



Ring Once for Death, by Robert Andrew Arthur

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RING ONCE FOR DEATH

BY ROBERT ARTHUR

Illustrator: Ernie Barth

The power of the old gods was certainly nothing for Mark and Edith--a modern, twentieth-century couple--to worry about. After all--everybody dies!

* * * * *

[Illustration:]

Twenty years had left no trace inside Sam Kee's little shop on Mott Street. There were the same dusty jars of ginseng root and tigers' whiskers, the same little bronze Buddahs, the same gim-cracks mixed with fine jade. Edith Williams gave a little murmur of pleasure as the door shut behind them.

"Mark," she said, "it hasn't changed! It doesn't look as if a thing had been sold since we were here on our honeymoon."

"It certainly doesn't," Dr. Mark Williams agreed, moving down the narrow aisle behind her. "If someone hadn't told us Sam Kee was dead, I'd believe we'd stepped back twenty years in time, like they do in those scientific stories young David reads."

"We must buy something," his wife said. "For a twentieth anniversary present for me. Perhaps a bell?"

From the shadowy depths of the shop a young man emerged, American in dress and manner despite the Oriental contours of his face and eyes.

"Good evening," he said. "May I show you something?"

"We think we want a bell," Dr. Williams chuckled. "But we aren't quite sure. You're Sam Kee's son?"

"Sam Kee, junior. My honored father passed to the halls of his ancestors five years ago. I could just say that he died--" black eyes twinkled--"but customers like the more flowery mode of speech. They think it's quaint."

"I think it's just nice, and not quaint at all," Edith Williams declared. "We're sorry your father is dead. We'd hoped to see him again. Twenty years ago when we were a very broke young couple on a honeymoon he sold us a wonderful rose-crystal necklace for half price."

"I'm sure he still made a profit." The black eyes twinkled again. "But if you'd like a bell, here are small temple bells, camel bells, dinner bells...."

But even as he spoke, Edith Williams' hand darted to something at the back of the shelf.

"A bell carved out of crystal!" she exclaimed. "And rose-crystal at that. What could be more perfect? A rose-crystal wedding present and a rose-crystal anniversary present!"

The young man half stretched out his hand.

"I don't think you want that," he said. "It's broken."

"Broken?" Edith Williams rubbed off the dust and held the lovely bell-shape of crystal, the size of a pear, to the light. "It looks perfect to me."

"I mean it is not complete." Something of the American had vanished from the young man. "It has no clapper. It will not ring."

"Why, that's right." Mark Williams took the bell. "The clapper's missing."

"We can have another clapper made," his wife declared. "That is, if the original can't be found?"

The young Chinese shook his head.

"The bell and the clapper were deliberately separated by my father twenty years ago." He hesitated, then added: "My father was afraid of this bell."

"Afraid of it?" Mark Williams raised his eyebrows.

The other hesitated again.

"It will probably sound like a story for tourists," he said. "But my father believed it. This bell was supposedly stolen from the temple of a sect of Buddhists somewhere in the mountains of China's interior. Just as many Occidentals believe that the Christian Judgement Day will be heralded by a blast on St. Peter's trumpet, so this small sect is said to believe that when a bell like this one is rung, a bell carved from a single piece of rose crystal, and consecrated by ceremonies lasting ten years, any dead within sound of it will rise and live again."

"Heavenly!" Edith Williams cried. "And no pun intended. Mark, think what a help this bell will be in your practise when we make it ring again!" To the Chinese she added, smiling: "I'm just teasing him. My husband is really a very fine surgeon."

The other bowed his head.

"I must tell you," he said, "you will not be able to make it ring. Only the original clapper, carved from the same block of rose crystal, will ring it. That is why my father separated them."

Again he hesitated.

"I have told you only half of what my father told me. He said that, though it defeats death, Death can not be defeated. Robbed of his chosen victim, he takes another in his place. Thus when the bell was used in the temple of its origin--let us say when a high priest or a chief had died--a slave or servant was placed handy for Death to take when he had been forced to relinquish his grasp upon the important one."

