

## *An Effective Token*

A STORY

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

Pleasant pictures are always pleasant; the lapse of time never makes them less attractive; nor can age lessen their value. As it is with pictures upon canvas, giving to the eye some marvelous beauty of nature, so it is with those pictures of real life which the hearts of good men are presenting every day, and which only require to be gathered up, and to be put in preservable form, to become treasures and blessings.

The following one which, as a picture of the spirit of Masonry will be interesting to many, and in giving it to you, I will simply say, by way of introduction, that the hero of the incident was my friend in the after years, and that his story was amply true and unadorned.

Billy William—"Fifer Billy" was his name of common use, from the fact that he had been a musician in the regular army, with the fife for his instrument—was a native of Portland, Maine, left parentless at an early age, and thrown upon his own resources for sustenance. He was not more than fifteen when he entered the army as a musician, where he remained eight years. From that he went to sea, concluding that he would see a bit of the old world before he died. He made three voyages to Liverpool, after which, in 1840, at the age of thirty-five, or thereabouts, he shipped for a voyage to India.

Of the possessions left to Billy Williams from his father's store, the only thing he cared to preserve was a masonic emblem—a Past Master's jewel, presented to his father by a lodge of Freemasons on which he had presided for several years. It was a simple pin of silver, its design, the square and compasses, resting upon the segment of article. Billy prized this the more highly because upon the inner side thereof was engraved professing of the good-will of the brethren to his parent. Of course, the youth felt a strong desire to become a brother in that mystic band. He watched eagerly for an opportunity which did not come. When he was able to afford the other opportunity was wanting; and when he was for any considerable length of time near to a lodge, he had not the means. It will be remembered, also, that at that time but very few of the lodges were "at work." Still he kept his father's honored and honoring jewel and it was to him an inspiration, leading him to a reverence for the institution, and a certain feeling of kinship with the brotherhood.

In the spring of 1840 Billy shipped on board the bark "Other" of New York, loading at Boston for a trip to Calcutta. The crew consisted of twenty two men before the mast, cook, steward, cabin-boy, carpenter, and four officers, making thirty souls, all told. The run across the ocean was made with favorable winds, and not until the bark had approached the African coast did any signs of trouble appear. Then came calms, and storms, and intolerable heats; but they crept on their way, thinking of making a stop at Cape Town. The bark had struck on towards the mouth of Orange River, and was touching the line of Cape Colony, when one dismal, dark, drizzly, dead-aired month, half-a-dozen long war-canoes, filled its painted and feathered savages, put out on the river, and pulled towards them. There could be no mistaking the character of the strangers. The bark had all sail set, but not breath of air to move a thread. Only a brown, glass expanse of blue water, broken into swelling masses, with the dim rays of the rising sun vainly endeavoring

to penetrate the gloom.

The bark was armed with a six-pound iron gun, on a traverse, upon the forecastle, and there were arms enough for all hands, such as they were. The muskets had not been properly cared for, the pistols were rusty, and the long, iron-sheathed cutlasses, ditto. Capt. Burke assembled his crew, and pointed to the coming host. Said he:

“You have your choice of dying. You can stand by me, and the bark, and fall in good and righteous cause, or you can let that crew board us, and have your throats cut without mercy.”

The men chose to fight, and preparations were made accordingly. The iron gun was loaded to the muzzle with powder and iron scraps, and the arms distributed as they could be taken, every man taking a musket and a pistol, and most of them taking cutlasses.

Capt. Burke himself aimed the forecastle gun, and had the bark been provided with enough of them, the proas would never have reached the vessel. She blew one of the boats in which were forty men, clean out of the water, leaving her crew howling and yelling like so many black demons. The others saw, and with terrible energy put to their paddles, and very soon came shooting alongside. A shower of bullets was poured down upon them, but in the wild excitement under the stimulus of deadly fear and terror—the missiles flew wildly, and did but little execution.

Up by the chains, by the stern davits—by the bob-stays, and over the bows—up by the flying booms, and by the anchor-stocks—the black horde came pouring in upon us, and the first blow struck was at the captain of the bark, who had been seen to discharge the great gun.

Early in the fray Billy Williams, who had a pistol in his belt and a cutlass in his hand, and who was by far the coolest of the crew—his service in the army having initiated him—was endeavoring to collect his shipmates in a gang-way, there to make a stand, when he was struck down by a blow from behind, and he knew nothing more for a long time. He had a faint idea of being lowered into a boat—of hearing a bedlam of strange sounds—of hearing many orders, and he fancied the bark was being towed in shore.

When Billy recovered his senses, he found himself in a hut of bamboo, thatched with palm leaves, with half a dozen of his shipmates around him. He sat up, and looked around. They were all bound, hand and foot, but there were no bonds upon himself. Among those who sat around him—eight of them—was one officer, the first mate, Samuel Seaver, of Yonkers. Of him Billy inquired what had transpired.

The mate shook his head.

