

The
Thing
Is *Short Stories of Things &
the People They Encounter*

Written & Illustrated by
Rivers Houseal



NOGGINNOSE
PRESS

The Thing Is

ISBN 978-1-956611-03-8

Copyright © 2022 Rivers Houseal

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher at info@nogginnose.com.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Illustrations by Rivers Houseal

Cover design and content layout by Houseal Creative

Edited by Rachel Nix

Nogginnose Press
PO Box 96
Smithville, AR 72466 USA
nogginnose.com

*To Mumsie, who is the reason
I wrote three of these stories, and
had faith in me even when I told her
one of them would be about a potato.*

*Also, to Robbie. We never met,
but your typewriter inspired (and
typed) my favorite of these stories.
Your wordsmithing blood flows in
my veins. I wish we could have
bantered about books together over
foaming cups of tea—but this will
have to do, this side of Heaven.*

Contents



Of When a Typewriter Was Found	1
The Paternal Time-Keeper	23
Such Precious Potatoes as These	45
Answer the Bell When It Calls	69
Pipes & Strings	85



Of When a Typewriter Was Found

and the Events That Followed



In my part of the world, at least, to see a typewriter sitting in the middle of the road is not normal. But if I have learned one thing, it is that odd things do happen, and there it sat. Furthermore, I was raised to know that when one spies a typewriter in trouble, one rescues it. So I did.

Once the typewriter was safe, I realized that my parents had let me down. They had failed to teach me what one is supposed to do with a

rescued typewriter. I supposed the only natural thing to do was to try to find the owner, and I further supposed that the only way to do that was to post an advertisement in the newspaper. So I did.

FOUND

**Smith-Corona 'Silent' Typewriter
Found on Old Coast Road, halfway
between Portlethen and Downies.**

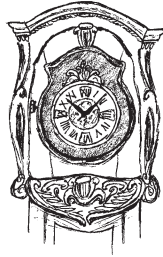
Misses its owner terribly.

CONTACT

**Emma MacMorrel
Portlethen Village, Aberdeen, AB12**

Weeks passed, and nothing came of it. I believe that typewriter was beginning to think of me as its mother. It was becoming a fixture in my old roll-top. Both the newspaper office clerk and the telegram boy got tired of my asking if anything had come up, and both assured me that the typewriter's owners obviously were not inclined or not able to reclaim it, and that I might consider myself the rightful owner of a new Smith-Corona typewriter.

So, for the first time, I sat down, and I typed at it. Just a little bit. When I began, I had not



The Paternal Time-Keeper



It was not yet opening hours, so as usual, I had to let myself in. That tarnished old doorbell, original to the late-Victorian shop structure, announced my perfectly-timed arrival to work at Runnels' Clock & Repair. However, the sleepy darkness of the front room told me there was nobody around to hear about it.

I thought it was odd that Mr. Runnels was not yet at work, but no matter. I knew my way about as well as the Runnels family did. My mood dampened as my exposed fingers and nose

reminded me that his lateness meant the shop was not really warmer than the outdoors, after all, but I was not going to have any depression setting in. I whistled the chorus of “Loch Lomond” to keep my thoughts cheery (and my cheeks warm) as I headed to the back to rouse the furnace for its day’s work. A diligent furnace it is, and within minutes I shed my coat.

I was standing halfway in the coat closet, busy arranging my coat, scarf, and cap in their respective places when the door from the front room opened suddenly with an ill-tempered groan. It harmonized well with the mutterings its opener was giving off.

I turned and smiled. “Amelia! Good morning.”

Miss Amelia Runnels stood with her gloves in her hand. She stared at the back wall contemplatively. “Hmm. Yes. Good morning, Evelyn. No family to leave you in the lurch; I suppose it *is* a good morning, isn’t it?”

I blinked and looked away. Well then. That jab was callous, uncalled-for, and it had sting—and I was not immune. It was also uncharacteristic. I had never heard of Amelia Runnels being praised for her tact, but this was not the foot on which our mornings usually started.



Such Precious Potatoes as These



I had seen trillions of them, and yet this one stood out to me, capturing my attention in all its dusty brown glory. I picked it up.

