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Hollow

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The Bell of Sundown Hollow

Kirk Wareham

Alvin and little sister Sandy, who had not one but two dimples, and who sang wherever she went even though she was only six, meandered happily toward Buffalo Hill. Cabin fever had engulfed the children and Naomi Conway was glad to let them go. Sandy's heart was full of springtime and it overflowed in a continuous torrent of happy song. But Alvin walked quietly, his eyes and mind taking in the details around him as he went.

Winter was fading quickly here in the back hills and only a few patches of snow remained, hunched resolutely against the warm sweet breath of spring. The slender stalks of forsythia, dull and brown all through the cold dark days of winter, were taking on a greenish-yellow hue and it would only take a few exceptionally warm days before they burst into a glorious profusion of flower. Easter was only a few weeks away.

Sandy sang as she skipped along. As the children passed by his shanty, Mose Dawson waved his callused hands in greeting. His old rocker clicked gently on the porch floorboards as he rocked to and fro, drawing contentedly from a long-stemmed pipe. Through the open window Alvin could see Abby Dawson moving gently between the kitchen table and the sink, busy with her supper preparations. Even the lean yellow cat stalked gently off the porch in search of a mouse or mole. Everything about the Dawson place was gentle. It was, in a way, the very picture of Sundown Hollow.

Further up the road Alvin and Sandy passed the cabin of Walt Thorton. Just about all the men of the village except Mose had gathered on Walt's porch for a game of chess. The players slouched in their chairs and snapped their suspenders as they attempted to fathom the depths of strategy and tactic. The onlookers cheered and joshed amid the clink of glasses.

Down in the yards of the shacks the children played and quarreled, the chickens scratched, and the goats continued their studied work of reducing the bushes to leafless stumps.

Naomi Conway stepped out into the street occasionally to reassure herself of the safety of her children. She wasn't much worried for Sandy; she was friend to everything and everybody. But you never quite knew with Alvin; sometimes the most curious things set him off. She watched for a minute, then turned and went back inside to finish the washing. She sighed at her work. Things had been hard since the day Adam had left . . . real hard. Alvin had even stopped talking after that. Why, only last Easter they had still been together and then . . . then . . . she wiped a sleeve across her eyes. No, she would not think about it. Life was a rocky road, full of ups and downs. By the grace of God she would carry on.

By the time the children had scrambled to the top of Buffalo Hill, Sandy's singing had stopped and her breath came in gasps. The view, as always, was stunning.

"Look Alvin . . . you can see . . . all the way to Pinder's Gap . . . Mama says . . ." She stopped to catch her breath.

Alvin smiled. He didn't say anything. Sandy understood his smile perfectly. She knew that this was his favorite place in the whole world. Why, from here you could see all the way to . . . well, all the way to Pinder's Gap. Alvin loved Buffalo Hill and they often came here together.

After they had rested awhile, Alvin motioned to Sandy and pointed to the logging road at the end of the hill. Sandy led the way singing. Alvin loved the hemlocks along the road almost as much as he loved Buffalo Hill. It was a longer way than straight home, but Alvin was in awe of the tall hemlocks and he never tired of their majesty. They were a company of soldiers, standing at attention, tall and noble, like the stories he had heard of wars long gone.

At Old Jud Kentry's place they stopped. The outside cellar doors were open and Alvin smiled to see Jud's head sticking out. He waved, just as he would have waved at Mose Dawson or Walt Thorton or any of the other men of the village. Jud smiled in pleased surprise.

"Hello there, Alvin. Spring'll be along shortly, don't you think?"

The boy nodded.

"That your sister?"

He nodded again.

"She got a name, by any chance?"

Sandy's smile lit up her whole face and the two dimples winked at him. "Sandy, sir."

"Sandy." He chuckled warmly. "An excellent name, a wonderful name, my dear."

Jud climbed the stairs and shook hands with both of them. "You want to see what I'm making today, Alvin? Come on down, I'll show you. I'm making a couple of birdhouses."

It was rather dim in the basement, but fascinating nonetheless. Alvin had never known Jud had a real basement. The cement holding the stones of the foundation walls had recently been reworked and Jud had put down a brick floor and set up a nice little workshop. An impressive workbench with a solid butcher-block top took up the middle of the room. Plastered to the wall was a tool board with hand tools, each with its particular place marked out carefully. Jud held up his birdhouse to show them.

