THE DEDICATION OF THE BELLS.

A Dream.

In our dreams we often dream over again the past; we go through it with variations; what was gets entangled with what might have been; the actual with the possible, and a vein of the impossible with all. Thus it was with me the night after I had witnessed the dedication of the new bells at St. Paul's.

What had struck me most on the occasion was the large gathering in the Cathedral, apparently a surprise to the officials; and the interest which the enormous congregation insisted on taking in the bells. Disperse they would not, though the evening service was over; the choir and clergy had disappeared through the door at the foot of the 'geometrical staircase,' and those in the nave were hopelessly shut out and barred off from all sight and hearing of the dedication service, which took place in a small chamber with no eye-witnesses, though a score or two of writers for the press were permitted to be ear-witnesses. The 'great congregation' were not taken into confidence in the actual ceremony; in my dream, amongst other variations, I dreamed that they were.

I dreamed—sometimes we dream platitudes—that the occasion was a public one, that St. Paul's was the property, in a wide sense, of London Churchmen, and only in a narrow sense of the Dean and Chapter; that church bells had public functions like canons and precentors and bishops; and that there was no reason to be ashamed of them, or admit them to their office in a hole-and-corner sort of way. And so the ceremony of my dream differed from that of the day's actuality in many ways.

Not in its first stages. There was the same enormous inpour of congregation, the same puzzled and half-annoyed look upon the faces of the vergers, who seemed to think it an intrusion on the part of the public that they should come to church to see bells dedicated; the same finely-rendered evensong, with thirty boy-choristers filling, as never used to be filled, the choir-seats; the same outpouring of organ tone, now from one, now from the other side; the same good and careful singing of the priest's part. All, in short, went in my dream as it had gone in the real, up to a certain point; nor did the dream service exceed in beauty, in glow, in hazy resonance, the service of the waking afternoon. For even a dream cannot clothe such a scene as that of last All Saints' Day's evensong at St. Paul's was with an additional charm, or lend to the music a glamour beyond that which it obtains from the building.

After the third collect, however, my dream took a turn. In choirs and places where they sing, here followeth the anthem. And I dreamed—for dreams care nothing for chronology—that Henry Purcell was there, as well as Dr. Stainer; and at the third collect they conferred together. That the dead should talk with the living caused me no surprise, for the faculty of astonishment is dormant in dreams: at a motion from Purcell a set of old-looking anthem-books were quickly passed round. And then there came a sound not unknown, I rejoice to say, in St. Paul's—a sound of viols, interlaced with the sound of the organ; and Purcell's face lighted up as the introductory symphony of his 'Bell Anthem' began, with its four string parts, and the congregation recognised in the instrumentation those passages in which the bass viols imitate the ringing of bells; and old ringers, of whom many were present, noted that Purcell had even been careful to link the downward scales in couples, as they occur in ringing, and knew, in fact, as genius generally does, what he was about. Then the voices entered, 'Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice!' and all felt that the significance of the occasion had been embodied in the anthem.

As yet the bells were silent. They had not been dedicated, or licensed by the Bishop to preach praise. The service went on; the preacher preached, not making timid and veiled reference to the new bells at the end of a long discourse upon nothing in especial, but going straight to the business of the evening, and linking together much pious and pleasant discourse upon bells; such as, in the real sermon of the day, had been sparingly thrown in after much dry preface; and it warmed the hearts of many, so that they glowed with a glow of praise, such as the sound of the bells might presently fan into a flame of Alleluias.

Evensong was over; but as in the reality, so in the dream, the concourse of worshippers remained expectant, not thinking that what was to be done needed to be done in a loft, with the doors bolted below, but thinking that the bells would be dedicated in the face of the great congregation. And in my dream it was even so. There came anew a rise and fall of versicle and response, in words not taken from the Prayer-book, but selected from the Bible; then the choir chanted a short Psalm; not three or four of doubtful relevance, but one, the most pointed that could be found; next followed prayers, and these were in my dream the same as I had heard waking—short, reverently turned, yet well to the point, and free from those mere vaguely pious phrases which any bishop, or dean, or priest, or lay reader, can join together by help of a *Cruden;* but in which you shall ever and anon see the joints, and mark the slovenly dove-tailing. All this in the usual place of Divine service, and in no remote corner; so that none present could be ignorant of what was said and done, or have excuse for writing cock-and-bull stories to the *Morning Advertiser*, or other sapient newspaper, alleging Papistical ceremonies or ultra-Ritualistic observances.

Then there was a pause. All remained upon their knees in silence. A few moments of expectation, and in the high distance, from the north-west tower, came a quiet, softened, sound of bells; not swinging fiercely round and dashing each his iron tongue impatiently against his metal cheek; but speaking gently and restfully, each as he hung, still but trembling, in his timber cage, to the stroke of the chiming hammer,—an opening symphony to the coming anthem, which Stainer, I thought, not Purcell, had written for the dedication service itself, and in which he had treated the bells as what they are, an enormous ecclesiastical instrument of music. The anthem was in B flat, to suit the bells, whose chiming quietly opened it: they ceased presently, and then there crept in again the insidious sound of the strings; and to these entered half imperceptibly the organ, registered, according to the cunning of the organist, with such stops as might best mix with the strings; but presently giving voices of other and different timbre, till half its resources of tone-stamp had been brought upon the ear; and then entered the full choir, with sentences of praise carried upon glowing sentences of music; and the listeners were silent, but their hearts rejoiced, and the anthem carried their souls hither and thither, between earth and heaven.

The anthem of my dream went on; it grew in technical complication and in musical effect: while all were busy,—trebles, altos, tenors, basses, organ, strings,—I suddenly found myself transported in my dream to the very presence of the bells. In the dark windy chamber, pierced with Wren's circles, I heard, as I stood, the creaking of strained wood, the rattle of ropes, a muffled murmur of bronzy bell-notes; and in the dim I could see the bells being hurriedly rung up with lashed clappers. In a minute all twelve stood still and erect; and then there was a rush of rapid feet up the stone stairs; men scrambled over the timbers of the bell-cages, and unbound their tongues. All the time I thought—for nothing is impossible in a dream—I could hear the anthem; the first movement, after reaching a climax, had gradually been relaxing in its activity, and at length fell gently to cadence. Then came a quartette of voices—a 'verse' as we call it in cathedral music—in the relative key of F; full of the flow and grace of Dr. Stainer's pen; it moved quietly for awhile to words of the last Psalm, 'Praise him in the sound of the trumpet; praise him upon the lute and harp;' the organ here was silent, and only the stringed instruments accompanied; then the parts grew more and more animated, the voices calling, in insistent repeated phrases, for praise 'upon the loud cymbals.' There was a semi-cadence in the dominant, a few moments of suspense; some one passed a rapid word up the narrow staircase which leads to the ringing-chamber, and down came a shower of bell-music in B flat; the peal had been set ringing. The immense congregation, I thought in my dream, made as if to shout hurrah; but the sense of reverence imposed by the vast cathedral was upon them in a moment, and the impulse was softened down to a glowing desire to join in the act of praise; and at that moment, the bells still ringing their rounds, the organ and choir plunged into a full chorale, in the key of the peal; it was a familiar tune, and the whole assemblage joined in a broad doxology. When this had ended the bells had been set, and were silent; the bishop gave the blessing, the people knelt for a moment, and then the ringers, beginning to ring changes, played the out voluntary to a congregation who dispersed with the feeling that they and the bells, and not merely a knot of clergy, had taken part in a grand, meaningful, and edifying function.

Such was my dream: and after awaking next day, I could not but ask myself whether it was in all respects as unreasonable as dreams are apt to be. By chance I came upon an answer. In one of the daily papers there caught my eye an article on the opening of the Cathedral bells, in which the question of a public and congregational ceremony of dedication was mentioned as having been taken into consideration: but the idea had been dismissed. It seems that there was 'no precedent.' Could I have fallen asleep again, I might have dreamed that the Dean and Chapter had found courage, where it was a question of admitting a metropolis to assist in a great religious and popular observance, to make a precedent. But perhaps this would be deemed an extravagant supposition, even in a dream.

J. C.

'WEIRD RINGERS'; OR, WHAT THE STEEPLE-KEEPER SAW.

