

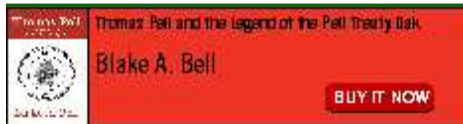


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## Monday, February 19, 2007 Another Manor of Pelham Ghost Story: The Whispering Bell

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After years of researching Pelham history, I was virtually certain that I had uncovered all published accounts of "ghost stories" regarding Pelham and surrounding areas. Recently, while researching The Village Improvement Association of Pelham Manor, I ran across an item published in "Holden's Magazine" in April 1848 with yet another ghost story: "The Whispering Bell; A Legend of Westchester".

The story concerns the bell that still hangs today at Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site in Mount Vernon. That church, of course, was for many years a principal place of worship for Pelham families in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Many former Pelham residents are buried in its graveyard.

Below I have transcribed the lengthy story in its entirety.

"THE WHISPERING BELL;  
A LEGEND OF WESTCHESTER.  
NO. III.

[ORIGINAL.]

THERE are a great many credulous people in the world, and a good many of an entirely different turn of mind -- and as it is always pleasant and pleasing for a story-teller to be on as good terms as possible with those who, by chance or by any other way, form his acquaintance, the writer of this, with the ambitious hope of holding a small place in the esteem of both parties, has spent considerable time, not to mention anything about a small outlay of patience, in endeavoring to ascertain the correctness of the incidents mentioned, and feels quite happy in stating that his exertions have been crowned with the highest success.

There are a good many old people who do not believe in ghosts, and there are a good many young people who do; yet there are very few living at the present time who have not, at various periods of their terrestrial sojourn, broached the subject of their existence to certain unruly members of the rising generation, and by certain and unmistakable allusions to 'old shoes' and 'dark rooms,' brought the refractory juveniles to a sense of their feebleness and of the positive impropriety of their behaving 'so naughty.'

For our own part, we must honestly acknowledge that in our 'bib and tucker days,' we once and a while, *probably oftener*, bade desperate defiance to the laws of good behaviour, generally expected to be familiar with small children by those of a 'larger growth,' and in return for our youthful exuberance were as frequently treated with visions of tall personages decorated with extremely long white gowns, of a very picturesque description, and well calculated to create nervous sensations in the region of our intellectual faculties. These 'walking shadows' were oftentimes ushered in by a mysterious rattling of stair rods and sundry wild shrieks to render their appearance more impressive, and convey a better idea of their importance to those who were least desirous of cherishing their acquaintance.

To say that these mysterious visions ever made us better than what we were originally intended, we can not certainly and keep truth on our side -- but this we can and do say, with some degree of assurance, that their 'familiarity bred contempt,' and also created in our mind a desire to discover the manner in which they, as spiritual individuals, existed, while paying such uncommon long visits to the good people of this mundane sphere; for it is an indisputable fact that some of those gentlemen ghosts had funny tricks of 'doing for themselves,' in the way of lodging and eating, which the *initiated*, even as late as the present period, have not found out. As the aforesaid desire increased, we felt more and more like having our mind set at rest in regard to the matter. Fortune, however, at last favoured us with a golden opportunity of satisfying our youthful longings, and we had the indescribable pleasure of making a discovery which some how or other convinced us that *one* ghost, in particular, was a most unmitigated humbug, let the rest be what they may. We discovered, on peeping surreptitiously through the key-hole of the apartment which his ghostship occupied, that in his endeavour to personate the character, for which he was by nature never intended, that he had actually purloined from the bed one of its whitest sheets, and that his feet were encased in a pair of boots manufactured by the village shoemaker, whose workmanship at that time was more remarkable for its solidity than beauty. We afterwards found out that he not only did what most other people were in the habit of doing, but that he did what a good many other people did not -- that is, being possessed of a genial flow of spirits, he would oftentimes get exhilarated, we will not say drunk, for we have become so fashionable now-a-days that that word is rendered altogether obsolete. Well, 'that same' ghost was a good honest fellow, and, like Yoric, was one of 'infinite jest,' and would 'often set the table on a roar.' But the potent poison was too much for him; it killed him at last, and his ashes now rest in the village church-yard of which we are about to speak.

East Chester is a beautiful and picturesque little place, pleasantly situated about sixteen miles from the city of New York. In the time of the Revolution, it sent forth a

good many strong arms and stout hearts to do battle for the country, and was the scene of many a brilliant exploit and daring achievement. 'Twas here that lived and died some of those who calmly looked forward, amidst the darkest storms, for good for those whose cause was blessed of God. In this little village we behold Washington in the darkest hour of the American Revolution, firmly trusting in an over-ruling Providence, and calling on those [Page 219 / Page 220] around him to exercise the same faith, and to fight the good fight, and fight it bravely.

To us it has many pleasant associations, for with it is linked some of the happiest and brightest hours passed in boyhood's day. The old school house and the mill, the village church and the grave-yard hard by, all rise before us as we write, and bring with them the old associations of other days, when the future was painted in our imagination with all the lovely hues of the rainbow, and when nought that was selfish or debasing had stolen in upon our feelings. There was a little brooklet that ran through the green meadow by the old church-yard, and many a day, after being tired and weary in pursuing the bright-eyed trout along the stream, have we crossed over and watched the old sexton at his work among the graves. At such times he would beguile us with some pleasant story of the olden time, for grave making to him was not as to those who looked on, but rather as a business which he expected to go at regularly every morning, and finish at a certain hour at night. And yet his work among the graves, instead of making him cross and crabbed and gloomy, had a contrary effect, and when either at work or at leisure, he was always one of the most jovial and light-hearted old men we ever knew. His ruling passion, it might be said, was grave digging, for he would rather work than play, and would always go about it with such a hearty will, that one would almost fancy that he would as leave pick out his best friends and make their graves, as quickly as he would those of others. But whatever he seemed outwardly, he had a big heart throbbing in his bosom, a heart that did not throb for one alone, but all, and was as light and happy at the 'worst of times' as at the best.

