

Sonata for Harp & Bicycle by Joan Aiken

“No one is allowed to remain in the building after five o’clock.” Mr. Manaby told his new assistant, showing him into the little room that was like the inside of a parcel.

“Why not?”

“Directorial policy,” said Mr. Manaby. But that was not the real reason.

Gaunt and sooty, Grimes Buildings lurched up the side of a hill toward Clerkenwell¹. Every little office within its dim and crumbling exterior owned one tiny crumb of light -- such was the proud boast of the architect -- but toward evening the crumbs were collected as by an immense vacuum cleaner, absorbed and demolished, yielding to an uncontrollable mass of dark that came tumbling in through windows and doors to take their place. Darkness infested the building like a flight of bats returning willingly to roost.

“Wash hands, please. Wash hands, please,” the intercom began to bawl in the passages at a quarter to five. Without much need of prompting, the staff hustled like lemmings along the corridors to green- and blue-tiled washrooms that mocked with an illusion of cheerfulness the encroaching dusk.

“All papers into cases, please,” the voice warned, five minutes later. “Look at your desks, ladies and gentlemen. Any documents left lying about? Kindly put them away. Desks must be left clear and tidy. Drawers must be shut.”

A multitudinous shuffling, a rustling as of innumerable bluebottle flies might have been heard by the attentive ear after this injunction, as the employees of Moreton Wold and Company thrust their papers into cases, hurried letters and invoices into drawers, clipped statistical abstracts together and slammed them into filing cabinets, dropped discarded copy into wastepaper baskets. Two minutes later, and not a desk throughout the Grimes Buildings bore more than its customary coating of dust.

“Hats and coats on, please. Hats and coats on, please. Did you bring an umbrella? Have you left any shopping on the floor?” At three minutes to five the homegoing throng was in the lifts² and on the stairs; a clattering, staccato-voiced flood darkened momentarily the great double doors of the building, and then as the first faint notes of St. Paul’s³ came echoing faintly on the frosty air, to be picked up near at hand by the louder chimes of St. Biddulph’s-on-the-Wall, the entire premises of Moreton Wold stood empty.

“But why is it?” Jason Ashgrove, the new copywriter, asked his secretary one day. “Why are the staff herded out so fast? Not that I’m against it, mind you: I think it’s an admirable idea in many ways, but there is the liberty of the individual to be considered, don’t you think?”

“Hush!” Miss Golden, the secretary, gasped at him with large and terrified eyes. “you mustn’t ask that sort of questions. When you are taken onto the Established Staff you’ll be told. Not before.”

“But I want to know now,” Jason said in discontent. “Do you know?”

“Yes, I do,” Miss Golden answered tantalizingly. “Come on, or we shan’t have finished the Oat Crisp layout by a quarter to.” And she stared firmly down at the copy in front of her, lips folded, candyfloss hair falling over her face, lashes hiding eyes like peridots⁴, a girl with a secret.

Jason was annoyed. He rapped out a couple of rude and witty rhymes which Miss Golden let pass in a withering silence.

“What do you want for your birthday, Miss Golden? Sherry? Fudge? Bubble bath?”

“I want to go away with a clear conscience about Oat Crisps,” Miss Golden retorted. It was not true; what she chiefly wanted was Mr. Jason Ashgrove, but he had not realized this yet.

“Come on, don’t tease! I’m sure you haven’t been on the Established Staff all that long,” he coaxed her. “What happens when one is taken on, anyway? Does the Managing Director have us up for a confidential chat? Or are we given a little book called *The Awful Secret of Grimes Buildings?*”

Miss Golden wasn’t telling. She opened her drawer and took out a white towel and a cake of rosy soap.

“Wash hands, please! Wash hands, please!”

Jason was frustrated. “You’ll be sorry,” he said. “I shall do something desperate.”

“Oh no, you mustn’t!” Her eyes were large with fright. She ran from the room and was back within a couple of moments, still drying her hands.

“If I took you out for a coffee, couldn’t you give me just a tiny hint?”

Side by side Miss Golden and Mr. Ashgrove ran along the green-floored passages, battled down the white marble stairs among the hundred other employees from the tenth floor, the nine hundred from the floors below.