He smiled, shook his head.

"There," he said. "A preposterous story. Now if you wish it, the bell is ten dollars. Plus, of course, sales tax."

"The story alone is worth more," Dr. Williams declared. "I think we'd better have it sent, hadn't we, Edith? It'll be safer in the mail than in our suitcase."

"Sent?" His wife seemed to come out of some deep feminine meditation. "Oh, of course. And as for its not ringing--I shall make it ring. I know I shall."

"If the story is true," Mark Williams murmured, "I hope not...."

* * * * *

The package came on a Saturday morning, when Mark Williams was catching up on the latest medical publications in his untidy, book-lined study. He heard Edith unwrapping paper in the hall outside. Then she came in with the rose-crystal bell in her hands.

"Mark, it's here!" she said. "Now to make it ring."

She plumped herself down beside his desk. He took the bell and reached for a silver pencil.

"Just for the sake of curiosity," he remarked, "and not because I believe that delightful sales talk we were given, let's see if it will ring when I tap. It should, you know."

He tapped the lip of the bell. A muted *thunk* was the only response. Then he tried with a coin, a paper knife, and the bottom of a glass. In each instance the resulting sound was nothing like a bell ringing.

"If you've finished, Mark," Edith said then, with feminine tolerance, "let me show you how it's done."

"Gladly," her husband agreed. She took the bell and turned away for a moment. Then she shook the bell vigorously. A clear, sweet ringing shivered through the room--so thin and ethereal that small involuntary shivers crawled up his spine.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

"I just put the clapper back in place with some thread," Edith told him.

"The clapper?" He struck his forehead with his palm. "Don't tell me--the crystal necklace we bought twenty years ago!"

"Of course." Her tone was composed. "As soon as young Sam Kee told us about his father's separating the clapper and the bell, I remembered the central crystal pendant on my necklace. It *is* shaped like a bell clapper--we mentioned it once.

"I guessed right away we had the missing clapper. But I didn't say so. I wanted to score on you, Mark--" she smiled affectionately at him--"and because, you know, I had a queer feeling Sam Kee, junior, wouldn't let us have the bell if he guessed we had the clapper."

"I don't think he would." Mark Williams picked up his pipe and rubbed the bowl with his thumb. "Yet he didn't really believe that story he told us any more than we do."

"No, but his father did. And if old Sam Kee had told it to us--remember how wrinkled and wise he seemed?--I do believe we'd have believed the story."

"You're probably right." Dr. Williams rang the bell and waited. The thin, sweet sound seemed to hang in the air a long moment, then was gone.

"Nope," he said. "Nothing happened. Although, of course, that may be because there was no deceased around to respond."

"I'm not sure I feel like joking about the story." A small frown gathered on Edith's forehead. "I had planned to use the bell as a dinner bell and to tell the story to our guests. But now--I'm not sure."

Frowning, she stared at the bell until the ringing of the telephone in the hall brought her out of her abstraction.

"Sit still, I'll answer." She hurried out. Dr. Williams, turning the rose crystal bell over in his hand, could hear the sudden tension in her voice as she answered. He was on his feet when she reentered.

"An emergency operation at the hospital," she sighed. "Nice young man--automobile accident. Fracture of the skull, Dr. Amos says. He wouldn't have disturbed you but you're the only brain man in town, with Dr. Hendryx away on vacation."

"I know." He was already in the hall, reaching for his hat. "Man's work is from sun to sun, but a doctor's work is never done," he misquoted.

"I'll drive you." Edith followed him out. "You sit back and relax for another ten minutes...."

* * * * *

Two hours later, as they drove homeward, the traffic was light, which was fortunate. More than once Mark, in a frowning abstraction, found himself on the left of the center line and had to pull back into his own lane.

He had lost patients before, but never without a feeling of personal defeat. Edith said he put too much of himself into every operation. Perhaps he did. And yet--No, there was every reason why the young man should have lived. Yet, just as Mark Williams had felt that he had been successful, the patient had died.

In twenty years of marriage, Edith Williams had learned to read his thoughts at times. Now she put a hand comfortingly on his arm.

"These things happen, darling," she said. "You know that. A doctor can only do so much. Some of the job always remains in the hands of Nature. And she does play tricks at times."

"Yes, confound it, I know it," her husband growled. "But I resent losing that lad. There was no valid reason for it--unless there was some complication I overlooked." He shook his head, scowling. "I ordered an autopsy but--Yes, I'm going to do that autopsy myself. I'm going to turn back and do it now. I have to know!"

He pulled abruptly to the left to swing into a side road and turn. Edith Williams never saw the car that hit them. She heard the frantic blare of a horn and a scream of brakes, and in a frozen instant realized that there had been someone behind them, about to pass. Then the impact came, throwing her forward into the windshield and unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Edith Williams opened her eyes. Even before she realized that she was lying on the ground and that the figure bending over her was a State Trooper, she remembered the crash. Her head hurt but there was no confusion in her mind. Automatically, even as she tried to sit up, she accepted the fact that there had been a crash, help had come, and she must have been unconscious for several minutes at least.

"Hey, lady, take it easy!" the Trooper protested. "You had a bad bump. You got to lie still until the ambulance gets here. It'll be along in five minutes."

"Mark," Edith said, paying no attention. "My husband! Is he all right?"

"Now lady, please. He's being taken care of. You--"

But she was not listening. Holding to his arm she pulled herself to a sitting position. She saw their car on its side some yards away, other cars pulled up around them, a little knot of staring people. Saw them and

dismissed them. Her gaze found her husband, lying on the ground a few feet away, a coat folded beneath his head.

Mark was dead. She had been a doctor's wife for twenty years, and before that a nurse. She knew death when she saw it.

"Mark." The word was spoken to herself, but the Trooper took it for a question.

"Yes, lady," he said. "He's dead. He was still breathing when I got here, but he died two, three minutes ago."

She got to her knees. Her only thought was to reach his side. She scrambled across the few feet of ground to him still on her knees and crouched beside him, fumbling for his pulse. There was none. There was nothing. Just a man who had been alive and now was dead.

Behind her she heard a voice raised. She turned. A large, disheveled man was standing beside the Trooper, talking loudly.

"Now listen, officer," he was saying, "I'm telling you again, it wasn't my fault. The guy pulled sharp left right in front of me. Not a thing I could do. It's a wonder we weren't all three of us killed. You can see by the marks on their car it wasn't my fault--"

Edith Williams closed her mind to the voice. She let Mark's hand lie in her lap as she fumbled in her bag, which was somehow still clutched in her fingers. She groped for a handkerchief to stem the tears which would not be held back. Something was in the way--something smooth and hard and cold. She drew it out and heard the thin, sweet tinkle of the crystal bell. She must have dropped it automatically into her bag as they were preparing to leave the house.

The hand in her lap moved. She gasped and bent forward as her husband's eyes opened.

"Mark!" she whispered. "Mark, darling!"

"Edith," Mark Williams said with an effort. "Sorry--damned careless of me. Thinking of the hospital...."

"You're alive!" she said. "You're *alive*! Oh, darling, darling, lie still, the ambulance will be here any second."

"Ambulance?" he protested. "I'm all right now. Help me--sit up."

"But Mark----"

"Just a bump on the head." He struggled to sit up. The State Trooper came over.

"Easy, buddy, easy," he said, his voice awed. "We thought you were gone. Now let's not lose you a second time." His mouth was tight.

"Hey, I'm sure glad you're all right!" the red-faced man said in a rush of words. "Whew, fellow, you had me all upset, even though it wasn't my fault. I mean, how's a guy gonna keep from hitting you when--when----"

"Catch him!" Mark Williams cried, but the Trooper was too late. The other man plunged forward to the ground and lay where he had fallen without quivering.

* * * * *

The clock in the hall struck two with muted strokes. Cautiously Edith Williams rose on her elbow and looked down at her husband's face. His eyes opened and looked back at her.

"You're awake," she said, unnecessarily.

"I woke up a few minutes ago," he answered. "I've been lying here--thinking."

"I'll get you another phenobarbital. Dr. Amos said for you to take them and sleep until tomorrow."

"I know. I'll take one presently. You know--hearing that clock just now reminded me of something."

"Yes?"

"Just before I came to this afternoon, after the crash, I had a strange impression of hearing a bell ring. It sounded so loud in my ears I opened my eyes to see where it was."

"A--bell?"

"Yes. Just auditory hallucination, of course."

"But Mark--"

"Yes?"

"A--a bell did ring. I mean, I had the crystal bell in my bag and it tinkled a little. Do you suppose--"

"Of course not." But though he spoke swiftly he did not sound convincing. "This was a loud bell. Like a great gong."

"But--I mean, Mark darling--a moment earlier you--had no pulse."

"No pulse?"

"And you weren't--breathing. Then the crystal bell tinkled and you--you...."

"Nonsense! I know what you're thinking and believe me--it's nonsense!"

"But Mark." She spoke carefully. "The driver of the other car. You had no sooner regained consciousness than he--"

"He had a fractured skull!" Dr. Williams interrupted sharply. "The ambulance intern diagnosed it. Skull fractures often fail to show themselves and then--bingo, you keel over. That's what happened. Now let's say no more about it."

"Of course." In the hall, the clock struck the quarter hour. "Shall I fix the phenobarbital now?"

"Yes--no. Is David home?"

She hesitated. "No, he hasn't got back yet."

"Has he phoned? He knows he's supposed to be in by midnight at the latest."

"No, he--hasn't phoned. But there's a school dance tonight."

"That's no excuse for not phoning. He has the old car, hasn't he?"

"Yes. You gave him the keys this morning, remember?"

"All the more reason he should phone." Dr. Williams lay silent a moment. "Two o'clock is too late for a 17-year-old boy to be out."

"I'll speak to him. He won't do it again. Now please, Mark, let me get you the phenobarbital. I'll stay up until David--"

* * * * *

The ringing phone, a clamor in the darkness, interrupted her. Mark Williams reached for it. The extension was beside his bed.

"Hello," he said. And then, although she could not hear the answering voice, she felt him stiffen. And she knew. As well as if she could hear the words she knew, with a mother's instinct for disaster.

"Yes," Dr. Williams said. "Yes ... I see ... I understand ... I'll come at once.... Thank you for calling."

He slid out of bed before she could stop him.

"An emergency call." He spoke quietly. "I have to go." He began to throw on his clothes.

"It's David," she said. "Isn't it?" She sat up. "Don't try to keep me from knowing. It's about David."

"Yes," he said. His voice was very tired. "David is hurt. I have to go to him. An accident."

"He's dead." She said it steadily. "David's dead, isn't he, Mark?"

He came over and sat beside her and put his arms around her.

"Edith," he said. "Edith--Yes, he's dead. Forty minutes ago. The car--went over a curve. They have him--at the County morgue. They want me to--identify him. Identify him. Edith! You see, the car caught fire!"

"I'm coming with you," she said. "I'm coming with you!"

* * * * *

The taxi waited in a pool of darkness between two street lights. The long, low building which was the County morgue, a blue lamp over its door, stood below the street level. A flight of concrete steps went down to it from the sidewalk. Ten minutes before, Dr. Mark Williams had gone down those steps. Now he climbed back up them, stiffly, wearily, like an old man.

Edith was waiting in the taxi, sitting forward on the edge of the seat, hands clenched. As he reached the last step she opened the door and stepped out.

