

Mystery Of The Mill

How Tom Dennis Was A Victim
Of Rum And Circumstances

by William Edward Penney

A very strange man was old Ichabod Crane,
A queer old fellow was he;
His hair was white and his eyes were black,
And his mouth looked like an expressionless crack
In a piece of old crockery.

At the foot of a hill near his tumbledown mill,
He lived in an old red house;
While no one around, at least above ground,
Had seen on the premises anything 'round
Save Ichabod and his dog Bowse.

The dog was a great brindle creature, as fierce
And ugly as he could well be;
He guarded the yard by day, and at night
He was shut in the house with baying to fright
And make the late passer-by flee.

Old Ichabod did his own cooking and mending,
And faithfully tended his mill;
'Twas seldom he spoke, and then 'twas a croak,
Like a half-strangled ox that has turned in the yoke,
And plainly against his own will.

He went not to church or political meetings,
Nor voted on 'lection day;
Subscribed for no paper, nor cut any caper
That showed he cared the worth of a haper
What happened around any way.

To the store in the village some three miles away
He went once a week for supplies,
Then all the small boys ceased their jabber and noise,
And watched him in silence, forgetting their toys,
With big and terrified eyes.

In the country, you know, people learn all about

The smallest affairs of their neighbors,
But a mystery still hung over the mill
And the man in the red house under the hill,
In spite of their prying labors.

But true to their nature as Yankees, of course,
When the truth was hid then they guessed;
So it came to be said his left hand was red
With the blood of a victim of his, long dead,
Slain somewhere away out West.

This suspicion arose because his left hand
Was covered year in and year out;
That he had lots of gold hid under the mould
In his cellar, or somewhere, in value untold,
The neighbors had not the least doubt.

And thus an uncanny shadow was thrown
'Round the mill and the old red house;
And oft in the night did the footstep grow light
Of passers belated, 'till well out of sight,
Though all was as still as a mouse.

Tom Dennis, a shiftless and useless young chap,
From the village returning mellow,
Quite late in the night, with one eye shut tight,
The visible fruit of a hot barroom fight
Bestowed by another fellow—

In the wee sma' hours with a heavy jag on,
Was tacking plain sailing to find;
The real truth to say he was "over the bay,"
With wind and tide running the other way,
Distress signals flying behind.

A chicken he'd borrowed from some farmer's roost,
And calmly decapitated;
His coat hid from view, though its blood had soaked through,
He was taking it straight to his own 'Tildy Drew,
With whom he longed to be mated.

As he came near the silent, gloomy red house,
In the shade of the wood-clad hill,
He hiccup'd a song to help him along;
He had a queer notion that something was wrong
With him or the house by the mill.

A bright light was burning in two of the rooms,
At least it looked so to his ken;
Inside he saw figures quick moving about,
And then he heard talking that rose to a shout;
Tom thought he had "got 'em agin."

A pistol's sharp crack came echoing back,
Another! another! and then
A deep silence fell. Tom gave a wild yell
And rapidly down the road skurried pell-mell,
A frightened and half-sobered man.

As he jumped o'er the wall with his chicken and all
To reach home as quick as he could,
His limber legs bent and over he went,
And on the earth's bosom his head made a dent,
As if 'twas a beetle of wood.

The shock was too much for his befuddled brain,
He lay in a stupor for hours,
And it was daylight ere the unlucky wight
Rubbed his head and sat up, a hard-looking sight,
And tested his walking powers.

At last he got home and staggered to bed;
The chicken he'd lost on the road,
Where it made a meal fine for some hungry canine,
While Tom from looking too long on the wine
Was trying in sleep to unload.

A farmer came down with a big load of rye
That morning, and stopped at the mill,
To have his grain ground into flour he was bound;
But he found the mill locked and no one around,
And the water-wheel standing still.

Such a thing had not happened in many a year,
And the farmer thought it was queer;
He looked at the house, all was still as a mouse,
No sign of the miller or big brindle Bowse;
The man felt a shadow of fear.
In vain he halloed, but the echoes replied
In a mocking sort of a way;
Then he walked up the path inviting the wrath
Of the dog, in his hand a hickory lath,

He thought it might come into play.

He knocked on the door, no answer came back,
From his feet he stamped off the mud;
Then as he turned 'round he saw on the ground
What made his face suddenly turn white from brown—
A ghastly pool of fresh blood.

He peered through the window, and saw the room looked
As if a cyclone had been there;
The furniture tipped, the rag carpet ripped,
And looking as if it in blood had been dipped—
He saw with a horrified stare.

