

"The Town in the Snuff-Box" by Vladimir Odoyevsky, translated by Kathleen Cook. (Source: [freebooksforkids.net](http://freebooksforkids.net))

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by Vladimir Odoyevsky

## The Town in the Snuff-Box

Father placed the snuff-box on the table.

“Come and look at this, Misha,” he said.

Misha was an obedient little boy; he left his toys at once and went up to his father. It was well worth a look! What a splendid snuff-box! Made of bright tortoise-shell. And see what was on the lid! Gates, turrets, a tiny house this, that and the other — dozens of them, all as minute as could be and all made of gold; the trees were gold, too, but their leaves were silver; behind the trees the sun was rising and its pink beams spread right across the sky.

“What town is it?” Misha asked.

“It’s the town of Ding-Ding,” his father replied, touching a spring...

And then what happened? Suddenly music began to play. Misha could not make out where it was coming from: he went up to the doors — was it from the other room? Then to the clock — perhaps it was in the clock? Then to the bureau, and to the cabinet: he listened here, he listened there; he even peeped under the table... Finally Misha was sure that the music was playing in the snuff-box. He went up to it; he saw the sun rise from behind the trees and steal quietly over the sky, while the sky and the town grew lighter and lighter; the windows shone brightly and the turrets seemed to be glowing. Then the sun crossed the sky to the other side, sank lower and lower, and finally disappeared behind a little hill. The town grew dark, the shutters closed, and the turrets faded, but not for long. A star lit up, then another, and then a crescent moon peeped out from behind the trees, and the town grew bright again, the windows gleamed with silver, and the turrets gave off a bluish light.

“Papa! Papa! Can’t I go into the town? I’d like to so much!”

“How can you, my boy: the town is not your height.”

“That doesn’t matter, Papa, I’m very small; do let me go there: I’d love to know what’s going on in there...”

“It’s full enough without you, my boy.” “But who lives there?” “Who lives there? The little bells.”

So saying his father lifted the lid of the snuff-box, and what did Misha see? Little bells, hammers, a cylinder, and wheels... Misha was surprised.

“What are the little bells for? And the hammers? And the cylinder with the hooks?” Misha asked his father.

And his father replied:

“I won’t tell you, Misha; you have a good look and think hard: perhaps you will be able to guess. Only do not touch this spring, or everything will break.”

His father went out of the room, and Misha was left with the snuff-box. He sat over it for a long time, looking carefully and thinking hard: what made the bells ring?

Meanwhile the music went on playing, but grew quieter and quieter, as if something were clinging to each note, pushing each sound away from the others. Misha watched: at the bottom of the snuff-box a little door opened and out ran a boy with a little gold head in a steel skirt. He stopped on the threshold and beckoned to Misha.

“Why did Papa say the town was full enough without me?” thought Misha. “The people who live there must be nice; see, they’re inviting me to visit them.”

“If you like, with the greatest of pleasure!”

Misha ran to the door and noticed with surprise that it was exactly his height. As a well-mannered boy, he considered it his duty to first address his escort.

“Kindly tell me,” Misha said, “with whom I have the honour of speaking.”

“Ding-ding-ding,” the stranger replied, “I am a boy bell who lives in this town. We heard that you wanted very much to visit us, so we decided to invite you to be our guest. Ding-ding-ding, ding-ding-ding!”

Misha bowed courteously; the boy bell took him by the hand, and off they went. Then Misha noticed that above them there was a vault made of gay embossed paper with golden edges. In front of them was another vault, only smaller; then a third, smaller still; a fourth, smaller than the third, and so on with all the other vaults. The further away, the smaller they were, so that the last one seemed hardly big enough for the tiny head of his escort.

“I am very grateful to you for your invitation,” Misha said to him, “but I do not know whether I can take advantage of it. I can get through here easily, true,

but see what low vaults there are further on; I tell you quite honestly I could not get through them even if I crawled. I am surprised that you can.”

“Ding-ding-ding!” the boy replied. “Come along, do not worry, just follow me.”

