



Why the Chimes Rang

by Raymond McAlden, 1906

There was once in a faraway country, where few people have ever traveled, a magnificent church. It stood on a high hill in the midst of a great city; and every Sunday, as well as on sacred days like Christmas, hundreds and hundreds of people climbed the hill to its great archways, looking like lines of ants all moving in the same direction.

When they came to the building itself, they found stone columns, and dark passages, and a grand entrance leading to the main room of the church. This room was so large and long that one standing at the doorway could scarcely see to the other end, where the choir stood by the marble altar. In the farthest corner was the organ; and this organ was so loud, that sometimes when it played, the people for miles around would close their shutters as though to prepare for a great thunderstorm. Altogether, no such church as this was ever seen before, especially when it was lighted up for some festival, and crowded with people, young and old. But the strangest thing about the whole building was the wonderful chime of bells.

At one corner of the church was a great gray tower, with ivy growing over it as far up as one could see. I say as far as one could see, because the tower was quite grand enough to fit the splendor of the church, and it rose so far into the sky that it was only in very fair weather that anyone claimed to be able to see the top. Even then one could not be absolutely certain that it was in sight. Up, and up, and up climbed the stones and the ivy; and as the men who built the church had been dead for hundreds of years, everyone had forgotten how high the tower was supposed to be.

But one thing all the people knew was that high at the top of the tower was a chime of Christmas bells. They had

hung there ever since the church had been built, and they were the most beautiful bells in all the land. Some thought it was because a great musician had cast them and arranged them in their place; others said it was because of the great height, which reached up where the air was clearest and purest; but whatever the reason, no one who had ever heard the chimes denied that they were the sweetest in the world. Some described them as sounding like angels far up in the sky; others as sounding like strange winds singing through the trees.

The fact was, though, that no one had heard them for years and years. There was an aged gentleman living not far from the church who said that his mother had spoken of hearing them when she was a little girl, and he was the only one around who was sure of as much as that. They were Christmas chimes, you see, and were not meant to be played or heard on common days. It was the custom on Christmas Eve for all the people to bring to the church their offerings to the Christ Child; and in years past, when the greatest and best offering was laid on the altar, there used to come sounding – even out over the music of the majestic choir – the ringing of the Christmas chimes far up in the tower.* Some said that the wind rang them, and others, that the minister must somehow signal a boy to climb high in the tower and pull at the cord. But how they rang mattered not so much as that for many long years they had never been heard at all. It was rumored that people had been growing less careful of their gifts for the Christ Child, and that no offering was brought that was worthy of the music of the chimes.

Every Christmas Eve the rich people still crowded to the altar, each one trying to bring some better gift than any other, yet being careful not to give anything that he wanted himself, and the church was crowded with those who

thought that perhaps the wonderful bells might be heard again. But although the service was splendid, and the offerings plenty, only the roar of the wind could be heard, far up in the old stone tower.

Now, a number of miles from the city, in a little country village, where nothing could be seen of the great church but glimpses of the tower when the weather was fine, lived a boy named Pedro and his little brother. They knew very little about the Christmas chimes, but they had heard of the service in the church on Christmas Eve and had a delightful plan, which they had often talked over when by themselves, to go someday and see the beautiful celebration.

"Nobody can guess, Little Brother," Pedro would say, "all the fine things there are to see and hear in that place."

The day before Christmas was bitterly cold, with a few lonely snowflakes flying in the air, and a hard, white crust on the ground. Pedro had convinced Father and Mother that he was old enough to care for Little Brother and escort him responsibly to the Christmas service and back, so Pedro and Little Brother were given permission to leave early in the afternoon; and although the walking was hard in the frosty air, before nightfall they had trudged so far, hand in hand, that they saw the lights of the big city just ahead of them. Indeed they were about to enter one of the great gates in the wall that surrounded it, when they saw something dark on the snow near their path and stepped aside to look at it.

