

*The band ring Grandsire, starting off alright but after a short time starting to go wrong, bells clashing.*

JEAN: Lead NOW Christine! Mark - make thirds! Oh – rounds, rounds...stand!

TRICIA: Well, that went well.

CHRISTINE: I'm so sorry – it was my fault.

JEAN: Not entirely. You were sabotaged. People who ought to have been right were going wrong. What was the matter with all of you?

TRICIA: Nobody seemed to be where I expected them to be. It was as if we were all out of sync, somehow.

JEREMY: That was just how I felt. It was weird! And my rope was so stiff. It was as if it had a life of its own. It just didn't seem to want to go where I wanted it to.

MARK: Yes, mine was all over the place, too. And it's so bloomin' cold in here.

*CHRISTINE, JEAN, MARK and JEREMY leave the ropes and move to right of stage to the bench. Their voices gradually get quieter until the audience can't hear them any more, and all the audience can hear is the conversation between TRICIA and NATHAN.*

CHRISTINE: So when the call came, I should have double dodged at the back?

JEAN: That's right, and then dodged four five up next time.

CHRISTINE: I can do it perfectly in my head in the bath but when I am actually ringing it, my mind goes a blank.

JEAN: It'll come. It's only practice.

MARK: I was trying to dodge four five up but no-one was there.

JEAN: The leading is so bad, that's the trouble.

*While the above dialogue is going on, TRICIA walks over to the wall on the left, touching it with her fingers. NATHAN joins her.*

NATHAN: What's that, Trish?

TRICIA: Initials carved into the wall. There are lots of the same ones all round the walls. Haven't you noticed them? GR GR GR. See if you can find some more.

NATHAN: Oh - I've found one – look. They all look as if they are inside little houses, don't they?

TRICIA: I see what you mean – the initials are inside square boxes with a little triangle on top for a roof. Hey! He's actually written his name here, G Ralph.

NATHAN: How do you know it's a boy?

TRICIA: Girls don't do naughty things like this!

NATHAN: I bet they do.

TRICIA: Yes, but this was done years ago, by the look of it, and I think the ringers were all boys or men then.

NATHAN: Here's another one.

TRICIA: Where?

NATHAN: Down here – look

TRICIA: That's not GR. I think it's meant to be a J.

NATHAN: It's inside a box like the others.

TRICIA: No triangle on top though. It looks sort of half finished. It's like the others but the carving is not as good, and it's newer – see how sharp the edges are.

*JEAN leaves the others and comes over to where TRICIA and NATHAN are standing.*

JEAN: What are you two looking at?

NATHAN: Look Mum – look at all the GR's in their little houses!

**ACT I Scene 2 - Stage 4 A week later. Practice Night. The Ringing Chamber. TRICIA and NATHAN. Enter TRICIA. Walks over to wall where initials are carved.**

TRICIA: *[whispers]* Hello, George.

*Enter NATHAN.*

NATHAN: Hello, Trish.

TRICIA: Oh, Nathan! You made me jump. Everyone was a bit jumpy up here last week for some reason, weren't they?

NATHAN: I bet you thought I was GR!

TRICIA: Course not! I've found out some things about him, though.

NATHAN: Oh – what?

*TRICIA moves to right of stage and sits on bench.*

TRICIA: Well, his name was George. George Ralph. I found out that he rang handbells here before the big bells were rehung back in 1910.

NATHAN: How old would he have been when he carved his initials?

TRICIA: I don't know. He was twenty on the 1911 census - do you know what a census is?

NATHAN: Yes, we did them at school last year.

TRICIA: The handbell group started up in 1908 so he would have been er. em... that's three years off from 1911 ..Maths not my strong point..17 years old in 1908. But his father was the church sexton so I suppose he might have come in here any time when he was growing up. He might have been carving those initials when he was the same age as you.

*Enter YOUNG GEORGE RALPH. Starts scratching initials in wall left. Neither TRICIA nor NATHAN can see him.*

NATHAN: You'd think his Dad would have told him off.

TRICIA: Perhaps he was busy somewhere else in the church at the time. George was a stonemason when he grew up. He must have known that was what he was going to do – all this practising with his initials.

NATHAN: Would he be dead now?

TRICIA: He died when he was 26.

*GEORGE leaves stage.*

NATHAN: What of?

