

THE MESSAGE OF THE BELLS

AN ENGLISH CHRISTMAS STORY.

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CHAPTER I.

The Christmas bells were pealing overhead. The chimes, flung out from a lofty steeple into the wild and blustering night, rose and fell upon the wings of the wind: now lost entirely in the rush of the winter storm, now sweeping with magical clearness across the ears of listeners in the silent streets below. Thus changing from moment to moment, the sound had a curiously ethereal effect; it seemed to typify the eternal order of things, whereby, above the darkness, tempest, and desolation of earthly sorrow, celestial voices were continually proclaiming peace and goodwill to men.

But transcendental meanings of this kind were lost upon one listener. "Those bells are enough to deafen one," said Stephen Hatfield to himself, as the chimes broke clearly upon his ear in a momentary lull of the driving wind. "Haven't we din enough all day without having it at night as well?" Din enough there was likely to be in the place he knew best. Redford was a large manufacturing town, and a great railway junction, and Stephen Hatfield was a signal man on one of the lines that stretched away from the station in bewildering intricacy. His box was a lonely spot. Sounds from the town, however, reached it easily enough—the clank of hammers, the throb of great engines, the whirr of wheels from neighboring factories, the clash of bells from the church steeples, the thunder of heavily laden wagons over stony streets—these were familiar to him, and almost indistinguishable one from another. But late on Christmas Eve such disturbances had ceased. The howling of the wind, the pealing of Christmas bells, could alone be heard; and yet Stephen Hatfield grumbled at the noise.

There must have been something peculiarly disturbing to him in the sound. He was a dark faced, reticent man, with a stoop in his shoulders, and a way of looking at the people from beneath his heavy eyebrows that was not particularly agreeable. A perpetual frown had settled upon his low, broad brow. His countenance was yet sad rather than morose; the mouth was contracted as if from constant pain, and the dark eyes were melancholy when seen in repose. The face expressed power of a certain kind; something lay behind its quietude, something hidden and suppressed. What it was, perhaps he himself could have scarcely told.

He was making his way along the line to his box, going slowly, because it was not quite time yet to relieve his mate, and swinging a lantern in his hand. With his head down, and his lips muttering objurgations on the bells, he did not notice the figure of a man that came towards him, passed him, and turned back with a start. He heard, however, when his name was called.

"Hatfield! Stephen Hatfield! You're the man I came to see."

"Who is it?"
"It's me; George Dene. Don't you remember me?"

Hatfield started in his turn, and raised the lantern so that its light fell on the newcomer's face. His own countenance became suddenly tinged with a dull red flush, though in the darkness this change of color passed unnoticed. After a moment's pause, he said, in somewhat unsteady tones.

"George Dene! Ay, I remember. And what brings you to Redford, George Dene?"
"Ain't you going to shake hands, Stephen?" said a friendly voice. "Don't you bear malice, old man! I've come to tell you that I've got work in Redford, and me and Grace thought we'd find you out first thing."

"You—and Grace!" repeated the man strangely. He continued to swing the lantern to and fro, without looking at his old acquaintance or seeming to notice the offer of his hand. "Why should you try to find me—you—and Grace?"

"The other—he was a much younger man—burst into a cheery laugh. "Why, to make friends with you, old man!" he cried. "Friends, as we used to be, you know, before this—this—shadow, this—sort of cloud—came over us. It's all past now, surely. It's five years ago, and you've not remembered it against me all this time, have you, Steve?"

"Yes, it's five years ago," said Stephen, meekly, with his eyes upon the ground. George Dene stared at him for a moment, but saw that Hatfield's words were not intended as an answer to his appeal. He went on, hoping to conciliate, blundering as only an embarrassed man could have blundered.

"We've had a very happy five years on the whole. Our second little baby died, but the oldest is alive and hearty. . . . She is a rare one for four years old, our Polly is. . . . And we took the corner cottage in Main-road, the one with the sweet-briar bush before the door and the green shutters. . . . Why, now I come to think of it, the very house you thought of taking for yourself—Good Lord, Stephen are you ill?" He had caught a glimpse of Stephen's face, and the look of suffering upon it staggered him.

