

THE JUDAS GOAT

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My best friend, Web Aten, and I made a cart and set of harness for Old Bill. By the time he was a yearling we were driving him everywhere, but I was the only one that Old Bill ever loved. No fence or rope could hold him. Sooner or later, he would find a way to free himself to join me at school, or at the ballgame, or at Sunday school. His first victim was Web.

Web was bending over one day to tie his shoe. Bill let out a small warning bleat and charged. Web never trusted him again. A few weeks later Old Bill put my mother up an apple tree in our backyard. One day when my father was leading him down to our small barn, passing through our chicken yard, Old Bill let out his warning bleat and charged. Dad went round my mother's big glass brooder house. Bill came across the top, thirty-eight-dollars-worth of glass. It was about this time that my pet's future was in doubt. A few weeks later all doubt was removed.

Mr. Easley, a neighbor up the street, was an amateur horticulturist. Above all other possessions, he prized his apple and peach trees. When they were in full bloom, Old Bill paid the Easley yard a visit. His horns came together at the top of his skull like a scissors, with little sharp ridges protruding outward. With this scissor arrangement my pet cut neat little ribbons of tasty bark from the fruit trees, eating them up as far as he could reach. The damage, settled out of court, amounted to fifty dollars.

The following day Old Bill was taken down to my grandfather's farm, two miles south of town and placed with a flock of sheep that had been assigned to the job of clearing a sprout thicket. I was permitted to visit him on Saturdays.

Old Bill remained on the farm eleven days, then became homesick-for-me. He vaulted a six-foot sheep fence and found his way back to town. Father and mother were quite touched at his affection and decided that I might try him one more time in town. He was a model of behavior, until the day of my brother's wedding. A family photograph, featuring the bride and groom, was being taken in the front yard by Otis Hutson. Otis had just placed his head inside the black hood to focus his camera when Old Bill appeared on the scene to spot his target for the day. There was a low baa-aa, then a crash, resulting in considerable damage to both photographer and equipment.

There was a second trip to Grandfather's farm. Bill remained there, locked in a bull shed, until that November, when he again freed himself and searched me out, appearing at our back

door after dark. The family had gone out for the evening. My younger sisters and I were there alone.

The first snow of winter had fallen that day and it was below freezing outside. I was afraid that Old Bill would catch cold in our drafty old barn, so I took him over to my father's small broom factory, where a fire was maintained throughout the night to keep the bleach vats from freezing. Old Bill seemed quite comfortable there in the loading room where a carload of brooms, neatly packaged in dozen lots, was awaiting shipment to a Chicago jobber the following day.

My friend, who would eat almost anything, had a special taste; it turned out, for broom-corn and enameled broom handles. The brooms he did not eat were permeated with Old Bill's strong goat odor.

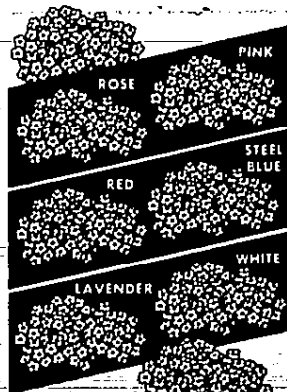
The train that might have hauled a carload of brooms to Chicago, had they been in any condition to ship under my father's label, hauled a carload of sheep to the Windy City. Old Bill was among those sheep. That night a little boy cried himself to sleep, wondering at the fate that awaited his friend.

It was almost two years later before the boy saw the picture in the *Chicago Tribune*, which was used to illustrate a feature story about the Chicago stockyards. Old Bill, it seemed, had become quite famous as the Judas Goat who each day led his contingent of sheep to their destiny.

Years later, when the boy was almost a man and visited Chicago for the first time, he made a tour of the Chicago stockyards. Bill had died of old age three years before. A man who had worked there for many years remembered him well. He had come to the stockyards with a carload of sheep from a small town in southern Illinois. There had been no mention of a goat in the bill-of-lading that accompanied that particular shipment. It had also seemed unusual that a goat should have had brass knobs affixed to each point of his horns.

My daughters thought that the story of Old Bill was a wonderful story. They looked up at their father with new respect in their eyes.

Yesterday we acquired a Mexican burro named Peco. He's the small kind. They don't eat hardly anything except lawn, rhododendron, lilies of the valley, oats, hay and vegetable gardens. It is true that they make braying noises in the morning, attract flies from the woods and give out with a certain odor, but it's so nice to have a pet burro of one's very own.



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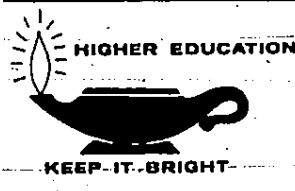
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