

# The Bells of Burracombe

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Published by Orion

Extract

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## Chapter One

*Burracombe, South Devon, 1950*

‘**Y**ou must be the new teacher!’ Stella Simmons turned quickly. The little bus, that had trundled around several villages on its way from Tavistock where she’d got off the train, was already departing down the narrow lane. There was nobody on the village green apart from herself and the young man who stood a few yards away, watching her with dark blue eyes. Tall, very thin and loose-limbed, wearing what appeared to be an old gardening jacket and trousers splashed with paint, he looked rather as if he’d been thrown hastily together from spare parts. Yet there was an attractive friendliness in his face and the grin that showed white, if slightly crooked, teeth. He was carrying a large, flat book.

‘Are you the vicar?’ Stella asked doubtfully, and he burst into delighted laughter, his wavy black hair flying around his bare head.

‘Do I look like a vicar?’

‘Well, no, but he was supposed to meet me here. And I’m not the new teacher – not yet. I’ve come for an interview. How did you know about me, anyway?’

‘In a small place like Burracombe,’ the young man said, ‘everyone knows everything. We all knew that someone was coming today, and I guessed it must be you as soon as I saw you get off the bus. You’re the only stranger here, you see.’

Stella met his bright blue glance and then looked away. The October sky was a hazy blue, with the jewelled colours of the woods shimmering as if through a delicate silvered veil. Her journey had brought her through meadows that dipped and dived, across wide, flat fenland and fields of sunburned stubble, and then between the brown folds of the moors. Even as she stepped off the bus into this village,

tucked into a soft valley clothed with oak and beech trees, she had felt as if she were coming home. Oh, she thought, I hope I get this job . . .

The village green still seemed deserted, with the church tower tall and grey above the cob cottages clustered around it, but as she gazed about she began to see signs of life. Along the lane was a forge with a big Shire horse being shod by a brawny, bald-headed man. A young woman a few years older than Stella, wearing breeches and a yellow jumper, was holding the horse's head. A cottage door opened and a woman in a crossover pinafore stepped outside and began to shovel up some dung that had obviously been deposited there only a few minutes before by the horse; she gathered it into a bucket and disappeared round the side of her cottage, but not before giving Stella a quick, sharp glance. And then hasty footsteps coming down the church path announced the arrival of the vicar, and the young man murmured in Stella's ear: 'Here he comes. He's just like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* – always terrified of being late!

The vicar opened the wooden lych gate and hurried across to them. He grasped Stella's hand and shook it vigorously, talking almost before he was within speaking distance. 'My dear young lady, I'm Basil Harvey. So sorry to keep you waiting. I'd intended meeting the bus but I was asked to give an opinion on marrows – not that my opinion's worth anything. All I could say was that they're very big!' He let go of her hand and stepped back a little. 'It's so kind of you to come all this way. I hope you had a good journey?'

'Very good, thank you,' Stella said, smiling at him. He did indeed look a little like the White Rabbit, with a halo of silver hair and a pink face that looked as if it had been scrubbed. 'I came on the train as far as Tavistock, just as you said.'

'Ah yes. A pleasant journey. And when you're settled you must try the branch line, from Whitchurch to Plymouth. Or in the other direction, to Launceston. One of the most beautiful railway lines in the country, to my mind. Railways are something of a hobby of mine,' he confided a little sheepishly. 'But I mustn't keep you standing here. The other governors are meeting at the vicarage at twelve-thirty, so I thought it might be nice for you to see the church before going on to the school. And there'll be lunch afterwards.' He glanced at the young man, who was watching them quietly, an amused twinkle somewhere deep in his bright eyes. 'I see you've met our other recent newcomer to the village.'

'We've had quite a conversation,' the young man said easily, 'but we

haven't actually introduced ourselves.' He held out his hand. 'Luke Ferris, at your service.'

'Oh.' Stella took his hand, feeling unaccountably flustered. 'And I'm Stella Simmons. But of course, you know that already.'

He laughed. 'I had the advantage of you, didn't I! But to be honest, I've only been here a week or two myself. I'm renting a cottage on the estate. I'm an artist – or like to think I am,' he added a little ruefully. She realised that the book he was carrying must be a sketchpad. 'Trying my hand at the Devon landscape.' He gestured at the vicar. 'It was Uncle Basil here who suggested it. Thought I needed a change from smoky old London.'

'And so you did. I'm not really his uncle,' the vicar told Stella, 'but his father and I have been friends for many years. Anyway, we mustn't stand here gossiping. Miss Simmons will be getting cold. Come along and look at our church, my dear.' He turned to Luke. 'Why don't you join us for lunch? I'm sure Grace can stretch the rabbit pie to another plate.'

