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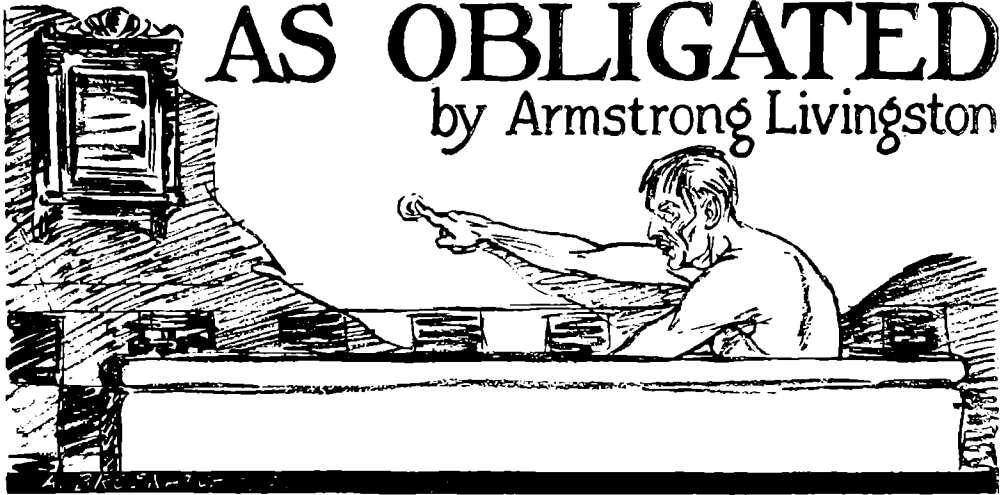
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AS OBLIGATED

by Armstrong Livingston

1. *The Bathroom Bell.*

SIR GEOFFREY COOMBE, Bart., snorted contentedly as his round bald head and his plump white shoulders emerged above the waters of his morning tub; without troubling to open his eyes, he reached over the edge of his porcelain container and groped blindly along the length of the heated towel rail. Then he snorted again, in a very different key. The second housemaid, derelict in her duty, had evidently neglected to place any towels upon the device intended for them; worse than that, a more thorough examination through reluctantly opened eyes showed that there were no towels in the room at all.

Of all life's little misadventures, this is admittedly one of the most annoying. The baronet was on the point of being very annoyed indeed, until his eye chanced to fall upon the button of an electric bell that was placed in the wall at the side of the tub. A sudden smile came to his face instead of the threatened frown, and his blue eyes were twinkling as he reached up and pressed firmly upon the button.

"That's one to Hodgkins!" he murmured good-humoredly. "I must tell

the old chap about it the next time I see him. He'll be tremendously bucked."

When he had added this new and perfectly equipped bathroom to the ancient country seat of his fathers, that bell had been a bone of contention between Hodgkins and himself. The baronet, weary of antiquated appliances, had drawn the plans of the room himself to the end that they might be perfect, and with the aid of a London catalogue of modern lavatory fixtures, plus his own vivid imagination, he had succeeded admirably. He was proud of those plans. . . .

Of course the task of executing them had fallen to the lot of Hodgkins, the village plumber. Any other arrangement would have been manifestly improper. Hodgkins was a tradition. Ever since plumbing had been invented a Hodgkins had been plumber for a Coombe, just as a Stubbs had always supplied the meat and a Smith the groceries. The system worked excellently for all concerned: the village profited by the patronage of the Hall, and the Hall benefited by good meat and groceries and plumbing. Traditions, properly adhered to, have a practical as well as a sentimental value.

Hodgkins had glanced over the plans and warmly approved them. A glow of pride suffused the amateur draftsman's being, to be presently chilled by a growing doubt in the plumber's eye.

"You've not allowed for a bell, Sir Geoffrey."

"A bell in a bathroom? Don't be silly, Hodgkins!"

"It's not silly, sir. You'll want a bell—there."

Hodgkins had jabbed at the neat plan with a sadly maculate finger, and when he removed it there was no difficulty in finding the spot he had indicated.

"Just where you can reach it from the tub. Handylike."

"Absurd! Have you no sense of decency, Hodgkins? Under what conceivable circumstances would a man in a tub want to ring a bell—especially if he knew it was bound to be answered by a housemaid?"

