

# **The Bell-Ringer of Angel's and Other Stories**

by

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# The Bell-Ringer Of Angel's

## CHAPTER I.

Where the North Fork of the Stanislaus River begins to lose its youthful grace, vigor, and agility, and broadens more maturely into the plain, there is a little promontory which at certain high stages of water lies like a small island in the stream. To the strongly-marked heroics of Sierran landscape it contrasts a singular, pastoral calm. White and gray mosses from the overhanging rocks and feathery alders trail their filaments in its slow current, and between the woodland openings there are glimpses of vivid velvet sward, even at times when the wild oats and "wire-grasses" of the plains are already yellowing. The placid river, unstained at this point by mining sluices or mill drift, runs clear under its contemplative shadows. Originally the camping-ground of a Digger Chief, it passed from his tenancy with the American rifle bullet that terminated his career. The pioneer who thus succeeded to its attractive calm gave way in turn to a well-directed shot from the revolver of a quartz-pro prospector, equally impressed with the charm of its restful tranquillity. How long he might have enjoyed its riparian seclusion is not known. A sudden rise of the river one March night quietly removed him, together with the overhanging post oak beneath which he was profoundly but unconsciously meditating. The demijohn of whiskey was picked up further down. But no other suggestion of these successive evictions was ever visible in the reposeful serenity of the spot.

It was later occupied, and a cabin built upon the spot, by one Alexander McGee, better known as "the Bell-ringer of Angel's." This euphonious title, which might have suggested a consistently peaceful occupation, however, referred to his accuracy of aim at a mechanical target, where the piercing of the bull's eye was celebrated by the stroke of a bell. It is probable that this singular proficiency kept his investment of that gentle seclusion unchallenged. At all events it was uninvaded. He shared it only with the birds. Perhaps some suggestion of nest building may have been in his mind, for one pleasant spring morning he brought hither a wife. It was his OWN; and in this way he may be said to have introduced that morality which is supposed to be the accompaniment and reflection of pastoral life. Mrs. McGee's red petticoat was sometimes seen through the trees—a cheerful bit of color. Mrs. McGee's red cheeks, plump little figure, beribboned hat and brown, still-girlish braids were often seen at sunset on the river bank, in company with her husband, who seemed to be pleased with the discreet and distant admiration that followed them. Strolling under the bland shadows of the cotton-woods, by the fading gold of the river, he doubtless felt that peace which the mere world cannot give, and which fades not away before the clear, accurate eye of the perfect marksman.

Their nearest neighbors were the two brothers Wayne, who took up a claim, and built themselves a cabin on the river bank near the promontory. Quiet, simple men, suspected somewhat of psalm-singing, and undue retirement on Sundays, they attracted but little attention. But when, through some original conception or painstaking deliberation, they turned the current of the river so as to restrict the overflow between the promontory and

the river bank, disclosing an auriferous "bar" of inconceivable richness, and establishing their theory that it was really the former channel of the river, choked and diverted though ages of alluvial drift, they may be said to have changed, also, the fortunes of the little settlement. Popular feeling and the new prosperity which dawned upon the miners recognized the two brothers by giving the name of Wayne's Bar to the infant settlement and its post-office. The peaceful promontory, although made easier of access, still preserved its calm seclusion, and pretty Mrs. McGee could contemplate through the leaves of her bower the work going on at its base, herself unseen. Nevertheless, this Arcadian retreat was being slowly and surely invested; more than that, the character of its surroundings was altered, and the complexion of the river had changed. The Wayne engines on the point above had turned the drift and debris into the current that now thickened and ran yellow around the wooded shore. The fringes of this Eden were already tainted with the color of gold.

It is doubtful, however, if Mrs. McGee was much affected by this sentimental reflection, and her husband, in a manner, lent himself to the desecration of his exclusive domain by accepting a claim along the shore—tendered by the conscientious Waynes in compensation for restricting the approach to the promontory—and thus participated in the fortunes of the Bar. Mrs. McGee amused herself by watching from her eyrie, with a presumably childish interest, the operations of the red-shirted brothers on the Bar; her husband, however, always accompanying her when she crossed the Bar to the bank. Some two or three other women—wives of miners—had joined the camp, but it was evident that McGee was as little inclined to intrust his wife to their companionship as to that of their husbands. An opinion obtained that McGee, being an old resident, with alleged high connections in Angel's, was inclined to be aristocratic and exclusive.

