



THE BELLS OF STAGNANT MEADE

The church bells of Stagnant Meade were old; very old. Not so old as their illustrious cousins—the Wolsey Bells of Ipswich—but nonetheless impressive in their own antiquity. Baptised in *the French tradition* when young King Edward VI was only two years into his short reign, they had bore witness to over four hundred and fifty years of turbulent British history. From the Spanish Armada, the Civil War, the Glorious Revolution, Waterloo, the rise and fall of the Empire, and two World Wars; to our problems of diminishing democracy, political greed and incompetence, and a judiciary no longer fit for purpose, these bells had watched keenly from their bell tower, and seen *everything*.

For centuries they had tolled out the canonical hours; officiated over the *Officium Divinum*, and called generations of worshippers to Holy Communion, baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Indeed, local parishioners boasted, with some confidence, that the Bells of Stagnant Meade were without equal when it came to a good Passing Bell, Death Knell, and Corpse Bell.

But church bells in an old English village do more than signal the calls to prayer; do more than bring the local community together for matters sacred *and* secular. For there once existed, across the length and breadth of England, the strongly held belief that the ringing of church bells could ward off evil spirits, who, in their playful malignancy, sought to cause mischief, mayhem, and harm to any given parish. So passionately was this superstition believed that the bells themselves were often inscribed with text and verse attesting to their heavenly-ordained powers. Indeed, by the seventeenth century, the three bells in the village to which we are interested, had each been engraved with a clear warning to all passing demons—*“The Sound of this bell shall vanquish all tempests, repel all demons, and summon good men to Holy prayer.”*

It was five years ago—five years ago this very day, in fact—that the bells, ringing out in wild and excited chorus, proclaimed the hour of noon, and thus, the second of that day’s Call to Prayer. Their majestic peal could be heard far and wide. Beyond the village, the gladsome sound was heard by farmers toiling in the fields, and by weary travellers who had parked by the roadside and were refreshing themselves with flasks of indifferent coffee and sandwiches of numerous descriptions. So glorious was the sound of the bells that they summoned these same people from out of their cars, vans, and lorries, and they gathered as a quieted host to listen. Looking over the vista before them of high peaks, dense forest, snaking stream, scattered copse, and the village itself, the scene announced itself as quintessentially *English*.

But not all the bells that hour rang out in triumphant jubilee. On a bench immediately below the bell tower sat an old man of eight decades and two, his tired, watery eyes fixed on a small plot of sacred soil, his blue-veined, bony hands propped up by the crook of his walking stick.

Hadley Bell had made this daily pilgrimage for precisely one year. For twelve long, lonely months he idled his time, sitting by the gravesite that bore the decaying corpse of his wife. He missed her terribly. But not, as you might suppose, for those things he’d always loved about her. No. Hadley Bell lamented the loss of all those little habits and foibles that, at the time the poor woman existed, vexed, and annoyed him to the point of heated argument, and much silent sleeping in separate bedrooms. The way Petriana



would eat, snore, bite her nails, leave her underwear at the foot of their bed, talk when he was reading, comment upon every mouthful of food, forget to flush the toilet, leave the discarded cardboard tube on top of the cistern, and a whole host of other such natural habits too intolerable to mention. It wasn't until she had departed this world for a better place that all those seemingly-significant atrocities congealed into something altogether more sinister—loneliness.

She had been a difficult woman to live with. She was abrupt, prone to violent mood swings, and the foulest language known to Man. Her tendency towards prolonged hiccupping sent poor Hadley into a paroxysm of such agitation that on more than one occasion, he spent the night in the garden shed, preferring the company of spiders and their sticky webs to that of his wife in the marital bed.

But her sudden departure left a hole in Hadley's life that nothing could fill. Not that he tried to abate his loss with other distractions. From the moment her body was returned to the earth, he instigated his vigil. Through fair weather and foul, there he would sit on the wooden bench beside her headstone, armed with a flask of hot tea and some sandwiches, manufactured on the strict principle of *Sustenance over Taste*.

On the morning of the Saturday in question, Hadley Bell mused forlornly over his porridge. The spoon had long concreted itself into the pile of oats and to make matters worse, his tea had gone cold. He liked his tea boiling hot and anything other than a searing ninety-degrees was an affront to everything he held dear. As Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 3 in A minor Op. 56* filled the small kitchen with stirring Scottish romance, he sat as though in another world. This masterpiece had been a particular favourite of the late Petriana's, and during the past twelve months, Hadley had become *fond* of it too.

