

Miss Tillie's Bicycle

By May Kelsey Champion

ALL that was left of the old Fanning place—beams, shingles, flooring, window and door casings, even the sections of the summer-house and the trunks of the nine great sentinel elms that had surrounded the garden—lay in a huge pile in Mr. Luther Sill's back yard.

Mr. Luther Sill could be depended on to take anything that would burn. The news that a house was to be pulled down, or a tree cut, brought him at once to the spot, with a fair offer for the wood. Fuel of this sort frequently cost him more than coal, but, if he knew, it did not trouble him.

Forty years before, Mr. Sill had danced in the long parlors of the Fanning house and wandered about the box-edged paths of the garden. Once he had sat in the summer-house by moonlight with pretty Polly Fanning, and she had asked him why he did not marry some nice girl.

He did not know any, he had said, with a choke in his throat, for her small white hand lay in a ray of moonlight within an inch of his own—that would take him, was what he would have added the next moment, but she broke into a gurgle of laughter and ran off to the house.

Polly married a naval officer not long after. But she told the story to every girl in town, and he had never found the courage to look at a woman's eyes since.

It was a cool, bright morning, with a crisp breeze coming from the west. Just the day to saw wood, Mr. Luther reflected, contentedly, as he got the rollers ready.

"Guess ye'll have enough stuff to carry ye through the winter," said Dan, surveying the pile. "Where goin' to put it, Mr. Sill. The sallar's full a' ready."

As master and man, Mr. Luther Sill and Dan had saved a great deal of wood together in the last thirty years.

The Sill family had been one of governors and judges, brilliant statesmen, lawyers of renown and skilled physicians; but Luther Sill had either fallen behind in the race or had not cared to run. Something of his inheritance appeared in his voice, a rarely failing index, for though he might lapse—and frequently did—from grammatical rectitude, his inflections were those associated only with culture and breeding.

When his mother died, and his last brother and sister married and went away from home, Luther was left with the old place and Dan. Ever since, the two had lived and worked together, had cooked their meals and eaten them together, in intimate but never familiar relation.

Dan's head and shoulders were bent as to a yoke, and his respect for the Sills had no limit. He labored steadily between suns, and yielded patient and unquestioning obedience, like a dumb creature.

When they were at work Luther Sill fretted at him continually, with a fussy irritability. It took the place of conversation, and both men would have missed it. Dan seldom replied, but as soon as he was left alone could be heard singing gospel hymns in a loud, cheerful voice.

By eight o'clock the log was in position. Mr. Sill tied a piece of old rope about his waist and seated himself on the chopping-block.

"Bring the saw, Danny."

"Yes, suh."

Dan returned with the long, two-handled cross-cut saw. Mr. Sill laid it in position, and Dan took his place on the other side of the log.

"Now, Ready?"

"Yes, suh."

"No, you ain't, neither. Stand back! Stand back!" It was beginning. Dan moved awkwardly to the right.

"Not that way! Not that way! Back! There!" And Mr. Sill's voice sank to a satisfied level.

Seated on the chopping-block, he steadied the saw with one hand, but it was clear that all the work was done at the other end.

For a few moments there was silence, except for the singing of the steel in the wood. Gradually Dan approached the log, and little by little the saw shortened on his side. Nearer, nearer. Then Mr. Sill lifted his voice again.

"Get back! Get back! Stand over yonder!"

Dan sought the spot, growing confused and stupid as Mr. Sill grew louder and more impatient. Moving too far away, he was ordered nearer, and coming too near, he was ordered back.

"The trouble with you, Dan, is you don't know nothin'" he declared, as he seated himself after one of these trips. "Hold it higher! Higher!"

Only once had Dan ever shown spirit and replied in kind. That was a long time ago, and the result had been an instantaneous reversal of their positions. Meekness fell upon Mr. Sill and, during the rest of that day, whenever he addressed Dan it was with some deference in his tone.

He half rose once more, threateningly.

"Higher! Higher! I tell you higher! You're too low! There!" And the sawing went on.

"Reckon I'll have to find another man, and you'll

have to look round for another place, Dan," he said, after a while. "I sh'd think I'd told you that enough times these last two-three years. Why don't ye? Pull harder! Harder! It'll take somebody with backbone to get this cleaned up before snow flies. Somebody with backbone."

That night Mr. Sill enjoyed the wholesome, pleasant weariness of the laborer who comes home at the day's end with his dinner-pail. He had earned not only his bread, but the right to sit on the steps and watch the sun go down. They had made a good beginning on those big sticks. He had not expected to do so much.

He leaned back in his chair and, clasping his hands behind his head, gazed out upon the shaded road, on the long orchard, generous in its promise for the autumn, and on the garden, where not a weed was to be seen.

