

THE BROTHERHOOD OF BELLS

by

BEATRICE PLUMB

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Snowed under with Christmas cards! Yet, of the hundreds received, only one could so set the bells of memory ringing in my homesick heart! Simple, artistic, hand-made, it bore the photograph of a tower-less carillon, and the cordial invitation, "Come to Old Alfred University in the hills of Allegheny--and hear our buried bells ring!"

Buried bells! Like a flash my mind leaped the years and the ocean, and I was a wide-eyed child again, listening to my little Welsh mother whisper that on Christmas Eve all the buried bells rang! No matter how deep they lay beneath the still earth or the restless sea, on this one mystic night of the year their faint, muted tones could be heard...ringing...ringing.... And now, since I was going on six, I was old enough to stay up late and hear them.

We dodged the carol singers in the English lane to steal hand-in-hand under the frosty stars to a mound in the meadow where all summer long the archeologists dug up my daisies. But with the first frost, the spading and sifting stopped and the Abbey Mound was ours again.

"Listen!" my little Welsh mother whispered, her ear close to the frozen ground. I knelt beside her in the blue-velvet night, the turf cold as Abbey slabs, wraiths of dead incense haunting the upturned sod, stars above like a million altar candles, and all about us the still peace of ancient sanctuary.

"Hush! Don't breathe, even....Now!....Hear them?...Hear their faint ringing?"

Of course I heard them! Deep, deep under the mound which had once been a great Holy House, the noble bells, buried so that Henry the Eighth should not seize them, were ringing: "O, come ye....O, come ye...to Bethlehem," in glad chorus with their free brothers in steeple and tower.

Sweet bells of memory! But they were drowned out by a more insistent peal from the card in my hand.... "Come to Alfred, in the hills of Allegheny...and hear our---" Alfred! The very name set the bells of memory ringing again.

That memorable Christmas Eve it had seemed as if the Miracle of the Manger were all about us as we stole back across the white English fields. We rested on the hill to look down on the lights of the little home village that had once gone to bed when the curfew rang. Now, peals and chimes swept into it a rainbow torrent of bell music, rushing from a dozen dove-gray church towers. Beneath one of them was King Alfred's font to which he had brought his vanquished foe, the fierce pagan chief Guthrum, to be "Christen-ed"--the royal Alfred, himself, standing as his sponsor. A historical peace pact that had not been broken!

Up from the valley rose the exultant Christmas chimes, but through all their clamor I still seemed to hear the faint peals of the buried bells under the mound. What had they to ring for?

"There's magic in bells," explained my mother. "Magic in their music, magic in their souls, magic in their very metal. It's part of a bell's magic to make all men brothers. So, buried or not, they just have to ring a welcome to the Little Brother of All Mankind." She always called Him that.

All the way down the valley path, guided by the yellow glow of the ringers' lanterns, we talked of the magic of bells.. . Once, the old legend ran, their music was part of the mysteries of Heaven. Up there, somewhere beyond the stars, they were the soul of sound--God's own harp. But they could not speak to the souls of men from that great height; so they came to earth, born in bronze.

"Ever since then," she told me, "bells have been bridging distances, the differences that separate us, calling people together, closer to one another, nearer to God. King Alfred knew their magic. Why, over twelve centuries ago he had made bells 'a matter of Kings,' hanging them from the roof of a spreading oak to assemble his countrymen for church and council.

"It's nice to remember," said my mother, "that when you hear Great Tom of

Oxford University doing his one hundred and one strokes at nine each night, it's just a survival of King Alfred's thousand-year-old law about his Carfax bell."

Alfred! Again the bells of memory were silenced by a more insistent pealing from the Christmas card in my hand.... "Come to Old Alfred University ... in the hills of Allegheny ... and hear our buried bells ring!"

Buried bells? In little Alfred, New York? In a country as new as America? So new that a university which started as a select school only a hundred years ago could call itself old? Incredible!

Inquiries followed. Investigation--and then the story of quiet little Alfred's amazing treasure was brought to light--I couldn't sleep nights for the wonder of it!

Their treasure is truly unique in America. It is a carillon of thirty-five ancient Flemish bells, buried to save them from becoming the casualties--or, worse still, the instruments--of the World War. This carillon is precious beyond words because all of its bells were made by sixteenth and seventeenth century founders whose names are to the carillon what the name Stradivarius is to the violin.

