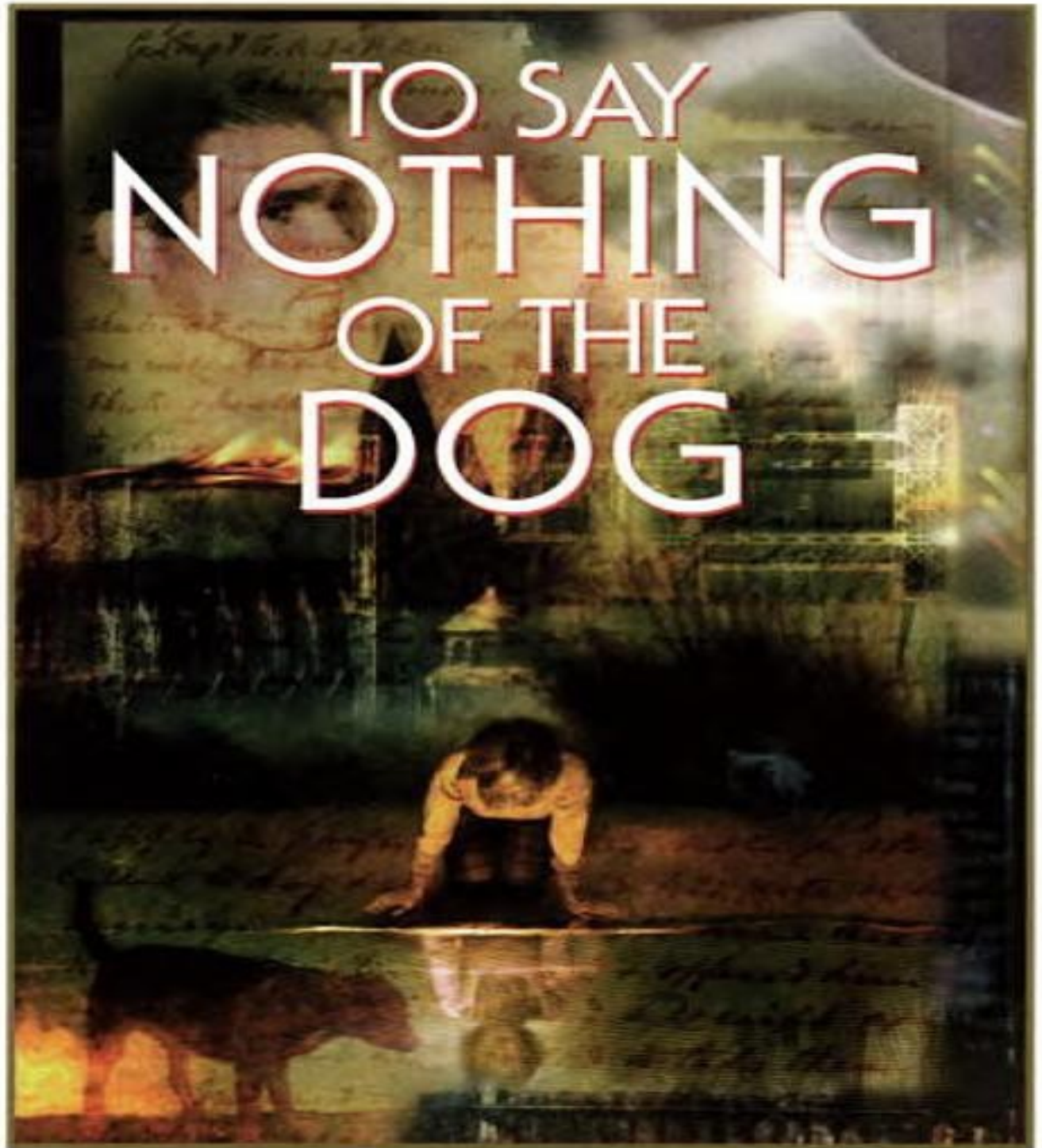


"THE MOST HILARIOUS BOOK OF ITS KIND SINCE JOHN IRVING'S *THE WATER-METHOD MAN* AND *A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES* BY JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE."*

CONNIE WILLIS



To Say Nothing of the Dog

or

How We Found The Bishop's Bird Stump At Last

CONNIE WILLIS

“ . . . a harmless, necessary cat ”
William Shakespeare

“ God is in the details. ”
Gustave Flaubert

To Robert A. Heinlein

Who, in Have Space Suit, Will Travel,
first introduced me to Jerome K. Jerome's
Three Men in a Boat,
To Say Nothing of the Dog

“ It would have been nice to start fresh without those messy old ruins, ” she
said.

