

HOW BLACK BILL DIED.

Chicago Herald: Bill Ellis stopped half way to the barn and looked over the fields to a little cluster of men in the edge of the woods near the railroad track and wondered what had occurred to call Kentuckians afield so early in the morning. As he watched them a little longer something so unusual in the situation impressed him that Ellis let his teasing go and walked down to the road, where he could see clear to the railway.

"My God!" said the farmer, "there has been a wreck." He hurried along down the highway, finding the evidences of a catastrophe thick as he advanced, till the moans and cries of wounded men and women reached his ears. From the first he had feared with a shuddering heart that it was not an accident, and when he reached the track and saw the displaced rails of the switch, saw the spikes which had held them in wrong position, and the great timber which had thrown the engine on its wrong side, Bill Ellis ran over the list of his neighbors, and wondered on which one suspicion would fall. He lent a willing hand in the work of relief, offering his home for a shelter to such as could be removed there and lending his great strength to help carry the wounded away from the wreck.

No one asked how it had happened. Everybody knew that. Everybody knew that, somehow, it seemed they knew it without being told—that the express car had been robbed. Bill felt this as a certainty—a ghastly, sickening certainty, cruel as fate, and as unavoidable—even before he heard the comments of the people.

"Three men and two women killed," said a man coming up from the patch of green weeds where the thickest crowd had gathered.

Just as the relief train from Bowling Green came hurrying to the scene, with physicians and citizens and the usual crowd of newspaper correspondents, Bill King, commonly called "Black Bill," to distinguish his christian name by which all men were known from the farmer, Black Bill, appeared on the scene. Black Bill was loud with inquiry and comment. He inspected the wrecked engine and studied the misplaced switch. He strode around the coaches improvised from car cushions and talked constantly to whoever would listen.

"Never heard a sound," he said. "Never seen a thing about it till this last engine came a whistling through the timber. Then I said to Liz, says I, 'Somepin wrong down in the track,' says I, 'Somepin wrong down there,' and I kin fast as my legs would carry me."

He helped everywhere, working manfully with Bill Ellis and his other neighbors till the last injured person was placed on the relief train; till the five corpses were decently composed and till all moved off in the soft summer air, the engine bell tolling and the reporters hurrying among the passengers. He helped to clear the track for regular traffic, and that the wreck, while plainly intentional, was the act of some person or persons unknown.

"We couldn't get a scrap of evidence," said Black Bill, with an emphasis on the final syllable of his last word. "They didn't nobody seem to know nothing about it."

But somebody was finding out about it every day. Agents of the secret service men who checked the reign of crime in the border states after the war, were constantly fitting in and out of Bowling Green, and every week or two some man from Bill Ellis's neighborhood would be tackled in town and made to give up some hint that pointed to local talent as the authors of the crime.

"Must a big man and Younger gang," said Black Bill to Bill Ellis, as the two sat on the line fence one day in July after the wheat had been cut and shocked.

"No, I want no James outfit," protested Bill Ellis, "I'm four lightnin' will hit a heap nearer home when it does come." But neither went any further. For himself Bill Ellis believed that Black Bill had a hand in the affair, and he grew stronger in the conviction every week, and that the wreck, while plainly a bludge one day some weeks later, and the talk turned on the wreck and express robbery of the preceding spring.

"Honest now, Harve," said Bill, "wasn't you into that thing? You wasn't be afraid of no brother."

"I ain't fared in you, Bill," said Harve, "and if I was in it I would a told you long ago. Got mighty little use for them that was killed, an' glad the express company was robbed. I wish I had the money. But didn't have no hand in it, and I don't know no one that did."

"You wasn't to home that night, Harve."

"No, I wasn't to home. I was up to Black Bill's and we was drinkin' and playin' all night. Black Bill's wife and me played agin him and Zeph Courtney—and we beat 'em."

"Rummin' with that gang will get you into trouble yet, Harve. They got you drunk and all that, an' tain't doin' you no good. And that sister of Black Bill's, she's bad. Harve—awful bad."

