

Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight

In Medieval England, the curfew bell was rung in the evening as a signal for everyone to go to bed.

A bell was usually rung about 8 p.m., and it was meant for people to cover their fires – either deadening them or covering them up, not necessarily putting them out altogether. At the sound of the bell, the procedure was for burning logs to be removed from the center of the hearth of a warming fire and the hot ashes swept to the back and sides. The cold ashes were then raked back over the fire so as to cover it.

The ashes would then keep smoldering, giving warmth without a live fire going. Unattended live fires were a major concern since at the time most structures were made of wood and burned easily. Here is a story coming out of that time that involves the curfew bell:

It was in an English village. The sun was sinking, the shadows were deepening toward night, and in jail sat a prisoner. He was a soldier – a robust, noble man – yet the shadows meant to him the approach of death, condemned to be hanged. The people of the place knew and loved him, and there was a whisper that friends with soldiers were coming to deliver him. If they should not come before the curfew tolled, he would be put to death because the judges had ruled, “Hang him at the curfew.”

An 18-year-old girl stood in the long, lonely street, watching and hardly knowing what to do. The deaf old sexton who had rung the curfew bell at sunset for 70 years would soon be going his way to ring it. The girl was almost crazed with grief at what was about to befall her sweetheart. She waited for the sexton to arrive, and pleaded with him – her eyes red and swollen with tears – not to let the bell ring. The sexton shook his head and replied, “I must do my duty, girl.”

As the door to the bell tower opened, she saw the ladder to the bell tower and – without the deaf sexton’s awareness – she climbed to the bell chamber, sprang to the tongue hanging above her head, and clung to it in desperation. She lifted herself higher, twining her arms tightly around its big, iron ball.

The pull rope began to move, the beam turned, the bell struck her head. Again the beam turned, and the bell swung. Had it rung? She thought not. A third time, the rope was pulled, the beam turned, the bell swung, and the girl’s limbs dashed against the cold sides. Faintly, she heard the old sexton go out and the tower door close behind him. He did not know the bell had never sounded.

The girl relaxed her bleeding arms and hands and dropped to her feet.

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All was still in the jail. The jailer was waiting for the curfew. The villagers heard their own hearts beat as they awaited the first stroke of the fatal bell.

Suddenly, the sounds of horses' feet were heard in the distance. Winding along a slope was a company of troops with Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland, at its head. The girl darted toward him, threw herself at his feet, and begged for the life of her sweetheart.

Inquiring of her injuries and learning the story, Cromwell was so impressed by her willingness to suffer on behalf of someone she loved that he pardoned the soldier, saying, "Curfew shall not ring tonight."

It is an amazing love that absorbs suffering for the sake of another.

And it is the kind of love that propels associates in Life Care and Century Park to engage in the mission they have chosen. Caregiving is not an easy matter. And sometimes – particularly in the case of dementia – residents may lash out verbally or even physically at those who are trying to help.

These associates – who work for more than a paycheck – are not deterred from their commitment to serve.

Theirs is a demonstration of an extraordinary, rare kind of love.

Love suffers long and is kind ... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Corinthians 13:4, 7 NKJV).

– Beecher Hunter