

THE TAP

By ARTHUR EDWARDS CHAPMAN



MENTALLY I cursed the tap. If I had risen once to turn it off, I had risen half-a-dozen times during the last quarter of an hour, and still the disconcerting *drip, drip, drip* continued.

This was my first night in the new flat, and after Mrs. Biggs, who came to do the cleaning and prepare my meals, had wished me "Good-night," I had settled down to run off a short article which I had promised to deliver by morning.

The words had flowed from my pen with scarcely an effort, and probably for this very reason the incident stands out in my memory more vividly than would otherwise have been the case. I recollect that I had paused in my writing to consider more deeply a certain point in my article. Glancing up at the clock, I had noticed the hands indicating a quarter to

eleven, and as I took up my pen afresh I heard that *drip, drip, drip* of the tap in the bathroom. For a few minutes I paid no attention to the sound, and continued writing; but presently it became so loud and insistent that I found myself counting the drops unconsciously.

Drip, drip, drip. . . .

"A loose washer," I said to myself. "I'll get a plumber tomorrow!"

Rising, I proceeded to the bathroom and turned the tap off so far as I was able. Then I went back to my desk; but barely had I picked up my pen than the sound recommenced.

Drip, drip, drip. . . .

I tried to ignore it; but without success. The very quietness of the building seemed to intensify the noise until to listen to it became painful. I must have gone at least four times to try and screw

the confounded thing off, and as surely as I returned to my chair, believing I had fixed it, just as surely would that dripping begin anew.

With an exclamation of annoyance, I rose to my feet once more. And then, suddenly, I became aware that the *drip, drip, drip* was changing slowly, gradually, to a full rush of water as though someone were turning on the tap to its fullest extent.

In surprise, I hurried to the bathroom, and as I approached the door I heard the little window blow open with a loud bang, and a great gust of air enveloped me, air of so icy a coldness that I shivered involuntarily.

Grumbling at the carelessness of Mrs. Biggs in leaving the window unfastened, I closed it hastily and made it secure, shooting home the tiny bolt that a previ-

ous tenant had for some reason placed on the bottom frame. After stopping the tap, which, by some strange freak, had turned itself on, I closed the bath-room door and returned to my work with a renewed resolve to send for the plumber on the morrow.

It was some time, however, before I was able fully to concentrate again, for I kept breaking off to listen for that *drip, drip, drip*. I listened in vain; for the tiresome sound was not renewed, and, though I wrote for at least an hour longer, I did not hear it again that night.

NEXT morning, I put my resolve into practice, and in due course my friend the plumber arrived. After spending considerable time in the bath-room he came in to report to me.

"Didn't seem to be anything wrong, sir," he assured me. "But I've put a new washer on, and it'll be right enough now, sir. I'll bob in again, though, just to see it's goin' proper."

Apparently he was right, for I did not hear the tap at all during the day. Once, after Mrs. Biggs had gone, I visited the bathroom to inspect the job, and was quite convinced that the dripping would not cause me further inconvenience. Also I took the opportunity of seeing that the bathroom window was securely fastened, and, thus satisfied, I returned to my study.

I had got thoroughly warmed up to my work and was totally oblivious to everything but the scratch of my pen as it sped across the smooth surface of the paper. All else seemed wrapped in a quietness like that of a tropical night, a quietness paradoxically emphasised by the multitude of familiar sounds that, strangely enough, fail to impress themselves upon one's mind solely by reason of their very insistence.

The ticking of the clock on the wall before me; the falling of an occasional coal from the grate; these and other commonplace noises served only to heighten the deadly stillness of my room.

Then, suddenly, as I wrote, I became conscious of a new sound, an accompaniment, it seemed, to the scratch of my pen.

Drip, drip, drip.

It pierced the silence like a rapier pierces a heart; it forced itself upon me so harshly that I dropped my pen and stuffed my fingers into my ears to shut it out. As I did so I raised my head and found myself gazing with a feeling akin to fear at the clock.

It was exactly a quarter to eleven!

For an instant I stared, and a cold shiver ran down my spine. Was it

merely coincidence, or was there something uncanny about the tap? A quarter to eleven!

Slowly, fearfully I turned my head toward the door, half expecting to see some awful apparition come gliding through. Then I laughed, somewhat nervously I must admit, at my childish dread, and got sharply to my feet. Hang it all! my nerves were all on edge. I was working too hard; a rest would do me good. . . .

Drip, drip, drip. . . .

Nothing strange about *that*, surely! I thought. I would have it out with my friend the plumber, all the same. . . . Meanwhile, I must try and check the dripping. . . .

As I entered the bath-room the tap, seeming to protest against my interference, began to drip faster, and I reached out my hand to stop it. Then I felt a peculiar stinging, burning sensation of intense cold across the backs of my hands as though someone were passing a piece of ice over them, and the knob of the tap began slowly to unscrawl itself.

It was weird, uncanny—I cannot adequately describe it. I tried to resist that unseen force, but was powerless against it. Nor could I withdraw my hands from the tap. They were numb with that icy coldness, and pressed as by invisible fingers against the metal, while the screw slowly turned round and round before my very eyes, and the drip, drip became a swift dribble.

And then an awful, nameless terror took possession of me. I strove to flee, but could not—I turned my head away, but some strange power impelled me to return my gaze to the tap that kept on slowly turning . . . turning. . . .

My heart beat madly against my ribs—I was hot and cold alternately—I think I went mad and struggled wildly to escape that horrible influence. Then, as the screw reached its limit and the water gushed forth, the little window suddenly was flung open and an icy blast met me and sent me staggering back against the wall.