"No, I'm not ill," said Hatfield, more gruffly than ever. "Go on with your tale. What were you saying?"

But what George said he did not hear. In the darkness of the night a picture rose before his mind's eye—a vision of the little house that was once to have been his own; of the trim little garden, the shining windows, the spotless cleanliness of the tiny rooms; the mistress of the whole, a slim fair girl with smiling eyes, and the sunshine in her hair, who went about her work with such a sweetness of love and hope upon her gentle face—ah, these belonged to another man, and he was homeless and alone! Home, wife, children—George Dene had taken everything, and now he came with his foolish offer of friendship, his hope that all the past had been forgotten! What did he mean? Was the man mad to think that he, Stephen Hatfield, either forgot an injury or forgave it? . . . Would those bells never cease, then, with their eternal refrain of peace and good-will—peace and good-will to men? . . . He hated the whole world, and all of the world's inhabitants, he hated George Dene the most.

"I must get to my work," he said, dully.

"Thompson's waiting for me. Is there aught else you want to say?"
"Do you mean that you won't be friends with me?" asked Dene, with a glimmer of truth lawning upon his denser mind.

Hatfield turned on him with an oath. "Why should I be friends with you?" he demanded savagely. "Why have you the insolence to come and ask me? Didn't you rob me of the only woman I cared for, of the home I wanted to have, of all that makes a man's life worth anything?—Then you ask me to be friends with you!—Get out of my way; I'll not answer for myself if you come too near. I hate you both, you with your lies and your castings, and her with her foolish, false face and her fickle heart—"

"Stop!" shouted George Dene. "You shan't speak of my wife in that way—you—" "Out of the road, you fool!" said Hatfield contemptuously. The younger man had squared up to him, his face aflame, his eyes aghast with passion. He was devoted to his wife, and Stephen's words roused all the devil within him.

"Take back what you said!" he cried. "I'll have her called false and foolish by no man! I'll teach you better manners, Stephen Hatfield—by the Lord, I will." "Out o' the road!" repeated Hatfield. "What, you won't, you fool? Take that, and go to the devil!"

He struck him and pushed forward. He heard a cry, a thud, as of a body falling, but he would not look round. He expected that George would be after him in a moment, swearing, foaming at the mouth with rage, and vowing vengeance. George Dene was in the main a good natured fellow, but subject to fits of unbridled passion. Hatfield was prepared for one of these.

But no sound of voice or step pursued him. The wind perhaps drowned the noise of either; the wind and the pealing of the bells. Presently Stephen stood still, raised his lantern, and looked behind him—nothing but the darkness, and in the distance the lights of the station could be seen. It seemed to him that the lamps ought to show him the figure of a man making his way back to the platform; but there was nothing of the kind to be distinguished. "Wait! what did he see? A dark something rising from the ground—stumbling again and lying prone across the line? Hatfield laughed grimly to himself. "I've given him what he won't forget in a hurry," he muttered.

Then he turned his face again to the blacker and wider space of darkness through which the many diverging lines of railway travelled into the night, and, swinging his lantern, set off once more to the signal box.

The whole interview had not taken five minutes, but he was astonished to find that he was not late at his post. After so great an upheaval of feeling he could scarcely believe that only five minutes had elapsed since he jumped down from the platform and made his way along the line. He noticed vaguely enough, that a man brushed against him as he arrived at his place—a stranger, not George Dene—and he wondered what a stranger could be doing in that unfrequented and somewhat dangerous spot. Dangerous! Ay, that was the word. Dangerous to those, who did not know the ins and outs of the line; a forbidden place to the general public, of which George Dene was one. Had he got up and gone away? Or was he still roaming in reckless fashion about those iron ways? Hatfield paused before entering his box to wonder whether he ought to go back and satisfy his mind upon this point. But why should he trouble himself? he thought. George Dene was a man who took excellent care of himself; no fear about his safety. And thus sneering, he took his place in the signal box.