“Billy, I don’t know what to make of it. After you’d been knocked down by a Portuguese, I should think—though he may have been one of the natives—they set out to strip you. The man that knocked you down, upon tearing open your frock, found the shammy bag that you always wear around your neck, and as soon as he saw it he sprang to his feet, and swung his arms in the air. I couldn’t tell what he said, but I knew what he meant, for in an instant the black pirates held back and dropped the points of their swords and clubs and spears and axes. Then they put their

heads together, and the man that had overhauled you could speak a little English. He asked us, if they would not strike any more, if we would surrender in good faith and give them no further trouble?

“What could we do? Of course we promised, and were glad enough, too. Then they put us into the boats, and lashed scrap-iron to the dead bodies, and threw them overboard. A few of us prayed in our hearts, but it was a sad and hurried funeral. Here you see eight of us living. The rest I need not tell you about. You know as well as I do. Our officers fell fighting valiantly, and so did the men who have fallen. The canoes hitched to the bark, and she was easily towed into the river, and her lofty spars run down. She is stripped to her lower tops, so that no passing vessel outside will see her.

“And now, Billy, what is all this about? Why did they hit upon you as the one white sheep of the flock? I cannot understand it.”

“Let us wait until somebody comes,” said Williams, “and they shall explain as they please. Upon my life, I cannot comprehend.”

Or, if he did comprehend, he did not choose to speak.

They had not long to wait. Billy had discovered a gourd shell standing upon a ledge at the side of the hut, and was seeking to discover what it contained, when the entrance to the hut was darkened, and presently afterwards the chief of the pirate crew entered. He saw that Williams had recovered his consciousness, and his next movement thereafter was to bring in a massive golden goblet filled with highly-spiced wine, of which he caused the revived man to drink freely. And Billy made no objections. The beverage was grateful to his palate, and quickening to his pulses, and under its generous influence he revived still further. The pirate brought cool water and bathed the heated brow, and by and by Billy found courage to put his question. He asked—Why was this kindness shown to him—why had his life been spared, and why had this burden of gratitude been laid upon him?

The pirate caused the others to leave the hut, and when they had gone—when he and Williams had been left alone together—he took from his bosom the jewel which he had found upon the other’s neck, and which he declared he had held as a sacred pledge.

“You ask me why I have been good to you. Before I tell you, I would have you answer me this:” He spoke the language with difficulty, but could make himself plainly understood.

“If,” he went on, “you had found this bauble upon my person, what would you have done?”

“I should have done as you have done unto me.”

“And could I do less? Ah! the better and brighter days come back to me when I see this.”

He pressed the jewel to his lips, and held it at arm’s length and gazed upon it long and earnestly. Williams was upon the point of speaking when the pirate stopped him.

“I must not let you speak unguardedly. You judge, from my manner, that I am of the fraternity to which you belong. Ah, no! If I had been my life would not have found this depth of sin and shame.

“In my youthful days I served a man who was a Freemason. He was to me a father and a friend, giving me the full measure of his love, and hesitating never at a sacrifice which could conduce to my comfort and welfare.

“When we separated he exacted from me a promise that if I should ever find a Freemason in distress I should contribute to his necessities according to my best ability; and should I ever find a Brother of the mystic tie in mortal danger, I should offer my life for his if need be.

“That was four-and-twenty years ago; and from that time I have never, to my knowledge, found my master’s brother until now. Have I not kept my word?”

“Indeed you have,”

“And it has cost me more than you know. But never mind that. The memory of the deed is blessed, and shall be to me a full recompense for all that I may have to endure.

“And now, is my brother able to walk? If he is, let him follow me, and make no misstep. Sharp eyes are upon us, and we have need of the utmost caution.”

Wondering greatly what could be meant by this movement, Williams arose from his cot and followed the pirate to the door, where his seven companions were found in waiting and ready to move, though they knew no more of the wherefore than did he.

The pirate went out first, and took a survey of the surroundings. He came back with his finger upon his lips, and with a look of deep anxiety upon his face.

“Not a whisper, for your lives!” said he. “Be silent and circumspect, and I will lead you to life and to liberty. Let my brother follow next after me.”

They went out in solemn silence, and not a word was spoken until they reached the river’s bank, where a boat was found in waiting.

“You know the way,” said the pirate; “and the wind is in your favor. I will look to it that you are not pursued.”

Then he took Williams aside, and grasping him by the hand, said:

“I wish I could do more for you; but, as it is, I am doing more than many would do. If my comrades knew what I was now doing, my life would not be worth an hour’s purchase. But they shall not know. I can keep the secret, as I have kept the faith with you—a sacred charge in my own bosom.”

On the following morning Williams and his shipmates pulled into the broad, deep bay of the

Bethany Mission, whence they readily found passage to Cape Town. At Cape Town the story of their adventure leaked out, and a British sloop-of-war was dispatched to Orange River to look after the pirates; but nothing came of it. The bark was found, stripped to the deck, and scuttled in deep water, her naked spars standing out in sad and solemn relief against the murky sky.

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