

The Day of the Bell

The demonstration had been quite orderly. There had been speeches by students and a few radical members of the staff, some waving of cryptically worded banners and cheering. Then someone set fire to the O.T.C. building.

When the firemen arrived, the building was burning well, like a great tulip in the Spring air. A multitude of students gathered round it and chanted anti-war slogans. They booed the firemen vigorously and hustled about them, getting in the way and falling over their equipment. But the firemen went stolidly about their work, connected up their hoses and began to spray water on the flames.

A cry of anger went up from the milling students. The building was already quite gutted, but they wanted it utterly consumed. Over the flames, a thick tumbling yeast of yellow and white smoke worked frantically up into the air, beckoning to distant passers-by who came hurrying to join the throng. The fire rumbled like a great wind.

For a moment there was confusion, then out of the uncertainty came an ugly temper. The students snatched up stones and threw blindly. Then some bent down and slashed at the hoses with pocket knives. From the ruptures water spouted erratically, like silver rain over the delighted scrambling figures. It was all hilarious again, and they shouted and embraced one another with joy.

Two police cars came whining down from the main road with blue lights flashing. The students pressed around them, forcing the doors shut and banging on their roofs and bonnets. Suddenly, like a shoal of fish, they turned and ran. The policemen followed, trying to herd them away from the firemen.

More police cars were arriving. The scattered figures drew instinctively together into a vast sprawling crowd which moved under some inner compulsion towards the higher ground. The green slopes dropped away from them and flattened into the playing fields and oval.

On the far side, three olive-green lorries drew up and men in helmets and gas masks climbed down. They formed into a line and came across the football field. The sight of them in the distance checked the shouting. For an instant the entire crowd paused and watched the distant men.

'Chicks up front! Chicks up front!'

Some of the girls moved forward of the congregation, balanced, ready to run. They bawled obscenities, but prudently, as one would taunt a bull in the same field. The olive-green men were carrying rifles.

'Shitheads! Bastards! Pigs! Pigs! Pigs!'

The men came on, the glare of flame on their sea-green goggles. The crowd held its ground, but uncertainly. When the troops reached the road bordering the playing field there was the crunch of boots upon gravel.

The crowd fell back slightly, then, under the same common impulse,

swarmed across the green towards the main buildings of the university. For a moment they were held by the paling fence around the lawn and shrubbery. It leaned under their weight, then fell and they swept on.

At that instant, a student in a canary-yellow sweater came out of the library. The sweater made him very conspicuous, but as less sensational newspapers later reported, he was really only an average young man.

He took in the crowd, and the line of men approaching. The fire was still burning and spread an orange glow. After the gloom and quiet of the library the noise and glare surprised him.

The afternoon sun glowed richly on the windows of the engineering faculty and turned them into open furnace doors. Everything was burning with a strange, elating fire. Everyone seemed alight with a tremendous energy.

He let fall the books from under his arm and moved forward, slowly at first, then at a run. When he reached the crowd he was shouting as lustily as the rest.

They were now swirling round the lawn in front of the humanities building, caught in a pocket. Its huge main door was locked. The walls were faced with smooth, grey-veined marble, like a well-bred tomb. In a moment of excited desperation, someone shouted: 'The bell! The bell!'

The Great Bell stood isolated in the middle of the lawn in front of the humanities building. It had been donated. Once it had hung in a church in the Old Country which had been destroyed by fire during the war. Now it hung from an oak beam beneath a little shelter, like the roof over a wishing well, or a lychgate. There was an inscription round the Great Bell, but no one could read it. It was never rung and it took no part in campus life. Occasionally the groundsman washed the white rope and tassel that hung from its clapper, but he no longer tried to clean it.

The cry was taken up in the crowd. 'The bell! The bell!'

It happened that the student in the yellow sweater was nearest. He seized the white tassel and swung the clapper against the blackened bronze with a strength that thrilled him. A booming ecstasy throbbed across the fields and echoed back from the impassive buildings. There was a deep, solemn vibrance in its voice they had never heard before. It was like a victory peal in their ears, fierce with a mystery they did not understand.