It was a poor woman, who had fallen just outside the city, too sick and tired to get in where she might have found shelter. The soft snow made of a drift a sort of pillow for her, and she would soon be so sound asleep, in the wintry air, that no one could ever waken her again. All this Pedro saw in a moment, and he knelt down beside her and tried to rouse her, even tugging at her arm a little, as though he would have tried to carry her away. He turned her face

toward him, so that he could rub some of the snow on it, and when he had looked at her silently a moment he stood up again, and said:

"It's no use, Little Brother. You will have to go on alone."

"Alone?" cried Little Brother. "Will you not come with me to see the Christmas festival?"

"No," said Pedro, and he could not keep back a bit of a choking sound in his throat. "See this poor woman. She will freeze to death if nobody cares for her. Everyone has gone to the church now, but when you come back you can bring someone to help her. I will rub her arms and feet to keep her from freezing, and perhaps I can coax her to eat the bun that is left in my pocket."

"But I cannot bear to leave you and go on alone," said Little Brother.

"Both of us need not miss the service," said Pedro, "and it had better be I than you. You can easily find your way to church; and you must see and hear everything twice, Little Brother – once for you and once for me. I am sure the Lord must know how I should love to come with you and worship Him at the beautiful church, but I cannot leave this poor woman alone in the street. Oh, wait! If you get a chance, Little Brother, slip up to the altar without getting in anyone's way; take this little silver piece of mine and lay it down for my offering when no one is looking. Do not forget where you have left me, and find me again as soon as you can."

In this way Pedro hurried Little Brother off to the city and winked hard to keep back the tears, as he heard the crunching footsteps sounding farther and farther away in the twilight. It was no easy sacrifice to lose the music and splendor of the Christmas celebration that he had been planning to enjoy for so long and have to spend the time instead in that lonely place in the snow.

The great church was certainly a wonderful place that night. Everyone said that it had never looked so bright and beautiful before. When the organ played and the multitudes of people sang, the walls shook with the sound, and little Pedro, away outside the city wall, felt the earth tremble and heard strains of music mixed with the howl of the wind.

At the close of the service came the procession with the offerings to be laid on the altar. Rich men and great men marched proudly up to lay down their gifts for the Christ Child. Some brought wonderful jewels, others brought baskets of gold so heavy that they could scarcely carry them down the aisle. A great writer laid down a book that he had been making for years and years. And last of all walked the king of the country, hoping with all the rest to win for himself the chime of the Christmas bells. There went a great murmur through the church as the people saw the king take from his head the royal crown, all set with precious stones, and lay it gleaming on the altar as his offering.

"Surely," everyone said, "we shall hear the bells now, for nothing like this has ever happened before."

But even though they waited, breathless and still for many moments, only the frigid wind could be heard chasing itself round and round in the tower. So the people shook their heads; and some of them said, as they had in years before, that they never really believed the story of the chimes anyway and doubted if they ever rang at all.

The procession was over, and the choir began the closing hymn. Suddenly the organist stopped playing; and everyone looked at the venerable minister, who was standing by the altar and holding up his hand for silence. Not a sound could be heard from anyone in the church, but as all the people strained their ears to listen, there came softly, but distinctly, swinging through the air, the sound of the chimes in the tower.

So far away, and yet so clear the music seemed – and so much sweeter were the notes than anything that had been heard before, rising and falling away up there in the sky, that the people in the church sat for a moment as still as though something held each of them by the shoulders. Then they all stood up together and craned their necks and jostled one another to get a glimpse at the great gift that had awakened the long silent bells.

But all that even the nearest of them saw was the childish figure of Little Brother, who had crept softly down the aisle when no one was looking and had laid Pedro's little piece of silver on the altar.

* To clarify: Although the thought of "bringing one's gift to the Christ Child" has been retained here and is referenced in other stories in this collection as well, we must remember that Christ is no longer a child. He came a baby; He grew to be a man; He died and rose again and sits now at the right hand of the throne of God. He is not "reborn" again each Christmas, though we celebrate His coming each year. We can certainly still give gifts in His honor – though we don't even need to wait for December 25th to do that. Give of your best to the Master all the year through.

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from
The Birds' Christmas Carol.
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