

THE SUN WAS A SLAVER - 007

The workmen were hurrying homewards, their arms powdered above the rough elbows and their black faces smeared with the white stone, the time I took grandfather's jug of milk for the last time. The red sun was striking upon the rising walls of the Chapel's new vestry, and the tops of the dingy trees were the colour of honey. But when I reached grandfather's house the last sun had gone, and in the east was a colour like when I tilted the milk so that it stained the glass jar.

My grandfather grumbled because the jug wanted two inches to fill it, and swore that children no longer knew their duty to their parents, and that he'd lick his arthritis and be about and rear his own cow again yet.

I told him my father said why didn't he stop being so stubborn and chuck this living alone and come and live with us, but he made a sound with his mouth like a pig feeding and said that he'd never been a trouble to anyone in his life and he didn't plan to be then. He'd been always master in his own house, grandfather said, and say help his blest, he'd rather die than be otherwise. More and besides, my grandfather went on, he thought it more proper for a son to come to a father, not for a father to go to a son. If my dad wanted to show gratitude to his old parent, grandfather said, let him come with his wife and me and make our homes there. But to be ordered around and lorded over in his son's house by a young gal like my mother, it certainly wasn't true, said my grandpa. And I could tell my dad too,

grandfather told me, that if he thought twice about sending him the little milk, say help his blest he could very well stop that too. Grandfather wouldn't have been put out, he said. He wouldn't even have been surprised, for this generation, he said, was a generation of vipers, and children would rise up against parents.

But when I had lit the lamp and taken the milk from the stove grandfather called me and, hugging me into his side, stroked my head with his hand, the hardness of whose palm I seemed to feel through my hair. And in a voice that was kind like his actions he asked how my dad's canes were looking, and if my mother'd been about as usual that day, and if I would have liked a baby sister like myself or a brother. I told him that my mother had only been just in time to stop dad and Bert Seale from fighting, for dad had caught Bert breaking the arrows from our canes. Grandpa said that my father mustn't get himself into trouble with such red trash as Bert Seale, but that all the same Bert knew it was wrong to break the cane arrows, for the water would get in. Grandpa had just taken the first sip of milk the time when the first note came from the Chapel, and he put his face as though the milk tasted badly and turned his face to the window as though to spit it out, but I knew it was because he didn't think much of Chrissie Coggins as a bell-ringer. My grandfather said that if ever in life anyone told me a bell was an ordinary piece of cast metal without soul or power, I should

look him in the face, whoever he was, and tell him to his teeth he was a liar. Or if I didn't care to be so straightforward, seeing that I lived only a few inches off the ground, I could tell whoever it was that my granddad said so, and direct the lying rascal where he could be found too.

Grandfather said that Chris Coggins' bell-ringing had as much to it as the bell on a wandering wether, and said that Chris'd make the best bell that was ever moulded sound cracked. If medicine, or the priesthood, or law was ever in anybody's blood, grandfather said, bell-ringing was in the very bones of our family, and it'd broken his heart when my dad took up mad with this planting, with overhead irrigation and the Lord knew what, and had no time for bell-ringing. Grandfather told me of the time when, as a young man, he had gone from parish to parish and listened to a hundred bells, each speaking to him with a sweet different voice; how he had climbed a hundred high steeples and traced with his hands the curvatures of each vibrant bell, until he knew them all like intimate forms.

My great-great-grandfather it'd have been, grandfather said, who'd made his little piece in cholera by letting it be known that if the right hands were put to the church bells no cholera'd come to the members. And from far and near, grandfather said, the villagers flocked to the old man, dropping their shillings in the jar of vinegar which he kept for the purpose, and praying him to put his hands to the bells of their missions. The old man, grandpa said, was kept far busier than a doctor, and made

more too out of cholera, he'd warrant. For no true member of a church whose bell the old man rang was ever stricken, grandfather said, only the water-washed Christians. And if I doubted that he spoke the God's truth, for this generation, grandfather said, was full of disbelief, I could get into conversation with old Clawson Peare who'd been a young lad in cholera, and whom the Lord seemed to let live to vouch for the truth of such things.

But my great-grandfather, that is, grand-dad's father, had the gift of laying restless spirits, grandfather said. And he wouldn't venture to say that he had made as much out of his gift as his father before him had made out of cholera, but he had managed to buy the spot of land under the house which cholera'd given his forbear. Grandfather said that at funerals his father made no bones of telling the relatives of the dead that while it was, right enough, his duty as sexton to toll the funeral bell, he would not, however if they were unreasonable, vouch for the peace of their dead, seeing that, in view of their tight purses, he would not, in his bell-ringing, employ the uncommon gift which heaven'd given him. And as oft as not, grandfather said, the dead person's folk were reasonable, for, as oft as not those who weren't were haunted by their dead, and as oft as not had to pay my great-grand-dad a bigger fee for laying the restless spirits with his art.

And this gift of laying restive spirits, grandfather said, had been passed on to him too. He told me of how, when his father had gone to his maker, at the Chapel the post of sexton had been given another

through favour. But on the night of the birth of the Saviour, grandfather said, above the graves the full moon shone like the heralding angel, while the worshippers were flocking to the midnight mass. But at each entrance, grandfather said, fear awaited and checked them, for lining the causeways that lead through the thick graves were the dread of a hundred years risen up on that night, grandfather declared, against the bastardly ringing. Straightway, grandfather went on, he made his way to the ministering father, who stood perplexed at the approaching hour and the vacant pews, and taking him to a window showed him the thick ghosts and told him just how the affair stood. And when the ground was ripe for a bargain, grandfather said, he offered to lay the ghosts by the art of his ringing and give the worshippers way, if the sextonship, which was rightly his'n, were gi'n him. So said, so done, grandfather said. The bargain was struck and no sooner was the bell-rope given him than the ghosts sank back to their places. And ever since then, grandfather said, he'd been ringing the bell of the Chapel, until a year or two back when his bad heart failed him.

The sky was a sea, and the sun a white slaver, the time Ruth ran bearing her father's message to her grandpa that the new baby was a boy. But when she burst in and fell on her knees where the old man slumped in his armchair, shaking him and shouting her news of an heir, she could not rouse him, nor, for that matter, could a million Ruths.

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The time Ruth came into the tower her streaming eyes were shot red like the spent sun. Chris Coggins surrendered the bell-rope to her, and sobbing, she tolled her grandfather to his rest.

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