One cold afternoon in December, some years ago -- we recollect it well -- as the old sexton and ourself were entering the porch of the church, we heard a strange noise, as if of some one moaning among the graves; presently it grew nearer and nearer, and instead of lamenting was full of deep, strong melody, that sounded like the chanting of the church choir. Then it rose up higher and higher, until it died away in soft sweet whispers, as if its melody had been exhausted.

ONE, TWO, THREE, pealed forth the bell, but yet no human power was nigh.

The old sexton turned round, and as he did so, there was something strange and solemn in the expression of his face.

'You heard it, did you not?' said he, speaking for the first time. A nod of the head, with a mysterious look, was the reply he received, for, to tell the truth, if you had been by, dear reader, you would have noticed some very peculiar workings about our physiognomy -- not that we were afraid at all -- no, no, not a bit of it, but we felt quite strange and sentimental.

'Tis the anniversary,' he continued; 'how strange that I did not think of it before. Yes, 'tis the anniversary,' and he paused and bowed his head.

'The anniversary of what?' we inquired, our bump of curiosity getting somewhat excited.

'Tis a long story,' he said, 'and this is not the time or place for you to hear it. Those two unmarked graves you see by yonder vault, now almost level with the ground, have something to do with it; and, if you please, you may go home with me and I will tell it you.'

Now, whether we had sufficient curiosity to hear the sexton's story will be shown,

but to tell the truth, and be candid and above-board about the matter, we will own up to having one other motive for accepting his polite invitation, which was for the purpose of seeing his black-eyed little niece, for whom we had at that time a tender, very tender regard. And who will blame us for it? Not you, we are pretty positive, for there are but few at that age who do not have the same sensation, and if we are not greatly mistaken there are some older heads in our circle of acquaintance who have not yet learned better.

The soft light of the setting sun had fallen on the earth, and the roaring wind had for a time died away. The old sexton left the church-yard with a firm step, and his eye seemed to lighten up as he thought of his snug fireside, and the good cheer that awaited him on his arrival home. We walked down the little knoll leading from the church gate, and were in a second on the bridge which crosses the road a short distance below. We passed but few people on our journey, but all of them had a friendly 'how do you do?' for the old sexton, and even the dogs at the different gates gave him welcome, for starting off at first with vigorous barks as they heard footsteps approaching, they would, on leaping the wall, greet him with familiar wagging of tails and sundry other demonstrations of esteem in general vogue with the canine race, all of which can be better understood than described. Here and there a light shone brightly through the window, and you might discover, with but slight exertion, a happy group of children seated around a blazing fire of wood, the sparks flying out as if they too would like to join in the merriment. But many of the hearts that throbbed so gaily then have ceased to beat, and the eyes that beamed so brightly have hid their lustre in the grave. The old sexton has 'gathered them in,' and they now 'sleep the sleep which knows no waking.'

There was a light step heard within the sexton's cottage as he knocked at the door, and there was a bright face beaming with smiles that welcomed him as he entered. Just then something beneath our waistcoat, we will not say what it was, gave two or three uncommon strong throbs, and at the same time we felt a strange burning in our face which we did our best to suppress, and, by the greatest exertion, succeeded. Fanny was all light, all joy, all smiles, while we felt most wofully nonsensical, and fully illustrated our feelings by our looks. Oh! that was a sly rogue, that Fanny; and, though it is some years since we have met, we will wager one of our largest possessions that she has broken many a poor fellow's heart ere this!

A nice tidy little lady was the sexton's wife, in her tastefully trimmed cap and her gold specs. She was the very personification of comfort, and seemed to spend all her time to make her husband happy. There was a large brass warming-pan hanging back of the door -- that looked like comfort, surely. Then there were sundry little articles hard by, which none but old people who enjoy themselves, have; and last, though not least, there was quite a venerable looking pipe, with a very long stem, on her work-stand, and beside which reposed a paper of the 'choicest' tobacco, brought forward expressly and in readiness for the old gentleman after supper.

The supper! Ha! ha! what a supper to wait on [Page 220 / Page 221] a good appetite? There were short cakes, though rather long in the baking; spare-ribs freshly cut from some unfortunate member of porkdom, and which were not spared; pickled salmon, and fried potatoes, with a few than Fanny, for her own individual appetite, had thought proper to bake.

It was a pleasant thing to see the old sexton, with a smiling countenance, seated between his wife and Fanny, now making a demonstration on the spare-ribs, and then punishing the short cake in a manner extremely terrific. Then the joyous laugh of the little black-eyed beauty at some witticism perpetrated by the old man; and, then, shall we mention it, the strange confusion of eight feet under the table, when two, smaller than the rest, would, as if compelled by magic, come together gently at the toes, -- sometimes getting lost in the confusion, but always finding out the

right harbour in the end.

Supper over, the table was cleared, and the dishes nicely washed and put away. Everything being ready, the old gentleman smiled good-humouredly as he drew his chair closer to the fire, lighted his pipe, and produced a very mysterious looking MSS., which, to judge by the chirography, certainly bore the marks of genius, to say the least. As it afterwards came in our possession, we have taken the liberty of calling it

#### 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.

'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!

'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!

\* \* \* \* \*

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!!'

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 *bell'es* 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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*posted by Blake A. Bell @ 4:54 AM [Comment](#)*

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