

A Tragedy of Boyhood.

By A. E. Roberts.

On the seventh day of May, Billy was five years old. To commemorate that event, and to give Billy some tangible evidence of her love, grandma set a hen for him. In time eight little fluffy black, and two white chickens arrived. As it sometimes happens, even in the best regulated families, the eight little blacks all turned out to be "boy" chickens, leaving as "girls" only the two white ones. One of these gradually changed until she became a decided buff or "blonde," but the other remained pure white.

The eight boys, being of little value on a farm that is far from town, soon became inextricably mixed with the rest of the general flock and thus gradually passed out of Billy's jurisdiction and recollection, and in time met the fate of all superfluous males. It didn't just seem right to Billy, but there were so many other things in the world so much more interesting than the garnering of mere wealth, that in time the incident faded completely from his mind.

Being of more intrinsic and potential value, a different fate awaited the two "young ladies." In them and their future, Billy's imagination, aided by his mother's knowledge, pictured great expectations. About the time they became feathered out and passed into demure young maidenhood, somebody gave Billy a pretty picture. It was of two little girls, Rose Red and Snow White. The picture then settled for once and all, a very serious problem that had bothered Billy for some time. Henceforth, his two chickens were known as Rose Red and Snow White. Some time during the following winter little Rose Red disappeared, taken probably by some sneaking coyote, leaving out of the ten original grandma chickens, only little Snow White. The passing thus of Red Rose threw great responsibilities on Snow White. In her centered all Billy's hopes.

The spring and summer months came and went; during all of which time Snow White laid eggs prolifically but refused to "set." Along in early September she suddenly disappeared and later re-appeared as suddenly with eight little white chicks.

How Billy did love those wee chickens. He fed them, watered them, cared for them, and they grew fast and fine. When they were about a month old the chicken coop caught fire from an unknown cause and was burned to the ground. The season was late; threshing time came round, and daddy had no time to build a new one. Night after night the chickens gathered and "roosted" on the ground squatting around where the coop had once been. For Snow White and her family, Billy had a separate coop made out of a box that once contained canned salmon. This box he buried in the side of the big, new straw stack and every night he covered it over with an armful of straw, and every morning before starting for school he gave them a quart or two of daddy's wheat or oats.

Cold weather came on apace, the chicken coop was still unbuilt, and saving his young charges from the biting cold became more and more of a task for Billy. One morning away on in November it was bitterly cold; Billy had covered the box the night before with several big armfuls of straw until not a sign of anything could be seen. In the morning he hurried out, burrowed a hole into the box and was delighted to find them all safe and sound. He put in a can full of grain, covered them up again and went joyfully to school. He was happy all day because he knew the chickens would be good and warm, and daddy had bought some lumber and was going to build the coop that day. When school was out he hurried home. Already the short November day was drawing to a close. From a distance he spied the new chicken coop. He hurried to the house, threw his books inside, then ran to the stack. The box was there, turned on its side, but there was no Snow White and no little chickens. The cause of the disturbance was only too plain. Daddy had thoughtlessly turned the pigs loose. One of them had sniffed the wheat and oats and had burrowed and dug and rooted and tossed until the wee home was a wreck and a ruin—and where was Snow White? He ran to the new chicken coop but she was not there, he searched the barnyard back and forth but find her he couldn't. In the midst of his search he was called to supper, and supper over must go quickly to bed. He said his prayers and was snugly tucked in. Somehow he couldn't sleep. Outside the wind was howling and he knew it was fearfully cold. He lay quietly for a while then called "Mumma, come here please, I want to ask you something."

His mother came. "What is it, Sunny Jim?" she said, "hurry and tell me now because I have the dishes to wash and bread to set and the churning to do before I can go to bed."

"Mumma," he asked, disregarding these facts, "does God—would God care—can I pray for something—after I've said Amen—when I'm in bed—will He do it Mumma?"

"Why yes, dearie, God will answer your prayer any where, any time; now you go to sleep little man, seven o'clock comes awfully quick you know."

