

**HOW UNCLE BILLY BECAME AN ORACLE.**

Before a red-hot stove in Zeke Taylor's saloon, on Christmas eve, sat the "Village Oracles" of Spikenville with their several pairs of feet placed as near the fire as a proper regard for shoe leather warranted.

The conversation had reached that argumentative point that is induced by a liberal supply of hard cider and the absence of women folks, and many were the knotty problems discussed that night before the company took their several ways home in a more or less undignified manner. But of this we have naught to do. It would be a pity if a Spikenviller, and an Oracle at that, could not get more or less mellow on the night before Christmas.

Squire Epenetus Quackerbush having borrowed a plug of "Lone Star Chewing," hit the stove with his usual precision and bringing his hand down hard on his knee, said, "I want to tell yer right now, that somethin' has got ter be done 'bout that ere Imp o' Satan, and I reckon yer all know who I'm talkin' erbout."

"There ain't no call ter calkerlate who yer mean, Squire," said Zeke, as he came out from behind the bar and joined the others around the stove. "It's that pesky boy of Uncle Billy Doolittle's, that's who it be, an' fer downright cussedness, he do beat anythin' in Spikenville, though he ain't no bigger n'r a pint o' cider. All he thinks on is gittin' inter mischief, an' he hez mos' worn tler tail off o' my dog, tyin' on his blame termater cans, and I guess you don't find many apples on yer trees when that boy's erbout, eh Squire? I've told ther folks 'hum time and ag'in, not ter let 'im come nigh ther house, but my woman's so soft-hearted she won't say nothin', 'cause he's a half orphan, and she sez it don't do no harm noways fer our gal ter play with 'im. Yer can't expect a sight o' good, Squire, from sick stock es he comes from. The Doolittles hez allus been er shiftless lot. He's queer, jist like his ma was, and his pa ain' never been no account nohow. He's a child o' Satan, 'het's what he be."

The Squire coughed warningly and there was an embarrassed silence as Uncle Billy Doolittle, the father of the much discussed "Imp of Satan" shuffled up to the stove. He had been standing in the doorway and had heard every word.

No one expected Uncle Billy to say anything, and he didn't. As for resenting an insult, he had never in the recollection of any one in Spikenville been known to do such a thing. So he just sat there, all humped up, and gazed vacantly at the Oracles, and soon feeling that he was not wanted, got up and shuffled out as meekly as he had entered.

Christmas day there was wild excitement in the quiet village. Zeke's child, and the "Imp of Satan" had wondered off together, and the whole town was roused to join in the search of the missing children.

Every able-bodied man turned out and soon the woods and surrounding hills echoed with the shouts of the searchers.

It was growing bitterly cold and the wind was whirling and twisting the rapidly falling snow through the almost deserted village street as Zeke Taylor, accompanied by his dog, Wolf, struck out for the mountains. The man's haggard face told the story of his fears.

Sending Wolf on ahead, he followed, seeking anxiously for some trace of the children. Mile after mile he struggled through the blinding storm, the wind coming in short, sharp gusts, lashing the snow into fine particles that cut his face like so many needles. Still he pushed on, now urging on the dog, now shouting first one child's name and then the other, until his voice became a hoarse croak and failed altogether, his knees tottering

beneath him with fatigue, yet still fighting his way through the great drifts that threatened to bury him. When, just as the morning sun was rising over the mountains of Spikenville, the dog stopped and began to whine and dig at the snow with his paws. And there, half buried in a drift, Zeke found them. The girl was living. The boy had placed his woolen muffler over her head, had taken off his ragged little jacket and wrapped it around the childish form, and then, placing her under a shelving rock and arranging some underbrush so as to ward off the icy wind, he had lain down beside her—never to waken. The man touched the poor little frozen body very tenderly.

"The Imp of Satan" had redeemed himself.

Zeke never remembered how he got home; but when he staggered into the village with the children in his arms, and they told him the boy was dead, something in the man's rugged soul seemed to give way, and he wept, as only strong men weep, silently and bitterly.

New Year's eve found the saloon doing business as usual, but the proprietor did not join much in the conversation. There was a great change in the obstinate bull-headed Zeke Taylor. He had lived a long time in that terrible night on the mountain. He was more gentle and considerate of others than formerly.

The Squire was just in the middle of a heated political argument when the door opened and Uncle Billy Doolittle entered, shuffling slowly across the room to the bar where Zeke stood.

"Zeke," said Uncle Billy quietly, and there was a look in his eyes that no one in all Spikenville had ever seen there before, "I hev been thinkin' erbout what I hear'n yer say Christmas eve, an' I hev sorter come ter ther conclusion," and he straightened up a little, "I hev sorter come to the conclusion, Zeke, arter er thinkin' of it over, that what yer said that night erbout his bein' a child o' Satan kinder reflected on him ez ain' here ter derfend himself, an' bein' too little er feller to do it ennyway," and his voice faltered, growing steady again as he continued, "an' I come in here to tell yer," and Uncle Billy stood up very straight now and set his eyes squarely on Zeke's, who was staring at him in open-mouthed astonishment, "thet unless yer takes back what yer said erbout my boy—termorrer Zeke Taylor won't be er sellin' no more whiskey, ner me er drinkin' of it, 'cause we won't hev no more use fer it where we be er goin'." And Uncle Billy drew very deliberately from the capacious pocket of his much worn coat, a brace of huge old-fashioned dueling pistols, that must have belonged to his grandfather. He handed one to the astonished Zeke, keeping the other himself, while the Oracles, only relishing a fight when there was no chance of their being in it, made haste to get behind anything that afforded protection. Zeke looked at Uncle Billy, who stood patiently waiting, and then at the pistol—at last he spoke.

"Uncle Billy," he said, and he gulped hard once or twice with something in his voice that sounded suspiciously like a sob, "you hav knowed me ever since I were a little feller, and you know Zeke Taylor ain't never been no hand ter change his views when he once hez giv' 'em, nor he ain't no coward ter back down et ther sight of er gun, but,"—and Zeke spat on the stove, "he were no Child o' Satan; you hear me say it, he were a man he were, every inch of 'im, and you be ther same. What ere yer goin' ter take, Uncle Billy?"

Squire Epenetus Quackerbush, peering out and seeing the difficulty had been adjusted, wormed his long body from behind an empty whisky barrel where he had crowded it, the rest of the

party appeared bravely from sundry curious hiding places, and Uncle Billy Doolittle had become an Oracle.—H. King Blakeslee, in Truth.

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