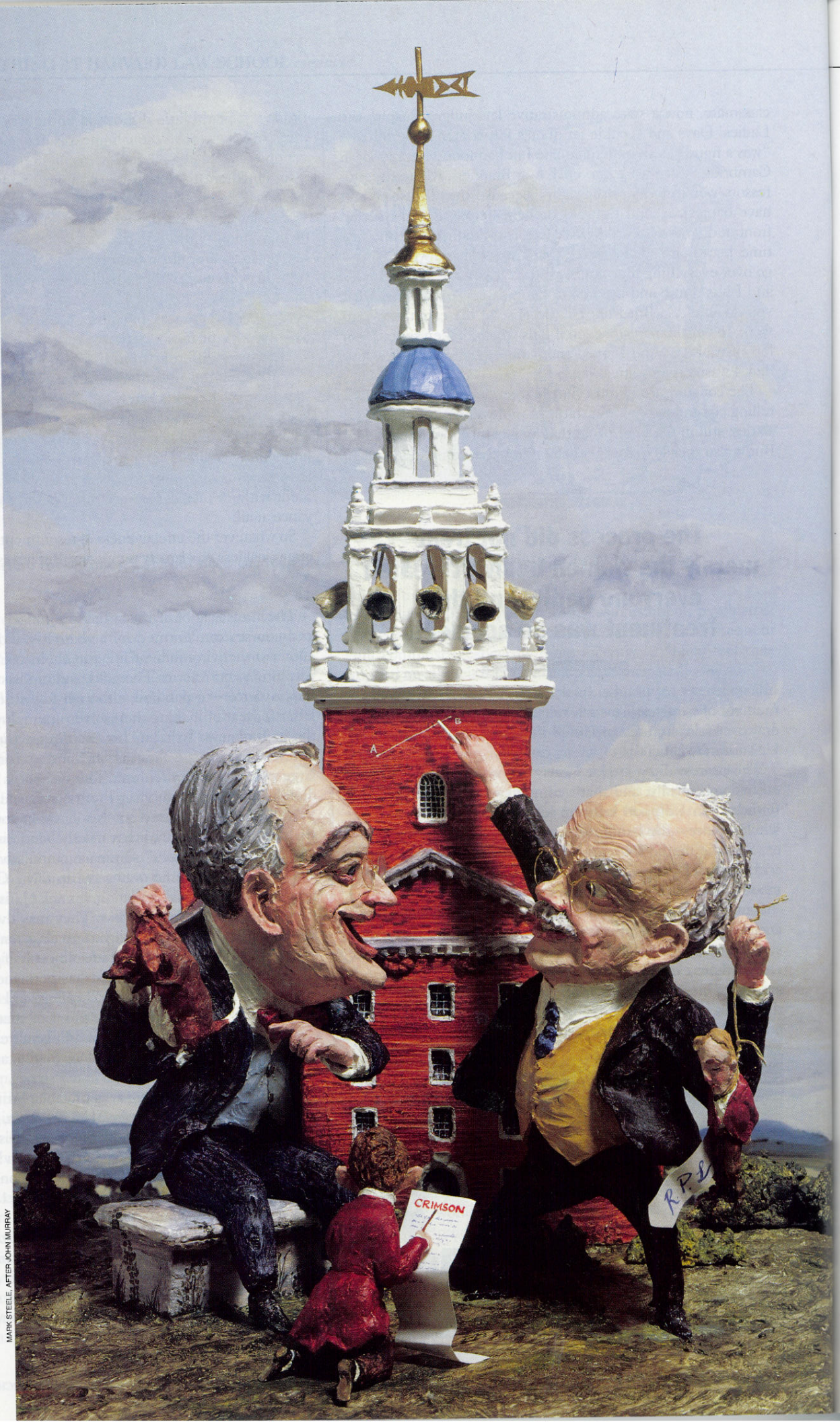


President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Julian Coolidge, the master of Lowell House, and Donald Carmichael, a *Crimson* reporter, act their parts in the affair of the bells. The identity of perpetrator "R.P. Lucas," hanging in effigy here, has never been disclosed.



