

The Boy and the Bells

By Augustus Bridle



HE was on the borderland of heaven and didn't know it. Because he had a drudging, back-aching bucksaw job alongside a long pile of cordwood, and he had been in Canada only three months; which was a long while ago, when the part of the land he went to was being conquered out of the bush. And it was always those dark, silent woods across the fields and the snow that made the lad wonder what lay beyond. The mill he knew because it screamed all day; the corner-store he knew, for he had been sent there by old Grim, his master, to buy tobacco; and he knew the blacksmith shop—and the harness-maker next door; both of them mighty men in that village since horses must have both shoes and harness and the Lord knew it was a land of horses.

Christmas week—day before the day of days—heaven the night before had rolled out a garment of new snow that made even the saw-mill go muffled and the—logs, the logs, the logs! Heavens, how they came, snow-splashed and huge under the creaking chains and the humpbacked binder-poles with the men bawling to one another on top and the horses below bobbing, jingling, belling along. Out of the bush they came, wherever that was, or the end of it, in to the village and the mill.

"Quit—that—dawdlin'," barked one out of a doorway close by, where a large boot hung. Spectacles. A leathery old face. His hammer had been whacking pegs into soles since seven a.m., when the mill whistle blew.

"Oh, crimes, oh crumbs; who is dawdlin'?" grumbled the lad as he swabbed another lick of the pork fat on the saw. He whopped a big hickory stick on the sawbuck and began again. The door shut. "I won't finish the job," he muttered. "I won't stay here. I don't like it. Splinters!"

He meant the slivers and the hickory bark that kinked the saw and chugged his chin.

SEVEN days and more he had been whittling at that cordwood like a mouse nibbling out of a wall. In the land of the beaver, where every man, as he had heard, was expected to hustle or bust. Glorious wood; seven varieties, and by this time he knew most of them. The whiskered personage who hauled them here in a sleigh had taken boots for pay and he lived beyond the bush lines somewhere in the fabulous land where the lad had never been. But it was not his horses and bells the lad liked most; that grey, hushed-up morning of white silences and jingling, dreamy bells.

"Wish he'd send me to the mill for a bag o' sawdust to bed the pig," mumbled the lad as he craned himself to see what a spectacle it might be to behold twenty of those loads snaking amidst the walls of the logs.

Boong! Every little while a log thumped down from the bunks.

Crash! A mile away and over some tree went down.

Day after day it had been so while the lad bucksawed and remembered the dingdong of a Sunday text in the saw-mill church. "Seest thou a man diligent in business, he shall stand before kings." Well, he was ready for the kings. And for aught he knew these furred fellows that drove the log-loads were the real kings. Now and again he had seen a few of their felt boots dangled from the counter in the store; had heard their fables and their oaths; tales of the trees going down and the logs coming out and the fights.

Oh, the bells! Seven sorts of them. Some on the tongues, on the collars, on the neck-yokes, on the back-bands, whole strings of them round some teams—as many kinds of bells as there were colors of horses, brown, bay, black, white, sorrel, chestnut, speckled and mongrel. Bravo! The lad paused to smell the breath of the horses. To hear the bells louder than the bucksaw thump in his ears. One of those teams—who could believe it?—had two strings of bells, one chime for each horse slung naively under the bellyband. That must be a rich bush-whacker. A hulky, huge-booted man of whiskers, he was, black and benign, sometimes a bit scowling, as kings ought to be, and once the lad heard his voice boom back the road to a teamster.

"Oh, I guess I got near two thousand on here."

Two thousand what?

Then the man stood up. Ben ceased sawing altogether to gaze at the colossuslike straddle of the great leathery legs as the load slid along down to the corner, round the store and—

Smack! came the door under the boot.

"Go to work, you whiffit!" roared spectacles.

And by now it was almost the drop of dusk; last loads for the day crawling in from the hinderland; empty bobs trotting and jangling home, bells at the bow and loose chains aft in the snow. Ben followed the bucksaw and looked. Oh, when would that king with the iron-grey horses and the two chimes of bells come by? Whenever he came Ben must be on the slab bridge to wave at him.

The shoemaker's window blazed. Ben put away the bucksaw and stood on the bridge. Team after team. As yet no black-whiskered king of the bush. Soon—

Ah! yonder round the store came the jangle of those double bells.

Ben crouched low on the bridge and looked upwards. The team came snorting on the slow trot. When he should pass! Oh, let the sign of the boot and the drone of the bucksaw be blasted!

Here was the man himself, squat low on the forward bunk gidooping his team. Now or never! As the hind bob slithered next the bridge Ben leaped upon it, grabbed the binder-pole and lay flat behind the bunk not far from the dangling hook in the snow. He knew not where he was going, but he was on the way. He would stand before the king. And the king saw him not. In the dusk Ben saw the broad of the man's back and the rumps of the horses as the bells jangled; one mile down the town line, round a corner, over a culvert on to a side-road, heading for the bush-land, the unknown, the great grey beyond of the trees and

the hidden clearing where lights and music and great men and kind women lived.

Would the king throw him back? Had he boys enough and to spare of his own? Oh, Lord!

What token! What sign, or claim could he have upon this man of the bells?

THE jangle of music changed up yonder. Ben's low-lying eye noted something suddenly dark along the track in the white snow. It was—one of the bell-chimes! Dropped, and the king didn't know it. Ben slid off and snatched the treasure. Wildly waving the string of bells for a moment, he shouted; then he ran, on and on to the jingle of bells, up and up the strangest road he

had ever seen, panting as never he had over the saw, slipping and tumbling and jingling—till he saw the king's horses turn in at a gate.

A few minutes later Ben ran into a barnyard where horses were loose.

"Please, sir," he panted, as he stood before the bush king, whose name he knew not, "I brought you—the bells!"

The king's hand reached out.

"Well, I'll be jiggered! Where'd yeh brung 'em from, sonny?"

As best he might the boy told him.

The bush king laughed.

"And I wish you a merry Christmas, sir," said Ben, awkwardly.

"Well, you'd better come in and have supper, boy. Mebbe—mebbe you can spend Christmas with us if it's all the same to the old man yunder."

In a fit of blindness, Ben fumbled about helping the great man stable his iron-grey horses in one end of a huge barn—or it seemed huge. Strange cattle peered at him round a straw-stack as he helped the man lug in straw to bed the team. Chickens gabbled on a roost. A line of strange birds occupied the entire peak of the roof on a slatsided corner. And the king, as he paused on his way to the house beyond the woodpile, yanked his whiskers and said,

"One o' youse will be missing to-morrow morning, I guess."

What family it was that gathered around the supper-table Ben was too blind to notice clearly. He realized that old Grim, the maker of boots, would be in a fine rage by now. But he never would find him that night. No.

"Be you—wantin' to go to roost, sonny?" asked a kind, motherish voice.

AND in all his excitement Ben was sleepy—but not so drowsy as not to realize what a mountainous feather-bed he was to climb into in a cold room off the parlor. And that he slept in a pack of dreams, from which he was roused by a terrible flutteration and squawking among the poultry. When he came to himself he observed the bronze-black hulk of a headless gobbler lying on the woodpile.

Oh, the crime of it!

The sun swept up in a blaze of blue. The maze of all things lay about the lad in the great trance of a perfect holiday. The horses snorted and pranced out to the water-hole in the pond. Cattle stood in the snow and the sun, chewing their cud.

Breakfast! He scarcely knew when it came. Dinner—dinner was the thing. The household set to getting the dead gobbler ready for the

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