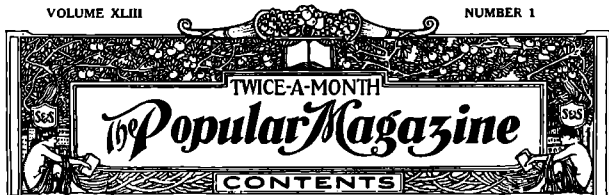


"THE SHERIFF OF SACATONE"

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VOLUME XLIII

NUMBER 1



DECEMBER 20, 1916

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NEXT POPULAR ON SALE JANUARY 7th

The Bell

By Arthur Stringer

Author of "The Gun-Runner," "The Hammer of God," Etc.

One man brings another four hundred miles to answer the question Thomas Bailey Aldrich once asked about a certain situation for a story: "What would happen if you knew you were the last human being alive in the world and you were sitting alone in your study, and suddenly your doorbell rang?"

DO you happen to know just why you're here?" asked Ryckman, as I stepped into the waiting motor car.

"Because you sent for me," was my deliberate retort. I stared about the lonely little station half buried in snow.

Ryckman cranked the car, shook the snow from the lap robe that had been covering his radiator, and crowded in beside me. We backed about, swung into the frozen road, and crawled southward across a country blue gray with wintry twilight.

"You've been wondering why I *did* send for you, of course," said Ryckman, as he pushed the lap robe over across my knees. "And, now you're here, I'll explain it. You see, you could never make it clear in a telegram."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Buchner," Ryckman said, after a silence, "do you remember what Thomas Bailey Aldrich once asked about a certain situation for a story? What would happen if you knew you were the last human being alive in the world and you were sitting alone in your study, and suddenly your doorbell rang?"

I turned and stared at Ryckman as he bent over his wheel.

"Did you bring me all the way up here to answer that question?" I demanded.

"Yes," was his answer.

Ryckman had always been odd, but I had never thought of him as insane. That he was not without temperament had been made plain to me seven long years before, when I first became his attorney. We had then stopped by injunction one of his own plays because a Broadway manager had grabbed a third-act ending. And since then we had been through most of the small legal skirmishes which every successful author, I suppose, has to face.

Yet success had not greatly added to Ryckman's eccentricities. He had always loved solitude, I knew, when struggling with a new drama, and this was largely based on the fact that he composed *viva voce*, striding up and down his study and shouting his big-scene speeches to a waiting stenographer. So I had not been surprised when he wrote me that winter, saying he had snatched up a huge old country house on Lake Erie and was leaving the city to give three months of hard work to the new Frohman comedy.

But I was not willing to swallow four hundred miles in an overheated sleeper

and accept a spoiled Christmas holiday as the negligible whim of a temperamental playmonger.

So I looked at the capped and muffled Ryckman for some time, trying to sweep back the wave of anger which was inundating my weary body.

"So I've been brought here on the matter of a doorbell?" I inquired, with ironic placidity.

"Precisely," said Ryckman.

"On the matter of your doorbell, which somebody has been making so bold as to ring?" I went on.

"Exactly," said the man at my side.

"But, my dear Ryckman," I retorted, exasperated by the theatricality of his attitude, "the situation seems rather without point in this case, because you do not happen to be the last human being alive in the world."

"That's where you're wrong," he quickly amended. "I am the only human being alive in the world!"

"Oh, are you?" I echoed, steeling myself for some confession of incipient paranoia. It was clear, I told myself, that the man had been overworking.

"I mean I'm the only human being left in this world of mine up here," explained Ryckman.

"How about Burke?" I asked.

Burke was Ryckman's stenographer, who had been with the playwright, I knew, for the last three years at least.

"Burke left three days after my housekeeper went. He couldn't stand it any more than the others could!"

"Stand what?" I demanded.

"The bell," was Ryckman's answer.

I tried to be as calm as possible.

"What did the bell do?" I finally inquired.

"It rang."

Ryckman had uttered this foolish answer in a quite matter-of-fact tone, but for some absurd reason I experienced a faint horripilation of the nerves.

"Bells have a habit of doing that."

"No, they haven't," solemnly and de-

cisively declared Ryckman. "Not without some human being first making them ring! Not without some earthly reason or cause!"

I could afford to laugh at his solemnity.

"And this is some super-rational bell that rings of its own sweet will and gives you goose flesh along your idiotic young legs just because a couple of wires have got crossed."