Then staying no longer to gaze at the scene,
He quickly unhitched his old mare,
Jumped in with a bound, not looking around,
And sent the astonished old mare o'er the ground
In a way that made people stare.

The indignant old mare showed a clean pair of heels,
And settled right down to her work;
Up hill and down dale, with straight neck and tail,
While the farmer hung on to the dashboard quite pale,
She thundered with many a jerk.

With a rattley bang and a clatter and jingle,
Straight into the village he rode,
And down the main street, at a pace hard to beat,
He went vainly trying to sit on the seat,
And stopped at Squire Deacon's abode.

The farmer related the terrible news
To the quietly pompous old squire.
Who heard him all through, hoisted in a fresh chew;
Then sent for the constable, Jonathan New,
And slowly began to perspire.

The Squire, the farmer and constable started
The case to investigate;
The news spread round of what had been found,
And soon half the town arrived on the ground,
And gathered around the big gate.

The constable broke down the heavy oak door,

And into the house they all went;
There was blood on the floor, the walls and the door;
On the walk to the gate they also found more;
To the mill their steps then they bent.

The crimson trail led them outside the old mill
And ended beside the deep flume,
Through which the stream roared and rapidly poured;
Of course here the miller's dead body'd been lowered
Into a dark watery tomb.

A motive they sought for the terrible deed,
And found it beyond the least doubt;
They saw in their quest the miller's strong chest
Wide open and rifled of all it possessed,
The money bags turned inside out.

These amateur sleuth-hounds went hunting around
To find of the villain some trace,
And people looked wise as if the disguise
Of the villain would fail if it came 'neath their eyes,
No matter how guileless his face.

While the search for the villain went on Tom Dennis
Was snoring profoundly in bed.
Oblivious quite to the deeds of the night,
Or the scenes exciting that came with the light,
Round the mill and the old house red.

But Tom's reputation was none of the best,
Though he never'd been caught in crime;
So hunting around the detectives soon found
A place by the wall where he lay on the ground
The night before for a time.

They found out the hour when he left the barroom
And started his homeward road;
That when he arrived it was half past five,
And that he with fright was more dead than alive,
And also had on a big load.

They started to interview Tom right away,
And found him in bed fast asleep;
'Twas a hard undertaking, but after much shaking
The befuddled fellow showed signs of awaking

At last he sat up in a bewildered way,
 Abstractedly scratching his head
Where it had been hurt when it struck in the dirt,
And then they all saw that his coat and his shirt
 Were dyed with blood a deep red.

To the stern and threatening questions asked
 Tom muttered half-foolish replies.
So they took him along under double guard strong;
That blood showed plainly that something was wrong
 With Tom in the officers' eyes.

He had no idea what all the fuss meant,
 And quietly went to the jail;
And the people were glad the murderer had
Been caught red-handed—a villain so bad
 Should speedily swing without fail.

The next day Tom Dennis began to find out
 What a serious scrape he was in;
He thought of his fight in the barroom that night,
And of the poor chicken he'd crowded so tight
 'Neath his coat so ragged and thin.

Whose fowl he had stolen he couldn't make out—
 There was more than one roost on the way;
He took it, he knew, for his own 'Tildy Drew,
And its innocent blood had furnished a clue
 To land him in jail the next day.

Then they tried to extort a confession
 From him regarding the deed,
But he sullenly said his clothes were not red
With the blood of the miller, but a chicken's instead.
 They gave to his story no heed.

They asked him whose chicken it was, and what
 He had done with it when he got home;
He thought long and well, but he never could tell,
And so he remained in a dark prison cell,
 Supplied with a Bible and comb.

The trial came on and no lawyer had Tom,
 So the Court picked out one for him;
A youth very wise in his own modest eyes,
Though people generally thought otherwise,

And looked on his talents as slim.

This wonderful limb of the law went to Tom,
Where he lay in the dark old jail,
And told him his case looked bad on its face,
That it showed he was guilty of murder most base,
And that he would hang without fail.

“But if you’ll plead guilty,” said he, “andv so save
A trial’s great cost to the State,
Your neck you may save from the rope and the grave,
And get a life sentence; then, if you behave,
Your pardon may come soon or late.”

Tom swore he was innocent, that he would die
Before he would plead to a lie;
But the gallows-tree stared in his face, he grew scared,
That he would plead guilty at last he declared,
He didn’t feel ready to die.

The day for the trial at last came along,
And Tom was marched in to report;
The room was so packed that the floor fairly cracked,
And many a head by the bailiff was whacked
In keeping due order in court.

