

The Crystal Bell

By Fitz-James O'Brien

It was a country tavern, and I sat in the bar-room for lack of something better to do. Heaven knows there was little enough to amuse one in that dreary temple of Bacchus. There were five newspapers, the newest a month old, lying on the table—I knew every advertisement in them. There was a picture of the favorite Presidential candidate hanging over the fire-place, which, if it at all resembled the gentleman in question, entitled him to a glass-case in Barnum's Museum rather than to a chair in the White House. A book for registering names lay on a sort of desk in the corner, but since my arrival the pages, though dated, were destitute of a single name. Apple-jack, bad gin, and blazing brandy in bottles of eccentric colors, filled a glass press behind a counter, which was called by courtesy a bar; and behind this stood a wooden image called by courtesy a landlord.

When a man has no books, and no acquaintances at a country tavern, he is apt to fall back on the landlord. I have met in my time very amusing landlords—landlords who could talk about fishing, and shooting, and politics, and perhaps retail to you some of the gossip of the neighborhood; for it is wonderful how a man in the strait in which I was, will find amusement in the doings of people he knows nothing about. But the landlord of the Hominy House was not to be relied upon in such an emergency. You were not to take any such liberties with him, Sir, let me tell you. He took you into his house, as it were, under protest. He gave you a bed with an air that seemed to say he regretted doing it, but still he did not like to refuse; and you ate your dinner before him in fear and trembling, lest he should reconsider his hospitality and order you out of the house.

Whether it was a natural inflexibility of joints, or whether it was a high sense of personal dignity, I do not know; but certainly General Dubbley, the landlord of the Hominy House, in the village of Hopskotch, New Jersey, was the most dignified man I ever saw. The halo which he threw round a glass of whisky and water was perfectly wonderful. You might have imagined you were drinking "green seal" to judge by the lofty expression of his countenance as he handed you the bottle. At the dinner-table he fairly awed the appetite out of one; and I shall never, as long as I live, forget the thunder-cloud which gathered on his brow when, one day, I unluckily asked to be helped to soup twice. When Lafayette passed through Hopskotch, General Dubbley was one of the committee that received him. I did not know him at that period, not having been born, but I have formed a theory that from this epoch may be dated his tremendous dignity. Whether this interview with the French patriot had any thing to do with turning the General's hair green, I can not say; but it is, nevertheless, a fact that he was remarkable for possessing a lock of bright verdant olive on either side of his head. This eccentricity of color, I presume, must remain forever a mystery.

As I was saying, I sat in the bar-room. General Dubbley stood behind the bar counting the contents of the till with Olympian dignity. Quarter-dollars seemed to become thunder-bolts in his hands. I was very weary. Weary of Hopskotch, weary of Dubbley, weary of the Presidential candidate over the mantle-piece, who seemed to have been born with a patch of strawberries on each cheek; weary of the old newspapers; weary of every thing, in fact, except the memory of my dear Annie to whom I was engaged, and on whose account I had left New York and immured myself, in mid-winter, at the Hominy House, in order, before our marriage, to settle some matters

connected with my property, which lay near Hopskotch. I yawned in the very teeth of General Dubbley.

The door opened ere my teeth closed again, and a man entered, and, shaking off the snow that lay in thick flakes on his coat, advanced to the wood fire that blazed and crackled on the broad hearth, and spread out his hands to the cheering warmth. He was a very seedy-looking man. He had but one coat on—an old, threadbare evening coat—which was tenderly buttoned across a chest which seemed afraid to breathe too lustily lest it should burst the frail buttons. His shoes were old and soaked, looking as if he had found them after they had been boiled for soup by Lieutenant Strain and his companions on the Isthmus. His trousers were also wet, and very scanty, and shrank from contact with his shoes as if they had been as sensitively constituted as the mimosa. Poor fellow! he looked as if he had not had a dinner in his stomach, or a cent in his pocket for a very long time.

As he entered, the General raised his head from the till and looked at him severely. I saw the poor man shrink a little, but presently he seemed to muster up sufficient courage to go up to the bar.

“Can I have a bed here tonight?” he asked, in a timid voice.

“Full, Sir, full!” said the General, frowning until his old eyebrows fairly creaked; “besides, we seldom have accommodation for strangers.”

The poor man gave a glance at his threadbare coat, and smiled. But, oh! how sad the smile was! Patient, but very sorrowful!

“It is a very bad night,” said the stranger, pleadingly; “and I am not particular as to where I sleep. Any where would do for me.”

Unphilosophical stranger! A worse method than a confession of heedlessness of comfort could not have been adopted to win the General’s favor. If he had blustered up to the bar and shouted for a bed of rose-leaves with every leaf ironed out, the majestic Dubbley might have overlooked the seedy coat; but not to care where he slept! that settled him.

“Sorry, Sir, but can’t accommodate you;” and with this brief intimation the Jove of Hopskotch commenced once more to make quarter-dollars look like thunder-bolts.

