

# Ding Dong Bell — By Arthur C. Train

**T**HIS is a writ of habeas corpus," began Mr. Crookshanks, pronouncing the words with professional relish, "to inquire into the sanity of one John Dixon." The judge slightly inclined his head, examined the papers handed him by the clerk, and glanced casually at the prisoner, whose lackluster eyes roved vacantly and whose ill-fitting garments hung loosely about his emaciated figure.

"Part Two" of the Supreme Court was through its business for the day, except for this writ of Crookshanks's (the little lawyer always made it a point to turn up at the end of the calendar), and the only other figures in the room were those of Dockbridge, the young assistant district attorney; the keeper from Matteawan and a pale young woman who sat in a far corner.

"Well, well, Mr. Crookshanks, be as brief as you can," remarked his honor, leaning back resignedly.

"I am always brief," returned the lawyer with gravity. "The case is simply this: Twenty years ago my client, Mr. Dixon, was indicted by the Grand Jury for murder in the first degree. He was to have been prosecuted by my honored father, then an assistant district attorney, and defended (here Crookshanks coughed slightly) by the scrupulous Mr. Stephen O'Reilly. But the unexpected happened—as usual—and on the day set for his trial the prisoner suddenly became insane. Thereupon a good-natured jury promptly adjudged him 'Incapable of understanding the proceedings or making a defense,' and he was immediately clapped into the State asylum. Remember, this was twenty years ago, your honor. To-day, willy-nilly, he would have been most incontinently hanged."

"I inherited, fortunately or unfortunately, whichever the court may consider, Mr. Stephen O'Reilly's law practice, and the other day, rummaging among his papers, I chanced upon some memoranda which led me to visit the defendant at his place of confinement. I found, much as I had expected, that time had ameliorated his condition and that he had regained his strength of mind. I therefore exhorted him. My young friend," nodding toward the assistant, "agrees with me that Mr. Dixon is now entirely sane and should be tried for his offense."

"Ought to be, but can't—as Mr. Crookshanks knows exceedingly well," interpolated Dockbridge with sarcasm.

"Why not?" inquired the court.

"The evidence against him has succumbed to age," replied the prosecutor. "He's sane, all right. We don't oppose the writ. He's sound as a drum."

"Then this is an 'amicable proceeding'?" continued the judge.

"It could not be more so," murmured Crookshanks.

"Of course, there's no opposition," returned Dockbridge. "Your honor will have to let him go and remand him to the Tombs pending trial!"

"Stand up, Mr. Dixon," directed his honor. The prisoner rose heavily to his feet. "What was the particular form of your affliction?"

"Voices, your honor, I heard voices—voices and bells ringin' all the time," he hesitated. "But I don't hear 'em now! I can't hear 'em now! I heard 'em for twenty years," he added, unemotionally.

"Appears to be sane enough, don't he, your honor?" inquired his counsel.

"I think he is quite as sane as you are, Mr. Crookshanks," answered the court, dryly.

"That is ambiguous," returned the lawyer.

The judge scribbled something on the back of the writ.

"Defendant discharged," said he, briefly, blotting the order. The keeper arose and snapped a handcuff across the prisoner's wrist. Crookshanks shuffled his papers together, bowed to the court and congratulated his client.

"Everything's all right now," he chirped, briskly. "You'll be out in a week!"

The girl slipped forward and tucked the prisoner's arm through her own.

"Come on, father," she whispered, encouragingly, and the strange group straggled slowly out.

"Queer case, isn't it?" remarked Dockbridge to the judge. "Not a shred of evidence left against him. Of course, we'll have to turn him out. He's had an awful dose of it—punishment enough for any man. Think of it—twenty years!"

"It's a long time," acquiesced his honor, gazing thoughtfully out of the window toward Broadway. "I wonder how the devil Crookshanks happened to remember the chap was still in the asylum and why he didn't try to get him out before."

"Possibly waiting for the daughter to grow up and earn the fee," suggested the assistant. "Crookshanks is a wonderful man. There isn't any fish too small for his net. Good-night, sir."

"Oyez, oyez!" cried the officer. "This court stands adjourned until to-morrow morning at 10 o'clock."

"Good-night, Mr. Dockbridge," said the judge. "I quite agree with you about Crookshanks."

Dockbridge sat in his office smoking a cigar and reading with interest

an indictment, yellow with age and bespattered with inks of many colors.

"Homicide of the degree of murder, first degree. (Sec. 183 Penal Code.)"

"The People vs. John Dixon. Filed 3rd day of October, 1884. Pleads not guilty."

"Counsel, Stephen O'Reilly. Peter B. Smith, District Attorney. A true bill—Edward Norton, Foreman. Oct. 22, 1884."