"See, this one is basically done. All I have to do is paint it and mount it outside my living room window. But this next one here is for the porch. It's still got a bit of work to do. Maybe you want to come over sometime and make one yourself, what do you say Alvin?"

Alvin thought it was a great idea and nodded in agreement.

Sandy spoke for him. "Alvin would love to do that. He'll come again, but Mama said not to stay too long. We just went up on to Buffalo Hill. But now we better go home."

Alvin started up the stairs but then he stopped, peering into the darkness below the stairs. He pointed and raised questioning eyes to Jud.

Jud laughed. "You've got good eyes, Alvin. You know what that is? It's an old church bell. When I was a boy that bell was never rung but once a year, and that on Easter morning. We boys would wake up early on Easter and ring it, and everyone knew that Easter had come again. It was a special sound, I can tell you."

Alvin's eyes shone. For a moment Old Jud was quiet, then in the half-darkness Alvin could see his face wrinkle some.

"Yes, haven't heard that bell ring now for thirty odd years. It's right sad, you know. My father was the preacher of that church." He paused, and swallowed hard. "That church burned down one night, wouldn't you know it? Not two sticks left to lean against each other. The only thing

that came out of that fire was this here bell.” He sniffed and brushed the back of his wrinkled hand across his eyes and swallowed again. “I still miss my father some, you know. He was too young to go yet, too good of a man for that. He loved Jesus with his whole heart and followed the Golden Rule all his life long. He served others, not himself.”

“After the fire was over, I went and dug that bell out of the charred remains, thinking of my father. That bell always reminds me of him. A kid needs something to remind him of his father, right? In a way I like to think that as long as I’ve got that bell with me, I’ve still got him.”

It was very quiet in the dim cellar. “Well, you kids better be getting along now. You come over some time and we’ll make a birdhouse together, you hear?”

All the way home Alvin thought about that bell. All through supper he thought about that bell. And when he climbed into bed and closed his eyes, Alvin could see that bell clear as daylight. He thought of the bell ringing out on Easter morning, and how its tongue had been silent all these years. Easter was only a few weeks away! That bell should be rung this Easter for all of Sundown to hear. Why it would be heard all the way to Pinder’s Gap!

Then a thought struck him. They wouldn’t hear it in Pinder’s Gap if it was in Jud’s basement. But maybe, just maybe, they would hear it if it was rung from the top of Buffalo Hill. Slowly the plan formed in Alvin’s mind; tomorrow after school he would go and visit Jud. Alvin sank into a contented sleep.

When Alvin arrived the next day he found Jud asleep on his couch. Jud was a little embarrassed at being caught napping in the middle of the day. “Haven’t been feeling too well lately, you know. But now, let’s get to work on that birdhouse, okay?”

To his surprise, Alvin disagreed, and vigorously. He shook his head. Taking hold of Jud’s shirtsleeve, he led the way to the basement. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned and pointed at the bell, urgently.

“You like that bell, do you? You want to hear it ring, I’ll bet, is that it?”

Alvin shook his head again. He beckoned Jud up the stairs again and out onto the road. Old Jud coughed painfully as he climbed the stairs, and paused a moment to get his breath. Then he followed Alvin out into the road. Alvin pointed up the lane of hemlocks, to where the green arch ended and only the blue of the sky could be seen above the rim of Buffalo Hill. Urgently he pointed. Jud was puzzled; he scratched his ear and scrunched up his cheek in puzzlement. Alvin made motions of pulling the bell rope. Jud scratched harder. Alvin pointed to the basement, then back to Buffalo Hill. The old man questioned; Alvin explained with his hands. Jud questioned again; Alvin shook his head. Jud’s scratching stopped; he couldn’t think and scratch at the same time. Another question; another gesture. The old man spoke with his voice and the boy spoke with his whole being.

Then suddenly Jud slapped his overalls and stood up straight. “I’ve got it Alvin, I’ve got it. It’s clear as a bell now. You want to take the old thing up on the hill and ring it for Easter morning, is that it?”

A wide grin spread across the boy’s face. He stood, nodding vigorously. Then, he turned and plunged down the stairs again. There was work to be done. Easter was not far off.

Together they hauled the old bell out from under the stairs and set to work. Together they hoisted it onto the workbench. Jud showed Alvin how to clean and polish the bell. Alvin

worked hard, his tongue gripped tightly between his lips as he concentrated. Jud cut off the charred bits of rope and knotted a new rope in place. The gong had rusted in place and took a good bit of coaxing with some machine oil to free it up.