"O, she's all right," protested Harve. "None of them ever got me into trouble yet. So they finished blading the cane, and Bill believed his brother. He was very sure Harve would have told him had he known anything about the wrecking. Next day was Sunday and Harve put on a clean suit of clothes and went down to Black Bill's. That worthy was not at home at the time, but the young man found better entertainment from Liz. They drew a large black jug from a cool corner of the cellar and resolved to pass the hour agreeably, till Black Bill should return. But that worthy was in no hurry. He had taken a fish pole and gone over to the beaver dam. Luck was with him and before the heat of the day had come the fisherman had quite a load of good perch and black bass. "I don't need 'em to home," he said. "I'll just take 'em by and leave 'em with Bill Ellis and his folks. Maybe I will see Bill while I am there."

"and I thought it was a pity to throw them away."

"I'll clean 'em," said the girl. "You can stay for dinner and help eat 'em, too."

"Aw, ain't hardly got time," protested the fisherman. "Ain't got time a Sunday?" and Julie laughed at her visitor's unskillful excuse. So Black Bill stayed at the Ellis place all day, eating dinner with a relish which told of a poorer feeding at home, and leaving at last late in the afternoon.

Out by the barn he met Harve coming back from his day's carouse with Liz. Harve was much the worse for the frequent visits to the road in the evening, and managed to tread a path as devious as that of the rail fence which supported him now and then when he stepped to rest.

Bill Ellis saw his brother talking to the depot guest, and fancied there was some heat in the conversation—more spirit, certainly, than was needed in a casual Sunday evening meeting. But after Black Bill passed on down the lane Harve came to the house and found his brother.

"Bill," he said, "I want you to keep this money for me. I'm goin' to Bowling Green, an' I don't want to carry it, and he tendered a roll of greenbacks. There was \$75 in three bills. Where had he got 'em?"

"I don't want it, Harve," said Bill a little harshly, for all the fear and horror of the wreck came back to him. "I don't think you came by it honestly, and I won't have nothin' to do with it."

Harve was easily angered, and spoke sharply to his brother. He wanted to fight, and declared he would either leave the money with Bill or lick him—he didn't care which. Mrs. Ellis settled the difficulty.

"I'll keep your money, Harve," she said, "and I know you got it honestly, too. Let me have it."

So she took the bills and pacified her brother-in-law. Harve staggered out in the orchard and lay down on the grass. Bill went to him and began a conversation.

"Harve, how much did you get out of the wreck and express car?" he asked. "Didn't get nothin'," said Harve, without rising from the sod.

"Black Bill says he give you five hundred dollars," he said, "you pulled the spikes himself."

"Black Bill's a liar. He pulled the spikes himself."

"What Black Bill drive them spikes with, Harve? He ain't got no sledges. He drove 'em with your ax, an' it's got the ends of spike-heads on the pole right now. Harve was not muddin'. His legs were drunk, but his tongue was sober. Bill remembered the ax was unaccountably battered.

"How did you smash the safe?" "I didn't smash it," he said. "I got it out of it, Harve?" "I got only seventy-five. Black Bill didn't treat me right. He got more'n a thousand. Every fellow got more'n I did, but Black Bill had it all and counted it."

Ellis waited a long time. The problem was a heavy one. Deep despair, dishonor, even death, seemed haunting the orchard like ghosts of that June crime.

"Harve," he said, "do you know what I'm tellin' you?" "What you tellin' me?" "The government agents down to Bowling Green are after you. You better go away tonight. Better go out west or up north some where. They'll get you sure if you stay here." Harve was frightened, and half-sobered by the words. But he was plainly in no condition to go away now. Better wait till tomorrow night. Then he would take his \$75 and try and hide himself in the brighter light of some other places.

rain awful, don't we?" He went back under the fields to his home, and Ellis wondered how he could find some way to separate that fiend and his sister Julie. The girl seemed inclined to favor the shiftless fellow, and Ellis felt that there was nothing more against him than his generally worthless name. Ellis was opposed to him; but when added to that was the consciousness that Black Bill had capped a long life of evil doing, an unbroken course of varied villainies with that monstrous train wrecking, even this coarse and hardened dweller in the boarder shuddered at the thought of marriage.

