

HIGHLAND PARK NEWS-LETTER

Volume 18

HIGHLAND PARK, ILLINOIS, JUNE 24, 1905

Number 4

"HON. WILLIAM"

By OPIE READ

RAIN came in dashes. It was like the angry spitting of a cornered cat. The landscape was dreary; the farmhouses seemed as blotches of wretchedness—the train roared toward Chicago. There were not many passengers. Some of them were nodding, others sat in gloomy resignation, but there were three men who were inclined to be prankish. These three men, Brooks, Adams and Cooper, were actually laughing, at one of the oldest of jokes, doubtless, and a gaunt old fellow, wise enough to be miserable, was frowning on them in sour disapproval when the train stopped at a station. A woman, with a bundle almost as large as a feather bed, bumped her way off, and a comical looking fellow, nodded and "ducked" his head. What a peculiar old fellow he did appear to be, with his squinting eyes set so close together and his hooked-nose shaped so much like a scythe. His type is not found in old countries—quiet self-assurance in homespun exists only in America.

"What have we picked up now?" said Brooks.

"The governor of the state, perhaps," Adams answered, and then added: "Cooper, go and ask that old fellow to explain himself."

"Well, I don't know that he owes me an explanation," Cooper replied, "but if you say so I'll go and tell him that you want to see him."

"All right, go and tell him to come down here and make himself sociable."

Cooper told the old fellow that he was wanted, and he good-humoredly came back and joined the friends.

"You looked lonesome up there," said Brooks, "and we didn't know but you might be willing to enter into a sort of reciprocity with us."

"Much obleeged," the old fellow replied, squinting comically.

"Where are you from?" Adams asked.

"Wall," he answered, pulling at his thin, streaky beard, "my home is down yan in Kaintucky, sah. Come up here in Indiany to see my married daughter that lives back yander a piece. Hearn her husband wa'n't treatin' her very well and I lowed, I did, that I'd come up and maul him a while. I transacted my business with him and I reckon it's all right now."

"What's your name?"

"Old Billy."

"Which way are you going now?" Cooper asked.

"Thiser way," he answered pointing forward.

"Yes, so I see."

"Glad of it, sah. I'm always glad to l'arn that a person ain't blind. I lowed I'd go up here to Chicago and see how them rascals are gitting along. Rascals tickles me mightly."

"There isn't fun enough in this," whispered Brooks adroitly, and then said aloud: "Well, Old Billy, you say you live in Kentucky?"

"Yes, sah, in Allen county."

"Well, then, tell us a story. I have heard that Allen county is full of yarns"

SPECIAL TRAIN SERVICE

During June and July for the Damrosch Concerts at Ravinia Park

In addition to the regular service a special train for the accommodation of Lake Forest and Highland Park patrons will run daily as follows:

Leave Lake Forest, Deerpath Ave, 7:45 p. m.

" Highland Park, Moraine Station, 7:55 p. m.

" " " Central Ave., 8:00 p. m.

There will also be special train service after the concert with ample accommodations for all.

"I don't know any story. You don't know Ab Starbuck, do you?"

"No; but what about him?"

"Nothin', only he was the toughest man in Kaintucky. And mean! Thar wa'n't nuthin' too mean for him to do. One night, over on Big Sandy, he rid into a meetin' house durin' a revival and shot out the lights and left the mourners thar in the dark. Oh, he was bad, and when he got on the rampage folks had to git out of his way. When he come to town business jes nachully suspended. I never shall furgit one day when he come to Scotville. A good many of the merchants closed their doors when they hearn that he had come, and men were pretty scarce on the street, I tell you. Wall, Ab he come a-stalkin' along the sidewalk with a couple of pistols in his belt, and a bowie-knife in his bootleg. Old men got out of his way, and little children got off the sidewalk down in the mud to let him pass. Wall, jest about the time he was the worst lookin'—jest after he had kicked a dog out into the street, here come an old old nigger man, walkin' along, meetin' him. The nigger didn't git out of the way—he walked right into Ab Starbuck—bumped against him. Ab jumped back. He was too much astonished to think about his bowie-knife, and he hauled off with his monstrous fist and hit the nigger in the mouth. The old man staggered. He wiped his bloody lips with one hand, and began to feel about at arm's length in front of him with the other; and then, in a voice as gentle as a child's, he said:

"Boss, you must skuze me sah; I'se blind."

"My God, old man; I didn't know that!" Ab cried, and then stood with his hand restin' on the nigger's shoulder. "Old man," he said, "I wouldn't hurt you for the world," and he took out his handkerchief and wiped the nigger's lips. "Old man," he went on, "that hat you've got on ain't fit to wear. Come in here," and he led him into a store that happened not to be closed up on account of

the desperado. "Here," he called, and the store-keeper began to dance around, "give this old man the best

hat you've got in the house. W'y, your shoes are all worn out, too, old man. We'll jest get a new pair, that's what we'll do. And you need a coat, too. Oh, we can't afford to go around lookin' shabby. We don't care what it costs. Here, young fellow, hustle around. Hand us a coat." He stood lookin' on with tender eyes. When the nigger was rigged out, Ab asked:

"Whar was you headed for old gentleman—and God knows you are a gentleman, I don't care how black you are."

"I was goin' down to the wagin yard, sah."

"Wall, it's too muddy to walk down there with

them new shoes on, so I'll jest send you down thar in a hack. Here, Mister, make out your bill; and when he had paid what was due the store he put the old man in a hack and sent him away."

The three friends looked at one another, but said nothing. The train stopped at a station, and a tired looking woman, carrying a little girl in her arms, got on. She took a seat just opposite the three friends and Old Billy. The little girl began to cry. Brooks bought her an orange, but she would not take it. Adams offered her an apple, but she screamed at him.

"Oh, I don't know what to do with her," said the woman, sighing. "I don't know what is the matter with her."

Old Billy looked at the woman and then at the child. "Your child, madam?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Your only child, I reckon."

"Yes, sir."

"The only one you've ever had, I take it."

"Well, yes, sir," she answered, regarding him curiously.

"And you were an only child, too, I reckon."

"I was, sir."

"And you didn't play with children much."

"No, sir."

"I thought not."

The old man got up, took a little shawl that had been thrown on a seat, twisted it, tied a knot at one end, smoothed the thing into a semblance of a rag doll, handed it to the little girl and said: "Love the doll." The little creature seized the rag and hugged it. She ceased crying in a moment, and in a sweet disregard of what was going on about her, hummed the improvised tune of tenderness.

"Madam," said the old man, "your little girl simply wanted somethin' to love and protect."

"Gentleman," Brooks remarked, arising, "the man who can thus touch the earliest bud of woman's noble nature—the very germ of the truest of all affections, motherly love, is my master. He is not Old Billy, but, gentleman, he is the Hon. William."