After awhile the old man tired and sat down on a chair, coughing. Alvin stopped his polishing; his old friend looked completely worn out. Quickly Alvin dashed up the steps into the house, and came back with a glass of water. The old man's big grin showed his thanks. They had discovered that they understood each other perfectly without the encumbrance of words.

They worked on together. The afternoon slipped away all too quickly. At last Jud reached over and pointed to his watch and Alvin stopped. He smiled as he dusted himself off and headed home.

The next day he was back.

Day after day they worked. After cutting ash planks for the mounting, Jud showed Alvin how to clean up the edges with a hand-plane. They clamped the pieces in a big wooden vice mounted on the edge of the workbench. Alvin loved to watch the chips curl out through the top of the plane. He loved the smell of the wood, the feel of it in his hands, and the fulfillment of making something himself. He sanded the ends of the boards and Jud nailed them together. It was fun.

But Alvin noticed that the old man had to stop again and again to cough, his body shaking. It worried him some. It didn't seem good. But Jud worked on, wrapping the gong in layers of cloth so that the bell wouldn't ring too early and disrupt the surprise. Then they hung the bell on the big mounting. Alvin decided he would have to get the help of his friends to get it up to the top of Buffalo Hill.

Day after day Jud's health deteriorated. The old man never complained to the boy. The progress of the bell was all that mattered. The basement rang with the good sound of work. All through the last week before Easter, Alvin and Jud worked hard on the final preparations.

Then, almost before they were ready, it was the day before Easter. Alvin got Sandy to round up the boys to help haul the bell up to Buffalo Hill, ready for the morning. It was to be a surprise for the villagers; the boys had promised not to breathe a word to anybody. Off to Old Jud's basement they hurried.

But when they arrived, Alvin was shocked to find Jud in his bed, sick and feverish. He tossed and turned, moaning now and again, seemingly unable to find a comfortable position. The boys stood quietly around his bed. He spoke to them in little more than a whisper. His usual humor had faded from his speech, and his thoughts were serious now.

"So Alvin told you about the bell, right? Yes, it's ready to go, ready to be taken to Buffalo Hill. Tomorrow's Easter morning, boys. When you go to ring that bell, remember the reason you're ringing it. It's to herald in the resurrection of Christ! You boys know the story; you've read it in the Bible with your parents, right?"

They nodded.

“Good Friday wasn’t the end, was it? No, Good Friday was only the beginning. Jesus was brought back from death to new life. That’s what resurrection means, new life.”

“Yes, the ringing of the bell is a proclamation. That bell, when you ring it, is proclaiming new life to the whole world. Who knows, maybe that bell will be heard even beyond Sundown Hollow and Pinder’s Gap. Perhaps the sound of that bell will carry over Summersville Mountain to the east, over Mount Hope to the west, and even down the hollow to Fisher’s Crossing. The sound of that bell could practically travel over the whole world.

“Just think, boys. Maybe there’s some old drunkard down in French Creek, lying in the gutter. He hears the sound of that bell ringing and he thinks to himself, ‘this is a crazy life I’m living. I’ve got to drag myself out of this mess I’m living and make my life count for something. I’ve got to start over, before it’s too late.’ It’s possible, don’t you think?”

“Or perhaps the sound of that bell carries over into Millerdale and there’s some poor old lady, sick in bed. She’s tossing and turning, half awake on Easter morning, trying to figure out why, at her age, she’s all alone in the world. Suddenly she hears the sound of that Easter bell coming faintly over the hill. Her eyes pop open, she sits up in bed, listens intently for a minute. Then she smiles and a warmth fills her heart and that lonely feeling disappears. That Easter bell is like balm to her soul. Don’t you think it could be like that, boys?”

The old man went into a fit of coughing that bent him double and left him inert and exhausted. For a minute he lay still, hardly moving. Then slowly he rose up on one elbow and looked at them through bloodshot eyes.

“Listen to me, boys. Easter isn’t something that happened a couple thousand years ago. Yes, that’s when He died and rose, but Easter didn’t stop there; it’s still happening today. We can see it all around us, right? New life is springing up every which way, in places you could never imagine. All winter it looked like the trees were dead, it looked like the grass was dead, why it looked like the whole world was dead. But it wasn’t, was it? No, Mother Nature had her plan and her plan is life. Just about the time we despair, the sun comes out, the snow melts, the flowers come up, and every way you turn you see new life.” He coughed again.

