



JINGLE BELLS

BY
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WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

The Sheridan Dramatic club, of which Tom Bilbeck, the narrator, Maryella, the girl he cares for, and Jim Cooper, his rival, are members, are to give Pygmalion and Galatea at the Old Soldiers' Home. Mr. Hemmingway, husband of one of the actresses, thinks Bilbeck is in love with his wife. The escape of prisoners from the local penitentiary keeps Bilbeck busy at his newspaper work, so that he gets away from the dramatic group. But Maryella summons him, and starts telling the story of "Dollyanna" who believes that everything that happens turns out to be for the best.

The players arrive at the Old Soldiers' Home, being greeted royally and meeting Pilk Henwether and others.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Conversing with Comrade Henwether had its embarrassing drawbacks at that. It is true it didn't matter what you said to him, but on the other hand he had the trick of pretending that he heard perfectly and replying to what he thought you said.

Thus unexpectedly when I asked him to pass the bread he responded:

"Yes. He has got a funny nose, hasn't he? That's Herb Ahlswede. But don't let him know you think so, because he is sensitive—terribly sensitive. Until I learned to be careful about it I used to make him mad when I spoke about it."

The forty-four caliber look which Comrade Ahlswede shot in his direction would have pierced anything but a rhinoceros-hide; but Pink Henwether rattled on obviously:

"It looks as if he drinks, don't it? But that can't be, because he ain't allowed to here at the Home. It's darn curious, and I've been puzzled about it ever since I come here eight years ago come next September."

Comrade Ahlswede half rose from his chair with a durable-looking ironstone-china cup in his hand from which he hastily gulped the coffee. I was torn between a desire to appear polite and an impulse for self-preservation which was urging me to get under the table, when Colonel Stewart rapped sharply on the table and a neighboring hand drew Ahlswede back into his chair.

"That's one thing I pride myself on," shouted Comrade Henwether, leaning closer so that I could hear him. "I am considerate, I am, and never hurt anybody's feelings if I can help it. No matter how funny a thing looks to me I shut up about it."

Then changing the subject hastily, he observed in a confidential shout: "That's a mighty pretty woman you got with you—the blond one, I mean. She ain't your wife, is she?"

I shook my head frantically.

"No? Well, I guess you are kind of sweet on her just the same. I'm old but I can tell from the way you looked at her and the way she looked back at you—Well, I miss my guess if there ain't a wedding pretty soon!"

Mrs. Hemmingway was blushing to her ears.

Pilk Henwether saw it.

"Notice how she's blushing?" he observed. "I wonder if she could have heard what I was saying to you. If you want her, my boy, go in and win. I sh-n't stop you. If I was a little

younger I am blessed if I wouldn't try it!"

Colonel Stewart rapped on the table again, but Pilk failed to hear it. Finally he sent one of the men who waited on the table with some kind of a message to my friend. The aide tapped Comrade Henwether on the shoulder and motioned toward the swinging door at the rear of the room.

Pilk rose reluctantly.

"I know what's the matter," he growled. "I got to eat my supper in the kitchen. 'most always do."

Then he laughed, a laugh of triumph.

"But I fooled him this time! I got all through before he caught me!"

Expostulating loudly with his guide, Comrade Pilk Henwether was led away past the swinging doors to the

ruffled pantalets which modestly covered the criticized hiatus between the tunic and the ankle. She had said that she would fix her costume so that her husband would not object, and she had succeeded—but at what a cost!

I had just barely become accustomed to Mrs. Hemmingway's concealed supports when Jim Cooper, the warrior, stalked on the stage. But what an altered gladiator he was! It was difficult to tell whether he was infantry or cavalry. His chest preceded him by at least eight inches. If you didn't look below the waist he would scare you to death.

He advanced to Galatea and told her in manly tones that he loved her. She spurned him, and when he tried to embrace her she spurned him again in the same place, rather roughly this



Before Our Horrified Gaze His Chest Sank Down Slowly and Lodged Conspicuously at His Waist

kitchen, where a loud rumble from time to time reassured us that he still retained the powers of speech.

CHAPTER V.

