title of "World's Bellman" given to him, even if it proved not to be a bell at all.

A great many people now took to going to the wood for the sake of the excellent victuals they got there, but there was only one who came back with any sort of explanation. No one had been far enough into the wood; neither had he for that matter, but still he said that the bell-sound came from a very large owl in a hollow tree. It was a real bird of wisdom, and it kept on beating its head against the tree, but whether the sound came from its head or from the tree he could not say even now with certainty. So he was appointed "World's Bellman", and every year he wrote a little book about the owl, but the world was no wiser than before.

Now there chanced to be a confirmation day. The priest had spoken beautiful and moving words. The confirmands had been deeply touched; it was a momentous day for them; from being children they were all at once become grown people; their child-soul must now pass over, so to say, into a being of more discretion. It was a day of the loveliest sunshine; the confirmands went out of the town, and out from the wood there rang with marvellous clearness the great unknown bell. Instantly a great desire came upon them to go thither—all of them except three. One of these had to go home and try on her ball-dress, for the dress and the ball were the whole occasion of her being confirmed this time, otherwise she wouldn't have come with the rest. The second was a poor boy, who had borrowed a coat and boots, to be confirmed in, from the innkeeper's son, and he had to return them by a certain time. The third said that he never went to any strange place without his parents, and that he had always been a good boy, and so he would continue to be, even when he was confirmed; and that isn't a thing to make game of. But they did make game of him all the same.

So three of them didn't go with the rest; the others trotted off. The sun shone and the birds sang, and the young people sang too, and held each others hands—for why? They hadn't yet got situations and were all confirmands in the sight of God.

But, soon, two of the smallest got tired, and they turned back to the town. Two little girls sat themselves down and began making wreaths, so they got no farther; and when the rest came to the willow trees, where the confectioner lived, they

said: "Look here, we've got to the place; there isn't really any bell, it's just a sort of thing people fancy to themselves."

At that moment, in the depth of the wood, the bell sounded out, so sweet and solemn that four or five made up their minds that they would after all go a little farther into the wood. It was so thick and leafy that it was really hard work to get through it; the woodruff and the anemones were almost too tall, flowering convolvulus and brambles hung in long festoons from tree to tree, where the nightingale sang and the sunlight played. Oh, it was beautiful!—but it was no place for the girls to make their way through, they would soon have their frocks torn to rags. There stood great masses of rock grown all over with moss of all colours, and the fresh spring water came babbling out and talked in a strange fashion. "Cluck! Cluck!" it said.

"That can't be the bell, can it?" said one of the young people; and he lay down and listened to it. "This must be looked into properly." So there he stayed and let the rest go on.

They came to a hut of bark and branches; a big crab apple tree leant down over it as if it would shake all its wealth of blossom over the roof, which was gay with roses; the long boughs stretched straight towards the gable, and on it hung a little bell. Could that be the one they had heard? Yes! They were all agreed about it, except one. He said that the bell was far too small and shrill to be heard so far off as they had heard the other, and that those were quite different sounds that so moved people's hearts. The one who said this was a king's son, so the others said: "That sort, of course, must always be cleverer than anybody else!"

So they let him go on alone, and as he went his heart filled more and more with the forest loneliness; but still he heard the little bell with which the others had been so delighted, and now and again, when the breeze came from the confectioner's way, he could hear as well how the people sang at their tea. But the deep stroke of the bell still sounded louder; it was as if an organ was playing, too, and the sound came from the left, from the side where the heart is set.

Suddenly there was a rustling in the bushes, and there before the king's son stood a little boy, a boy in wooden shoes and a jacket so short that you could see exactly how long his wrists were. They recognized one another. The boy was that very one who hadn't been able to come with the rest because he had had to go home and give back the coat and boots to the innkeeper's son. He had done that, and then, in his wooden shoes and his shabby clothes, he had started off alone, for the bell rang so loud and so deep that out he must go.

"Ah, now we can go on together," said the King's son; but the poor boy with the wooden shoes was quite embarrassed. He pulled at his short sleeves and said he was afraid he couldn't get along so fast, and besides he thought the bell ought to be looked for on the right, for everything that is great and noble is on that side.

"Well, at that rate we shan't meet again," said the King's son; and he nodded to the poor boy, who plunged into the darkest and thickest part of the wood, where the thorns tore his shabby clothes to bits, and scratched his face and hands and feet till the blood came.

The King's son, too, got a good few scratches; but the sun shone on his path, and he is the one we will follow, for a brisk lad was he.

"I must and will find the bell," said he, "if I have to go to the world's end for it."

The ugly baboons, sitting in the trees, grinned at him with every tooth in their heads. "Shall we smash him?" said they. "Shall we smash him? He's a king's son!"

But on he went, undaunted, deeper and deeper into the wood, where grew the strangest flowers. There stood white star lilies with blood-red stamens, sky-blue tulips that glistened in the breezes, and apple trees whose apples, one and all, looked like great shining soap bubbles—just think how those trees must have shone in the sunlight! Round the most beautiful green glades, where hart and hind played on the turf, grew splendid oaks and beeches, and whenever one of the trees had had its bark split, grass and long tendrils had grown in the cleft. There, too, were great glens with calm lakes, on which white swans swam and flapped their wings. Often did the King's son stop and listen; often he thought that it was from one of those deep lakes that the bell rang upward to him; but then he was aware that it was not there, but from a further depth of the forest, that the bell sounded.

And now the sun was sinking and the sky shone red as fire, and a great stillness was over all the forest. He sank on his knees and sang his evening hymn, and said: "Never shall I find that which I seek! Now the sun is sinking. Now night,

dark night is coming on; yet once again, perhaps, I may see the round red sun before it sinks wholly behind the earth. I will climb this cliff that stands there, with the great trees on the top."

And he clutched at creepers and roots and clambered up towards the wet rocks, where the water snakes twined into knots, and the toads seemed really to bark at him—yet up he got before the sun, seen from that height, was quite down. Oh, what splendour! The sea, the great majestic sea, that rolled its long billows toward the coast, stretched out before him, and the sun stood like a huge shining altar, far out, where sea and sky met, all fused together in glowing colours. The forest sang, and the sea sang, and his heart sang with them. All nature was a vast solemn cathedral, wherein the trees and floating clouds were the columns, the flowers and grass the woven hangings of silk, the heaven itself the mighty dome. Up there the red hues were dying as the sun disappeared. But millions of stars were being lit, millions of diamond lamps shone there, and the King's son stretched out his arms towards the heavens, the sea, the forest—and just then there came from the path on the right the poor boy with the scanty coat-sleeves and the wooden shoes. He had come there just as soon, come by his own way; and they ran to meet each other, and caught each other by the hand in the great cathedral of Nature and of song.

And above them rang out the unseen solemn bell, and about it happy spirits hovered, circling in a joyful song of praise to God.

[End of *The Bell* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]