The stranger sighed; looked wistfully at the bright fire; gave another hopeless glance at the wooden Dubbley, and then moved slowly to the door. It was more than I could stand. Olympus had no terrors for me at the moment.

“Stay!” I cried, advancing from the obscure corner in which I had been seated; “stay, Sir, for a moment. This weather is too inclement for any human being to wander in at night. I have not the pleasure of knowing who you are, but there are two beds in my room, and I esteem it my duty to offer you one of them. Pray accept it.”

I almost lost the murmured thanks with which the seedy man accepted this impetuous offer, in the consideration of General Dubbley’s countenance. I don’t think I ever beheld such a picture of astounded dignity. My heart sank after my speech was fairly out; for really I expected nothing more than to be turned out myself; and, what is more, I believe that I would have gone. To my surprise, however, the General took another tone.

“If Mr. Massy was willing to proffer such indiscriminate hospitality,” he said, “*he* was perfectly satisfied.”

For the first time the truth burst upon me that the General was not so awful as he looked, and that by the aid of a little resolution he might even be reduced to the position of a landlord. I plucked up courage from this supposed discovery, and having opened the breach, pushed on.

“I want some supper, General Dubbley,” said I, peremptorily.

“Sir, you have had your supper,” answered the General, clutching madly at the last rag of his importance that was being torn so ruthlessly from him.

“No matter; I wish to sup again. I sometimes sup frequently during an evening.”

I was reckless with victory, and began to talk wildly.

“You shall be served, Sir.”

And the General abdicated his thunder-bolts and disappeared into the kitchen. I had conquered. A hand was laid very gently on me, and the stranger now spoke audibly to me for the first time.

“I am very, very much obliged to you,” he said, “for all this kindness; but if in getting this supper you put yourself to inconvenience on my account, may I beg that you will countermand it?”

“Not at all,” I replied, diplomatically; “but as you have reminded me of it, perhaps you will favor me by supping with me—that is, if you have not supped?”

“I have not dined,” said the stranger, with a feeble smile. “I see through your kind *ruse*,” he added; “and to a gentleman who can act so feelingly as you have done, I have little shame in confessing that if I have not dined, it was because I had no money.

“Come, come!” said I, trying to bluster away those confounded tears that always *will* get in my eyes when I hear such things, “Come, we will have a jolly good supper together, and then we will talk of business matters afterward. Let us sit by the fire until it is ready, and, meanwhile, drink this.”

So saying, I invaded the General’s Olympian domains, and pouring out a stiff horn of apple-jack, forced it upon my new friend. It did him good, I am certain, for I saw the dim eyes brighten and the thin cheek flush; and it was not the fire-light that did it, cheery as it was.

I never met a more delightful man than this seedy stranger. He had been every where, seen every thing, done every thing, knew every body. He was a finished scholar, an original critic, a delightful singer, an epitome of wit. He so fascinated me, that we sat up in my room until almost twelve—an unearthly hour in Hopskotch, where the people go to roost with the chickens—and it never once entered into my head to ask him who he was, what he was called, or how it was that he was wandering about in the snow without any money. I even went to bed without locking my door, or putting my watch under my pillow.

It was the gray dawn of the morning when some one sitting on my bedside awoke me suddenly. I started upright in an instant, and beheld my friend. He was completely dressed, and in the dim light seemed like a departing ghost. For a moment, in the incoherence of my ideas, I had a confused idea that he was about to rob me, and seized him instinctively by the arm.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said, with a smile. “I intended to awake you, and before I went—for I am going immediately—I wished to thank you for your extreme kindness to me. God bless you for it! I have but little to offer you in the way of return, but what I have is yours. Here is a crystal bell,” and he drew a tiny glass bell from his pocket, a thing like a child’s toy. “It was forged in distant lands, where the sun makes the rocks vocal, and its maker sang over it in the furnace the spells known only to the children of the East. It is the touchstone of truth. Whoever utters a falsehood to him who bears it about, that moment the crystal bell will vibrate. Scoff at the story now, if you will, but try the talisman—it will never betray you. Farewell!”

And laying the little bell upon the counterpane, before I could sufficiently collect my scattered senses he glided to the door and went out, closing it softly after him.

I took up the bell mechanically, and examined it. It was entirely formed of what seemed to be the purest crystal. The tongue was also of crystal, but flexible as the finest watch-spring. I tried to ring it, but although the ball at the end of the pendant tongue visibly struck the clear sides of

the bell, it did not emit the slightest sound. I tried it again and again, and always with the same result.

I got up and looked for my watch. It was safe. My pockets were untouched; my drawers intact. My seedy friend, therefore, was not an impostor. Again I returned to the mysterious bell, and agitated its crystal tongue in vain. Not even a muffled tinkling was to be drawn from it. Had the pendulum been a feather it could not have been more silent.

All day long I felt wretchedly uncomfortable with the crystal bell in my pocket. I scarcely answered the sneering inquiries after my seedy friend with which General Dubbley assailed me. I scarcely took the trouble to inform him that I had not been robbed. I was indifferent to the display which he made of his counting his spoons in my presence. The last words of my mysterious guest continually rang in my ears—"Whoever utters a falsehood to him who bears it, that moment the crystal bell will vibrate."