"Mark," she asked shakily, "was it--"

"Yes, it's David." His voice was a monotone. "Our son. I've completed the formalities. For now the only thing

we can do is go home."

"I'm going to him!" She tried to pass. He caught her wrist. Discretely the taxi driver pretended to doze.

"No, Edith! There's no need. You mustn't--see him!"

"He's my son!" she cried. "Let me go!"

"No! What have you got under your coat?"

"It's the bell, the rose-crystal bell!" she cried. "I'm going to ring it where David can hear!"

Defiantly she brought forth her hand, clutching the little bell. "It brought you back, Mark! Now it's going to bring back David!"

"Edith!" he said in horror. "You mustn't believe that's possible. You can't. Those were coincidences. Now let me have it."

"No! I'm going to ring it." Violently she tried to break out of his grip. "I want David back! I'm going to ring the bell!"

She got her hand free. The crystal bell rang in the quiet of the early morning with an eerie thinness, penetrating the silence like a silver knife.

"There!" Edith Williams panted. "I've rung it. I know you don't believe, but I do. It'll bring David back." She raised her voice. "David!" she called. "David, son! Can you hear me?"

"Edith," Dr. Williams groaned. "You're just tormenting yourself. Come home. Please come home."

"Not until David has come back.... David, David, can you hear me?" She rang the bell again, rang it until Dr. Williams seized it, then she let him take it.

"Edith, Edith," he groaned. "If only you had let me come alone...."

"Mark, listen!"

"What?"

"Listen!" she whispered with fierce urgency.

He was silent. And then fingers of horror drew themselves down his spine at the clear, youthful voice that came up to them from the darkness below.

"Mother?... Dad?... Where are you?"

"David!" Edith Williams breathed. "It's David! Let me go! I must go to him."

"No, Edith!" her husband whispered frantically, as the voice below called again.

"Dad?... Mother?... Are you up there? Wait for me."

"Let me go!" she sobbed. "David, we're here! We're up here, son!"

"Edith!" Mark Williams gasped. "If you've ever loved me, listen to me. You mustn't go down there. David--I had to identify him by his class ring and his wallet. He was burned--terribly burned!"

"I'm going to him!" She wrenched herself free and sped for the steps, up which now was coming a tall form, a shadow shrouded in the darkness.

Dr. Williams, horror knotting his stomach, leaped to stop her. But he slipped and fell headlong on the pavement, so that she was able to pant down the stairs to meet the upcoming figure.

"Oh, David," she sobbed, "David!"

"Hey, Mom!" The boy held her steady. "I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry. But I didn't know what had happened until I got home and you weren't there and then one of the fellows from the fraternity called me. I realized they must have made a mistake, and you'd come here, and I called for a taxi and came out here. My taxi let me off at the entrance around the block, and I've been looking for you down there.... Poor Pete!"

"Pete?" she asked.

"Pete Friedburg. He was driving the old car. I lent him the keys and my driver's license. I shouldn't have--but he's older and he kept begging me...."

"Then--then it's Pete who was killed?" she gasped. "Pete who was--burned?"

"Yes, Pete. I feel terrible about lending him the car. But he was supposed to be a good driver. And then them calling you, you and Dad thinking it was me--"

"Then Mark was right. Of course he was right." She was laughing and sobbing now. "It's just a bell, a pretty little bell, that's all."

"Bell? I don't follow you, Mom."

"Never mind," Edith Williams gasped. "It's just a bell. It hasn't any powers over life and death. It doesn't bring back and it doesn't take away. But let's get back up to your father. He may be thinking that the bell--that the bell really worked."

They climbed the rest of the steps. Dr. Mark Williams still lay where he had fallen headlong on the pavement. The cab driver was bending over him, but there was nothing to be done. The crystal bell had been beneath him when he fell, and it had broken. One long, fine splinter of crystal was embedded in his heart.

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