THE CONNING OF THE PRESIDENT

*In which FDR experiences
a piece of "undergraduate pleasantry."*

In 1930 Harvard installed a set of Russian bells—17 of them, bearing inscriptions in Old Church Slavonic, the largest bell weighing 13½ tons—in the tower of brand new Lowell House. The bells were and remain exotic hardware because they are tuned to an Eastern scale. Most melodies beloved by Harvard ears cannot be played upon them. No "Fair Harvard." No "Melancholy Baby." Nevertheless, they are rung. Emily Brodsky '95, current clappermeister, or *zvonn*, offers "improvisations" every Sunday afternoon in term time, and the bells sound for Lowell House High Table, at Commencement, after every victorious home football game, whenever Harvard beats Yale at anything, and at Halloween, when Brodsky rings the biggest bell 13 times at midnight to ward off evil spirits. "During my undergraduate years," writes Donald S. Carmichael '35, L '38, "the first sound of the bells at . . . Sunday concerts was greeted with much hooting, cat calling and beating of metal waste baskets—all keen competition for the carillon—gleefully arranged by the occupants of the House."

The young Carmichael, a Lowell House resident, found himself one Monday evening in October 1933 the guest of Master Julian L. Coolidge, A.B. 1895, LL.D. '40, at High Table, a social occasion permitting students to mingle with their elders in the dining hall and in the tutors' common room afterward for coffee, cigars, and elevated conversation. Carmichael, a reporter for the undergraduate newspaper *The Harvard Crimson*, busied himself once inside the tutors' sanctum by thumbing through a scrapbook full of House memorabilia. There he discovered copies of recent letters to and from President Franklin D. Roosevelt '04, LL.D. '29, concerning the bells. The first of them, on Lowell House letterhead, was addressed to Roosevelt at the White House:

Lowell F-35
Cambridge, Mass.

Dear Sir:—

It is my privilege to inform you as secretary of the House Committee of Lowell House, Harvard University, that our committee has voted to profer [*sic*] you, as a slight token of our esteem for you, both as a President of unusual ability and profound farsightedness, and as a Harvard man, the dedication of the heretofore unnamed carillon of Russian Bells, at present installed in the tower of

our House. We propose to name them, with your permission, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Bells.

In this matter we have received the complete and hearty approval of President Lowell and Professor Julian L. Coolidge, our House Master. In communicating your decision in this matter, please address your reply to Professor Coolidge, Lowell House, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Hoping that you will favor us with an affirmative in this matter, I remain,

Sincerely yours,
R.P. LUCAS '34
Secretary, House Committee.

The second letter, on White House stationery and dated March 20, 1933, suggested that the president of the United States was well pleased:

My dear Julian:

R.P. Lucas, the Secretary of your House Committee has written me an awfully nice letter asking if I should approve naming the carillon for your tower after me. Of course, I shall be delighted, and, it goes without saying, greatly honored. I am especially happy that it is Lowell House which suggests this and my worthy House master who tried his best to teach me something many decades ago.

Very sincerely yours,
FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Master Coolidge conducted investigations and replied to the president on March 24:

Dear Franklin:

Your nice letter of March twentieth perturbed me greatly, the one clear point being that I must write you a letter of humble apology. The fact is, you have been made a victim of what the French call "a mystification," in other words a piece of undergraduate pleasantry.

1.—There is no R.P. Lucas, in Harvard University. The secretary of the Lowell House Committee is John D. Kernan, Jr., of New York, whose father you doubtless know. There is an R.R. Lucas, in the House. Both deny all knowledge of the incident.

2.—The Russian bells were given by Mr. Charles R. Crane to Harvard University. Their situation in Lowell House is purely fortuitous so that I should have no authority to put into execution the really charming suggestion contained in this young man's letter. Even an undergraduate would hesitate to do this without authority from the higher ups.

I do not understand the innuendo in your saying that I tried to

teach you something many decades ago. I have naturally attributed your present success to the mathematics you learned from me thirty-five years back. Perhaps you do not agree, feeling that too much mathematics is not a good thing. There is poor Einstein languishing in a foreign country, while his own countrymen are thirsting for his gore. Let's agree to disagree on the point. I am willing to grant that the ability to write a note such as yours adds more to the gaiety of nations than the ability to write mathematics such as Einstein's.