TRICIA: He died in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. He went missing in 1916 but his family didn't know he was dead until about a year later. It must have been awful for them, not knowing.

NATHAN: I wonder what he looked like.

TRICIA: Well, do you know – he had eyebrows just like yours!

NATHAN: You don't really know, do you? You're joking.

TRICIA: Honestly – I saw a photo of him in an old paper – the picture was all dark and speckly, you know, but you could see that he was tall and thin, and he had your eyebrows!

NATHAN: They call me 'caterpillar' at school.

TRICIA: *[looking out of window, above bench]* Here are the others, coming up the path. Who do you think will get up here first.

NATHAN: Not my Mum!

**Act 1      Scene 3 – Wednesday. TRICIA'S car. TRICIA and JEAN – Stage 3**

TRICIA: Like a lift, Jean?

JEAN: Oh, that's great. Thanks. Can I put this on the back seat? *[door closes and car moves off]* Tim will be glad that I'm back in time to make lunch for a change.

TRICIA: I'm lucky. My Peter likes cooking. When he's away, I tend to live on sandwiches.

JEAN: When will he be back?

TRICIA: The end of September. At least I get a lot of ringing practice in when he's not around. Ringing's such a good hobby when you're on your own, isn't it? *[to motorist]* A little indication would be nice. *[sound of indicator and the car turns off roundabout]*

JEAN: It must have been a help knowing how to ring when you first moved into the village - to be able to just turn up at the tower and find new friends.

TRICIA: That's right, and everyone is at different stages but we're all trying to learn something. I suppose you learnt to ring as a child.

JEAN: Didn't have much choice actually! My Dad was Tower Captain in Stoke.

TRICIA: So bell ringing is in the family then?

JEAN: That's right. My Granddad was Tower Captain too - Jack Taverner.

TRICIA: Oh yes – I've seen his name written up in lots of towers. I wonder if he knew the Ralphs.

JEAN: Who?

TRICIA: George Ralph's family. He was the bell ringer who carved his initials all over the ringing chamber. Remember – your Nathan and I were looking at them on Monday.

JEAN: Oh, the one who died in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. I wouldn't have thought so. My Granddad, Jack, was born in the twenties, I think.

TRICIA: Oh. Shame. I should so like to talk to someone who actually knew the family. I've got really interested in George Ralph.

JEAN: Have you found out much about him?

TRICIA: Well, I've discovered that his father was called John Ralph. He was the gardener in Ham Hill House. I think the family had quite a bit to do with the church. John Ralph was the sexton and his wife did the flowers. They lived quite close to the church.

*Enter JOHN RALPH with spade. Leans on spade Stage 2 and looks up at the sky. Walks slowly off the other side.*

JEAN: Do you think you might write an article or something about it all eventually?

TRICIA: Oh, I wouldn't be any good at writing it down. I'm just interested. Well, obsessed, really, I suppose. I can't stop thinking about George. Whoops! (*slight screech of brakes*) Sorry! Better concentrate a minute... Apparently he did quite a bit of restoration work on the church. He must have loved working in stone to want to do more of it outside of his working day. Did I say he was a stonemason up on the Hill? I think perhaps he would have done something really special if he hadn't died in the war.

JEAN: You can drop me at the end of the road, Trish.

TRICIA: No – that's alright – you've got all that shopping to lug in.

JEAN: Well, thanks – that'll be great. So sad – all those young men with their lives ahead of them. Did you say the Ralphs lived near the church?

TRICIA: That's right. They had the middle cottage of that little terrace of three opposite the church.

JEAN: Well, that's a coincidence. That's where *my* family lived – well, next door - in the end cottage. My Granddad, Jack, was brought up there with his sister, Olive. My Auntie Olive is still alive, actually. I wonder if she would remember the Ralphs. She's in her nineties but bright as a button still.

TRICIA: Oh I AM glad I stopped to pick you up! That's brilliant. Would she mind if I went to see her, do you think?

JEAN: I'm sure she'd love the company. She lives in one of the bungalows near the doctor's surgery. My mother goes in to see her every day. I'll get her to pave the way for you to visit, if you like.

**ACT 1**

**Scene 4** *The Duke of Cornwall pub, Thursday, late evening. MARK and JEREMY. Stage 3. JEREMY is sitting at a table with a drink on it. MARK sits down and puts glass of brandy in front of JEREMY.*

MARK: Here. Get this down you, Jeremy.

