

The Old Church Bell

Hans Christian Andersen

In the German country of Württemberg, where the beautiful acacia trees bloom beside the highways, and the apple and pear trees bend down in autumn under the weight of their ripe blessings, there lies the little town of Marbach. It belongs to the class of quite unimportant towns, but it is located in a beautiful spot near the Neckar, the river that flows swiftly past towns and green vineyards and old knights' castles, to join its waters with those of the proud Rhine.

It was late one year; the vines had red leaves; showers fell, and the cold winds increased. This was not a happy time for the poor people. The days were dark, but it was darker still within the cramped old houses. One of these stood with its gabled end toward the street, with low windows, poor and humble in appearance; and poor indeed was the family that lived there, yet courageous and diligent, with the love and fear of God within their hearts.

God was soon to give them one more child. The hour of its birth had come; the mother lay in pain and need. From the church tower came the sound of chiming bells, so deep, so festive. It was a holiday, and the solemn ringing of the bells filled the heart of the praying woman with faith and devotion; she lifted her soul to God in fervent prayer, and at that moment her little son was born; and she was happy beyond words. The bell from the church tower seemed to send forth her joy over town and country. Two bright baby eyes gazed up at her, and the little one's hair shone as if it were gilded. On that gloomy November day the child had been welcomed into the world by the chiming bells; the mother and father kissed it and wrote in their Bible, "The tenth of November, 1759, God gave us a son," adding later that he had received at his baptism the names, "Johann Christoph Friedrich."

What became of the little fellow, the poor boy from the humble town of Marbach?

At that time nobody knew, not even the old church bell high in its belfry, though it had first rung and sung for him, that he should one day sing that most beautiful song about "The Bell."

And the little boy grew, and the world grew larger about him; the parents moved to another town, but some dear friends of theirs still remained in Marbach; and thus it happened that mother and son returned there one day for a visit. The boy was still only six years old, but already he knew parts of the Bible and the pious old hymns; many an evening while seated on his little cane stool, he had heard his father read Gellert's *Fables* and the poem about Messiah; hot tears had come into the boy's eyes, and his sister had cried at hearing of Him who had suffered death on the cross of Golgotha, that He might save us.

At the time of their first visit to Marbach the town had not changed very much - in fact, it was not very long since they had left it. The houses stood exactly as before, with their pointed gables, sloping walls, and low windows; but there were new graves in the churchyard; and there, down in the grass, close by the wall, lay the old church bell, fallen from its high position. It had developed a flaw and could ring no longer, and a new one had been put up in its place.

The mother and son had entered the churchyard and stood still before the old bell, while she told the little boy how this bell had performed its duty for centuries; it had pealed at baptisms, and joyful weddings, and funerals. Its tones had told of joy and of the horrors of fire; yes, the bell had sung of the most important moments in human life.

And never did the child forget what his mother told him that day; it sounded within his breast until, when he was grown to be a man, he could pour it out in song. And the mother

told him how this old bell had pealed comfort and joy to her in her hour of fear, had rung and sung when her little boy was given to her. The child looked almost with awe at the grand old bell; he stooped over and kissed it as it lay there, old and broken and cast aside among grass and nettles.

And it lingered in the memory of that little boy, as he grew up in poverty, tall and thin, with reddish hair and a freckled face.

Yes, that's what he looked like, but his eyes were as clear and blue as the deep water. And how did he get on? Well, he had been lucky, enviably lucky. He had been received graciously into the military school, and even into the section where the children of the rich people were. This was an honor, a piece of rare good fortune; and he wore top boots, a stiff collar, and a powdered wig. He was taught under the system of "March! Halt! Front!" This was likely to result in something!

The old church bell would probably someday go into the smelting furnace, and what would become of it next? Well, nobody could tell that, and nobody could tell, either, what would come from the bell in the breast of the young man. There was a turmoil within him; it rang and echoed and strained to sound forth into the wide world. The more cramped the space within the school walls, the more deafening the commands of "March! Halt! Front!" the more strongly it rang within the youth's breast. What he felt he sang to his comrades, and it was heard beyond the boundaries of the country; but it was not for this that he had received a scholarship, clothing, and food. He already had the number of the screw he was to be in the great watchwork that we all belong to. How little we understand ourselves, and how then shall others, even the best of them, understand us? But it is the pressure that forms the precious gem. The pressure was here; would the world in the course of time be able to recognize the precious gem?

There was a great festival in the capital of the country. Thousands of lamps glittered, and rockets flamed; people still remember that splendor, remember it because of him who in tears and sorrow tried then to escape unnoticed to foreign soil. He must leave his native land, his mother, and all his loved ones far behind, or perish in the stream of commonplace life.

But the old bell was well off; it lay hidden in the shelter of the church wall of Marbach. As the wind swept over it, it could have told of him at whose birth the bell had rung; it could have told how coldly it had blown upon him as, weary and exhausted, he sank down in the forest of a neighboring country, with all his treasures, all his hopes for the future, in some written pages of *Fiesco*. The wind could have told how, when he read it aloud, his only patrons, artists all of them, stole away and amused themselves by playing ninepins. The wind could have told of the pale fugitive who lived for weeks and months in the miserable inn, where the landlord was noisy and drank, and where vulgar merriment took place while he sang of the Ideal. Hard days, dark days! The heart itself must suffer and understand what it would sing to the world.

Dark days and cold nights passed over the old bell, and it did not feel them; but the bell within the human breast is sensitive to these miseries. What happened to the young man? What happened to the old bell? Well, the bell went far away, farther than its sound could ever be heard even from its high tower; the young man - ah, yes, the bell within his breast sounded farther into distant lands than ever his foot would ever tread or his eyes ever see; it sounded and resounded across the ocean and around the earth.

But first you must hear about the church bell. It was taken away from Marbach and sold for old copper, and now it was to go into a smelting furnace in Bavaria. How did it come there, and when? Well, this the bell itself may tell you, if it can - it's of no great importance; but it is certain that it came to the capital of Bavaria. Many years had passed since it fell from the tower; and now it was to be melted down, to become part of the casting of a great monument, a statue in honor of one of the German people's great men. Now listen to how

it all came about. Strange and beautiful things do happen in this world!

Up in Denmark, on one of the green islands where the beech tree grows and there are many ancient viking graves, there once lived a very poor little boy who wore wooden shoes and used to carry the meals, wrapped up in an old piece of cloth, to his father who worked on the wharves, carving figureheads for ships. This poor child had become his country's pride; he carved out of marble such wonderful things that they amazed the whole world, and to him the noble task was given to shape from clay a majestic and beautiful figure that would be cast in bronze, a statue of him whose name his father wrote in the Bible, Johann Christoph Friedrich.

And the bronze flowed glowing into the mold. Nobody thought of where the old church bell had come from, or of its sounds that had died away - the bell, too, flowed into the mold and became the head and breast of the statue that now stands unveiled before the old palace in Stuttgart. There it stands, on the spot where he whom it represents walked in life, amid strife and struggles, oppressed by the world around him - he, the boy from Marbach, the pupil from the military school, the fugitive, the immortal poet of Germany, who sang of the liberator of Switzerland and the heaven-inspired Maid of France.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and flags waved from the towers and roofs of the royal town of Stuttgart. The church bells chimed in holiday joy; only one bell was silent, but it shone in the bright sunlight, shone from the breast and face of that noble statue. It was just a hundred years since that day when, in Marbach's church tower, it had pealed joy and comfort to the suffering mother when in that lowly house she gave birth to her child - who would one day be a rich man, whose treasures the world blesses, the heart-thrilling poet of noble women, the great and glorious singer - Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller.