# The Friendly Call

O. Henry

When I used to sell hardware in the West, I often “made” a little town called Saltillo, in Colorado. I was always certain of securing a small or a large order from Simon Bell, who kept a general store there. Bell was one of those six-foot, low-voiced products, formed from a union of the West and the South. I liked him. To look at him you would think he should be robbing stage coaches or juggling gold mines with both hands; but he would sell you a paper of tacks or a spool of thread, with ten times more patience and courtesy than any saleslady in a city department store.

I had a twofold object in my last visit to Saltillo. One was to sell a bill of goods; the other to advise Bell of a chance that I knew of by which I was certain he could make a small fortune.

In Mountain City, a town on the Union Pacific, five times larger than Saltillo, a mercantile firm was about to go to the wall. It had a lively and growing custom, but was on the edge of dissolution and ruin. Mismanagement and the gambling habits of one of the partners explained it. The condition of the firm was not yet public property. I had my knowledge of it from a private source. I knew that, if the ready cash were offered, the stock and good will could be bought for about one fourth their value.

On arriving in Saltillo I went to Bell’s store. He nodded to me, smiled his broad, lingering smile, went on leisurely selling some candy to a little girl, then came around the counter and shook hands.

“Well,” he said (his invariably preliminary jocosity fit every call I made), “I suppose you are out here making kodak pictures of the mountains. It’s the wrong time of the year to buy any hardware, of course.”

I told Bell about the bargain in Mountain City. If he wanted to take advantage of it, I would rather have missed a sale than have him overstocked in Saltillo.

“It sounds good,” he said, with enthusiasm. “I’d like to branch out and do a bigger business, and I’m obliged to you for mentioning it. But—well, you come and stay at my house tonight and I’ll think about it.”

It was then after sundown and time for the larger stores in Saltillo to close. The clerks in Bell’s put away their books, whirled the combination of the safe, put on their coats and hats and left for their homes. Bell padlocked the big, double wooden front doors, and we stood, for a moment, breathing the keen, fresh mountain air coming across the foothills.

A big man walked down the street and stopped in front of the high porch of the store. His long, black moustache, black eyebrows, and curly black hair contrasted queerly with his light, pink complexion, which belonged, by rights, to a blonde. He was about forty, and wore a white vest, a white hat, a watch chain made of five-dollar gold pieces linked together, and a rather well-fitting two-piece gray suit of the cut that college boys of eighteen are wont to affect. He glanced at me distrustfully, and then at Bell with coldness and, I thought, something of enmity in his expression.

“Well,” asked Bell, as if he were addressing a stranger, “did you fix up that matter?”

“Did I!” the man answered, in a resentful tone. “What do you suppose I’ve been here two weeks for? The business is to be settled tonight. Does that suit you, or have you got something to kick about?”

“It’s all right,” said Bell. “I knew you’d do it.”

“Of course, you did,” said the magnificent stranger. “Haven’t I done it before?”

“You have,” admitted Bell. “And so have I. How do you find it at the hotel?”

“Rocky grub. But I ain’t kicking. Say—can you give me any pointers about managing that—affair? It’s my first deal in that line of business, you know.”

“No, I can’t,” answered Bell, after some thought. “I’ve tried all kinds of ways. You’ll have to try some of your own.”

“Tried soft soap?”

“Barrels of it.”

“Tried a saddle girth with a buckle on the end of it?”

“Never none. Started to once; and here’s what I got.”

Bill held out his right hand. Even in the deepening twilight, I could see on the back of it a long, white scar that might have been made by a claw or a knife or some sharp-edged tool.

“Oh, well,” said the florid man, carelessly, “I’ll know what to do later on.”

He walked away without another word. When he had gone ten steps he turned and called to Bell:

“You keep well out of the way when the goods are delivered, so there won’t be any hitch in the business.”

“All right,” answered Bell, “I’ll attend to my end of the line.”

This talk was scarcely clear in its meaning to me; but as it did not concern me, I did not let it weigh upon my mind. But the singularity of the other man’s appearance lingered with me for a while; and as we walked toward Bell’s house I remarked to him:

“Your customer seems to be a surly kind of fellow—not one that you’d like to be snowed in with in a camp on a hunting trip.”

“He is that,” assented Bell, heartily. “He reminds me of a rattlesnake that’s been poisoned by the bite of a tarantula.”

“He doesn’t look like a citizen of Saltillo,” I went on.

