

Down from the Mountain

If you have read the story of how Jack and Ellayne climbed Bell Mountain and rang the bell that King Ozias put there, you may have wondered what happened to them next.

Jack fully expected the world to end as soon as the bell stopped ringing. He did not know how it would end, he was not even sure he understood what “the end of the world” meant, and he was afraid it would be loud and painful. But what choice had he? God had sent him dreams about the bell, and those dreams were commands. Something even worse than the end of the world would happen if those commands were not obeyed. Besides, God would just find someone else to ring it.

You can imagine his feelings when the clouds blew away and he and Ellayne were still there. The ancient wooden frame that had supported the bell for centuries had collapsed into a pile of splinters; the bell itself was broken in pieces. But the world was still there. He let out a long, deep sigh.

“I’m cold,” he said.

“The bell’s broken, so I guess that’s that,” Ellayne said. “Where did all the fog go?”

They might have stood there some time longer if they hadn’t noticed a man lying facedown on the trail, maybe

half a stone's throw from them. Jack remembered the man coming out of the mist just as they'd grabbed the chain to ring the bell, and waving at them and hollering. But they couldn't hear him over the pealing of the bell.

"Who could that be?" Jack said. And because it was too cold on the mountaintop to be just standing there, he went to have a closer look at the man. Ellayne followed; Jack heard her teeth chattering.

"I wonder if he's dead," she said. "Whatever you do, don't touch him."

But the man wasn't dead. As they stood over him, he rolled onto his back and let out a groan. His eyes fluttered open. He stared at them.

"Who are you?" Jack said. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you sick?" Ellayne asked.

Martis opened his eyes. When the bell rang, he'd had the sensation of falling headfirst into a black pit, falling and falling forever. Now he lay on solid ground, and there were children looking down at him and asking him questions. When he pushed himself up on his hands, he saw that the bell was down, broken, its supporting framework ruined.

He'd failed in his mission. The children had rung the bell, and it would never ring again. He'd failed to stop them. If he ever returned to Obann, Lord Reesh would have a new assassin waiting for him.

He stood up with a sigh, his whole body aching.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded.

Martis laughed; but he didn't like the way his own laugh sounded.

“You don’t know what you’re asking me, young sir!” the man said. “But to answer you briefly, the Temple sent me to make sure you didn’t ring the bell. I was sent to kill you. But you needn’t reach for your knife. I won’t hurt you now—or ever.”

Ellayne recognized the Temple insignia on his torn, stained coat. His beard was white but his hair was brown, which she thought very odd. He told them a story about how he’d followed them all the way from Ninneburky and found Obst dying in a shelter on the mountain; and Obst had told him how to follow them the rest of the way up. The children listened for a while, but now they wanted to see Obst again. He deserved a decent burial, at least.

“We have to go back down,” Jack said. “It’s too cold to stay up here. We need a fire and food. You’d better come back to our camp with us.”

The man agreed, and slowly, together, they proceeded down the trail.

Martis spoke no more. He could barely think. He remembered coming up the mountain, hurrying after the children, toiling in a blinding cloud, unable to see more than a step or two ahead, in a fog thick enough to force its way under your clothes. Now, coming down, they fared in the full light of the morning sun. Every pebble on the trail, every scratch on every boulder, stood out bright and clear. The neighboring peaks, glistening with streaks of ice and snow, looked like you could reach out and touch them, pick them up and take them with you.

He was cold, a deep-down cold that went all the way to the core of his mind, freezing thoughts before they could take shape as words. And yet with every faltering step he took, the sun caressed his face and each step was just a little stronger. He could not remember the last time anything had felt as good as that sun on his face.

They hustled down the mountain as fast as they could, anxious to reach camp before nightfall. No one felt like talking. There was too much to think about, and too much to see. Bell Mountain's cloak of clouds was gone.

No one had ever seen the peak; clouds had always shrouded it. Down below, growing up in Ninneburky, Jack looked up at the mountains every day of his life; and on every one of those days, Bell Mountain's peak hid under that bank of clouds. What were people thinking down there now that the cloud was gone? What did the mountain look like now? Jack wished he could see it.

But even more on his mind was the question of when the world would begin to end and what that would be like. He couldn't put those thoughts into words: they were too big. More than anything else, he wanted to sit down by a fire and have something to eat. He was terribly tired.

And in good time, there it was, their camp, with Ham the donkey still there and little, hairy Wytt, no bigger than a rat, hopping up and down and chittering to greet them. There was a horse hobbled, too.

"Is that your horse?" Ellayne asked the man from the Temple.

"Yes."

"Let's get a campfire started!" Jack said. He was shivering all over.

Their camp was just a wide spot in the trail, with some huge boulders well-placed for shelter from the wind and the firewood they'd brought up with them; but it felt like coming home. Jack got busy right away, making a fire. If he used up the last of his matches, he didn't care; and anyhow, Ellayne knew how to start a fire without matches (Jack had never gotten the hang of it). She passed out drinks of water, and the man sat down and sighed.

Wytt stood in front of him, chattering, brandishing his little sharp stick. The man stared at him.

"Jack! Wytt's talking to us!" Ellayne said.