At the mention of rabbit pie, Luke shot a swift glance at Stella, who shyly looked away. 'I won't, thanks.' I want to go over to Little Burracombe and catch the afternoon sun on Cuckoo Wood. The colours are magnificent now, but if we get a wind the leaves will be gone overnight and I'll miss the chance.' He said goodbye and loped away along the lane, his jacket unbuttoned and flapping round his lean body. The vicar looked after him and then turned to lead Stella up the path.

'Luke's been rather ill for the past two or three years – Grace and I do worry that he doesn't feed himself properly . . . However, that's not why you're here.' He bustled up the flagstone path and Stella followed him, peering at the leaning gravestones on either side. *Robert Tozer, Beloved Husband of Alice . . . Fell Asleep January 14<sup>th</sup> 1842; Albert Tozer, 1796–1875, Gone But Not Forgotten; Jemima Tozer, 1800–1879, Wife of the Above; William Tozer, 1833–1835; Susannah Tozer, 1834–1840; Eliza Tozer, 1836–1880.*

'There are a lot of Tozers here,' she said. 'Are they a local family?'

'Oh yes, and there are still plenty of them about.' Basil Harvey looked at the gravestones. 'Many of them died young, as you can see, especially during the 1830s. Cholera, you know.' He hurried on and opened the big wooden door. Stella followed him into the dim church and stood still for a moment, letting her eyes adjust.

'It's lovely,' she said, looking up at the wooden beams on the

vaulted roof and the sturdy, tree-like pillars of the nave. The soft grey of the stone was lit and coloured by sunshine pouring in through a stained-glass window, while the deep crimson of the altar cloth glowed like a winter bonfire behind the carved railing of the chancel. The stone floor was cold but the dark wood of the pews seemed to give out its own warmth as if extending a welcome that had been sustained for centuries past.

'We're very proud of it,' the vicar admitted, standing beside her. 'As you see, we're preparing for our Harvest Festival service on Sunday – that's why I was asked to choose which marrow should go at the foot of the pulpit.' He moved up the aisle towards a young woman who was arranging fruit and flowers around the pulpit and chancel steps. Two enormous marrows lay like slumbering green hippos on the floor, with a pile of scrubbed orange carrots beside them and a great sheaf of golden chrysanthemums thrust into a bucket of water. There were boxes of other vegetables and fruits as well – potatoes, swedes, scarlet apples, gleaming bronze onions – all in glorious disarray at her feet, while Stella now noticed two or three other women busy arranging more produce on the wide windowsills.

The young woman looked up as they approached. She was about thirty and was wearing an old jumper and skirt, yet still managed to appear elegant with her slender figure and long, artistic hands. Her fair hair was loose, in a long page-boy style, and her grey eyes were cool but friendly as she surveyed the vicar and his companion.

'You must be the new teacher.' She wiped her hand on her skirt. 'How do you do? I'm Hilary Napier. Sorry, I'm in a bit of a mess – perhaps we'd better save the handshake for later.'

Stella smiled and shook her head. 'I'm not the new teacher – not yet, anyway. I haven't even had my interview yet. Mr Harvey's just showing me round.'

'Well, that won't take long – Burracombe's not much more than a handful of cottages and a dog. I hope you're not a city girl. You'll find it very dull and quiet here if you are.' She eyed Stella assessingly. 'You look very young to be applying for a teacher's post.'

'I'm twenty-one. I've done all my training, and worked as a pupil teacher where I used to live.' Stella felt a twinge of anxiety. She had done her best to make herself look older before setting out on the journey that morning – trying to brush her short, dark curls flat, putting on a brown hat and coat that had been passed down to her by one of the other girls, wearing lace-up shoes and thick stockings. But

nothing could disguise her fresh, smooth complexion, nor the brightness of her hazel eyes. She had an uneasy feeling that she just looked like a little girl, dressing up in her mother's clothes.

'Well, we want someone young and lively for our children, don't we,' the vicar was saying cheerily. 'Miss Morgan was an excellent teacher, I'm sure, but I did sometimes feel that the little ones were getting a bit too much for her. There were times when she didn't even seem to *like* them very much, but I'm sure she did really. It was just that she was tired.'

'It wasn't that at all,' Hilary Napier said. She had a brisk way of speaking, in a clipped voice that Stella guessed indicated an upper-class background and private education. 'She *didn't* like them. And it wasn't just her age, either – she never did like small children. Totally unsuited to be a teacher, if you ask me.' She bent and picked up one of the marrows.

