

# A Bell for Adano

By John Hersey

THE STORY THUS FAR: The American troops arrived at Adano, a seaport in Italy, with Major Victor Joppolo, the Amgot officer in charge. Sergeant Borth, an MP, was in charge of security. The Major set out immediately to win the friendship and confidence of the citizens and vowed to replace the town bell, which the Germans had taken. He met the priest, attended mass and appointed Mercurio Salvatore as town crier. Gargano, chief of the Carabinieri, shoved his way to the head of the bakery line. When Carmelina, wife of the lazy Fatta, objected, the Chief marched her off to the Major, who turned her free. He informed the citizens that all were equal and must take their turn.

## CHAPTER VI

The cart groaned. The right wheel crumbled around the axle. The whole weight of the thing rolled slowly over into the ditch, and the shafts twisted and upset the mule, and the mule, which had always feared ditches on the right, screamed to find itself falling into what it had feared.

Errante hit the earth hard. He woke up, but what with his dazedness, his drunkenness, his surprise and his natural stupidity, he was unable to do anything except roar wordlessly.

General Marvin was still roaring too. "Serve him right," he shouted. "Holding up traffic. Trying to stop the invasion."

A new fury rushed up the General's cheeks. "Middleton," he shouted, "shoot that mule."

Colonel Middleton's blood froze. He shouted back: "Do you think it's wise, sir?"

The General shouted: "What's that? What's that?"

Colonel Middleton knew it was hopeless but he shouted again: "I said, do you think it is wise, sir?" Trying to reason with any man, and especially with this man at two hundred feet and the top of one's lungs was not rewarding work.

The General shouted: "Middleton, you trying to stop the invasion too? Do what I say."

So Colonel Middleton pulled out his Colt and fired three shots into the head of the screaming mule.

All this was accomplished before Errante Gaetano was able to shape his roaring into words. He stood there in absolute amazement at the shooting.

General Marvin shouted: "Let's go, can't spend all day here."

The men got back into the armored car and the seep. As they started up, General Marvin said: "Got to teach these people a lesson. Take me to the mayor of this town, what is this town anyhow?"

And they drove off, leaving Errante sobbing on the flank of his mule, lying with his arms around the neck of the mule which had had a sense of the middle but no sense of urgency.

The General's armored car pulled up in front of the Palazzo di Citta. Lieutenant Byrd ran across the wide sidewalk and up the marble stairs and burst into Major Joppolo's office. He interrupted the Major in the middle of a conversation with Gargano, the Chief of the Carabinieri.

"General Marvin's downstairs and wants to see you," the Lieutenant said. "He's mad as hell, so you better hurry."

"General Marvin," said Major Joppolo, and the tone of his voice was not of delight. Though he had never met the General, he had heard much about him. "I'll be right down."

Lieutenant Byrd turned and ran downstairs. Major Joppolo absently arranged the papers on his desk in neat piles. Then he stood up and walked out of his office. Half way down the marble stairs he realized that he was out of uniform. He had heard stories of General Marvin's insistence on correct uniform. Here he was in pink pants and khaki shirt, when he was supposed to be in woolens. He was suddenly very frightened, and he turned and began walking up the stairs again, trying to figure out what to do, how to get into proper uniform.

Colonel Middleton ran to the foot of the marble stairs and shouted up: "Hey, you, what do you mean by keeping the General waiting?"

"Yes, sir," Major Joppolo said. "Be right down."

There was nothing to do. He ran down the stairs.

When Major Joppolo reached the armored car, the General was sitting with his left arm raised in front of him, glaring at his wrist watch.

Major Joppolo saluted. General Marvin roared: "One minute and twenty seconds. You've been keeping me waiting one minute and twenty seconds. Do you think I have all day to wait for you? Who are you, anyway?"

"Major Joppolo, sir, senior civil affairs officer, town of Adano, sir."

General Marvin remembered the cart and was apparently too angry even to notice Major Joppolo's uniform. "Major, these Italian carts are holding up our whole invasion. Keep them out of this town. Don't you let another cart come across that bridge back there into this town. What the hell is this town, anyway?"

"Adano, sir, town of Adano."

"Adano. Keep the carts out of this town, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir, I'll take care of that right away."

The General shouted: "Right

away? That's not soon enough for me."

"Sir, I'll go right up and call the M.P.'s and tell them about it."

"That's not soon enough. I want action. No more carts. Adano's the name of this town, remember that, Middleton, Adano. No more carts at all, Major, do you understand? What are you standing there gawking about? Action. Let's get going, let's get out of here, do you think I have all day?"

And before Major Joppolo could even salute, the armored car had roared away.

By the time he reached his desk again, Major Joppolo realized what the consequences of keeping the carts out of town would be. He knew very well how essential they were to the life of the place.

With a heavy heart he cranked his field telephone, asked for Rowboat Blue Forward, got the ear of Captain Purvis, head of the M.P.'s in Adano, and ordered him in the name of General Marvin, to keep all carts out of Adano, to stop them at the bridge on the east and at the sulphur refinery on the west.

Then he called for Zito, his usher, and asked him to assemble all the officials of the town in his office.

When they were all in, Major Joppolo stood at his desk and said: "I have promised to tell you every important thing which the American authorities decide to do in this town. I do not want this to be a town of mysteries. In a democracy one of the most important things is for everyone to know as much as possible about what is going on."

"The American authorities have decided that because of military necessities it will no longer be possible for mule carts to come into the streets of town."

