

The Battle of the Bells

By Jerome Bixby



**Charley's practical joke was usually good
for a laugh when a city feller made a rest stop;
but it also aroused heavenly concern and began—**

It would happen maybe once or twice a week—never much more. Because things had to be just right.

For example, it had to be daytime for it to work. At night, nobody was likely to notice the chain hanging down with the handle on the end of it.

And naturally the victims had to be city folk. Had to be used to just reaching up and grabbing and pulling without a thought. Because when you stop to think about it, a chain like that in a place like that is about the most unlikely thing in the world.

But it worked—it worked often enough to bring grins to the faces of any men who were around at the time, and enough to make the town women sometimes a little cool toward Charley Mason when they went in to buy things at his store. Because it was strictly a man's joke, and he was the man.

Owensville is a small town in western Pennsylvania. It sits low in one end of a green-sided valley, just a few frame houses and stores strung along a main street ... and that main street is on the one and only road that leads through the valley: a road that all the maps show to be a convenient and dependable connection between the Penn Turnpike and several other major routes, should you be heading south.

So a lot of people drive through Owensville every week—upwards of two hundred or so. And there's always one or two of them in the mood to spend a little time in a restroom—the last Howard Johnson's is twenty miles back along the Turnpike, and the road

down into the valley is a bumpy one besides, and you know what that does to your innards.

So they come driving around the bend under the trees and their car wheels thump across the old wooden bridge across Miller's Creek—and once in a while one of them would pull off the road into the yard beside Charley Mason's General Store because they'd spot his crescent-doored outhouse standing there. Charley always kept it painted up so it'd be easier to see—clean white with a red roof—and over the door he'd lettered, big enough to see from the bridge, PUBLIC RESTROOM.

Then somebody'd get out of the car and go in, and a few minutes later the chain that came up through the roof would yank down as whoever was inside reached up and pulled the handle.

And then the big old cowbell on the roof—the biggest and noisiest Charley'd been able to find—would dance around in the mounting he'd made out of an angle-iron, and go *Blongle, blongle, blok!*

After a minute the door'd open and the city folk would come out, looking puzzled and kind of sneaky. They'd give a glance up at the roof and see the cowbell mounted there. Some of them might grin at the way they'd been had. But mostly they'd get into their car and drive off maybe a little faster'n they would've ordinarily.

If it was a woman, it was five times as funny. Because some of the older men were always sitting around on the porch of Charley's store playing pinochle, or lounging down by the bridge just talking, and when the woman would come out they'd all grin at her and those who had mustaches might twiddle them a bit, and she'd get redder'n a bushel of tomatoes.

Women drove off faster'n anybody, usually.

Some townspeople said it wasn't a very good way to advertise Owensville to passersby. But Charley said that a town of thirty-two people didn't have to worry about advertising one way or the other—it just needed diversion. And since it was on his property, the cowbell stayed up.

It was just a gag. It never really hurt anybody. Charley, who could incline to philosophy when it suited him, said that the only person it could hurt was somebody who was plain ashamed of being human. And, on the personal side, he admitted he got a kick out of seeing them all flustered up that way.

Probably the outhouse and the bell'd still be there, and Charley'd still be getting his laughs, if the fat lady in the green convertible hadn't decided to do some praying.

It was a late July afternoon, and plenty hot. The sun was reflecting like yellow-green fire off the hills around, and everybody was sitting in the shade.

Charley Mason and Sam Knudson were sitting on the store porch playing gin, and Luke Yates was just coming up the steps, when they heard a car approaching.

Charley and Sam paused in their game and Luke turned his gray head to look.

"Maybe this time," Charley said.

Luke Yates studied the dust cloud moving toward town above the tops of the trees.

"Coming pretty fast," he said. "Bet they drive right on through."

"A dollar," said Charley. "You bounce harder when you drive fast."

"It's on," said Luke.

Waiting, Charley Mason leaned back in his chair and half-closed his eyes, a lean, bald man in shirt-sleeves, the hand holding his cards relaxed in his lap. They could hear the murmur of the creek carrying away the runoff from last night's rain, and the air was sweet with the breath of the fields off down the valley.