The vicar protested. 'Oh, I'm sure you're wrong about that, Hilary. She was an excellent woman. Every child who passed through her hands went on to the junior class able to read and write and do sums.'

'Too frightened not to.' Hilary balanced the marrow in both hands and flicked her eyebrows at Stella. 'It was a good day for Burracombe when she retired. And not a moment too soon, either – she must have been well over age. Eighty in the shade.'

Mr Harvey gave her a reproachful look. 'If I weren't accustomed to your sense of humour, Hilary, I might be cross with you. You shouldn't be talking like that, even if you don't mean it. You'll be making poor Miss Simmons wonder if she really does want to come to Burracombe.' He glanced suddenly at the watch on his wrist. 'Goodness gracious me! Where does the time go? We ought to be making our way to the school. And I haven't shown you the church properly at all. Never mind, there may be an opportunity later.' He whirled off down the aisle towards the door and Hilary Napier laughed.

'You'd better go,' she said. 'If Basil thinks you're late, you must be!' She gave Stella a friendly smile. 'I hope you get the job. Burracombe's quiet, but it's a nice enough place to live, provided you don't hanker for city streets and big shops.'

'I don't,' Stella said, smiling back. 'I lived in the country for a while when I was a child – evacuated, you know.' The usual shadow touched her heart, but she was so accustomed to it by now that she could ignore it – almost. 'I hope I'll see you again, Miss Napier.'

'Oh, I expect you will.' Hilary clasped the marrow to her chest as if it were a baby and carried it over to the altar. 'You'll be meeting my father, anyway – he's one of the school governors. Enjoy your visit to Burracombe. At least you've got a nice day for it. I warn you, it can be a bit bleak around here in winter.'

She turned to arrange the vegetables in a row along the chancel rail, and Stella followed the vicar out of the church.

The October air was as sharp as a russet apple as they trotted back down the church path. Stella looked about at the cluster of cottages and tried to imagine herself living here, in this tiny village on the edge of Dartmoor. A narrow stream ran along the edge of the road, and beyond the cottages the hills were clothed in woods, bronzed with autumn colour, with occasional splashes of deep purple. Above the woods she could see the moor itself, golden-brown with the dying bracken and scattered with the bright yellow of gorse flowers. *When gorse is out of season, kissing's out of reason . . .* Someone had told her that once, years ago. It never was completely out of season.

Luke had disappeared but there were a few more people about now. The Shire horse had finished being shod at the forge and was coming along the green. He was a huge beast with chestnut-brown sides, a creamy white blaze down his nose and feathery blond hairs covering his enormous feet. The young woman leading him paused as Stella and the vicar came down the church path, and the horse leaned his big head against her arm.

'Valerie!' Basil Harvey greeted her. 'Come and meet Miss Simmons. We're hoping she may come to be our new infant teacher.' He rubbed the horse's nose absently and felt in his pocket. 'I'm sure I've got a peppermint somewhere here . . .'

Stella smiled shyly. She was beginning to wonder how she would ever be able to remember the names of all these people. This young woman looked about the same age as Hilary Napier – a year or two under thirty, perhaps – and was about the same height, but her hair was dark and tied back from her face with a blue ribbon. She had a rather long face and her smile seemed tinged with sadness. She nodded at Stella.

'Nice to meet you.' She was the first person Stella had met who spoke with a Devon accent, although it wasn't very strong; perhaps she'd been out of the village for a while. She gave the vicar an apologetic glance as she added, 'Sorry, Mr Harvey, I can't stop, Dad needs Barley back on the farm. He cast a shoe in the night – got it

caught up on the fence – and it’s put us all behind.’ The horse had his nose down in the grass and had begun munching, and she gave the head-collar a gentle tug. ‘Come on, Barley, it isn’t dinnertime yet. We’ve got work to do.’

She walked on and Stella saw the vicar look after her thoughtfully. Then he turned back to Stella with a cheerful smile on his rosy face.

‘A nice person, Val Tozer. She lives at the farm just over there. Still with her parents – ought to be married with her own home and family, but she lost her fiancé in the war – a sad story. Right – the school’s just along here and if we’re lucky we’ll get there while the children are still in class.’ He gave Stella a conspiratorial glance. ‘I’m afraid you won’t meet the redoubtable Miss Morgan, though. Since Dr Latimer ordered her to retire, we’ve had the assistance of another of our old teachers, Miss Perriman – a very different kind of person. The children love her.’