He turned to me with a quick and reproving side glance. I could see his face, thin and blue with the cold, in the shadowy half light of the snow-muffled dusk.

"There are no wires to get crossed," he declared. "It is just a plain bell that has to be pulled, pulled by some one's hand. The only wires that are getting crossed are the wires in my brain. I tell you, I can't stand this thing much longer. I've got to straighten it out in some way!"

I sat silent, momentarily disturbed by the rising note of protest in his voice. It was clear that the man was not himself.

"Been working hard?" I finally inquired.

"I can't work," he cried. "This thing has got on my nerves and knocked everything out of my head."

"Then why are you staying here?"

"I want to get to the bottom of it," was his answer. "I've got to understand it."

I thought things over. Then I went back to the question of the bell.

"You're sure it actually rings?" I asked.

"As sure of it as I know we're sitting in this car."

"And without reason?"

He nodded an affirmative.

"I even lamplacked the pull knob, hoping to get finger prints, something to work on. *But there was no sign that a human hand had touched it.*"

Again I felt that small chill along

the nerve ends. But I forced a laugh at the solemnity of his face.

"And the servants—Burke and others—what stampeded them?"

"They knew the bell rang."

"When would it ring?"

"At night."

"And how did they explain it?"

"They *couldn't* explain it. That's what stampeded them."

"But they must have talked about it."

"Burke told me they had passed a story on, from one to the other, about a woman being killed in the place and buried under the bricks in the cellar. Being lowbrows, they accepted the story—even Burke did, at last, and with the usual results."

"And you yourself?" I inquired.

Ryckman threw me another quick side glance.

"I'm not altogether foolish!" he replied. Then he added, without looking at me: "And the cellar floor isn't of bricks. It's solid cement."

"Any details about that woman?" I asked, feeling that the more Ryckman could externalize the thing, as the psychopathologists phrase it, the better it would be for him.

"Nothing authentic, naturally. Those yarns never are authentic. But as far as I can gather the house was built about thirty years ago by a retired Lake captain. He was in middle life then, and married a young wife. They had two children. The first, a boy, was delicate and afraid of the water. This used to anger the old captain, who took the boy out in a boat and threw him overboard to make him a swimmer. The shock, or the strain on the boy's throat when he screamed, ruptured the vocal chords. At any rate, according to the story, it left him a mute. And the boy's mother never forgave his father. They lived under the same roof, side by side, for two years without speaking. Then the captain disap-

peared. They said he went back to the Lakes, took up sailing again. Then he came back one winter and tried to make up with his wife. She still refused to speak to him. He was drunk, and turned her out in zero weather. Three times she came back and rang the bell. The third time, they say, he dragged her in and killed her. As a matter of fact, I suppose, she died of exposure, or probably was never even turned out of the house."

"And the boy with the ruptured vocal chords?"

"He went to Baltimore and had an operation on his throat and got his voice back. He and his younger sister turned the place—they called it Pine Brae—into a fruit farm. But old Captain Hudson's family disputed the title and threw it on the market. That's how it came into my hands."

We had turned off the main road, and were winding down through a stretch of heavily wooded hills. We chugged and stuttered in past two huge stone gateposts, crawling on second speed through a spectral-looking orchard. Then we took a turn to the left and skirted a thick tangle of pine trees. Half hidden in the gloom of these pines I could make out the still gloomier pile of the house, without a light or a sign of life showing from any of its windows. As I sat in the car, while Ryckman got out to unlock his garage door, I could hear the sound of the lake booming desolately on the ice ridge along the shore.

"This is surely a sweet and home-like corner of the world you've bought yourself," I told him, with a candor born of much weariness of body and depression of mind.

"I don't believe I'll buy the place," he said, as he stood staring into the gloom of the pines.

"But you have bought it."

"Not altogether," he amended.

"There's a disputed title somewhere or other. That is one of the things you've got to look into for me at the county seat. I've been too busy, and I'm not much good at that work."

Again I detected a flaw in my young client's line of talk, but I did not draw his attention to it.

"Well, that's saner work than waiting for bells to ring," I told him, as I followed in his steps and circled the gloomy pile that huddled back among its gloomy pines. I stood beside him as he took out a key to unlock the forbidding oak door; I could see the faint glimmer of a polished brass knob. I reached out and touched it, feeling sure it was the hand knob of a pull bell. Then I let my gloved fingers close about it. The next moment I pulled promptly and deliberately on the knob.