"Rich man," said Charley, looking across the yard at his outhouse, "poor man, beggar man, thief. In there, you're all alike in the eyes of God, I guess."

Sam Knudson nodded thoughtfully. "In the eyes of *something*, at any rate."

"All alike," said Luke Yates.

"Can't see your wallet from *there*," Charley said.

"Your brains either," said Luke.

After a moment, Charley said, "Some people's brains, maybe."

They all nodded.

A green convertible driven by a fat woman came around the bend, trailing dust, and rattled across the bridge.

"New York license plates," Luke said, squinting.

"Yep," said Charley.

"Maybe she'll bite."

"If she stops," Charley said, "maybe she will."

The green convertible swerved off the road and pulled to a halt beside the store. The fat lady got out and looked around for a moment, blinking in the sun. She saw the three old men up on the porch and seemed to hesitate. Then she went around the back of the car and headed for the outhouse, walking a little defiantly, head up, her steps steady and deliberate.

The men exchanged glances. Luke handed Charley a dollar bill.

"Do her some good, maybe," Charley said. "Shy type."

"Like we didn't know how it was," Sam said, shaking his head.

"Or maybe," Charley said, "because we do. Funny."

Luke sat down on the bottom-most step and scuffed the dirt of the yard with a toe. They watched the cowbell atop the outhouse, and listened to the murmur of the creek, and heard a bird sing in the big elm out back of the store, and waited.

The chain that came up through the outhouse roof yanked down.

The cowbell went Blongle, blongle, blok!

Charley puffed his pipe in satisfaction. Luke and Sam grinned. They waited for the fat lady to emerge.

When she did, a moment later, it was looking puzzled as usual—but there was a difference. She stalked ten feet away from the outhouse, about-faced, and stared up at the cowbell. The men saw the back of her neck get red and redder still. Then she turned and came toward the porch. Her eyes were narrowed, her hands were clenched into fists, her mouth was a determined slash.

She marched across the yard and stood facing the three men on the porch. She put her fists on her hips and glared.

Luke and Sam stopped grinning. Charley's pipe drooped.

The sun beat down on the valley, the town, the yard, the outhouse, the fat woman. Her brow was shiny with perspiration. She stood there, turned her cold blue glare on one man after another, like you'd sweep a gatling against enemy ranks.

Luke said uncomfortably, "Howdy, ma'am."

"You old lechers!" said the fat woman tightly.

Charley and Luke and Sam exchanged dismayed looks.

"Now, ma'am—" Charley began.

"Don't say anything, you old lechers," the fat woman spat. "I don't want to hear your gloating, oily voices! Of all the lecherous, salacious, lascivious things to do!"

"Why," Charley said doubtfully, "I guess we're a little old to be all those things—"

"You're never too old to be evil-minded!" she snapped. "Even if your bodies are too old for unGodliness!" Her positive and indicating gaze raked them up and down, and she saw the cards which Charley held in his lap.

"Playing cards, too!" she said, her lips curling. "Well, I guess *that* follows!"

"Follows what, ma'am?" Luke asked puzzledly.

She saw the brown beer bottle resting on the box beside Charley's chair.

"*Alcohol!*" she hissed.

She stood glaring up at them, her breath coming fast and shallow, in a half-crouch that led Charley Mason to wonder if she planned to climb right over the porch rail and lace into them physically.

Then, as they watched in wary silence, her anger seemed to abate a little; over a period of five seconds her fists slowly unclenched, her breath slowed, she straightened.

She said in a low voice, "It's the work of the Devil. Anger is not the answer."

"The Devil, ma'am?" Charley asked.

"*He* has made you do this—it is a device to keep lewd and licentious thoughts uppermost in your minds and corrupt your immortal souls. I suppose I shouldn't blame you for listening to him ... so *few* of us *are* able to resist his honeyed mouthings."