The London express was due in ten minutes' time. It occurred to him, with a shudder, that this train passed over the lines close to the spot where he and George Dene had stood talking. "Lucky we didn't stay much longer; he might not have got away so easy," he said to himself, taking it for granted that George Dene had got away. Then he devoted his attention to the signals, and tried to think no more of the scene that had passed.

But his brain seemed to be on fire. He was not confused in mind; he was, on the contrary, unusually alert and keen-witted, but he was restless, ready to start at every sound, to exaggerate every impression. The wind had dropped a little, the bells had ceased to ring. In the silence, which seemed to him almost unnatural, he heard the distant murmur of the train long miles away. Little by little the murmur grew; he saw the lights in the distance, he saw the red-eden vapour as the black monster rushed out of the darkness, sweeping round the curve of the line, thundering over the metals and shaking the signal-box as it flew by. He stood in his place, lamps glowing brightly above him, business-like, apparently impassive as usual—but conscious of a curious keenness of all the senses, as if he were endowed with eyes that saw further, ears that heard more, than those of mortal men.

What did he see? What did he hear? It was as if lightning had flashed and shown him a gruesome scene. There was a man lying on the rails, in the track of the advancing train. He did not move; he did not drag himself away as it came on. Nobody saw him. Hatfield would have shouted to him if he had been able to speak; but his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth, and he could not get it free. Just as the engine rushed forward, the doomed man lifted his head and knew his fate. Hatfield saw the agonised countenance, the look of horror in the distended eyes, the agony of the shrinking limbs. Then the flying wheels passed on. . . . The signal-man saw no more. Only an agonised shriek, a terrible moan, rang in his ears for a moment; then, all was still.

Hatfield came to himself with a start. Not at first did he realize that he had been the victim of a vision produced by exertion of the brain—as a doctor would have explained it. He found himself trembling from head to foot, covered with cold perspiration, and deeply harassed with the belief that what he had seen had really occurred. The vision was as real and vivid to him as though he had been present, and

the shriek of the tortured man as the train passed over his body seemed still to re-echo in his ears; but he knew well enough that it was utterly impossible for him to have beheld anything of the kind, or to have heard a hundred cries as the deafening roar of the express train passed down the line. And yet he had seen it all so plainly! Just as one might behold a whole landscape illuminated by a lightning flash, so, he reflected, he had caught sight of every detail—the various interlacing lines, the distant station, the platform with its rows of lights, the poplars, and the old church-tower in the background. And in the midst of all, that prostrate form, that terrible advancing train! He turned sick and cold when he thought of it.

In a few minutes he remembered the trains; and, on looking at his watch, found that not more than five minutes had gone by since the passing of the express. There was not another train due for some little time. He was glad of it; he wanted to collect his thoughts and steady his shaken nerves. What does this vision mean? "It means a Warning," said Hatfield, shivering as if he had the palsy, and casting his eyes around the signal box in awful fear of supernatural powers. "It was no ordinary thing. I couldn't have seen all that if I had tried. It's what might have happened if George Dene had not gone away; what might have happened, not what did happen—I pray God!"—How many a year had elapsed since he last took that sacred Name upon his lips!—"It's just my fancy, playing me a trick—God grant it!—suppose he didn't crawl off the line—Oh, he must have got away. I did not strike him hard; he would never have gone down at such a little blow. When I see him again, I'll tell him what I've gone through to-night. He's a good-natured chap; he'll be ready enough to make matters up. And I'll say that I didn't mean to call Grace false or fickle. I'll make friends with them both when they come to Redford; for if any man ever had a Warning, it's I that am that man!"

So he reflected, starting and staring, the very hair upon his head lifted by the fright. He would have given all his belongings if he could have dared to quit his post, run along the line, and see for himself that Dene had got safely back to the station. But he dared not go. Several trains were shortly due, and to leave his duties involved risk to more lives than his own.

Looking out, however, he espied an acquaintance—one of the porters—tramping down the line. Hatfield hailed him, and he stopped short, looking up at the signal box in surprise. He was making his way by a short cut across the lines to his home. He knew the place so well that he could do it without thought of danger. "What's up?" he said, catching a glimpse of the white scared face above him. "Anything wrong?" "Do me a favor," said Hatfield hoarsely. "Go back—that way—to the station, and see if anyone has come to harm by the London express."

