

Saved by the (paper Christmas) bell

By Charles Pinning

‘T was the week of Christmas and it was off to the library to return books and pick out something new. It was cold and blowing snow, but God forbid that *mon mere* would allow a library book to become overdue.

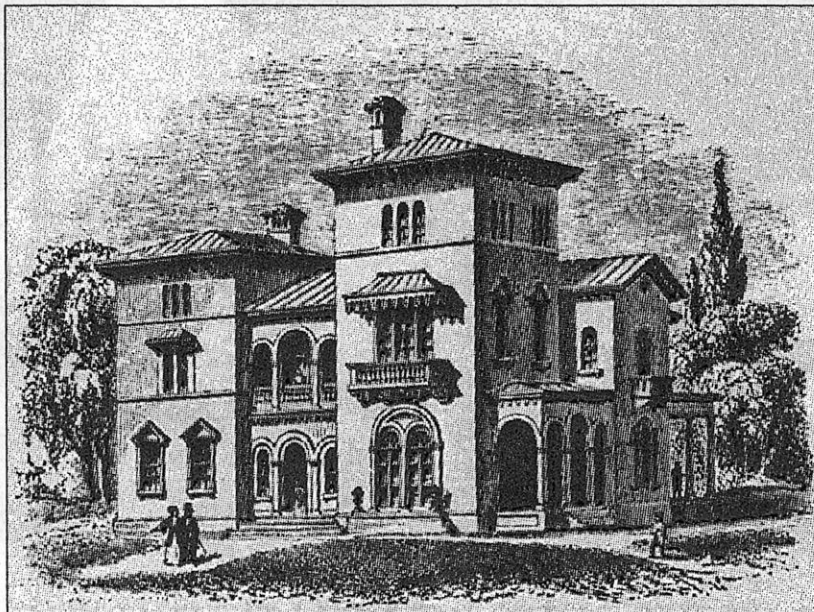
Hustling our barrel buttons and wool into the station wagon, we rumbled toward Bellevue Avenue, parking in the shopping center lot in front of Cherry and Webb, trudging around the corner to the library with our books.

The Newport Public Library was at that time located in an Italianate mansion, whimsical and stern at the same time, at the top of a hill overlooking the harbor. Today it’s a senior center and the new library is a brutish thing, squatting at the bottom of the hill.

We entered, glittering, and while my mother returned the books, I climbed up the central staircase to get closer to the enormous red bell that was suspended from the ceiling.

It was huge and pleated, one of those paper bells that comes flat and accordions out. Only this was industrial strength, probably 4 feet high and 10 feet around, a giant Christmas hoop skirt of a bell, hanging on fishing line from a gold hook.

Why, if I leaned a little forward over the railing, I could ... and I did. I lifted the loop off the hook and freed the bell, watching it float silently straight down, where it landed on top of the librarian



The old library in Newport. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

sitting at the front desk in the middle of the foyer.

Her unbridled shriek rang through the building, sending me melting into the first available room of books, grabbing a volume entitled “Diseases of the Horse,” and plunking myself down at a long table.

Soon, I heard my mother’s voice calling me. But I was studying so hard that when she came into the room I could hardly look up.

“I think we had better go now,” she said.

Book in hand, I stood up.

“Leave it,” she said.

She led me downstairs, where a group of people surrounded the librarian, who lay crumpled on the floor as if shot. We didn’t pause but put on our hats and swept out the door.

We said nothing rolling slowly down Bellevue and turning onto Kay Street. My mother began rocking back and forth, and suddenly burst out laughing.

“Oh, Dear God! Dear God! ... Get a stick of gum out my purse, please, sweetie.”

She placed the back of one hand in a red driving glove up against her mouth and began shaking with uncontrollable laughter. She stopped for a moment and then suddenly started up again.

“Dear God ... Dear God,” she repeated and then the laughing began again.

Before we got out of the car, Mom got serious and said, “Never tell anybody about this. Do you hear me? Promise me that. Do you promise?”

“I promise,” I said, gripping the

door handle.

“You’re a good boy,” said my mother, and then we exited the vehicle.

I got my bicycle under the tree that Christmas, glistening and perfect, just as I’d imagined. And nothing was ever mentioned about the librarian upon whom the bell fell. If I heard something about someone’s untimely death, I blocked it out. Newport was a small town back then, and the librarian could have been anyone: a former classmate of my mother’s at Rogers High; the sister of the man who owned the dry cleaners; anyone.

I have at times been tempted to delve into old records, newspaper obituaries, but haven’t.

Once a swan suddenly swooped down upon me when I fell water skiing at dusk on a mountain lake, and I sensed what the bell must have felt like to her, the amorphous presence, the shock. I’ve entered dark rooms and felt a specter ...

I used to remember the incident and feel badly every Christmas, especially at the sight of a red pleated bell. But now, with the passage of more years, I realize that sometimes bad things can be for the best. Who knows?

It is my annual Christmas present to myself, that wish that I did something good. God knows, I intended nothing bad. I was only a boy, curious to see what it would be like, the bell floating.

—Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, is a Providence novelist.