Hodgkins accepted the implied challenge with gusto. He began to enumerate a series of hypothetical cases in which a bell by the bathtub might be most useful, and when he presently showed signs of deserving the reputation he had in the local Conservative Club of being its most eloquent and long-winded member, the baronet threw up his hands in despair.

"Have it your own way! I can always tie a bow of pink ribbon on it and pretend it's a mural decoration."

"Yes, sir."

Hodgkins, having gained his point, magnanimously proceeded to explain his insistence.

"You'll not regret it, Sir Geoffrey. You see, sir, it's like this: my father always did his best for your father, and my grandfather for yours before that, and now it's up to me to do the best I can for you. So when my judgment tells me you *ought* to have a

bell in that bathroom, I'm just plain obligated to say so!"

"Thank you, Hodgkins," replied the baronet gravely, and not ungratefully. He might reserve his private opinion about the matter in dispute, but he could also appreciate the stubborn determination of the old plumber to do his best for the Coombe family. "It is really a pleasure nowadays to meet anyone who takes the interest in his work that you do."

Sir Geoffrey, twiddling his toes in the bath while waiting an answer to his summons, smiled as he recalled that conversation with Hodgkins. The smile faded slowly away as he reflected that quite an interval had elapsed since he rang, and that the water in the tub was getting deucedly chilly. He reached for the bell again, and this time his finger lingered on the button with a pertinacity that he devoutly hoped would cause consternation in the servants' hall.

He had not entirely regained his poise when he hustled into the breakfast room and seated himself at the table. His wife was already in her place at the other end, deftly sorting the morning mail.

"Henrietta," he began promptly, "I wish you would please send word to Hodgkins that the bell in my bathroom doesn't work. I rang three times this morning for towels, and nothing happened. It was most embarrassing. I had to scuttle to my dressing room, dripping like a—like a half-drowned rabbit!"

"Very well, Geoffrey. I will have it attended to," answered Lady Coombe soothingly.

She paused in her shuffling of the mail to examine an envelope.

"Here's a letter to you from the Psychological Society!"

"I was expecting it. I met Matthews, the secretary, the other day, and he told me they were going to invite me to address them some evening this week."

“Really!”

Lady Coombe’s slender eyebrows were delicately arched for an instant, but they straightened again as she remembered that her husband was an astute politician.

“They control some votes, I suppose?”

“Possibly in the next world,” said Sir Geoffrey, and added with a little chuckle: “Of course there’s no reason why a far-sighted statesman shouldn’t build up a constituency there—in advance!”

She ignored his flippancy, but the eloquent brows signaled her amusement at his new hobby.

“Is it possible that you are a believer in spooks?” she asked, mildly derisive. “At your age? Really!”

“I’m—interested. Frankly, I am. One hears such extraordinary stories. . . . There must be some truth in these well-authenticated cases of apparently inexplicable phenomena.”

“One hears!” she repeated skeptically. “But does one ever experience?”

“Ah, that’s it,” admitted Sir Geoffrey readily. “Listening to another man’s account of a ‘manifestation’ is not like having one of your own. But I’m afraid I’m not the sort of a person to attract a spook!” he ended with a sigh.

Lady Coombe surveyed his plump, matter-of-fact face good-humoredly.

“No, Geoffrey, I don’t think you are!”

She picked another letter from the pile beside her.

“Here’s a dinner invitation from Agatha. Of course we’ll accept. . . .”

2. *The Bell Bewitched.*

IN THESE days of international conferences, a serious politician’s life is not his own. Sir Geoffrey Coombe, who had expected to spend

many pleasant week-ends at Coombe Hall, found himself fluctuating instead between London, Geneva, and Cannes—and other hospitable points. Fully six months had gone by before he and Lady Coombe returned to the Hall, glad to escape from the turmoil of London life and photographers. This was real comfort.

While he was taking his bath next morning Sir Geoffrey’s eyes inevitably rested upon the bell-button so conveniently placed beside the porcelain tub. It was equally inevitable that his mind should revert to that unhappy morning when he had scurried through the hall to the haven of his dressing room.

“Wonder if it has been fixed?” he mused.