“No,” said Bell, “he lives in Sacramento. He’s down here on a little business trip. His name is George Ringo, and he’s been my best friend—in fact the only friend I ever had—for twenty years.”

I was too surprised to make any further comment.

Bell lived in a comfortable, plain, square, two-story white house on the edge of the little town. I waited in the parlor—a room depressingly genteel—furnished with red plush, straw matting, looped-up lace curtains, and a glass case large enough to contain a mummy, full of mineral specimens.

While I waited, I heard, upstairs, that unmistakable sound instantly recognized the world over—a bickering woman’s voice, rising as her anger and fury grew. I could hear, between the gusts, the temperate rumble of Bell’s tones, striving to oil the troubled waters.

The storm subsided soon; but not before I had heard the woman say, in a lower, concentrated tone, rather more carrying than her high-pitched railings: “This is the last time. I tell you—the last time. Oh, you WILL understand.”

The household seemed to consist of only Bell and his wife and a servant or two. I was introduced to Mrs. Bell at supper.

At first sight she seemed to be a handsome woman, but I soon perceived that her charm had been spoiled. An uncontrolled petulance, I thought, and emotional egotism, an absence of poise and a habitual dissatisfaction had marred her womanhood. During the meal, she showed that false gayety, spurious kindliness and reactionary softness that mark the woman addicted to tantrums. Withal, she was a woman who might be attractive to many men.

After supper, Bell and I took our chairs outside, set them on the grass in the moonlight and smoked. The full moon is a witch. In her light, truthful men dig up for you nuggets of purer gold; while liars squeeze out brighter colors from the tubes of their invention. I saw Bell’s broad, slow smile come out upon his face and linger there.

“I reckon you think George and me are a funny kind of friends,” he said. “The fact is we never did take much interest in each other’s company. But his idea and mine, of what a friend should be, was always synonymous and we lived up to it, strict, all these years. Now, I’ll give you an idea of what our idea is.

“A man don’t need but one friend. The fellow who drinks your liquor and hangs around you, slapping you on the back and taking up your time, telling you how much he likes you, ain’t a friend, even if you did play marbles at school and fish in the same creek with him. As long as you don’t need a friend one of that kind may answer. But a friend, to my mind, is one you can deal with on a strict reciprocity basis like me and George have always done.

“A good many years ago, him and me was connected in a number of ways. We put our capital together and run a line of freight wagons in New Mexico, and we mined some and gambled a few. And then, we got into trouble of one or two kinds; and I reckon that got us on a better understandable basis than anything else did, unless it was the fact that we never had much personal use for each other’s ways. George is the vainest man I ever see, and the biggest brag. He could blow the biggest geyser in the Yosemite valley back into its hole with one whisper. I am a quiet man, and fond of studiousness and thought. The more we used to see each other, personally, the less we seemed to like to be together. If he ever had slapped me on the back and snivelled over me like I’ve seen men do to what they called their friends, I know I’d have had a rough-and-tumble with him on the spot. Same way with George. He hated my ways as bad as I did his. When we were mining, we lived in separate tents, so as not to intrude our obnoxiousness on each other.

“But after a long time, we begun to know each of us could depend on the other when we were in a pinch, up to his last dollar, word of honor or perjury, bullet, or drop of blood we had in the world. We never even spoke of it to each other, because that would have spoiled it. But we tried it out, time after time, until we came to know. I’ve grabbed my hat and jumped a freight and rode 200 miles to identify him when he was about to be hung by mistake, in Idaho, for a train robber. Once, I laid sick of typhoid in a tent in Texas, without a dollar or a change of clothes, and sent for George in Boise City. He came on the next train. The first thing he did before speaking to me, was to hang up a little looking glass on the side of the tent and curl his moustache and rub some hair dye on his head. His hair is naturally a light reddish. Then he gave me the most scientific cussing I ever had, and took off his coat.

“‘If you wasn’t a Moses-meek little Mary’s lamb, you wouldn’t have been took down this way,’ says he. ‘Haven’t you got gumption enough not to drink swamp water or fall down and scream whenever you have a little colic or feel a mosquito bite you?’ He made me a little mad.

“‘You’ve got the bedside manners of a Piute medicine man,’ says I. ‘And I wish you’d go away and let me die a natural death. I’m sorry I sent for you.’

“‘I’ve a mind to,’ says George, ‘for nobody cares whether you live or die. But now I’ve been tricked into coming, I might as well stay until this little attack of indigestion or nettle rash or whatever it is, passes away.’

“Two weeks afterward, when I was beginning to get around again, the doctor laughed and said he was sure that my friend’s keeping me mad all the time did more than his drugs to cure me.