Meantime, the two brothers who had founded the fortunes of the Bar were accorded an equally high position, with an equal amount of reserve. Their ways were decidedly not those of the other miners, and were as efficacious in keeping them from familiar advances as the reputation of Mr. McGee was in isolating his wife. Madison Wayne, the elder, was tall, well-knit and spare, reticent in speech and slow in deduction; his brother, Arthur, was of rounder outline, but smaller and of a more delicate and perhaps a more impressible nature. It was believed by some that it was within the range of possibility that Arthur would yet be seen "taking his cocktail like a white man," or "dropping his scads" at draw poker. At present, however, they seemed content to spend their evenings in their own cabin, and their Sundays at a grim Presbyterian tabernacle in the next town, to which they walked ten miles, where, it was currently believed, "hell fire was ladled out free," and "infants damned for nothing." When they did not go to meeting it was also believed that the minister came to them, until it was ascertained that the sound of sacred recitation overheard in their cabin was simply Madison Wayne reading the Bible to his younger brother. McGee is said to have stopped on one of these occasions—unaccompanied by his wife—before their cabin, moving away afterwards with more than his usual placid contentment.

It was about eleven o'clock one morning, and Madison Wayne was at work alone on the Bar. Clad in a dark gray jersey and white duck trousers rolled up over high india-rubber

boots, he looked not unlike a peaceful fisherman digging stakes for his nets, as he labored in the ooze and gravel of the still half-reclaimed river bed. He was far out on the Bar, within a stone's throw of the promontory. Suddenly his quick ear caught an unfamiliar cry and splash. Looking up hastily, he saw Mrs. McGee's red petticoat in the water under the singularly agitated boughs of an overhanging tree. Madison Wayne ran to the bank, threw off his heavy boots, and sprang into the stream. A few strokes brought him to Mrs. McGee's petticoat, which, as he had wisely surmised, contained Mrs. McGee, who was still clinging to a branch of the tree. Grasping her waist with one hand and the branch with the other, he obtained a foothold on the bank, and dragged her ashore. A moment later they both stood erect and dripping at the foot of the tree.

"Well?" said the lady.

Wayne glanced around their seclusion with his habitual caution, slightly knit his brows perplexedly, and said: "You fell in?"

"I didn't do nothin' of the sort. I JUMPED in."

Wayne again looked around him, as if expecting her companion, and squeezed the water out of his thick hair. "Jumped in?" he repeated slowly. "What for?"

"To make you come over here, Mad Wayne," she said, with a quick laugh, putting her arms akimbo.

They stood looking at each other, dripping like two river gods. Like them, also, Wayne had apparently ignored the fact that his trousers were rolled up above his bare knees, and Mrs. McGee that her red petticoat clung closely to her rather pretty figure. But he quickly recovered himself. "You had better go in and change your clothes," he said, with grave concern. "You'll take cold."

She only shook herself disdainfully. "I'm all right," she said; "but YOU, Mad Wayne, what do you mean by not speaking to me—not knowing me? You can't say that I've changed like that." She passed her hand down her long dripping braids as if to press the water from them, and yet with a half-coquettish suggestion in the act.

Something struggled up into the man's face which was not there before. There was a new light in his grave eyes. "You look the same," he said slowly; "but you are married—you have a husband."

"You think that changes a girl?" she said, with a laugh "That's where all you men slip up! You're afraid of his rifle—THAT'S the change that bothers you, Mad."

"You know I care little for carnal weapons," he said quietly. She DID know it; but it is the privilege of the sex to invent its facts and then to graciously abandon them as if they were only arguments. "Then why do you keep off from me? Why do you look the other way when I pass?" she said quickly.

"Because you are married," he said slowly.

She again shook the water from her like a Newfoundland dog. "That's it. You're mad because I got married. You're mad because I wouldn't marry you and your church over on the cross roads, and sing hymns with you and become SISTER Wayne. You wanted me to give up dancing and buggy ridin' Sundays—and you're just mad because I didn't. Yes, mad—just mean, baby mad, Mr. Maddy Wayne, for all your CHRISTIAN resignation! That's what's the matter with you." Yet she looked very pretty and piquant in her small spitefulness, which was still so general and superficial that she seemed to shake it out of her wet petticoats in a vicious flap that disclosed her neat ankles.

"You preferred McGee to me," he said grimly. "I didn't blame you."

"Who said I PREFERRED him?" she retorted quickly. "Much you know!" Then, with swift feminine abandonment of her position, she added, with a little laugh, "It's all the same whether you're guarded with a rifle or a Church Presbytery, only"—

"Only what?" said Madison earnestly.

"There's men who'd risk being SHOT for a girl, that couldn't stand psalm-singin' palaver."

The quick expression of pain that passed over his hard, dark face seemed only to heighten her pretty mischievousness. But he simply glanced again around the solitude, passed his hand over his wet sleeve, and said, "I must go now; your husband wouldn't like me being here."

"He's workin' in the claim,—the claim YOU gave him," said Mrs. McGee, with cheerful malice. "Wonder what he'd say if he knew it was given to him by the man who used to spark his wife only two years ago? How does that suit your Christian conscience, Mad?"

"I should have told him, had I not believed that everything was over between us, or that it was possible that you and me should ever meet again," he returned, in a tone so measured that the girl seemed to hear the ring of the conventicle in it.

"Should you, BROTHER Wayne?" she said, imitating him. "Well, let me tell you that you are the one man on the Bar that Sandy has taken a fancy to."

Madison's sallow cheek colored a little, but he did not speak.

"Well!" continued Mrs. McGee impatiently. "I don't believe he'd object to your comin' here to see me—if you cared."

"But I wouldn't care to come, unless he first knew that I had been once engaged to you," said Madison gravely.

"Perhaps he might not think as much of that as you do," retorted the woman pertly. "Every one isn't as straitlaced as you, and every girl has had one or two engagements. But do as you like—stay at home if you want to, and sing psalms and read the Scriptures to that younger brother of yours! All the same, I'm thinkin' he'd rather be out with the boys."

"My brother is God-fearing and conscientious," said Madison quickly. "You do not know him. You have never seen him."

"No," said Mrs. McGee shortly. She then gave a little shiver (that was, however, half simulated) in her wet garments, and added: "ONE saint was enough for me; I couldn't stand the whole church, Mad."

"You are catching cold," he said quickly, his whole face brightening with a sudden tenderness that seemed to transfigure the dark features. "I am keeping you here when you should be changing your clothes. Go, I beg you, at once."

She stood still provokingly, with an affectation of wiping her arms and shoulders and sopping her wet dress with clusters of moss.

"Go, please do—Safie, please!"

"Ah!"—she drew a quick, triumphant breath. "Then you'll come again to see me, Mad?"

"Yes," he said slowly, and even more gravely than before.

"But you must let me show you the way out—round under those trees—where no one can see you come." She held out her hand.

"I'll go the way I came," he said quietly, swinging himself silently from the nearest bough into the stream. And before she could utter a protest he was striking out as silently, hand over hand, across the current.

## **CHAPTER II.**

A week later Madison Wayne was seated alone in his cabin. His supper table had just been cleared by his Chinese coolie, as it was getting late, and the setting sun, which for half an hour had been persistently making a vivid beacon of his windows for the benefit of wayfarers along the river bank, had at last sunk behind the cottonwoods. His head was resting on his hand; the book he had been reading when the light faded was lying open on the table before him. In this attitude he became aware of a hesitating step on the gravel outside his open door. He had been so absorbed that the approach of any figure along the only highway—the river bank—had escaped his observation. Looking up, he discovered

that Mr. Alexander McGee was standing in the doorway, his hand resting lightly on the jamb. A sudden color suffused Wayne's cheek; his hand reached for his book, which he drew towards him hurriedly, yet half automatically, as he might have grasped some defensive weapon.

The Bell-ringer of Angel's noticed the act, but not the blush, and nodded approvingly. "Don't let me disturb ye. I was only meanderin' by and reckoned I'd say 'How do?' in passin'." He leaned gently back against the door-post, to do which comfortably he was first obliged to shift the revolver on his hip. The sight of the weapon brought a slight contraction to the brows of Wayne, but he gravely said: "Won't you come in?"

"It ain't your prayin' time?" said McGee politely.

"No."

"Nor you ain't gettin' up lessons outer the Book?" he continued thoughtfully.

"No."

"Cos it don't seem, so to speak, you see, the square thing to be botherin' a man when he might be doin' suthin' else, don't you see? You understand what I mean?"

It was his known peculiarity that he always seemed to be suffering from an inability to lucid expression, and the fear of being misunderstood in regard to the most patent or equally the most unimportant details of his speech. All of which, however, was in very remarkable contrast to his perfectly clear and penetrating eyes.

Wayne gravely assured him that he was not interrupting him in any way.

"I often thought—that is, I had an idea, you understand what I mean—of stoppin' in passing. You and me, you see, are sorter alike; we don't seem to jibe in with the gin'ral gait o' the camp. You understand what I mean? We ain't in the game, eh? You see what I'm after?"

Madison Wayne glanced half mechanically at McGee's revolver. McGee's clear eyes at once took in the glance.

"That's it! You understand? You with them books of yours, and me with my shootin' iron—we're sort o' different from the rest, and ought to be kinder like partners. You understand what I mean? We keep this camp in check. We hold a full hand, and don't stand no bluffing."

"If you mean there is some effect in Christian example and the life of a God-fearing man"—began Madison gravely.

