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Hell's Bells

by MaryPat Campbell

Who do they think I am, something less than human that doesn't notice the dirt and squalor, the offensive noise, uproar and confusion. I live in this god forsaken place, once owned by the church and named St. Mary's Bethlem. Now re-purposed, as they say, into a place for those 'who have fallen out of their wits'.

The Lord Mayor of London once wrote about this place, that some poor folk will abide here forever. If I am unlucky enough to be one of those who will bide here forever, I don't know how I could, or if I would want to survive it, as nothing much has changed in the last hundred years. Living here would drive any human being into madness, even if they were not raving before they arrived.

They tell me I was raving well before I came here and that in order to remain alive I would have to come to this place. Many who came here are no longer alive because they have taken their own lives, even though we are taught it is a sin to do so. Folk here are known to deaden themselves in other ways to everything lively, be it pleasant or hideous, and retreat into a chamber in their poor sick minds where neither the demons, the sunlight, the noise or the quiet can enter. All here is jagged and sharp and without sense or memory. I myself am well on my way into this state of deadened mind, for I cannot bear this racket that assails me night and day.

To be dead would mean the blessed silence could wing me on my way to heaven and there I could bide forever in tranquillity.

The hullabaloo is deafening. All I can hear most nights is shrieking and bawling and all manner of loud and turbulent commotion from my fellow inmates. Hearing is a sense that allows for taking something in through the ears and making sense, for thinking and puzzling in a sensible and thoughtful way. Instead this din surrounds, invades and enters me in the most abominable and ceaseless way.

Occasionally it halts. And the silence, I discover, is something you can actually hear. Last night a blessed silence came twice or three times for a few moments around the midnight hour and I felt hallowed and freed by it. I wept and felt the hand of god on my poor head, sick and sore from the onslaught of such torture. It was almost as if I could be saved. It would take long hours to tell you how I came to reside here. I don't like to remember it, as it causes me even more head pains than the noise that is Bedlam, as it is known now to locals and foreigners alike in this city.

Before memory began, I am told I was taken forcibly from my mother's lap and brought to a place where poor children were given to folk who didn't have them and wanted them. I believe I was sold, and the people who bought me were eager to have me work all the hours that god made, and treated me without courtesy or warmth. It was a matter of survival, and I got used to that.

The second onslaught came when I reached the age of fourteen and was again sold into a labouring job at the famous bell foundry in White Chapel in the east of this city. The great Liberty Bell was cast there, and Big Ben, the largest bell ever cast at the foundry, weighing some 13 tons, and measuring seven feet tall and nine at its widest girth. My job at the foundry was a lowly one, fetching and carrying molten metal and all manner of heavy materials and tools. But I basked in the glory of being in the company of the great bells and the men who made them, and this has been my finest achievement.

I cannot say what happened after that, except that before I reached manhood I found myself here in this pit of human misery. Each time I hear a bell toll out across this great city, I dream that one day I will escape, and find my way in the world in a way that I have never done before.