He saw her lips move as she said something, but in the clatter of two thousand feet the words were lost.

“---fire escape,” he heard, as they came into the momentary hush of the carpeted entrance hall. And “--it’s to do with a bicycle. A bicycle and a harp.”

“I don’t understand.”

Now they were in the street, chilly with the winter dusk smells of celery on carts, of swept-up leaves heaped in faraway parks, and cold layers of dew sinking among the withered evening primroses in the bombed areas. London lay about them wreathed in twilight mystery and fading against the barred and smokey sky. Like a ninth wave the sound of traffic overtook and swallowed them.

“Please tell me!”

But, shaking her head, she stepped onto a scarlet homebound bus and was borne away from him.

Jason stood undecided on the pavement, with the crowds dividing around him as around the pier of a bridge. He scratched his head, looked about him for guidance.

An ambulance clanged, a taxi hooted, a drill stuttered, a siren wailed on the river, a door slammed, a brake squealed, and close beside his ear a bicycle bell tinkled its tiny warning.

A bicycle, she had said. A bicycle and a harp.

Jason turned and stared at Grimes Buildings.

Somewhere, he knew, there was a back way in, a service entrance. He walked slowly past the main doors, with their tubs of snowy chrysanthemums, and up Glass Street. A tiny furtive wedge of darkness beckoned him, a snicket, a hacket, an alley carved into the thickness of the building. It was so narrow that at any moment, it seemed, the overtopping walls would come together and squeeze it out of existence.

Walking as softly as an India, Jason passed through it, slid by a file of dustbins⁵, and found the foot of the fire escape. Iron treasuries rose into the mist, like an illustration to a Gothic⁶ fairy tale.

He began to climb.

When he had mounted to the ninth story he paused for breath. It was a lonely place. The lighting consisted of a dim bulb at the foot of the every flight. A well of gloom sank beneath him. The cold fingers of the wind naggled and fluttered at the tails of his jacket, and he pulled the string of the fire door and edged inside.

Grimes Buildings were triangular, with the street forming the base of the triangle, and the fire escape the point. Jason could see two long passages coming toward him, meeting at an acute angle where he stood. He started down the left-hand one, tiptoeing in the cavelike silence. Nowhere was there any sound, except for the faraway drip of a tap. No night watchman would stay in the building; none was needed. Burglars gave the place a wide berth.

Jason opened a door at random; then another. Offices lay everywhere about him, empty and forbidding. Some held lipstick-stained tissues, spilled powder, and orange peels; others were still foggy with cigarette smoke. Here was a Directory's suite of rooms -- a desk like half an acre of frozen lake, inch-thick carpet, roses, and the smell of cigars. Here was a conference room with scattered squares of doodled blotting paper. All equally empty.

He was not sure when he first began to notice the bell. Telephone, he thought at first, and then he remembered that all the outside lines were disconnected at five. And this bell, anyway, had not the regularity of a telephone's double ring: there was a tinkle, and then silence; a long ring, and then silence; a whole volley of rings together, and then silence.

Jason stood listening, and fear knocked against his ribs and shortened his breast. He knew that he must move or be paralyzed by it. He ran up a flight of stairs and found himself with two more endless green corridors beckoning him like a pair of dividers.

Another sound now: a waft of ice-thin notes, riffing up an arpeggio⁷ like a flurry of snowflakes. Far away down the passage it echoed. Jason ran in pursuit, but as he ran the music receded. He circled the building, but it always outdistanced him, and when he came back to the stairs he heard it fading away to the story below.

He hesitated, and as he did so heard again the bell; the bicycle bell. It was approaching him fast, bearing down on him, urgent, menacing. He could hear the pedals, almost see the shimmer of an invisible wheel. Absurdly, he was reminded of the insistent clamor of an ice-cream vendor, summoning children on a sultry Sunday afternoon.

There was a little fireman's alcove beside him, with buckets and pumps. He hurled himself into it. The bell stopped beside him, and then there was a moment while his heart tried to shake itself loose in his chest. He was looking into two eyes carved out of expressionless air; he was held by two hands knotted together out of the width of dark.