Billy prayed—prayed that God would take care of Snow White and her little ones, then strangely soothed and contented he snuggled down into the covers from the depths of which he called sleepily: "Good night, mumma, I love you, fo-o-sty millyun—"

The mother smiled and went on with her endless work.

The next day and the next passed and no sign of

Snow White nor the little ones. When Saturday came Billy searched diligently and thoroughly. He knew she was somewhere near and he knew she was all right because he had asked God and Mumma said— He went over to the grain bin on the other side of the straw stack and for the third or fourth time got on his knees and peered under. The sun was high now and the light was better and he could see something under there. He scratched the straw away and wriggled and twisted and reached as far as he could. The tip of his fingers touched something, he pinched it and pulled, drew it towards him, then reached for a stronger hold. A disquieting fear crept into his mind. Could it be?—but no—he drew the unresisting thing out, and there it was, it was poor little Snow White, she had died in that awful cold trying to protect those little ones.

He picked her up, smoothed and stroked her feathers, his mind a chaos; how could it be—why was it? He started for the house, he must tell—must show his mother.

Coming around from behind the straw stack he met his father. He held up the chicken. "See daddy, it's poor little—" A lump came in his throat. "What you got, Bub? A dead chicken, eh? The white one that had the bunch of late-hatched chicks, is it? Never mind, they wouldn't have lived anyway, and besides I'm going to kill off everything but the Plymouth Rocks. Throw it into the pigs, they'll fix it," he called over his shoulder as he passed on out to the barn.

With heavy feet and a heart like lead Billy walked slowly up to the house. Didn't daddy know, he wondered, that that was his chicken, the last of all the ones that grandma had given him? Didn't he know how he had been trying to save her and the little ones? And now they were gone, every one—and daddy didn't care.

He stroked and smoothed again the poor little ruffled feathers, then hurried to the house and in his mother's sympathetic lap poured out a world of grief.

Several years passed and the tragedy of Snow White



The fighting isn't all done in Europe.

was apparently forgotten. Since her passing he had no desire to own anything. His mother though, planned otherwise. Time, she knew, would heal Billy's wounded trust, and besides in the years to come he must have an education—if possible he must even go to college. She thought of it by day and planned by night. If she could only somehow start a fund for him—

One day in the summer daddy came home from plowing. He had finished the last of the breaking on the "upper quarter." Down near the barn there was a level place between two hills that he figured would make a good big pasture. The patch was a little over two acres in extent, and he soon ripped the sod up. Along in the winter he changed his mind about it, it would be in the way there, that big pasture, he'd break one out somewhere else, a bigger one too. What would he do with two acres? Oh, seed it to wheat or oats or something.

Mother got to thinking and one day along in early spring she told her plans to Billy.

"Ask your father," she said, "to seed that little piece to wheat and call it yours."

Billy advanced the proposition to his father. "All right," he acquiesced, "we'll do that." All through the summer Billy watched the growing grain. He speculated on the number of bushels there would be in his "crop," and during many school hours figured out his money receipts. He pored over the catalogues and made lists of all kinds of wonderfully impractical things that he would buy. He talked it over with the boys at school, and estimated he would have at least twenty bushels to the acre.

"Pooh!" said Johnny Rover, "my pap gets fifty bushels to the care."

Gee! Fifty bushels, he wished he'd get that, that would be some crop; he appealed to his mother, she'd know.

"Johnny Rover," she said, "is a perfectly wonderful boy and he has a wonderful father; however, son, it is

better, I always think, to figure on getting, say, fifteen bushels to the acre, then you'll feel pretty good if you get twenty or twenty-five, while if you should figure on fifty and then only got fifteen—well you'd be pretty badly disappointed, wouldn't you?"

The threshing outfit came one day while Billy was at school, and he was again at school when they finished up and pulled away. The tally showed some 37 bushels over the even number.

"Better call that Billy's," suggested the mother, and so it was done.

From then on there was one definite side to the problem. He had 37 bushels of wheat and he pestered his dad to sell it. Finally it was sold, it all went in with "that last car." In time the returns came and he possessed—nominally—some twenty odd dollars.