“So that’s the way George and me was friends. There wasn’t any sentiment about it—it was just give and take, and each of us knew that the other was ready for the call at any time.

“I remember, once, I played a sort of joke on George, just to try him. I felt a little mean about it afterward, because I never ought to have doubted he’d do it.

“We was both living in a little town in the San Luis valley, running some flocks of sheep and a few cattle. We were partners, but, as usual, we didn’t live together. I had an old aunt, out from the East, visiting for the summer, so I rented a little cottage. She soon had a couple of cows and some pigs and chickens to make the place look like home. George lived alone in a little cabin half a mile out of town.

“One day a calf that we had, died. That night I broke its bones, dumped it into a coarse sack and tied it up with wire. I put on an old shirt, tore a sleeve ‘most out of it, and the collar half off, tangled up my hair, put some red ink on my hands and spashed some of it over my shirt and face. I must have looked like I’d been having the fight of my life. I put the sack in a wagon and drove out to George’s cabin. When I halloed, he came out in a yellow dressing-gown, a Turkish cap and patent leather shoes. George always was a great dresser.

“I dumped the bundle to the ground.

“Sh-sh!’ says I, kind of wild in my way. ‘Take that and bury it, George, out somewhere behind your house—bury it just like it is. And don—’

“‘Don’t get excited,’ says George. ‘And for the Lord’s sake go and wash your hands and face and put on a clean shirt.’

“And he lights his pipe, while I drive away at a gallop. The next morning he drops around to our cottage, where my aunt was fiddling with her flowers and truck in the front yard. He bends himself and bows and makes compliments as be could do, when so disposed, and begs a rose bush from her, saying he had turned up a little land back of his cabin, and wanted to plant something on it by way of usefulness and ornament. So my aunt, flattered, pulls up one of her biggest by the roots and gives it to him. Afterward I see it growing where he planted it, in a place where the grass had been cleared off and the dirt levelled. But neither George nor me ever spoke of it to each other again.”

The moon rose higher, possibly drawing water from the sea, pixies from their dells and certainly more confidences from Simms Bell, the friend of a friend.

“There come a time, not long afterward,” he went on, “when I was able to do a good turn for George Ringo. George had made a little pile of money in beeves and he was up in Denver, and he showed up when I saw him, wearing deer-skin vests, yellow shoes, clothes like the awnings in front of drug stores, and his hair dyed so blue that it looked black in the dark. He wrote me to come up there, quick—that he needed me, and to bring the best outfit of clothes I had. I had ‘em on when I got the letter, so I left on the next train. George was—”

Bell stopped for half a minute, listening intently. “I thought I heard a team coming down the road,” he explained. “George was at a summer resort on a lake near Denver and was putting on as many airs as he knew how. He had rented a little two-room cottage, and had a Chihauhau dog and a hammock and eight different kinds of walking sticks.

“‘Simms,’ he says to me, ‘there’s a widow woman here that’s pestering the soul out of me with her intentions. I can’t get out of her way. It ain’t that she ain’t handsome and agreeable, in a sort of style, but her attentions is serious, and I ain’t ready for to marry nobody and settle down. I can’t go to no festivity nor sit on the hotel piazza or mix in any of the society roundups, but what she cuts me out of the herd and puts her daily brand on me. I like this here place,’ goes on George, ‘and I’m making a hit here in the most censorious circles, so I don’t want to have to run away from it. So I sent for you.’

“‘What do you want me to do?’ I asks George.

“‘Why,’ says he, ‘I want you to head her off. I want you to cut me out. I want you to come to the rescue. Suppose you seen a wildcat about for to eat me, what would you do?’

“Go for it,’ says I.

“‘Correct,’ says George. ‘Then go for this Mrs. De Clinton the same.’

“‘How am I to do it?’ I asks. ‘By force and awfulness or in some gentler and less lurid manner?’

“Court her,’ George says, ‘get her off my trail. Feed her. Take her out in boats. Hang around her and stick to her. Get her mashed on you if you can. Some women are pretty big fools. Who knows but what she might take a fancy to you.’

“‘Had you ever thought,’ I asks, ‘of repressing your fatal fascinations in her presence; of squeezing a harsh note in the melody of your siren voice, of veiling your beauty—in other words, of giving her the bounce yourself?’

“George sees no essence of sarcasm in my remark. He twists his moustache and looks at the points of his shoes.