"Ma'am," Luke said, "I don't think you should get so excited on a hot day like this. Maybe a cold coke—"

"I'll pray," the fat lady said. "I'll pray for the Lord to undo this Devil's work. I'll pray that your souls be cleansed of the evil thoughts the Dark One has put there." Her pale blue eyes seemed a trifle fixed, and now she smiled, looking through the men who watched her worriedly. "I—I'm almost proud that I should have suffered this humiliation in order to help Him in His work—it is a small price to pay, to have been the object of your lustful thoughts,

if I can save your souls by telling the Lord what you are doing and seeing to it that He stops you!"

She gave them a pitying, sympathetic look. "You hate me now," she said, "but when you are pure you will thank me."

She turned away and walked toward her car, head bowed.

After a moment Luke got up from the steps and sank into a chair on the porch. "Does lust mean what I think it means?" he asked.

"Guess it does," Charley said.

"Well, back when I *could* lust, I wouldn't ever have lusted *her*."

They watched her get in and drive off, head still down in an attitude of prayer, eyes up so she could drive. The car reached the other end of the main street, followed the road into the trees, and vanished.

Charley stared contemplatively across the yard at his outhouse.

"Work of the Devil, huh?" he mused. "Well, now doesn't that beat all! I bet Heaven would kick that prayer right out of court!"

"No," said a firm voice. "It was heard."

The three old men turned and saw a tall, handsome, blond young man, dressed in a neat and utterly clean white suit, standing in the center of the yard. His face wore an expression of perfect peace and abounding love.

Actually, he wasn't *quite* standing in the yard yet. When they turned, his feet were about four feet above the ground. As they

watched, he floated slowly down until he was standing straight, and tall and smiling a little.

At that moment, *timelessness* descended upon the scene—upon Charley Mason's store, the yard, the outhouse. *Timelessness* bounded the area from one edge of Charley's yard to the other, and from the road clear to the woods out back; and that *timelessness* extended downward to a perfect point at the very center of the Earth, and extended upward in a perfect cone to Heaven; and within its boundaries nothing that happened was visible to the outside world, or indeed even "happened" so far as the outside world was concerned: for it all happened in *timelessness* ... in one of those particles of time-substance which exists *between* microseconds on Earth's time continuum: particles so small that they are of use only to angels, who in their work must often get between people and their intended deeds faster than seems possible.

The young man's calm eyes looked into the minds of the three old men on the porch, and saw no evidence there of lewd or lascivious thoughts of the magnitude reported by the fat lady in her prayer. This did not surprise him, for exaggeration is the backbone of prayer, and the Heavenly Workers are used to it. In particular are they used to nuisances like the fat lady, who continually turn in false alarms.

Closing his eyes, the young man contacted his secretary-cherubim in his office in Heaven. The cherubim immediately returned the dossiers of Luke and Sam and Charley Mason to the Heavenly Files, with no additional notations on the debit side.

That done—for nothing is so urgent in the eyes of Heaven as the latest data on souls—the young man turned his attention to the outhouse.

He saw the cowbell, and his lips pursed.

He left the porch, walking lightly, and crossed the yard to the outhouse. The three old men watched him dreamily, unmoving, comprehending, gripped by *timelessness* and a sense of wonder.

The young man opened the crescented door and went in. The chain yanked. The cowbell went *Blongle, blongle, blok!*

The young man reappeared in the door and looked at the old men on the porch. He pursed his lips again and shook his head reprimandingly. He disappeared again.

A second later, the cowbell and chain and angle-iron disappeared too.

The young man came out, dusting his hands with a white handkerchief. He came back across the yard and mounted the steps. He seated himself on the porch railing, where he could face the three old men.

"Shame on you," he said.

The men cast their eyes downward.

"The lady's accusations were somewhat excessive," the young man said. "Your motives seem not to have been primarily lascivious, and I have so informed Heaven. But still ... don't you think you should be ashamed of yourselves?" He paused. "You may nod if you wish."

The men nodded, eyes dreamy.

"After all," the young man said, "isn't that rather a snide trick to play on tired travelers who seek your hospitality?"

Charley Mason's mouth worked; his Adam's apple bobbed.

"Speak," said the young man.

"Gosh," Charley said in a low voice, "it was just a little joke. We never had nothing else in mind—"

"I know," the young man said. "I have discounted that element. I am speaking of the unkindness of the prank—the discomfiture which you impose on its victims."

