

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Hell's Bells 2

by MaryPat Campbell

“Did you hear that?” a quiet voice whispered in my ear around midnight last night. I awoke, startled.

“What, what is it? I can hear nothing.” It slowly dawned on me that both voices were my own, the first deep in my head, the second was myself, alarmed and speaking aloud.

Silence. The sweet hum of no sound seeped into me like a warm drink coursing down my throat and into my innards. It rang quietly, spreading around the whole inside of me. But just as I was beginning to savour it, it went. Gone in an instant. Back came the caterwauling and uproar. I shut my ears again to force it out.

The greatest achievement of my life, the one I find both difficult and wonderful to bring to mind, was before being sent here to Bedlam. I was working with a team of men who cast the big bells in the Whitechapel Foundry. The memories come back to haunt me in these blessed and at the same time cursed moments. The blessed sound of the bells tolling in the silence, and the cursed fact that I lost my musical hearing in that foundry and never found it again.

I am immensely proud to have been part of the big bells architecture and building in my time at the foundry, when I was aged fourteen to, was it twenty years old? Especially the casting of Big Ben. Even though myself and others toiled with aching backs from carrying the weight of molten tin and copper and suffered from the intense heat of the furnace, we played our part in the molten music of their making.

After weeks and months of labour, it finally came time to open the mould on Big Ben. All the gaffers, pattern makers, dippers, coremakers, and heavy labourers like me gathered for the first ringing. We were supplied with ear muffs made of leather, inlaid with many layers of cotton to dull the huge tolling sound.

My employers picked me out as I had the ears to hear when the bell struck the necessary and magical note E, and only I could hear it better than the others. I was brought out and applauded, because they said I had perfect pitch. My job was to listen with all my might and confirm if the E had been struck and achieved. If it wasn't, and sometimes this happened, there would be hell to pay. This was a great moment for me, I felt I was suddenly the most important worker in the foundry.

I was also afraid that I would not be able to distinguish the E in front of all my fellow foundry workers and the rich gentlemen with top hats who were investing their money in this great bell. Everyone gathered with much excitement and expectation. I was instructed to say nothing but to nod my head three times if I heard the E sound after each strike. Big Ben was struck three times and three times the E sounded in my ears. All eyes were on me, as never before and never since. I nodded once, then twice, and then a third time, and on the third nod, the crowd erupted into clapping, cheering and congratulating each other. My finest moment.

I can no longer tell an E from a C. I live in Bedlam now where the only peace I find is when the noise stops, and I am reprieved.