“‘Well, Simms,’ he said, ‘you know how I am about the ladies. I can’t hurt none of their feelings. I’m, by nature, polite and esteemful of their intents and purposes. This Mrs. De Clinton don’t appear to be the suitable sort for me. Besides, I ain’t a marrying man by all means.’

“‘All right,’ said I, ‘I’ll do the best I can in the case.’

“So I bought a new outfit of clothes and a book on etiquette and made a dead set for Mrs. De Clinton. She was a fine-looking woman, cheerful and gay. At first, I almost had to hobble her to keep her from loping around at George’s heels; but finally I got her so she seemed glad to go riding with me and sailing on the lake; and she seemed real hurt on the mornings when I forgot to send her a bunch of flowers. Still, I didn’t like the way she looked at George, sometimes, out of the corner of her eye. George was having a fine time now, going with the whole bunch just as he pleased. Yes’m,” continued Bell, “she certainly was a fine-looking woman at that time. She’s changed some since, as you might have noticed at the supper table.”

“What!” I exclaimed.

“I married Mrs. De Clinton,” went on Bell. “One evening while we were up at the lake. When I told George about it, he opened his mouth and I thought be was going to break our traditions and say something grateful, but he swallowed it back.

“‘All right,’ says he, playing with his dog. ‘I hope you won’t have too much trouble. Myself, I’m not never going to marry.’

“That was three years ago,” said Bell. “We came here to live. For a year we got along medium fine. And then everything changed. For two years I’ve been having something that rhymes first-class with my name. You heard the row upstairs this evening? That was a merry welcome compared to the usual average. She’s tired of me and of this little town life and she rages all day, like a panther in a cage. I stood it until two weeks ago and then I had to send out The Call. I located George in Sacramento. He started the day he got my wire.”

Mrs. Bell came out of the house swiftly toward us. Some strong excitement or anxiety seemed to possess her, but she smiled a faint hostess smile, and tried to keep her voice calm.

“The dew is falling,” she said, “and it’s growing rather late. Wouldn’t you gentlemen rather come into the house?”

Bell took some cigars from his pocket and answered: “It’s most too fine a night to turn in yet. I think Mr. Ames and I will walk out along the road a mile or so and have another smoke. I want to talk with him about some goods that I want to buy.”

“Up the road or down the road?” asked Mrs. Bell.

“Down,” said Bell.

I thought she breathed a sigh of relief.

When we had gone a hundred yards and the house became concealed by trees, Bell guided me into the thick grove that lined the road and back through them toward the house again. We stopped within twenty yards of the house, concealed by the dark shadows. I wondered at this maneuver. And then I heard in the distance coming down the road beyond the house, the regular hoofbeats of a team of horses. Bell held his watch in a ray of moonlight.

“On time, within a minute,” he said. “That’s George’s way.”

The team slowed up as it drew near the house and stopped in a patch of black shadows. We saw the figure of a woman carrying a heavy valise move swiftly from the other side of the house, and hurry to the waiting vehicle. Then it rolled away briskly in the direction from which it had come.

I looked at Bell inquiringly, I suppose. I certainly asked him no question.

“She’s running away with George,” said Bell, simply. “He’s kept me posted about the progress of the scheme all along. She’ll get a divorce in six months and then George will marry her. He never helps anybody halfway. It’s all arranged between them.”

I began to wonder what friendship was, after all.

When we went into the house, Bell began to talk easily on other subjects; and I took his cue. By and by the big chance to buy out the business in Mountain City came back to my mind and I began to urge it upon him. Now that he was free, it would be easier for him to make the move; and he was sure of a splendid bargain.

Bell was silent for some minutes, but when I looked at him I fancied that he was thinking of something else—that he was not considering the project.

“Why, no, Mr. Ames,” he said, after a while, “I can’t make that deal. I’m awful thankful to you, though, for telling me about it. But I’ve got to stay here. I can’t go to Mountain City.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Missis Bell,” he replied, “won’t live in Mountain City, She hates the place and wouldn’t go there. I’ve got to keep right on here in Saltillo.”

“Mrs. Bell!” I exclaimed, too puzzled to conjecture what he meant.

“I ought to explain,” said Bell. “I know George and I know Mrs. Bell. He’s impatient in his ways. He can’t stand things that fret him, long, like I can. Six months, I give them—six months of married life, and there’ll be another disunion. Mrs. Bell will come back to me. There’s no other place for her to go. I’ve got to stay here and wait. At the end of six months, I’ll have to grab a satchel and catch the first train. For George will be sending out The Call.”