"Daisy, Daisy?" came the whisper. "Is that you, Daisy? Have you come to give me your answer?"

Jason tried to speak, but no words came.

"It's not Daisy! Who are you?" The sibilants⁸ were full of threat. "You can't stay here. This is private property."

He was thrust along the corridor. It was like being pushed by a whirlwind -- the fire door opened ahead of him without a touch, and he was on the openwork platform, clutching the slender railing. Still the hands would not let him go.

"How about it?" the whisper mocked him. "How about jumping. It's an easy death compared with some."

Jason looked down into the smokey void. The darkness nodded to him like a familiar⁹.

"You wouldn't be much loss, would you? What have you got to live for?"

Miss Golden, Jason thought. She would miss me. And the syllables Berenice Golden lingered in the air like a chime. Drawing on some unknown deposit of courage he shook himself loose from the holding hands and ran down the fire escape without looking back.

Next morning when Miss Golden, crisp, fragrant, and punctual, shut the door of Room 492 behind her, she stopped short of the hatpegs with a horrified gasp.

"Mr. Ashgrove, your hair!"

"It makes me look more distinguished, don't you think?" he said.

It had indeed this effect, for his impeccable dark cut had turned to a stippled silver which might have been envied by many a diplomat.

“How did it happen? You’ve not--” her voice sank to a whisper -- “*you’ve not been in Grimes Buildings after dark?*”

“Miss Golden -- Berenice,” he said earnestly. “Who was Daisy? Plainly you know. Tell me the story.”

“Did you see him?” she asked faintly.

“Him?”

“William Heron -- The Wailing Watchman. Oh,” she exclaimed in terror, “I can see you did. Then you are doomed -- doomed!”

“If I’m doomed,” said Jason, “let’s have coffee, and you tell me the story quickly.”

“It all happened over fifty years ago,” said Berenice, as she spooned out coffee powder with distracted extravagance. “Her was the night watchman in this building, patrolling the corridors from dusk to dawn every night on his bicycle. He fell in love with a Miss Bell who taught the harp. She rented a room --this room--and gave lessons in it. She began to reciprocate his love, and they used to share a picnic supper every night at eleven, and she’d stay on a while to keep him company. It was an idyll¹⁰, among the fire buckets, and the furnace pipes.

“On Halloween he had summoned up the courage to propose to her. The day before he had told her he was going to ask her a very important questions, and he came to the Buildings with a huge bunch of roses and a bottle of wine. But Miss Bell never turned up.

“The explanation was simple. Miss Bell, of course, had been losing a lot of sleep through her nocturnal romance, and so she used to take a nap in her music room between seven and ten, to save going home. In order to make sure that she would wake up, she persuaded her father, a distant relative of Graham Bell¹¹, to attach an alarm-waking fixture to her telephone which called her every night at ten. She was too modest and shy to let Heron know that she spent those hours in the building, and to give him the pleasure of waking her himself.

“Alas! On this important evening the line failed, and she never woke up. The telephone was in its infancy at that time, you must remember.

“Heron waited and waited. At last, mad with grief and jealousy, having called her home and discovered that she was not there, he concluded that she had betrayed him; he ran to the fire escape, and cast himself off it, holding the roses and the bottle of wine.

“Daisy did not long survive him but pined away soon after. Since that day their ghosts have haunted Grimes Buildings, he vainly patrolling the corridors on his bicycle, she playing her harp in the room she rented. *But they never meet.* And anyone who meets the ghost of William Heron will himself, within five days, leap down from the same fatal fire escape.”

She gazed at him with tragic eyes.

“In that case we must lose no time,” said Jason, and he enveloped her in an embrace as prompt as it was ardent. Looking down at the gossamer hair sprayed across his pin-stripe, he added, “Just the same it is a preposterous

situation. Firstly, I have no intention of jumping off the fire escape--" there, however, he repressed a shudder as he remembered the cold, clutching hands of the evening before --"and secondly, I find it quite nonsensical that those two inefficient ghosts have spent fifty years in this building without coming across each other. We must remedy the matter, Berenice. We must not begrudge our new-found happiness to others."

He gave her another kiss so impassioned that the electric typewriter against which they were leaning began chattering to itself in a frenzy of enthusiasm.

