

"The On'y Bloke"

By Robert Cove Lloyd

U LLO, 'ullo, 'ullo! blest if it ain't Lize! 'Oo'd 'uve hexpected ter see yer ole fice 'ere? Wot 'yer doin' 'ere in Winnipeg, Lize, eh?"

Little Billy Ackers, returned veteran, had but a few moments before been manfully trudging along Main Street, thankful for the aid of his stick. Painful enough his progress has been—he was not yet accustomed to his artificial limb—and his face was grim and set as he meditated on the lifetime of limping which was, in all probability, before him.

"Wot a 'ell uve a life. If on'y I 'ad some a'me ole pals 'ere wiv me! It's

so 'ellish fer a cove when 'e ain't got a sole wot owns 'im! Wot ever sort uve life is 't fer a pore lone feller?"

And then, in the midst of these reflections, just in fact as he turned the corner onto Portage, he brought himself up with a jerk, whilst his face took on an expression of amazement, and in the first maze of perplexity, incredulity, but as he stared hard at the girl who had occasioned the stoppage, he gave vent to his surprise in words.

The girl who was dressed in an impossible mourning costume, and had a plentiful supply of "fevers" in her hat, was as much taken aback as the man,

and for a moment could only gaze at him with mouth agape—and then:

"Yus, Bill!" she began, whilst a glad-some smile illuminated her face, thus giving her an air of beauty one would not have suspected at first sight.

The man eagerly, nay greedily, drank in the tones of her voice, loud and almost rasping as it was.

"Yus, yus!" he muttered to himself rather than to the girl before him; "oh yus, it sure is Lize, orl right!"

And then Bill Ackers for a bare second seemed to lose the sound of her voice—his eyes became dreamy, whilst his soul, his mind, and his will, flitted back over the stage of years.

'Twas a very different Lizer that Bill in fancy saw. In 1914, Lizer Madden

was the belle of all the flower sellers on the stand at the Cathedral end of Cheapside, and amongst those girls, too, were some real beauties; rare pictures they made, as they voiced their varied plaints:

"Buy a bench uve v'lets, sir!"

"Narcis'—daffe'—orl a bloomin'! 'eve a sniff at 'em, Lidy! ain't they sweet?"

"Please Lidy, do buy a bunch uve these v'lets, I ain't sold none ter diy!"

Bill recalled his first impression of Lize—it had been one Saturday afternoon; he was wheeling his 'barrer 'ome, everyfink sold art'—just as he was passing the flower-stand, his gaze became riveted on Lizer Madden. The rays of April sun, missing the great dome of the Cathedral, quivered and shimmered across the Churchyard, finally settling in fitful fancy on Lizer's bronze head of hair, giving to it a truly coppery tint, which surmounting the ivory complexion, sufficed to make a remarkable picture.

Indeed, at first sight, Bill Ackers had almost imagined that he was viewing an angel, who had by some strange mistake donned a shawl over her shoulders instead of wearing the regulation wings.

But Lizer had speedily disabused him of this idea, by giving him the "glad eye"; and by this act of friendliness, so unangel-like, she drew him towards her, but the flower girl still remained beautiful in the young coster's eyes; in fact, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

And as for Lizer—well, she had cast approving eyes on Bill, with the natural result that before long they were "walking out," and very soon afterwards a wedding had been arranged.

In the coster's world very little time is lost in clinching affairs of this nature, and often mere boys and girls, after an acquaintance of perhaps only a few weeks, will go to the parson for his blessing.

However, just one short week before the "appy diy" Bill Ackers stopped at Lizer's stand and commenced to chaff her:

"Wot cher Lize! wot 'o nex' week, won't it be a bit uve orl right?"

The flower girl frowned, and the boy—really was scarcely more than nineteen—failed to observe the twinkle underlying the frown. Then she shot out at him in seemingly venomous tones:

"Go 'ome, Bill Ackers, an' tike yer mucky little coster barrer wiv yer! Huh! I'm a' goin' out wiv a "fish and chips" bloke—go 'ome, go 'ome, Bill Ackers!"

Then the coster, almost bursting with rage, pain, mortification and a feeling of utter impotence, melted away, without so much as voicing a protest.

The following day Bill Ackers had observed talking to Lizer an individual—fat he was, and prosperous looking—whom he took to be his rival—his successful rival, the "fish and chips" merchant.

So convinced was he that he had been supplanted in Lizer's affections that he cut off any possibility of intimacy with the girl by booking a steerage passage to Canada.

Bill was sorely hurt and broken—he had been so sure—so happy in his gal—and in a moment the world was turned upside down.

In due course, however, Ackers had reached Winnipeg, and soon found work in a fruit store. But he was not given much opportunity to settle down, for, as all the world knows, in August of that fateful year of 1914, the "dogs of war" were let loose in Europe.

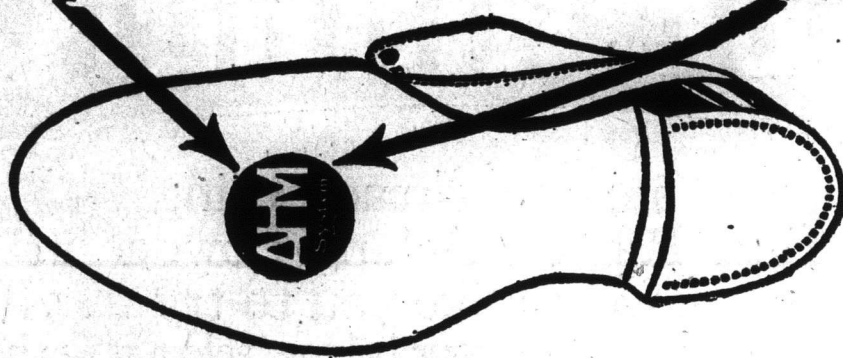
Then commenced that rush of men from the colonies, eager to help the Motherland—Canada foremost 'mongst them all.

Bill had volunteered in the very early days, and he went overseas with one of the very first drafts—God bless those early volunteers—it was they who did much to save the day.

There was no loving farewell from mother or sister, no fond last embrace before he went, no wife or sweetheart to choke back a final, sobbing message of love and hope ere he commenced his long journey in pursuit of duty's call!

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