But the men in olive-green were coming closer. They climbed the paling fence, holding their rifles before them, and then reformed into the silent line.

The crowd would have to move again. There was nothing to throw here. One of the men lobbed a tear gas grenade which fell short and gave off white smoke. They streamed back across the lawn towards the gap they had broken in the fence.

The rearguard student in the yellow sweater rang the bell until the crowd had gone and the tear gas was attacking his throat and the tear pits of his

eyes. Then he followed, turning to jeer and thrust up his middle finger at the advancing men.

Where the crowd had burst through the fence, there were broken palings and wooden stakes on the ground. He bent down and twisted the wire free from a long, heavy, sharply-pointed stake. Running easily with it balanced in his hand, he felt a primitive, physical pride, like some native warrior.

He came up with the crowd; there were cheers and he saluted gaily with his stake. They were all moving towards the high ground again. He half turned and moved with the sprawling, ululating mass up the grassy mound until, packed on its summit, they stopped.

How that little lift in the ground changed the view! They had the advantage now. They looked down upon those bastard uniforms and masks. Now! It was now! Face them, face them! He must not run any more. The olive-green men coming steadily forward would take away his new identity. He must keep it, by force, by violence. The terrible joy of single combat gripped him. He stood absolutely unafraid, indifferent to everything except his own enemy, and the weight of the stake in his hand.

When the troops reached the bottom of the mound a shower of stones met them. They faltered; one fell clutching at his mask.

They had them now! Beat them back! Force them away, their rifles weren't loaded! He launched the stake like a javelin, saw it arc through the air, heard it crunch through olive-green cloth, felt the hunter's triumph as the quarry dropped. Then he ran.

His legs thrust down and down, his arms pumped forward and back, but he seemed to be barely moving. The hill was always rising, rising, pressing him back. Behind him he heard a great muddled outburst of shouting and screaming. Suddenly he felt a tremendous thrust in the small of his back, as if someone had given him a push up the hill, but the lower half of his body seemed to drop off. There was a succession of sharp cracks. Sprawling down he felt tiny green fingers of grass brush his cheek, and the breath of damp earth in his face. There was a thin, agonised cry from the crowd. 'NOoo...! He's my brother!'

He felt no pain, no physical pain, only a confused doubt that he had been hit at all, and a vague despair. The windows of the physiology building, set sagaciously in their courses of red brick, were undulating provocatively. His head lolled to one side and his gas-reddened eyes misted. There was the library, where he had spent so many hours, turning over the pages of other people's lives, never quite feeling the pulse...

A long-haired girl kneeled down beside the body, then flung up her arm dramatically. She had only ever read of death like this in war poetry. Now the truth of it came like the shock of discovering an old lie. It was all a filthy trick! You could read the poem time and time again, and death would play itself over again in the bayonet thrust, the choking gas. But this! Now! It was played out in an instant, with no time, it was already over

for the first, last, single time. Surely there should be more time, and quiet, to think, to decide, to feel the pity of it. But there was no time, for discussion, no argument, no critical analysis...

The lieutenant pulled the gas mask from his stifled face and wiped the sweat from his eyes. The students were talking in little hushed groups. They were quiet enough now. The guts had gone out of them. In a little while they would go home. They got Kovrin though, the bastards. Still, it was all quits, the score was even.

He watched the yellow sweater and the olive uniform being lifted on to stretchers and the ambulance drive away.

There was going to be one hell-of-a-row. Better get the men back, the rifles cleaned, ammunition returned, before anyone could start pointing a finger.

He turned and looked over the trampled lawn and the broken fence. Ash from the burned building was already mingling with the earth in the flower beds around the law block. The Great Bell hung under its little shelter, deserted. It looked indestructible. He wondered at its aloofness, its silence.

GORDON INSKIP.