As though roused subconsciously by the advancing of the clock, he stretched, yawned, pulled his earlobes left then right (a peculiar habit and one, incidentally, that infuriated his late wife), rose from the kitchen table and slowly made his way to the sink.

The majority of the washing up didn't take long; one cup, one saucer, and a teaspoon (the bowl and spoon he wisely resolved to allow to *soak*). He set the washed items out according to custom on the drainer, wiped his hands on the tea towel, switched off the radio, and headed upstairs.

Now, there is a habit peculiar to gentleman of a certain age and vintage in that they seldom appear in public without the donning of their 'Sunday Best'—suit, shirt, tie, and shoes brushed up to look *presentable*. Hadley was no exception, and having attended to his ablutions, was soon exiting his bedroom bedecked in all his modest finery. Descending the stairs, he avoided the handrail knowing that to be incorrectly fitted (and consequently unsafe) and was soon out the door.

The village of Stagnant Meade being decidedly small, it was only a few moments between leaving his front door to the barn-style gate separating Main Street (the *only* road of significance in the village) from the graveyard. The weather was cool, but dry. It had been a long, hot summer across Britain and as autumn advanced through September and into October, the changing hues of the opulent foliage brought forth a wonderful palette of colour, as of a warming glow like a winter's fireside.

Hadley took up his usual spot on the bench. He positioned the flask and Tupperware box containing his potted meat sandwiches and an apple within easy reach, placed his hands upon his walking stick, and stared at the headstone utterly oblivious to the colours and smells of autumn surrounding him.



The church bells' first Call to Prayer had long since passed, and the second—the one where we began our story—had now ceased to vibrate. The trickle of parishioners came and went. The sight of Hadley sat forlornly on his bench had become so familiar a sight to the village that it hardly warranted comment. No one engaged him. He was very much left to his own devices.

A generous number of hours ticked by, and still the old man sat, braving the dropping temperature and the diminishing sunlight. From within the heated office of the parish vicar, a young curate began lighting candles. As he neared the window that looked directly out over the graveyard, he caught the faint shadow of the old man.

"Every day he sits there," said the curate, addressing the vicar. "Sits there as though waiting for something; a miracle, perhaps?"

"Perhaps the resurrection?" returned the vicar laughing. He lifted his mug with his bony hands and took a sip of his tea, then returned to the scrutiny of his lottery tickets.

The Reverend Justus Tune was a small, puny-looking man, with no discernible shoulders, scarcely any neck to speak of, a bald head so round and polished that it resembled a ping-pong ball sat precariously upon a matchstick, and a smile so filled with teeth; so obsequious and insincere, as to make him hideous to gaze upon.

Curate Jasper Cake, in stark contrast, was a kind, compassionate man. He had entered the church because he truly believed in the scripture, precepts, and teachings his religion professed to encourage. In that sense, he was quite a novelty within the Christian Church. He drew no salary, instead preferring to earn his daily bread by the growing of vegetables and flowers on a nearby allotment and undertaking general handyman tasks for some of the more elderly parishioners under his charge. He vehemently rejected the ostentatious pomp, lavish wealth, and diverse investment portfolios of the modern church, and so was decidedly unpopular not only within his own Diocese, but also with the archbishop, who saw Cake and his ilk, as "troublemakers".

"I have an appointment with Bishop Belch this evening," said the vicar. "I'll leave you to shut up shop."

With that, the venerable missionary of God put on his Aquascutum raincoat, removed a small bundle of banknotes from *the cookie jar*, checked to make sure he had his cigars and lighter, and finding he had, left *the shop*, and awaited the arrival of his taxi by the main gate.

Jasper Cake remained at the window until the reverend's cab had disappeared into the late afternoon's descending fog, then went in search of Hadley Bell.

"It's been a while now since dear Petriana passed, I think?" suggested the curate, as he joined the old man on the bench.

"Twelve months," replied Hadley, softly. "I buried her here one year ago today.

"Ah, then today is, indeed, a sombre occasion."

Curate Cake placed his hand on the shoulder of the parishioner and tapped him compassionately. The two men sat in silence for several minutes.

"It's very good of you curate to spare a thought for Pet and me."

"Nonsense," returned the curate. "I can see the pain that exists inside you, Hadley. I wish there was



something I could do to ease it; to remove your suffering.”

“Only death can do that.” Hadley’s words were heartfelt and sincere.

Again, they sat in silence, both deep in thought.

“Would you like me to make you a fresh pot of tea?” said Jasper, his turn to break the silence.

“No thankee,” said Hadley. “There’s plenty in my flask.”

“Then, I’ll leave you to your meditations.”

With that, the young curate rose to leave. As he was about to round the west tower, he stopped and turned back towards the old man.