“ They're a symbol, dear, ” said her friend.

C H A P T E R O N E

A Search Party—Wartime Headgear—The Problem of Nepotism—Royal Headgear—The Bishop’s Bird Stump Is Missing—Jumble Sales—A Clue to Its Whereabouts—Astronomical Observations—Dogs—A Cat—Man’s Best Friend—An Abrupt Departure

There were five of us—Carruthers and the new recruit and myself, and Mr. Spivens and the verger. It was late afternoon on November the fifteenth, and we were in what was left of Coventry Cathedral, looking for the bishop’s bird stump.

Or at any rate I was. The new recruit was gawking at the blown-out stained-glass windows, Mr. Spivens was over by the vestry steps digging up something, and Carruthers was trying to convince the verger we were from the Auxiliary Fire Service.

“This is our squadron leader, Lieutenant Ned Henry,” he said, pointing at me, “and I’m Commander Carruthers, the post fire officer.”

“Which post?” the verger said, his eyes narrowed.

“Thirty-six,” Carruthers said at random.

“What about him?” the verger said, pointing at the new recruit, who was now trying to figure out how his pocket torch worked and who didn’t look bright enough to be a member of the Home Guard, let alone AFS.

“He’s my brother-in-law,” Carruthers improvised. “Egbert.”

“My wife tried to get me to hire her brother to work on the fire watch,” the verger said, shaking his head sympathetically. “Can’t walk across the kitchen without tripping over the cat. ‘How’s he supposed to put out incendiaries?’ I asks her. ‘He needs a job she says. ‘Let Hitler put him to work,’ I says.”

I left them to it and started down what had been the nave. There was no time to lose. We’d gotten here late, and even though it was only a bit past four, the smoke and masonry dust in the air already made it almost too dark to see.

The recruit had given up on his pocket torch and was watching Mr. Spivens digging determinedly into the rubble next to the steps. I sighted along him to determine where the north aisle had been and started working my way toward the back of the nave.

The bishop's bird stump had stood on a wrought-iron stand in front of the parclose screen of the Smiths' Chapel. I picked my way over the rubble, trying to work out where I was. Only the outer walls of the cathedral and the tower, with its beautiful spire, were still standing. Everything else—the roof, the vaulted ceiling, the clerestory arches, the pillars—had come crashing down into one giant unrecognizable heap of blackened rubble.

All right, I thought, standing on top of a roof beam, that was the apse, and along there was the Drapers' Chapel, although there was no way to tell except by the blown-out windows. The stone arches had come down, and there was only the bayed wall left.

And here was the St. Laurence Chapel, I thought, scrabbling over the rubble on my hands and knees. The clutter of stone and charred beams was five feet high in this part of the cathedral, and slippery. It had drizzled off and on all day, turning the ash to blackish mud and making the lead slates from the roof as slick as ice.

The Girdlers' Chapel. And this must be the Smiths' Chapel. There was no sign of the parclose screen. I tried to judge how far from the windows it would have stood, and started digging.

The bishop's bird stump wasn't underneath the mass of twisted girders and broken stone, and neither was the parclose screen. A broken-off length of kneeling rail was, and part of a pew, which meant I was too far out into the nave.

I stood up, trying to orient myself. It's amazing how much destruction can distort the sense of space. I knelt down and looked up the church toward the choir, trying to spot the base of any of the north aisle pillars to see how far out into the nave I was, but they were hopelessly buried.

I needed to find where the arch had been and work from there. I looked back up at the Girdlers' Chapel's east wall, aligned myself with it and the windows, and started digging again, looking for the supporting pillar of the arch.

It had been broken off six inches from the floor. I uncovered the space around it, then, sighting along it, tried to estimate where the screen would have been, and started digging again.

Nothing. I heaved up a jagged piece of the wooden ceiling, and under it was a giant slab of marble, cracked across. The altar. Now I was too far in. I sighted along the new recruit again, who was still watching Mr. Spivens dig, paced off ten feet, and started digging again.

"But *weare* from the AFS," I heard Carruthers say to the verger.

"Are you certain you're with the AFS?" the verger said. "Those coveralls don't look like any AFS uniform I've ever seen."

