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It's Catching

by MaryPat Campbell

We sat by the stained & grimy window most of the morning, Jarvis and I, looking out at the rain. The usual din went on around us, closed us in like the rain coming down in sheets and soaking the people, dogs, carts and buildings we could see hurrying by outside.

Even when he and I don't speak, sitting alongside Jarvis helps to insulate me against the torments of this place. The rain had washed away yesterday's conversation about the buttermilk but as I could still remember it, I realised it had stayed with me like a quiet memory in the nether regions of my mind. It's catching, even this morsel of optimism and nourishment.

Food for the soul, I heard a high preacher say once and I wondered then what he meant. It was on the occasion when what came to be known as the Liberty Bell was being blessed by the archbishop of London before it went on its long sea journey to America. I didn't know what food for the soul meant back then, but it lingered like a puzzle in my mind, like the buttermilk, and here it is again.

Buttermilk and Liberty. Liberty is the great thing Jarvis, me and some others who are not too far gone from our wits in here long for. Such a grand word, liberty. I'm told it means personal freedom from servitude, confinement or oppression. All three exist here in bucketfulls, how I would love to be free of it.

I remember one of the foundry gaffers telling us lads about how the Americans wanted to cast that particular bell, to celebrate their victory in the War of Independence from the British in 1751, if my memory is accurate. The first bell was cast when I was a lad working at the foundry in the same year. Such hard labour, such celebrations when the giant bell was taken carefully out of the mould, and it was me who did the sounding test to see if it's music was right, I know I've told you about this before. The bell was then shipped to Philadelphia the following year costing the enormous sum of £100 for heaving and hauling, packing, unpacking and the final delivery to the powerful men in Philadelphia who commissioned it.

I'm sorry to tell you the great Bell of Liberty and independence cracked into a jagged cleft within a few months of arrival, and had to be recast all over again, the second time with a different recipe of lead, zinc and copper.



I've never understood why the bell was cast in the first place here in London, when the Americans were desperate to be free of the British. Why would they want their great symbol of liberation to be built in the country they were colonised and oppressed by? It beggars belief. To be hounded and oppressed for many decades, to then fight for and win your freedom is a great achievement for any man, woman or nation. Can a servant win his freedom

from his master and then be lauded by the master for winning that freedom?

You see now, I think, why this puzzle is of such importance to me. I must talk to Jarvis about it and ask his opinion, the next time we are both reasonably quiet and not too oppressed by the noise and the racket that fills this place to the brim.