

The Curse of the Cuddesdon Stone

[Being a manuscript found in the dining room of Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire, at the close of Cambridge University Guild Week 2010, organised by Richard Youdale. The document, multiply folded and somewhat stained, was tucked into the frame of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce's portrait.]

In well over one hundred years as an oil painting, I have never seen such a rum crew as stayed at my college of Cuddesdon last week. Theological students I understand. They arrive, they have children in abundance, they leave to perform good works. But these types were not still for two minutes. As soon as they had breakfasted, they were off in their motor vehicles, not returning until just before dinner.

Since I like to know what my residents are up to, it is fortunate that my pastoral duties bequeathed me many contacts in the world of monumental masonry. Some of my flock have lain in an attitude of pious resignation for upwards of three hundred years. They can only relieve the monotony by taking an interest in visitors to their church. My informants reported that these curious characters drove their horseless carriages obsessively from one church to the next with no object other than to jangle the bells. This was so implausible that I deemed it necessary to put one of Cuddesdon's resident vampires on their tail. *[Transcriber: the word used, although illegible due to a faded brownish stain, is definitely not vampires; however, I understand that vampires are indispensable these days to any literary work aspiring to the merest shred of credibility.]*

Most people never see the vampires in Cuddesdon. Many people *[such as your present Transcriber]* are foolish enough to scoff at their existence. They should take a little time to look above the portrait painted in *oscuro* on the bend in the front stairs, in the windowless corridor joining two blank doors, even behind the largest tomes in the library. There is no danger: a vegetarian Chaplain of the early twentieth century made inspired use of our large mulberry tree to wean the vampires onto a fruit-based diet. *[The College plans, perhaps unwisely, to fell this tree next year; the Domestic Bursar is pinning her hopes on cranberry juice.]*

Velveteen, my assistant, lives behind Volume 10 of a dictionary so large and heavy that he does not suppose anyone will ever try to lift it out. Most of the words in it only occur as a result of an obscure eighteenth-century writer misspelling another, simpler, word. It is one of many books that seem quite natural in Cuddesdon but would be rather out of place anywhere else. While waiting in the bar, for instance, you may leaf through a perfectly respectable-looking book and turn up a gem of high Victorian sado-masochistic poetry. *[The Poems of William Ernest Henley lay on the bar, open at Echoes XXXVII.]*

Velveteen reports that, as far as he could discern from the handbags in which he concealed himself, the group had many amusements other than bell ringing. In fact, some of them seemed to amuse themselves with anything *but* bell ringing. Some ate their way around the churchyards, enjoying the plums and apples found there. One person seemed to have more of a taste for liverwurst. *[A curious green stain disfigures the manuscript at this point: it possibly should read liverwurst.]* 'They also visited a brewery,' stated Velveteen. 'On that day, I was riding in a charming

wickerwork handbag, which afforded me an excellent view. I had already suffered first the indignity of being left behind on the church steps and then the shock of swinging to and fro as someone raced after the owner's departing car, so perhaps I was not in the most amiable frame of mind. Nevertheless, I cannot say that the cleanliness of the brewery's vessels was an inducement to me to partake of their products. I think I will stick to my preferred beverage.'

Velveteen disturbed me by reporting that the group took luncheon in low public houses. Having once aspired to gentility, he refused to enter such places, hanging about in the nearest belfry until they emerged. On Thursday, having inadvertently accompanied a peal band, he spent three hours of utter boredom disguised as a weathercock. His only comment on that day was that the band were overjoyed to have been served a sandwich lunch for what he insisted on calling 10 shillings apiece. 'When I was alive, that was the yearly wages of a labourer.' he sniffed.

I hardly dared ask Velveteen whether the group showed a right spirit on entering churches. 'Two actual prayers were uttered.' he replied, with what looked uncommonly like a smirk. 'But many informal opportunities to show Christian charity arose.' [*Just who went the wrong way in Grandsire Triples, Barbara?*] I myself, from my prime position in the dining hall, had observed a certain scope for disagreement between those ringers possessing a teaching gene and those who regard perfect striking as no more than a barely acceptable first pass.

'What about the bells, the ostensible purpose of their visit?' I demanded. 'Oh, *those*.' Velveteen answered. 'They were no fun at all: the ringers had nothing to complain of. There wasn't a vicious bell among them. Maybe one or two had unusual personalities. And one tenor insisted on having his little joke with a ringer who claimed that she could ring big bells. But otherwise the organiser had chosen bells that were a pleasure to ring and to listen to.' Velveteen has never talked so much in all the time I have known him. I think he may be a potential recruit to bell ringing.

'They did ring one funny lot of bells, though, at some bell hanger's workshop.' Velveteen continued. 'As in all workshops, there was a vampire in residence, tucked into a corner that never gets cleaned, but he did not object to my entering. Seventeen baby bells lived there in a sort of bell nursery. Of course, the group insisted on ringing rounds on seventeen, which sounded quite as ghastly as you might expect. My escort that day called herself a steeplekeeper, but she had clearly not kept her steeple as well as she might, since she spent most of her visit being told how to put her tenor back together again.'

By now I had had enough of Velveteen's gabble and I despatched him back to his bookcase. I had established for myself what the bell ringers did in the evening. The better-bred among them played bridge. In my youth, fortunes were gambled away and duels fought over card games, but theological students led more exciting lives then. The vulgar rang handbells: peals for some, practice for others. One particularly merciless teacher was quite unable to interpret 'I can't ring handbells; I have no wish to ring handbells; I want to do the crossword.' as anything other than a request to learn Plain Bob Minor.

Did the Curse of the Cuddesdon Stone alight on anyone? The stone is, of course, the one that graduates of the college carry away with them affixed to their stomachs and hips. The maximum reported weight gain over the week was $\frac{1}{4}$ stone, which, extrapolated over the two or three years of a College course, would render the possessor incapable of ascending all but the very widest of tower stairs. When I was in my prime, such girth would have been regarded as a sign of intellectual maturity, but, as Mr Darwin and Mr Huxley assure us, we have evolved since then.

SOAPY SAM