He wasn't having any of it, and no wonder. Our uniforms had been intended

for the middle of an air raid, when anyone in a tin helmet can pass for official. And for the middle of the night. Daylight was another matter. Carruthers's helmet had a Royal Engineers insignia, mine was stencilled "ARP" and the new recruit's was from another war altogether.

"Our regular uniforms were hit by a high explosive," Carruthers said.

The verger didn't look convinced. "If you're from the fire service, why weren't you here last night when you might have done some good?"

An excellent question, and one that Lady Schrapnell would be sure to ask me when I got back. "What do you mean you went through on the fifteenth, Ned?" I could hear her asking. "That's a whole day late."

Which was why I was scrabbling through smoking roof beams, burning my finger on a still-melted puddle of lead that had dripped down from the roof last night, and choking on masonry dust instead of reporting in.

I pried up part of an iron reinforcing girder, nursing my burnt finger, and started through the heap of roof slates and charred beams. I cut the finger I'd burnt on a broken-off piece of metal and stood up, sucking on it.

Carruthers and the verger were still at it. "I never heard of any Post Thirty-six," the verger said suspiciously. "The AFS posts in Coventry only go up to Seventeen."

"We're from London," Carruthers said. "A special detachment sent up to help out."

"How'd your lot get through?" the verger said, picking up his shovel aggressively. "The roads are all blocked."

It was time to lend assistance. I went over to where they were standing. "We came round Radford way," I said, fairly sure the verger wouldn't have been out that direction. "A milk lorry gave us a lift."

"I thought there were barricades up," the verger said, still clutching his shovel.

"We had special passes," Carruthers said.

Mistake. The verger was likely to ask to see them. I said hastily, "The Queen sent us."

That did it. The verger's tin helmet came off, and he came to attention, his shovel like a staff. "Her Majesty?"

I placed my ARP helmet over my heart. "She said she couldn't look Coventry in the face till she'd done something to help. 'Their beautiful, beautiful cathedral,' she said to us. 'You must go up to Coventry straightaway and offer them whatever help you can.'"

"She would," the verger said, shaking his bald head reverently. "She would. 'Their beautiful, beautiful cathedral.' It sounds just like her."

I added a dash of the verger's salute at Carruthers and went back to work.

I nodded solemnly at the verger, winked at Carruthers, and went back to my digging. The rest of the collapsed arch was underneath the roof slates, along with a tangle of electrical cords and a broken memorial tablet that read, "May you know rest et—," a wish which apparently had not been granted.

I cleared a space three feet wide around the pillar. Nothing. I crawled over the rubble, looking for the rest of the pillar, found a fragment of it, and began digging again.

Carruthers came over. "The verger wanted to know what the Queen looked like," he said. "I told him she was wearing a hat. She did, didn't she? I can never remember which one wore the hats."

"They all did. Except Victoria. She wore a lace cap affair," I said. "And Camilla. She wasn't queen long enough. Tell him Her Majesty saved Queen Victoria's Bible when Buckingham Palace was bombed. Carried it out in her arms like a baby."

"She did?" Carruthers said.

"No," I said, "but it'll keep him from asking why you're wearing a bomb squad helmet. And it might get him talking about what was saved last night."

Carruthers pulled a piece of paper from the pocket of his coveralls. "The altar candlesticks and cross from the high altar and the Smiths' Chapel were saved by Provost Howard and the fire watch and taken to the police station. Also a silver paten and chalice, a wooden crucifix, a silver wafer box, the Epistles, the Gospels, and the regimental colors of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, Seventh Battalion," he read.

It matched the list in Provost Howard's account of the raid. "And not the bishop's bird stump," I said, surveying the rubble. "Which means it's here somewhere."

"No luck finding it?" Carruthers asked.

"No," I said. "I don't suppose there's any chance anyone arrived earlier and has already found it?"

"Nobody of ours," Carruthers said. "Davis and Peters couldn't even get to the right year. It took me four tries to get this close. The first time I came through I landed on the nineteenth. The second time I ended up in the middle of December. The third time I ended up spot-on target, right month, right day, ten minutes before the raid started. And in the middle of a field of marshmallows halfway to Birmingham."

"Marshmallows?" I said, thinking that I couldn't have heard right. Marshmallows didn't grow in fields, did they?

"*Marrows*," Carruthers said, sounding irritated. "In a field of vegetable marrows. And it wasn't anything to joke about. The farmer's wife thought I was

a German paratrooper and locked me in the barn. I had the devil of a time getting out.”