"Why do you think that anyone's come to harm?"

"Don't stay to ask questions. Go back, Tom, for God's sake. I saw a man run along the line; I heard a cry. I can't tell you everything now. Go and find out the truth for me. You know that I mustn't leave."

Tom started back, grumbling yet curious. "This is a rum start," he said to himself. Hatfield lost sight of him in the darkness as he went.

freely. But hour after hour went by, bringing him no news. If he were not mistaken, however, something had happened that night. Some excitement had been aroused; he was sure that he had seen an unworked group of figures doing unusual work upon the line—bearing something away with reverent footsteps and lowered heads. Stephen Hatfield's blood ran cold to think what that something was. But not until the grey dawn was mounting in the sky, and the cold breath of day made itself felt through all his veins, did any one come to him with news.

It was a foggy morning. A footstep was heard before the passer-by could be seen. A voice came out of the fog, followed by the burly figure of the man who relieved him at his work.

"Morning, Hatfield. Merry Christmas." Hatfield could not reply. "Accident on the line last night. Man killed by the London express not far from here. Tom Burton says you saw him." "I don't know that I saw him," said Hatfield, struggling to free himself from the haze that seemed to envelop him, blinding his eyes and blunting his faculties at the same time. "I saw several folks on the line last night." "But Tom Burton says you sent him in search of one—" "Yes. I had a warning." "What do you mean?" "Nothing. Was the man dead?" "Quite dead."

"I knew it," said Hatfield, as he turned away.

His words to Tom Burton and to the signalman made it necessary for Hatfield to attend the inquest upon the body that had been found. It was to him a terrible piece of work; but strength of nerve returned with the daylight, and he exhibited no further strangeness of look or manner, such as had excited the curiosity of his acquaintances. The man who had been killed was crushed out of all semblance to himself; the face was unrecognisable, but the fair hair, the build, the tweed suit that he had worn left no place for doubt in Stephen's mind. He identified the body as that of George Dene, carpenter, resident in Woodley, a Kentish village, nearly two hundred miles from Redford. Being questioned prettily sharply concerning his words to Burton, Hatfield answered that Dene was an old acquaintance, that he had stopped him on the line to tell him that he was coming to live in Redford, that they had then parted and had met no more.

"What made you say to Burton that 'there was a man on the line'?" he was asked. "I had forgot the London express when I parted from him, and was afraid that he had not gone back straight to the station," said Hatfield.

"Had you any dispute with him?" "No." "Why did you say that you had had 'a warning'?" "I thought I heard a cry, but I dare say it was only the wind," Hatfield answered stubbornly.

He knew that he had lied in saying that there had been no dispute, but he did not care. What was the use of telling the truth? Would it bring George back to life again? Would it comfort George's widow? Would it lift from his spirit the load of anguish which Stephen Hatfield knew he must now endure for evermore?

He only half heard some talk of writing to Dene's relations in Woodley; it fell upon unheeding ears. He did not know that there were two Woodleys: one in Kent and one in Staffordshire, and that the Coroner had got hold of the wrong one, and was about to write to the clergyman there. All that was said and done seemed to him like some strange, oppressive dream; he was conscious only of a desire to get into the air and lose himself in loneliness.

The inquest, however, was not held until the day after Christmas Day, and how he got through that Christmas Day he could never tell. He could not have defined his feelings as those of either shame, guilt, or positive distress; he only knew that a great weight seemed to lie upon him; he had got into a black shadow and could not get out. He went about his duties as usual after the tragic ending of George Dene's visit to Redford Station; nothing in his manner or bearing suggested that he bore the burden of a guilty secret; that he bore the burden of a little grimmer than he used to be; but there was no one to be offended by his behaviour. He had no friends. He lived alone, with a charwoman to clean his room and cook for him now and then. The only change in his manner of life after the inquest was to dispense with the charwoman. He did not want any human being about him now. He felt himself cut off from his kind.