There was nothing unusual in that; it was what the dozen other young women around me were doing, and what I had been doing for almost a week now. I had heard people call us “land girls”—picking up potatoes and turning our ankles on hidden rocks in the potato field was simply what we did. So you will believe me when I say that I felt like I had seen trillions of

potatoes in the last few days alone, and that there was absolutely no reason why this one should catch my attention.

But it did, and for a few moments I stood still and turned it over and over in my hands, taking in each eye, and wrinkle, and the general ugliness of it. Then I noticed that the farmer and his tractor-drawn disk had progressed well ahead of me. The group with pails and burlap sacks plodded steadily along behind him, and I was falling to the rear—and that would not do. I stuffed my potato into my sack and hurried to cover ground, picking up three potatoes the others had missed and working my way back to the front of the troops.

Several of the girls cast curious or amused or possibly concerned glances in my direction as I passed them. Apparently I had been observed at my potato-ey ruminations. I felt very silly. Why on earth would I have been interested in a potato that had a soft spot, an unnatural number of eyes, and had almost been shorn in two by that rusty old disk?

Perhaps I had just been in the sun too long. Yes, that was it. Potatoes must be harvested on a sunny day, to allow them to dry properly before being stored. But the preferences of the



Answer the Bell When It Calls



Dear Eamonn,
You ask very interesting questions. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the ones in your letter, and I even had to laugh at the priceless innocence of a few of them. If that makes no sense to you now, perhaps it will someday. Too few people at my stage of living ask such innocent questions—more's the pity.

It occurred to me, at the end, that indeed you would expect me to answer your questions. I only hope I can answer them as interestingly

as you delivered them. I don't expect I can, but here's a go.

Firstly, you asked if I knew how much the great bell weighs. I have never undertaken to weigh it, myself; in fact, I do not imagine it has been weighed since it was cast (and on account of a fire in the town's record hall fifty-two years ago, no one knows for certain when that was). But I have been told—and agree—that one would not want to be in its shadow if ever that headstock should break and the bell return to earth.

It has happened more than once, I hear: the positively ancient ropes that held up the bell frayed away and dropped it. I am told that the most recent incident was in 1723, though we cannot be sure (unfortunate, that records fire). The story goes that it fell in the dead of night, and the locals went fleeing to the hills, afraid that the priest had finally gone batty (apparently there was some preexisting concern). Local ears did not stop ringing for four days afterward, so the old ones used to say—not that they were around. The seven-meter fall to the stone floor of the bell tower did not crack the brass—which is a wonder, because it was (allegedly) a frigid winter—but it did squish it some. The bell is a whole centimeter shorter than it used to be, it is



Pipes & Strings



My story begins, as I suppose many do, with a fog. It was not any dramatic fog, though. Not a “pea-soup-er,” as some say. A halfhearted fog, it may be thought, is not the most thrilling setting for the beginning of a story. But I cannot help that; a halfhearted fog it was, and I shall be truthful.

The side streets of Daren-Felyn were as empty as my head that morning, and very cold. (For indeed, whoever heard of a warm fog?) Now you should not think that I mean that I was empty-headed in the way you may be thinking

of—the shallow type of person who deflates if the hot-air pump goes out. Such a person has no depth or interest at all unless they are puffing wind (hardly then). No...I do not think I could be accused of that, even if I say it myself.

I only mean that I had nothing in particular to think about that morning, just as the street had no one to walk on it. A journeyman does not often get to see a town at rest, for he is never at rest himself. I was enjoying this rare good look at life with roots. For myself, the mornings on which I have nothing in particular to think about are the cheerfulest, because that means there is nothing awfully disturbing afoot, and therefore it is easy to continually be in the sort of good mood that stops to listen to birdsong.

It was odd for a bird to be out warbling on a cold, halfway-foggy morning such as that one, when the clever people and the calendars tell us it is spring but we all know it isn't. But there was a bird out singing. It was none of my business if a bird had missed his southern flight, or come home early, so I sang along—which was very difficult. Have you ever tried to sing along with a bird? When you do not know the bird, you don't very well know their song. I am a journeyman, and the son of a journeyman. I did