“What about the new recruit?” I said.

“He came through right before I did. I found him wandering about in the Warwick Road, no idea of where to go. If I hadn’t found him he’d have fallen in a bomb crater.”

Which might not have been a bad thing, considering. The new recruit had given up watching Mr. Spivens and was back trying to figure out how to switch on his pocket torch.

“It took us two hours to get here,” Carruthers said. “How about you, Ned? How many tries before you got this close?”

“Just the one. I only just got pulled off jumble sales to try when you weren’t having any luck.”

“Jumble sales?”

“Lady Schrapnell got the idea the bishop’s bird stump might have been sold at one of the cathedral’s jumble sales,” I said. “You know, to raise money for the war effort. Or given to a scrap iron drive, so she sent me to every church and community function from September on. I say, you don’t know what a penwiper’s used for, do you?”

“I don’t even know what a penwiper is.”

“Neither do I,” I said. “I’ve bought seven. Two dahlias, a rose, a kitten, a hedgehog, and two Union Jacks. One’s got to buy something, and since I couldn’t bring anything I bought back through the net with me, it had to be something I could slip onto the fancy goods table without being caught, and penwipers are small. Except for the rose. It was nearly as big as a soccer ball, made out of layers and layers of bright fuchsia wool sewn together, and pinked round the edges. And what I can’t see is what on earth the use of something like that would be, except of course for people to buy at jumble sales. They all had them, the Evacuated Children Charity Fair, the ARP Gas Mask Fund Baked Goods Sale, the St. Anne’s Day Sale of Work—”

Carruthers was looking at me oddly. “Ned,” he said, “how many drops have you made in the past week?”

“Ten,” I said, trying to remember. “No, twelve. There was the Trinity Church Harvest Fête, the Women’s Institute Victory Drive Sale of Work, the Spitfire Benefit Tea. Oh, and the bishops’ wives. Thirteen. No, twelve. Mrs. Bittner wasn’t a drop.”

“Mrs. Bittner?” Carruthers said. “The wife of the last bishop of Coventry?”

I nodded. “She’s still alive. And still living in Coventry. Lady Schrapnell sent me out to interview her.”

“What could she possibly know about the old cathedral? She wouldn’t even have been born when it burned.”

“Lady Schrapnell had the idea that if the bishop’s bird stump survived the fire, it might have been put in storage somewhere in the new cathedral, so she sent me to interview the bishops’ wives because, and I quote, ‘Men don’t know where anything’s kept.’”

Carruthers shook his head sadly. “And did the wives know?”

“They’d never even *heard* of it except for Mrs. Bittner, and she said it wasn’t there when they packed up everything before they sold the new cathedral.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” he said. “If it isn’t here either, that means it wasn’t in the cathedral when the raid happened, and you can tell Lady Schrapnell she won’t need to have a reconstruction of it in the cathedral for the consecration.”

“You tell her,” I said.

“Perhaps it was removed for safekeeping,” he said, looking at the windows. “Like the east windows.”

“The bishop’s bird stump?” I said incredulously. “Are you joking?”

“You’re right,” he said. “It isn’t the sort of thing you’d want to keep from being blown up. Victorian art!” He shuddered.

“Besides,” I said, “I’ve already been to Lucy Hampton rectory—that’s where they took the windows—to check. It wasn’t there.”

“Oh,” Carruthers said. “Could it have been moved to somewhere else in the church?”

That was an idea. Perhaps one of the Altar Guild ladies, unable to stand the sight of it, had stuck it in a corner behind a pillar or something.

“Why is Lady Schrapnell so obsessed with this stump thing anyway?” Carruthers said.

“Why is she so obsessed with every detail of this project?” I said. “Before she assigned me to the bishop’s bird stump, it was monuments. She wanted a copy of every inscription on every monument in the cathedral, including the one on Captain Gervase Scrope’s tomb, which went on forever.”

Carruthers nodded sympathetically. “Organ pipes,” he said. “She’s had me all over the Middle Ages measuring organ pipes.”

“The real question, of course, is, why is she so obsessed with rebuilding Coventry Cathedral?” I said.

“Her great-great-something grandmother went to Coventry and—”

“I know, I know, the experience changed her great-great-something grandmother’s life, and when Lady Schrapnell found her diary, it changed *her* life, and she decided to rebuild the cathedral exactly as it was just before it

burned down in honor of, et cetera, et cetera. I've heard that speech a number of times. Also the one about how God—"

"—is in the details," Carruthers quoted. "I despise that speech."