JEREMY: Thanks. It's really shaken me up.

MARK: I thought you must have fallen over or something the way you were leaning against the wall, looking all dazed. What happened?

JEREMY: It was just so weird. Perhaps I dreamt it. I dunno. I went to put some flowers on my mother's grave this evening. It would have been her birthday today and I always do it on her birthday. The light was going - it was getting a bit dimpsey - but I saw someone standing with her back to me on the other side of the churchyard wall – near those cottages. She turned round to face me.

MARK: Yeah?

JEREMY: She was close as I am to you now.

MARK: What was so weird about it?

JEREMY: Well, she looked just ordinary, you know. In her 70's perhaps. A comfortable sort of a face. She reminded me of Jean a bit. I said, "G'd evening!!" and something about the weather, as you do, and she just stood there, not saying anything. [drinks from glass] And then suddenly she was gone. Vanished. It was such a shock. You know when you step off the kerb and nearly get knocked over by a lorry – you get a sort of rush in your ears. It was like that.

Mark: Blimey! You sure you hadn't been in here first?

Jeremy: I know. That's what I would have said if I hadn't seen her myself. I've never believed in ghosts.

Mark: And she never said anything?

Jeremy: No, but I couldn't shake the feeling that she WANTED to say something to me. I felt inside my head as if I could nearly hear what it was but couldn't quite get hold of it.

Mark: What was she wearing?

Jeremy: A coat. I remember wondering why she was wearing a coat because it's a warm day. She had a pretty sparkly brooch. Longish skirt. And she wore a hat.

Mark: No clanking chains, then?

Jeremy: It's alright for you to laugh. You didn't see her. I say, Mark, keep this under your hat will you? I don't want everyone thinking I've got a screw loose.

**ACT 1**      **Scene 5** *Friday morning. OLIVE TAVERNER'S bungalow. Table and two chairs. Small chest of drawers. Stage 3. TRICIA is sitting at table. Enter OLIVE with tea tray and puts it on the table.*

TRICIA: Thank you. This is so kind of you.

OLIVE: Well, I don't know if I'm going to be able to help you very much, dear. It was such an awfully long time ago.

TRICIA: But you do remember the Ralph family living next door when you were growing up?

OLIVE: Oh yes. There was old Mr & Mrs Ralph and their daughter, Annie. Help yourself to milk, dear. Sugar's there if you want it.

TRICIA: Thank you. No, no sugar, thanks. Annie was George Ralph's sister, wasn't she?

OLIVE: Yes, George was killed in the war, you know.

TRICIA: I suppose any photos of George would be with his sister's family.

OLIVE: Oh no, dear. Annie never married. She died in that cottage. Mother had some of her belongings after she died. I don't know what happened to the rest. I know I've got a photograph somewhere of Mrs Ralph in the garden, holding my brother Jack when he was a baby. But it's the one who was killed in the war that you're interested in, isn't it? I don't think I've got any of him.

TRICIA: I'd love to see that photo of Mrs Ralph, though. Your brother, Jack – that's Jack Taverner, Jean's grandfather, isn't it? The one who was Captain of Stoke bellringers.

OLIVE: That's right. I'll have a look for that photo in a minute. Why are you interested in the family, dear?

TRICIA: I'm a bellringer, like Jean, and I found some marks George made on the wall up in the ringing room at Stoke church when he was a bellringer there. I just wanted to find out more about him.

OLIVE: Well, as I say, I never knew him, but I knew OF him. His sister, Annie, used to tell us about him. She thought the world of him.



TRICIA: Did she? I suppose he was her only brother.

OLIVE: The only one who survived, yes. I think the Ralphs had other children who died before I knew them. Annie was lovely. We called her Auntie Annie. She must have been in her thirties or forties I suppose when we were children, but she didn't act her age. She was great fun.

TRICIA: Can you remember what she told you about George?

OLIVE: My word – it's a long time ago now! It must be getting on for 80 years! I remember he had a friend called..Art..Arthur.. that was it. He was a rascal, Art was. Annie said Art used to get the two of them INTO trouble and George would get them OUT of it again. He had such an innocent face, George.