THERE was no hope. The dear Old Year was sinking fast, it had but a few short minutes to live. The snow fell fast in big feathery flakes upon the white canopy which covered the earth, as if the very elements were hastening to complete a winding-sheet in time for the final scene. The mighty Metropolis seemed awestruck, as its traffic, with subdued tread, stole softly along its streets and alleys. High up in the huge square steeple which overtops the heart of the city, the sonorous chimes strike the hour before midnight; and as the passers-by involuntarily glance upwards through the pelting snow in the direction of the sound, the faint flicker of a lantern at the belfry window shows them that someone is on the move among the twelve dusky monsters which lie between the massive oaken timbers of the frame, and causes them to shudder at the thought of any man being obliged to go to such a place on such a night. But it is only old Baldrick, the steeple-keeper, who, with his son, is clearing away the snow from the bell-gudgeons and brasses, and preparing for the Scroofe, which is now toiling up the dark and narrow stone staircase towards the ringing-room, in order to chaunt the Old Year's requiem, and to hail the birth of the New Year in one and the self-same peal.

A weird spot is that ringing-chamber. The north wind howls and shrieks around the walls and pinnacles of the tower, as it drives its chill blast through the holes in the masonry. Hissing through the casements, and whistling through the roof and floor-boards, the fitful gusts rush uproariously through the works of the great clock; then they jostle one another down the spiral staircase, only to come up again through the floor with renewed vigour, in order to pursue their mad career round the peal-boards which frown gloomily on the scene from their lofty perches on the walls. These are the annals designed to perpetuate the prowess of ringing heroes long since gathered to their fathers; but the woodwork of many of the tablets is mouldy and worm-eaten, and the dusky panels are so begrimed with the dirt of centuries, that the very names of the performers are illegible; and instead of enlivening the aspect of the place, they serve but to increase its general dreariness. The huge clock ticks with sepulchral voice as the mighty pendulum sways to and fro with ghostly solemnity, and, ever and anon, countless wires and weights creak, oscillate, and whiz, in harsh discordancy as they work the chimes above. But for the boxes fixed to the floor in a circle at intervals as pedestals for the ringers, and the ropes with their red and white 'tuftings' dangling above them, there would be little to associate man with the place; but the thought of how many men have toiled and laboured on those boxes century after century, seems to make their absence more appalling; and many a stout heart would quail at the thought of passing a night alone in such a chamber.

But the Scroofe is not alone, and not likely to be, and its only fear at present is that when once the twelve noisy ladies up above have been set a talking, it may lack the judgment and experience necessary to control their brazen tongues. Puffing and gasping, the Scroofe reaches its destination. It stamps its feet to knock off the snow from the toecaps of its boots, thinks that the journey from the street gets more tiring than it used to be, consoles itself with the sage reflection that it supposes it must be getting older, becomes gravely aware that old Father Time won't stay the deadly sweep of his scythe for one moment even out of respect for the poor Old Year; and so, without more ado, proceeds to doff coat and muffler, and prepare for action; but the ropes remain untouched, seeing that some of the bells are 'up,' and to pull them 'off,' *i.e.*, to set them revolving would mean certain and instant death to old Baldrick up above, if he happened to be within reach of their swing.

Now, how came the Scroofe in the steeple at all? *Pace*, 'Brother Ropes,' it was in this way. Those ringers who can change at every pull are banded together in London, as 'College' or 'Cumberland' 'Youths,' Societies which exist in friendly rivalry, each being on the alert to cap the performances of the other; and the 'Scroofe' or 'Scroofers' of a church, are those members told off by the Society to do the parochial or paid ringing, in consideration that the Society is allowed an occasional practice night on the bells of that church.

But here come Baldrick and son; the former is a small grizzly-looking man, with shoulders drooping from continual creeping about among the bells, and up the narrow staircase; yet his eye is sharp and piercing, and his frame bears the traces of wire and agility.

'Happy New Year to you, gentlemen all!' says he.

The Scroofe suitably responds: 'No time for compliments, John,' adds the conductor, a keen little ringer: 'Catch hold of the second, we must get them on the move as soon as we can.'

The 'behind' or big-bell men strip to their shirts and bare their arms; the bells that are 'down' are raised, and poised mouth upwards, ready to join the lusty chorus; each man takes up his station with his eye on the conductor.

'What shall it be?' says that functionary: 'Grandsire,' or 'Stedman's Cinques,' or 'Treble Twelve-in?' 'I think we have a good enough band for "Treble Twelve."'

The Scroofe smiles assent. You may always see a smile of quiet contentment on a ringer's countenance when 'Treble Bob' is mentioned, and a band is there which is well up in that favourite method.

'Are you ready? One gone, go!' cries the conductor pulling off the treble.

The ropes dart up through the mouse-holes one after the other, and the black monsters aloft, plunge and roll over and over like porpoises at play, as they lift up their voices in quick succession in tones graduating from the shrill treble to the rich-tongued tenor which covers all with a 'bome' that makes the air vibrate again. A few 'rounds' struck in beautiful compass, and the words 'Go, Treble Bob,' are heard; and thenceforth each pull records one of the 479,000,000 changes of which the bells are capable. So dies the Old Year to the mellow music flowing from the grandest instrument of the great city, which ceases not its harmony until changes in number equal to the date have been completed.

Hastily donning coats and mufflers, away go the Scroofers to the snug little club-room, open for the nonce, to take a well-earned parting glass. Date-touches of 'Treble Bob Maximus' are not got every day, even by such giants in the art; and besides, in keeping fifty and odd hundredweight of metal on the swing for more than an hour and a half in a dusty belfry, a dryness is apt to accumulate in a man's throat, which needs speedy removal by that liquor which he finds most efficacious for the purpose.

The talk was of bells and of ringing, as it always is.

'Well done, my lads,' said a ringer, who had been listening outside. 'I never heard better striking; how did the tenor go, Jim?'

'Better a lot than she did on last meeting night,' said the tenor-man, his face, with the beads of perspiration still on it, emerging from the froth of a foaming tankard. 'Shouldn't mind a "5000" to such compass.'

'She must have gone better a hundred years back, or Cupperidge wouldn't have stuck to her for nearly 8000 changes,' said Grimshaw, a stalwart youngster. 'I expect he was a big, heavy man.'

'What reason have you for thinking that?' said old Baldrick excitedly, fixing his sharp eye on the speaker.

Everybody turned to look at the old man, who latterly had grown very reserved, and hardly ever ventured on a remark.

'Because no small man could have done it,' retorted the other.

'It's my firm belief that Cupperidge was just about such another man as the conductor there, maybe a bit stiffer in the build, but no taller, mind you,' returned the steeple-keeper, decidedly.

'Haven't I heard you say that you knew Joseph Friar, who rang the 9th in that peal?' queried the conductor.

'I saw him once only,' replied Baldrick, 'when I was a young lad, and he a very old man; now he was a fine man if you like, well over six feet, and big in proportion.'

'And I guess Cupperidge was as big or bigger, or they would have put Friar at the tenor,' said Grimshaw.

'Friar would have made two of Cupperidge,' muttered the old man.

'But Cupperidge died soon after the peal, according to the Society's books.'

'Yes, so I have heard.'

'Then you couldn't have seen him, could you?'

The steeple-keeper was silent. Presently he took a long pull at his glass; then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looked at the Scroofe with a solemn but somewhat defiant gaze, and said, 'If the men who rang that peal more than a hundred years ago were to walk in here now, I'd wager I could point out each by name.'

'You're joking, Mr. Steeple-keeper.'

'Would to Heaven I was! but now I've begun I may as well make a clean breast of it, and ease my mind, especially as my son has gone home. I've kept it in too long as it is.'

You might have heard a pin drop, as the Scroofe bent forward to hear the old man, who continued in a low but firm voice, 'Gentlemen, it was on the 10th of March last, which you may recollect was our practice night at the steeple yonder, that Jim here broke the fifth rope in the eye of the wheel, and the band left off ringing early in consequence, and went away to the club-room to transact the business of the company.'

'I remember it well,' said Jim. 'You took the rope up to the bell to splice it, just as we were leaving, so as to have it ready for a wedding there was to to be next day.'

