

# The Doorbell

David H. Keller

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DAVID H. KELLER

# THE DOORBELL

Two men stood on the suspension bridge that hung over the trackage of the largest steel works in America. They were watching the crane and an electromagnet load scrap-iron from the ground to small freight cars. The crane swung the magnet over the hill of scrap; several tons of iron moved up to meet the magnet; then the crane carried the magnet and the mass of attracted metal to a position above a car, where the load of iron fell.

"Rather clever!" exclaimed one of the men. "I see it every day but never fail to think it clever. Man throws a switch and the magnet starts pulling, throws another switch and it stops pulling. Does the work of twenty men and does it better. I own this place and am extremely busy, but almost every day I walk out on this bridge and watch the thing work. It's been a big help to me."

"I wish it would help me," sighed the other. "There ought to be a story in it, but I can't identify it. That's the tough part of being an author; you could write lots of things if you just had lots of things to write about."

"There is a story in it," replied the steel man. "I owe you something and I think I ought to pay you with a story. How about spending the week end with me up at my shack in Canada?"

The author blushed.

"Sorry. I can't. I've no money to pay the fare; nor the right clothes for the kind of guests you'll have. Thanks for the invitation, but the answer is no."

"Come on," urged the rich man. "There'll be only one other guest—but he stays by himself all the time. Here's the program. Be at the front door of my office at three, Friday afternoon. One of my men will be waiting for you in a Rolls-Royce. Tell him who you are and he'll drive you up. He's a fast driver and makes the trip in six hours. He'll leave you at the front door. Push the electric button on the side of the porch and my man will admit you. I'll wait supper for you and return to New York with you early Monday morning. You'll find the visit interesting—and I promise you a real story, though whether you'll be able to sell it, I don't know. What must a story have to be saleable?"

"Originality—the sound of truth—human interest."

"Then you'll never sell it because no one will believe it—but come anyway. Sorry your wife can't come along but this is the kind of party I can't invite her to. Just tell her that it's a business trip—that I want you to write a book about me. Tell her I paid you five hundred in advance. Show her the money. Here it is in hundred dollar bills."

"I can't do that," protested the writer. "I admit that I'm broke but I can't take the money for nothing."

"Sure you can. I owe you more than that. Be at the office Friday at three. I'll see you at supper."

Even Mrs. Hubler admitted Jacob Hubler had done Henry Cecil a genuine service, though she raised her eyebrows when her husband explained that it was to be a stag party for two. At any rate, the appointment was kept.

The trip through New York and into Canada was long and tiresome. Hubler lost all sense of direction. The chauffeur was a better driver than a conversationalist and most of the time simply grunted. Hubler tired of the grunted answers and stopped asking questions. The last fifteen minutes, they drove through a forest of heavy pine. At last they arrived at the house.

"There's the door," announced the chauffeur. "I go back to town."

There was nothing for Hubler to do but to walk up the pathway and ring the doorbell. There was a light over the front door—otherwise, the house was dark. The night was as black as pitch. It was impossible to tell anything about the house, its size, or its architecture. The author could see only the front door. He could hear only the constantly diminishing sound of the automobile returning to New York.

Stepping onto the porch he at once found the electric push-button which served as a doorbell. There was nothing peculiar about it—just a circular piece of polished brass with a small white button in the middle. He looked at it and thought that in some way it was incongruous with the

doorway and the house and the dark silent night. A brass doorknocker, a pull bell that would tinkle merrily, some kind of announcer that could be heard by the visitor would have been more friendly, more sympathetic to his lonely mood. He hesitated, and his hesitation was born of the haunting fear that if he pushed the button, he would not hear the bell within; he would not know whether it rang within the house or, if it rang, whether there was anyone to hear it. He wished he had a horn to blow and then laughed bitterly, realizing that he had never blown one, and even if he knew how and did blow it lustily, how could anyone hear him if there were no one in the house? He realized the neurasthenic quality of his fear, the almost psychopathic tendency of his imagination. Perhaps Cecil had done this on purpose to furnish him the thread of a story—a six-hour ride ending on the porch of an empty house, and the nearest dwelling God knew where. Already there was a sort of story, and it might become a really good one before he returned to New York. He looked moodily at the doorbell. It was just a plain, ordinary, everyday electric push-button.

Cursing himself for an imaginative fool, he pressed the button; he rang the doorbell.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by the sobbing shriek of a thing in pain, the terrible howling of a tortured animal. The menacing noise rose into the night, carrying with it the terror of deadly agony, only to die away in throaty sobbings as he withdrew his finger from the white button.