Twelve good men and true in the jury-box sat,
And looked at Tom Dennis askance;
’Twas easy to see they would quickly agree,
And that of the murder convicted he’d be;
Tom saw it himself at a glance.

When the proper time came in the order of things
The fearful indictment was read;
Tom Dennis arose with red eyes and nose
And gazed at the jury made up of his foes
With defiant, unbending head.

“Are you guilty or not of the charge as here read?”
Was the question propounded to him;
As he stood there alone like a statue of stone,
His white lips gave vent to an agonized groan
As he faced the alternative grim.

He gazed at the jury, no mercy he saw;

At the Judge, no pity was there;
His pleading blue eye sought his lawyer near by,
Who winked his advice that he plead to a lie;
His heart sank down in despair.

An innocent victim of circumstance strange,
He saw that for him was no hope;
That every man's hand abroad in the land
Was lifted against him, and that he must stand
Ere long at the end of a rope.

The only slim chance for escape that he saw
Was to follow his lawyer's advice;
But deep in the grain of Tom Dennis a vein
Of true moral courage unheeded had lain
Which now to the surface did rise.

He threw back his head in a defiant way,
And facing the jury nearby,
"Not guilty!" he cried, and a flash of the pride
Which graces a hero and none else beside
Shone forth in his fearless blue eye.

A deep silence fell for a moment on all;
Tom's lawyer sank back in his chair
And his under lip bit, chagrined at the grit
Of his client; he felt that his prestige was hit
A certain death-blow then and there.

Then just as the trial was ready to move,
A man in the audience rose
From a seat in the rear, a figure quite queer,
And pressing his way up the aisle he drew near
Where Tom stood facing his foes.

"Before this 'ere trial goes funder," said he,
"I reckon I've sumthin' tu say."
When this he declared, the jury all stared,
And the Judge frowned down on the man who dared
To block the wheels in that way.
And then, without noticing how these few words
Affected the Court, he proceeded:
"Tom, here, is all right; I got hum last night,
'Nd Ichabod Crane 'aint defunct, I guess, quite;
The proof I kin show ye if needed."

Ho pulled off a wig and some whiskers, and lo!
 There stood old Ichabod Crane.
Then a horrified snort gave the jury and court,
While Ichabod smiled as if it was sport;
 Tom feared he was going insane.

“I’ve been off, ’nd got back last night,” then said he,
 “It’s none o’ yer business where.
I took my own cash ’nd left all the trash;
’Twas my money, wan’t it? ’nd if I wuz rash
 It’s jest my own business, I’ll swar.

“I couldn’t take Bowse, nor leave him behind,
 So of course he’d got tu be killed;
I missed the fust shot, he came for me hot,
’Nd then we all over the premises fought,
 ’Nd lots of his blood wuz so spilled.

“I fit with one hand, fer the other is gone,”
 And then he pulled off his old mit;
Lo a dummy was there! a counterfeit fair;
You just should have seen how the people did stare,
 And whisper “Law suz!” and “Gee whit!”

“I tumbled him inter the flume by the mill,
 ’Nd started off on my tramp,
’Nd when I got back last night, it’s a fact,
I found my door had been splintered and racked
 By sum consummit old scamp.

“I got up this mornin’ ’nd started to look
 Both the house and the old mill through,
’Nd who should I see a starin’ at me,
’Nd lookin’ ez crazy as she could well be,
 But purty black-eyed ’Tildy Drew.

“Wall, that is the reason I come here tудay,
 ’Nd now, havin’ had my own say,
I want Tom tu swar on the Bible right thar,
That he’ll fight jest ez shy of rum ez a b’ar,
 Fer evermore ’nd a day.”

He ceased and the room was as silent as death,

A very long breath the Court drew;
Poor Tom was unmanned, but he laid his great hand
On the Bible and swore a big oath that he'd stand
By the pledge and his own 'Tildy Drew.

Then folks made a rush and a hundred warm hands
Were eagerly stretched out to him.
“Three cheers,” they all say, “for Tom Dennis, hooray!”
The outcast had proven a hero that day,
In battle with circumstance grim.

Tom's lawyer sneaked off, but Tom did not scoff.
Then he called for his own 'Tildy Drew;
They were tied on the spot by the Judge with a knot,
That wouldn't unravel or loosen a jot,
'Till death cut the fond tie in two.

He found ready hearts to help him to start,
And a useful man to become,
And he always was glad of his courage that day,
That his name was not “Dennis” in more than one way,
And that he had got through with rum.

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The original was accompanied by six in-text illustrations.