From beyond that still unlocked door, from somewhere deep within the silent and tomblike house, I could hear the sudden, brazen clamor of the bell. I don't know whether it was the utter desolation of the place or my own depressed spirits or the ghostly nonsense which Ryckman had been dishing up to me, but as I heard those muffled sounds reverberating through the gloom which I could not decipher I felt a shiver speed up and down my backbone.

Ryckman swung about as though he had been shot.

"Was that you?" he gasped, catching at my arm.

"Of course it was me," I retorted. But I could see that it had given him a bad turn.

Again I forced a laugh as I struck a match for him. He stood there until it burned out, before he turned again to unlock the door. Then I struck a second match. This time I held it close to the bell knob and looked it over. Then I stepped in through the opened door, at Ryckman's heels, following him into the silence of the unlighted house.

II.

I found the interior of Ryckman's house much more comfortable than I had anticipated. And I made the further discovery that Ryckman himself was a much more practical-minded man than I had thought him. He soon had a wood fire roaring in the huge fireplace of the great high-ceilinged hall, which ran the full length of the house. Then came a hot supper, of his own cooking, and coffee and cigars. And although the wind increased as the night advanced and the sound of it in the pine tops was no blither than the booming of the surf on the ice ridge below the lake cliffs, I found myself, what with the hot meal and the lighted lamps and the open fire and the easy-chairs, in a much more comfortable frame of mind.

The situation, as we smoked and talked, became a more matter-of-fact one, and when Ryckman carried a lamp to the rear end of the wide reception hall and pointed out the bell which was given to ringing without earthly reason or cause, I could even view that bell with half-amused disdain.

It was an old-fashioned and very ordinary-looking bell, swinging on the end of a curling steel band wire. When once set in motion, because of this wire, it would naturally oscillate for some length of time. I noticed that it stood high above the door tops, and could not be easily interfered with by any one crossing the back of the hall, which, Heaven knows, had doors enough standing on either side of it. I made particular note of this, for the back end of the hall was in shadow, far beyond the radiance of our open fire and the large reading lamp which stood behind us; and the deeper the shadows, I knew, the better the chances for that trickery of the senses which is all too readily accepted as the supernatural.

So fortified, in fact, did I become

in my skepticism that I determined to cut off all other chances of trickery. I first insisted on making sure we were alone in the house. And this we did by a most thorough and painstaking search of the place from attic to cellar. During that search, which was a dismal and bone-chilling experience, I stumbled on nothing that could be made to serve as an elucidation of Ryckman's tuppenny little mystery. I discovered, though, that the house was even larger and drearier than I had first thought it. I also discovered that the cellar, in which Ryckman had made preparations for installing a hot-water furnace, was a solid-walled, well-floored place in no way suggestive of the abnormal. The only feature of that cellar which could be called in any way irregular was a door which opened into a passageway running under the terrace to the east of the house. But this passage, Ryckman explained, had originally connected with a frame building holding two huge cider presses, for when the orchards of Pine Brae were in their prime the earlier owner had thought to make a business of champagnizing and aging native cider for the city market.

I made it a point to see, however, that the door of this passage was securely locked, just as I made it a point to see that every door and window on the ground floor could not be tampered with by a possible intruder. And as for intruders, I knew that no one could approach the house without leaving in the freshly fallen snow unmistakable marks of that approach. Yet before we settled ourselves before the open fire again I obtained a hammer and wood chisel from the quietly condoning Ryckman. With these, after some difficulty, I removed an inner board from his front-door casement, and then a couple of the floor boards, to make sure, as I had expected, that the bell wire ran along to the back of the house under our feet, and not overhead. My first impulse was

quietly to cut this wire. But, on second thoughts, I surreptitiously loosened the set screw which held the brass bell pull in place. Then stepping outside for a moment on the pretext of making sure there were no footprints in the freshly driven snow, I drew the brass knob from its socket and slipped it into my pocket.

When I lighted a fresh cigar in front of Ryckman's open fire I was fortified with the knowledge that no one outside the house could ever interfere with my neurasthenic friend's bell. I nursed the even more comforting conviction that for one night at least this sleep-disturbing bell would remain quite normal. I had to struggle against a tendency, in fact, to doze off in the very face of Ryckman's spasmodic and thin-voiced talk. I even laughed a little, from the depths of my chair, when he showed me the Ross rifle he had brought into the hall and left leaning there in its corner, protesting that he always felt safer with the firearm at his elbow. Then I stretched myself and told him that I was tired and thought I'd turn in.

He stopped short at these words from me, and a look of trouble deepened on his thin and none-too-happy face.

