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The Last Word

by MaryPat Campbell

“It doesn’t follow,” I said to Jarvis the other day.

“What doesn’t follow? Doesn’t follow what?”

“That you could meet the devil in a church, even a black church.”

“You’re still chewing the cud about that? I told you, in here is the devil, nothing to do with out there and all those stories folk tell to frighten other poor folk who don’t know any better.”

That evening, Jarvis sat opposite me in the refectory when we were having our evening meal. He was quiet, apart from slurping sounds coming from him and the soup we all eat, every day, a bit more of something, maybe bacon rind on a Monday, or a piece of turnip with the sweetness gone out of it on a Thursday, mixed in to make it seem tasty and new.

“Tell me how come you’re imprisoned here with the rest of us then, I don’t even know your name.”

My turn to be silent. I didn’t know what to say or how to explain myself here, and couldn’t quite remember how long ago it was since my arrival. So I continued to eat my soup and said nothing. After a while Jarvis finished and left the table.

My mind wandered then, from the grotesque notion of meeting a devil in a church, the place where the bells I learned for my trade, are housed.

How could such a holy sound mean there were devils there too? What if Jarvis was right, that the devil is in places like this.

I didn't know what to make of it, and forgot about the question Jarvis had asked me. The mind does that sometimes, wanders off into something distracting or even interesting, to get you away from awkward questions.

"So you're not going to answer me then?" Jarvis shouted in my good ear this morning as we queued up for the breakfast, two full days after we had spoken last.

For a moment, everyone was silent, his loud voice rent the stale air in the refectory. The man who dishes out the porridge paused his ladle in mid-air and I watched the sloppy grey stuff dribble back down into the pot on the stove. I could feel my face burn with shame and felt glad I had a long beard to cover it. I shuffled away, without my porridge, and could hear Jarvis behind me.

"This man doesn't have a name!" he yelled. "Or if he does, he won't tell us. He must be more ashamed of himself than the rest of us in here."

All day I rehearsed how I would answer him, or anyone. No one had asked my name in all these years since I first arrived here, must be some twenty years ago now. I would say,

"My name is Pearson, James Pearson. Son of James the elder and Margaret, both of them skilled painters of glass, trained at Bristol with my father born in the city of Dublin."

It was a lie of course, but who in here in this devilish place would know any different. As well as learning my trade at the Bell Foundry, I had a talent for drawing and sketching out anything that took my eye. I thought in pictures, and had a facility for feeling the taste and contours of colours, especially colours emblazoned by light.

That time I accompanied my master from Whitechapel, when we went to St. Botolph's to mend the bells there, my eye was caught by the sunlight streaming through the magnificent east window. When I had a chance to slip away from my duties for a few minutes, I went and stood in front of this window, bathed myself in the warm sunlight that shone through the coloured pictures on glass, and read that the artist was someone named James Pearson. I later read that he and his wife Margaret worked alone and sometimes together on the design and making of such windows in London and abroad.

I stood there, feeling my body warmed by the coloured lights, the yellows and greens, the blues and scarlets that turned my hands and bare arms yellow, blue and scarlet by turns. I knew that if I ever could, I would try to apprentice myself to someone like Pearson, who could teach me all he knew.

Surely there was no harm in wanting to be known as the son of James and Margaret Pearson, even when I was not. They were artists who made a fine living together by creating warmth and delight in the hearts of men and women who came to worship at St. Botolph's with their paintings on glass. There would be no last word to my life and even my name, as long as I could imagine myself into a place of colourful freedom, freedom from the devils within and without these city walls.