Hubler wanted suddenly to escape, to run down the dark road, to plunge into the friendly, silent darkness.

Then the door was flung open, lights blazed in all the windows of the house. A stately butler bade him enter. Cecil came to meet him—Cecil the steel man, in evening clothes, with a friendly smile, and a warm greeting.

"You are five minutes late," he scolded laughingly. "You were due at nine. Hurry to your room and clean up. Then join me as soon as you can. Supper's ready and I'm sure you're hungry."

Everything seemed different. Hubler wondered if he had been the victim of auditory hallucinosis. Here were light, warmth, good fellowship, and the cheer of a fireplace. Supper was served before the glowing fire instead of in a formal dining room—a supper of roast duck in front of the cheery fireplace. Henry Cecil made a charming host; the butler was everything a butler should be; there was a quiet charm in the atmosphere of the room. Gradually, Hubler relaxed; by the time the meal was over, he was silently laughing at his former fears. The table was removed, the butler withdrew, and then the author asked the steel millionaire the question that had been bothering him for several days.

"You promised me a story, Mr. Cecil."

"So I did. In fact, as I remember it, that was your real reason for making the trip."

"Exactly."



"Not being an author, I hardly know how to even start a story."

"You start with a title. Every story has to have a name."

"I understand that. You can call the story what you wish. If I were going to write it, I would call it *The Doorbell*, but perhaps that wouldn't sound interesting enough to you." He spoke softly, with a smile.

Hubler stared at him. Doorbell? Suddenly a memory which he had almost thrust into the subconscious returned. He answered sharply:

"That will do for the name of the story. Go on, please."

"For a proper understanding I'll have to begin with a bit of family history," said the steel man. "Originally I came from the western part of South Carolina. Perhaps we were related to the Cecils on the eastern shore of Maryland, or the Cecils of Louisiana. I've read their family histories, but I was never satisfied that my father was of either branch of the family. In fact, I never saw my father, for he died when I was a little fellow. My mother was Amy Worth from Atlanta, Georgia. She was related to the Fannings and the Stills. They were proud people, but poor. After father died, she tried to support the three of us. You see, I had a brother who was much older than I, but not yet a man.

"We lived in a house in the country that formerly had been the home of a rich man. Beside the front door was a doorbell. It was the old-fashioned pull-bell kind. A wire ran from the

door to the kitchen, and when the knob was pulled, the bell *tingled-tangled* in the kitchen. Mother kept it in repair, saying it was a symbol of former greatness and something for us boys to try to grow up to. She wanted us to become real men. The bell was seldom rung because we had few visitors and mostly they, being neighbors, just came around the back way, like neighbors would.

"Father had enemies. There were four brothers who claimed they owned our farm, but Mother declared that she had a clear title to it. One day I was away hunting, like any shaver will do, and when I came home toward dusk, I noticed that the front door was open. Brother was dead and Mother was almost dead, but she managed to gasp out what had happened. From the way she was shot, I don't see how she lived as long as she did, but she had Fanning blood in her and the Fannings die hard. Anyway, I sat down on the floor and put her head in my lap and wiped the blood from her lips while she told me what had happened. Perhaps this is not interesting you, Mr. Hubler?"

"On the contrary, I find it more than interesting. Please go on with it."

"All right. Anytime you tire, tell me to stop."

"Mother said that she and Brother were in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. It was such an unusual thing that they were sure something was going to happen, but they went to the front door and opened it because they were in their own house and were not afraid. There stood the four brothers. They had come to the front door and rung the

doorbell instead of going around to the back door as friendly neighbors would have done. Without saying a word they just started to shoot, and when they left, they told Mother they were coming back after dusk and finish me off. I wanted to stay, but Mother made me promise to leave. She said there was work a-plenty for me but that I'd have to wait until I got to be a man for it wasn't work for a boy to undertake. She died in a while—after she had told me what there was to tell. So I took my rifle and left that part of the country. The neighbors found Mother and Brother and buried them. Many years later, I went back and put a stone over their graves. That is the end of the story."

"Not much of an ending," Hubler insisted, disappointedly. "It's not the ending that would interest the average editor. The story just couldn't stop there. There must be something more."

"Perhaps," replied Henry Cecil, "but so far it is all true. And there's the rifle I took with me from the Carolina mountains. When I bought this land and built this house, I brought it up here and hung it over the fireplace. End the story yourself."