'Yes, that's right. Well, having done the splice, I went down into the ringing-room to see that the length was all right, and while there I saw some one on the stairs pass the door, and go up towards the bells. Thinking it was one of the band coming back to lend me a hand with the job, I shouted to say I was below, but no one came down. Then several of the ropes began to move up and down as though some one was trying to steady himself along the frame by holding on to the wheels. I shouted again, and, while listening for an answer, I became aware of a man on the tenor-box, just in the act of pulling her off. I cried out to him to desist, fearing that he would kill the man up aloft, but he took no heed, and swung the bell, and set her again in a way that showed him to be an old hand. When I came to have a good look at him he reminded me of some of the old almshouse men whom I used to see when I was a boy, only his dress was even more old-fashioned. It was composed of a long snuff-coloured coat, open in the front, with rows of buttons on the flaps, immense side-pockets, a velvet collar, and sleeves with broad cuffs; the waistcoat was very long, and overlapped the black shorts which encased his lower limbs. His stockings were grey, and his shoes of unpolished leather, ornamented with large, square buckles. On his head was a three-cornered hat with the brim turned up; and his hair, which was long, was gathered up, and tied with a ribbon at the back of his head. Well, I was just going to warn him again that there was some one up above, when in came seven or eight other men, all dressed more or less in the same fashion. They shook hands with each other, and their lips moved as if in conversation; but it was all dumb show to me, for I could not hear a word. After a bit I mustered courage to ask them what they were doing in my belfry, but they didn't seem to hear what I said, or to know I was there.

'Then they began to pull off the tenor one by one, letting her down a bit, then holding her up a stroke, evidently guaging the "go" of her, and from their signs they seemed to be discussing whether somebody or other was likely to ring her for a long peal. Presently, the man who had been amongst the bells came down, and entered the room. He placed some wax-candles on the floor, and lowered a lantern which hung in the centre of the room; it was the image of what the old broken lantern which is now in one of the cupboards would be if it was properly repaired. How it got hung up I couldn't tell you, it wasn't there a minute or two before. I glanced to where the gas jet is now, but it had gone. The

men gathered round the candles, and one of them seemed to measure them with his thumb, as if he doubted whether they would last. Soon after that a short, thickset, wiry man came in with two others, and the man, who had come down from the bells left, after making a bow, and addressing a short speech to the company. I was getting frightened, and was about to rush out, when, to my horror, the belfry-door was locked by one of the men, who put the key in his pocket, so that there was no chance of escape. I sat down on a bench in a corner, and began to realise that the strange band might be going for a long peal; the pulling off of the tenor, the long candles, and the locking of themselves in, all pointed to that conclusion. I wasn't long in doubt; the little, wiry man mounted the tenor-box, the curious coats and hats were hung on the pegs, the ropes were adjusted, and in less than a minute the men were all ready. I saw the conductor's lips move as he pulled off his bell, the ropes worked up and down in their usual manner, but no sound came from the bell-loft, although I am positive that the bells were all swinging, for the tower began to sway to the motion as it always does. My "rope-sight" soon revealed the method rung by them, which was the same that we rang to-night; it also enabled me to judge that the ringing, although inaudible to me, was excellent.

'Hour after hour I watched the progress of that strange peal, every incident of which is only too deeply engraven on my memory. I can see the hot breath of the big-bell ringers issuing in jets from their mouths and nostrils, and steaming in the cold air, and the perspiration rolling in big drops from their foreheads. Neither shall I forget the tenor-man. His rope might have been a bar of iron he held it so deftly in his arms, the muscles and sinews of which stood out in great knots. He never threw an ounce of strength away as he dropped that huge bell into her place in the maze of changes minute after minute, and hour after hour. For such a man to ring such a bell was a masterpiece of skill and endurance combined, in fact, he was the picture of what a ringer should be; and as the time flew by, and the wax-candles burnt lower and lower in their sockets, I became fascinated with the weird scene, but particularly with the desire to see whether the man would be able to finish his task. The clock-face showed that he had kept the two tons and a half revolving for five hours and more, and from the position of the ropes it was clear that another "course" was almost completed. Then the conductor looked towards him, and addressed him with evident anxiety; but the latter nodded his head as if in token that he was not done yet, and went on doggedly as before. I fancied that the nod meant that he would try another course, or nearly an hour's more work; and so it turned out.

'I then glanced round to see how the others were going on. There was a very big man at the 9th, whom I soon recognised as Joseph Friar, whom I had seen when a boy. I could have sworn to him, although he was now changed from an old man to a young one. Then my eye glanced at the wall in order to see what bell he rang in the peal when Cupperidge rang the tenor. To my surprise the peal-board had vanished, although all those which record previous performances were there, as well as some very old ones which I never saw before or since. Soon the earnest looks of the ringers towards the tenor-box made me look in that direction. The man was pulling desperately at the bell, which seemed to have suddenly commenced to go badly, as if the gudgeons had become heated. There was only one more "lead" to finish, but it was doubtful whether he could last out the minute or so required to accomplish it. It was a hard struggle, and I never saw a man fight so gamely when dead beat. After what seemed an age, the bells came into rounds, and the next moment the 11th man set his bell just in time to catch his neighbour as he fell fainting off the box.

'But soon after he got all right again; and then the men did seem pleased with their performance, for they had rung by the clock five hours and fifty-nine minutes. They shook hands all round, and clustered together opposite the tablet which records the peal rung a few years before the one the board for which had so strangely vanished. Then they set-to laughing and capering about like madmen, or something in the style of ringers nowadays when they have beaten a good performance. After that they put on their curious coats and hats, and went away.

'Up to this point I had kept up pretty well; but now I seemed to lose my nerve utterly, and I remembered no more until I found myself at daylight next morning sitting in the same place. I looked for the missing peal-board, it was in its place. The peal was "Treble Twelve-in," the same method performed by the men the night before. The time was given as five hours and fifty-nine minutes, and the date the 10th March, 17—, the very same day of the month! I had no doubt then as to the identity of the band; and if any further evidence is wanted to settle the matter, it is furnished by the Society's books which show that Friar never rang but that one peal of "Treble Twelve."

'Are you sure that you didn't fall asleep in the tower and dream it all, Mr. Baldrick?' said Grimshaw.

'If you're man enough to judge for yourself, you shall have the tower keys on the 10th of next March,' said the old man, as he started for home through the driving snow.

'THE MUFFLED PEAL.'

We were a band of brothers. 'United we stand, divided we fall, was the motto of the Slowbury Ringers, of whom I was one. We were the proud possessors of the finest ring of ten bells in the world; of that we were certain, although we had only had the opportunity of hearing two other similar rings, and they were at Mudford and Stanton, both neighbouring villages.

In our tower each man had his bell; and did he ever let any one else try to handle it? No, certainly not; why should he? No other person could hope to ring it as well as he could himself, and any presumptuous attempt to do so would inevitably lead to that very ill-feeling which we all strove so earnestly to avoid. 'Grandsire' was our method. It must not be thought that we were unable to ring 'Stedman,' 'Treble Bob,' 'Double Norwich,' 'Superlative Surprise,' and all the rest; doubtless we should have managed all these 'cramp' methods had we tried, but we hadn't, and didn't want to. 'Grandsire' we could ring better than any other band in the world; it suited us, and that was sufficient.

Old Enoch Watts rang the treble and called the 'dodges.' It was a real treat to hear him. His usual cry was 'Doge,' which he drawled out solemnly, beginning in a low key, and finishing up a good octave higher; but, in order no doubt to defy imitation by unprincipled visitors, he varied his pronunciation occasionally by giving us 'doitch,' 'datch,' 'dadge,' 'dedge,' or 'dooge,' according to the frame of mind in which he might happen to be. So duly impressed was he at the importance of his office, that he almost annihilated with his satire a stuck-up 'College Youth,' who came up one night and suggested that dodge-calling was an unnecessary and illegitimate aid. 'If that be so, how was it that the bells were all of a heap in a moment when I forgot to call "dodge" three hours after starting?' demanded he. And the College Youth could not account for this unanswerable logic of fact at all.

We were all good men; but Joe, big-chested, brawny-armed Joe Cotter, who rang the ninth, was the best of us. I don't suppose there ever was such a clever bob-caller as he. Why, he could actually get the bells round from any change, and when we went for a peal we never lost it through a shift, or by reason of our conductor missing a call. The Mudford men and some others used to say that Joe never scrupled to mend a 'shift,' or to let a course run twice over; but then, what will not envious people say? As to the Mudford men, they would say or do anything to spite us after that occurrence at Stanton on Bank Holiday, five years ago. They had somehow got the right side of old Jonas the steeple-keeper over there, and he had promised them the first peal on the bells after they had been rehung, and they decided to make the attempt on that day. The affair created a great stir among the local ringers—six-bell men, most of them—and the village was crowded with such talent. We felt somewhat slighted, knowing our great superiority to the Mudford men, so we sent Joe down to listen, and pick a hole in the ringing if he could.