Major Joppolo could see his audience suck in its collective breath.

General Marvin roared: "One minute and twenty seconds!"

He said: "I am not happy to have to announce this decision. It is because of military necessities. I am sorry. That is all."

The officials of Adano, a comic-looking collection, turned sadly to go. They did not protest. They had learned during the years of Fascism how to swallow their protests. But Major Joppolo could tell that they were not with him, that for the first time in nine days they were against him.

Before the first of them reached the door, Major Joppolo said: "I wish to tell you that I do not have that in my power to have this unjust order revoked."

And when the comic-looking officials of Adano went out of the door of the Major's office, they were still sad but they were for him.

The Major worried all day about the order and wondered what he could do about it. He slept very badly during the night, because of his worry.

Early in the morning, Zito, the little usher, came up to his desk and said: "Mister Major, there are three men to see you about the carts."

Because it worried him, the Major snapped back angrily at Zito: "What do they want about the carts?"

"That is something they wish to tell you, Mister Major," Zito said. "It is something they did not tell me."

"Well, show them in."

The three Italians were evidently poor but respected men. There was a kind of democracy in their coming to see the Major: they were the chosen delegates of all the cartmen, to argue this thing out.

They all had old, clean coats on, and they all clutched cloth caps in their hands. Zito brought three chairs forward, and they sat in a half circle opposite the Major.

The Major pointed with a fountain pen at one of the men and said in Italian: "You. What is your name?"

The man was about sixty. His hair was pure white but the skin of

his forehead, though furrowed, was the skin of a tough young man. He jumped to his feet, twisting his cap in his strong hands, and he shouted: "Afronti Pietro, Mister Major."

Then he gave the Major a Fascist salute.

"Speak softly here," the Major said. "I am not deaf." He leaned and spoke to the other two men. "Are you deaf?"

"No, Mister Major," they both said.

"Then speak softly," he said to the strong-voiced man. "What do you desire?"

"I desire," the old man said, trying to keep his voice quiet, "to raise the question of the carts coming into the town of Adano. I desire to tell you, Mister Major, that these carts are most dear to us. I wish to tell you about my cart. It has two wooden wheels, Mister Major."

"I have seen these carts. It is not necessary to describe the carts."

Afronti gave another Fascist salute. "One day last summer," he said in a louder voice, "I drove my cart all the way to Gioia di Monti, and all the way the wheels sang a song which was also a prophecy. At the time none of my friends would believe this song, would you, my friends?" And he turned to the other two.

The two nodded their heads, but the expression of their faces was blank because they were thinking of the speeches they were about to make.

Afronti's voice grew louder and louder, as if he were outdoors. "Do you wish to hear this song, Mister Major?"

Major Joppolo said: "No, please come to the point."

Afronti stepped back. He unbuttoned his coat. He held his cap out at arm's length and he sang. It was not exactly a tune he sang, but his voice went up and down, very loud. This is what he sang: "The Americans are coming here, Signor Afronti,

The Americans are very just men, Especially with regard to carts."

Major Joppolo said: "Do not joke with me, old man. We have no time for humor this morning. I want to help you if you have something reasonable to ask of me. Come to the point."

Afronti shouted: "The music has stopped. There is no more music."

The Major said: "Please do not shout here. You seem to think that Americans are deaf men. We are not deaf. Do not shout."

Afronti said very softly: "The music has stopped, there is no more music, Mister Major. Thank you, Mister Major." And he sat down abruptly.

The Major lifted his pen and pointed it at the next man. "And you," he said, "your name."

This was a man who seemed a little backward. He was timid in the way he stood up and he did not twist his cap with any enthusiasm, as the others did. His voice was slow and he had to think a long time before he could say his own name. Finally it came out: "Erba Carlo, Mister Major."

"And you desire?"

Erba stopped and thought. His eyes wandered. He looked at the Saint of the Telephone. He looked at the Red Cross badge on the breast of Princess Marie Jose. He thought and thought, but he could not think what it was he desired. He had forgotten his speech entirely.

After an embarrassing pause, the other two left off thinking about their own speeches and came to the assistance of Erba.

"Tell him," one of them said, "about the water carts."

A look of vast relief came over the face of Erba. "It is about the water carts, Mister Major."

"Yes?"

Erba looked at the huge painting over the Major's head. He studied many details of the painting. But he could not remember exactly what it was about the water carts that he wished to say.

The other of his friends said: "Describe your cart, Erba."

Erba said: "It is big. Outside it is dirty but inside it is clean. It holds water. My friends drink the water."

After this sustained effort, Erba's face was covered with perspiration. At first he looked proud and triumphant, but then he could see another hurdle coming.

Major Joppolo was frantic with impatience, but he said: "Yes, my friend, tell me some more about the water cart." This was a quality in the Major that came out time and again: he was always gentle with those who evoked impatience, and he was always impatient with those who begged for gentleness.

"The thirst," said one of Erba's friends, "the great thirst."

Erba turned to the Major with an expression of delight which belied the seriousness of what he was to say. He was delighted because it was all coming back to him now. He said: "You will not let my cart across the bridge. There is no water in Adano without my cart and the other water carts. There is a thirst in Adano. Since yesterday morning at eleven o'clock there is a great thirst. Carmelina who is the wife of the lazy Fatta says that her daughter will die of the thirst. It is all because of the bridge and the carts . . . and the—"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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