“I’m doing poorly, boys, you can see that sure enough. But you go and take that bell up to the mountain. Take it and set it up. And tomorrow morning, when the sun peeks over Buffalo Hill, you ring it for all you’re worth. Ring it with everything you’ve got, and tell the whole world that it’s Easter morning! I’ll be listening for it. Would you do that for me?” And he sank back and closed his eyes.

Down into the basement the boys scrambled. They hoisted the frame onto their shoulders and eased it up the stairs and out into the road. With a cart borrowed from Mose Dawson and two strong ropes tied to the front, they fought their way up the hill and placed the bell at the highest point they could find. It was a place where both Sundown Hollow and Pinder’s Gap would be able to hear it.

On Easter morning, at the first hint of light, Alvin awoke. He thought first of the bell, then of Jud. Jud was not well; perhaps Jud needed him. Alvin climbed out of bed and dressed in the dark. As he slipped out of the house, Sandy joined him silently.

Jud's house was quiet and dark except for a small lamp in the bedroom. They did not bother to knock but went in the front door quietly. Alvin wanted to make sure Jud had what he needed, then they would slip home and wait for the appointed hour to ring the bell. At the door of Jud's bedroom Alvin knocked and listened. He knocked again gently, and when there was still no answer, he opened the door and Sandy followed him in.

Jud was lying still in his bed; the light from the lamp cast weird shadows across his face. The familiar wrinkles seemed relaxed, and strangely different. Alvin went softly to the side of the bed and laid his hand on Jud's arm. It was cold.

Death is not an easy thing to understand for man or child. For Alvin, it was completely incomprehensible. He shook his head in confusion and doubt. He tried again to waken Jud gently. Then, with increasing intensity, he shook his friend's arm, but without success. And slowly, like a cold creeping mist, the reality of death sank into the core of his being. Alvin slumped to his knees and wept, shaking his head back and forth in mute and disbelieving protest. For many minutes he sobbed and shook.

Then at last he felt Sandy's arm on his. "Alvin, we must go home and tell Mama. Come." He rose and they went out into the street, Sandy leading the way. Alvin walked in a daze, as a blind man who sees nothing, as a deaf man who hears nothing.

Then, suddenly, Alvin stopped and turned. Leaving Sandy standing alone, he ran up the road. He ran up through the forest of hemlocks that stood strong and stately. He ran, sobbing, to the base of Buffalo Hill, his breath coming in great gulping gasps. The tears streamed down his face. When he could not run anymore, he walked. When he could no longer walk, he crawled. At last he reached the top of Buffalo Hill, and crawled straight to the bell.

Alvin staggered to his feet. He gripped the rope of the bell and pulled with all his might.

The sound of the great bell pealed out over Sundown Hollow. It rang, clear and strong, down the valley and across to Pinder's Gap. Echoes bouncing off the surrounding hills joined the song of the bell. On and on it rang. And as Alvin pulled, the sky grew lighter.

One by one people appeared in the street of Sundown Hollow. They gathered in confusion and uncertainty. Some scrambled for their shoes, some threw on whatever came to hand, others gathered up little ones and stumbled into the road. They gathered there in sleepy confusion and looked towards Buffalo Hill. On and on rang the bell.

Naomi Conway rushed out of the house, her trembling arm around Sandy. "It's him, Mama, it's Alvin. Old Jud died in the night and Alvin went crazy. It's him ringing the bell up on Buffalo Hill."

"Okay, hush, Sandy. He'll be all right. Walt Thornton and Mose Dawson are going up to get him." And they joined the gathering throng of villagers. As they waited, word of Old Jud's death spread quickly.

At last the bell stopped. The quiet of the early morning settled over Sundown Hollow once again. Gently, gently, Mose and Walt brought Alvin down from Buffalo Hill and home. By the time he reached the village, Alvin's outburst had dissipated. He was dazed. Naomi held him close.

And then, once again, the Easter bell began to ring. Once again all eyes turned in surprise to the hill. After several rings the bell stopped. Down from Buffalo Hill came a figure. At last the figure became a man, and when he was not far off, one of the men recognized him.

“Adam Conway. Why it’s Naomi’s Adam come home.”

Naomi’s hand flew to her throat and she drew Sandy and Alvin close. “Adam,” she whispered. “All the way from Pinder’s Gap. It was the Easter bell that called him home.”

Together, they hurried to meet him.

The rosy glow on the eastern skyline turned to a fiery yellow as the first sliver of the morning sun peeked over the hill, announcing that Easter had come to Sundown Hollow.

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