

The Bell

Hans Christian Andersen

In the narrow streets of the big town, toward evening when the sun was setting and the clouds shone like gold on the chimney tops, people would hear a strange sound like that of a church bell. But they heard it only for a few moments before it was lost in the rumble of city carriages and the voices of the multitudes, for such noises are very distracting. "Now the evening bell is ringing," people used to say. "The sun is setting."

People who were outside the town, where the houses were more scattered, with little gardens or fields between them, could see the evening sky in even more splendor and hear the bell more distinctly. It was as if the tones came from some church, buried in the silent and fragrant depths of the forest, and people looked solemnly in that direction.

A long time passed, and people began to say to each other, "I wonder if there really is a church out there in the woods? That bell has a mysterious, sweet tone. Let's go out there and see what it looks like."

So the rich people drove out, and the poor people walked out, but to all of them it seemed a very long way. When they reached a grove of willows on the outskirts of the woods, they sat down and looked up into the branches and imagined they were really in the heart of the forest. The town confectioner came out and set up his tent there, and then another confectioner came, and he hung a bell right above his tent; but the bell had no clapper and was all tarred over as a protection against the rain.

When the people went home again, they said it had all been very romantic, much more fun than a tea party. Three people even said that they had gone right through the forest to the far side and had still heard the strange sound of the bell, only then it seemed to be coming from the direction of town.

One of these even wrote a poem about the bell and compared its tones to those of a mother singing to a beloved child-no melody could be sweeter than the tones of that bell.

The Emperor of the country heard about the bell and issued a solemn proclamation promising that whoever discovered the source of the lovely sounds would receive the title of "Bell Ringer to the World," even if there were not really a bell there at all.

Of course, a great many people went to the woods now to try to gain that fine title, but only one of them came back with some kind of an explanation. No one had been deep enough into the forest-neither had he, for that matter-but just the same, he said the sound was made by a very large owl in an old hollow tree, a wise owl which continually knocked its head against the trunk of the tree. He wasn't quite sure whether the sound came from the bird's head or from the hollow trunk, but still he was appointed "Public Bell Ringer Number One," and every year he wrote a little treatise about the remarkable old owl. No one was much the wiser for it.

Now, on a certain Confirmation Day, the minister had preached a very beautiful and moving sermon; the children who were confirmed were deeply touched by it. It was a tremendously important day in their lives, for on this day they were leaving childhood behind and becoming grown-up persons. Their infant souls would take wing into the bodies of adults. It was a glorious, sunny day, and after the confirmation the children walked together out of the town, and from the depths of the woods the strange tolling of the bell came with a mysterious clear sweetness.

At once all the children decided to go into the woods and find the bell. All except three, that is to say. The first of these three just had to go home and try on a new ball dress; for that forthcoming ball was the very reason she had been confirmed at this time, otherwise she would have had to wait until next year's ceremony. The second was a poor boy who

had borrowed his confirmation coat and boots from the landlord's son and had to give them back by a certain hour. And the third said he never went to a strange place without his parents; he had always been a dutiful child and would continue to be good, even though he was confirmed now. The others made fun of him for this, which was very wrong of them indeed.

So these three dropped out while the others started off into the woods. The sun shone, the birds sang, and the children sang too, walking along hand in hand. They had not yet received any responsibilities or high position in life - all were equal in the eye of God on that Confirmation Day.

But soon two of the smallest grew tired and returned to town; two other little girls sat down to make wreaths and so did not go any farther. The rest went on until they reached the willows where the confectioner had his tent, and then they said, "Well, here we are! You see, the bell doesn't really exist at all; it's just something people imagine!"

And then suddenly the sound of the bell came from the depths of the woods, so sweet and solemn that four or five of the young people decided to follow it still farther. The underbrush was so thick and close that their advance was most difficult. Woodruff and anemone grew almost too high; convolvuluses and blackberry brambles hung in long garlands from tree to tree, where the nightingale sang and the sunbeams played through the leaves. It was so lovely and peaceful, but it was a bad place for the girls, because they would get their dresses torn on the brambles.

There were large boulders overgrown with many-colored mosses, and a fresh spring bubbled forth among them with a strange little gurgling sound. "Cluck, cluck," it said.

"I wonder if that can be the bell," one of the children thought, lying down to listen to it. "I'd better look into this." So he remained there, and the others went on without him.

