



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

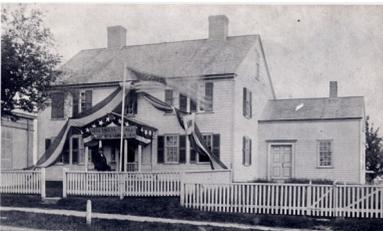
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The Laughter of Baalis Shiverick

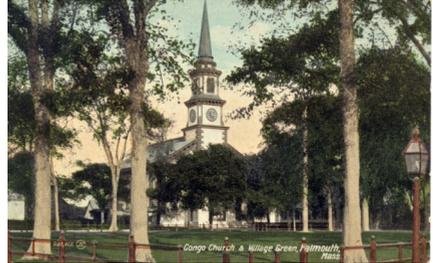
The following is excerpted from "Old Falmouth Sketches," an unpublished memoir by Edward H. Jenkins (1850-1931).

In a house under the English elm trees used to live Baalis Shiverick, who for more than fifty years was the sexton of the village church. He never married. The church building was the one satisfying object of his love. During these fifty years the church was never found at any service to be too warm or too cold, never close, never draughty, never dusty; there was never any reason for the audience to think of their bodies rather than of their souls. He was a Christian man who could never speak to others of what was holiest to him.

He knew every boy in town. He had helped every boy to make a kite, or rig a boat, or make a woodchuck trap, or had showed him a good place to set traps for rabbits. Baalis knew everything. The boys did not realize this till they had thoroughly tested him. Did you ever see a ropeyarn gun? It is made of an empty tin can and a piece of tin tube, the whole tightly wound with ropeyarn till it makes a round ball twice as big as your head. Through the tube the can is filled with powder and fired with a fuse. It makes a great noise when it explodes but is quite harmless if only you dodge the can. One or more of these things the boys made in secret each year to disturb the sleep of people on the night before the Fourth of July. One year Baalis heard some guarded talk about ropeyarn in June and asked the boys if they were getting up a ropeyarn gun.



The Silas Jones/Harriet Burrill House (Elm Arch Inn), ca. 1900, before it was moved from Main St. to Elm Arch Way.



When Baalis Shiverick (1810-1873) started as sexton, the church stood on the Village Green. In 1857, it was moved to its present site, on land purchased from Baalis.

The boys admitted it and the sexton said, "Why don't you make her in my shop, and make a decent one for once that they can hear, when she goes off, up to Woods Hole? You need coarse cannon powder." He kept the gun locked in his shop so that no one else should

know about it, and filled the gun for them on the evening of the third of July. The boys took it with them.

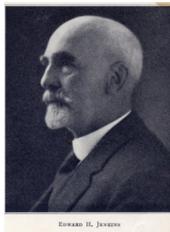
At midnight the gun was put on the Village Green and the fuse lighted. With fizz and splutter the fuse burned but failed to explode the gun. A second fuse did no better. Nothing would fire the gun. In the morning, the boys dumped out the powder. Someone said that he hoped he'd never see the back of his neck if it wasn't onion seed. About this time appeared Baalis, who said he guessed there was some mistake about that powder, but he had got some now that he would warrant. So they filled the gun with that and it burst with great noise. But he never said a word afterwards to anyone about the onion seed. No one but those boys knew of it till they wanted to tell it on themselves—and the sexton was still their friend.

Some boys always contrived to get into the school house on the evening before the Fourth and ring the bell at midnight, but the church bell never rang till sun-up. It was planned with great secrecy one year that an expert climber should shin the lightning rod and so get to the belfry. At the time set he tried, got up about twenty feet and then found the rod and the side of the church so well greased that he could get no further.



Above: The carriage is decorated for Old Home Week, 1904. The horse trough was located at the tip of the Village Green, as seen in the second picture.

Right: Long after his youthful escapades, the author was honored as a distinguished scientist in Connecticut.



Next year there was an evening meeting the night before and one of the boys, unobserved, wedged a window catch so that it would not hold, and at midnight he with some others climbed in. In the dark they groped up the belfry stairs and when they found the bell rope, caught it high up so as to announce to the village by a first rousing peal that Baalis for once was outdone. But they sat down on the floor suddenly while the rope ran down over them through the hole above. It was not fastened to the bell.

The sexton never complained to any one, never even mentioned these things. He enjoyed them alone. And every year, when the sun rose in agreement with the old Farmer's Almanac on Fourth of July morning, punctually the church bell rang, with a happy, rollicking tone.

Edward H. Jenkins