

The Kennington Well

It was Peter who first picked up on the mention of the Kennington well. He heard his mother talking about it to Mrs Fisher from the chemist's. He liked the sound of it. It combined elements of nursery rhymes which he had grown out of – almost. And fairy tales that he still enjoyed and even, maybe, something out of those books for slightly older boys that he suspected were lurking in the school library, waiting to pounce on him and his class mates next autumn.

Wells were where magical things happened: wishes could be made, that was the first and obvious thing. Then the water from the well might have special properties. Drinking it might transform you into someone very beautiful or handsome. Of course, there was always the risk it might turn you into a toad or something else equally undesirable. The next possibility was that the well might tell you things, give you answers. Who will I marry? Am I the cleverest child in the school? There were probably other things it could do, but his list was enough to be going on with.

Peter has gathered from the tone of the adults' conversation that the well was something very good about Kennington and it seemed obvious to him that he should find it, tout suite, as the Head of the village library might say. In fact, having failed to elicit a sensible answer from his mother as to its whereabouts, he thought he might ask a librarian. Libraries were a good place to find things out according to his form teacher and, as it was the long summer holidays, he could not ask at school.

But, sadly the librarian didn't know about a local well. "Oh, Peter, I am sorry I have never heard of such a thing," she replied in answer to his question. "But I shall look up some old books about the village and I promise you if I find any reference to a well I will tell you." Peter had to be content with that, but it sounded like it could take some time. Who else could he ask he wondered?

His next brainwave was to ask a policeman. He spotted one he knew, a constable who had come and given them a talk in school last term. "No, can't say I have ever heard of a well," said Constable Jones, "But then I wasn't born here, I'm not local. Maybe there was some old well up in the woods. I would ask someone local who is really old if I was you."

Peter thought about asking his grandmother, but she wasn't really, really old. In fact she had a part-time job and was often too busy to babysit him when his parents wanted to go out. No, that was no good, he needed someone great-grandparent age.

"Where do very old people live, Mummy?" he asked.

"Well, it depends," his mother looked startled, "they might just be living at home if they are fit enough but sometimes they live in sheltered accommodation or even care homes if they are not so fit. There are two here in Kennington actually."

"Oh, good, said Peter, "can I go and visit one?"

"Er," said his mother, "what do you mean, visit a home or a person? She was looking nonplussed.

“An old person,” said Peter, “an old person who has lived in Kennington for ever. I want to ask them a question about the old days.”

“Well, said his mother, who was really a nice person, even though not very bright on the subject of wells, “first of all, you don’t always have to go to a house to meet someone.

“What do you mean?” asked Peter.

“I mean, events like next Saturday are good places to meet people. Next Saturday is a Bring and Buy in the village hall. We could go to that, we should go in any case - it’s a good cause. My guess is that there will quite a few old people there that you could talk to.”

Peter brightened up, Saturday wasn’t far off. “Can we definitely go, promise Mummy?”

“Yes, really. Big promise.”

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Saturday was a nice day and even Daddy said he would come in the hopes that his favourite date and walnut cake would be on offer. The hall was busy. There were lots of people selling and lots of people buying, but Mummy pointed out that there were a number of elderly people sitting at little tables having tea or coffee. She even gave Peter a bag of mini biscuits and suggested he offer them to the people at a table and then say to them, ‘may I ask a question?’ Really, Mummy was becoming more and more useful, thought Peter – he hadn’t honestly been sure how to go about his mission now that it was actually happening.

“I can remember the days,” said old Mr Elways when there were only two houses in Upper Road and they both had wells on their land. I suppose that’s why they build their houses where they are. You have to have water where you live. Nothing happens without water.”

“You mean so you always have something to drink?” asked Peter.

“Yes, that’s the first thing, I suppose,” replied Mr Elways, “but there’s an awful lot more to it than that. You need it for cooking and washing and cleaning. In the old days people grew their own vegetables and fruit. You would need to water them.”

“You need water for life. It’s as simple as that,” chimed in old Mrs Nicholls, “that’s why they look for any signs of water on other planets like Mars – if there’s no water there can’t be any life.”

Then a very energetic looking, friendly lady came over to the table Peter was at. “Are you asking about the Kennington Well?” she said looking at Peter.

“Yes,” said Peter, this sounded hopeful, he thought. “Can you tell me where it is?”

“It’s a long way away,” said the lady, “in India. It’s in a village called Otterthotti. We raised the funds here in Kennington to bring clean, safe water to this village.”

“I thought it would be a magic well,” said Peter, crestfallen.

“Well, I can tell you that the well is magic to those people in that village,” said the lady who had lots of grandchildren and knew how to explain things to Peter.

“If you can make things happen like building that well then you are doing magic. If lots of people buy things today and we can send more money to places that need help that will be very good grown-up magic.”

As they were walking home Peter asked his father, “Can we make a well in our garden, Daddy?”

“I don’t know about that,” said Daddy, “but I know Mummy would like a bird bath. Shall we go to a garden centre and look for something nice to surprise her?” He winked at Mummy over Peter’s head.

Daddy was curious, “how did it all start Peter, this looking for a Kennington well?”

“Mummy said about it in the chemists - she was laughing about it with Mrs Fisher – she said she made her profits out of the Kennington well.”

“Oh,” said Mummy, looking at Daddy, “yes, I do remember now. I was having a conversation with Mrs Fisher about all the supplements they stock and I asked her if they sold a lot and she said, yes, they sold to the ‘worried well’ - people who aren’t ill but worry that they might become ill. There had been an article about the worried well in one of the Sunday supplements. Then we joked about how much she might make from the Kennington well. That’s all it was - silly really.”

Daddy laughed, “I see – little pitchers and long ears, eh?”

“It would be nice to have a water feature,” said Mummy musingly. “What about a fountain? Do you remember the Trevi Fountain in Rome, darling? It was so beautiful. People throw coins in and made wishes.”

“Yes, they say if you want to come back to Rome one day you have to throw a coin in the fountain,” added Daddy. He and Mummy had had their honeymoon in Rome.

“When we have got our fountain,” said Peter firmly, “and the bird bath and other things to make the garden look really pretty, I am going to charge people to come in and wish in it and then give all the money to that village in India!”

A short story for the people of Kennington by Linora Lawrence

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Kennington Library