

## Hummer's Bell

Michael Hummer was the first regular pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Iowa City, coming to the little frontier capital in 1841. A faded photograph reveals a man similar in type to Robert Lucas, the first Governor. The face is thin with high cheek bones and an aquiline nose. Heavy and irregular lines cross the high forehead, and the tight-lipped mouth is drawn down at the corners as if he is determined not to smile at any one, least of all at his own mistakes. The deep-set eyes, overshadowed by heavy arched eyebrows express a surprised and pathetic disappointment over his treatment by the world. A serious minded, visionary, and erratic character he seems, a man little fitted for the practical every day life of the frontier. A contemporary characterized him as "a man of vigorous intellect & an orator, but of *ungovernable temper.*"

It fell to the lot of Michael Hummer to organize the Presbyterian congregation at Iowa City and build a church in which they might worship and he entered upon his work with confidence and energy. The little group of Presbyterians, however, found it impossible to raise the five thousand dollars needed for the building and the pastor was sent east to raise money among the older and richer congregations, with the agreement that he was to receive his ex-

penses and ten per cent of the money collected. It appears that he made two or three trips on this mission and spent some two years and a half in the East.

Just how much money Mr. Hummer collected is not recorded, nor is it important in this connection. His sojourn in the East, however, had two important results. For one thing he secured the bell for the church building at Iowa City, a coveted possession of all early churches, and at the time of its installation, it is said, the only church bell west of the Mississippi River towns. Naturally the community was proud of its possession and the members of the Presbyterian congregation felt a thrill of pride as each Sabbath morning they listened to its call.

But the visits of Mr. Hummer in the East had another and less fortunate result. Always excitable and somewhat peculiar, an avowed infidel before his conversion, he now embraced Swedenborgianism and soon became a believer in spiritualism. These beliefs, together with his other peculiarities, soon made him unpopular with his congregation and charges of misconduct were preferred against him. He was tried before the presbytery, which he denounced as "a den of ecclesiastical thieves", and in 1848 was expelled from the ministry.

Before leaving Iowa City, however, he made a bargain with the church trustees by which he obtained possession of the communion service, two Bibles, the pulpit furniture, and other movable

property, as part payment of the church's debt to him for unpaid salary. In addition he also received a note for some \$650, secured by a mortgage on the real estate of the church.

Soon after this settlement, Michael Hummer went to Keokuk, where, it is said, he planned a spiritualistic temple or church. Perhaps it was the contemplation of this sanctuary which reminded him that he had forgotten the church bell at Iowa City. Here was an opportunity to revenge himself on the congregation which had rejected him and at the same time secure a bell for his new temple.

Accordingly Mr. Hummer returned to Iowa City late in the summer of 1848, accompanied by J. W. Margrave who had been one of the church trustees but had followed the former pastor to Keokuk. The two men went to the church and Mr. Hummer mounted into the belfry. He unfastened the bell and with ropes and tackle slowly lowered it to the ground.

But this took time and, Iowa City being a small place, a crowd soon collected to see what was happening. The two conspirators apparently did not anticipate so much publicity nor were they prepared for resistance. While Mr. Hummer was still in the belfry unfastening the tackle, Dr. Margrave left the bell unprotected and went off for the team and wagon which were to transport the bell to Keokuk. During his absence some of the spectators decided to play a practical joke on the would-be abductors of

the bell — and at the same time prevent the removal of the treasure from the city.

Having first removed the ladder, thus imprisoning the irate Mr. Hummer in the empty belfry, the Iowa City men, who, it is said, were not members of the congregation, quickly procured a team and having loaded the bell on the wagon, drove rapidly away leaving Mr. Hummer raving and gesticulating while the delighted small boys and other bystanders laughed and giped at his helpless wrath. Driven almost to frenzy by this treatment the former minister delivered an impromptu sermon more remarkable for its emphatic language than for logic of thought and drove home his points by hurling pieces of scantling, bricks, and loose boards at the crowd below which with characteristic American levity considered the demonstration a huge joke. At last Dr. Margrave returned and released his tormented chief, but the bell was gone, whither Michael Hummer did not know.

