

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

17 *No Bell-Ringing*

A Ballad of Durnover

The little boy legged on through the dark,
To hear the New-Year's ringing:
The three-mile road was empty, stark,
No sound or echo bringing.

When he got to the tall church tower 5
Standing upon the hill,
Although it was hard on the midnight hour
The place was, as elsewhere, still;

Except that the flag-staff rope, betossed 10
By blasts from the nor'-east,
Like a dead man's bones on a gibbet-post
Tugged as to be released.

"Why is there no ringing to-night?"
Said the boy to a moveless one
On a tombstone where the moon struck white; 15
But he got answer none.

"No ringing in of New Year's Day."
He mused as he dragged back home;
And wondered till his head was gray
Why the bells that night were dumb. 20

And often thought of the snowy shape
That sat on the moonlit stone,
Nor spoke nor moved, and in mien and drape
Seemed like a sprite thereon.

And then he met one left of the band 25
That had treble-bobbed when young,
And said: "I never could understand
Why, that night, no bells rung."

“True. There’d not happened such a thing
For half a century; aye, 30
And never I’ve told why they did not ring
From that time till to-day. . . .

“Through the week in bliss at *The Hit or Miss*
We had drunk — not a penny left;
What then we did — well, now ’tis hid, — 35
But better we’d stooped to theft!

“Yet, since none other remains who can,
And few more years are mine,
I may tell you,” said the cramped old man.
“We — swilled the Sacrament-wine. 40

“Then each set-to with the strength of two,
Every man to his bell;
But something was wrong we found ere long
Though what, we could not tell.

“We pulled till the sweat-drops fell around, 45
As we’d never pulled before,
An hour by the clock, but not one sound
Came down through the bell-loft floor.

“On the morrow all folk of the same thing spoke,
They had stood at the midnight time 50
On their doorsteps near with a listening ear,
But there reached them never a chime.

“We then could read the dye of our deed,
And we knew we were accurst;
But we broke to none the thing we had done, 55
And since then never durst.”

1925

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