"I can't do it. A thousand endings have already been written to the story you've just told me. You should have taken the rifle and hunted down the four brothers. You should have shot them one at a time. But things like that have been written before—nothing new to it. Instead, you came north, learned the steel business, became a rich man, built a palace in Canada, and hung the gun above the fireplace.

That's interesting, but it is not a story. Why didn't you use the gun?"

Cecil smiled.

"There would have been no originality in it. A thousand mountain boys would have done that, but as far as I know, I am the only mountain boy who became interested in steel and electricity. I had to be different in every way. You see, I was just a lad when Mother died with her head on my lap, and when I wasn't looking at her face, I kept looking at the doorbell. She always said that the doorbell was a symbol; that rich people had doorbells, that the Worths and Fannings and Stills in Georgia always had doorbells and if Brother and I kept that in mind, we would grow up to live with doorbells, have servants in the kitchen and everything that went with doorbells. But instead of bringing joy and happiness and prosperity into her life, it had been the signal of death to Brother and her.

"So I have never been able to forget the doorbell."

"You mean?"

"Something like that. I'm trying to explain why the rifle was never used. Now a doorbell would be something different. You can see that for yourself."

"There certainly is a difference—so much so, that there's no resemblance," agreed the puzzled author.

"At least, Mother's ambitions for me have been satisfied. I've become rich, well known, and somewhat important to

the financial life of the nation. In fact, some of the Maryland Cecils have recently been trying to prove they are related to the Carolina branch. I have a home in the country and a doorbell at the front door. I have servants who can be trusted. My butler is a man of breeding and well educated. Being an ex-convict, in fact an escaped convict, he realizes and appreciates that this place is a city of refuge for him. His wife is the cook. My chauffeur also has certain things for which to be grateful to me and, in addition, knows how to drive and keep his mouth shut."

"He certainly is no conversationalist."

"No. He doesn't talk. Then there is the doctor. I just had to have a doctor. I have guests occasionally, and if they become sick, it's so much better to have a physician in the house instead of having to send to Montreal. This man is a good fellow; he drinks though and can't return to the States. But he's a wonderful nurse too, and takes very good care of my ill guests. It was a long time before I found a doctor who answered my purpose. Different doctors, you realize, have different ideas concerning the administration of drugs. Some give powders, others liquids or hypodermics, and only rarely do you find one who thinks that the *only* way to administer any and all medicine is in the form of capsules. This man I have is what you might call a 'capsule doctor.' He's mighty clever. He has some capsules that dissolve in the stomach and some that don't dissolve till they enter certain sections of the intestines. That's my doctor and family up here. Sometimes I meet a man and become interested in him and invite him up for the week end. If he gets sick, he's well

cared for—very well cared for. Well, it's late and you're tired from the drive. Suppose we go to bed now."

"That suits me," said Hubler. "And is that all there is to the story?"

"All for tonight, and it's enough for you to work on as you drift into the land of dreams. Will you go with me? Often before I go to bed, I go out to the front door. It makes me think of Mother and the brother who died so unnecessarily in his early manhood. Come."

It was a command rather than an invitation. Opening the door, Henry Cecil turned a switch and the house darkened—all except the light over the front door. The two men stood on the landing out in the night air. The darkness was like velvet silence.

"Often we hear a great horned owl, and occasionally a wildcat. Did you ever hear a wildcat, Hubler? At times they sound like a child crying—and again—"

Hubler shook his head. "I never heard a wildcat," he answered. "Do you hear them often?"

"Now and then," Cecil answered casually. "Now and then." Turning, he pressed strong and hard with his right index finger against the doorbell.

Suddenly the stillness was rent with a sobbing, shuddering shriek, a cry that rose in intensity, that carried with it the terror of a soul torn to bits and cast into the flames of hell. Cecil removed his finger, and slowly the yelling died to

sobbing and the sobbing to moaning and the moaning to silence.

"That's what a wildcat sounds like," explained Cecil.  
"Come. Let's go to bed. Tomorrow is another day."

He turned the lights on and personally took his guest to his room. Hubler went to sleep slowly, telling himself that here he'd found a wonderful story—but that somehow there wasn't any sequence. It did not make sense.

