

## THE OLD SEXTON'S STORY ABOUT THE WHISPERING BELL.

'In the time of the Revolution,' commenced the old man, 'the people about this neighbourhood and surrounding country were greatly annoyed by the British and Hessians. Their property was destroyed; their houses plundered, and everything was done that could be done to make them uncomfortable. The language of the British was as insulting to females as males and they oftentimes committed acts which today's humanity shudder at the bare recital. Sometimes, when they were out of provisions, they would visit a house and take from it all they could lay their hands upon, not so much as leaving a crumb of bread behind. All farming utensils were stolen, and everything useful was either taken away or destroyed on the spot. To avoid, as far as possible, these annoyances, the people had to bury their money, and all else worth preserving. There are but few living now, surrounded by luxuries and comforts from every clime, that think at what a price their present happiness was purchased, and of those noble spirits who so gallantly and bravely fought for the independence of their country. No, no: the world is changing every day, and it seems to me that the good old feelings that flowed in the noble tide of human sympathy are fast ebbing away.

'One time, learning that a party of British and Hessians were about to pay them a visit, the Americans took the bell which hangs in the Episcopal church, and filling it with money and other valuables, buried it under an apple tree in the orchard \* [asterisk footnote] of ----. Among those concerned in secreting it were two brothers, who lived in the village, and who went by the name of Wilson. At one time they were thought a great deal of by those who knew them, and were often entrusted with secrets which, if they so felt disposed, might turn gently to their own individual

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\* At that time the farm was owned by a gentleman by the name of Vincent. His son was shot down under a black walnut tree, which is now standing, for refusing to shoe a British officer's horse. The place is at present owned by a relative of the writer.

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benefit, for they were quite poor, and lived mainly by the little jobs which they got to do about the neighbourhood.

'The eldest, whose name, I believe, was Henry, had a wife and one child -- a little girl some three or four years of age. They had been married quite young, and his wife was of a sickly and delicate constitution, and what occasioned her ill-health more than anything else, I think, was the manner in which her husband oftentimes conducted himself; for he had a passion for strong drink, a burning, awful thirst for rum, which would often make him act more like a madman than a human being possessed of reason and reflection. He would, at times, go for weeks without tasting a drop, but soon after the fit would seize him again, and he would spend as long a time in indulging his beastly appetite for the intoxicating cup. He could not, if he had tried, done more to break her heart. Yet for all, for any unkind thing that he did, she, true woman-like, freely forgave him, hoping that he would soon see the error of his way, and mark out a new path for the future. But her bright anticipations were scarcely created before they were dashed to the ground; still she hoped on, dreamed on, ever trusting, and ever willing to forgive. To tell all that woman suffered, and so patiently and so meekly withal, would bring tears to the eyes of the most obdurate scoundrel. Days and weeks, and months, and years, of privation and misery seemed nothing, if she could only ween him back to the path of rectitude.

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'His brother, in respect to drinking, was as different as could well be, for he detested the conduct of Henry, if possible, more than any one else; and he was not at all backward in speaking to him, and giving him his opinion on the subject. This created a dislike for him in the bosom of Henry, who had been frequently heard to swear, that if ever he crossed his path it should cost him his life. No one thought anything about his threats, but looked upon them only as the idle ravings of a

drunken man.

'By some singular coincidence they had both resolved to dig up the bell, on the same night, and at the same time, when discovery would be the least possible. The night before they contemplated carrying their designs into execution, Henry had commenced one of his fits of drunkenness, and on coming home, he, in a moment of forgetfulness, told his wife what he was going to do on the following evening, and likewise of his intention of quitting the country if successful in recovering the buried treasure. He had arrived at that point which roused in his mind the worst passions of his animal nature, and made him think that all mankind was his common enemy, and that he, in justice to himself, must have revenge, not on one, but all -- in fact, the free use of ardent spirits had wrecked his mind completely. His wife threw herself upon her knees and besought the Almighty Being to lead him back from his evil ways, and guide his steps aright. But her prayers and words seemed to have but little effect upon her husband -- for the more she entreated the worse he became -- and even went so far as to tell her that if she did not desist from her entreaties, that she should not live to see the morrow dawning. It was a piteous spectacle to behold that woman, still so young and beautiful, on her knees, beseeching him to cast aside for ever the awful poison [Page 221 / Page 222] which was carrying him with slow, sure steps to death and degradation.

'For God's sake, for my sake, for our child's sake, Henry,' she cried, 'dash aside the accursed wine cup, and be yourself once more. There is forgiveness even for the worst; you can, you will, you must repent; do not, do not hold back any longer.' Not a murmur escaped his lips as she spoke, but he sat before the fire with his head bent down, as if he dared not look her in the face -- her he had so deeply wronged.

'Speak to me -- only a word, Henry; tell me that you love me now as you did in other days. Do not look so cast down and dejected; I am still your loving wife, your own true Mary!'

'Stop this at once!' he exclaimed, rising to his feet, and dashing the chair on which he was seated to the floor with all his strength, 'stop this woman's talk at once, or, by all the fiends in hell, the life blood shall not flow through your veins a moment longer! I have sworn, and call God to witness, that for all the injuries I have received I will have revenge -- that from this time forth, to the last moment of my life, I shall devote my whole energies to the one object -- it shall be terrible, undying, and unextinguishable!'