"Oh," said Charley. "I—gosh, it just embarrassed them a little bit, that's all. I mean ... that's all, isn't it?"

"No," said the young man sternly, "there is more. Think a moment, humans, upon that common structure in the yard ... think deeply, and you will realize that there is much more to it than meets the eye."

"Guess so," mumbled Charley.

"It is a haven ... a place of wondrous solitude ... a refuge for those who would contemplate without interruption, as many a weary traveler yearns for."

"Guess so."

"In what other situation can you be so completely alone ... in a perfect isolation not only permitted but sanctioned by your society? Why, humans, I could tell you of the most extraordinary moments

of piety, of philosophical reflection, of artistic conception which we have recorded as occurring under such circumstances...."

"I never thought of it that way, I guess," Charley said slowly. "I always did sort of think it leveled you off, though."

The young man eyed them soberly.

"In late afternoon," he said, "in the confines of the rustic outhouse, settled happily, hearing the quaint and natural sounds of the insects in the field, the flutterings of birds from branch to branch ... do you know that in this day it is the only waking place where one may flee for the inner life?"

The old men looked down guiltily.

"It is ever a reminder of one's mortality," the young man said.

"It is Man in his true aristocratic state," he said.

"And yet at his most humble," he said.

"And now I will leave," he said. "I hope you have seen the light, and will no longer impose your crude, cruel joke on those who trust you for a moment's peace."

He stood up. "I hardly think that it was the work of the Devil, however, as the lady seemed to think—"

A cloud seemed to come over the sun—but there were no clouds, so perhaps the sun dimmed. The birds in the trees were suddenly silent. Even the rustling leaves seemed to pause. It grew still darker, and a chill breeze sprang up.

A head, whose face was dark and sharp and saturnine, appeared in the center of the yard.

As the young man and the three old men watched, a tall, dark, gaunt man in a neatly tailored black suit rose from the ground and stood eyeing them mockingly.

"Wasn't it?" he said in a thin, dry voice, and laughed.

The young man's lips tightened. He said nothing. The three old men were shrunken back in their chairs, staring.

The Devil—or perhaps the man in black was only *part* of the Devil, for mysterious and complex are the ways he influences from his bronze throne in the exact center of midwestern Gehenna—turned and sauntered to the outhouse. He entered.

A moment later the cowbell and chain and angle-iron reappeared—though not quite as they had been. The chain seemed a little heavier, the cowbell a little larger and more shiny.

The chain was yanked. The cowbell went *Blongle, blongle, blok, blok!*—a metallic sound of triumph.

The man in black came out smirking. He made his way across the yard and mounted the porch steps. The young man frowned and lifted a shoulder so the fabrics of their clothing would not touch.

The man in black went to the opposite end of the porch and sat down in a chair there. He looked out over the bridge and the murmuring creek and the trees beyond and took a pipe from a pocket. From another pocket he took a live coal, which he dropped into the pipe. He puffed, and sulphur-smell filled the air.

The young man got up, sighing and bracing his hands on his knees. He stood for a moment regarding the man in black levelly. Then he went down the steps and across the yard and into the outhouse.

Chain, cowbell and mounting vanished.

The man in black rose, still smiling. He passed the three old men, trailing sulphur smoke from his pipe. They shrank back, eyes wide. He went down into the yard and toward the outhouse.

When he was halfway there, the young man emerged. They locked eyes, the young man's cool and determined, the other's hot and mocking and quite as determined.

They passed each other, saying not a word.

As the young man reached the porch steps, there came from the outhouse a loud *Blongle, blongle, blongle, blok, blok*, and he paused, one foot on the steps, lips thinned. He seated himself deliberately, and only then did he look around.

The new bell was twice as large as the former. The chain was heavier. It hung from a heavy cast-iron mounting.

The man in black came out. He sauntered back to the porch and seated himself.

Half a non-existent hour passed—non-existent, because it passed in *timelessness*. The young man sat quietly, seeming to ponder; the man in black sat as quietly, smoking his sulphur; the three old men sat like mice, their eyes shuttling back and forth between the two antagonists.

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