

# Jubal, the Ringer

By Fitz-James O'Brien

## I

High in the brown belfry of the old Church of Saint Fantasmios sat Jubal the Ringer, looking over the huge town that lay spread below. A great black net-work of streets stretched far away on every side—the sombre web of intertwisted human passions and interests, in which, year after year, many thousand souls had been captured and destroyed.

Sleeping hills with clear-cut edges rose all about the dark town, which seemed to be lying at the bottom of a vast purple goblet, whose rim, touched with the whiteness of approaching day, looked as if they were brimming with the foam of some celestial wine. Deep in the distance rolled a long river, musical through the night, and shaking back the moonbeams from its bosom as if in play.

It was an old belfry, the belfry of Saint Fantasmios. It sprang from a vaulted arch with four groinings, which hung directly over the altar, so that one above in the bell-room could see, through the cracks in the stone ceiling, the silver lamps that lit the shrine, the altar-railings, the priest, the penitents below. Old flat mosses clung to the weather-beaten sides of the belfry, and the winds went in and out through it wheresoever they willed. From the very summit, which was pointed, there arose a tall iron rod, on which stood a golden cock, with head erect to catch the morning breeze, with feathers spread to bask in the morning sun. A golden cock, I said: alas! golden no longer. Wind and weather had used him badly, and he had moulted all his splendor. Battered, and gray, and rusty, with draggled tail and broken beak, he was no more the brave cock that he had been of yore. He had a malevolent and diabolical aspect. He looked as if he had made a compact with the demons of the night.

How blame him, if he had ceased to be an amiable cock? For years he had done his duty bravely to the town in all weathers, telling the points of the wind with unerring sagacity. The winds furious at having their secrets betrayed, would often steal softly down upon him in the disguise of a delicate breeze, and then burst upon him with the roar of a lion, in the hope of tumbling him from his sentinel's post. But they never caught him, for he was then young and agile, and he glided round at the slightest breath, so that the winds never could succeed in coming upon his broadside, but went off howling with anger to sea, where they wrecked ships, and buried them under the waves.

But the town neglected the poor cock, and he was never regilded or repaired, so that in time his pivots grew rusty, and he could no longer move with his former agility. Then the storms persecuted him, and the Equinox came down on him savagely twice a year, and buffeted him so that he thought his last hour was come; and those who passed by Saint Fantasmios on those tempestuous nights heard him shrieking with rage, through the wild aerial combats, till thinking it the voice of a demon high up in the clouds, they crossed themselves, and hurried home to bed.

So the cock, and the belfry, and Jubal the Ringer grew old together; but Jubal was the oldest of all, for the human heart ages more quickly than stone or copper, and the storms that assail it are fiercer and sharper than the winds or the rains.

## II

Jubal sat in the window of the belfry, looking over the black town, and moaning to himself. The day had not yet risen, but was near at hand.

"This morn," he said, shaking his long hair, which was already sprinkled with gray, "this morn she will be wed. This morn she will stand in front of the altar below, the light from the silver lamps shining on her white forehead, that I love better than the moon; and her lover will put the gold ring upon her finger, and the priest will bless her with lifted hands, while I, through the cracks in the vaulted ceiling, will behold all this: I, who adore her: I who have loved her for years, and followed her with my eyes as she wandered through the fields in May, toying with the hawthorn hedges, herself more fragrant, whiter, purer than the blossoms which she gathered. I, who used to spend the early dawn traversing the woods, gathering the red wild strawberries while the silver dews still lay upon them, in order that I might place them secretly at her door! Ah! she never knew how in the cold winter nights I sat in the fork of the apple-tree outside her chamber-window, watching her light, and gazing on her shadow as it fell upon the blind. Sometimes the shadow would seem to lengthen, and come across the walk and climb the tree, and I would strive to fold it in my arms, as if it was my beloved in person; but it would suddenly recoil and elude me, and I could do nothing but kiss the branches where it had fallen, with my cold lips.

"One day, she went to gather white and yellow water-lilies, that swam on the surface of a pond. She held a long crook in her hand, with which she reached out and endeavored to bring them to shore. But they were cunning and slippery, and did not wish to be captured, by even so fair a maid as she; so when her crook touched them, they ducked their pearly and golden crests under the waters and escaped, coming up again all dripping and shining, and seeming to laugh at the eager girl. Being vexed at this, she stretched out her crook still farther, when the treacherous bank gave way, and my Agatha went down into the deep pond. I was near—I was always near her, though she knew it not—and I plunged in, and sought her amid the loathsome weeds. I brought her to shore, and chafed her fair forehead, and revived her. Then when she had recovered, I said to her: 'I am Jubal, the Ringer: I love you Agatha: will you make my lonely life happy forever?' With a look of wild horror she broke from me, and fled to her home.

"And I am despised, and she weds another. While the blessings are being given, and the church is white with orange-wreaths, and the poor wait in the porch for the nuptial bounty, I, who adore her, must sit aloft in this old belfry, and ring out jubilant chimes for the wedded pair.

"Aha! they know not Jubal, the Ringer. I can work the spells my mother worked, and I know the formulas that compel spirits. Agatha, thou false one, and thou, smooth-checked lover, who dreamst perhaps of her now, and thou, sacred priest, who givest away to another that which belongs to me, beware, for ye shall perish!"