"Jury find defendant insane. Sent to Hudson River State Hospital at Poughkeepsie."

"N. Y. Supreme Court."

The assistant glanced through the quaint phraseology of the document charging the defendant in the old-time legal verbiage with mortally wounding one Edward Tyng with a pistol, which he "did shoot off and discharge, with the leaden bullet aforesaid, in and upon the heart of Tyng aforesaid," of which he, "the said Tyng, did for a long time languish and languishingly did die."

"Paid by the word!" grunted Dockbridge.

"Paid by the word, by George! Wish I was paid by the word!" And he wondered how long "the said Tyng would have languished if the original draughters of indictments had been reimbursed in some other fashion."

Inside the indictment a "Trial Brief" furnished the necessary information which he sought. It had been compiled by Murcheson, a fiery prosecutor now long since dead, a contemporary of the assistant's father.

"It appears," ran the brief, in its crabbed penmanship, "that Dixon was employed by the deceased as a typesetter. On the afternoon of September 27, 1884, the two had a quarrel in regard to some night work. The assistant foreman, Washburn, was present at the time. The deceased became incensed and struck Dixon with his open hand. The latter stepped back, and exclaiming, 'No man has ever struck me before, and you will never live to do it again,' pulled a pistol from his pocket and fired, the bullet entering the employer's right breast and passing transversely across the body. Tyng fell and expired almost instantly. Dixon handed the pistol to Washburn, saying, calmly, 'Here take the gun Wash!'"

"Why did you do it, Bill?" asked Washburn.

"I don't know," replied Dixon.

"Just then the bell of the refectory of the Dominican Fathers began to ring 6 o'clock, so that Washburn can identify the time with exactitude. When Dixon heard the bell he said grimly, 'That's the knell for poor old Tyng and me.' Washburn immediately summoned the police."

A note at the bottom of the page read, "I find that the bell was ringing 7 o'clock—not 6. L. Murcheson."

Dockbridge grunted again.

"Just like old Murcheson to put that in. I'd like to know what difference it made whether that bell was ringing 6 or 7 or 13!"

A loose sheet lying beneath the brief contained only the words in a large scrawl:

"Washburn is the only material and important witness. No one else was present at the shooting. Subpoena him sure. Can't convict without him."

Another hand had written below:

"T. W. Washburn is employed at the Mechanical Type Foundry at No. 2190 Head street. He can come at any time. Underneath lay an unfinished letter, begun by Murcheson to some unknown friend but never finished.

"Dear S—"

"You know that I was to try Dixon for murder and had hoped that it would enhance my reputation to a considerable degree. It was a clear case and he would undoubtedly have been convicted, but what do you suppose has happened? Just as I was about to move the indictment he goes insane! So, of course, I lose my chance and Dixon goes to the asylum instead of to the scaffold. There is no doubt but that he is really out of his head, but probably he will soon recover sufficient to be tried—at least I hope so."

Dockbridge crumpled the letter in his fist.

"Bloodthirsty old brute!" he muttered.

He relit his cigar and pondered over the pile of manuscript lying on the desk before him. How quickly time flew! And how men had a way of dying! Tyng first—well, count him out! There was Smith, the district attorney! Norton, the foreman of the Grand Jury; old Murcheson, gone long before his quarry; the coroner, the policeman, and, yes, Washburn, too, the only witness, was dead. He examined the date carefully. And all this time the defendant had slumbered peacefully, first at Poughkeepsie and then at Matteawan, bobbing up in a new generation on a habeas corpus. Lucky for him he hadn't slumbered there forever.

This insanity business had evidently been just as big a nuisance in the time of the forefathers as it was now. You never could tell. Voices and bells!

"Why, anybody could pretend to hear voices and bells!" thought Dockbridge. "But suppose he did hear 'em! Wouldn't I have heard 'em if I'd killed a man?"

He had often heard the experts talk

was. He's been very nice. He says the witnesses are all dead."

"Why didn't he let you know that before?"

"I asked him that and he said he had forgotten all about it until he was looking over some old papers Mr. O'Reilly had left, and even then he mightn't have done anything, only he found a slip with something on it that made him think that maybe father—perhaps—"

"Might have gotten well," finished Dockbridge, grimly. "So he offered to get him safely out for two hundred dollars? So kind of him!"

"Well," answered the girl, "it seems he wasn't quite sure about it, so he went up to Matteawan (father had been transferred from Poughkeepsie, you understand) and found that he was all right."

"Humph!" growled the assistant.

The girl burst into tears.

"Poor old father," she sobbed. "Twenty years! When we might have been so happy together! And I never knew!"