They came to a little hut, all made of branches and tree bark. Its roof was covered with roses, and over it a wild apple tree was bending as if it would shower its blessings down on the little house. The long sprays of the apple tree clustered around the gable, and on that there hung a little bell!

Could that be the one they had heard? Yes, they all-except for one boy-agreed it must be. This one boy said it was much too small and delicate to be heard so far away, and besides, its tones were very different from those that moved human hearts so strangely. The boy who spoke was a king's son, so the other children said, "Of course he thinks he knows a lot more than anybody else."

So the king's son went on alone, and as he proceeded deeper into the woods, his heart was filled more and more with the solitude of the forest. He could still hear the little bell which had satisfied the others, and when the wind was from the right direction, he could even hear the voices of the people around the confectioner's tent, singing while they were having their tea.

But above all rose the peeling of that mysterious bell. Now it sounded as if an organ were being played with it, and the tones came from the left-hand side, where the heart is.

Suddenly there was a rustling in the bushes, and a little boy stood before the king's son. He was wearing wooden shoes and such a short jacket that the sleeves did not cover his long wrists. They knew each other at once, for this was the poor boy who had had to go back to return the coat and boots to the landlord's son. This done, he had changed again into his shabby clothes and wooden shoes and come into the woods, for the bell sounded so loudly and so deeply that he had to follow its call.

"Then let's go on together," suggested the king's son.

But the poor boy in his wooden shoes was very shy, pulled at his short sleeves, and said

he was afraid he could not walk as fast as the king's son; besides, he was sure the sound of the bell came from the right, because that side looked much more beautiful.

"Then I guess we can't go together," said the king's son nodding his head to the poor boy who went in the direction he thought best, which took him into the thickest and darkest part of the forest. The thorns tore his shabby clothes and scratched his face, hands, and feet until they bled.

The king's son received some scratches too, but the sun shone on his path. And he is the one we will follow, for he was a bright young lad.

"I will and must find that bell," he said, "even if I have to go to the end of the world!"

High in the trees above him ugly monkeys sat and grinned and showed their teeth. "Let's throw things at him!" they said to each other. "Let's thrash him, 'cause he's the son of a king."

But he went on unwearied, and went farther and farther into the woods, where the most wonderful flowers were growing. There were lilies white as stars, with blood-red stamens; there were light-blue tulips that gleamed in the breeze, and apple trees with their fruit shining like big soap bubbles. Imagine how those trees sparkled in the sunlight! Around the beautiful rolling green meadows where the deer played grew massive oaks and beeches; and wherever one of the trees had a crack in the bark, mosses and long tendrils were growing out of it. In some of the meadows were quiet lakes, where beautiful white swans swam and beat the air gently with their wings. The king's son often stopped to listen, for the tones of the bell sometimes seemed to come from the depths of these lakes; then again he felt sure that the notes were coming from farther away in the forest.

Slowly the sun set, and the clouds turned a fiery red; a stillness, a deep stillness, settled over the forest. The boy fell on his knees, sang his evening hymn, and said to himself, "I'll never find what I'm seeking now. The sun is setting, and the night is coming—the dark night. But perhaps I can catch one more glimpse of the round red sun before it disappears below the horizon. I'll climb up on those rocks; they rise up as high as the tallest trees!" Seizing the roots and creepers, he slowly made his way up the slippery stones, where the water snakes writhed and the toads and frogs seemed to be barking at him. Yet he reached the summit just as the sun was going down. Oh, what a wonderful sight!

The sea, the great, the beautiful sea, rolling its long waves against the shore, lay stretched out before him, and the sun stood like a large shining altar, where ocean and heaven met; the whole world seemed to melt together in glowing colors. The forest sang, the sea sang, and the heart of the boy sang too. Nature was a vast, holy church, where the trees and drifting clouds were the pillars; flowers and grass made the velvet carpet, and heaven itself was the great dome. Up there, the red colors faded as the sun sank into the ocean, but then millions of stars sprang out, like millions of diamond lamps, and the king's son spread out his arms in joy toward the heavens, the sun, and the forest.

At that moment, from the right-hand path, there appeared the poor boy with the short sleeves and the wooden shoes. He had come there as quickly and by following his own path. Joyfully they ran towards each other, and held each other by the hand in the great tabernacle of Nature and Poetry, while above them sounded the invisible, holy bell. The blessed spirits floated around them and lifted up their voices in a joyful hallelujah.