Misha did as he was told. And indeed, with each step the vaults seemed to go higher, and the boys passed through easily; when they reached the last vault, the boy bell asked Misha to look back. Misha did so, and what did he see? Now the first vault, under which he had passed when he came in, looked very small, as if it had sunk down while they were walking. Misha was very surprised.

“How did that happen?” he asked his escort.

“Ding-ding-ding!” his escort replied, laughing. “Things always look like that at a distance; it is obvious that you have never observed anything carefully from a distance; from a distance everything looks small, but when you come nearer it is bigger.”

“Yes, that is true,” Misha replied. “I had never thought about it before, so this is what happened to me: the day before yesterday I wanted to draw Mama playing the piano next to me, and Papa reading a book at the other end of the room. But I could not get it right: I tried ever so hard, drawing as carefully as I could, but I kept getting Papa sitting next to Mama and his armchair standing next to the piano, although I could see perfectly well that the piano was near me at the window, and Papa was sitting at the other end, by the fireplace. Mama told me that I should draw Papa small, and I thought she was joking, because Papa is much taller than her; but now I see that Mama was right: I should have drawn Papa small, because he was sitting further away. I am most grateful to you for the explanation, most grateful.”

The boy bell laughed with all his might: “Ding-ding-ding, how funny! Ding-ding-ding, how funny! Not to be able to draw Papa and Mama! Ding-ding-ding, ding-ding-ding!”

Misha was annoyed at the boy bell laughing at him so pitilessly and said to him very politely:

“Pray let me ask you: why do you always say ‘ding-ding-ding’ with every word?”

“That’s a catchword of ours,” the boy bell replied.

“A catchword?” Misha remarked. “Well, my Papa says it isn’t good to get used to catchwords.”

The boy bell bit his lips and did not utter another word.

Before them were more doors; they opened, and Misha found himself in a street. What a street! What a town! The streets were paved with mother-of-pearl; the sky was shining tortoise-shell; over the sky moved a gold sun; if you beckoned to it, it would leave the sky, revolve round your hand, then start rising again. The tiny houses were made of polished steel and faced with different coloured shells, and under each roof sat a boy bell with a gold head and a silver skirt, lots and lots of them, each one smaller than the next.

“No, I won’t be deceived now,” said Misha, “it only looks like that from a distance. The bells are really all the same size.”

“No, you’re wrong,” his escort replied, “the bells are not all the same size. If we were all the same size, we would all give the same ring, one like the next; but can’t you hear the songs we make? That is because the bigger ones have a deeper voice. Didn’t you know that? See, Misha, that will teach you a lesson: in future do not laugh at people who use catchwords; sometimes such a person knows more than others, and you can learn something from him.”

It was Misha’s turn to bite his tongue.

Meanwhile they had been surrounded by boy bells, who plucked at Misha’s clothes, rang, jumped and ran about.

“You do have a jolly time,” Misha said to them. “I should like to stay with you forever: you don’t do anything all day; you have no lessons and no teacher, just music all day.”

“Ding-ding-ding!” cried the bells. “So you think we have a jolly time! No, Misha, our life is not a happy one. It is true that we have no lessons, but what is so good about that? We would not mind having lessons! Our trouble is that we have nothing to do; we have no books, no pictures; no father or mother; nothing to occupy us; we just play and play all day, Misha, and that is very, very boring. Don’t you believe us? Our tortoise-shell sky is very nice, so are the sun and the gold trees; but we have had enough of them, and we are bored by it all; we never take a step out of the town, and you can imagine what it

must be like to stay in a snuff-box all the time, doing nothing, even if it is a musical snuff-box.”

“Yes,” Misha replied, “you are right. That happens to me too: when you start playing with your toys after lessons it is very nice; but when you play all day long on a holiday, it gets boring by the evening; you pick up this toy, then that, and none of them are any fun. I could not understand why that was, but now I see.”

“Yes, and what’s more we have another worry, Misha: the uncles.”

“What uncles?” Misha asked.

“The uncle hammers,” the bells replied. “They’re so nasty! Always strutting round the town and hitting us. The bigger bells don’t get knocked about so much, but the little ones have it all the time.”