He occupied a small house in a row of workmen's cottages, not far from the station. There was a tiny square of garden, a wooden paling and a gate before the house. Inside there were four rooms, two on each floor, and the staircase between them. Hatfield lived in the kitchen at the back of the house, and slept in the room above it. The front room, which opened directly upon the garden, had fallen into almost hopeless disorder.

January passed away. February, with its changeful smiles and tears, had made the old cheer new. Even in Hatfield's utterly neglected garden, a few crouches pushed up their golden heads, a few bunches of snowdrops nodded to the wind. The man did not look at them. The gay spring sunshine tried in vain to pierce the gloom of his lonely dwelling, the voice of human love and pity was yet to seek an entrance to his soul.

He sat alone one March evening, preparing his supper. For the time he was off night-duty, and at liberty to sleep the heavy hours away, if sleep would visit him. It was an intermittent visitor, and generally brought bad dreams. He was learning to hate the midnight hours.

Suddenly there came a knock—a timid, hesitating knock—to the front door. It made him nervous. He peeped the dial that he was holding, and growled out an oath at his own clumsiness. He waited till the knock was repeated before he went to the door.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

In Russia there is no crime punishable by death, except against the Crown. A man may murder a whole household of people to gold blood and escape with but a five-year sentence, but if he criticizes the Government, the Czar, or a member of the family or an official, he is liable to be executed or sent to Siberia.

The Bridge of an Ocean Steamer. With steam power naval construction took a new departure, and there had to be adaptations for naval requirements. With a York, to be able to see, from some elevated point on the deck, ahead, astern, because necessarily. The man at the wheel, placed right above the rudder, is a thing of the past. Certainly the idea of the bridge on a steamer derived its origin from the pilothouses on American steamers, which were built near the bows, and in use long before they were known in Europe. To the man at the wheel of a steamer, the view from these huge vessels is brought nearly to the side of the deck or taken out into the stream without a collision, or even a bump, is a matter of wonder. It is an effort on the bridge who sees everything and anticipates all possible contingencies. Convenient to his hand are the various signals, and he controls the action of the engines. Near him, within call, is the quarter-master, with a single word he gives the needed instructions, and a quick and cool hand it is that is at the wheel. Of a pleasant day, when all is clear, a position on the deck of an ocean steamer is a delightful one. You are high enough above the deck to be free from all the smells of the ship; and the places on the bridge is sometimes given to distinguished passengers by the captain. It is perfectly enjoyable there when the sky is clear and the water smooth, but it is the most uncomfortable of all places in rough weather. On the bridge every roll and pitch of the ship is accentuated. Here, no matter how ugly are the seas, how terrible the blast, must stand either one or more of the officers of the ship; and when the gale is at the heaviest the captain invariably takes a place there. Precautions are sometimes used, as by stretching heavy canvas around the bridge, to deaden somewhat the effects of a passing wave which might break over the side of the ship. It often happens that a green sea weighing tons strikes the bridge as if it were a huge hammer, and canvas no more resists the force of the sea than were it paper. On more than one occasion brave men in pursuit of their duty have been carried out of the bridge by the surging seas and lost. Driven as are steamers at a high rate of speed, the greatest watchfulness is necessary. Steamers follow somewhat an ocean lane, and it may be broad and wide, and yet chances of a collision are always possible. Especially when the coast is near are the officers stationed on the bridge, and eyes are strained for an early sight of the land if it be day, or of the light if it be night. A night at sea when there is dirty weather is an exciting experience. The wind is howling through the rigging, and the seas angry. Just in front of one of the officers is the man at the wheel. If a particularly ugly sea be seen coming, a word from the captain intimates how the steamer is to escape it. Just a slight turn of the spokes of the wheel suffices, but sometimes, while one heavy mass of water is being evaded, another presents itself on the opposite side. Then the steamer has to take it. It comes aboard, and the good ship staggers under the blow. Drenched to the skin, the breath almost knocked out of them, still these brave men on the bridge hold their places. Certain white incrustations, which sometimes show themselves on the smoke-stacks of steamers when they come into port, attest how seas have broken quite over the bridge.

HOUSEHOLD

Solding

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