Harve did not come home that night. This was not unusual, as the women were not surprised, but Ellis sat up till past midnight, hoping his brother might come. Harve must be gotten out of the country. Surely the blow would fall sometime. The detectives never for a moment ceased to hunt for him, and the men who robbed that express train. And when the end came Ellis knew that Black Bill would not be so willing to take all the blame as he was to take all the money.

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As Ellis rose from the ground, leaving his brother to sleep off his deep potations, he saw a shock of black hair drop below the laurel hedge, and knew by the movement of weeds that a man had been near the mill, and was now making his way to the road. But he was not frightened. In the instant's glimpse he recognized Black Bill, and for the first time was glad to see him. Had it been a stranger Bill Ellis would have taken down his revolver and nursed him to the death. This secret must be kept.

Next day Harve went over to True's Mill to buy a new pair of shoes. Bill Ellis was making sorghum. The old bill mare was treading around the field, and the wooden wheel was feeding with the long, smooth stalks of cane, and Bill's wife was busy at the house. Just about noon Black Bill came over and sat on the chopping block near the furnace, talking first to Ellis and then to Julie. He took the pitiful way went over to carry the crushed stalks away from the mill, chaffing the girl in the rough fashion of the section.

work, his conviction, and one grows to honor the direct, simple honesty of the man; grows to live the scenes over with him; and to feel as he did how hard was the fate which crushed him. And in it all there is, along each line, above each misdeed, word, running through the crude sentences and crowning the confession of Bill Ellis, the everlasting stamp of God's truth. You could not read it and doubt it.

Just a month before the day appointed for his death Bill Ellis was visited by the sheriff.

"Black Bill is under arrest," said he. "What for?" asked Ellis. "Wrecking and robbing that train last June; for the murder of five men and women."

All this made no sign. "What do you know about it?" "You have the right man."

"How long have you known this?" "Ever since the Sunday when me and Harve quarreled."

"Why didn't you tell of it?" "But there was no answer to this. Why should he tell? Were they not neighbors? Were not the officers kept and paid to ferret out these crimes? Was not the whole border swarming with them? Was not the last man of them again the people, and had not the people long ago learned to stand against them? Bill Ellis always kept his counsel.

"Do you know who killed Harve?" asked the sheriff. "I'd tell if I did—that's one thing I'd tell."

Black Bill was locked up safe enough, and one by one the officers and detectives picked up all the others until they found who would talk—the weak link in the chain, and by him the defenses were broken. Every step of the crime, from its planning by Black Bill to the night when a confederate telegraphed Tom Baldwin at Bowling Green, "Coming tonight"—the signal which marked a heavy cash shipment by express; to the gathering in Bill Ellis's barn and the taking of Bill Ellis; to the silent groping through the woods to the railroad, and to the shriek and shock; the devastation and death of that early morning wreck. Then the infamy of the deed, when the time came for the six who united in the crime met at Black Bill King's to drink and gamble and spend the night in such wild orgies as should have shamed the face of brotherhood.

Liz was brought in, too. She knew everything, and bravely, honestly, told of every step. She said she knew who killed Harve Ellis, but she wouldn't tell.

"He was my friend," she said, touched to weeping when she spoke of him—the only glimpse of tenderness, womanliness, sympathy, and honesty, which she had treated me right. He was a gentleman. All the rest of them were brutes. And then he was shot and murdered. But she would not give a hint of what she knew. They had convicted the wrong man; they had convicted the wrong man; they had committed a crime when they hanged Bill Ellis; she warned them of that.

But they hanged him. He marched to the scaffold as steadily as he ever had walked aloft to the sweet duties of life; he fixed the noose with his own hands; and had them bind against his body, beneath his arms, over his head, and he wanted to speak for me when I am silent," he said, and then, from beneath the cap which shrouded up his head, he spoke the signal which cut short his life.

Black Bill and his gang were not tried till January. It was a famous event. Great lawyers were pitted against each other. Generous funds were raised for both prosecution and defense. Three counties came together and fought for admission to the little court room where they were tried. The railroad company, the express company, the relatives of the deceased, all were represented, and all watched the run to cover on the first day of the trial. Black Bill, who had held them all up with the vow to fight it out; Black Bill, who swore he was not guilty of anything; Black Bill, who hushed the babbling lips of Liz and every other traitor Black Bill confessed.

