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Six days out of every seven the area along the Burford Road resounded with the clattering, booming, clanging, rattling, thundering noise of Bellman's Mill. The shuttles that hurtled back and forth were the very least of it: there was also the churning, crashing roar of the Windrush as it turned the wheel that powered all this hectic toing and froing. Such was the racket that at the end of the day, when the shuttles were brought home to rest and the mill wheel ceased to turn, the ears of the workers still rang with the vibration of it all. This ringing stayed with them as they made their way to their small cottages, was still there as they climbed into their beds at night and, as often as not, continued to sound through their dreams.

Birds and other small creatures stayed away from Bellman's Mill, at least on working days. Only the rooks were bold enough to fly over, seeming to relish its clamour, even adding a coarse note of their own to the music.

Today though, being Sunday, the mill was peaceful. On the other side of the Windrush and down the high street, the humans were making noise of another kind.

A rook – or a crow, it is hard to tell them apart – alighted with aplomb on the roof of the church, cocked its head, and listened.

Oh come and dwell in me,
Spirit of power within,
and bring the glorious liberty
from sorrow, fear, and sin.

In the first verse of the hymn, the congregation was tuneless and as disorganised as a herd of sheep on market day. Some treated it as a competition where the loudest wins all. Some, having better things to

do with their time than sing, rushed to the end as quick as they could, while others, afraid of getting ahead of themselves, lagged by a safe semiquaver. Alongside and behind these singers was a mass of mill workers whose hearing was not what it had been. These created a flat background drone, rather as if one of the organ pedals had got stuck.

Thankfully there was the choir, and thankfully the choir contained William Bellman. His tenor, effortless and clear, gave a compass bearing, according to which the individual voices found north and knew where they were going. It rallied, disciplined and provided a target to aim at. Its vibrations even managed to stimulate the ear-drums of the hard of hearing, for the dull drone of the deaf was lifted by it into something almost musical. Although at 'sorrow, fear and sin' the congregation was bleating haphazardly, by 'Hasten the joyful day' it had agreed on a speed; it found its tune 'when old things shall be done away', and by the time it reached 'eternal bliss' in the last verse it was, thanks to William, as agreeable to the ear as any congregation can expect to be.

The last notes of the hymn died away and soon after, the church door opened and the worshippers emerged into the churchyard where they lingered to talk and enjoy the autumnal sunshine. Among them were a pair of women, one older and one younger, both abundantly decorated with corsages, brooches, ribbons and trims. They were aunt and niece they said, though some whispered otherwise.

'It makes you wish every day was Sunday,' the young Miss Young said wistfully, of William's voice, and Mrs Baxter, overhearing, replied,

'If you wish to hear William Bellman sing every night of the week, you need only listen at the window of the Red Lion. Though' – and her undertone was audible to William's mother standing a little way off – 'what is pleasant to the ear might be less so to the soul.'

Dora heard this with an expression of benign neutrality, and she turned the same face to the man now approaching her, her brother-in-law.

'Tell me, Dora. What is William doing these days, when he is not displeasing souls who loiter at the window of the Red Lion?'

'He is working with John Davies.'

'Does he like farm work?'

'You know William. He is always happy.'

'How long does he intend to stay with Davies?'

'So long as there is work. He is willing to turn his hand to anything.'

'You would not prefer something more steady for him? With prospects?'

'What would you suggest?'

There was a whole story in the look she gave him then, an old story and a long one, and the look he returned to her said, *All that is true, but.*

'My father is an old man now, and I have charge of the mill.' She protested but he overrode her. 'I will not speak of others if it angers you, but have *I* done you any injury, Dora? Have *I* hurt you or William in any way? With me, at the mill, William can have prospects, security, a future. Is it right to keep him from these?'

He waited.

'You have not wronged me in any way, Paul,' she said eventually. 'I suppose that if you don't get the answer you want from me, you will go to William directly?'

'I would much sooner we could all agree on it.'

The choristers had disrobed, and were leaving the church, William among them. Many eyes were on William, for he was as agreeable to look at as he was to the ear. He had the same dark hair as his uncle, an intelligent brow, eyes capable of seeing numerous things at once, and he inhabited his vigorous body with grace and ease. More than one young woman in the churchyard that day wondered what it would be like to be in the arms of William Bellman – and more than one young woman already knew.

He spotted his mother, widened his smile, and raised an arm to hail her.