"Best-looking garden anywheres around," he reflected. "Guess Dan must be out there before day-break."

The Sill house was large and square and very white. Every three years it was given a new coat of paint, because of the mildew from the shade of the buttonwood and four great elms in the front yard. A flagstone

Dan coughed.

"I've found a place, Mr. Sill."

"Found a place!"

"Yes, suh."

"Found a place!" This time Mr. Sill put down his paper.

"Yes, suh. Goin' to work for Miss Comstock to-morrow mornin'." Dan twisted his hat in his hands. "She says she wants a man."

"What's she want a man for? Mr. Sill stared incredulously at the Comstock house. "You can't go down there to-morrow. We've got too much to do. We've got to work on that wood. What's she want you to do to-morrow?"

"Pick up green apples, first thing. She says she don't want 'em decayin' all over the grass ground."

"Don't want 'em what?"

"Decayin', she says."

"Oh! Well, I can't spare my man to go out pickin' up green apples just at present."

"But I'll be her man to-morrow," Dan reminded. "You said—"

"I didn't say anything. You just go down and tell her you can't come."

"Yes, yes; I'm going to 'tend to it," Mr. Sill declared impatiently. But he did not. He spent his mornings close to the fence, where he could watch Dan at work on the other side and order him about in the old way, which was a comfort to both. Now and then he would draw a timber from the pile and saw it into short lengths, but the heap did not lessen rapidly.

One morning—Dan had been in Miss Comstock's employ for a month—Mr. Sill looked up suddenly from a piece of the old Fanning summer-house that he was splitting up. His eye had caught a strange glitter, and he turned, axe in hand, to see his neighbor, Miss Tillie, riding around her strawberry bed on a shimmering new bicycle.

"Stays on pretty good, don't she?" remarked Dan, who had also straightened up to watch. "She's be'n a-learnin' nights. Bought it of an agent two weeks ago."

Mr. Sill stepped behind a young quince tree and viewed the absorbing spectacle through the top branches. Now and then the front wheel would make a sudden, wayward swerve to right or left, at which he would exclaim under his breath, but it always came back to the path again.

Miss Tillie's bonnet was well on the back of her head. She always wore either a sunbonnet or a bonnet and

the garden. Mr. Sill and Dan propped up the piece of fence, but in the first high wind it went down again, carrying several more lengths with it. The posts were worthless, and it was clear that a new fence was needed between the two houses.

Mr. Sill spent two toilsome evenings in composing a note to his neighbor. After three weeks, during which no reply came, and the fence lay flat on the ground, he spoke to Dan one morning:

"Miss Comstock ever say anything about a little—er—business letter I sent her? I must 'a' mailed it three weeks ago."

"Mailed it?" said Dan.

"Yes."

"At the post-office?"

"Yes."

"Guess it's there yet, then, Mr. Sill. We don't neither of us ever get to the post-office."

"Well, you tell her there's a letter there for her, will you?"

"Yes, suh," assented Dan cheerfully.

That afternoon, as they were sawing through one of the large trees, Dan suddenly paused and looked up.

"She won't let me get it out," he said.

"What's that?"

"She won't let me get that letter out o' the post-office."

"Why not?"

"Dan know." Dan pushed the saw again.

Only two persons, or possibly three, understood why the foot of Miss Tillie Comstock never crossed the threshold of the post-office.

Thirty years before, coming home one Friday night from prayer meeting, Elmer Dagget—he was not postmaster then—had squeezed her hand in the moonlight, and asked if he might pay attention to her. And she—in the moonlight—had told him that he might. The next Friday night he walked home with Amelia Bacon, and they had never spoken to each other since.

The possible third person was Amelia Bacon, whom he had married. If Miss Tillie could only have been sure that he had never known.

On the morning after his conversation with Dan Mr. Sill walked over the fallen fence and, knocking at Miss Comstock's kitchen door, gave her the first news that their joint property was in disrepair.

Miss Tillie put on her pink sunbonnet and accompanied him down the garden walk. As she surveyed the gap and prostrate lengths, her face took the color of the sunbonnet.

"It looks as if we should haf to have a hull new fence," Mr. Sill said.

"Can't—can't it be fixed?" his neighbor stammered.

"Two'dn't really pay. You can see for yourself the posts all along are pretty—er—decayed." Mr. Sill gave one of them a kick with his heavy-soled shoe. "The question is now, what kind of a one we'd better put up."

Mr. Sill politely deferred to his neighbor, and Miss Tillie could not decide. She did not want wire so near the house in a thunder storm. Slats were so convenient for boys. Boards were ugly, and shut off your view up the street. Pickets made the best-looking fence, if you had the front of it your way, but they were expensive.