On his arrival at Stanton at ten in the morning he found some of the Mudford men hard at work among the bells, giving the frame a screw up here, splicing a faulty rope there, greasing the gudgeons, and, in fact, taking every precaution to prevent any of those mishaps which so frequently bring a peal to an untimely end. An hour afterwards, and the rest of the band mustered in the ringing-room below. As Joe was about to leave them, after hypocritically wishing them success, it suddenly struck him that the top of the tower was just the place where, unobserved and undisturbed, he could sit and listen to the peal. So, making pretence to go down, he crept stealthily up the stairs, and emerged on the leads outside. Then he heard a Mudford man descend in order to lock the bottom door of the winding steps, and a minute after the bells struck off in changes.

It was a lovely morning, and the sun shone hotly on the summit of the pinnacled and battlemented tower; but Joe liked sun, and he stretched himself luxuriously on the leads with his back against the parapet in order to enjoy it; then he produced a pocket-book and pencil, and made a note of the 'going-off course.' By the way, that stuck-up 'College Youth' used to say that Joe's ear was not good enough to enable him to take down course-ends correctly—another instance of his envious misstatements.

Well, whether it was the sun, or the lullaby of the bells, accompanied by the rocking of the tower, or whether he got tired of taking down the courses, the fact remains, that after an hour or so Joe fell fast asleep with his mouth open; so fast, indeed, that he remained supremely oblivious of the flies which crawled into that spacious receptacle.

But now is heard a clash from two bells in front, as one tries to take the other's place and the other will not have it at any price. Then, as so often happens, all the rest of the bells, which are very comfortably situated in their proper places, suddenly leave them without rhyme or reason, and rush off to be in the wrangle and jangle, just as respectable people, who ought to know better, hasten to be in the thick of a street row. The mixture of the bells which ensues is too much for the not very clear brain of John, the Mudford conductor, and he is obliged to call 'Stand!' As usual, each vociferates that everybody else is to

blame for the mishap; but, luckily, the disaster is not irreparable this time, and it is decided to start again after dinner. Meanwhile, what could be pleasanter than to take a short trip on the Stanton River, so as to keep the band well together and out of mischief? The proposal is carried *nem. con.*, and the men descend, with John bringing up the rear. He relocks the door before mentioned, and, to make all safe against their return, puts the key into his pocket. Then, having provisioned a 'shallop' with some cold viands, and a jar containing enough liquid creature comfort for ten thirsty souls, they embarked, and, after pulling two miles up the river, landed on a cool and shady island, and proceeded to enjoy themselves.

About this time a fly, more bold than the rest, made such a long journey of exploration into the interior of Joe's mouth that that worthy was constrained to cough himself awake. His surprise at finding the bells silent and the tower deserted was only equalled by the satisfaction of knowing that his rivals had failed. But this joy was somewhat marred by the subsequent discovery that they had locked him in. There was nothing for it but to re-ascend the steps and make signals of distress from the top. The Rector happened to be enjoying the sunshine in his garden hard by, and seeing a man wildly gesticulating through the battlements, hailed him. Then, on comprehending the situation, he took his private key and let Joe out. Explanations followed as to how he got there, and Jonas, the steeple-keeper, coming up at the time, narrated what had befallen the Mudford men; but when the worthy Rector understood that they had taken the key away with them he was wroth, and Joe, seizing his opportunity, politely asked whether there was any objection to another party handling the ropes for a short touch, provided he could muster them.

'Not the least,' replied the Rector. 'Take my key; go and ring as long as you like.'

'But the Mudford men be a-comin' back, sir, in an hour or so,' urged Jonas.

'Silence, sir!' said the Rector. 'Recollect that you have grossly abused your office by allowing those men to lock up the belfry and take away the key; and since they have had the audacity to behave in this way, they deserve no consideration at my hands.' And he turned and went into his house.

Joe had a shrewd notion that by that time we should all of us have found our way to the village in order to satisfy our curiosity as to the fate of the peal, and also to pay our respects to a certain boiled leg of mutton at the house of meeting. Sure enough there we all were, as festive as a good dinner just consumed could make us. 'Pass the word quietly,' whispered he to several of us, 'to slip round one by one to the tower.'

He then sat down with old Jonas and fell to work at the joint. The latter had followed him, evidently thinking it advisable to keep his eye on Joe until the Mudford men returned. Presently, when we had all slipped out on various pretences, and Joe had taken the edge off his appetite, and just as Jonas was commencing to make an example of his second plateful of mutton, 'Landlord!' cried Joe, putting down his glass with a bang, 'I don't think much of your ale to-day.'

'Perhaps the thunder-shower last week has turned it,' said that polite functionary. 'I'll bring you some more from another tap.'

'Don't trouble to fetch it,' said Joe. 'I'll come and taste it in the bar.'

But when he got there he made some excuse, and rushed on towards the church.

'In with you quick, my mates!' said he, as he opened the belfry-door.

It takes some little time for ten full-grown men to enter a very small door, and just as Joe had closed and locked it behind us old Jonas came pushing against it from without.

'Let me in!' said he, gasping for breath, from the combined effect of the run and his dinner. 'A pretty trick to shut a man out of his own tower!'

'We've a youngster or two in our company, and they are a bit nervous, and don't strike their bells so well before strangers,' said Joe in his oiliest tones through the door; 'so I thought we would just lock ourselves in.'

'Well, your touch must be short,' said Jonas, somewhat mollified; 'mind that. I expect the others back directly.'

'That's just what made us want to get to work in such a hurry,' replied Joe, as he quietly screwed a strong gimlet, provided for the purpose, into the woodwork of the door, just behind the old-fashioned bolt of the lock, in which, by the way, he also left the key. Then we all went into the belfry, from the window of which we could follow the course of the shining blue river, and could make out a large boat coming down stream a mile or so away, and as we took our ropes we regretted that our touch was to be such a short one.

In that boat all was merriment and good-humour, for the men had long got over their disappointment of the morning. As the craft floated down stream with just sufficient way on her to steer by, the rich bass voice of the Mudford tenor-man was trolling out a song in praise of the mysteries of Ringing, while at intervals came the lusty chorus, 'Ring away, pull away! Ring, my boys, ring!' given with great gusto by the rest of the band.

After the song had ceased, one of the men observed to his neighbour, 'I fancy I can hear some bells now.'

'It *is* fancy,' retorted the other; 'you've got bells on the brain. There are no bells to be heard here but Stanton, and they can't be rung till we do it. What do you think, John?' said he, turning to the leader.

John looked at the top of the huge key which was protruding from his breast-pocket, and winked knowingly at the speaker.

'But row on a bit, men,' said he, looking at his watch; 'we ought to be getting down there if we mean to finish in good time.'

After that it was not long before the occupants of the boat discovered that Stanton bells were really going.

'Grandsire Caters, too!' observed John. 'It must be those Slowbury chaps. And they have got them in the "tittums,"' continued he, as a 9 7 8 turned up at the end of a course.

They hurried to the tower, and found Jonas.

'Slowbury men!' exclaimed he. 'Rector's key! only gone for a short touch! bells will be round directly!'

But they waited and waited; then they tried the door, but failed to get in. Then old Jonas went into the church and pulled the little signal bell which hangs in the ringing-chamber; but, unfortunately for the Mudford party, the tying of the clapper of this bell was one of the extra precautions taken by themselves in the morning, and though it oscillated tremendously, it remained mute. Then they consoled themselves by vowing to beat our paltry 5000 changes the next day. But Joe had his wits about him; he knew that their ninth man could not stand more than four hours at a stretch, and to their dismay they heard us ring into and complete the fifth hour before we descended, pretty well done up, it is true, but with a peal of over 8000 changes to our credit.

Old Jonas was furious. 'You only asked to go for a short touch!' roared he.

'Yes, and that's all my mates thought they were going for,' retorted Joe; 'but the Rector said we might ring as long as we liked.' And then we cleared out of the way, somewhat hastily, for the Mudford men looked as if they would like to do us an injury.

For a few months after this stupendous victory we held our heads high, but then came a great and crushing blow. Joe left us for Australia, where he had the offer of a lucrative post as foreman to a contractor for the period of four years; and in the absence of our acknowledged head dissensions crept into our once united band. Then our ringing waned, and we should have collapsed entirely but for Joe's promise to return, and to lead us once more to victory and renown; and we managed to keep the Society going after a fashion until the four years were up.

One summer we received a letter from Joe, saying that he was coming home in a ship called the *Aurora*, and that he hoped to eat his Christmas dinner in Slowbury. The news set us all a-gog to welcome him, and we fixed a day for ringing a peal with him in honour of his return.