Escorted by a number of Iowa City admirers, the bell had been taken up the Iowa River to a point near the mouth of Rapid Creek, where it was sunk in deep water, chained to an elm tree, there to await the settlement of the difficulties between the ex-minister and the congregation. Here the curtain descends on the first act of the comedy.

The incident, of course, attracted much attention in the little frontier community and incidentally had an important effect on the career of one of the

observers. A young man who had watched the proceedings at the church and perhaps followed the chagrined Mr. Hummer about during the remainder of his stay in town, drew a crude cartoon of the events on a sheet of brown paper. This attracted the attention of a man who decided that the rude drawing showed unusual talent. He looked up the artist and assisted him in the development of his talent. This boy was George Yewell, afterwards a noted portrait painter. His cartoon is still preserved in the library of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

This drawing is in seven sections, the first picture portraying the scene at the church, where Michael Hummer is hurling missiles at his tormentors while small boys dance in glee and even one of the horses turns its head in astonishment at the commotion. This is labelled "The Outbreak". The remaining drawings are entitled "The Parson in a Rage", "The Ghost Appearing unto Michael", "Arrival of the Attorney", "Clairvoyance", "The Missionary Sermon", and "The Attorney 'Slopes'".

Below the drawing is a written explanation of the events in the following language:

And it came to pass that Michael did ascend unto the housetop and commence taking down the bell — And the multitude cried out unto him to show by what right he did so: but he did hold his peace.

Now when Michael had lowered the bell even unto the floor of the building lo! the people laid hands on it and carried it away. Then Michael waxed wroth and did say

many naughty things and did cast pieces of wood among the multitude who cried unto him to stop lest he should kill some one. Then Michael raised his voice aloud and cried "Verily, verily, will I kill more of you."

Now when evening was come Michael and his serving-man did go into a room in a public inn. And Michael's wrath was great and he did kick over the chairs and stools insomuch that his serving-man did quake and tremble.— And Michael bade him take a horse and ride to a distant town and hasten back with a cunning man who was a lawyer and then he would fix the rebellious multitude.

When the serving man had departed and night was come, Michael did retire to his bed and lo! about the middle watch he was awakened by a rushing noise. He leaped from his couch and saw a bright light at a far distance coming towards him. And Michael watched it and trembled. It suddenly became of the shape of a huge bell such an one as he did try to take the day past. And it stopped, and a huge face did appear on the top of the bell and did say unto him "*Michael! Michael!! Michael!!!*" And Michael answered "What wilt thou" and it answered "Verily verily will I visit thee in thy slumbers until thou forsake thy wickedness."

Now when the serving man did arrive in the morning with the lawyer, Michael was much down cast because of the visit of the ghost on the past night. Nevertheless they did set themselves to work to devise means to find where the multitude had hid the bell. Finally the serving man did remember that he had a sister who by the means of Clairvoyance could give unto them the information.

And straightway they journeyed unto Keokuk and did hire a learned man who did put the young woman in a

state of Clairvoyance. And then he spake to her saying, "Where is the bell." And she forthwith answered "Verily it is in a well five miles distant S. W. from the town wherein it was placed."

Now Michael's spirits did revive and straightway he sent the cunning man to the town to preach unto the natives and to threaten them.

And he did so and the multitude did laugh at and persecute him. Nevertheless he threatened the wrath of the law, and of the law-loving Michael, but they only laughed the greater until with a sad heart and sorrowful countenance he bade adieu and straightway mounted his horse and without a hat did journey no one knew whither and has not been heard of since.

And also of Michael and his serving-man nothing more can be found. Verily, verily, they shall have their reward.