"All for the Best"

At eight o'clock the Soldiers' Home Band played an overture in the theatre, which was improvised from the stable at the rear of the institution.

I will do that band justice. We had not heard them at their best out in the open. To get the full benefit of their talent you have to get them in a small building where there is no escape either for you or the sound. Never have I heard so much music in so short a space of time.

The curtain rose on Galatea and her apprentice at work. I did not have to make up until the first act was pretty well along; so I stood in the wings to watch. Maryella was resplendent in a flowing Greek robe and Mrs. Hemmingway's pearls, which added just the final touch to the soft, glowing flesh of her neck.

When I had finished my approving inspection of Maryella I allowed my glance to stray to Mrs. Hemmingway herself. She was dressed as before, except that beneath the skirt of her tunic she was wearing voluminously

time. Something must have become unfastened or broken, because he stood for a minute panic-stricken and then before our horrified gaze his chest sank down slowly and lodged conspicuously at his waist.

It's lucky he wore a waistband or I hate to think of the consequences.

The plot of the piece was a trifle unfamiliar to most of our audience and the beauty of the lines was probably lost upon them.

"It ain't as funny as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'" vouchsafed Comrade Pilk Henwether to the slide-trombonist, "but we won't let them know we think so. That's a darn pretty woman—the one that's in love with the fat fellow."

I was getting ready to go out and break the big drum over his head when a number of his fellow veterans made him subside by placing their hands over his mouth.

They kept him quiet, too, until the beginning of the second act, when the curtain went up on me standing on the pedestal where the statue had been. Comrade Henwether took one look and exploded into merriment.

I nearly burned up with anger. If it hadn't been for the play I would have jumped across the foot-light and

choked the old fool. I tried to assure myself that it was all for the best; that I had to stand there because otherwise I would probably have had to appear in court for assault and battery the next morning; but it was difficult to do.

"You can't fool me," said Henwether in the tone of a subdued fog-horn. "That ain't no statute. That's the fat fellow that sat next to me at dinner. I like him. He's funny. I'm glad they've got a clown in this show."

We had to hold the performance while they put him out protesting. He delivered a Parthian shot at the door.

"Ha You'll be sorry you didn't let me stay. Wait until you want to play another piece. Where'll your band be without me to play the bass-drum? Besides, I thought something like this would happen so I hid all the music!"

Chuckling, he was yanked through the doors.

We picked up the threads of the story and tried to go ahead. I stood there with hands upraised and eyes fixed upon the spot where Maryella would enter. It was a hard pose to hold even for a few minutes, owing to the interruption I had been obliged to stand there in that strained position for considerable time. My arms began to feel like leaden weights and a spot on my shin started to itch. It seemed as if I couldn't possibly keep from bending over and scratching it. It was maddening!

"This is all for the best; it's all for the best," I kept repeating. "If it didn't itch I wouldn't know it was alive."

But that didn't stop it. It seems as if it would take forever for Maryella to make her entrance and kneel at the foot of the pedestal. How eagerly I waited for the words:

"It's my dearest wish that my beautiful statue should come to life."

I tried to think how it would be possible to make it plausible for the first move of a transformed statue to be that of scratching the shin.

At last she crossed the stage. She knelt. She looked up at me. She paused. It seemed as if the words would never come. What was the matter? I counted ten. At last I looked down at her. She was trying to speak but could not. Her eyes were fixed with terror on a spot above my head.—I turned quickly.

One of the borders or hanging pieces of scenery was ablaze! Yellow, licking flames were creeping over it like serpents. It had not gained much headway yet, but it was a difficult place to reach.

I leaped from the pedestal. My first thought was for those old men crowded into the improvised audience-chamber. Whatever happened, there must be no panic.

I stepped to the foot-lights.

"Colonel Stewart," I said, "will you please instruct your bugler to call assembly and draw your men up for inspection outside? Please hurry."

The colonel saw that there was some unusual reason for my request and did as I asked. The familiar blare of the bugle brought the old soldiers instantly to their feet and they filed out in orderly fashion at the word of command, not knowing what it was all about.

I told the women of the company to get out as quickly as they could just as they were, and asked the men to help me put out the fire if possible, and save whatever property we could.

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