Next morning the butler served his breakfast in his room. Hubler tried to question him, but the man was everything a loyal servant should be. All he would say was that the master was busy and would see him at two for dinner and that he would find interesting books in the library, or the butler would be glad to bring him some. Or if the gentleman cared to play pool, the butler would be pleased to play with him. So Hubler called for a typewriter and spent the morning writing the story in a dozen different ways and tearing it up as fast as he wrote, because he realized that all the versions were poor and far from the truth.

Disgusted with himself, he rang for the butler and spent the rest of the time playing pool. He found the man an excellent opponent.

At two, as Cecil entered the billiard room, the butler left silently. Commonplace remarks were exchanged, and then the steel man led the way to dinner. A third man awaited them and was introduced as Doctor Murdock. The meal was served with some formality and a complete lack of

conversation. Finally, Cecil asked the doctor, "How is your patient?"

"Rested fairly well today but had two severe attacks last night."

"Your medicine does not relieve him?"

"No. He is going like the other three."

"Have you made a diagnosis?"

"No. Nothing seems typical of any condition I am familiar with. I really would like a consultation. My professional pride—"

The rich man interrupted him.

"Tut, tut! You have nothing to worry about. You're doing as well as any other doctor could. Let me make the situation clear to you, Mr. Hubler. I have recently had four guests, one at a time. They came at my invitation to enjoy my hospitality and fatten their purses on my bounty. Each became mysteriously ill, went into a stupor which, of course, may have been caused by drinking too much. They were taken to our little hospital room, and Doctor Murdock took charge of them. Each patient's symptoms were the same, occasional pains of a terrifying nature at irregular intervals accompanied by a progressive anemia. Three of my guests died, and the doctor now states that the last one is going rapidly. He's a good physician and I have the greatest confidence in him. There's no occasion for him to worry. Everything is perfectly regular and each man has had a legal death certificate and a



simple, but satisfactory, burial. Of course, it is to be greatly regretted. It may make other guests, like yourself, feel ill at ease, but I don't think there'll be any more such cases. Are you still giving the capsules, Doctor?"

"Yes. It's a favorite prescription of mine and one that should be good for cholera."

"I had your prescription filled by the best druggist in New York."

"I know. You said that before. An autopsy might help with a diagnosis."

"No, Doctor Murdock—But come, let's finish the meal. I want to show Mr. Hubler the place."

For several hours, the two men rode slowly on horseback through the woods. Hubler expressed continual astonishment at the large number of birds and animals and their obvious lameness.

"It's nothing to wonder at," explained his host. "I don't hunt myself and I let no one else hunt on my property. As a result, even the deer have become tame. It seems cruel to kill just for the sake of killing. Of course, they kill each other. The birds eat insects and the weasels eat the birds, and, now and then, one of the big wildcats catches a rabbit or a very young fawn, but that's just a natural course of events. I used to hunt when I was a boy, but after my mother died in my arms, I've never been able to pull a trigger."

Through the dying day they rode, and at last, almost in the darkness, returned to the house. An Irishman was waiting for them on a third horse, to take the horses back to the stable, some miles from the house.

Inside the house again, Cecil became proud and boastfully expansive. He delighted in showing Hubler through the different rooms, the library, the picture gallery, and a small, but complete, laboratory for electrical experimentation. At last, they came to a little room. It was empty except for a large mass of wire and iron in the center of the room, reaching from floor to ceiling.

"That's something of which I'm especially proud," said Cecil. "It's an electromagnet—probably as large and powerful a magnet as there is in the world. If it could touch iron, it would probably be able to attract a load of four tons. It can attract iron particles at a distance of twenty feet. In fact, I had to have this part of the house built without iron nails; otherwise it would have pulled the place apart. It's very simple in construction and most of the time is inert, dead. But if a button is pressed at a distant part of the house and the electric current turned on, it becomes instantly alive and functions perfectly. It's very similar to the electromagnet I have at the mills, but this one is much more powerful. I thought you might like to see it. Perhaps it may help you with the story you came up here to write. Have you started it yet?"

"Yes—a dozen times this morning, but I tell you frankly—I can't write it. It doesn't make sense; none of it. I feel there's a story here but it doesn't click as yet."

"Perhaps it will later. Suppose we go down to see our patient. The hospital room is directly below. We'll take off our shoes and put on carpet slippers. Nails in the shoes, you know, and all that sort of thing. You must be careful when you're near a magnet such as this. Come along."

As the butler approached down the hall Cecil asked him, "What time have you?"

"Eight-thirty-five, sir."

"I have the same. At exactly nine o'clock will you ring the doorbell? Remember—exactly at nine."