He paused. She was right—it was a kind of talking, not just scolding like a squirrel in a tree. It wasn't words, like human speech. Nevertheless, Jack understood it.

"Wytt's met this man before," he said. How Jack knew that, he couldn't have said; he just knew. "Well, of course he has. That's how the horse got here."

"He's telling us this man is all right," Ellayne said. "That's funny! We never used to understand him. But that man in the forest, that Helki—he said he could talk with the little hairy folk. And I always thought Wytt understood most of what we said to him."

"He's been with us long enough. We ought to understand him by now," Jack said. He was too tired for a miracle, just now. He got the fire started, finally, then looked up at the man. "You haven't told us your name, mister."

"My name is Martis. I'm a servant of the Temple."

With the fire going, and food in their bellies, and Wytt cuddled in Ellayne's arms, they finally got the man to talk.

And he had much to say.

“I’ve been following you for a long time,” he said. “Lord Reesh himself, the First Prester, assigned the mission to me. He wanted me to see if you could find the bell. He wanted to know if there really was a bell. But I was not to let you ring it. I was to kill you.”

It would be the easiest thing in the world for a grown man to kill a pair of children. Jack knew that. There was nothing to stop this man from killing them now.

“Don’t be afraid!” Martis said. “Everything’s changed. I wouldn’t hurt you now, not for anything.”

“But the First Prester!” Ellayne cried. “He’s a great lord, and a man of God! Why would he—?”

“Because he was afraid. Afraid of you, afraid of the bell. Most of all, he was afraid God might be real, after all. I understand that now.”

Martis shook his head. He looked desperately sad, Jack thought.

“I never thought Lord Reesh believed in God. He always said there was no God; or if there was, it didn’t matter. He said the only things that matter are order and progress: wise men moving the world forward, he always said.

“Was everything he taught me just a lie? Everything? He must have known it was a lie, or he never would have sent me to stop you from ringing the bell. He must have believed God would hear it, just like the Scripture says. He must have feared God would bring the world to an end. He had dreams about it.”

“But how could the First Prester not believe in God?” Ellayne said. She was more upset about it than Jack was, being much better educated. “I mean, he is the First Prester!

He's holy."

Martis laughed quietly, a kind of laugh with a lot of pain in it.

"I was the servant of that holy man," he said. "He took me off the streets and taught me everything I know. And can you guess how I served my holy master?"

"I killed the people that he wanted killed, and found false witnesses to speak against persons that he wanted cast into prison or hanged, although they'd committed no crime. I stole the things he ordered me to steal. I doubt I could tell you half the crimes that I've committed—but I did them all by his command."

"Then you must be a very wicked man!" Ellayne said. "You must be as bad as he is, or worse."

"That can't be denied," Martis said.

"But it really doesn't matter," Jack said, "seeing as how the world is going to end." That silenced them all for some moments, until Ellayne spoke up.

"But it doesn't feel like the world's about to end," she said. "Instead, it feels more like everything is just about to start. It all feels *new*."

Jack was about to say that that was just about the stupidest thing he'd ever heard—but was it? Even in this washed-out mountain landscape, weren't the colors somehow brighter than they were the day before? It was late afternoon; the sun had already gone down behind the mountain peaks, and it was getting dark—but look how bright those first stars shone!

"Oh, what do you know about it!" he grumbled. "I guess Obst knew a hundred times better than you do, and he always said that after we rang the bell, God would end

the world. I guess he must've known what he was talking about."

"Poor Obst! I wonder if he heard it when we rang the bell," Ellayne said. "I wonder what he thought of it before he died." She wiped away a tear. Just like a girl, Jack thought, ignoring the tear trickling down his own cheek.

"He was still alive when I left him," Martis said, "very weak, but in good spirits. That was, I think, two days ago." He shook his head. "I'm not sure of how much time has passed, lately."

"I wonder if there's a chance he's still alive," Jack said. "Maybe tomorrow, if we hurry ..." He turned to Martis. "But how do we know you won't kill us?"

The assassin shrugged. "You don't."

"But Obst was going to kill us, too, at first—he even said so," Ellayne said. "And then he changed his mind and helped us. We couldn't have got here without him."

"But Obst is a good man!" Jack said. "And this is a bad one. He told us so. How can we trust a bad man?"

"I don't ask you to trust me," Martis said. "I don't ask anything of you. But I'll protect you if I can. I know Lord Reesh. He will stop at nothing to have you brought before him, in secret; and then he will have you killed, in secret. He'll find another assassin to do his bidding."

"So you're going to turn against him? I thought he was your master," Jack said.

Martis sighed. "Up there on the mountaintop," he said, "I found another master. I think I came very close to dying. I doubt I would have come back to my senses, if you hadn't spoken to me."

"Another master?" said Ellayne.

“One to whom I owe my life—what’s left of it. And to you and Jack, too, I find myself in debt. I wouldn’t know how to turn into a good man,” Martis said, “but perhaps my wickedness can be put to some constructive use.

“One thing I do know now that I didn’t know this morning: God is truly God, and God protects you. He will not let me harm you, and I would be a fool to try. I hope I’ve never been as big a fool as that.”