"The one I hate the most is the 'leave no stone unturned' speech. Give me a hand." I pointed to the end of a large stone.

He stooped down and got hold of the other side of it.

"One, two, three," I said, "lift," and we heaved it across the aisle, where it rolled into what was left of a pillar and knocked it down.

The bishop's bird stump wasn't under the stone, but the wrought-iron stand it had stood on was, and one of the crosspieces of the parclose screen, and, under a chunk of red sandstone, a half-charred stem of a flower. There was no telling what sort of flower, there weren't even any leaves left, and it might have been a stick or an iron rod except for the inch or so of green at one end.

"It stood in front of a screen?" Carruthers said, crunching through the glass.

"This screen. On this stand," I said, pointing at the wrought-iron stand. "As of November the ninth, the Prayers for the RAF Service and Baked Goods Sale. Two crocheted antimacassars, a pansy penwiper, and half a dozen rock cakes. Extremely aptly named."

Carruthers was looking round at the glass. "Could the blast have knocked it to some other part of the nave?" he asked.

"It wasn't high explosives that destroyed the cathedral, it was incendiaries."

"Oh," he said. He looked over at the verger, who was coming toward us. "Queen Victoria's Bible, did you say?"

"Yes. Complete with the births, deaths, and nervous breakdowns of all those Georges," I said. "Find out if anything was taken away for safekeeping to anywhere besides Lucy Hampton before the fire."

He nodded and went back over to the verger, and I stood there looking at the wrought-iron stand and wondering what to do next.

The majority of the bombs that had fallen on the cathedral had been incendiaries, but Carruthers was right. Concussion can do peculiar things, and there had been a number of explosions in the vicinity, from HEs togas mains going. The bishop's bird stump might have been blown into the central aisle of the nave, or the choir.

I cleared away more masonry, trying to see what direction the glass from the Drapers' Chapel had taken. Most of it seemed to have sprayed south and west. I should be looking in the other direction, toward the back of the nave.

I went back to the screen and started digging south and west from it. No stone unturned.

The bells began to strike the hour, and we all stopped what we were doing,

even Mr. Spivens, and looked up at the tower. With the roof gone, we could see the spire, rising above the smoke and dust unharmed. The bells sounded beautiful, undimmed by the destruction that lay around us.

“Look, there’s a star,” Carruthers said.

“Where?” I said.

“There,” he pointed.

All I could see was smoke. I said so.

“*There*,” he said. “Above the spire. Above the smoky pall of war, above the wrack of destruction. Untouched by man’s inhumanity to man, a high herald of hope and beauty, of better times to come. A sparkling symbol of a resurrection it yet kens not.”

“It yet kens not?” I looked at him, worried. “A high herald of hope and beauty?”

One of the first symptoms of time-lag is a tendency to maudlin sentimentality, like an Irishman in his cups or a Victorian poet cold-sober. Carruthers had been on at least four drops in the past day, two of them within hours of each other, and who knew how many others researching the organ pipes. He’d said himself he hadn’t had any sleep.

I frowned, trying to remember the checklist of time-lag symptoms. Maudlin sentimentality, difficulty in distinguishing sounds, fatigue—but he’d heard the bells, and everyone associated with Lady Schrapnell’s reconstruction project was suffering from sleep deprivation. The only sleep I’d gotten in the past week was during the St. Crispin’s Day War Effort Bazaar. I’d dozed off during the “Welcome” and slept through half the “Introductions of the Organizing Committee.”

What were the other symptoms? Tendency to become distracted by irrelevancies. Slowness in answering. Blurred vision.

“The star,” I said. “What does it look like?”

“What do you mean what does it look like?” Carruthers said, not at all slow to answer. “It looks like *astar*.”

The bells stopped chiming, their echoes lingering in the smoky air.

“What do you *think* a star looks like?” Carruthers said, and stomped off toward the verger.

Irritability was a definite symptom. And the net guidelines specifically stated that time-lag sufferers were to be immediately “removed from the environment” and from duty, but if I did that, I would have to explain to Lady Schrapnell what we were doing in Oxford instead of Coventry.

Which was why I was here poking about in the rubble in the first place, because I didn’t want to try and explain why I hadn’t landed at eight o’clock on