"I'd rather you'd wait," he said.

"Wait for what?" I demanded.

He moved his head toward the hall end, where I knew the bell swung on its spring.

"But nothing's going to happen," I protested, as I sat watching him stare into the shadows at the back of the house. "Nothing *can* happen!"

"I want you to wait," he said, with a new and more wistful note in his voice. He was still watching the shadowy hall end, but I could see that his stare was not directed toward the bell itself.

"Ryckman," I suddenly asked him, "is there anything in this besides the mere ringing of that bell up there?"

"Yes," he replied, after a pause. But still he did not look at me. I became more conscious of a sense of reservation about the man and everything he had said to me.

"What's the other thing?" I inquired.

His right hand groped behind him, feeling for the chair arm. Having found it, he sank slowly down into its depths.

"It's a woman," he said. And I caught his vague look of abashment, his eye flash of mute protest against possible ridicule, as the strong side light picked out the shadows on his lean and tragic face.

"You mean you see a woman?" I asked, struggling to make my tone a casual one.

"I tell you, Büchner, I've seen her, as plain as I see that reading lamp. God only knows where she comes from or where she goes! But every line of her face stands out as distinctly as though it had a stage spotlight on it!"

"And you want me to sit up for a thing like that?" I demanded, with a pretense at disgust.

"Yes," he replied quite simply.

III.

I had been reading on and off for about an hour when Ryckman got up from his chair and crossed to the fireplace. He put on a fresh log, lighted a cigarette, and stood looking down at me.

"I guess it's no use," he said, with a sigh of weariness.

"Of course it's no use," I told him. "The combination, you see, is broken. According to the recipe, you have to be the last man left in the world—at least, in your world, as you put it. You have to be alone before you can get those things to happen—alone and all ready to let your sense be imposed upon."

He raised a hand and took the cigarette from between his lips. Then he

lifted his head a little, as though to answer me. But he did not speak for a moment or two. Instead, he stood staring off into space.

"Oh, my God!" he said in a quick gasp. And, before I had quite realized that he had spoken, the quietness of the house was shattered by a sudden tumult of sound.

It was the bell!

There, on the wall before us, the bell had most unmistakably rung. It clamored out through the quietness with a suddenness that struck on the sense like a mallet blow. And with it it seemed to carry a note of desolation, of vague misery attempting to articulate itself, which sent a tingle arrowing up and down my startled body.

In a moment I was out of my chair, running toward the door. Instead of opening the door, as Ryckman expected me to do, I dropped on my knees before the torn-up floor boards. There I thrust my hand through the opening and firmly grasped the pull wire. I held it tight, so that it could not be moved. But even as I held it motionless the silence was again shattered by that unearthly brazen clamor.

"It will ring again," Ryckman was saying in a voice that sounded as thin as though it had come to me over a long-distance wire.

Neither of us spoke as the third signal sounded and died away. Then I ran to where Ryckman stood, with a scattering of high lights on his moistened forehead. I put my hand on his arm; I think I must have shaken him.

"Can you get me another lamp?" I asked him.

He did not answer me. But in the face staring over my shoulder I could see sudden terror. I could see the lips become flaccid and the eyes alter and widen. And I knew that behind me was a Something which had entered his line of vision, a Something which it was my duty to face.

I turned slowly about, forlornly struggling to fortify myself for anything with which I might be confronted. Then I leaned forward, with one hand on the chair back, giving vent as I did so to a little challenging call that was as foolish and futile as the squeak of a frightened mouse.

For there, before our eyes, was a figure in white, moving across the shadowy end of the hall. The figure was that of a woman still young.

I stood staring at her face, which seemed rapt and luminous. I could see the delicately chiseled nose and the line of the white cheek that merged into the slender chin. I could see the mouth, with the lips slightly parted. And then I saw something else. It was a trivial thing, but it drove the cold chill out of my legs. That apparition which I had tried to tell myself had been conjured up by overtense nerves and too active imagination had moistened its lips.

Even as I stepped forward I heard Ryckman call out. The next moment the place was filled with the reverberations of a quick report. I saw the vague figure in white wheel halfway round, throw out an arm, and go down on the floor. It was only then that I realized that Ryckman had made use of his rifle, and it was only then that I had the intelligence to clear the space between my chair and the far end of the hall.

"Bring the lamp," I called, "for I rather think you've killed a woman!"