*On Stage 2, ART is seen sitting on the grass on ham hill, looking at a rook scarer.. Enter YOUNG GEORGE RALPH.*

GEORGE: Whatya got there, Art?

ART: Wouldn't you like to know!

GEORGE: Well, I do then. What is it?

ART: 'Tis one o' they newfangled bird scarers. I found it.

GEORGE: Let's see 'un. Where d'you find it?

ART: Down Rixon. It sorta dropped off the end of the string. Got any matches?

GEORGE: Aye. But hold on. You gotta rub the gunpowder off first.

ART: How d'ya mean?

GEORGE: Look – you try and light that as it is an' it'll blow up. Here – gimme. You gotta take off a bit of the paper first – like this – rub this black stuff off. Now you can light it.

ART: How d'you know so much about it?

GEORGE: I seen 'em in the garden at Ham Hill House – where Dad works. He's got all the latest stuff, Mr Knight Revel has.

ART: [*lights rook scarer*] How long will it...

*Bang. Sound of a lot of sheep baa-ing and running in panic. Voice off..*

MAN: You young varmints! What are you a-playin' at thir?

ART: O-oh

GEORGE: Run!

*Fade Out*

OLIVE: Yes, she thought the world of him.

TRICIA: Do you suppose Art and George joined up together when the war started?

OLIVE: I seem to remember Annie saying that Art went to America before the war. She said George missed him a lot.

Tricia: Poor George. He joined up right at the beginning of the War, didn't he?

OLIVE: That's right – one of the first to go, he was.

TRICIA: It must have been very hard on the Ralphs – their only son.

OLIVE: Yes – and when he was killed, well, there were no more Ralphs after that.

TRICIA: I read somewhere that he was very tall.

OLIVE: Annie was a tall woman, very tall.

TRICIA: Your memory is brilliant. Do you mind my asking how old you are?

OLIVE: I'm 93 next month. I was born in 1923. My brother Jack was born in 1918 – there were five years between us.

TRICIA: You don't look it. You're amazing. I hope I look as good as you when I'm 93.

OLIVE: The secret of a long life, I tell people, is knowing when you can change things and when you can't. People worry such a lot. I just wish I could remember where I put that photograph. Can you have a look for me in that bottom drawer, dear? I can't get down there any more. Me knees. *[sound of drawer opening]* It'll be in a box, I think – bring it out, my dear, and put it on the table here. *[Opens box]* Goodness! My poor niece will have to sort all this out when I'm gone. Look – there you are – there's old Mrs Ralph and that's my brother, Jack, in her arms.

*MRS RALPH steps onto Stage 1 with Baby Jack and stands rocking him gently.*

TRICIA            She looks nice. Oh..and that's the porch of their cottage, isn't it? I recognise that little decorative bit on the top.

OLIVE:            Yes, that's the one – next to ours. You can just see the corner of our kitchen window. Well, I wonder where this one was taken...

TRICIA:            It looks like a cemetery – lots of little wooden crosses.

OLIVE:            Oh, I remember - that'll be when they went to France to see George's grave. Annie said my mother and father went with her – she didn't want to go on her own and her own parents were getting on a bit. Is there a date on the back? My Mum was good at putting dates on things. Oh yes – there you are – 1919.

TRICIA:            I wonder who looked after your brother, Jack, while they were away. He would only have been about two then, wouldn't he?

OLIVE:            I don't know – perhaps Grannie Taverner did.

TRICIA:            I suppose Annie must have liked having you and your brother growing up next door, having no children of her own.

OLIVE:            All the children loved her. If I got told off by Mother, I would run next door to Auntie Annie. My brother, Jack, was very close to old Mrs Ralph. She thought the world of him.

*Light on MR RALPH on Stage 1, sitting in armchair smoking pipe. MRS RALPH still on stage, nursing Baby Jack. Sharp voice of JANE TAVERNER (OLIVE'S mother)*

JANE:              Olive Taverner! What's this hole in your new stocking? Didn't I tell you not to wear them stockings yet? You *naughty* girl!"

*Sound of slap. Enter YOUNG OLIVE who runs to MR RALPH and climbs onto his lap.*

JOHN

RALPH:            Art in trouble again, little maid?

*Takes handkerchief out of breast pocket and makes it into a mouse, making it run up his arm until OLIVE stops crying.*