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Ding Dong Bell at Dingley Dell

by Sue Hitchcock

Instinct is a marvelous thing. It can neither be explained nor ignored. John felt that this was the first day of spring, as he put the kettle on in the ticket office at Dingley Dell Gardens. The air had a little warmth in it and small clouds were scudding across the sky. When the three gardeners arrived for their tea, accompanied by the cat, which had adopted the gardens as his home, there was a new cheerfulness. John poured some milk into a saucer for the cat and they planned their day.

“You can plant out the pansies by the wishing well.” said the head gardener to Marie, a differently-abled girl. In other words she had been born with Downs syndrome, but was also mute. Her ability was in her green-fingered magic, that made plants thrive. “Jason and I will be pruning some trees over the other side, so we’ll be out of communication. Can you keep an eye out for Marie, John?”

John took Marie's phone to check it was on Skype. She was slow at texting, but he would be able to see if she wanted something. Marie pushed the cat off her lap and pocketed her phone, giving John a sweet smile before they all started work.

A few people were waiting to come in when John opened his ticket window, but he expected the numbers to increase later. Marie phoned a couple of times, just to wave and smile, but he had to ignore her as the visitors arrived. The next family – mum, dad, granny, a young boy and a baby in a pushchair looked familiar. Granny was Mrs Thynne, his old school teacher. As they set off the boy was pushing the baby. He rushed up the hill, then turned and let the pushchair roll downhill, till he had to run to catch it.

“Don't do that, Tommy!” called his mum.

John thought “Oh-ho! That looks like trouble!”

They disappeared from view and John was busy. His phone was tinkling, but he had to get on. He ignored it, though it worried him. Eventually he answered it, to find Marie gesturing frantically. He locked his cashbox, apologized to the queue and started off up the hill. Puffing as he reached the top, he saw Marie crying. She ran up to drag him along as fast as they could go to the wishing well. He looked in but could see nothing. Marie was making a strange sound, like mewling. Then he spotted the cat, wet at the bottom of the well, which fortunately wasn't deep.

John squeezed in between the rope winder and the wall. He grabbed the cat and put it in the bucket. Marie pulled it up and when he hoicked himself up and over the edge, she pulled him and the cat into her warm arms. The cat made his escape, while Marie pointed accusingly at Tommy, but she didn't let go of John, comforted by his cosy tummy.

Ding, dong bell!
The pussy's in the well!
Who put him in?
Little Tommy thin!
Who pulled him out?
Little Johnny stout!
What a naughty boy was that
To try and drown a cat,
Who ne'er did any harm,
But kill all the mice on his father's farm!