He hastened on along the village street with Stella almost having to run to keep up with him. Her heart was beginning to beat fast and she felt again the tinge of apprehension that had accompanied her all the way on the train from Hampshire and then on the bus from the little market town of Tavistock.

I want this job so much, she thought. I don’t know what I’ll do if I don’t get it . . .

Val Tozer strode along the lane, her hand stroking the soft skin under Barley’s neck. The big, gentle horse nuzzled her as she walked but her mind wasn’t with him. Nor did she notice the colours of the hedgerows, their summer green fading now to the browns of autumn with a few blackberries still glistening above the gateways, and the grey, spiky twigs of a sloe-tree in contrast with its purple fruits. Familiar as they were to her, they were far from her thoughts as she walked between the steep Devon banks towards her father’s farm.

‘Val!’

Even before she heard the voice, the sound of footsteps behind her had brought a prickle to her spine. Her back stiffened and she quickened her pace.

‘Val, wait. Please. Look, you can’t go on avoiding me all the time.’ The voice was closer. ‘Please talk to me, Val.’

Val took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and stopped. Barley came to a halt and turned his head enquiringly. Stubbornly, she stared straight ahead.



Luke Ferris came beside her and touched her arm. She shook it off and stepped away from him.

‘Don’t do that.’

‘Val,’ he said despairingly. ‘Val, please. We can’t pretend we don’t know each other.’

‘I don’t see why not.’ Her breath felt tight in her chest, like a hard lump, and her heart was thumping painfully. ‘I don’t see why we have to have anything to do with each other.’

‘But I’m living here now. We’re bound to meet—’

‘No, we’re not. Not if you keep out of my way.’ She faced him at last. ‘I’m perfectly prepared to keep out of yours. And why did you have to come and live here anyway? Couldn’t you have gone somewhere else?’

‘I didn’t know you lived here,’ he said quietly and, at the flash of angry disbelief in her eyes, added, ‘I *didn’t*. You never told me – or if you did, I’d forgotten. It was all a long time ago.’ He hesitated, but she didn’t speak, and he went on, ‘Look, I really didn’t come here to make trouble. I needed to be in the country and Uncle Basil – the vicar – knew of the cottage and asked Colonel Napier if I could rent it. It was as simple as that. It never occurred to me that you’d be here.’

She looked at him. His face was thinner than she remembered, and rather drawn. Yet he was still sunburned, as if he spent a good deal of time in the open air. She wondered briefly what he’d been doing over the years since they’d last met.

‘Well, you know now,’ she said brusquely. ‘And if you don’t mind, I’d rather we didn’t talk to each other. We’ve got nothing to say.’ She lifted her hand to push Barley’s damp nose off her shoulder. ‘I’ve got to go now.’

Luke’s eyes went to her fingers and a frown gathered between his brows. ‘You’re not wearing a ring.’

‘No,’ Val said shortly. ‘I’m not.’

‘But . . .’ He seemed to be feeling for words and when he spoke again it was uncertainly. ‘You – you didn’t get married, then?’

‘I couldn’t,’ she said. ‘He was killed in the D-Day landings. We didn’t have a chance to get married.’ Her eyes met his again and she added bitterly, ‘Not everyone had a soft job drawing pretty pictures.’

‘They weren’t pretty,’ Luke said quietly. ‘You know that, Val.’ He paused. ‘I’m sorry to hear about Eddie, though. And – there hasn’t been anyone else?’

Val’s eyes filled with tears. She turned away and jerked at Barley’s

head. He gave a whicker of protest and she rubbed his nose in apology, but was already striding on along the lane.

‘No,’ she said over her shoulder, ‘there hasn’t been anyone else. There never will be.’ She stopped and turned again, facing him. ‘Go away, Luke. You’ve done enough damage. Go away and leave me alone.’

Together, she and the big horse marched away down the lane. Her shoulders were stiff, her back straight, but Luke knew that if he could see her face he would find tears pouring down her cheeks. He started after her and then stopped again, knowing that it was no use.

He watched until she disappeared from sight round the bend in the lane. Then he walked slowly back through the village, past the green with its huge ancient oak tree, past the grey stone church, past the Bell Inn with its thatched roof and benches outside, past the school where the children were spilling out into the playground. Almost without seeing them, he passed the vicar and Stella Simmons, standing at the door and talking to Miss Kemp, the headmistress, and then he turned up the narrow lane that led to his own cottage, on the edge of the Barton estate.

He had spoken the truth when he’d said he hadn’t realised that Val Tozer lived in Burracombe. But he couldn’t, in all honesty, say that he wouldn’t have come to live here if he had known.