Annie Gray! sweet, truthful, pure-eyed Annie Gray! why was it that your face continually rose up before me whenever I touched the magic bell? Whenever I drew it forth, and looked through its crystal walls, why was it that your fair countenance seemed dimly visible within, but clouded with some horrible shadow? And when I thought of you, why did the name of that hateful Aubyn always flicker in big letters before my mind's eye?

I suffered positive torture. Here was I, engaged to be married to one of the sweetest girls in New York, beloved by her to my heart's content, and rich enough to satisfy her every wish, when in comes a stranger, who puts what he calls a talisman for testing truth into my hands, and straightway I begin to doubt the dear girl whom I had never doubted before. Did she really love me, or was it only for my wealth that she became mine? Did she not rather prefer that horrible Harry Aubyn, who danced so well, and who talked so charmingly about nothing? The more I tried to conquer this abominable fantasy of jealousy the more positive it became, until at last I had worked myself into such a fever of excitement that I could bear suspense no longer. Yes! I would instantly hurry to New York and test this wondrous gift! It was folly—madness; I knew that well enough, but still I would test it—test it all the more willingly, for I had such faith in Annie. But why did she encourage that empty dandy, Harry Aubyn?

In less than two hours I was in New York, ringing madly at Annie Gray's door.

As I entered the drawing-room hastily, out walked Mr. Aubyn. We saluted coldly, but I could have strangled him at the moment, if such things were permissible in this century. I must have been rather pale and disordered-looking, for I had scarce entered the room when Annie's first words were,

"Oh, Gerald! has any thing happened?"

Dear girl! how could any but a madman doubt that anxious, fond look—that quivering lip? I kissed her forehead, and reassured her.

"Annie, dear, why do you have that Mr. Aubyn here in my absence? You know I don't like him."

"Why, Gerald, I really can't help if he calls. I don't care about his visits, I assure you; but I can not be rude to him, I have known him so long."

Gracious heavens! was it fancy? or did I hear a faint, crystalline tinkling in my pocket? A cold shiver ran through my frame; but I endeavored to dissemble my agony, and, with a forced smile, went on.

"So you don't like him really, you little puss! Come now, confess that at one time you did care a little—a very little—for Aubyn, your old playmate?"

“Why, what ails you, Gerald? You look so queer. I assure you, I never cared any thing for Harry Aubyn.”

Tinkle! tinkle! tinkle! in my pocket. I felt the blood rush to my head; it was a Niagara of emotion, but I subdued it.

“And you love your poor Gerald, then, better than any body else; better even than the old school-fellow you have known so long?”

“What a fool you are, Gerald! Of course I do,” and she kissed me gently on the forehead.

Tinkle! tinkle! tinkle! in my pocket. Plain, clear, distinct. Every vibration of the crystal bell thrilled through my frame. If the bells of every cathedral, headed by Tom of Lincoln, had pealed altogether at my ear they could not have moved me half so much as that sharp, shrill crystal tintinnabulation from that horrible bell.

I could bear it no longer.

“Traitor!” I shouted, flinging away the tender arms that wound around my neck. “Hypocrite! I despise you! Yes, madam, the eyes of your dupe were opened in time. You shall not laugh at the credulous Gerald Massy.”

“Gerald! are you mad?”

“Not quite; though a week after our marriage I would have been, impostor that you are! But I know you. Know that you don’t love me. Know that you have lied to me three times within this last half hour.”

She tried to embrace me; but I flung her off. She wrung her hands, and the big tears rolled over her cheeks, and her gentle head was bent, as if stricken with some great blow. She acted her part excellently well.

“What can you mean, Gerald? I have never deceived you in thought or word. If you have proofs of my hypocrisy advance them, but do not storm me down with assertions.”

“My proofs are here!” I cried, holding up the bell triumphantly—the triumph of despair. “Here! look on this talisman, falsest of women, and tremble!”

“But, Gerald, are you sane? I see nothing but this bell.”

“And this bell, as you call it, has told me within the last half hour that you are a worthless woman.

One tigress-like leap, and she caught it from my hand. With flaming eyes she held it aloft, and then dashed it on the ground. A crash, like the bursting of a thousand hand-grenades—a thundering of cathedral bells, that seemed to shake the world; and, looking up, I saw General Dubbleby standing over me in a dignified attitude.

“Mr. Massy,” said he, “the dinner-bell has been ringing these ten minutes; but you appear to have been sleeping so soundly that you have not heard it. Dinner waits.”

And so it was a dream. No seedy friend—no talisman—no falsehood in sweet Annie Gray. I rubbed my eyes and went into dinner; but as I ate my soup under the awful eye of the General, I confess I regretted the non-reality of that portion of my dream in which I had subdued the Thunderer of the tavern.

I never told Annie Gray that I had ever doubted her even in a dream, until we had been a month married.