And indeed Misha saw some gentlemen with thin legs and long noses walking along the street, whispering to themselves: “Biff- biff-biff! Biff-biff-biff! Knock-knock-knock! Lift up! Catch on! Knock-knock-knock! Knock-knock-knock!”

And the hammer uncles really were knocking the bells all the time, first this one, then that, and even poor Misha felt sorry for them. He went up to the gentlemen, greeted them very courteously, and asked politely why they were beating the poor boys so pitilessly. But the hammers replied:

“Be off with you, oh, leave us, do! Over there the overseer is lying down in his dressing gown, and tells us to knock. He turns and hooks, turns and hooks. Knock-knock-knock! Knock-knock-knock!”

“Who is your overseer?” Misha asked the bells.

“Mister Cylinder,” they rang out, “a very kind man, who lies on the sofa day or night; we can’t complain about him.”

Misha went to the overseer. He really was lying on a sofa in his dressing gown tossing from side to side, but always with his face upwards. And all his dressing gown was studded with hundreds of little pins, hooks; whenever a hammer appeared he would hook it, then let it go, and the hammer knocked a bell.

As soon as Misha came up, the overseer cried:

“Hanky-panky! Who’s that walking? Who’s that talking? Hanky-panky! Who won’t be off? Won’t let me sleep? Hanky-panky, hanky-panky!”

“It’s me,” Misha replied, bravely, “I’m Misha...”

“And what do you want, pray?” asked the overseer.

“I’m sorry for the poor bell boys, they are all so clever, and so kind, and so musical, but you make the uncles knock them all the time...”

“What’s that got to do with me, hanky-panky! I’m not the boss here. Let the uncles knock the boys! What do I care! I’m a nice overseer, I just lie on the sofa and don’t watch anyone. Hanky-panky, hanky-panky...”

“Well, I have learnt a lot in this town!” Misha said to himself. “Sometimes I get annoyed because the form-master always keeps an eye on me. ‘The nasty man!’ I think. ‘After all, he’s not my Papa or Mama; what does it matter to him if I am naughty? If I’d known, I would have stayed in my room.’ But now I can see what happens to poor boys when no one keeps an eye on them.”

Meanwhile Misha walked on, then stopped. In front of him was a gold tent with a fringe of pearls: a gold weather vane on top turned like a wind mill, and under the canopy lay Queen Spring, like a snake, coiling and uncoiling, and forever prodding the overseer in the side. Misha was very surprised at this and said to her:

“Your Majesty! Why do you keep prodding the overseer in the side?”

“Zing-zing-zing,” the Queen replied. “You’re a silly boy, a foolish boy! You look at everything and see nothing! If I did not prod the cylinder, the cylinder would not go round; and if the cylinder did not go round, it would not hook the hammers, and the hammers would not knock; and if the hammers did not knock, the bells would not ring; and if the bells did not ring, there would be no music! Zing- zing-zing.”

Misha wanted to find out if the Queen was telling the truth. He bent over and pressed her with his finger — and then what happened? In a flash the spring uncoiled, the cylinder whizzed round, the hammers knocked, the little bells began to ring nonsense and the spring broke. Everything went quiet, the cylinder stopped, the hammers dropped, the bells swung to one side, the sun

dropped, the houses broke... Then Misha remembered that his father had told him not to touch the spring, he grew frightened and... woke up.

“What did you dream about, Misha?” asked Papa.

For a long time Misha did not know what had happened. He looked around — it was Father’s room, and there in front of him was the snuff-box; Papa and Mama were sitting next to him, and laughing.

“Where is the bell boy? And the hammer uncle? And Queen Spring?” Misha asked. “So it was a dream, was it?”

“Yes, Misha, the music lulled you to sleep, and you dozed here for quite a while. Do at least tell us what you dreamed?”

“Well, you see, Papa,” Misha said, rubbing his eyes, “I wanted to find out what made the music play in the snuff-box; so I looked at it carefully and tried to work out what moved in it and why; I was just beginning to understand it, when I saw the door in the snuff-box opening...” And Misha described all his dream in the right order.

“Well, I can see that you really did almost find out what makes the music play in the snuff-box,” said Papa, “but you will understand it even better when you study mechanics.”