

ON BELLS

If a man should sit down to think of all the loveliest things in the world, though his meditation lasted as long as St. Brendan's rapture, he would not be able to think of anything lovelier than bells. Not that all bells are lovely; some are raucous, others strident, others again querulous and ill-mannered; and there are cracked bells. But even poetry is vulgarised by bad verse and brought into discredit—and so bells must not be judged by those hanging in railway stations any more than the sacred poets can be dismissed on account of the doggerel of a rhymester. If we consider poetry, in its essence, as the perfect utterance of beautiful ideas, then bells have a peculiar poetic quality. They are akin to poetry in that they touch life at all points; like it, too, in their antiquity, universality, and charm. Their chiming is not music except in the sense that verse is music: a chime, as a rhyme, may have music in it. Bells require words, and if no words are chanted by them somebody is sure to supply a phrase to make good the lack. They speak a language more often than they sing.

Bells are for all moods. They are cheerful and plaintive, merry and solemn in turn. Often the same bells can be rung with perfect aptness for a wedding as for a burial, though there might be various sets of bells for the various functions of bells. A carrillon of glass would only fit the funeral of a fairy as a great gaunt iron peal would be most in keeping with the marriage of a miser. It is an outrage to force bells to dance to a tune for which they were not made, or to weight their tripping feet with heavy metal.

Who does not love their sweet gravity carried on a faint breeze across a twilight water? And are they less beautiful upon the sheep of the downs or on sleigh-horses? Lovers among woods of bluebells hear in their secret hearts not the music of an orchestra, but the music of bells.

Tennyson felt them to be symbolical as they rang out the depression of the old year and rang in the hope of the new. Though they have been put to sentimental usage, more often they have stirred their hearers to bravery. To Whittington they prophesied that he should be Lord Mayor of London; and to Londoners they are a token of civic pride, for the definition of a cockney is one who has been born within the sound of Bow Bells.

Far older than our civilisation and our faith, they were introduced (so it is said) into the Church by Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, and from the worship of Isis were baptised in Holy Water. In England they were used (for Bede mentions them) long before St. Dunstan; but it was that great man who cast them for general use. From henceforth they rang continually over the land. At their three strokes given at the

Consecration of the Host, men would turn in their houses towards the church where the Holy Sacrifice was being offered. Instead of a muezzin upon a minaret, a bell rung from a steeple called the faithful to the saying of the "Angelus." Excommunication was made by bell, book and candle, and the dead-bell tolled the passing of a soul. But of all sacred bells, those I love most are the little bells and the big which they ring at Mass on Holy Saturday. In some countries carnival is held at the Sanctus for 20 minutes, and flowers fall like golden rain from the roof; but we, staid English Catholics, keep the bells.

The bells that I do not love are bicycle bells and the horrid alarm-bell that wakes me in the morning. The one sort makes one jump aside and swear; but I have a way with the other that effectually stops its nonsense. Much pleasanter are dinner bells and the bells that ring if you can hit very hard with a hammer in a fair. As for the fire-engine bell, that always puts fire into my blood.

A bell is sometimes a crisis. Keats hears the nightingale, and its voice is

"like a bell,

To call me back from thee to my sole self."

More often a bell is the regulator of routine. I knew a man once who tried for seven months to be a monk; and though he probably feels kindly disposed towards bells now, he spoke (irreligiously, I think) of the cloister bell that called him to his choir-stall as "that blasted bell!" He was young and foolish, or he would have known that even the bell of a clock tower has a wise ritual, and tells sweetly of the passage of time and of an undue grave.

I could go on; but I remember that Mrs. Meynell has written in her essay on *The Spirit of Place*:—"The inarticulate bell has been provided with too much interpretation, too many rhymes professing to close with her inaccessible utterance, and to agree with her remote tongue. The bell, like the bird, is a musician pestered with literature." I also have pestered the bell, though not, I fear, with literature. Supposing that we take it and drop it, as the Scandinavian raiders dropped Bosham Bell in Bellhaven Harbor? Not even a team of seven milk-white oxen could draw that bell to the land; and wild horses shall not recover my bell. I am tired . . . a bell can grow monotonous!

ALOYSIUS CAREY, in *The New Witness*.

One way to recollect the mind easily in the time of prayer, and preserve it more in tranquility, is *not to let it wander too far at other times*: you should keep it strictly in the presence of God; and, being accustomed to think of Him often, you will find it easy to keep your mind calm in the time of prayer, or at least to recall it from its wanderings.—*Brother Lawrence*.



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