I was down on my knees before a tangle of white cotton drapery, padding foolishly about a warm body which seemed hopelessly enmeshed in its swathings. I was exploring and feeling frantically about, trying to find the bullet wound.

"It's there in her shoulder," said Ryckman, with a choke in his voice. I could hear the lamp shade rattle against its holder in his shaking hand.

I was clumsily but determinedly cutting away the wet sleeve with my pocketknife when the bluest eyes I have ever looked into opened and stared up at me and then suddenly closed again.

"It's here in the arm," I cried out as I got the wet sleeve away. "Fetch me something for a tourniquet, quick!"

He was back with enough linen and lint to outfit a Red Cross camp.

"I'm better at this than you are," he said, as he dropped on his knees and elbowed me aside. "I want you to get a doctor."

"How?" I demanded.

"Can you run a car?" He was busy tightening the tourniquet.

"No!"

"Then you'll have to telephone from the Tishburn Farm. There's a rural line there that connects with Egerton Corners. Take my fur motor coat. And follow the trail until you come to the main road where we turned in."

"And then what?" I asked, as I struggled into the coat.

"The Tishburns will tell you the rest," he said, without looking up, for he was busy making a pillow for the tumble-haired head so close beside him.

"But do you know who this woman is?" I demanded.

"Yes, I do," he retorted.

"Who is she?"

"She's the daughter of the man who built this house."

IV.

It was two hours later that the practicing physician of Egerton Corners drove up to the Tishburn farmhouse. He came in a "cutter" that looked about as big as a conch shell, and drove a team of spanking bays. He wore a coonskin hat and a greatcoat of the same outlandish fur, looking like a cross between a submarine monster and an Eskimo in spectacles.

So I duly said good-bye to the Tish-

burns—who had all promptly arisen and dressed and joined me about their sitting-room “base-burner,” waiting, avid-eyed, for some inkling as to why a doctor should be called up at such unseemly hours—and climbed in beside that fur-smothered practitioner, who further barricaded me beneath a ponderous buffalo robe.

He waved his whip to the cluster of faces peering from the lighted window, touched his bays on their steaming flanks, and chuckled audibly as we swung down into the Lake Road.

“Now I understand why you gave me the message in Latin,” he said from the depths of his furs, nodding back toward the crowded casement.

“It’s the sort of thing one has to keep quiet,” I explained.

“Naturally,” he agreed. “But I’d like a few of the particulars, nevertheless.”

I told him, as briefly as I could, what had happened that night. He took it all as a matter of course—that is, with the one exception of Ryckman.

“This man, Ryckman, is a bit eccentric, isn’t he?”

I remembered how I had been elbowed aside and dumped out into the night, to say nothing of being brought four hundred miles to hear a bell ring.

“Most eccentric,” I admitted, “for one so young.”

“I’ve always thought as much,” said the man at my side.

It was my turn to surrender to undue curiosity and put a question to him.

“Who in the world,” I casually inquired, “could that young woman be?”

The fur-clad figure toolled his team in through the broken-down stone gateposts of Pine Brae.

“Oh, that’s old Captain Hudson’s daughter. She and her brother live in the cottage just beyond the old orchard there.”

But he would say nothing more. Ryckman himself, once we were back in the house, was equally reticent of speech. He already seemed to look on me as an outsider, an interloper. When I told him, a little wearily, that I thought I’d be going back with the doctor in the morning, he did not even demur. He merely said it was a nasty flesh wound, but that the patient was doing nicely and they would have a trained nurse there by noon.

“But how about that bell?” I quired.

He was carrying towels and hot water upstairs to the doctor. He stopped only long enough to regard me with a cold and unsympathetic eye.

“How d’you expect me to talk about bells when I’ve got a sick woman to look after?” was his quite ungenerous and altogether unsatisfactory answer.

It was not until the end of January that I heard from Ryckman. He had been busy, he said, installing his hot-water heating system and finishing up his Frohman comedy.

“You will be glad to know,” he continued, “that Catherine’s arm is quite healed. She asked me to explain to you about the bell.

“They had told her that if the family could retain possession of Pine Brae until over the New Year, their legal claim, in the matter of that disputed title I told you about, would be unassailable. The bell kept ringing because she had a key to the passageway and could step into the cellar and pull the wire overhead when she felt it would do the most good. She’s a wonderful girl, Buchner, even though she did try to frighten me out of a perfectly good home and into a psychopathic ward. And it seems only fair to confide to you, remembering the generous part you played in it all, that Catherine and I are to be married the second week in February.”