Then Jubal laughed horribly, and spread his arms out as if he would embrace the night, and muttered certain strange sentences that were tremble to hear.

As he muttered, there came from the west a huge cloud of bats, that fastened themselves against the sides of the old belfry, and there was one for every stone, they were so numerous. And presently a ceaseless clicking resounded through the turret, as if myriads of tiny laborers were plying their pick-axes; a hail of falling fragments of mortar tinkled continually on the tin roofing of the Church of St. Fantamos; and the bats seemed to eat into the crevices of the old belfry, as if they were about to sleep forever in its walls.

Presently the day rose. The sun-beams poured over the edges of the hills as the molten gold pours from the caldron of a worker in metals. The streets began to pulse with the first throbs of life, and Jubal, the Ringer, laughed aloud, for not a single bat was visible. The entire multitude had buried themselves in the walls of the belfry.

### III

The street leading to the Church of St. Fantasmos was by nine o'clock as gay as the enamelled pages of a pope's missal. The road was strewn with flowers, and the people crushed the tender lily of the valley and the blue campanula and the spiced carnation under their feet. In and out between the throng of loiterers ran persons bearing boughs of the yellow laburnum in full blossom, until the way seemed arabesqued with gold. The windows on either side were filled with smiling faces, that pressed against the panes, like flowers pressing toward the light against conservatory casements. The linen of the maidens' caps was white as snow, and their cheeks were rose-red; and each jostled the other so as better to see the wedding procession of the fair Agatha and her gallant lover on its way to the altar of St. Fantasmos.

Presently the marriage cavalcade came by. It was like a page from a painted book. Agatha was so fair and modest; the bridegroom was so manly; the parents were so venerable with their white locks, and their faces lit with the beautiful sun-set of departing life.

As the procession passed beneath the windows, bunches of ribbons and flowers and bits of gay-colored paper, on which amorous devices were written, were flung to the bride and bridegroom by the bystanders; and a long murmur swelled along the street, of "God protect them, for they are beautiful and good!" And this lasted until they entered the gates of the church, where it was taken up by the poor people of the town who awaited them there. So, with benedictions falling upon them thick as the falling leaves of autumn, they passed into the Church of St. Fantasmos; but as they gained the threshold the bride looked up to the belfry, and there she fancied she beheld a man's head glaring at her with two fiery eyes, so that she shuddered and looked away. The next instant she looked up again, but the head was gone.

The people who were not invited to the ceremony loitered in the yard without, intending to accompany the bride home when the sacred rite was concluded, and cheer her by the way with songs composed in her honor. While they waited, the chimes in the belfry began to peal.

"How now!" cried one. "It is too soon for the chimes to peal. The couple are not yet married."

"What can Jubal be dreaming of?" said a second.

"Listen," cried a third; "did you ever hear such discords. Those are not wedding chimes. It is the music of devils."

A terrible fear suddenly fell over the multitude as they listened. Louder and louder swelled the colossal discords of the bells. The clouds were torn with these awful dissonances; the skies were curdled with the groans, the shrieks, the unnatural thunders that issued from the belfry.

The people below crossed themselves, and muttered to one another that there was a devil in the turret.

There was a devil in the turret, for Jubal was no longer man. With his eyes fixed on the crack in the vaulted ceiling, through which he saw the marriage ceremony proceeding, and his sinewy arms working with superhuman strength the machinery that moved the bells, he seemed the incarnation of a malevolent fiend. His hair stood erect; his eyes burned like fireballs; and a white foam rose continually to his lips, and breaking into flakes, floated to the ground.

Still the terrible peals went on. The tortured bells swung now this way, now that, yelled forth a frightful diapason of sound that shook the very earth. Faster and faster Jubal tolled their iron tongues. Louder and louder grew the brazen clamor. The huge beams that supported the chimes cracked and groaned. The air, beaten with these violent sounds, swelled into waves that became billows, that in turn became mountains, and surged with irresistible force against the walls of the turret. The cock on the summit shivered and shrieked, as if the equinoxes of ten thousand years had been let loose on him at the same moment. The stones in the walls trembled, and from between their crevices vomited forth dust and mortar. The whole turret shook from base to apex.

Suddenly the people below beheld a vast cloud of bats issue from between the stones of the belfry and fly toward the west.

Then it appeared as if the bells spent their last strength in one vast accumulated brazen howl, that seemed to split the skies. The turret rocked twice, then toppled. Down through the vaulted arch, crushing it in as if it had been glass; down through the incensed air that filled the aisle, on priest and bride and bridegroom and parents and friends, came a white blinding mass of stone and mortar, and the next instant there was nothing but a cloud of dust slowly rising, a splash of blood here and there, that the dry stones soaked in, and one battered human head with long hair, half-visible through the mass of ruin. It was Jubal dead, but also Jubal avenged.

When on the ensuing October the wild equinoxes came like a horde of Cossacks over the hills, to make their last assault upon the golden cock, they found neither bird nor belfry, and the mischief they did that night at sea, out of mere spite, was, the legend says, incredible.