He could think of no excuse for ringing at that moment, and he was a kindly man who did not like to disturb his servants unnecessarily. But the question stuck in his mind all the time that he was shaving and dressing, and when his morning toilet was finally complete he decided to have it answered. He went back to the bathroom and pressed the bell. . . .

After some moments he rang again, and a little later a third time. Then he went into another room and rang the bell there. A maid appeared with commendable punctuality.

“I’ve just rung three times from the bathroom,” he told her severely. “Why did no one answer?”

“It couldn’t have rung, Sir Geoffrey,” answered the girl. “I’ve been right in the pantry, and I must have heard it if it had. Did you want something, sir?”

“I wanted to know just that,” said the baronet grimly. “Thank you, Jane.”

He came into the calm serenity of the breakfast room like a thundercloud.

“Henrietta, did you tell Hodgkins about that bell in my bathroom?”

"I spoke to the housekeeper, certainly," replied his wife tranquilly. "It must be all right now."

"Well, it's not!"

"Then I will speak to Mrs. Smith again."

Like a good housewife, she reported the result of her inquiry at dinner that evening.

"Mrs. Smith tells me that she referred the matter of your bell to Hodgkins. He was quite upset."

"I'll send him a card of sympathy," said her husband crossly. "I'm upset myself, and can feel for him."

"He came to the house two or three times, while we were away. He tinkered with it, but couldn't find the trouble."

"It's an electrician's job," commented Sir Geoffrey absently.

He was wondering why these modern cooks sent up a brown dressing with a chicken instead of a white.

"It serves me right for leaving that bathroom to the tender mercies of a village plumber!"

"Don't be silly."

Lady Coombe helped herself liberally to the salad—she was conservative in everything else.

"You could have done nothing else. Hodgkins would have been mortally offended. His father worked for your father, and his grandfather—"

"Worked for my grandfather!" groaned the baronet. "I've heard it all from Hodgkins himself, Henrietta!"

"It's rather fine, though, when you come to think of it," said Lady Coombe thoughtfully. "Hodgkins represents a generation that is dying out—the generation that did its work, and was humiliated if that work wasn't satisfactory. He told Mrs. Smith one day that such a thing had never happened before: that neither he, nor his father, nor his grandfather, had ever been obliged—

he called it 'obligated'—to remedy any work done at the Hall."

"Well, he hasn't remedied it yet," grumbled the baronet.

"How are the spooks getting on?" asked Lady Coombe softly.

Sir Geoffrey looked mildly surprised at the sudden change of subject; a little suspicious, too, for his wife had recently derived a lot of quiet amusement from what she called 'spooing spouse's spooks.' Before he could reply, she explained the connection.

"I was thinking of your Psychical Society," she said dryly. "I thought you might like to tell them about your bathroom bell, because Hodgkins swears it is bewitched!"

AGAIN Sir Geoffrey's presence was required in London, and once more several months slipped by before the Hall was warmed and aired throughout to receive its master.

This time he did not have to be reminded of the bell that had refused to respond to the pressure of his august finger. Curiously enough, the thought of that bell had continuously cropped up in his mind even during the stress of the past few months—and some of them had been very stressful indeed. Whenever a bell had rung for anything, he had been reminded of a bell that would not ring for towels. . . .

Fortuitously, on the afternoon of his arrival at Coombe Hall, he met the housekeeper in a darkened corridor of the old house.

"Oh—Mrs. Smith! Has that bell in my bathroom ever been put in order?"

"I'm sorry, Sir Geoffrey, but I don't think it has. Hodgkins—the plumber, you know, sir—has been here several times. But—"

"Confound Hodgkins!" cried the baronet angrily. "Hodgkins is an antediluvian fossil who doesn't know a brass washer from a tin bathtub!"

His voice rose high, and even in that dim light the startled housekeeper could see that his face was growing purple.

"Why did you call in Hodgkins? Why didn't you get somebody with some sense? I know that Lady Coombe left it to you. Why haven't you attended to it? What are housekeepers coming to? Oh, Lord—why does a sane man *have* a housekeeper?"

