

At the third stroke it will be ... forever

In South Devon, England, in 1994, the national telephone company, British Telecom, sent a circular letter to all residents of the seaside town of Teignmouth, offering to connect all those not yet having service to the telephone system. Accidentally, the letter was also addressed to the local cemetery ... which raised a certain train of thought.

The title is taken from British Telecom's 'Speaking Clock' service of the time.

"And not before time!" Great-great-great-grandad Moses shuffled back to his slab, myopically holding up an official-looking letter to his eyeless sockets.

"What's that then?" mumbled a head, inching itself along the dusty floor.

"One of them new fangled telly-phone things. They're puttin' one in." Moses eased his creaking old bones back onto his slab, wrapped his tattered shroud around him and peered closer at the letter. "I dunno, we been stuck in here for aeons, rapping on tables in morse-bleedin' code when all the time we could've been chatting away like somebody civilized!"

"I got arthritis, rapping on tables" whined a voice from beneath Moses' slab.

"You got arthritis before you went over Doris". Moses peered between his skeletal legs at the slab below. "Stop moaning and get back in your box. It's mournful enough without you dripping all over the place. Why you got embalmed by Grindle and Sons I don't know. They never was any good." The figure subsided with a whine and an audible 'schlurrrp'.

"I don't know how to face the corpse reclining in the crypt and smoke signals on the smoky air." This is not the complete story. To read further, please either register as a new reader or login now if already registered

Moses shrugged. "It don't bother me, do it Jereboam? I ain't got no nose. Not since that bleedin' rat ran off with it in 1899." He picked up a piece of broken sarcophagus and lobbed it viciously into the corner of the crypt. There was a squeak and a scrabble of tiny claws as something ratty backed hurriedly down a hole.

A pile of dust in the corner flurried. "Oy! Do you mind?" a dry voice whispered, agitatedly. "I would like to keep some corporeality, if it's not asking too much. It's all right for you youngsters, you've still got some body left."

Jereboam laughed his gargling laugh. "Body? That's a good one." He drooped his neck to look at Head. "What d'you think about that, then, Head?"

Head spat out a jawful of dust. "Some people have no sensitivity. That's what I think about that" it said, indistinctly, on account of a globule of Doris's decay gumming up its palate. "You haven't got much choice when you're arguing with a speed-boat propellor" it sighed heavily. "Right now there's a headless body crawling about on the ocean floor looking for me, and I'm stuck in this mausoleum with a load of comedians."

"It's just what you want then" said Moses emphatically.

"What's that?"

"Telly-phone. If we got one you could phone up. Tell it where you are ... like."