

Jesu Maria 1690

Allyn Wood

THE massive bell, resting on the rug in their living-room amid its travelling - wrappings, was much larger than they had expected. The girl and her mother felt their cottage grow smaller like a rock surrounded by rising tide. They were not inclined to discuss the bell in its presence, lest their minds turn on them with salty and even rude criticism from the inanimate thing's point of view; but they noticed for the first time how poor was the view from their windows, which did not look to sea. It was a great iron bell, with rust scoured thin to dust of Orient cinnamon; and on the inside, except where the tongue had struck, it was incrustated with salt. Around it a band of raised iron words said, "Jesu Maria 1690," with no comma between. Why no comma? wondered the girl. — "The mainmast is gone! We are sinking Jesu Maria 1690" — Is there comfort in handing down the year? No time for punctuation in the log-book that floats a while with its little mast, the pen. But Jesu Maria was not made in haste. The New England antique dealer from whom they had ordered it knew nothing of its history nor how it came to him.

Her mother returned to the kitchen pensively with a rolling step. The girl turned out the lamp, folded her hands under her head and curled into the couch. In shadow rested the bell. The transparent kettle began to sing thin and high like a sou'wester brewing . . . In New England, men and women are gathering to watch the liquid's motion in their glass

barometers, and to turn their kippered faces toward the sea.

Great waves break over the couch. Where is the beginning? That is not for you to know, to know, to know. Then we cannot begin at the beginning? where must we begin? begin? begin? The air is full of bells, but not yet Jesu Maria. Its ore is underground and flows dissolved in the oceans, flung backward and forward by the moon. Something is cast upon a shore. They have come — the discoverers, like animals invading a new continent; borne on ships as beasts on driftwood, frightened and wet, with sargassum for their banners. They are moving inland to meet men with names of animals, Listening Owl, Father Beaver; who worship gods of rain and corn; whose world moves through the heavens slowly on Great Turtle's mossy back. They demand gold and the other men, pointing westward, tell them about the sun.

They come in waves to live and die, in search of Eldorado, of La Mer del Sur, the Strait of Anian. They die of fever with the bells of Castile in their ears; and icebound while fierce childlike puffins in frosty feathers look down from Baffinland. At night — and it is always night — come ice-bells booming nearer, nearer, overture of spring too late for them; and the wind crying "perish!" through frozen sails.

It is cast.

What matter where? "Jesu Maria!" — a mariner's oath, a mariner's prayer. Swallows have built mud nests with double campanili in the west. White gulls have settled to be New England towns . . .

A cool feeling emanated from the bell, and the girl stirred. She remembered a Magellan scallop's valve that she had held once, how self-possessed it was. The storms of Magellan Strait had been in her, not in the shell. What is a shell, a bell? Something like the **Marie Celeste** that comes amidship mysteriously in the wastes of the sea, with her sails trimmed, her bunk-sheets smoothed, food on the table — and no one aboard. What, then, is the **Marie Celeste**?

But the air is full of bells! sometimes faint tinklings of a past that never goes, chatter of voices, invisible pennants streaming. "One, if by land, and two, if by sea." There was a woman who threw her petticoat out the window to Paul Revere that night, to muffle his oars

across Charles River. What kind of woman was she? One to throw down her best petticoat, or one to rummage for an old one, thinking, This will serve as well? And where is Jesu Maria at eighty-five years old? It is clanging in Sumatra, Madeira, the Isles of Spice; at Derby Wharf in Salem. Sailors darn their socks with a big nutmeg in the toe.

They are a chime of bells . . .

"Supper's ready," called the voice in the next room.

. . . on ships, on trains, in towers; ringing alarm, victory, marriage, death; in a lucent Sunday morning ringing across the river. They are one bell far off, in a night before rain. The girl sat up. What is imagination?

"Coming."



PURPLE PATCH

A book is a swift seducer. It swoops upon you and lifts you away before you are aware that you are captured. It throws a silken sack of thought about you, lulls you with soporific, fragrant dreams and carries you off to a fast stronghold from which there is no escape. From **Guard and Captive** by Earl Murphy