"Reckon we'll have to build ye a stun wall," said Dan, who had drawn near, with his wheelbarrow and rake.

After several visits at the back door of mornings, Mr. Sill went one evening to say that, whatever fence she might choose, he would be pleased to have all the posts on his side.

Miss Tillie treated him to a glass of home-made wine and a plate of seed cakes, and the next time Mr. Sill went over he wore cuffs.

That was the following evening. Miss Tillie had taken time to consider his kind offer, and thanked him, but she could not be so selfish and unneighborly as to accept it.

"Not every post, Mr. Sill," she said. "But I have a plan. Why can't we each have every other post?"

She put the question to the carpenter, when he came the next morning to make an estimate.

"If you want a Virginia snake, ma'am," he said.

It was while they were discussing flat pickets or square that Luther Sill went down flat and bought a new hat and three neckties with ginks of red in them.

The days grew short, and the sunsets took their autumn colorings. The spice of drying leaves was in the air. There came a morning when Mr. Sill told Dan that he might tear down the old fence and begin cutting it up.

"Fin'ly decided what she wants, has she?" asked Dan.

Mr. Sill vigorously pulled off a loose ribbon.

"We ain't going to have any fence at all," he said.

"Going to throw it all into one big lot." He jerked off several pickets and sent them after the strip of ribbon. "And, Dan, you and me've got to work lively on that heap of timber over there. It's right in the way. Going to put an ell on our house. The place will look good with an ell."

Dan's gaze rested for a while on the pile of timbers, then travelled slowly to the Sill house.

"When ye goin' to build on?"

"Ain't going to build on. Going to move on." He pointed across the marigolds and sage to the house.

"Going to put that on rollers and move it over and join it on and put a sallar under it, before ground freezes."

With a dropped jaw, Dan regarded the Comstock house for another long period. At last he turned back to Mr. Sill.

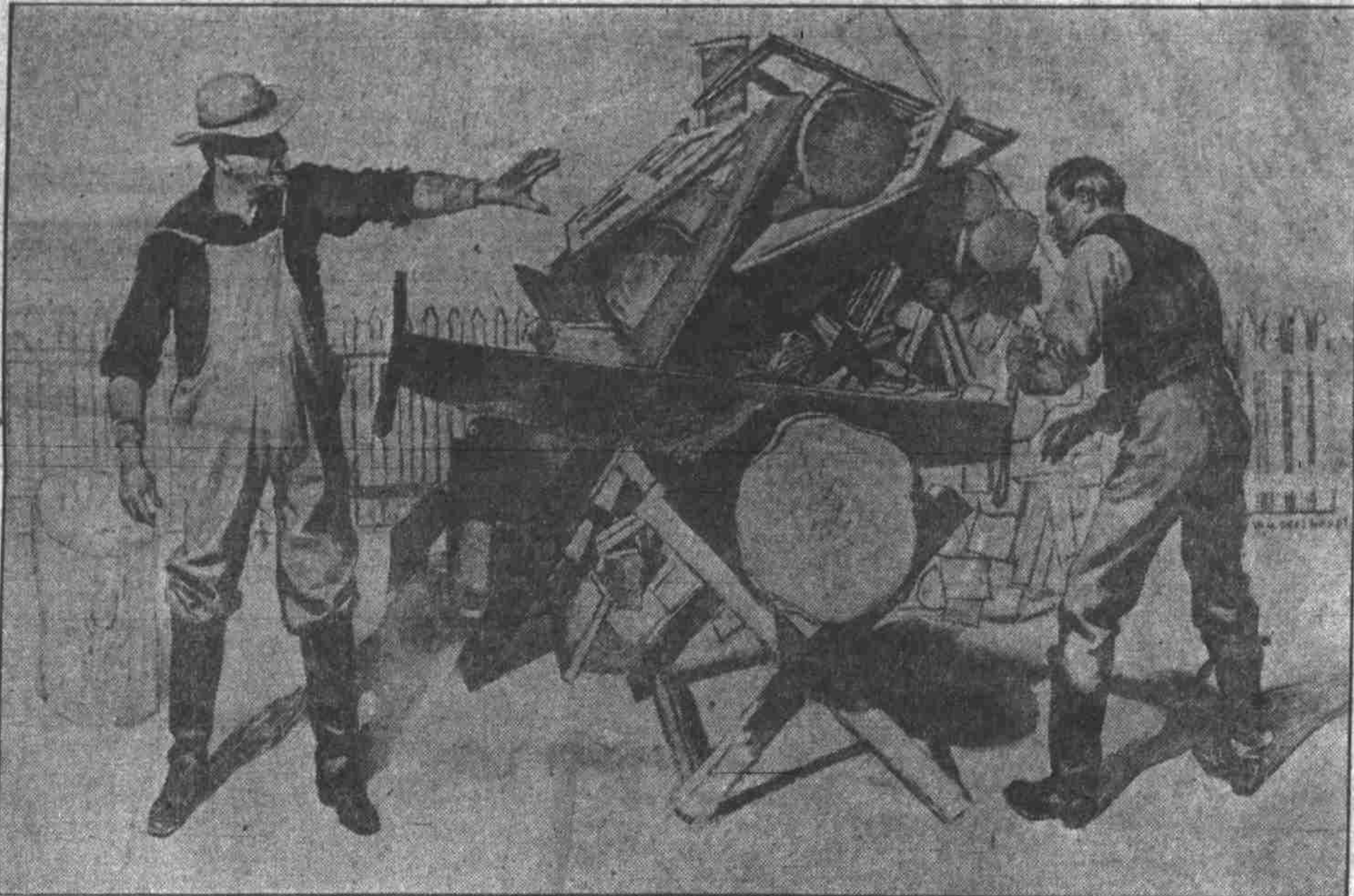
"What's goin' to become o' her?" he asked slowly, with a motion of his head over his shoulder. There was a chuckle in Mr. Sill's throat.