The serving man in this narrative was probably J. W. Margrave, the attorney was Ralph P. Lowe, afterwards Governor of Iowa, who represented Michael Hummer in the litigation which followed, and the young woman seer was Mary Margrave, a sister of J. W. Margrave. Much seeking failed to reveal the presence of the bell in the Iowa City wells, as suggested by the clairvoyant. It was also rumored that it was buried under the Old Capitol, but the bell was not found.

In the meantime the litigation concerning the church debt dragged on until 1853 when the trustees made a settlement with Mr. Hummer, for whom a guardian had been appointed on the ground that he was "a Monomaniac upon the subject of Communi-

cations with the Spirits of another world . . . . and is *therefore* incompetent to take care of his property". By this agreement Hummer received four hundred dollars in cash, one hundred dollars in one year with interest and costs up to fifty dollars. The missing bell was, however, charged against him so that he became legally the owner of the bell.

But where was the bell? When some of its abductors went to get it, the bell was gone — like many another hidden treasure — and it was not until a number of years afterwards that the mystery was explained by news from Salt Lake City. According to this story, two Mormons who were living in Iowa City at the time and knew the whereabouts of the bell decided to take it with them on their trip to Utah. They resurrected the bell, packed it in sawdust, headed it up in a hogshead, loaded it on an ox wagon, and made off with it across the plains. The clapper, however, was left behind rusting in a cellar.

Having arrived at Salt Lake City the men sold the bell to Brigham Young. Some time later a rumor of the missing bell at Iowa City having reached Salt Lake City, Brigham Young instructed one of his clerks who had a brother at Iowa City to write to him that the owners of the bell might have it, if they proved their ownership and paid the expenses of its return, or he would pay them a "reasonable & fair" price for it. This notice seems to have aroused no enthusiasm at Iowa City. Probably they considered

that the bell now belonged to Michael Hummer. In 1868 Brigham Young himself wrote to S. M. Osmond, then the minister at Iowa City, that the bell "is still laying here idle, as it always has done, and is at your disposal on the same conditions, whenever you please to send for it, accompanied with sufficient evidence that you are authorized to receive it for the congregation for whom it was manufactured". An attempt was made to raise funds for the return of the bell, but the plan failed and the bell remained with the Mormons.

The story of its career, however, has been told and retold for over seventy years. It has even been the inspiration of a song, which was evolved in the following manner. One evening while a group of lawyers were assembled in the bar room at Swan's Hotel in Iowa City, John P. Cook announced that he had prepared a parody on Moore's "Those Evening Bells" and proceeded to sing his composition. The following evening a rival appeared in the person of William H. Tuthill of Tipton who had written three additional verses. These also were sung by Mr. Cook. Here then is the story of the bell as told in song.

"Ah, Hummer's bell! Ah, Hummer's bell!  
How many a tale of woe 'twould tell,  
Of Hummer driving up to town  
To take the brazen jewel down,  
And when high up in his belfre-e,

They moved the ladder, yes, sir-e-e;  
Thus while he towered aloft, they say,  
The bell took wings and flew away.

“ Ah, Hummer’s bell! Ah, Hummer’s bell!  
The bard thy history shall tell;  
How at the East, by Hummer’s sleight,  
Donation, gift and widow’s mite,  
Made up the sum that purchased *thee*,  
And placed *him* in the ministry;  
But funds grew low, while dander riz,  
Thy clapper stopped, and so did his.

“ Ah, Hummer’s bell! Ah, Hummer’s bell!  
We’ve heard thy last, thy funeral knell,  
And what an aching void is left,  
Of bell and Hummer both bereft.  
*Thou* deeply sunk in running stream,  
*Him* in a Swedenborgian dream,  
Both are submerged, both, to our cost,  
Alike to sense and reason lost.

“ Ah, Hummer’s bell! Ah, Hummer’s bell!  
Hidden unwisely, but too well;  
Alas, thou’rt gone, thy silver tone  
No more responds to Hummer’s groan;  
But yet remains one source of hope,  
For Hummer left a fine bell rope,  
Which may be used, if such our luck,  
To noose our friend at Keokuk.”

RUTH A. GALLAHER