Dockbridge, perceiving that for the mo-

crowding forward. He felt again that sense of sweet possession—then—snap—it was off again! Through the white flashes he tried to catch the pictures, but they blurred one into the other. One flashed whiter than the rest, and in the dark that followed he thought he heard the ding-dong tolling of the bell, and his heart almost stopped beating as he saw strange figures crowding, running, gesticulating. Blackness again, and through it he felt the clinging arms of a little child and the hot tears of his wife upon his face. He groaned and tried to clasp them to him, but they slipped away—and in place of them, beside an iron door, stood O'Reilly's "runner." Yes, there he was, fat, pudgy, suggestive of a gorged and lazy spider. He slapped Dixon on the back and spat dexterously through a slit of a window. How distinct his voice sounded! "No lawyer? What! Why, O'Reilly would have him out in a week! You could always work 'self-defense.' An eye-witness was there? Um! That was bad! But there were ways—you understand? Given enough money the eye-witness might disappear and no questions asked."

"Do you want me to have the blood of two men on my head?" gasped Dixon's former self.

Nothing of the kind. Of course not. What did Dixon take Mr. O'Reilly for, anyway? He wasn't no assassin. He was just the cleverest lawyer in the city, that was all. He could persuade. He succeeded where others failed. He had defended fifty homicides, and no one yet got "murder in the first." Wasn't that a record? O'Reilly didn't need no advertisement. No posters for him. They all flocked to him. You paid your money and you went scot-free. No cure, no pay—but the cure was guaranteed.

The spider crawled away into the darkness, and in a clear white flash Dixon saw two men sitting together in a small room with heavily barred windows. One was his old self and the other was the man who had "saved" him. The lawyer regarded his client with satisfaction, for the latter was an excellent subject—couldn't be better, he said, and his voice seemed like the harsh grating of iron doors. He was the proud inventor of the "voice" business.

He saw Dockbridge step forward and say something to the judge and heard the judge laugh—with a sneer, it seemed to Dixon. He'd take him down a peg—he'd make him look like the fool he was, and he laughed himself, a grim laugh—his first in twenty years.

"Judge," said Dixon, with a childish air, "I'm scot-free, ain't I? You can't touch me, can you?"

The judge nodded, coldly.

Then Dixon's manner changed and he leered slyly at the bench.

"Suppose I ain't never been insane at all? Who's the joke on then?" he chuckled and glanced about him with triumph.

There was a moment's intense silence in the crowded courtroom at the prisoner's audacity. Again the judge smiled—bitingly.

"That depends upon the point of view, Mr. Dixon," he replied, slowly, in a voice low but distinct. "You are aware, I suppose—"

Dockbridge knitted his brows and shook his head in the direction of the bench. Dixon was not the first nor will he be the last criminal to feign madness, and always over the feigner hangs the horror that he will be "hoist with his own petard." Dockbridge had seen the force played to a ghastly end before, and his glance turned with the instinct of protection to the fair-haired girl, whose glad look had changed to one of vague alarm. The judge paid him no attention, nor glanced at the girl; but went mercilessly on.

"That the only witness against you died the week after you were committed to the asylum?"

The grin on Dixon's face lingered for full half a minute, then faded, and in its place spread a dusky pallor. For a moment he clutched the rail with writhing fingers. Then the hand flew to his ear.

"Voices! Voices! There's another!"

"There's the voice! There's another!"

The fire-bell in the corner tower began to boom out its tocsin. Dixon uttered a hoarse cry.

"Ding-dong! Ding-dong! One—two—three—four—five—six—seven. There's the knell for poor old Tyng and me."

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"It's All Right Now, Father," She Whispered. "The Judge Is Going to Discharge You and Then We'll Go Right Away Together."

about the "voice" form of insanity—that bete noire of the doctors—the last straw of the desperate—the only hope of the convicted.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Twenty years in that den of beasts!"

A hesitating tap came at the door.

"Oh, come in," snorted the assistant, without getting up.

The door opened and he saw the Dixon girl.

"I beg your pardon," he cried, jumping to his feet. "I thought it was one of those infernal book agents. Come in. How's your father?"

The girl smiled and took the chair he offered.

"Father's feelin' well, I reckon, thank you."

Dockbridge shifted his cigar.

"No sign of anything wrong here, is there?" He tapped his forehead.

"No, indeed. It's hard to believe there ever was."

Dockbridge gave one of his grunts.

"How did you come to wait so long to get him out?"