He went down the corridor without waiting for an answer to this conundrum. Mrs. Smith was staggered by the violence of the assault, which was as unexpected coming from him as if it had come from the tweeny and by no means more to be endured by a hard-working self-respecting woman with three children and a husband to support. . . . Before she could frame a crushing reply, she was staring down an empty corridor, and her honest brain had arrived at a just appreciation of the trouble. She recalled a few anxious remarks that Her Ladyship had dropped anent her husband's health. Politics had been very trying of late; Sir Geoffrey was no longer a young man; the doctors had warned him very gravely. Mrs. Smith mechanically pulled up her skirt and wrung her hands thereon, a custom that she had not thought of for twenty years.

"Poor dear!" she murmured sympathetically. "If only you wasn't a sick man—!"

Sir Geoffrey ate a very hearty dinner that evening, his appetite obviously improved by the fresh country air. Presumably it was still further improved by the fact that his doctor had sternly tabooed one or two of the dishes to which he helped himself twice. He remonstrated feebly across the table with a pair of eyebrows.

"Nonsense, my dear, nonsense! I feel like a two-year-old Clydesdale!"

He glanced sideways.

"Don't stand there like a graven image, Parkins; don't you see I want some more claret?"

"Go on, Geoffrey!" urged his wife bitterly. "Make an idiot of yourself, do! But don't forget to take a notebook to bed with you; it will be so useful at the next meeting of the Psychological Society when you try to describe your grandmother's ghost!"

He did in truth spend a restless, storm-tossed night. If he felt like a Clydesdale at all in the morning it must have been a very elderly specimen indeed. He swayed slightly as he got out of bed, and his hands gripped the footboard while he steadied himself.

"Gad!" he muttered. "My digestion must be properly out of whack!"

He clung to his base an instant longer.

"These doctors aren't such fools as we like to think 'em!"

A dim memory stirred in him to the effect that a hot bath is good for indigestion. He went to his bathroom, turned on the taps, and ran the tub full of water as hot as he could comfortably bear it. He discarded pajamas and wrapper, kicked off his slippers, and luxuriously submerged his body in the warm depths. . . .

He hardly knew what happened after that. A terrible pulse throbbed in his brain; a mist swam before his eyes; a chill raced from his head to his feet. Vaguely, he realized that he was ill—very ill—*dangerously* ill! Frightened, he flung a finger toward the bell beside the tub, and as he pressed it he remembered that it did not ring. . . .

That was his last thought before he lost consciousness. The room circled about him, a panorama of porcelain and white tile. His body relaxed into the tub, and the agitated water presently calmed above his face. . . .

3. *As Obligated.*

THAT was the beginning of a serious illness for Sir Geoffrey. A month, two months, passed. Life fought against death. The grim shadow hovered dangerously close for a time, then lifted, then returned again to frighten the watchers by the bed, and finally drifted away to bide a better opportunity. June found Sir Geoffrey able to sit up in his own room; in July, the doctors permitted short excursions in a wheeled chair through the beautiful grounds of Coombe Hall.

It was on a sunny morning in the latter month that the invalid first betrayed an awakening interest in his surroundings. Through the lingering days of convalescence he had led an apathetic, almost somnolent existence, answering with a perceptible effort when spoken to, and never speaking of his own initiative. But this morning, warmed by the sunshine, his tired eyes brightened and a touch of color crept into his sunken cheeks. He lifted his head and spoke over his shoulder to the old ex-soldier who was quietly propelling the chair.

"Saunders, I'm bored with this confounded park! Are you strong enough to wheel me as far as the village?"

"Plenty strong enough, Sir Geoffrey. Bless you, sir, you don't weigh no more than a feather, and these new chairs move along at the touch of a finger."

The touch of a finger. . . . The phrase struck upon Sir Geoffrey's ear with odd force, and he idly pondered the words while he was rolled along. He vaguely felt that there was some dormant memory in his mind that should have been awakened by their sense, but the memory stubbornly remained asleep. Presently, with the impatience of an invalid, he gave up the futile effort to recollect.

They proceeded slowly the length of the beautiful drive, passed through

the handsome gates, and slipped into the main street of the neat little village that lay beyond. Women and children came to the doors of the tidy cottages; men stopped their work to grin bashfully and touch their hats. One and all, they were glad to see the baronet out again, and he, brightened by their welcome, nodded and smiled his appreciation. But suddenly, as they came abreast of a small shop, he straightened in his chair and spoke sharply to his attentive nurse.

