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The Devil

by Mary Pat Campbell

Maybe Jarvis was talking to himself, it's hard to tell sometimes. There are so many human voices bellowing noise but not talking sense to anyone here. He said it loud so I could hear him above the racket.

“Run round the Black Church three times, in an anti-clockwise direction, at midnight, and you'll meet the Devil,” is what he shouted. No one was listening except me.

So many churches round here. Which is the black one? There's St. Botolph's Without, just outside the city gates. Then there's St. Peter in Chains, that's within. You can see their spires rise and point up into the sky and hear their bells tolling to count the time. Mostly it's music to my ears as the bells call all city dwellers, even those of us resident here in Bedlam, to prayer or to bedtime or wake time, or calling the people to worship.

I asked Jarvis if he'd ever met the devil. He answered with one of his strange smiles when his eyes become glassy and staring. He laughed loudly at my question. I waited. When he stopped laughing he whispered in my good ear;

“I see the devil every day in this mad place, and so do you! No need to exert yourself by running round the Black Church three times at midnight or any other time,” he added with a chuckle.

I took to wondering if what he said was true. What would it be like to meet the devil, and why in the black church? I was brought up to believe that churches were holy places, where God and the saints live in harmony and quiet.

I went to St. Botolph's once with my master from Whitechapel to inspect the great bells in St. Botolph's, one of Hawksmoor's famous churches. A day out for me to assist with a maintenance job. Cleaning had to take place first. I knew to mix a gallon of warm water with two spoonfuls of soap in a bucket. Light scrubbing was needed, unless bird droppings made a nasty brew, which corroded the metal and made the cleaning harder. After the cleaning my master did his inspection of the yoke and timber frame, to see if any rot had settled there, or if any of the clappers were cracked or broken. I once heard a story of the catastrophic tumble of a bell in East London, it landed on and killed the priest saying mass below in the church. Work of the devil? I wonder.

This is what happens, my mind wanders to memories of my time at the bell foundry and away from this place of noise and discomfort. I forgot my curiosity about meeting the devil, and decided that my time in the bell foundry had protected me from such encounters. I heard a man of God describe the function of bells once, beyond their daily tasks of counting time, mourning the dead, broadcasting warnings of fires or other calamities, as a way to give thanks with what he called joyful noise to the Lord.