"This very evening," he went on, looking at his watch, "we will put matters right for that unhappy couple and then, if I really have only five more days to live, which I don't for one moment believe, we will proceed to spend them together, my bewitching Berenice, in the most advantageous manner possible."

She nodded, spellbound.

"Can you work a switchboard?" he added. She nodded again. "My love, you are perfection itself. Meet me in the switchboard room then, at ten this evening. I would say, have dinner with me, but I shall need to make one or two purchases and see an old R.A.F.¹² friend. You will be safe from Heron's curse in the switchboard room if he always keeps to the corridors."

"I would rather meet him and die with you," she murmured.

"My angel, I hope that won't be necessary. Now," he said, sighing. "I suppose we should get down to our day's work."

Strangely enough the copy they wrote that day, although engendered from such agitated minds, sold more packets of Oat Crisps than any other advertising matter before or since.

That evening when Jason entered the Grimes Buildings he was carrying two bottles of wine, two bunches of red roses, and a large canvas-covered bundle. Miss Golden, who had concealed herself in the switchboard room before the offices closed for the night, eyed these things with surprise.

"Now," said Jason, after he had greeted her. "I want you first to ring our own extension."

"No one will reply, surely?"

"I think she will reply."

Sure enough, when Berenice rang Extension 170 a faint, sleepy voice, distant and yet clear, whispered, "Hullo?"

"Is that Miss Bell?"

"Yes."

Berenice went a little pale. Her eyes sought Jason's and, prompted by him, she said formally, "Switchboard here, Miss Bell. Your ten o'clock call."

"Thank you," the faint voice said. There was a click and the line went blank.

"Excellent," Jason remarked. He unfastened his package and slipped its straps over his shoulders. "Now plug in the intercom."

Berenice did so, and then said, loudly and clearly, "Attention. Night watchman on duty, please. Night watchman on duty. You have an urgent summons to Room 492. You have an urgent summons to Room 492." The intercom echoed and reverberated through the empty corridors, then coughed itself to silence.

"Now we must run. You take the roses, sweetheart, and I'll carry the bottles."

Together they raced up eight flights of stairs and along the passages to Room 492. As they neared the door a burst of music met them --harp music swelling out, sweet and triumphant. Jason took a bunch of roses from Berenice, opened the door a little way, and gently deposited them with a bottle, inside the door. As he closed it again Berenice said breathlessly, "Did you see anyone?"

"No," he said. "The room was too full of music." She saw that his eyes were shining.

They stood hand in hand, reluctant to move away, waiting for they hardly knew what. Suddenly the door opened again. Neither Berenice nor Jason, afterward, would speak of what they saw but each was left with a memory, bright as the picture of a Salvador Dali¹³ calendar, of a bicycle bearing on its saddle a harp, a bottle of wine, and a bouquet of red roses, sweeping improbably down the corridor and far, far away.

"We can go now," Jason said.

He led Berenice to the fire door, tucking the bottle of Medoc in his jacket pocket. A black wind from the north whistled beneath them as they stood on the openwork platform, looking down.

"We don't want our evening to be spoiled by the thought of a curse hanging over us," he said, "so this is the practical thing to do. Hang onto the roses." And holding his love firmly, Jason pulled the rip cord of his R.A.F. friend's parachute and leaped off the fire escape.

A bridal shower of rose petals adorned the descent of Miss Golden, who was possibly the only girl to be kissed in midair in the district of Clerkenwell at ten minutes to midnight on Halloween.

1. Clerkenwell: a central district of London
2. lifts: British colloquial for elevators
3. St. Paul's: a famous church in London
4. peridots: a yellowish-greenish gem
5. dustbins: British colloquial for trash bins
6. Gothic: a subgenre of horror
7. arpeggio: a broken chord, where notes are played one after the other rather than simultaneously
8. sibilants: hissing sounds
9. idyll: an extremely happy, picturesque, peaceful episode, typically idealized or unsustainable
10. familiar: a spirit

11. *Graham Bell: (1847-1922) Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone*
12. *R.A.F.: British air force (Royal Air Force)*
13. *Salvador Dali (1904-1989) Spanish surrealist painter*