For a few minutes I leaned there, striving to steady my racked nerves and collect my scattered wits. But now all was still and quiet save for the rushing of the water.

Mechanically, I crossed to the basin and turned the tap off, afterward closing and fastening the window. Now I was able to think more calmly and endeavored to probe the mystery of this strange happening. But, try as I would, I could not explain it.

I had always been a skeptic where spiritualism was concerned, and yet. . .

THE next day passed quite as usual, and though on several occasions I entered the bath-room there was no indication of anything out of the ordinary about the place. The tap was behaving just as any self-respecting tap should.

During the evening I received a visit from an old college chum, Ralph Gratrix. In the old days we had fought many a wordy battle on matters relating to psychic research, for Gratrix was a keen student of the subject, whereas I, as I have intimated, was openly a scoffer.

Remembering this, I took the opportunity of telling him of my experience of the previous night.

When I had finished my tale Gratrix was silent for a space. Then he turned and looked at me queerly and said, rather irrelevantly, I thought:

"D'you remember the Goldstone murder which created such a sensation some six months ago?"

I said I had a slight recollection of the affair. A certain theatrical manager of the name of Goldstone had murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy, wasn't it?

"Yes," Gratrix agreed slowly. "Well, the crime was committed—in this flat."

Now it was my turn to stare curiously.

"In this flat!" I repeated, taking out my cigarette-case and offering it to him. Gratrix nodded.

"Let me refresh your memory a little," he said, lighting up. "This Goldstone was known to be insanely jealous of his young wife. It was said that he suspected her of being unduly interested in a certain actor who was then playing lead in Goldstone's company.

"Well, one night, a Sunday it was, Goldstone was returning to his flat when he passed the actor in the street. Immediately Goldstone's jealousy was aroused. In his mind there was but one explanation: His wife had taken advantage of his absence to receive her lover—"

"Oh, I seem to remember that," I interrupted. "It was proved afterwards that the actor had just left some friends further up the street in whose company he had been all the evening. Wasn't that so?"

"Yes, you're right," Gratrix said. "But Goldstone didn't know that. All he thought of was the supposed faithlessness of his wife. His previous suspicions seemed to be more than justified. . . .

And he entered the flat with murder in his heart. His wife was just retiring, and had gone into the bathroom for a glass of water which she was in the habit of taking last thing at night. She had just turned on the tap—mark this well—and was reaching for the glass when Goldstone burst in upon her—"

Gratrix paused and gazed into the fireplace.

"That would be some time just before eleven," he said reflectively.

"Just before eleven!" I shot the question suddenly. "That's the time the tap starts to drip!"

My friend nodded his head slowly and continued:

"She hadn't time to fill the glass before Goldstone had her by the throat! . . . You know the rest. . . . A policeman heard her scream and forced an entry. . . . But it was too late!"

He finished speaking, and bent to poke the dying fire into a last despairing flame. I gazed at him half doubtfully.

"Then you think—?" I began.

"I believe," he said deliberately, "that the spirit of the dead woman is seeking to complete the action which the mind conceived but the body was unable to carry out."

"You mean that the thought uppermost in the woman's mind when death overtook her was to obtain a glass of water, and that the spirit will not rest in peace until this thought becomes translated into action?"

"Yes," he said; and then stopped short, listening intently.

I had heard the sound also, and knew that the hour had come. Glancing quickly at the clock, I saw that it was a quarter to eleven, and as the drip, drip, drip slowly became louder I felt something of that fear of the previous night returning.

Gratrix rose sharply and flung his half-consumed cigarette into the fireplace, a strange, far-off look in his eyes.

"Come," he said quietly, and I followed him, not without some misgivings, to the bath-room.

As he pushed open the door my eyes instinctively sought out the tap, and I saw that it was slowly turning. . . turning.

For an instant my friend watched in silence; then suddenly he crossed to the basin and taking a glass from the shelf above, held it under the tap which now was running swiftly.

Wonderingly I watched him, shivering a little as I felt an icy wave pass by me. But Gratrix did not appear to notice anything, and placing the glass, now full, on the basin, he came quickly to my side.

"Watch," he said simply.

Together we gazed at that glass of water: and then with a shock I realized that it was moving! Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, it began to float upward as though raised by an invisible hand. Fascinated, horrified, I watched its upward course, and I think I would have rushed forward had not my companion held me back with a warning arm.

Higher the glass went, and that invisible hand began to tilt it so that it seemed as if the contents must be spilled to the floor. No drop fell, however. Instead, I saw the water slowly disappear-

ing, vanishing into the air until the last drop was gone.

I felt my head throbbing; my heart began to race. I could stand it no longer, and with a cry I flung aside my friend's restraining hand and darted wildly forward. With a loud crash, the window burst open, and as I fell back before the fierceness of that inrush of air, the glass, freed from the invisible power, tumbled to the floor where it shattered in a hundred fragments.

With an effort I calmed myself and turned to Gratrix, who still was standing with his back against the wall, a vacant look in his eyes and a faint smile of understanding and relief on his lips.

"What—what was it?" I stammered.

"What does it mean?"

Quietly he answered as he turned toward me:

"It means. . . . that the unexpressed thought has become an actuality. The spirit will trouble you no more!"

MY friend the plumber came, as he had promised, to see how his job had gone on.

"Well, sir," he said, "I dare bet as how that tap ain't drippin' now, eh?"

I smiled thoughtfully.

"No," I replied slowly; "it doesn't drip. . . . now!"

"I thought as how I'd fix it!" he exclaimed with professional pride. "What I don't know about taps ain't worth wastin' breath on!"

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