"Hullo, Saunders! What's this? Why is there a new sign over Hodgkins' place?"

"Hodgkins, sir? Why, he's been dead this matter of two months or more. Went out very sudden, sir. I think the doctor said it was his heart. His widow sold the business, sir, and that's why there's a new sign over the door."

"Dead! Hodgkins dead!"

Sir Geoffrey's voice was shocked.

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

He was silent a moment, thinking of the man who had taken that path which he himself had so nearly followed.

"I would like to see Mrs. Hodgkins, Saunders. Where does she live? Is it far?"

"It's right across the street, Sir Geoffrey."

The old soldier twisted the chair as he spoke, and in another moment brought it to a standstill before a cottage door. A woman came out, gaunt, dull-eyed, black-garmented. She looked straight at the man in the chair, and there was an appreciable interval between her recognition of Sir Geoffrey and the curtsy she dropped.

"I'm glad to see you up again, Sir Geoffrey," she said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hodgkins. . . . I've only just heard of your loss, and I've come to tell you how sorry I am. I did not even know that your husband had been ill."

"He was hardly that, sir, but he'd been depressed like for a few months."

She hesitated, and added in a low tone with an edge of bitterness in it: "It seemed to me that he was never the same man since the time that bell went wrong at the Hall."

"Eh? What?"

Sir Geoffrey, wincing as if from a blow, leaned back in his chair and half closed his eyes. The clear sunlight bathed the little group by the cottage door, bringing out the stern, unrelenting lines of the woman's face and revealing the minute wrinkles of pain that twitched at the corners of Sir Geoffrey's mouth. It was Saunders, mindful of his trust, who broke the silence. A righteous indignation quivered in his speech.

"You've no business to say such things to Sir Geoffrey, and him as ill as he is."

He made an impatient movement as if to wheel his charge out of this danger zone, but the baronet opened his eyes and checked the old soldier's impulse with a prohibitory motion of his hand.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Hodgkins?" he asked gently.

The rebuke from Saunders had startled the woman into a softer mood. Her attitude became faintly apologetic, and she looked a little frightened as she marked the effect of her words in the baronet's altered features.

"I'm sure I'm sorry if I'm talking nonsense, sir, but it's only what I think to be the—the truth. I know he felt downhearted about that bell. . . ."

"I am distressed to hear you say so, Mrs. Hodgkins. I sincerely trust you are mistaken. After all, the thing was but a trifle."

"Not to him, sir; he was always one who took great pride in his

work," answered the widow with quiet dignity. "That was why your bell upset him so. It preyed on his mind, sir. I could tell from the way he talked about it, and from the way he acted a dozen times or more when he'd come back from the Hall without having been able to fix it. The night before he died he ate a very hearty supper, sir, and *that* was what killed him, according to the doctor. I suppose he ought to know. But just the same, the last words he ever spoke in this world were about that bell."

The baronet said nothing for a moment. From behind the chair Saunders glared ineffectively; the woman was fascinated, to the exclusion of all else, by the expression of Sir Geoffrey's face.

"Go on, Mrs. Hodgkins: what did he say?"

"He'd had a very bad night, sir. Restless. . . . About 8 o'clock in the morning I was getting him a bite of breakfast, thinking that something warm would do him good, when I heard him call me from the bedroom. I went in and put my arm beneath his shoulders. 'What is it, Henry?' I asked. 'I've been thinkin' about that bell at the Hall, Maria,' he said. 'I do wish I could have got that fixed up, as obligated. . . .' 'You'll have plenty of time to see to that,' I told him. 'No, I won't, wife,' he said, 'I'm goin' fast now.' It was on the tip of me tongue to tell him to stop his foolishness, when I felt him stiffen in me arms. His eyes were set, sir, like a person who's listening to something far off. 'He's ringin' now, Maria!' he said, sort as if he was chokin'. 'Can't you hear him? Sir Geoffrey's ringin' now, and he wants an answer pretty bad!'"

The baronet, his hands clenched on the arms of his chair, waited for the woman to control her emotion. Her worn face was working pitifully.

"And then, Mrs. Hodgkins?"

"Why—that was all, sir. He'd no sooner finished speaking than he fell back dead against my arm."