"That's it! God-fearin' or revolver-fearin', it amounts to the same when you come down to the hard pan and bed-rock," interrupted McGee. "I ain't expectin' you to think much of my style, but I go a heap on yours, even if I can't play your game. And I sez to my wife, 'Safie'—her that trots around with me sometimes—I sez, 'Safie, I oughter know that man, and shall. And I WANT YOU to know him.' Hol' on," he added quickly, as Madison rose with a flushed face and a perturbed gesture. "Ye don't understand! I see wot's in your mind—don't you see? When I married my wife and brought her down here, knowin' this yer camp, I sez: 'No flirtin', no foolin', no philanderin' here, my dear! You're young and don't know the ways o' men. The first man I see you talking with, I shoot. You needn't fear, my dear, for accidents. I kin shoot all round you, under your arm, across your shoulders, over your head and between your fingers, my dear, and never start skin or fringe or ruffle. But I don't miss HIM. You sorter understand what I mean,' sez I, 'so don't!' Ye noticed how my wife is respected, Mr. Wayne? Queen Victoria sittin' on her throne ain't in it with my Safie. But when I see YOU not herdin' with that cattle, never liftin' your eyes to me or Safie as we pass, never hangin' round the saloons and jokin', nor winkin', nor slingin' muddy stories about women, but prayin' and readin' Scriptor stories, here along with your brother, I sez to myself, I sez, 'Sandy, ye kin take off your revolver and hang up your shot gun when HE'S around. For 'twixt HIM and your wife ain't no revolver, but the fear of God and hell and damnation and the world to come!' You understand what I mean, don't ye? Ye sorter follow my lead, eh? Ye can see what I'm shootin' round, don't ye? So I want you to come up neighborly like, and drop in to see my wife."

Madison Wayne's face became set and hard again, but he advanced towards McGee with the book against his breast, and his finger between the leaves. "I already know your wife, Mr. McGee! I saw her before YOU ever met her. I was engaged to her; I loved her, and—as far as man may love the wife of another and keep the commands of this book—I love her still!"

To his surprise, McGee, whose calm eyes had never dimmed or blenched, after regarding him curiously, took the volume from him, laid it on the table, opened it, turned its leaves critically, said earnestly, "That's the law here, is it?" and then held out his hand.

"Shake!"

Madison Wayne hesitated—and then grasped his hand.

"Ef I had known this," continued McGee, "I reckon I wouldn't have been so hard on Safie and so partikler. She's better than I took her for—havin' had you for a beau! You understand what I mean. You follow me—don't ye? I allus kinder wondered why she took me, but sens you've told me that YOU used to spark her, in your God-fearin' way, I reckon it kinder prepared her for ME. You understand? Now you come up, won't ye?"

"I will call some evening with my brother," said Wayne embarrassedly.

"With which?" demanded McGee.

"My brother Arthur. We usually spend the evenings together."

McGee paused, leaned against the doorpost, and, fixing his clear eyes on Wayne, said: "Ef it's all the same to you, I'd rather you did not bring him. You understand what I mean? You follow me; no other man but you and me. I ain't sayin' anything agin' your brother, but you see how it is, don't you? Just me and you."

"Very well, I will come," said Wayne gloomily. But as McGee backed out of the door, he followed him, hesitatingly. Then, with an effort he seemed to recover himself, and said almost harshly: "I ought to tell you another thing—that I have seen and spoken to Mrs. McGee since she came to the Bar. She fell into the water last week, and I swam out and dragged her ashore. We talked and spoke of the past."

"She fell in," echoed McGee.

Wayne hesitated; then a murky blush came into his face as he slowly repeated, "She FELL in."

McGee's eyes only brightened. "I have been too hard on her. She might have drowned ef you hadn't took risks. You see? You understand what I mean? And she never let out anything about it—and never boasted o' YOU helpin' her out. All right—you'll come along and see her agin'." He turned and walked cheerfully away.

Wayne re-entered the cabin. He sat for a long time by the window until the stars came out above the river, and another star, with which he had been long familiar, took its place apparently in the heart of the wooded crest of the little promontory. Then the fringing woods on the opposite shore became a dark level line across the landscape, and the color seemed to fade out of the moist shining gravel before his cabin. Presently the silhouette of his dark face disappeared from the window, and Mr. McGee might have been gratified to know that he had slipped to his knees before the chair whereon he had been sitting, and that his head was bowed before it on his clasped hands. In a little while he rose again, and, dragging a battened old portmanteau from the corner, took out a number of letters tied up in a package, with which, from time to time, he slowly fed the flame that flickered on his hearth. In this way the windows of the cabin at times sprang into light, making a somewhat confusing beacon for the somewhat confused Arthur Wayne, who was returning from a visit to Angel's, and who had fallen into that slightly morose and irritated state which follows excessive hilarity, and is also apt to indicate moral misgivings.

But the last letter was burnt and the cabin quite dark when he entered. His brother was sitting by the slowly dying fire, and he trusted that in that uncertain light any observation of his expression or manner—of which he himself was uneasily conscious—would pass unheeded.

"You are late," said Madison gravely.

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