He had a thousand perfectly feasible ways of spending that money; air rifles, railroads with tracks, a Shetland pony, a bicycle—

"Not much," said his father. "You can't spend it that way, we'll put it in the bank for you or I'll keep it and owe it to you or—"

"I'll tell you what," suggested mother. "Why not charge Billy so much for plowing and seeding and rent, and so on; and seed as many acres as his money will pay for." But to this proposition daddy demurred. "Two acres this year; five acres next; twenty acres the next; no sir! Pretty soon he'd have the whole darned farm; no we might buy him some pigs, or a heifer or something, it wouldn't do any harm if we had another cow, anyway."

Accordingly, a pretty little heifer was bought from the Smith boys, and in time she became the mother of a fine young son. For the pasture, care and so forth, daddy was to have the milk, but the cow and calf were Billy's. Far into the future Billy laid his plans. If the next calf now was a steer too he'd break them in and sell them to some homesteader for oxen; while if it were a heifer and the next one after that was a heifer, why he'd have—let's see—

Along in the summer one of dad's horses died. They dragged its body off into a hollow on some unoccupied land. The next morning his dad went away and about noon came home with a fine, big, grey gelding.

"Got him for one-seventy-five," he said. "And I traded the cow and calf in on him."

"What cow and calf?" demanded mother. "Old Betsy?"

"Why no," he said astonished. "Billy's heifer and the steer." "Oh, pshaw!" he added, meeting mother's objection. "Wasn't it mine, didn't I give it to him? What was I to do anyway? I had to have a horse, didn't I?"

There seemed no other way; the farm, of course, had to go on, but what would Billy think. That was his cow and calf, his by all rights of ownership. Surely, too, there could have been some plan evolved, some way made up. She dreaded to see Billy come home. It was with an aching heart she told him of his loss, reassuring him as best she could, though she felt but little assurance herself. It seemed as though all her plans for Billy turned out badly, instead of bringing the happiness she fondly hoped for, they only brought tragedy. She wondered if Billy would be satisfied if daddy would perhaps give him a share in the new horse. After supper she questioned father about it. "Why, yes," he said. "But what difference does it make? He'll have the whole farm some time, won't he?"

Thus reassured, Billy lived down the loss of his heifer and laid other more far-reaching plans. At times he vaguely doubted his father's good intentions, but his doubts never lasted long. That he loved his father he knew from the bottom of his heart. His father was his ideal, and to his mind there was none like him in all the world. Other boys had fathers, of course, but none of them were like his; his father knew more, was smarter, stronger, better, more loving, more lovable than any other dad was or could be; and yet sometimes a disquieting doubt crept in. His crop money was gone; his heifer and calf were gone. Often in bed he thought of them and wondered where they were. He remembered, like yesterday, how he had fed the little calf when it first came, how day after day he had carried milk to it, how it would come running to meet him and with impatient eagerness would sometimes knock the bucket out of his hands, or snuff the milk up into its nose until it almost choked.

Day time it wasn't so bad; he had other things to do and other things to think about. He had lessons to learn at school, scrapes to get into and get out of; but at night for weeks he cried himself to sleep, cried softly so his mother wouldn't know.

More years went by and Billy still went to school, except for an odd day when his father let him stay at home when something special needed extra help. As he grew older, he and his mother had long talks about when he would go to college. Yes, dad had said all along he could go to college, to the agricultural college where he would learn to be a farmer—a real farmer—where he would learn the how and why of many things that even dad didn't know. Yes, he would go to college and when he came back he would pitch in with dad and they'd show them; they'd have the best farm in this old country around. When he was sixteen and had gone about as far as he could in the country school, he broached the subject to dad.

"Wasn't it time, didn't he think—?"

Yes, no doubt it was, his father agreed, but you see he had just made a deal for the Simmons place, picked it up as a bargain and, of course, buying it had taken all the cash he had. He was figuring, he said, on having Billy help him this summer; save him hiring a man; then perhaps, next fall when the crops were in—

Billy went to work and worked all that summer and worked hard. Fall and winter came and went, but it always seemed as though there was never quite money