"I will, sir."

"A faithful and obedient servant," commented Cecil.

"Before we go to the hospital, I should tell you about the furnishings. Since it's directly under the electromagnet, there's no iron or steel there. The bed is of wood throughout, but very comfortable. A series of hour-glasses mark the time. All instruments and hypodermics are of hardened gold. At my request the doctor wears slippers. He thinks I'm sort of queer, but as I employ him, he puts up with what he considers my eccentricities. Should the electromagnet start working while we're there, for example at nine, when the doorbell is pushed, you need have no fear for your personal safety. The last thing in the world I desire is to see you harmed in any way. Come on."

They entered the room. Sharp shadows were thrown by a burning candle in a glass holder. Doctor Murdock rose to

meet them.

"He's had a quiet day, Mr. Cecil," he whispered. "It's been the sleep of exhaustion, but there has been no recurrence of the colic."

"Have you used any of the sedative?"

"Yes. He has had his capsules every hour."

"Good. That's all that can be done for him. Doctor Murdock is a great believer in capsules, Mr. Hubler. He's not a pharmacist, so I have his prescription capsules filled in New York. What time have you, Doctor?"

"According to the hour-glasses, it should soon be nine."

"We'll wait till then. We left our watches upstairs. Will you tell us when it's nearly nine?"

They sat down and waited. The doctor went over, looked at the hour-glasses steadily pouring their golden sands.

"Only a few seconds now. The hour-glass is nearly empty," he soon said.

The sleeping patient moved restlessly. Hubler watched him closely. The author was trying to think, to coördinate his thinking so that it would make sense. Suddenly, the man sat up in bed shrieking and pulling at his abdomen. His cry was a mixture of curses and utter despair. It so completely filled Hubler's soul with terror that instinctively he covered his ears with his hands to try to shut out the horror of it. For he

recognized it; it was what he had heard the night he pressed the doorbell, and once heard could not ever be forgotten. Doctor Murdock bent over the man trying to calm him. Cecil looked on with detached interest. Suddenly, the unearthly cries ceased as the man dropped backwards.

"He's dead!" cried Doctor Murdock.

"No wonder," sighed Cecil. "No one can stand pain like that forever. He's better off dead. You know how to proceed, Doctor. Come with me, Mr. Hubler. It may be that a glass of brandy will help you. That was not a pleasant sight."

They were back in the living room in front of the fireplace. Hubler had taken three fingers of liquor, shuddered and felt better.

"And now for the story." The steel man sighed. "I realize that you must get this story settled in your mind or you won't sleep tonight, and tomorrow we'll leave early for the city, so you'd better have your rest. You've seen the electromagnet. Now I'll tell you that the four men who have died in our little hospital room were the four brothers who murdered my mother and brother. And as there was a doorbell in our home in Carolina, it seemed best to have a doorbell here. Of course, I *had* to have a doorbell. Every house, especially a house of wealth, has a doorbell, and you remember that my mother thought it a very important symbol. Of course, it's important for you to know that the doorbell was connected with the electromagnet. When it was pressed, the magnet started to work. Now the first brother who came was drunk; he just would not stop drinking, so we put him in the

hospital. Then I had the second one come here and he pressed the doorbell a number of times. You see, I was giving him a lot of money and he wanted to please me. Later he became ill and took his brother's place. Then the third brother came, and did the same thing. Finally the last brother, who was the man you saw die tonight, came. Of course, when he became sick, there was no one to press the button but the butler and myself and so I asked you to come up so you could have a hand in it. And now, since the last of the four brothers has died from this strange disease, I won't use the electromagnet any more but will connect the push-button with a sweet, musical bell which will welcome guests with the true sound of hospitality. Now you can write the story about the doorbell."

Hubler protested. "There's still something left out. What had the magnet to do with it? Doctor Murdock took care of all these men, and he did not die. Evidently he didn't have even a bit of pain. You're leaving something out! What is it? *I have to know*. It's not fair to tell me so much and still tell me so little."

"Perhaps you're right," answered Cecil. "But even after I tell you, you won't be able to sell the story, because no one will believe you. It was the capsules that did the trick."

"But you told me Doctor Murdock wrote the prescriptions and they were prepared by the best drug house in New York!"

"That's true. But I forgot to tell you one thing. After I got the capsules, I opened them and into each one I put a small

fishhook. Murdock gave a good many capsules to each of his patients. Now write the story."

[The end of *The Doorbell* by David H. Keller]