'It was plain to see upon that woman's altered face that the last blow had been given to break her heart. No tear or sound escaped her -- she stood there transfixed almost to the floor, a perfect picture of despair. Those who coldly talk of woman's love, how little do they know of her patient and gentle nature!

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'That night she died of a broken heart. Her existence had been a brief and joyless one, lingering on without pain until her life blood ebbed slowly away.'

The old man brushed a tear from his cheek as he read.

'Beneath a plain grave stone in a lonely corner of the yard repose the bones of mother and child. They died when life was in its spring time, but not before the world's cold breath had frozen their fresh young hearts; but they are in Heaven now -- in Heaven!

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It was a dark, cold night, the one following the death of Wilson's wife. He had been drinking almost the whole time since, and he started forth at twelve o'clock, to search for the treasure a crazed and desperate man. It seemed that the fiend himself had frightened away the better part of his good nature and taken possession of the citadel of his soul. There was a demoniac glitter in the flashes of his dark eyes, and they almost seemed to be starting from their sockets. His face had grown old that very night, but not with the hand of time. About his whole appearance there was something truly startling and terrible, a something which would create feelings of repugnance in the mind of any one who saw him.

'By the dim light of an old lantern he found his way to the meadow, and after searching about for a little time he at last discovered the apple tree under which the bell containing the treasure was buried. It was about three feet from the surface of the ground, and about two from the body of the tree on the right. He had armed himself with a pickaxe and spade, and after taking a good drink of the brandy which he had in a small black bottle, he commenced his work, and was soon agreeably astonished to find that by the sounding of the crowbar he had reached the bell. The night, as I said, was very cold, and it would seem that the nearer he got to the treasure the more familiar he became with the black bottle, until at last he swallowed every drop of its freindship, and then dashed it away from him with a curse. The earth had all been removed from the bell, and for a moment he seated himself upon it to rest. The liquor he had drank, seemed to have taken but little effect upon him, and he rested after the fatigue with considerable relish. But his composure was soon to be disturbed, for on looking across the meadow towards the old barn which stood there then, he fancied he saw a light coming toward him. He could not be mistaken, but cleared his eyes and looked again -- yes, he was right, and it approached nearer and nearer every moment. What was to be done? It was too late to think of covering up the bell again, and to run and leave it -- no, no, it had cost him too much labor to do that. He extinguished his light and made sundry preparations for the reception of his visitor, whoever he might be. A footstep came nearer and nearer, and in a few moments it was very evident that the stranger was coming to the apple tree. He approached it, and as he reached the ground, Wilson darted behind another tree near at hand.

'Ha! ha! then I am not wrong after all,' muttered the stranger, surveying the work before him; 'I would have sworn that I saw a light -- the villians, who ever they may be, have ran off without daring to touch a thing. What cowards some folks are, and to run away too from a treasure like this, when poverty is so very unpopular with the world. Ha! ha! its quite funny. I would have given a guinea to have seen what queer looking fellows they were.'

'Then behold one of them!' shouted Wilson, springing forward and grasping the stranger fiercely by the wrist. 'I am the only one of those fellows you would like to see -- now look at me well and see what you can make by the interview. Look well, I say, for my features are not always the same, and you may not perhaps recollect me!'

'Great God!' exclaimed the stranger, recoiling -- 'HARRY!!'

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Wilson smiled and was silent.

'Harry,' said the stranger wildly, 'do you not know me -- speak. Do you not know me? You look pale and tremble -- I am no enemy, speak to me!'

'Enemy or not, you die -- die on this spot and by my hand. Your time has come. I've sworn it!'

'With that he seized him by the throat -- they clinched and fell. For a time the struggle was desperate, but the voice of the stranger grew fainter and fainter, until it wholly ceased. His brother had kept his oath, and he was dead.

'He was found near the bell the next morning, and by some kind friends buried in the village church-yard. There was but one bag of gold missing. Young Wilson, at the time of his death, was engaged to be married to a young lady residing in the neighbourhood. She did not long survive him, however, and those two graves I showed you to-day were their's. Harry Wilson was never heard of after, but ever since the bell was placed in the old church tower, it has, on the anniversary of the murder, been heard to strike ONE, TWO, THREE, and strange sounds have also been heard by those who have been near it at those times.

'Many years have passed by since that night, but [Page 222 / Page 223] still it is well remembered by many inhabitants. I have been sexton here, man and boy, for over fifty years, and not an anniversary has passed without the strange noises from the bell.'

When the old gentleman had finished his story, the gold spectacles of his 'better half,' were quietly edging themselves toward the extreme tip of her nose, and

Fanny, dear soul, had fallen into a very comfortable slumber. We thanked him for his kindness, and started for home with fearful expectations of getting a 'blowing up' for keeping such bad hours. We succeeded in reaching our bed in safety, however, and were in a short time dreaming of *belles* in general, and the WHISPERING BELL of the old sexton in particular.

New York, March 1st, 1848."

Source: The Whispering Bell; A Legend of Westchester, Holden's Magazine, Apr. 1848, pp. 219-223.

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