“I say, Hadley.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll be locking up within the next few minutes. If you’re staying a little longer, would you be so kind as to padlock the gate on your way home?”

“Course.” Hadley hadn’t altered his position throughout this dialogue, but simply waved his arm to signify his understanding and concurrence.

Darkness descended, as did the fog, and now Hadley Bell was quite alone in the graveyard. As the hours progressed towards midnight, the temperature dropped with a sudden ferocity; every exhalation producing a fine mist of warm vapour exiting through the old man’s hairy nostrils and clinging like a pall to the cold air.

The bells had rung out the hours of six, then seven, eight, nine, ten and eleven. Within half an hour, they would be heralding a new day. The old man sat just as still as he had when first he arrived that afternoon. The contents of his flask and Tupperware box had long since disappeared, and he felt hungry.

He was temporarily lost in this thought when on a sudden, he thought he heard a voice. It was so soft that he quickly dismissed it as the call of some stray cat or dog, or perhaps a badger or rabbit. Not knowing what the last two sounded like, this was purely speculative on his part.

There it was again. Not the cry of an animal, but the sound of a woman’s voice. He listened intently. Nothing.

“Hello?” he said, his voice crackling with the cold. “Is someone there?”

“Come to me.”

There it was again. Definitely a woman’s voice.

“It sounded...but no,” he thought. “That’s impossible.”

“Come to me.”

The voice was clearer, louder—more defined.

“Who is it?” he asked. “Where should I go?”

“Come to me.”

There was now no mistaking the voice, nor where it was emanating from. It was Petriana’s, and it was coming from beneath the headstone.

“Come. To. Me!” The woman’s voice echoed around the graveyard, impatient, insistent. Demanding.



Hadley sat transfixed. He didn't dare move. It took all his strength, all his courage to utter something remotely coherent.

"Is-is that you, my sweet?" he whimpered, his jaw shaking violently.

A sudden burst of wind screaming through the trees startled him. He looked in their general direction and saw nothing. But upon returning his attention to the grave, he was struck with mortal fear to see mounds of earth begin bubbling up, over-spilling onto the path. *Something* was pushing up the soil.

"If you don't come to me," wailed the woman's voice from below, "I'll come for *you!*"

"But Pet-Pet-my dearest, it was an accident!"

A decomposed, dismembered hand bearing a wedding ring suddenly broke through the disturbed grass and soil and began to finger its way over the mounds of earth towards the terrified widower. He tried to scream but couldn't form a sound. He tried to vomit. This was far easier to accomplish.

The hand grabbed his ankle and began to drag him towards the grave. In panic and terror, he instinctively wrapped his arms around the slats at the rear of the bench. But the pull of the hand was not to be resisted, its sheer sense of force overwhelming.

Slowly, terrifyingly, he felt his grip weaken. As the hand began to gain momentum, another finger broke loose. It wasn't long before the screaming body of Hadley Bell was being dragged towards the now-open grave.

"Why!" he yelled. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"You killed me, you bastard!" The ghostly voice resounded from every wall, every gravestone, every trunk, and branch of every tree.

"No, no. It was an accident." he repeated. "It could have been me!"

"You pushed me down those stairs. You watched as I lay there screaming in agony, my bones broken, blood gushing out from the cut to my neck. I saw you looking at me. You were smiling."

Hadley continued to grapple with the soil, his flailing arms desperate to take possession of *anything* that would prevent the inevitable.

"You may have fooled everyone else, Hadley," continued the corpse voice. "But we both know the truth. You haven't sat here all these days missing me. You've been racked by guilt. But that's not going to save you, Hadley Bell. Nothing can save you now. Murderer!"

Twelve o'clock. Midnight. The church bells of Stagnant Meade tolled out the hour. But then, for reasons we-as strangers-are not privy to, they continued to ring; one solemn knell after another. On and on they went. They rang out their miserable lament for every year of Hadley Bell's life. Eighty-two times they disturbed the sabbath stillness with their mournful dirge. In vain did they seek to summon the Reverend Tune, or his young curate-*anyone* from the village. All slept peacefully in their beds. It wasn't until the following morning that the flask and box belonging to Hadley Bell were discovered on the bench, a discarded apple core and some slight evidence of an upset stomach close by. The neatly tended, undisturbed grave over which he had spent the previous year in mournful meditation was as it had always been. But there was no sign of the pensioner. Nor would there be. It was as though he had disappeared from the face of the planet. But the bells knew his fate. Those ancient bells that had witnessed all history, looked down from their lofty station and had seen *everything*.