He sent for the sheriff and the state's attorney as soon as the jury was impaneled and laid the whole story before them, asking only that his reason might be counted to him for honesty. They gave him no promises, but they read his statement to the court, and saw two condemned defendants leap upon the demon and beat him senseless before they could be restrained. No plea of guilty availed them. They were condemned to death, and filled the jail with such a sweeping draught of criminals as never since has cursed the border.

And Black Bill wrote a confession, too. I have read it. I have stopped at places to study if the man were mad. I have wondered that a heart so hard could beat, could send its strength along the nerves and guide the pen which told of such a life. Told, did I say? Nay, boasted—bragged of it—revealed in it. And, more's the shame, the stamp of truth is on the book. The man who is slandered manhood from his birth. He tells of crimes committed when a boy that older years might tremble at; he tells of outrages in the years when all the land was shaken with confusion; he tells of crimes which were cruel, and all the nameless acts of diabolism that spring from souls lost at inception.

And he went to the gallows gayly. He made a long speech, moulting some moral words and plainly proud that all men talked of him. Even his crowning villainy—his silence when Bill Ellis died—did not trouble him, and he died without one real regret.

Jamaica is in the field already with her invitations for the International Columbian exhibition, to open January 1, 1891. The display of Columbian relics of importance will probably be very great.

"We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree," read the clerk. "Is this your verdict, gentlemen?" "It is."



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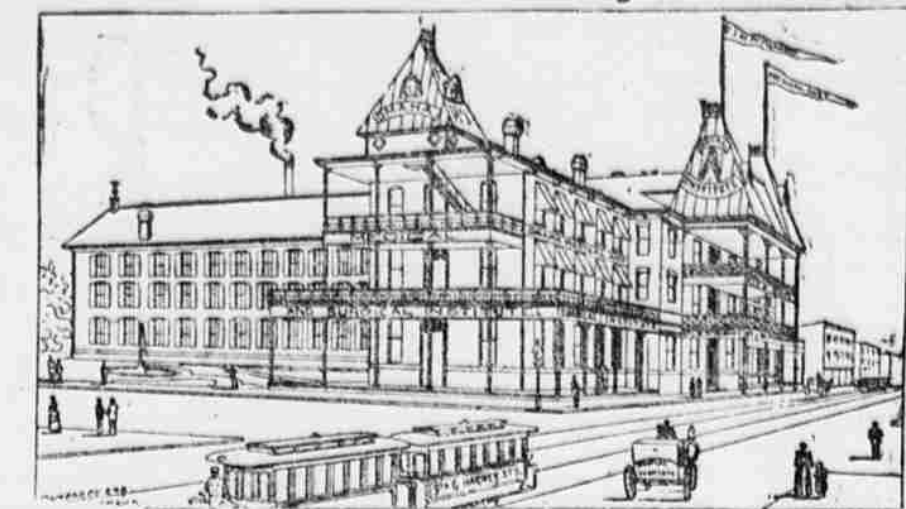
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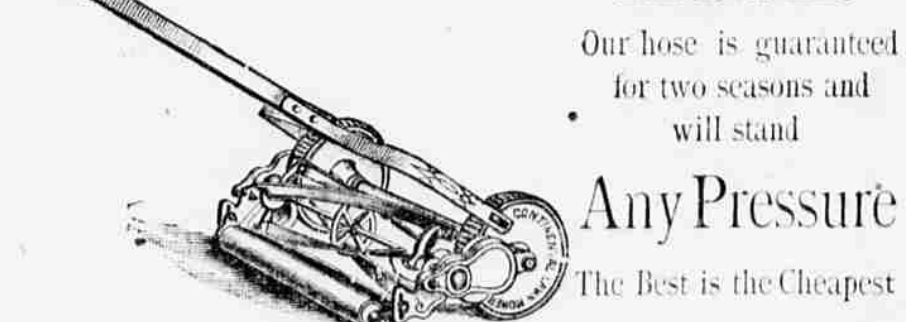
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