

# MEMORY AND BELLS.

## I.

'Tis sweet to hear a brook, 'tis sweet  
To hear the Sabbath bell,  
'Tis sweet to hear them both at once  
Deep in a woody dell.

—*Samuel Taylor Coleridge.*

I thought, to-day,—while the musical monitor, hanging in its tower near by, was “sprinkling the air with holy sounds,” and the villagers were entering the sacred porch,—how, when a boy in my father's house, I used to hear on Sabbath mornings the distant ringing of church bells among the Horton hills, sounding when the air was quiet or when a favouring wind

“Scattered the tuneful largess far and near.”

Ah! how soon, in spite of cares and years, when the Magician of our youth returns, touching us, we are children again. Surely there was some invisible cord that pulled at the bells in memory.

## II.

“Did the holy around  
Send forth mysterious melody?”

How they ring out of the past from their minstrel-towers! Poet peals—heart-touching as any of Nature's voices—like Heine's

“Far-off chimes smiting me  
With mysterious awe,”

bidding us to a sense of the infinitude of our being while

“Insatiable yearning, profound sadness,  
Steals into the heart.”

--Bells, perchance, that lift the boundaries of thought and sense far off, like Milton's “distant curfew,” heard from some high plat of ground, sounding

“Over some wide-watered shore,  
Swinging slow with sullen roar.”

Surely, while Milton and Gray are remembered in England the “curfew” can hardly cease,—it must still haunt the memory, tolling “the knell of parting day.”

## III.

“In the void air the music floats,”

Like all music, it seems most consonant with wind and waters. The harmonies of the turret have a delicious sweetness coming down to still shores and quiet waters, to the wash of waves or the lapse of the stream. We wonder if rowers still pause on their oars to listen, as on the evening when memory's minstrel mingled the rivers of Erin with alien waters, when listening to the chimes faintly tolling at St. Annes! And, if long an absentee, has Father Prout forgotten

“The bells of Shandon,  
That sound so grand on  
The pleasant waters of the river Lee?”

For the music of the bells is somehow in league with the tenderest affections. We hear the same sound to which they once listened who now, maybe, hear the singing of angels. Can it be heard, the music of “those evening bells,” telling

“Of youth and home and that glad time,  
When we last heard their soothing chime,”

and we not become more human and less worldly? Will it not amend our spirit to remember that

“So 'twill be when we are gone,  
Those mournful peals will still ring on,  
While other bards shall wake these dells,  
And sing your praise, sweet evening bells?”

I think the Irish poet's follies will be timely forgotten by many who have memory of a mother's voice singing his pensive verses.

## IV.

“How sweet the tuneful bells responsive peal!  
And hark! with lessening cadence now they fall;  
And now, along the white and level tide,  
They fling their melancholy music wide;  
Bidding me many a tender thought recall  
Of summer days, and those delightful years  
When from an ancient tower in life's fair prime,  
The mournful magic of their mingling chime  
First waked my wondering childhood into tears.”

—*Bowles. Ostend Bells.*

I recall one evening of a bygone summer. I had gone into the uppermost part of “that leafy, blossoming and

beautiful Cambridge,” at the sweetest time of the Sabbath. The air was serene, the sky full of tinted light, the foliage fresh and unsullied. I was near the gate of the Craigie House—haunt of hero and minstrel—when the chimes struck up in the bowery city below, and I paused to listen. Memory bells again! He who dwelt in the home near by loved such tones, and rang them in his mellow numbers,—

“Low and loud and sweetly blended,  
Low at times, and loud at times;”

for it is while lying wakeful in the Inn of the “quaint old Flemish city,” listening to the bells of the market-place, that memory awakes. In his verse are stirred the tongues of many beside the Bells of Lynn,—chimes of the Middle Ages,—

“Bells that ring so slow,  
So mellow, musical and low”—

holy, half mournful sounds, such as Evangeline listened to, while standing before her father's doorway, shading her eyes with her hands, while the sun descended, and

“Sweetly over the village the bell of the Angelus sounded.”

## V.

“How soft the music of those village bells,  
Falling at intervals upon the ear  
In cadence sweet! Now, dying all away,  
Now pealing loud again, and louder still.  
Clear and sonorous as the gale comes on.  
With easy force it opens all the cells  
Where memory slept.”

So, in some hallowed hour, mused the sainted singer of Olney; and a renewed glimpse of

“the embattled tower  
Whence all the music,”

animates my thought, and prompts this farther reverie. Among the chimes struck by English singers none touch us more tenderly than those of Berkhamstead, which fell so mournfully on the sensitive heart of the poet-child:

“I heard the bell tolled on thy burial day.”

Yea, and there shall be those who in the years to come shall hear it and weep! Who that loves (and who, knowing, does not love?) Cowper, but has listened to the palpitant sweetness that floated long ago from Olney tower. Fancy sees him in the ever-haunted meadow, gazing fixedly at the

“Tall spire from which the sound of cheerful bells  
Just undulates upon the listening ear.”