"I didn't wait at all," answered the girl. "I thought he was dead. They all told me so. When mother died I went to the orphanage. Let me see—that was in October, '84. I was a little child. When I grew up the matron said I had no parents living. I went out West to work on a farm in Minnesota, and I have been there ever since. Two weeks ago I got a letter from the lawyer. He said father was alive and in an asylum and that he would get him out for two hundred dollars. I'd saved up more than that, so I came right on. It turned out that the lawyer had used to know Mr. O'Reilly, father's lawyer that

Put your hands so. No, the little finger higher. Yes! That was it. Now look up as if you heard something. Good! Now say—what was it? Oh, yes. "Ding-dong! Ding-dong! One, two, three, four!" Splendid! The facts couldn't have been better arranged if O'Reilly had invented them himself. He grasped Dixon's cold hand. His own was soft and sticky. Dixon could feel it yet. It was the last hand he had clasped before he was hurried away to Poughkeepsie. Oh, that O'Reilly had been a great fellow—a man of superior intellect—real brain. Dixon had clung to him as to a father—miserable slyster though he was.

Then Dixon saw again plainly (as the next picture flashed into his poor camera obscura) the looks of pity and compassion of the jury when he had made his first public essay in his awful role. He had needed no further coaching. Given the words and the gesture, his own agony of spirit had made the trick convincing beyond question.

"We find the prisoner incapable of understanding the proceedings against him," the foreman had repeated.

He trembled again as he had trembled the first time he had heard the words.

"Saved! Saved!" he had whispered to himself. Under the counsel table O'Reilly had patted his leg, but Dixon had shrunk from him, he could not have told why. Then he heard someone say, "Poor fellow, it's a living death!"

Snap—crack—the pictures came to a stop. Beyond that word "death" everything was a dull gray, shading off deeper and deeper at the edges into blackness, and in the middle a red ball that whirled round and round. Suddenly that, too,

faded. Then the veil was rent and he found himself again. But his brain was chilled. Everything seemed very far away. He passed his hand trembling across his eyes and saw again Ann's child and his standing at his side.

He heard with a vague satisfaction someone saying that the witnesses against him were all dead, and that the People had no evidence which would warrant his his being placed on trial for his crime. He had been told this before—first by Crookshanks and later by the keeper—but he had had his suspicions of both of them. He had sacrificed too much to take any chances at this late day. Even when the lawyer had led him across the pavilion and whispered sharply, when out of earshot of the attendant, "I've looked it all up, Dixon. You're all right. They've no case against you," he had pretended not to understand and muttered unintelligibly. But he had really taken it all in and pondered over it. Afterward, by degrees, he had gradually become persuaded that it was no trick, but he had never been entirely sure.

These lawyers! That O'Reilly! O'Reilly would have sold him out at any time for a hundred dollars! But now he heard it with his own ears. There could be no mistake—no deception. He was safe! The consummation of his twenty years of suffering had been reached at last. During all that time his faculties had been concentrated upon the single task of feigning insanity and yet remaining sane. At first it had been easy enough. He had pretended, just as O'Reilly had directed, to hear voices and bells—that was all; and whenever a keeper was by he had put his hand to his ear and repeated the formula:

"Ding-dong! Ding-dong! One—two—three—four—five—six—seven. There's the bell! There's the voice! There's another! Voices! Voices!"

He had varied this and rung changes in it from time to time, but it had remained substantially the same. Soon habit had become "ten times nature." The hand would fly up of its own accord; the lips would move automatically. Sometimes he really thought he heard the voices and the bell, but knew what that meant and fought against it. Soon he lost all track of time.

Then little Crookshanks had appeared and beckoned him back to life, and he had waked partially from his dream of death.

"John Dixon, the indictment against you is dismissed for lack of evidence. You are discharged."

A look of vacancy stole into his face and his right hand twitched upward. He forced it down with an effort.

"You are discharged—you are at liberty," repeated the clerk, gently.

Dixon looked about full of distrust. Dockbridge smiled and nodded good-naturedly.

"It's all right now, old chap; you can go home with your daughter."

Then Dixon grasped the whole truth. He had cheated the gallows, had outwitted this whole sharp crew of judges and lawyers. He—Dixon—had hoodwinked 'em—fooled 'em all, and with the simplest trick in the world. First put your hand to your ear and pretend to hear bells and voices—and then wait—wait. Presently you were free. That judge thought he was a smart fellow. Well, if he only knew! The humor of the situation began to take hold of Dixon. He would just like to tell that judge something. It was too good to keep. He smiled cunningly.

He saw Dockbridge step forward and say something to the judge and heard the judge laugh—with a sneer, it seemed to Dixon. He'd take him down a peg—he'd make him look like the fool he was, and he laughed himself, a grim laugh—his first in twenty years.

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