

Last year, with a full moon making huge black shadows of the ancient pines among which the shrine is set, and glistening silhouettes of the heavy tiled roofs of buildings and gateways, we walked through the compound on to the Sammon (Mountain Gate) of the temple, Chion-in, on Higashiyama. Up the three hundred steep stone steps we plodded, across the moonlight-flooded courtyard before the main temple building, again up uncertain steps hewn out of the mountain-side, and through the forest to the tower where hangs the great bell of the headquarters of the Jodo (Pure Land) Sect, the second largest bell in Japan.

On the edge of the forest to the side of the bell-tower, over boiling cauldrons propped on blazing bonfires, bent and wrinkled *obasans* and *ojisans*, like so many forest gnomes and witches, were ladling out bowls of steaming sweet-bean soup to shivering watchers. Just before twelve, the great candles on iron stands were put in place in the four corners of the earthen floor of the tower. They illumined the eager, pushing crowd and brought into sudden relief a huge and strange dark-faced figure completely swathed in orange robes. A visiting monk from Ceylon, I knew. But just so must Bodhidharma have looked among the native crowds at some ancient festival in China. Before the simple Buddhist altar set beneath the bell itself, the *Kancho* and attendant priests, arrayed in purple robes and golden *kesas*, recited sutras and burned incense till it rose in clouds. The gnarled old bell-ringer, grasping the rope of the enormous log with which the bell is struck, stood immovable, watching for the signal that the year was done. A priest's hand dropped, the hour struck, struck with a great boom that went rolling over the entire city of Kyoto and far out to the fields and villages beyond. By this signal over many centuries have the folk of the Kamo valley known that the New Year has begun.

Again the great bell was struck, and again, and again, one hundred and eight times in all it was struck, a number sacred to all Buddhists. On the one hundred and eighth stroke, the great bell of the temple next north on Higashiyama sounded, and after that the next and then the next, until all the hills by which the city is surrounded echoed and re-echoed with the booming of the bells.

Late into the night the temple bells were still booming. And all through the city people were still streaming toward the shrine and out into the city streets carrying their fresh fire. Booming of bells, twinkling of tiny fires! A new year is beginning. A Happy New Year? A Prosperous New Year? Would the Kami Sama answer the unspoken hopes of these hearts?

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