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Bill, the Lokil Editor.



BILL, THE LOKIL EDITOR.

Bill wuz alluz fond uv children 'nd birds 'nd flowers. Aint it kind o' curious how sometimes we find a great, big, awkward man who loves sech things? Bill had the biggest feet in the township, but I'll bet my wallet that he never trod on a violet in all his life. Bill never took no slack from enny man that wuz sober, but the children made him play with 'em, and he'd set for hours a-watchin' the yaller-hammer buildin' her nest in the old cottonwood.

Now I aint defendin' Bill; I'm jest tellin' the truth about him. Nothink I kin say one way or t'other is goin' to make enny difference now; Bill's dead 'nd buried, 'nd the folks is discussin' him 'nd wond'rin' whether his immortal soul is all right. Sometimes I *hev* worried 'bout Bill, but I don't worry 'bout him no more. Uv course Bill had his faults,—I never liked that drinkin' business uv his'n, yet I allow that Bill got more good out'n likker, and likker got more good out'n Bill, than I ever see before or sence. It warn't when the likker wuz in Bill that Bill wuz at his best, but when he hed been on to one uv his bats 'nd had drunk himself sick 'nd wuz comin' out uv the other end of the bat, then Bill wuz one uv the meekest 'nd properest critters you ever seen. An' potry? Some uv the most beautiful potry I ever read wuz writ by Bill when he wuz recoverin' himself out'n one uv them bats. Seemed like it kind uv exalted an' purified Bill's nachur to git drunk an' git over it. Bill cud drink more likker 'nd be sorrier for it than any other man in seven States. There never wuz a more penitent feller than he wuz when he wuz soberin'. The trubble with Bill seemed to be that his conscience didn't come on watch quite of'n enuff.

It'll be ten years come nex' spring sence Bill showed up here. I don't know whar he come from; seemed like he didn't want to talk about his past. I allers suspicioned that he had seen trubble—maybe, sorrer. I reecollect that one time he got a telegraph,—Mr. Ivins told me 'bout it afterwards,—and when he read it he put his hands up to his face 'nd groaned, like. That day he got full uv likker 'nd he kep' full of likker for a week; but when he come round all right he wrote a pome for the paper, 'nd the name of the pome wuz "Mary," but whether Mary wuz his sister or his wife or an old sweetheart uv his'n I never knew. But it looked from the pome like she wuz dead 'nd that he loved her.

Bill wuz the best lokil the paper ever had. He didn't hustle around much, but he had a kind er pleasin' way uv dishin' things up. He cud be mighty comical when he sot out to be, but his best holt was serious pieces. Nobody could beat Bill writin' obituaries. When old Mose Holbrook wuz dyin' the minister sez to him: "Mr. Holbrook, you seem to be sorry that you're passin' away to a better land?"

"Wall, no; not exactly *that*," sez Mose, "but to be frank with you, I *hev* jest one regret in connection with this affair."

"What's that?" asked the minister.

"I can't help feelin' sorry," sez Mose, "that I aint goin' to hev the pleasure uv readin' what Bill Newton sez about me in the paper. I know it'll be sumthin' uncommon fine; I loant him two dollars a year ago last fall."

The Higginses lost a darned good friend when Bill died. Bill wrote a pome 'bout their old dog Towze when he wuz run over by Watkins's hay wagon seven years ago. I'll bet that pome is in every scrap-book in the county. You couldn't read that pome without cryin',—why, that pome wud hev brought a dew out on the desert uv Sary. Old Tim Hubbard, the meanest man in the State, borrered a paper to read the pome, and he wuz so 'fected by it that he never borrered anuther paper as long as he lived. I don't more'n half reckon, though, that the Higginses appreciated what Bill had done for 'em. I never heerd uv their givin' him anythink more'n a basket uv greenin' apples, and Bill wrote a piece 'bout the apples nex' day.

But Bill wuz at his best when he wrote things about the children,—about the little ones that died, I mean. Seemed like Bill had a way of his own of sayin' things that wuz beautiful 'nd tender; he said he loved the children because they wuz innocent, and I reckon—yes, I know he did, for the pomes he writ about 'em showed he did.

When our little Alice died I started out for Mr. Miller's; he wuz the undertaker. The night wuz powerful dark, 'nd it wuz all the darker to me, because seemed like all the light hed gone out in my life. Down near the bridge I met Bill; he weaved round in the road, for he wuz in likker.

"Hello, Mr. Baker," sez he, "whar be you goin' this time o' night?"

"Bill," sez I, "I'm goin' on the saddest errand uv my life."

"What d'ye mean?" sez he, comin' up to me as straight as he cud.

"Why, Bill," sez I, "our little girl—my little girl—Allie, you know—she's dead."

I hoarsed up so I couldn't say much more. And Bill didn't say nothink at all; he jest reached me his hand, and he took my hand and seemed like in that grasp his heart spoke many words of comfort to mine. And nex' day he had a piece in the paper about our little girl; we cut it out and put it in the big Bible in the front room. Sometimes when we get to fussin', Martha goes 'nd gets that bit of paper 'nd reads it to me; then us two kind uv cry to ourselves, 'nd we make it up between us for the dead child's sake.

Well, you kin see how it wuz that so many uv us liked Bill; he had soothed our hearts,—there's nothin' like sympathy after all. Bill's potry hed heart in it; it didn't surprise you or scare you; it jest got down in under your vest, 'nd before you knew it you wuz all choked up. I know all about your fashionable potry and your famous potes,—Martha took Godey's for a year. Folks that live in the city can't write potry,—not the real, genuine article. To write potry, as I figure it, the heart must have somethin' to feed on; you can't get that somethin' whar there aint trees 'nd grass 'nd birds 'nd flowers. Bill loved these things, and he fed his heart on 'em, and that's why his potry wuz so much better than anybody else's.

I aint worryin' much about Bill now; I take it that everythink is for the best. When they told me that Bill died in a drunken fit I felt that his end oughter have come some other way,—he wuz too good a man for that. But maybe, after all, it was ordered for the best. Jist imagine Bill a-standin' up for jedgment; jist imagine that poor, sorrowful, shiverin' critter waitin' for his turn to come. Pictur', if you can, how full uv penitence he is, 'nd how full uv potry 'nd gentleness 'nd misery. The Lord aint a-goin' to be too hard on that poor wretch. Of course we can't comprehend Divine mercy; we only know that it is full of compassion,—a compassion infinitely tenderer and sweeter than ours. And the more I think on 't, the more I reckon that Bill will plead to win that mercy, for, like as not, the little ones—my Allie with the rest—will run to him when they see him in his trubble and will hold his tremblin' hands 'nd twine their arms about him, and plead, with him, for compassion.

You've seen an old sycamore that the lightnin' has struck; the ivy has reached up its vines 'nd spread 'em all around it 'nd over it, coverin' its scars 'nd splintered branches with a velvet green 'nd fillin' the air with fragrance. You've seen this thing and you know that it is beautiful.

That's Bill, perhaps, as he stands up fr jedgment,—a miserable, tremblin', 'nd unworthy thing, perhaps, but twined about, all over, with singin' and pleadin' little children—and that is pleasin' in God's sight, I know.

What would you—what would *I*—say, if we wuz setin' in jedgment then?

Why, we'd jest kind uv bresh the moisture from our eyes 'nd say: "Mister recordin' angel, you may nolly pros this case 'nd perseed with the docket."

1888.

[End of *Bill*, *The Lokil Editor* by Eugene Field]