But in the beginning of December the terrible tidings appeared in the newspapers that the *Aurora* had foundered with all hands forty miles out of Sydney Harbour. Anxiously we waited for the list of passengers, and sure enough the name of 'J. Cotter' appeared as having sailed in the ill-fated vessel.

Nothing more could we gather as to the fate of our poor friend, and the day fixed for jubilation at his return found us with heavy hearts and hushed voices prepared to ring a muffled peal to his memory. Softly and silently fell the snow on that eventful night in Slowbury. The town seemed to sympathise with us in our sorrow, as men and horses with subdued tread moved to and fro on the white canopy which covered all around us as we made our way to the steeple.

Old Enoch was in tears as he met us at the belfry-door; he had been preparing the bells.

'Poor Joe always preferred 'em half-muffled,' said he.

And then we took our wonted places and began our melancholy task. The next moment the noble ring was chanting forth its plaintive *requiem* in music which few persons could listen to unmoved by solemn thoughts and apprehension.

'He was forty last birthday,' said the tenor-man, who was counting the number of 'rounds,' to Enoch. 'And,' added he, 'a better ringer never lived.'

'It seems but yesterday that he was on that box yonder,' said another, pointing to the ninth bell. 'I'd give something to see him at his old post now.'

'Amen to that,' said we all. There was not a dry eye amongst us.

In the interval between the more formal part of the ceremony and the usual touches of changes which finish it, several persons, attracted by the solemn music of the bells, had dropped in, and had seated themselves on the benches. One was a stranger dressed in a long coat. A thick muffler wound round his throat concealed the lower part of his face, but by the look of his eyes he appeared deeply interested in our proceedings.

A ringer can always recognise a 'brother-string,' and after the first 'touch' old Enoch asked him to take a pull.

'Thank you,' replied the stalwart stranger, as he stood up and prepared to doff his coat and muffler.

'Which bell will you ring?'

'I don't care, so long as it is somewhere at the heavy end.'

'Then try the ninth, mister,' said Enoch, as he proceeded to trim the lantern, for the dips wanted snuffing badly. But at that moment he awkwardly let the antiquated concern drop, leaving us in darkness as we held our ropes.

It was a minute or two before the newly-snuffed wicks were resuscitated, and we stood awaiting sufficient light to begin. We could just see the outline of the stranger on the ninth box; then the light gradually increased, and we looked hard at Enoch for the signal to begin.

'Are you all ready? One gone—go!' cried Enoch, the last syllable culminating in a shriek of terror as the old man's eyes became fixed on the stranger, and without another word he left his bell swinging and rushed for the steps.

One glance in the same direction was sufficient to strike a like terror into the hearts of all of us. There, on the ninth box, stood the ghost of the dead man. * * * *

How we got down the steps and across the road to the house of meeting we never knew. But our troubles were not over. In the course of a few minutes the apparition had followed us thither, and, eyeing our crouching forms, exclaimed sadly,

'Well, I didn't expect such a welcome as this after four years' absence!'

But it was long before we could comprehend that Joe had not shipped in the *Aurora* at all, and was only intending a little surprise for us. And he on his part quite forgave us for our apparent want of heartiness when he learnt that it was at his own funeral peal that he was assisting. J. M. R.

THE OLD YEAR'S KNELL.

A SHORT cut is usually the longest way round; and if people will go careering about the wilds of the North Riding of Yorkshire on a twenty-five-mile business journey in an open dog-cart during the depth of winter, instead of travelling comfortably in the train like sensible folk, they must not grumble if they meet with delays and mishaps; and, after all, one might find oneself in a worse place on New-year's Eve than snugly snowed up in the best bed of an old-fashioned country inn, after a dinner of grass-fed beefsteak, done to a turn, washed down with a warm glass of undeniable dew from the Scotch mountains by way of a digestive. Such was my sage soliloquy as I prepared to forget my recent bad treatment at the hands of the elements in those slumbers which are popularly believed to be the exclusive perquisite of the just man. Somehow, as I doze off, the church clock opposite appears to be taking an unconscionable time in striking eleven, and considering that it is at least a quarter of an hour late in starting according to my watch, it might have the politeness to hurry a little, and let me alone in peace. Mechanically I count the strokes—'Eleven!' 'Twelve!' '*Thirteen!*' and getting louder every blow! Who would have expected the new mode of reckoning time to have found its way down to this unsophisticated spot already? 'Twenty-three,' 'Twenty-four.' Yes, it has stopped now. Well, the system doubtless has its advantages, but it is noisy, very, and takes a power of counting at this time of night. 'Bome!' What, another clock? 'Bim!' Two! By all that is distracting! 'Clash,' 'clang!' I sit up, wide awake at last, to the fact that the church bells are being raised singly, and soon become aware of what I ought to have guessed at once, the reason. Hastily donning dressing-gown and slippers, for lying in bed is now out of the question, I descend the stairs to find old Boniface busily preparing some suppers for the ringers. So subsiding into a cosy chair in the chimney-corner with a cigar in my mouth, the lateness of the hour is soon forgotten, and I even become impatient to hear the disturbers of my incipient slumbers strike up in real earnest. Presently the deep voice of the tenor booms out as she is being raised.

'That's a grand bell!' I involuntarily exclaimed.

'You may well say that,' said a grizzled old man sitting opposite, smoking. He had hitherto been staring into the fire, apparently absorbed in his own reflections, without taking the slightest notice of me or of anything else.

'I wonder what her weight is?'

'Thirty-four hundredweight, three quarters, and ten pounds, exactly,' said he, glibly; 'although the folks hereabouts will have it she's double that. Aye, and they believe it, bless you. But considering that I rang her for five-and-twenty years, I ought to know.'

A verse of an old ballad came into my head,—

'For full five hundred years I've swung
In my old grey tower on high;
And many's the varied peal I've rung
As the years went stealing by.'

And I suppose I must have repeated it aloud, unconsciously, for the old man said,—

'Yes, and many's the queer tale those bells could tell, if they could master our language with their iron tongues and brazen lips. I can vouch for one at all events.'

'What arrant old gossips they would be! It seems to me that they speak to us in a better language than ours. But pray let me hear your story!'

He removed the extreme tip of the 'churchwarden' from his mouth, the better to gaze at me from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, and then, glancing furtively at the waning interior of his tankard, observed, 'It's somewhat lengthy!'

I took the hint. 'You mean to say that a long tale dries the throat?'

As he did not dissent in anyway from this proposition, I called the landlord, and, having satisfactorily arranged preliminaries, was all attention and expectation; but my newly found acquaintance was once more gazing abstractedly at the glowing logs, and continued to do so for such a lengthened period that I began to think he had obtained the refilling of his pewter by false pretences, and just as I had given up all hopes of his promised narrative he heaved a sigh from the bottom button of his waistcoat, and said,—

'Yes, it must be two-and-fifty years ago, since Annie Faulkner married her father's apprentice, Robert Lever. What a lass she was! Tall and slim, with fair hair, and brown eyes which sparkled with fun and good-nature; her bright face seemed to throw a charm over everything she came near, and her cheery laugh used to put all who heard it into the highest of spirits. Then she was as good as gold into the bargain. You should just have heard the old women! They were never tired of singing her praises. And well they might, for there wasn't a day of the week but what she must be doing one or other of them a kindness; something good and nourishing for this one in her basket, or a cheery word of comfort for that one, because she was low or in trouble; a warm garment to cure somebody else's rheumatics; and so on.

'Of course we youngsters were head-over-ears in love with her, to a lad. I was myself, but seeing it was no good I managed to get over it, although I do believe I've never really cared for anyone else since. Well, Bob had the pull of us all, being a fine-looking young fellow, and, what is everything with women folks, always on the spot; besides he'd a little money of his own, and that didn't go against him in her people's eyes, as you may well suppose. So as soon as he was out of his time he set up, as a carpenter, for himself, and took Annie to church, and we ringers willingly lost half-a-day's work all round, in order to ring their wedding peal, and to show that there was no ill-feeling amongst us at his good-fortune.

'I said "willingly;" but there was one man who handled a rope that day whose heart wasn't much in his work, and he was Isaac Loader, the beadle's son—a strong, active lad enough, who would have been handsome except that he had a way of never looking you straight in the face, and, somehow, none of us seemed either to like or to trust him. He had got into a bad set, too, and was always in the public-houses along with the poachers, and there was a rumour that he was out with them one night when they half killed the squire's keeper; but it couldn't be proved against him, and he got off without being summoned with the rest. Well, there's good and bad in every village, and you know the sort of man I mean.