"What . . . day . . . was . . . that?"

"May third, sir, a little after 8 in the morning."

Sir Geoffrey tried to think, tried to remember, but presently abandoned the effort. He covered his eyes with one shaking hand.

"It is all most distressing, Mrs. Hodgkins—most distressing. I cannot tell you. . . . You have my deepest sympathy, as you must know. If there is anything that Lady Coombe or I can do, you must certainly tell us. . . ."

He stammered out the awkward phrases, halted, and abruptly turned to his glowering attendant.

"Back to the Hall, Saunders. I am tired. . . ."

He was very still on the way home; so still that the conscientious Saunders wheeled the chair as rapidly as was consistent with comfort, his loyal heart filled with self-reproach because he had ventured to take his charge beyond the confines of the quiet park. But beneath the surface calm the invalid's mind was working rapidly, and he was no sooner back in his own room than he spoke crisply to his faithful companion.

"Saunders!"

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey."

"What day was I taken ill?"

"Well, sir, I—I wasn't here then—"

"You must have heard."

"Yes, sir, so I have. The other servants have mentioned it. It was May third, sir."

"That's what I thought. But everything seems so hazy. . . . Saunders, I want you to do something for me."

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey?"

"I want you to go into my bath-room and ring the bell beside the tub.

Come back and let me know if it is in order."

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey."

At the end of five minutes Saunders returned from his mission.

"It is not, Sir Geoffrey. I tried it twice, and waited, but nobody came."

"Thank you, Saunders. That is all."

THE convalescent was very quiet for the rest of the morning and for the better part of the afternoon. Yet it was not the quiet of an invalid who is fatigued so much as the quiet of a man who is deep in thought. At 5 o'clock he volunteered to Saunders the information that he felt much stronger. At 6, the whole household was electrified by the announcement that Sir Geoffrey had sent for the mail which had accumulated during his illness.

He was hardly half way through the pile of correspondence when 7 o'clock arrived, and with it his evening meal of weak tea, toast, and soft-boiled eggs. In their wake came Lady Coombe, whose custom it had been to have a tray in her husband's room since he had been able to sit up. She opened his eggs, buttered his toast, and fussed about him generally until she was assured of his comfort.

"You're feeling better, Geoffrey?"

"Much better, my dear." He continued to slit envelopes. "By the way, Henrietta, how long have I been ill?"

"Since May third. The doctors warned you, you know, and they think the hot bath you took that morning—"

"Ah, yes! That bath! I can't seem to remember much after I got into it. I lost consciousness, I suppose?"

"Lost *consciousness!* My dear Geoffrey, you nearly *drowned!* The servants heard you ring, thank heaven, and got you out just in time."

“They heard me—what?”

“Ring. You must have rung just before you fainted.”

“Then, the bell—rang!”

“Of course. Oh—!” She suddenly remembered. “I’d forgotten! It was that bell which gave poor Hodgkins so much trouble, wasn’t it? He must have fixed it just in time. . . . Oh, Geoffrey, suppose he *hadn’t*! And now—and now he’s dead! Did you know that, Geoffrey?”

“Yes, I heard so today.”

The answer came from him mechanically. He had been opening letters while they talked, and at that moment he had reached one which he held for a second in his hand. He was not given to premonitions, but he was seized with a perfectly genuine one as he read the neat letter-head at the top of the sheet. It was with something of an effort that he drew his eyes from the conventional form of address, from the opening lines that expressed regret at his ill-

ness, and fixed them upon the paragraph which was the meat of the communication.

“I must tell you something which I am sure will interest you very much, as I have often heard you wish that you personally might receive some message from the other side. At a recent séance, held by some members of this society, a message came through that was clearly sent to you. It was very indistinct, very cloudy, as though coming from one who had only just passed over. The name of the sender was doubtful; it might have been Hodges, or Hopkins. The message itself was quite incoherent. It seemed to refer to a *bell*, and two words, steadily reiterated, finally resolved themselves into ‘*as obligated*’. It will be most interesting if you can throw any light on this evident attempt to communicate.”

Sir Geoffrey, a little shaken, stared at the letter. He continued to stare until his wife reminded him that the eggs were getting cold. . . .