Some of these fine old bells were hidden in dark cellars, some in attics. The largest of all--the Grand Ducal Bell--was buried for untold years under a Luxemburg tower. There, in their secret hiding places, they had stayed during the war, silent but safe, while the noble carillons of Ypres and Louvain were shelled and burned to death. Followed by another, and another, until twenty-four Singing Towers with their breaking hearts had perished.

Perhaps the owners of Alfred's buried bells had suffered enough, so decided when war clouds gathered once more in Europe to send their bells to some peaceful spot across the sea....

And here they are in America--a little bit of the Netherlands picked up bodily and set down in Alfred's peaceful valley, where the hills may seem strange to them, but not the little red tile roofs. And last Christmas Eve, reverent

crowds felt an odd tightening of the throat as they listened to the old bells lifting their resonant voices in a new land to welcome the Little Brother of All Mankind.

At present, it is true, they are practically homeless. They hang in a skeleton framework campanile which looks like an oil derrick and actually was erected by oil men! The sight of the gray-green, time-mellowed bells in that modern contraption stabs one with its very incongruity. But it is only a temporary makeshift. In the surrounding hills there is native stone with which to build a permanent tower home worthy of such a distinguished family.

At present, too, the family is sadly divided, for nine of the noblest and costliest bells of the Flemish carillon are still in Belgium, while a small group of anxious-eyed, but still hopeful, alumni searches frantically for the money to bring them "home" for Christmas.

The fact that they have the carillon at all is such a miracle that one almost expects the necessary sixteen thousand dollars to drop from the sky to the campus. Then, what a joyful family reunion there would be in the oil-derrick home in the New Country! What carols would fill the valley, with the venerable old patriarchs adding their deep sonorous notes to the family chorus!

Of the thirty-five bells in the Davis Memorial Carillon at Alfred, some were cast by the great Pieter Hemony, himself. Had he lived in this century instead of the seventeenth, his advertising slogan would surely have been "Hemony for Harmony!" For it was his success in tuning the harmonics of a bell that carried him to so eminent a place in the art of bell-making that he is still "the master" to the great English founders of today. His masterpieces are still their patterns.

Colonel William Gorham Rice, world authority on carillons, whose book about the Singing Towers of the Old World was the literary seed of a score of lovely carillons in the New, says of the three great contemporary founders of the Golden Age of carillon-making: "Hemony's bells are bright, clear, and true--epic in

character. Van den Gheyn's bells are similar. Dumery's are velvety, soft, and true--elegiac in character."

In Alfred's carillon all three of these famous craftsmen are represented. There are eighteen bells cast by Pieter Hemony in 1674; sixteen, by Joris Dumery between 1745 and 1784, and one by A. van den Gheyn in 1784.

The Hemony Brothers made their first carillon just seven years short of three hundred years ago. Not only did it please the customers, it delighted them. The city fathers gave the Hemony's a glowing testimonial, declaring the new bells surpassed "in tone and resonance all other carillons in the vicinity." After that the Hemony's went from one glory to another. When Frans died, Pieter, ten years younger, held high the honor of the name. Carillon after carillon went out --hundreds of beautiful bells, perfectly made and tuned. Finally, in the year 1677, he wrote that he would soon dismiss his workmen, "and live in repose...having worked forty-four years at founding with my own hands."

He listed the carillons he and his brother singly or together had made. He mentioned forty-seven, and even then, he had missed some. Three years later he died, taking his precious secret with him. For two hundred years it was lost, and only within the past forty years has it been rediscovered by English bell founders.

How did the idea of a carillon for Alfred University start and grow? Who can diagram a dream or devotion? There probably never was a time in all Alfred's history when somebody was not dreaming about giving the old school a set of bells.

When Alfred was a settlement of a few little log cabins built by settlers of Rhode Island stock, a stranger came through the forest to open "a select school" in an upper room in the village. He found a tall, strong youngster of thirteen cutting maple in the woods already touched with the chill of autumn, and offered him a winter's tuition for six cords.

Allen could not write his name, but as he carried his own home-made chair to that upper room, something rang in his heart, like Dick Whittington's chimes.

Allen proved a scholar. He returned from Oberlin in 1849 with his bachelor's degree. The select school was now an academy. Allen entered into a campaign with six colleagues to build it into a college, non-sectarian and co-educational.

They built it literally, making bricks with the very superior clay which now supplies the School of Ceramics there. Allen made the hillside campus as his part of the physical work. He labored at it, loving the thing that grew under his hands.

In 1865 Allen became Alfred's first great president. The valley was his laboratory. He brought together thousands of kinds of stone and built them into a little castle, the "Stenheim," to show the students "what sort of earth we live in." And as his beautiful little Castle Museum went up, stone on stone, he must have said, "One day we'll have chimes here."