With renewed apologies and best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

JULIAN L. COOLIDGE

Roosevelt bore this news bravely, writing on April 3:

Dear Julian:

I am not the least perturbed about the chime of bells because, strictly between ourselves, I should much prefer to have a puppy-dog or a baby named after me than one of those carillon effects that is never quite in tune and which goes off at all hours of the day and night! At least one can give paregoric to a puppy or a baby.

Referring to the mathematics days, do you remember your first day's class at Groton? You stood up at the blackboard—announced

to the class that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points—and then tried to draw one. All I can say is that I, too, have never been able to draw a straight line. I am sure you shared my joy when Einstein proved there ain't no such thing as a straight line!

As ever yours,

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Reporter Carmichael, coming across this exchange of letters in the scrapbook—which was lying on a table in the common room for anyone there to see—thought at once that he had a good story for the *Crimson*, a scoop. He asked the master's permission to publish the letters. Coolidge was willing if Roosevelt was. Carmichael asked the president and received the following reply via Western Union:

As a former president of *The Harvard Crimson* I have not the slightest objection to your publishing the Lowell House bells correspondence except that I am inclined to think the *Lampoon* would be a more appropriate medium. The correspondence consists of the letter from Brother Lucas received here March twelfth; my letter to the house master of March twelfth; his letter to me of March twenty-fourth and my final reply of April third. In spite of it all, the next time I go to Cambridge I propose to listen to those bells.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

The *Crimson* printed the story on October 17, 1933. The Boston newspapers picked it up, the Associated Press and the United Press sent it out on the wires, and *Time* gave it space in its "National Affairs" department. John M. Murray '33 of the *Lampoon* drew a cartoon depicting the story of the correspondence and its revelation. And Carmichael savored the moment. He sent a copy of the *Crimson* coverage to the president and got a friendly thank-you note, for his scrapbook.

On what would have been FDR's 64th birthday, January 30, 1946, Carmichael had printed in an edition of one hundred copies a small booklet entitled *Franklin Roosevelt and the Lowell House Bells*, telling the tale. On the cover was Murray's cartoon, the original of which Carmichael had secured for his collection. Later, in 1986, Carmichael commissioned artist Mark Steele to make a sculpted rendition of the affair, using Murray's cartoon as inspiration. A photograph of that piece begins this article.

In his booklet, Carmichael quoted *The Boston Herald*, which on October 18, 1933, commented editorially on the matter of the bells, in part as follows:

The incident revealed the President in perhaps his happiest mood. A public man cannot afford, in serious-minded America at any rate, to be informal or facetious on the platform. People, he is told, will think him shallow or foolish. He must cling to "the great, broad issues," supplying, if not the illusion of wisdom, at least a pretence [*sic*] to it. Secretary Woodin's interest in music, for example, has caused the Democratic leaders many a qualm. It isn't regular.

Partly from inclination, partly because of the limitations placed on him in recent years by his physical condition, Mr. Roosevelt has developed a fine talent for letter-writing. In its pursuit he usually dispenses with the circumspection which public utterances demand and indulges in the pleasant informalities of casual conversation. Although they cannot compare in erudition to the masterpieces of such presidential correspondents as the Adamses, his easily composed and quickly dictated letters are refreshingly genuine in a day when so many communications are colorless or stereotyped.

Carmichael had similar reactions: "These letters, written at the very threshold of [Roosevelt's] several administrations, reflect that cheerful quality in the man which helped to make him one with all the common people of the world."

—C.R.



Brodsky ringing. "The Sacred Oil" hangs above.

"Pestilence, Famine, and Despair" and Company

The Lowell bells are eighteenth- and nineteenth-century recastings of seventeenth-century originals. Removed from the Danailov Monastery in Moscow in the 1920s, they were about to be melted for bronze when industrialist Charles R. Crane, LL.D. '22, learning of them, bought them. He presented the bells to Harvard while the residential Houses were being built. Together the bells weigh 26 tons. Each is inscribed with its name. The set at first included 18, but the bell of "Hope, Felicity, and Joy," judged too close in pitch to "Pestilence, Famine, and Despair," was given to the Business School. Today's chief bell ringer, Emily Brodsky, regrets the decision. "We're missing a note," she says.