

# The Bells of Carmel

*Mission Days in California*



**Edith H. Blackburn**





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by Edith H. Blackburn

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# Contents

1. The Bells	1
2. Aptos of Carmel	10
3. On El Camino Del Real	21
4. On to Mexico City	29
5. A Gift from the Sea	38
6. The San Francisco Bay Adventure	46
7. The Strange Ship	53
8. Nat's Chance Comes	62
9. In the Highlands	70
10. In the Deep Grass Valley	77
11. The Moon of Deep Water	85
12. The Letter	93



## 1. The Bells

THE WARMTH OF THE SUN baked the winter ache from Father Junipero Serra's bones as he limped eagerly ahead of the pack train. Old and lame though he was, Father Serra outdistanced the two younger friars who were his companions.

Summer had been late in coming to California in this year of 1771, but the summer sunlight had come now in the mountains and in the valleys. Father Serra lifted his head as a bird burst into song. His spirits mounted.

He stopped on the edge of a grassy open space in the forest, drinking in the beauty of the spot. Then he signaled his companions to halt the line of mules and cows that made up the pack train. As soon as the animals were brought to a stop under a moss-hung oak tree, the old man began to unfasten the pack straps of the nearest mule.

A wooden cross and a spade were already in the good Father's hands before a heavy-set young friar could speak. Nevertheless, the younger man protested. "There are no Indian encampments

nearby, Father Serra. See, there isn't a soul in this whole valley. Let us go on. Surely we should build our mission near a village."

Junipero Serra's eyes glowed under his heavy brows. "See that little river, fed by hillside springs," he answered. "See the level meadow and the green grass. Soon there will be fields here, corn and grain and many cattle."

"But, the Indians?" The youngest friar, Father Carlos, added his protest. "What good is a mission without the unbelievers to whom we can bring the word of God?"

Father Serra thrust the spade into the young friar's hands. "What good is a mission without food for the body? We will plant the cross right here and dedicate this mission to San Antonio de Padua. The natives will come. I feel it. Dig, brother."

The old man strode to the second mule, who was restlessly stamping about. "Easy, stubborn one," he scolded. "I will relieve you of your load; then you may nibble the sweet grass and roll as much as you like."

He unbuckled the straps that held a bronze bell in place on either side of the animal and unwrapped the clappers. When the unloading was completed, Father Serra's companions set up the large wooden cross. As soon as the cross was erected, the three brown-robed friars knelt in prayer. Then they hung a bell from the limb of an oak.

Father Serra seized the bell rope in his strong hands. "You shall see," he said confidently.

With the first sound of the bell, Junipero Serra's voice boomed out across the valley. "Come," he called. "Come, ye people."

The younger friars watched with wonder in their faces. The bell seemed to exult with the ringer, echoing back from the hills, and Junipero Serra's voice was one with the bell. "Come, ye people, come." For several minutes, the old man pulled on the rope; still the valley remained empty of anything human except themselves.

Then Father Serra paused. His eyes had been caught by some movement.

"See! It is useless," Father Carlos muttered.

Junipero Serra pulled at the rope again. "Look in that clump of bushes to your right," he said softly.

A little dog crouched on the ground, frozen to stillness. As the bell began to ring again, he moved slightly, and the friars saw a

hand come out of the bushes, clutching the animal. A boy's small brown face, topped by stiff black hair, appeared for a moment. Bright, curious eyes stared at the intruders; then the bushes closed.

Father Serra dropped the bell rope. He took some cornbread from the pocket in the sleeve of his robe. Breaking off a piece, he tossed it toward the bushes.

The dog leaped for the bread and swallowed it. The boy's face reappeared for an instant, then vanished.

The old man moved forward a step, talking quietly in the speech of Carmel Indians. He tossed another scrap, close to his feet.

The dog seized it, and did not retreat this time. He was only a pup and gaunt with hunger, but his stubby tail wagged furiously.

Again the face pushed through the leaves, watching, curious but unafraid. Junipero Serra reached into his pocket and drew out a bit of venison. This time he touched the pup's head as he fed him.

The boy's slim body slipped out of the bushes, his eyes hungrily fixed on the meat. At the sight, a smile touched Father Serra's lips. He held the remaining food in his hand. Suddenly the boy snatched it in his thin claw and ran, the dog at his heels.

Father Serra took a medal on a leather cord from his pocket. He held it so the sun caught its brightness, and spoke again in the language of the Carmel Indians. "Come, come, my son. This is for you."

The Indian boy advanced again, warily, his eyes on the shining thing in the brown-robed one's hand.

Father Serra pointed to the tall wooden cross and the bell. "Bring in your people," he begged. "Tell them to come. Tell them we have come to help them, to teach them." He made a sweeping gesture toward the hills. "Tell them all to come!"

The lad's eyes followed the friar's gestures and the movement of his lips. Suddenly he reached out and grabbed the medal, and his arrow-straight body melted into the woods. The dog's excited barking could be heard long after boy and dog had vanished from sight.

"Well," the heavy-set young friar exploded. "One Indian, a boy, scarce eleven years old, I would guess. Do you think he understood a word? I have heard that every isolated tribe speaks a different language."





Junipero Serra looked at his companions. "You are young," he said. "You have just come out into this wilderness. Your faith will strengthen."

Only three years had gone by since the first mission had been built. Less than five years had passed since Junipero Serra had been given permission to go out to spread the Gospel throughout Alta California. So much had happened in this brief time; however, it is no wonder that the Father spoke as if the work had gone on for a lifetime.

Since the day the Spanish ruler of Mexico decided to send an expedition to rediscover this unclaimed wilderness, Junipero Serra had not rested.

The Expedition had been a large one, undertaken by sea and by land. Three ships had sailed from Mexico loaded with church ornaments, with seeds, tools and household goods for the missions and forts that would be erected. Fifteen Franciscan friars had made the journey by sea, but Serra, Father-Guardian of the missions, had gone overland with the soldiers.

They had toiled more than two thousand miles over deserts and mountains, driving a herd of cattle. Neither the hardships nor his age, nor the lameness that grew more painful on the way, had conquered Junipero Serra's spirit. Within a month after the two parts of the expedition had met in the Bay of San Diego, three missions had been built and as many forts for the soldiers.

In the two years that followed, more missions and more forts had been erected from San Diego in the south, northward as far as Monterey. Father Serra could have done without the forts. The Spanish soldiers under Captain Portola acted toward the people of the country as intruders will. They had come to trade and to conquer for the glory of Spain.

Junipero Serra had come to save souls for the glory of God. He could not rest until all the people in every isolated valley like this one had been converted to the faith.

He laid his hand on the bell rope and began to call again. "Come. Come ye people."

After a half hour, the old friar paused. "We will begin now," he said quietly. "The people come."

His companions joined him, with wonder, as he knelt beside the cross. When they arose, more than a hundred men and women filled the green open space.