Because, from time to time, a single voice at Alfred has talked of giving chimes to the campus. Once, a librarian--but she lost all her money. Later, a student, who even donated a very small sum for the purpose. Then another student, Lloyd Watson, had the dream. When he became a member of the faculty, he still cherished it in his heart. He told his wife when their ship came in they would give Alfred a carillon.

But the ships of research men--half dreamers, half scientists, usually quite impractical in a business way--frequently are long coming in. So while he experimented with his bees, she made honey candy and sold it to those who came to the "Honey Pot," which is a nice homey remodeled barn, full of humming and harmony. Somewhere between the exhibition bee hives and the pianos, flutes and violins--all the family play--is a bell-founder's calendar hanging on the wall. No story of the carillon can be told without putting a grateful finger on that calendar, for it played a stellar part in turning the Watsons' dream into a ringing reality.

This is its story. Mrs. Watson, who backs every visionary venture of her scientist husband, encouraged him to write to an English bell founder whose address they had and ask the price of a carillon!

The reply they received caused great consternation at the Watsons'. The

company, it seemed, had a branch office in New York and was sending a representative to see them. The Watsons hastened to get in touch with the representative and assure him that their interest in bells was just a dream--a long-standing, practically hopeless dream!

Nevertheless, each year the English bell company sent them a calendar. And the Watsons hung it where they could see its pictures of towers and bells. It helped to keep their dream alive.

Then, in 1933, Dr. Boothe Colwell Davis, great pupil of the great Allen, retired after thirty-eight years as President of Alfred University. He and his wife were alumni of Alfred. They were adored by all. It was felt that there should be some sort of fitting memorial to the many years of service rendered to Alfred by President Emeritus and Mrs. Davis. How about a gymnasium?

Now we come to Professor Norman J. Whitney and his sister, alumni of Alfred but teaching now in another University. That Christmas they spent their vacation with the Davises in Florida. They made many trips to surrounding points of interest, among them the Bok Tower and Stetson College with its memorial bell tower. They were struck by the Davises' complete absorption in the bells. Once, their old "Prexy" reminisced, he had almost realized his ambition to have chimes on the campus. "One of the bits of unfinished business," he sighed. "Somebody will do it sometime--".

On the way home, Mildred Whitney was unusually quiet. Somebody....Some-time.... And right there, along a straight stretch of Georgia highway, the idea was born!

"Wouldn't it be a grand idea," said Mildred Whitney, "if we could build a bell tower at Alfred for the Davises while they are here to enjoy it?"

"It would," agreed her brother warily, "but we couldn't do it."

"I'm not so sure," said she. And the conversation continued across the Carolinas and over the hills of West Virginia, far, far into Pennsylvania and New York.

By the time they reached home the idea was striving mightily. Their friends received it with cheers. "Lloyd Watson is your man," the present President of Alfred, Dr. J. Nelson Norwood, told them. "It has been Watson's dream for years to build a bell tower here." And so the Whitneys found the Watsons--the professor still proving this or that with his super-bees gathered from all over the world, his wife still cheerfully making and selling her honey candy.

None of them knew much about bells. Investigation brought deeper bewilderment. What they needed was an expert. And one day she came to the Honey Pot for candy--and saw that calendar! Would they mind telling her how they came by it? Laughingly they told its story. In return she told them of the ancient bells in the Belgian carillons. "To me," she smiled, "they are the sweetest in the world."

They plied her with questions, discovering that she had visited practically every bell tower in the Low Countries, had, indeed, played many of them. Yes, she was a carillonneur; had studied under Jef Denyn, a personal friend. The expert! And here she'd been all summer studying pottery in Alfred's Ceramic Department--Mrs. Charlotte Greene, cultured, courteous, gently reserved--"the lady from Boston!"

Born in China, educated in the United States, married in Boston, she had returned to the land of her birth after her husband's death in China. She had been abroad and had stopped off on her way back to Boston to visit the Ceramic School. She had liked the quiet little Alfred village of about seven hundred inhabitants, with its red tile roofs and its valley just wide enough for the main street and the creek, and had decided to spend the summer making pottery there. And this was the last day of summer school--and Mrs. Greene was leaving in the morning!

The excited Watsons ate a hurried dinner. They knew one thing positively: before the lady from Boston left, she must see the Whitneys!