And there is another—a poetess of our time—whom he would have called sister. You will say Mrs. Browning, but I mean Jean Ingelow. I have heard the schoolgirl give emphasis to her “Boston bells,” that rang when the “stolen tyde” overwhelmed poor Elizabeth.

“The ringers rang by two, by three;  
‘Pull, if ye never pulled before;  
Good ringers, pull your best,’ quoth he.”

Among her later poems is one into which she has woven among many things of beauty and harmony, music from bells in the fruitful vale of Evesham. There, amid orchards by the riverside, she seems to have heard, stealing from the old abbey, what she here gives us in a memory chime:

“Often in dream, I see full fain.  
The bell-tower beautiful that I love well,  
A seemly cluster with her churches twain;  
I hear adown the river, faint and swell,  
And lift upon the air that sound again,—  
It is, it is,—how sweet no tongue can tell,  
For all their world-wide breadth of shining foam  
The bells of Evesham chiming Home, Sweet Home!”

“Home, Sweet Home,” and the bells,—how sweetly they go together! We put the chimes of Ingelow to match the chimes of Cowper.

## VI.

“Soft hour! which wakes the wish, and melts the heart . . .  
Or fills with love the pilgrim on his way,  
As the far bell of Vesper makes him start.”

While we are busied with ringing memory chimes, we suddenly recollect one of the sweetest ever heard, of the most plaintive pathos, from the pages of an old poet,—the greatest of the Middle Ages. Would we might all feel the power of the strange, sweet words,—

“Lo di ch' han detto a' dolce amici a dio;  
Eche lo nuovo peregrin' d'amore  
Punge, se ode Squilla di lontano,  
Che paia 'l giorno pianger che si muore.”

But, if we may not do this we may seek a fair compensation in the English of Rosetti, which is, on the whole, the best; though that of Byron, quoted above,—who caught the spirit of it,—is certainly fine. These verses come to one with an indescribable power. Who, with a soul to interpret the poet's meaning, would not feel,—though he had never read a page of his history,—that Dante had lived in a strange land and known the woes of an exile?—

“It is the hour that thaws the heart, and sends  
The voyager's affections home, when they  
Since morn have said adieu to darling friends;  
And smites the new-made pilgrim on his way  
With love, if he a distant bell should hear  
That seems a mourning for the dying day.”

One fondly lingers, as on enchanted ground, and wishes the pilgrim will not depart. We bring our sensibility into touch with this lucent, fragrant ambregris of the mournful poet's heart and fancy, that down the centuries gains currency more and more among song-lovers. The more we chafe it the sweeter it smells. It has still the charm that Macaulay felt, and is worthy of his magnificent eulogium: “To other writers evening may be the season of dews and stars and radiant clouds. To Dante it is the hour of fond recollection and passionate devotion,—the hour which melts the heart of the mariner and kindles the love of the pilgrim,—the hour when the toll of the bell seems to mourn for another day which is gone and will return no more.”

## VII.

“All men praised with lauding lips  
The apotheosis of the bell.”

—*Hunter Duvar.*

Who can be talking upon such subjects and not remember Schiller and his well-conned poem, elaborate and exhaustive? Or of one, less than Schiller, as intense a worshipper of Beauty, but lacking his sustained vigour, his breadth of mentality and strength of character—Edgar Poe? Where can we hear a subtler music than he won from the bells? He is an elfin singer, and his chiming is most ærial; like those chimes heard from turrets underneath the sea, or the knells rung by the sea-nymphs in that magical play, “The Tempest.”

“Through the balmy air of night,  
How they ring out with delight;  
From the molten-golden notes,  
And all in tune  
What a liquid ditty floats.”

And what wild, merry, tipsy, talkative, companionable bells were those Dickens listened to, lending the charm of his fancy,—bells that “burst out so loud and clear and sonorous, saying: “Toby Veck, Toby Veck, waiting for you, Toby . . . Come and see us; come and see us. Drag him to us; drag him to us. Haunt and haunt him; haunt and haunt him. Break his slumbers; break his slumbers! Toby Veck! Toby Veck! Door open wide, Toby.”

“The Bells, the old familiar Bells! his own dear constant steady friends; the chimes began to ring the joyous peals for a New Year; so lustily, so merrily, so happily, so gaily, that he leaped upon his feet . . . The chimes are ringing in the New Year. ‘Hear them!’ They were ringing! Bless their sturdy hearts! They were ringing! Great Bells as they were; melodious, deep-mouthed, noble bells; cast in no common metal; made by no common founder; when had they ever chimed like that before!”

Sleep well, Charles Dickens! beneath the worn towers of that gray minster. The tolling from above shall not wake you; but such joyous peals as you have rung will ever fill the memory of man with delight. We love you well, great departed one, for your ringing of memory chimes.

## VIII.

“Rustling runners and sharp bells.”

Not sharp, but soft of sound. “I like your bells,” I said to my companion, as we went gliding at evening through a woodland road, amid trees covered with late snow. “Yes,” he observed quietly, “they are chimes.” At the word “chimes” I fell into silence and went fairying. He continued: “I want something on winter evenings better than the creaking of my sleigh to listen to.” My friend furnishes me a moonlit ride and an agreeable