



THE DRAUGR'S GRIMOIRE

Volume II

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter 16

The Bell Witch

A documented true story, told by the Draugr.

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Chapter 16: The Bell Witch

As told in Tiny Terrors Episode 16.

I have watched hauntings rise and rot for longer than your country has had a name. Most are thin things, a cold breath on a stairwell, a knock that answers nothing, a grief that wears a house like a coat until the house burns or the family dies out. They fade. The Bell Witch did not fade. It named itself. It chose its victim the way a wolf chooses the limping deer. And it finished the work.

That is why my kind still speak of Adams, Tennessee, in low voices. Not because it was the strangest haunting. Because it was the most patient.

The Farm on the Red River

John Bell Sr. was born in 1750 in North Carolina, a farmer of the old hard kind, the kind who clears his own land and trusts no bank and no man he has not worked beside. In 1804 he moved his family west into Tennessee, to the Red River country of Robertson County, in what is now the town of Adams. His wife was Lucy Williams Bell. Their children were Jesse, John Jr., Drewry, Benjamin, Elizabeth, called Betsy, Richard Williams, and Joel Egbert. For thirteen years the farm prospered and the house was quiet.

Then, sometime in 1817, the strangeness began.

It started outside. John Bell saw a strange creature in one of his fields, something like a dog, but wrong in a way he could not name. He raised his rifle and fired. The thing vanished. His son Drew approached a bird perched on a fence that was, in the family's telling, of extraordinary size; it flew off before he reached it. Betsy saw a girl in a green dress swinging from the limb of an oak tree, and there was no girl living nearby who fit the description. Dean, an enslaved man belonging to the household, reported that a large black dog followed him on the evenings he walked to visit his wife.

Then it came inside.

Knocking along the doors and walls at night. The sound of gnawing on the bed frames. Invisible dogs fighting in the dark. Chains dragging across the floor. Stones falling with no hand to throw them. About this time John Bell began to suffer a strange affliction of his own, a paralysis of the mouth, as if something had laid a cold finger on his jaw. Sheets were yanked from the beds while the children slept. And then the touching began: hair pulled, skin pinched, bodies slapped and scratched by hands no one could see. Betsy took the worst of it, but no one in that house went untouched.

The Bells told no one at first. In those days a farmer did not go to his neighbors with a story like that. But the thing did not stop, and so they turned at last to a family friend, James Johnston, who agreed to spend a night in the house. He was woken in the dark by the same phenomena, the knocking, the dragging, the unseen violence, and in the morning he told John Bell what he believed: it was a spirit, just like in the Bible.

Word got out, as word always does. Travelers began arriving from across the county and

beyond, to sit up all night in the Bell farmhouse and listen. Hundreds came. They heard it too.

The Voice That Named Itself

The knocking learned to talk.

When it was asked, plainly, who it was and what it wanted, the voice answered, faintly: "I am a spirit; I was once very happy but have been disturbed." It offered the family several explanations for itself, among them, that it had been roused by the disturbance of a Native American burial mound on the property. It sent Drew Bell and a neighbor, Bennett Porter, hunting for buried treasure. They found nothing.

Then it gave its name. Pressed on who it was, it called itself Kate, "Old Kate Batts' witch."

Kate Batts was a real woman, a neighbor of the Bells, and the old accounts say she believed John Bell had cheated her in a land deal. Whether the voice was her malice reaching past her own grave, or a lie the thing told to give its hatred a human face, no living man can say now. I have known spirits to borrow the names of the living the way a crow borrows a shine. The name stuck. From that night on, it was Kate. The Bell Witch.

What it could do is written down in records kept by men who had no love for tall tales. It repeated, word for word, two sermons that had been preached thirteen miles apart at the same hour, as if it had stood in both churches at once. It knew the Bible well enough to argue it, and took open pleasure in correcting preachers whose doctrine it found wanting. It gossiped about the doings of other households, and if you asked about a neighbor, it would sometimes fall silent for a spell and then return with the answer, as if it had gone to look.

John Johnston, James's son, devised a test for it, something no outsider could possibly know. He asked the thing what his Dutch step-grandmother in North Carolina would say to the slaves if she thought they had done something wrong. The voice answered, in the old woman's own accent: "Hut tut, what has happened now?" An Englishman who stopped to investigate watched it mimic his parents across the ocean, and woke in the small hours to the sound of their worried voices; he left the next morning and later wrote the family a letter of apology for his skepticism.

It was not all cruelty. Toward Lucy, John Bell's wife, the thing showed a strange and steady tenderness. The records call her "the most perfect woman to walk the earth," and the witch brought her fresh fruit and sang hymns to her in the dark. It showed John Bell Jr. a measure of respect. Whatever Kate was, it had its favorites.

For John Bell Sr. it had only hatred. It called him "Old Jack." It cursed him by name. It struck at him, and it said plainly what it intended: it was going to kill him.

It also took a consuming interest in Betsy's engagement to a young neighbor named Joshua Gardner, and opposed the match with a fury that bent the whole household out of shape. I will not dwell on the girl. The record says enough, and the record is what matters here.