'Now, Ike had been very sweet on Annie before Bob made up to her. He used to walk her out of a Sunday, but when it came to her people's ears they stopped all that, and then Bob cut him out, as I told you. After that Ike would not let her alone, he was for ever dogging her about, and even trying to get her to run away with him: but Annie told him that she had broken no promise to him, and now that she knew her own mind it would be better for them both to part as friends. Then Ike persistently insulted his rival, until the latter could stand it no longer, and they fought it out one summer's evening under the old oak in Knight's Wood, when Bob came off victorious after a hard struggle.

'The wedding once over, however, Ike, to all outward appearance, had dropped his animosity towards his late antagonist; yet he became more sullen and morose, so much so that his own set began to drop him; added to which he used to drink harder than ever, and then got into trouble with the magistrates for poaching. Yet he somehow contrived to keep his place as assistant steeple-keeper, for the Church authorities were not so particular about character in those days as they are now.

'As for Bob and Annie, there never was a happier couple, or a handsomer, for the matter of that; and it was a right merry party that met in their cottage, not a hundred yards away from here, just after I had stood godfather to their firstborn, as fine a little boy as ever you saw. Ike did not come, although he had been asked, and, as you may suppose, we were not sorry; yet, as I left in the evening, I felt sure I saw him lurking round the house.

'After that came the fall of the leaf, followed by the approach of the new year. I mind the time well, for, seeing at that party how happy matrimony had made Bob, I got myself and my old woman asked in church a month or two afterwards, and we were married on Christmas Day. Well, we are all of us liable in our time to make mistakes.'

'You didn't assist at your own wedding-peal, I suppose?' said I, by way of not noticing his ungallant remark.

'Well, of course, I wanted to as soon as I heard the bells, for I was as keen as the keenest in those days; but, would you believe it? the women wouldn't hear of it! I was at it again, however, worse luck! a week afterwards. You must know that most of us were anxious to complete a long peal of Treble Bob Major, a new method, which we had just learnt, before the old year was out, and we had arranged to start at two o'clock in the afternoon, so as to get it over before the New-year's Eve service at half-past five.

'Shortly after one o'clock, Loader, who was not one of our party, brought the belfry keys round to me, with the remark that we had better make a quick start of it if we wished to get done in time, adding that he was going into the town to see the Circus. I soon mustered the band. The bells were all "up," for we had been ringing in the early morning. "Time is short, my lads," said I, for I was conducting from the tenor. "We'll ring a few 'rounds,' and if no one cries 'Stop!' off we go into changes without more ado."

'"Then here's one," and good luck go with us," said the treble man, as he pulled his rope.

'My bell seemed to slip wheel as she followed suit, for she came halfway down, but after a pull or two I got her into place once more, and she behaved better and was soon in compass with the others.

'"Up to her old tricks and banging against the frame," muttered my neighbour, the seventh man. '"Ike Loader said he'd have that looked to."

'However, feeling no more of it, I cried "Go," and we went off into changes.

'Somehow I felt uncomfortable; something wrong was sure to happen; drive it away from my thoughts as I would, the foreboding of evil kept returning.

'Although the ringing was so good that the bells seemed to drop into their right places in the changes as if by magic, I was certain that the peal was doomed. After an hour or so this feeling increased so much as to become almost unbearable; a cold sweat burst from my forehead, and my hands became moist and clammy as they grasped the white tufting. White, did I say? No, it had suddenly become red!! Red with blood running down the rope! My hands were bloodstained too, and so was the floor on which I stood, and, unable to go on, I set my bell, and, sinking on to the bench behind me, almost fainted away.

'I recovered soon enough, however, to go up among the bells with the others. There, under the tenor, still poised in threatening attitude over her victim, lay poor Bob;—dead, with his working tools around him.

'As we bore his mangled body along the bell-frame towards the spiral staircase we could see Annie in the garden below nursing her boy, evidently on the watch for her husband's return, and we felt that the worst had yet to come; a task, moreover, which none dared to face.

'At the foot of the steps stood the Rector, come to inquire the cause of the breakdown of the peal. When he knew, his cheek blanched, but his lip was firm and there was no falter in his voice as he said, "My lads, this is my duty, and God help me to do it;" then, beckoning me to follow him, he went towards the cottage.

'"God bless parson!" I heard more than one say after him.

'Annie opened the garden-gate for us with her happy smile of welcome, a smile which I saw on her face for the last time. The Rector followed her indoors, and presently through the latticed window I saw them kneel together, the white-haired old man and the fair-haired girl; then from the room there came a cry, not loud, but the low tearless wail of one whose life is left unto her desolate; and unable to bear it I went away.

'Then followed the inquest, whereat, of course, the question was how the deceased came to be in the belfry. Loader, who came home drunk from the town that night, could throw no more light on the mystery than this—that some few weeks prior to the accident he had told Bob that the frame required planing a little where the tenor in her swing sometimes touched it, and that this small job might lead to more work, repairs being frequently required in the belfry; but that he had given no orders for the work to be done, nor, in fact, had he seen the deceased on the day in question; that he supposed the man must have been returning from a farm where he was known to have been finishing some carpenter's work, and had entered the church and thence obtained access to the belfry stairs through the organ-loft; that, on reaching the bells, he had set to work in ignorance both of his danger in remaining under a bell which was set up, and of the fact that a peal was about to be attempted; that he (the witness) had locked the bottom door of the spiral staircase, which was outside the church, and also that of the ringing-chamber, and had given the keys to me; and that the key of the other door, which led from the church to the staircase, and which had been found open, was not in his custody, and never had been.

'The jury brought in a verdict of "Accidental Death," and exonerated us all from blame; and after a time things went on as usual, except that Loader left our band, but, having succeeded his father as beadle, he continued to look after the bells. He was observed to drink deeply, as of old, but more especially when certain fits of great despondency, to which he was subject, came upon him.

'Mrs. Lever, the widow, left the village, owing, it was rumoured, to the importunity with which Loader had pressed her, soon after the death of her husband, to marry him. Certain it is that she left no clue as to whither she had gone, and before long the awful story of her husband's death ceased to be a topic of conversation in the village.

'Now, let me see. Yes, it's twenty years ago this very day that I was sitting where I am now, in the dusk of the evening, when a young man, a stranger, came in, and while hiring a bed for the night inquired whether the bells would be rung, as he was curious to hear them. The landlord there referred him to me, being the ringers' captain, and inasmuch as he seemed both civil and respectable, I told him that we should ring the old year out as usual, and that if he would be outside the tower at half-past eleven I would take him up to see how it was done.

'"I suppose," he said, "I shall have to pay my footing?"

'"Well," said I, "my mates won't take it amiss if you do, but you're welcome whether or no."

'And I went home to tea.

'I met him at the time appointed. It was blowing hard and raining in fact a very dirty night, and as dark as pitch. As we went up the staircase he expressed a wish to see the bells, and asked if it was true that a man was once killed by one of them.

'"Only too true," I replied. "I lost my best friend by that sad accident."

'"I'll get you to tell me the whole story presently, after the ringing is over."

'By this time we had reached the frame. The wind was howling and roaring dreadfully through the louvre windows, and Loader was at the other side muffling the bells, which were all up.

'"Stay here a minute in this corner," said I to the young man. "I'll get the beadle's lantern as soon as he has finished; it is very dangerous walking about among the bells if you aren't well used to it. Hold on to this rail, and mind you don't stir till I come back."

'I had to go round to the further side of Loader, who was working at the clapper of the seventh. He did not appear to see me as I came up behind him, but I think he must have felt the vibration to the frame caused by my tread, for he looked up nervously, and, taking up his lantern, cast its rays towards the entrance where I had left the stranger. As I glanced in the same direction, the small, glowing circle of light revealed, as if in a frame, the features of Robert Lever to the life!

'My surprise was instantly changed to horror when I beheld Loader as with eyes almost starting out of his head, and uttering an appalling shriek of terror, he fell backwards into the pit under the tenor, clutching the wheel convulsively in his fall. By the glimmer of the expiring light I could see the mighty mass of metal begin to move slowly off the poise, and then, after an awful pause, there was a dull "thud" as the revolving bell struck the man with all her force, followed by the deafening roar of her tongue, which seemed like a shout of triumph at her own dread handiwork.

'The ringers below soon stopped the bell, and brought up a light, when the unfortunate man was found alive, but unconscious. The bell's first blow, which I heard, had knocked him beyond the range of her circuit, but had so terribly injured his spine as to render his recovery hopeless.