"Oh, she's coming with the ell," he said.

Dan began slowly pulling off pickets. Gradually an idea took form in his mind. A glimmer came in his eyes, and he wiped a smile off his lips with his sleeve.

"Be you—be you a-thinkin' o'—?"

"I be," said Mr. Sill.



THEN MR. SILL LIFTED HIS VOICE AGAIN, "GET BACK! GET BACK! STAND OVER YONDER."

walk between two tall, even rows of boxwood led to the front door. Luther's great-grandfather, the Judge of the Supreme Court, planted the boxwood, and it had blossomed.

No one used the dignified boxwood walk now, however, or lifted the knocker on the front door. Even strangers came to the side porch, where Luther Sill had his chair.

Suddenly Mr. Sill bent forward and stared over the long shadows of his yard at the house of his next-door neighbor.

"What in time is Dan going in there for?" he exclaimed.

The Comstock house stood close to the street. It was much smaller than Mr. Sill's, but quite as carefully kept. There was a latticework porch at the front door with honeysuckle over it. Borders of phlox and geraniums and heliotropes and lemon-verbena edged the walks. Nasturtiums and Madeira-vines and morning-glories grew on strings to the tops of the windows, half concealing the crisp white curtains with their fluted ruffles. Back of the house was a stretch of orchard and garden, and back of these, reaching round to the street again and embracing the kingdom of Miss Tillie like a protecting arm, lay Sill land.

Three generations of Sills had endeavored to buy back the two-acre square that one of their progenitors had sold out of the estate, and three generations of Comstocks had as persistently refused to sell. The result was a formality between the two families.

"Can't understand what Dan wants down there!" mused Mr. Sill, leaving his chair and taking a seat on the steps in order to get a better view under the trees. When at last Miss Comstock's gate clicked, and a pair of bent shoulders appeared above the front fence, he got up and went back to his chair.

He was reading the *Agriculturist* when Dan sat down on the extreme edge of the lowest step, and he did not turn.

Dan rose. Habit was strong.

"Yes, suh." And he went obediently down the road again.

He was back in five minutes, and spherically resumed his seat. Mr. Sill waited, but Dan did not speak.

"Well, what did she say?" he inquired at last.

"She says a bargain's a bargain, and she's hired me reg'lar."

Mr. Sill rose and scraped his chair violently to the other end of the porch.

"Did you tell her about all the work we've got over here?" he asked.

"Yes, suh. She says she knows it. She don't want to be onneighborly, she says, an' if you want to hire me for a couple of hours or so afternoons when I ain't to work for her, you can pay her fifteen cents an hour."

"Couple of hours?" cried Mr. Sill in scorn. Then, with an accession of curiosity, "What's she going to pay you, Dan?"

"Same's I be'n a-gittin'."

"How long 've you hired for?"

"Till nex' spring."

"Well, for all dum foolishness! You plumb crazy."

"I dun know," replied Dan, with humble uncertainty. "I jest done as you—"

"Well, I know," interrupted Mr. Sill with spirit.

The next morning Luther Sill built the kitchen fire for the first time in thirty years. True to the agreement, Dan came over in the afternoon and worked at the trees with him. But what could be done in two hours?

Day by day the grass grew yellower under the heap of timbers from the Fanning place.

"Well, Dan—she treat you well?" asked Mr. Sill one afternoon.

"Yes, suh," said Dan, with the old cheerfulness.

After two weeks of neglect a flourishing crop of weeds took possession of the garden. In, in distress, urged the hiring of a man to hoe it.