They quickly summoned Edna Saunders, the one remaining member of the bell

committee, and they found Norman Whitney dressed for his part in the old-fashioned melodrama which the Little Theatre Group was staging in the Firemen's Hall--unchanged since it was the "Opry House" of the Gay Nineties. They snatched him up--faded Prince Albert, glued-on sideburns, and all!--and whisked him off to meet the lady from Boston who knew all about bells. They were far too excited to explain his strange attire, merely introducing him as Professor Whitney. He shivered lest she might think him an eccentric Alfred professor, but there was no time for explanation. Here was the expert they had longed for, and there was just one little thin half-hour left in which to talk.

Out of that breathless interview came the first definite resolve to try to get for Alfred a carillon of ancient bells. Mrs. Greene was not too sanguine, but she was helpfulness itself. She was going abroad that autumn--would they like her to run over to Brussels as the advance searching party? From that moment on, she was the Carillon Committee's good fairy, so that from classroom and campus, home and village, they tell you, "We never could have had the carillon without Mrs. Greene's help."

And now the Watsons had the address of another bell founder--this time of a celebrated firm in Brussels, Belgium. They wrote to the president asking if he could supply Alfred University "with a small ancient carillon cast by one of the three great founders, Pieter Hemony, George Dumery, and A. van den Gheyn."

One can imagine what the Belgian bellmaker thought about these mad Americans! But, in reply, he merely said that it was quite impossible, that bells by these makers couldn't be bought.

But possibly Mrs. Greene was persuasive; or possibly the romance of sending an ancient carillon to the New World fired his imagination and added the spice of adventure to his business. In any case, he set out on an extensive search for ancient bells.

Through Belgium, the Netherlands, and Northern France he traveled, picking up a few here, a few there, until finally he cabled Alfred that their bells were ready for shipment. Oh, the joy of that devoted little band who had worked so

hard for the carillon! Now it could be dedicated at Commencement time!

But--alas!--woe and tribulation eclipsed their joy. The Belgian firm had been obliged to borrow money to finance the assembling of the carillon and had offered the bells as collateral. Now the lending bank refused to allow its security to leave Belgium until all the money was paid!

Contributions, not large but many, had been coming in right along from the alumni. The committee had paid two thirds of the total cost, but now they must find another \$2,500 before the bells could even be shipped! Somehow or other they found it. It was rumored that one hard-headed scientist mortgaged his home to insure the shipment of the bells. In olden days men vowed that only sacrifice could give a bell "soul sweetness." Then, of a surety, Alfred's bells will have it.

The carillon arrived at Alfred station one bright day in July, 1937, and was escorted in triumphant procession to Alfred Campus, with the little old chapel bell in Alumni Hall and the church bells ringing out a joyous welcome.

Less than two months later, the first public recital on the Davis Memorial was presented by Henry S. Wesson, first American graduate of the International School of the Carillon at Malines. Beside him sat Professor Ray W. Wingate, the college organist and Music Department head--the man who had found himself designated college carillonneur without ever having heard a carillon! During the summer vacation he went to Ottawa to hear Percival Price play, and to the great Riverside Church, New York City, to watch Kamiel Lefévere play the world's largest carillon--a majestic instrument of seventy-two bells, the largest weighing twenty tons.

Finally Professor Wingate talked with the great Gorham Rice, whose advice he followed when, less than a week after Wesson's recital, he mounted the steps to the Alfred carillon and sat down to do his valiant best at an unknown instrument, in the full hearing of the entire village and many distinguished guests. Whatever had been Dr. Rice's advice, it sufficed. "Faith of Our Fathers," sang the ancient

"Peace on earth, Good will to men," rings the carillon in Antwerp's utterly lovely tower to its brothers in their oil-derrick frame. From St. Gertrude's, Louvain, from Amsterdam's royal palace, from Utrecht Cathedral...Leyden... Delft, come the voices of great bells that are kin to little Alfred's in the New Country...all ringing to welcome the Little Brother of All Mankind.

And to the chorus of the ancient clan come other voices. The bells of old Rheims Cathedral, silenced by guns, mute for twenty-four years, set ringing again by the generosity of an American millionaire. The young, glorious voices of the English carillon in old Louvain, the gift of American engineers. The chimes of London's Old Bow Bells, which told Dick Whittington to "turn again," restored by an American-born merchant prince. English bells pealing in a Christian church in old Jerusalem--the gift of a generous American.

What a brotherhood! But in that glory of bell music, one somehow hears the silence of nine old wistful bells--that belong to the Alfred Carillon, but stand unbought across the sea.

But somebody...sometime. "A bit of unfinished business," as Alfred's old Prexy said.