

SOUTHERN JUSTICE - A VIGNETTE

Josh Billings

The law has probably tightened up recently; there seems to be a lessening of the patronizing attitude of police officers toward poor people. Forty years ago the police treated them badly, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, sometimes blandly tolerated minor or even major indiscretions as they would those of a child.

There is good reason for efforts to tighten up enforcement of the law. Crime has become harder, more complicated, more desperately related to need for money, drug tainted. In poor areas crime used to be more predictable - domestic squabbles and a knifing or shooting, drinking quarrels, interracial killings, some routine burglaries, stolen cars - but not very many cop shooting confrontations. Things have hardened up. Things are unpredictable. You stop someone on a routine road block or license check and he shoots you. Things used to be more relaxed.

Jim was a placid quiet man, thin, shambling, and serious, without much humor or joy. He worked unhurriedly around our yard, trimming and cutting grass, raking leaves unobtrusively, hardly there but for the work he did. He drove a battered old car slowly and awkwardly. He was small-accident prone, but because he read and wrote with difficulty, the police confused his names and their spelling, so he never accumulated many violations on the docket. He learned to take some telephone messages for us, which sometimes we could decipher. On one occasion when my wife remonstrated with him about some work he had done or had not done, he didn't show up for a few weeks. When he returned I asked him what had been the trouble. He said, "I was afraid of Mrs. Billings."

I tried to imagine what he would be like among his friends. Did he have any friends? For several years he had a common law wife. She left him, I think, because he drank sporadically and was unpredictable. His brother, a preacher, was not much in his life. We knew more of him later, when Jim became temporarily deranged. He heard noises in the wall. He took the siding off his house. He began shooting at demons in the ceiling. The television spoke to him, threatened him.

Occasionally on Saturday night Jim's wife would call me when he had been jailed for drinking. I'd go down and get him out on my recognizance. He was always embarrassed and apologetic. He'd be at work Monday.

One Saturday night Lula called: "Jim's in jail again!"

"What has he done?"

"Dr. Billings, I think he's killed a man this time!"

I went down to the jail. On Saturday nights it's a madhouse, full, several persons to a cell, hollering, clanging on the bars, clawing at passersby. The sergeant took me to Jim. He was dejected, drooping. He had streaks of court plaster on his right cheek and shoulder. He smelled of old whiskey in an atmosphere already reeking.

"Jim, what in the world happened?"

"We were shooting craps. He said I owed him fifty cents. I didn't, he pulled a knife to back me out a third story window. I got to him first."

I had learned that the man died on the way to the hospital from a knife wound.

"Well, Jim," I said, "you'd better spend the night here while we think this one over. We need some help."

I returned home to brood over the situation. It was midnight. Nothing could be done now. We needed a good lawyer. Jim would be tried for murder. It would be long and drawn out. The sergeant told me that the dead man had five brothers. I hoped self-defense could be proved. Witnesses had to be found. I hoped I could bail him out. The premonition of a prolonged murder trial hung over me.

The next morning I went to the jail. Things looked more cheerful. It was half empty, with less noise and less smell. I spoke to the sergeant and asked to see Jim.

"Oh, Doctor," he said, "we let him go. He's a good person. It was self defense. The man he killed was wanted on twenty-seven counts. We would pin a medal on Jim if we had one.."

Monday, Jim was at work. The court plaster was still in place. He looked embarrassed and apologetic.