'The rest of my story is soon told. As you have no doubt guessed already, the stranger turned out to be my godson, the very image of his father as we knew him. He had come to see the village where he was born, and was naturally enough interested in the dreadful story connected with the bells. He remained at my house, and was most studious that everything should be done, through me, to ensure the comfort of the dying man. The latter I was in the habit of visiting every day, and on my telling him that Robert Lever's son was with me in the belfry at the time of the fatal mishap which had befallen him, he became very anxious that I should bring my guest with me, which I accordingly did. We found the sick man calm, and in no pain, but from his appearance there was no mistaking that the end was near.

'Loader, on looking at the young man, muttered, as though to himself, "Yes, that is the face I saw!" and beckoning to him, said, "Until I made a clean breast of it to the parson a fortnight ago, I've known no rest for more than twenty years; and, as a man whose hours are numbered, I've sent for you to ask your forgiveness for my sin and the wrong I have done you. I decoyed your father into the tower under pretence of getting him some profitable work, and there left him to be killed in the way in which you saw me receive my death-blow. What my punishment will be hereafter is in the hands of a merciful God; what it has been here I could not attempt to describe in words. Say a kind word to me, if you can find it in your heart to do so."

'As soon as the lad had recovered himself sufficiently he took the beadle's hand, and said simply, "I forgive you!" and then he knelt down by the bedside, and so did I.

'Presently the dying man raised his head and inquired, "Is she alive?'

'Lever nodded assent.

'"Don't let her know that her husband—your father—was——"

'But the effort was too great, and he sank back, dead!'

The old man stopped speaking, drained his tankard to the dregs, and, replacing his pipe in his mouth, gazed once more into the expiring embers. I watched him for a time without saying a word, and then, seeing a big tear coursing down his weatherbeaten cheek, I rose and left him, pondering as I went over the weird story I had just heard, which the bell herself now seemed to repeat to me, and to the snow-clad country, with terrible truthfulness as the ringers lowered her.

J. M. R.

From Land and Sea.

A Tale of Church Bells.

BY C. J. WEST.

'Say, how canst thou mourn?
How canst thou rejoice?
Thou art but metal dull!

'And yet all our sorrowings,
And all our rejoicings,
Thou dost feel them all!'

LONGFELLOW.

THE clanging noise in the foundry and the roar of the furnaces sounded far off to the bells that were finished, and only waiting to be removed to their different destinations. Some of these, just cast, were eager to learn what their new life was to be; others were veterans which had come back to the foundry to be recast, and who were now about to return to the work they had left for a time.

Such was old Benedict, a tenor bell of enormous weight and fine sonorous tone, who was now going back to a parish church in the south-east to rejoin his seven brothers and sisters. His experience of life and his great benevolence made him a most interesting companion to the younger ones.

Two bells, so much alike that they might almost have been taken for twin brothers, now appealed to him to give them some idea of the future that lay before them. Gregory and Michael they called one another, and, though so much alike, they were firm friends.

'About your future, Gregory,' said Benedict, 'there can be no doubt, for I have heard them say that you and your brothers and sisters are all going to a fine church in the north, where there are good ringers. You will have a glorious time up there. As for Michael, I know nothing. There is an inscription on him which I cannot read, except the date, which is the same as on all of you. Perhaps he is going to join a ring of bells which want a new number three, or perhaps he is going alone to some new suburban church, though, in my opinion, he is of too good metal to hang alone.'

'To my mind,' said Angela, who belonged to a large town church on the south coast, and who had just been recast, 'he is just the sort of bell to be the only one in a new church. I can imagine the whole thing: a clean, unfurnished-looking church, which has something added or given every year, a good organ, a surpliced choir, and any number of services. Michael will be clanging away from eight in the morning every day, and sometimes from much earlier, and up to eight at night!' And she laughed in shrill tones.

Michael hoped that he would find some companions in his new home.

'Wherever you go you can do what we are all made for,' said Benedict, reverently. 'You can ring to the glory of God, even if you have to go abroad.'

Gregory now begged for an idea of his duties, and Benedict, nothing loth, gave them.

'You will, of course, all the eight of you, ring every Sunday, morning and evening, for service,' he said. 'You, Gregory, will, I should think, act as call-bell for the ringers, and you will go on for five minutes after the others are silent; I believe it is usual in bells of your weight and shape. Then you will all ring at the great Church festivals, and even to show sympathy for people sometimes, as at weddings—and you will ring in the new year. Gregory will very likely ring alone for week-day services, and possibly sometimes as passing-bell for a child, or at a child's funeral; but the tolling, as a rule, will be done only by Augustin, your big brother, though sometimes you may all have to ring a muffled peal. People may say,' he added, 'that there is no feeling in a bell; they are wrong. I feel it to the very end of my clapper when I have to toll for any of the people I love. I have known most of the folk in our village for years, and I have looked down on them from the belfry ever since they were little children. Augustin will soon know what I mean by this. Then, when we ring on festivals, or on any joyful occasion, we feel almost mad with delight as we fling ourselves round, first one way and then the other, while the steeple seems to reel under us.'

A corroborative murmur vibrated among the other old bells.

'Then, I suppose,' he went on, 'that the clock will strike on Augustin, and you may have chimes. We are to have Cambridge quarters when I go back.'

'It seems a pity,' said Augustin's deep voice, 'that we should have to part so soon, though I long to get to work after all you have told us.'

Though so young, he was very solemn.

'We shall hear each other sometimes if we listen,' said Benedict, 'for sound is never lost, and, if the wind is right, we shall sometimes catch the far-off ringing of the others. Listen for us at the end of the summer; there is to be a great service when I get back, and, if the

wind blows from the south-east, you will, perhaps, hear us then and after.'

At this point they arrived to take away Benedict.

'Good-bye,' he said to the others. 'May you have good ringers and be for ever free from that accursed apparatus which some use for chiming bells, instead of taking the trouble to ring them, and remember what I said about doing your duty wherever you are.'

A ray of sunlight fell on his round form, making him appear to smile as he was carried off.

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Soon after this, Michael was also taken away. He was a bell of the very best metal, with a clear, sweet tone. He departed in a state of great expectation, though no one who could not see below the surface would have thought so. As he went, he imagined many things—his introduction to his new relations, and the delight of ringing with them, and of sending his mellow voice far over the country till the sound should reach his old friends. The journey seemed to be a long one.

At last Michael heard a sound that was new to him, and found himself close to the sea. Then he discovered that he was in a boat. 'Alas!' he thought, 'I am going abroad!' and he remembered the words of Benedict: 'Wherever you go, you can do what we are all made for—ring to the glory of God.'

But Michael was not to go abroad; a fate undreamed of among the bells in the foundry was to be his. He was not to go to a church at all; he was to be fixed to a buoy, over some dangerous hidden sands on the west coast. All alone, a long way out from shore, he was to ring and toll to warn ships off the reef, his only companions the sea-birds, and at some little distance the lighthouse. The discovery of this fate was at first too much for Michael; the wonder is that he did not go cracked, but he was of too good metal for that.

The worst of it was that he knew not why he was doomed to so terrible a fate.

One night, as he tolled out his trouble and despair, the lighthouse answered him in his rough way, telling him that he was put there for an excellent reason, and that he was doing a world of good in his isolation. 'I, too,' said the lighthouse, 'am lonely; but how would the ships get on without me? Depend upon it, we may be of as much use as those church bells are, of which you are always talking.'

After this, Michael despaired no longer. In calm and stormy weather alike he called from his metal throat, to warn the ships off the sands.

His sadness and disappointment, too, became more bearable. Sometimes the sea around him was of a mysterious pearl grey, and almost as calm as a lake; sometimes of a pale, soft blue, with olive-green shades; sometimes it would be almost dark blue.

Michael could see the land on three sides of him, and on the fourth the open Atlantic; but sometimes the chilly sea-mist would surround him, and shut off alike distant view and near shore and ships—everything but the gleam of the lighthouse through the night, which shone steadily and strongly through the fog.

Now and then the wind and waves would roar round, and threaten to tear the bell away from his moorings; but still he held on, and night and day, rough and smooth, summer and winter, his chant went on. At times he chose to imagine that he was ringing for an evening service in Advent or Lent, or at Christmas-time that he was one of a ring clanging out all over the country; or, again, that he was tolling for the dying old year, and so on through all the seasons and festivals.