'I will put it to him,' she told Paul. 'It will be for him to decide.'

They parted, Dora towards William, and Paul to go home alone.

In the matter of marriage, Paul had tried to avoid his father's mistake and his brother's. Not for him a foolish wife with bags of gold, nor love and beauty that came empty-handed. Ann had been wise and good-hearted – and her dowry had just stretched to the building of

the dye house. By being sensible and choosing the middle path, he had ended up with a harmonious domestic life, cordial companionship and a dye house. But for all his good sense and solid reason he chided himself. He did not grieve his wife's passing as a loving husband ought and in painfully honest moments he admitted in his heart that he thought more of his sister-in-law than was proper.

Dora and William went home.

The rook on the church roof gave an unhurried flap, lifted effortlessly from the roof and soared away.

'I'd like to do it,' Will told his mother in the small kitchen. 'You won't mind?'

'And if I do?'

He grinned and put an easy arm about her shoulders. At seventeen, there was still novelty in the pleasure of being so much taller than his mother. 'You know I wouldn't hurt you if I could help it.'

'And there's the rub.'

A while later, in a secluded spot screened by sedges and rushes, Will's easy arm was around another shoulder. His other hand was invisible beneath a mass of petticoat, and the girl sometimes placed her hand over his to indicate slower, quicker, a change of pressure. Clearly he was making progress, he thought. At the start she had kept her hand over his all the time. The girl's white legs were whiter still against the moss, and she had kept her boots on: they would have to make a run for it if they were disturbed. Her breath came in sharp gasps. It still surprised Will that pleasure should sound so like pain.

She fell abruptly silent and a small frown of concentration appeared on her face. Her hand pressed so hard over his it was almost painful and her white legs clamped together. He watched closely, fascinated. The flush on her cheeks and chest, the quiver of her eyelids. Then she relaxed, eyes still closed, and a small pulse beat in her neck. After a minute she opened her eyes.

'Your turn.'

He laid back, arms behind his head. No need for his hand to teach her. Jeannie knew what she was about.

'Don't you ever think you'd like to come and sit on top of me and do it properly?' he asked.

She stopped and wagged a playful finger at him. 'William Bellman, I mean to be an honest married woman one day. A Bellman baby is not going to get in my way!'

She returned to her task.

'Who do you take me for? Do you think I wouldn't marry you if there was a baby coming?'

'Don't be daft. Course you would.'

She caressed him, gently enough, firmly enough. It was just right.

'Well, then?'

'You're a good boy, Will. I'm not saying you're not.'

He took her hand and stopped it, propped himself up on his elbows to see her face properly.

'But?'

'Will!' Seeing he would not be satisfied without an answer, she spoke, hesitant and tentative, the words born straight from her thoughts. 'I know the kind of life I want. Steady. Regular.' He nodded her to go on. 'What would my life be if I were to marry you? There's no way of knowing. Anything might happen. You're not a bad man, Will. You're just . . .'

He lay back down. Something occurred to him, and he looked at her again.

'You've got someone in mind!'

'No!' But her alarm and her blush gave her away.

'Who is it? Who? Tell me!' He grabbed her, tickled her, for a minute they were children again, shrieking, laughing and play fighting. Just as quickly adulthood repossessed them and they set to finishing the business they were there for.

By the time the leaves and the sky came back into focus above his head, he discovered his brain had worked it out for him. It was respectability she wanted. She was a worker, unimpressed by the easy life. And if she was killing time with him, while waiting, it meant it was

someone who hadn't noticed her yet. There were not so very many candidates the right age, and most of them you could eliminate for one reason or another. Of the remainder, one stood out.

'It's Fred from the bakery, isn't it?'

She was appalled. Her hand flew to her mouth, then, more aptly but too late, covered his. The smell of both of them was on her fingers.

'Don't tell. Will, please, not a word!' And then she was crying.

He put his arms around her. 'Hush! I won't tell. Not a soul. Promise.'

She sobbed and hiccoughed and then was quiet and he took her hand in his. 'Jeannie! Don't fret. I bet you'll be married before the year is out.'

They washed their hands in the river and parted, heading off in different directions in order to arrive home by different paths.

Will walked the long route, upriver and over the bridge, down the other side. It was early evening. Summer was clinging on. It was a shame about Jeannie in a way, he reflected. She was a good sort of girl. A rumble came from his stomach and reminded him that his mother had some good cheese at home and a bowl of stewed plums. He broke into a run.