The General Who Would Not Fight

Among the many who came to listen was General Andrew Jackson, the Andrew Jackson, the

hero of New Orleans, a man not known for fright. The old story says he brought a party of men to investigate, that the thing tormented them through the night, and that Jackson left the farm with fewer men than he had brought. Afterward, the story goes, he declared he would rather fight the British at New Orleans all over again than tangle with the Bell Witch.

I have heard a thousand boasts hung on a thousand dead men. But I will tell you this much and no more: Jackson's name is in the book, set down by men who had no reason to borrow a general's name to sell a story about a farmhouse. The book is the 1894 account of Martin V. Ingram, a Tennessee newspaper editor, who called his work an authenticated history, and whatever skeptics have said of it since, the people in it were real people, the dates were real dates, and the graves are still in the ground. Make of the general what you will.

The Vial, December 1820

By the fall of 1820, John Bell Sr. was a hollowed man. Years of the thing's attention had worn him down to bone and nerve.

One day in October he was walking with his son Richard toward the farm's pigsty when one of his shoes was jerked clean off his foot. Richard tied it back on. The other shoe was jerked off the same way. The air around them filled with horrifying sounds, and John, overcome, praying aloud for deliverance, had to be led back into the house. He took to his bed and did not truly rise again. His speech failed him. His swallowing failed him. He wasted away before his family's eyes, as if something were drinking him dry from the inside.

On the morning of December 19, he did not wake at his usual hour. The family found him in a stupor, sleeping unnaturally, and could not fully rouse him. John Jr. went to the medicine cupboard for his father's medicine, and found the medicine gone. In its place stood a strange vial, filled with a dark liquid. No one in the house had put it there. No one would claim it.

A doctor was summoned. And Kate began to laugh and taunt them through the walls. She had switched the medicine for the vial, she said. She had given Old Jack a dose of it while he slept.

The doctor tested the liquid on the family cat. The animal died almost at once.

John Bell Sr. died on December 20, 1820.

At the funeral, attended by hundreds, friends and the merely curious alike, the thing was silent while the service lasted. Then the grave was filled. The dirt struck the coffin. And out of the cold December air came Kate, laughing and singing, loud and joyous, and she did not stop until the last mourner had left the ground.

I have stood at gravesides for a thousand years. I have watched widows wail and priests intone and dirt fall on the boxes of kings and beggars alike. I have never heard anything laugh at a funeral.

Not until Tennessee.

Seven Years, and One Hundred and Seven

In 1821, under the entity's relentless pressure, Betsy Bell broke her engagement to Joshua Gardner. Then Kate told the family it was leaving, but that it would return in seven years.

In 1828, on time, it came back, to Lucy and her sons Richard and Joel. The same voice. The same mockery. This time the family gave it nothing to feed on, and it went again. Before it left, the old accounts say, it spoke of things to come, wars that would tear the country in two, wars that had not yet been dreamed of by any man in Tennessee.

And it said it would return again in one hundred and seven years. That would have been 1935. If Kate kept that appointment, no one in Adams ever came forward to say so.

The cave came later, the Bell Witch Cave, on what had been the Bell farm, which in the twentieth century grew its own legends and its own visitors. It is not part of the original account, and I will not pretend it is. But the stones are there, and the dark is there, and the name is carved into both.

This is what I know, and I do not lie about the stories. A captain named John R. Bell, crossing Tennessee in October of 1820 with Stephen Long's expedition to the western plains, wrote in his journal of stopping for dinner in Robertson County and hearing of a girl of about fifteen, living three miles off, who was accompanied by a voice that thousands had traveled to hear, some calling it ventriloquism, none of them satisfied. That is an outside witness, writing while the thing was still active, with no book to sell.

Richard Williams Bell, John's son, wrote the family manuscript he called "Our Family Trouble." In it he confessed what I will confess to you now. He wrote that whether it was witchcraft, or some fiend of hellish nature, or mesmerism, or a hobgoblin of the wild country, or a disembodied soul shut out from heaven, "I am unable to decide; nor has anyone yet divined its nature or cause for appearing."

Neither have I. I am older than this story by a thousand years, and I will tell you plainly what I have never told the living: I do not know what Kate was. A witch's malice outliving its witch? An old land's hunger, wearing a dead woman's name like a borrowed coat? The grave is real. The vial was real. The laughter was heard by witnesses whose names are written in the book.

That is enough. That is more than enough.

Sleep with the lights on. If you can.

Sources

- Martin V. Ingram, An Authenticated History of the Bell Witch (1894)
- Richard Williams Bell, "Our Family Trouble" (family manuscript, reproduced in Ingram's history)
- John R. Bell, The Journal of Captain John R. Bell (1820; kept during the Stephen H. Long expedition to the central Great Plains)
- The Saturday Evening Post, January 19, 1856 (letter signed "H"; later retracted, per Ingram)
- Wikipedia, "Bell Witch", legend synopsis, early written records, and scholarship notes
- Tennessee State University / The Moonlit Road, "The Bell Witch Cave of Adams, Tennessee"

Hungry for the rest?

This was one of thirteen nightmares in The Draugr's Grimoire, Volume II. Every chapter is a documented true story: hauntings, unsolved crimes, and encounters no one can explain.

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