

The bell deep

"Ding-dong! Ding-dong!" rings out from the Bell Deep in the Odense River. And what sort of river is that? Why, every child in Odense Town knows it well. It flows around the foot of the gardens, from the locks to the water mill, under the wooden bridges. Yellow water lilies grow in the river, and brown, featherlike reeds, and the black, velvety bulrushes, so high and so thick. Decayed old willow trees, bent and gnarled, hang far over the water beside the monks' marsh and the pale meadows; but a little above are the many gardens, each very different from the next. Some have beautiful flowers and arbors as clean and neat as dolls' houses, while some have only cabbages, and in others no attempts at formal gardens can be seen at all, only great elder trees stretching out and overhanging the running water, which in places is deeper than an oar can measure.

The deepest part is right opposite the old nunnery. It is called the Bell Deep, and it is there that the Merman lives. By day, when the sun shines through the water, he sleeps, but on clear, starry, or moonlit nights he comes forth. He is very old; Grandmother has heard of him from her grandmother, she says; and he lives a lonely life, with hardly anyone to speak to except the big old church bell. It used to hang up in the steeple of the church, but now no trace is left either of the steeple or of the church itself, which used to be called St. Alban's.

"Ding-dong! Ding-dong!" rang the Bell when it hung in the steeple. But one evening, just as the sun was setting and the Bell was in full swing, it tore loose and flew through the air, its shining metal glowing in the red beams of the sunset. "Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Now I'm going to bed!" sang the Bell, and it flew into the deepest spot of the Odense River, which is why that spot is now called the Bell Deep. But it found neither sleep nor rest there, for it still rings and clangs down at the Merman's; often it can be heard up above, through the water, and many people say that it rings to foretell the death of someone-but that is not the reason; no, it really rings to talk to the Merman, who then is no longer alone.

And what stories does the Bell tell? It is so very old; it was cast before Grandmother's grandmother was born, yet it was scarcely more than a child compared with

the Merman. He is a quiet, odd-looking old fellow, with pants of eelskin, a scaly coat decorated with yellow water lilies, bulrushes in his hair, and duckweeds in his beard. He isn't exactly handsome to look at.

It would take years and days to repeat everything the Bell has said; it tells the same stories again and again, in great detail, sometimes lengthening them, sometimes shortening them, according to its mood. It tells of the olden times, those hard and gloomy times.

Up to the tower of St. Alban's Church, where the Bell hung, there once ascended a monk, young and handsome, but deeply thoughtful. He gazed through the loophole out over the Odense River. In those days its bed was broad, and the marsh was a lake. He looked across it, and over the green rampart called "The Nun's Hill," to the cloister beyond, where a light shone from a nun's cell. He had known her well, and he recalled that, and his heart beat rapidly at the thought.

"Ding-dong! Ding-dong!" Yes, such are the stories the Bell tells.

"One day the Bishop's silly manservant came up to the tower; and when I, the Bell, cast as I am from hard and heavy metal, swung to and fro and rang I almost crushed his head, for he sat down right under me and played with two sticks, exactly as if they formed a musical instrument. He sang to them, 'Here I may dare to sing aloud what elsewhere I dare not whisper-sing of all that is hidden behind locks and bolts. It is cold and damp there. The rats eat people up alive! No one knows of this; no one hears of it; even now, for the Bell is ringing so loudly, Ding-dong! Ding-dong!'"

"Then there was a king called Knud. He bowed low before bishops and monks, but when he unjustly oppressed the people of Vendelbo with heavy taxes and hard words, they armed themselves with weapons and drove him away as if he had been a wild beast. He sought refuge in this church and bolted fast the gate and doors. I have heard tell how the furious mob surrounded the sacred building, until the crows and ravens, and even the jackdaws, became alarmed by the tumult. They flew up in and out of the tower and peered down on the multitude below; they gazed in at the church windows and shrieked out what they saw.

"King Knud knelt and prayed before the altar while his brothers, Erik and Benedict, stood guarding him with drawn swords. But the King's servant, the false Blake, betrayed his master, and when those outside knew where he could be hit, one of them hurled a stone in through the windows, and the King lay dead! Then there were shouts and screams from the angry mob, and cries, too, from the flocks of terrified birds, and I joined them all. I rang and sang, 'Ding-dong! Ding-dong!'

"The Church Bell hangs high and can see far around; it is visited by the birds and understands their language. The Wind whispers to it through the wickets and loopholes and every little crack, and the Wind knows all things. He hears it from the Air, for the Air surrounds all living creatures, even enters the lungs of humans, and hears every word and sigh. Yes, the Air knows all, the Wind tells all, and the Church Bell understands all and peals it forth to the whole world, 'Ding-dong! Ding-dong!'

"But all this became too much for me to hear and know; I was no longer able to ring it all out. I became so tired and so heavy that at last the beam from which I hung broke, and so I flew through the glowing air down to the deepest spot of the river, where the Merman lives in solitude and loneliness. And year in and year out, I tell him all I have seen and all I have heard. Ding-dong! Ding-dong!"

Thus it sounds from the Bell Deep in the Odense River-at least, so my grandmother has told me.

But our schoolmaster says there's no bell ringing down there, for there couldn't be; and there's no Merman down there, for there aren't any Mermen. And when all the church bells are ringing loudly, he says it's not the bells, but that it is really the air that makes the sound! And my grandmother told me that the Bell said the same thing; so, since they both agree on it, it must be true. The air knows everything. It is around us and in us; it tells of our thoughts and our actions, and it voices them longer and farther than the Bell down in the Odense River hollow where the Merman lives; it voices them into the great vault of heaven itself, so far, far away, forever and ever, until the bells of heaven ring out, "Ding-dong! Ding-dong!"

* * *