The booming of the steamers going into and coming out of the docks on the top of the tide, and the noise of fog-horns, became familiar sounds to him. Now and then he would hear church bells, some near and some far off. In the late summer of his first year at sea, the wind being south-east, he heard Benedict and his fellows ringing at their festival in their restored church, and he could catch their spirit all across England; he heard their joyful clanging, and he could recognise their power, softened by miles of distance.

One wild afternoon in early autumn, while the sea heaved sullenly, it occurred to Michael to send a special messenger to tell his friends of his curious occupation. The morning had been dull after a night of wind and rain, but now, towards sunset, came a pale gleam of primrose light, gilding the dark, wet rocks, and lighting the backs of the lead-coloured waves. These were swelling like hills round Michael, for it was always rougher on his reef than elsewhere, and, as an east wind was blowing, the surf was thrown back off the rollers like flowing white manes.

From those walking in the little bay Michael was often hidden by these swelling waves, but he still rode gallantly at his post, and his voice was always heard, clear and distinct, above the roar of the waters.

One of the sea-gulls, who constantly spoke to Michael as he wheeled about, and who greatly respected him for his grand service, now felt a sudden pity for his friend. Michael looked so small and lonely out there on the great sea, ringing away all by himself.

'I wonder if I could take any message for him to his friends?' thought the bird. His kind idea was immediately put into words.

Michael was very grateful to him, and the gull's strong pinions were soon carrying him to the north of England to find Gregory, and to give him his friend's message.

When he arrived, the bells were ringing for service. It was Sunday morning. Many of the people, on their way to church, were struck by the unusual sight of a sea-gull hovering round the tower. 'It will be stormy weather,' they said. But the bird was giving Michael's message to Gregory, who, when he heard of his friend's strange fate, and thought of Michael tossing alone on that wild sea, came as near to tears as a bell could, and tolled, instead of ringing, for the five minutes before service began.

The gull flew round the church till service should be over, in order to be able to give his friend Michael a full account of Gregory's surroundings. Then he turned south-east, and flew faster than an express train to the church where he knew Benedict was to be found. All round him, as the shadows deepened, while he flew across the country, he could hear church bells ringing for evening service.

The sound rose and fell on the freshening wind. In some villages he heard one bell, in others three, often four, five, or six, here and there eight.

When he got to the church where Benedict was, there was no mistaking his tone, for Michael had described it carefully, and a sea-bird has a good ear for sound. But how was he to make Benedict understand that he had brought him a message from Michael? He wheeled round the belfry, waiting, till at last, through the window, he could descry the mighty form of Benedict hurling himself round on end, mouth uppermost, pausing till his turn came, and then round again the other way. The sea-bird was almost deafened by the noise as he hovered there, admiring the masterly manner in which Benedict did his work. At last he made him know that he had brought news of Michael.

'Why have I never heard from him before?' shouted Benedict. 'Has he a chiming apparatus fixed to him which makes his voice too feeble to reach me?'

The bird explained that Michael was down so low that his voice could never be distinguished beyond the sea, where he was doing his work.

When Benedict heard all the particulars about his young friend, and of how manfully he was sticking to his work on the stormy waters, he did not mourn or toll; on the contrary, he hurtled himself into the air with more vigour than before, and his tone, though deep, was full of joy. 'Tell Michael all you hear and notice,' he called; 'he will understand.'

The bird did not go straight back after the bells were silent; he flew round the lighted church and looked in, admiring the glorious colours in the east window and the flowers in the church, and listening to the music of the organ and choir. What astonished and pleased him, for Michael's sake, was that one of the hymns was about the sea. He stayed till the congregation began to disperse, and the bells struck up again, for it was a festival occasion, and then he started for his home, hearing through the gale the clanging of the joyous bells behind him fainter and fainter in the distance, as he hurried westward.

Michael hailed the return of the bird with as much delight as he could put into his tone, and, when he heard of the way in which Benedict had received the news of his fate, he felt even satisfied with it. He was much interested in hearing all the details of the churches to which his friends belonged.

Michael seemed now to lose all account of time. He was never idle; all through the long nights, in winter often crusted with ice, through grey dawns, through fine or stormy days, and through the shades of evening after evening, his monotonous chant went on. Michael was doing good in more ways than he knew of all this time, for sometimes his ringing would put a thought into the minds of those who went by, whether walking round the rocks or passing in ships—a thought of home and church, and of all they had learnt there, and were perhaps forgetting. But whether he remained on the shoal a long or a short time Michael could never have told. A change came to him at last.

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One winter afternoon the sea began to complain bitterly. It seemed to have slight cause enough at first; it was only a difference of opinion with the wind, but neither side would give in. Little sulky brown waves flung themselves in, in a pet, as the tide began to flow; they were peevish, that was all, and, as the wind kept on arguing in a high-pitched voice, they began to get angry. Larger and rounder, the waves hurled themselves against the immovable rocks, trying to vent on them the anger caused by the wind.

The rocks cared nothing, but the spray flew up like smoke, and then sank down baffled and spent. Still the wind stuck to his point with unabated obstinacy, and the sea lashed itself into greater fury than it had known for years. The wind roared and the sea moaned.

As the tide rushed in, the night became awful. A large ship was making for the harbour, and the wind was trying to drive her on to the rocks; the sea, being in such a miserable temper, combined with his enemy to do mischief.

But the lighthouse and the bell did all they knew to save her.

The lighthouse, firm and solid on his rock, stretched out his lamp over the surf around him, and the bell, though hidden by the mountains of water which rushed over his reef, still rang his loudest.

But his moorings were strained to the uttermost. At last, to his glee, he saw the steamer-lights travelling away beyond the lighthouse, and he knew that she was safe.

Then, in their fury, the wind and sea rushed up together to punish the bell which had saved the ship. Michael's moorings were suddenly snapped like cotton, and he was at the mercy of the great fierce tide, hurried along, now grating on the rocks, now under water.

He was at last picked up by an enormous wave and banged down on the rocks, where he was left high and dry.

Michael was stunned; all the life seemed to have been knocked out of him; he had saved the steamer, but now he could ring no more.

The lighthouse sent him a message of pity, the sea-gulls came to console him, and when morning came round again many people arrived to look at the work of the storm; but there lay Michael, silent and sad, feeling as if his heart was broken.

After a few days Michael heard a new bell ringing on the reef in his place. Keenly did he now feel the misery of doing nothing. 'Anything would be better than this,' he said, in a weak, cracked voice. But he was not destined to remain all his life in the bay as a piece of wreckage.

After a time he found that they were taking him away; he was on another journey; what was going to happen now? Fresh fears came over him—going for old metal perhaps. The sea-gull followed to see where they were taking him, and soon he took another flight to the north, and to the south-east, to tell Gregory and Benedict that Michael had returned to the foundry—so he had. And now he was recast, a little fresh metal was added, and there he stood as good as a new bell again.

The question in his trembling mind as he cooled was, 'Where am I going now? Back to the reef or to a church? It was to the latter, a new life altogether for Michael. He was placed among a ring of eight bells, which wanted a new number three, in the belfry of a church on the west coast, not far from his old home.

He was hailed with the greatest respect by his new colleagues, who knew something of his history, and his strange, lonely life seemed to have given him even more pathos than is usual in the tone of a bell.

He had the wish of his heart now, and with what noble joy and vigour he flung himself into his work!

His friend, the sea-bird, would often come round to have a chat with him; but, when he took another journey to tell Michael's friends of his happy life, he found that both Gregory and Benedict already knew of it, for, now that he was elevated to a belfry, Michael could send his voice over land and sea.

He did not forget to send encouraging messages to his successor on the reef, nor did he in his joy forget the lesson which Benedict had taught him so long ago, and which he had learnt and practised so well in his loneliness and isolation.

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It was towards midnight on the last night of the old year, and all England was reverberating with a mournful and bitter tolling for the past. All the gates of possibility, open so wide at the beginning of the year, seemed closed now; the new white page turned over then was now black with writing, marred with erasures, blotted with tears.

The clanging of the solemn tenor bells, the sighing of the wind, and the sobbing of the sea, alike seemed to lament over the unfulfilled hopes and intentions, the losses and the failures of the past year.

At last the tolling, which sounded like an intense concentration of all grief, ceased, and even the wind and the sea grew quieter.

Suddenly a joyous peal broke out from north, south, east, and west. It told of the gates of possibility set open once more, of another white page turned over, and of a new year begun.

Among all the thousands of bell-voices could be heard Benedict's, full of hope, and Michael's, of rejoicing, answering each other across the land.