

Old Bill's Story

I will tell you a story I heard many, many years ago when I was just a young boy growing up in Sussex. It concerns, Bill, an “old boy” of the village; and by “old boy” we meant anyone in their seventies or older. This old boy, Bill, and his wife, Ethel, were much loved and respected in the village.

Take yourself back to a warm and sunny Sunday afternoon some sixty five years ago. We had gone as usual to watch the village cricket match. During the interval between innings, someone had disturbed an ants nest and we boys were looking at the little creatures as they scurried about here, there and everywhere.

“Interesting little critters emmets are,” said old Bill coming up to see what was going on. He called them 'emmets' just as my grandparents did; it was the old word for ants.

“It reminds me,” he continued, sitting on a nearby seat, “of a time many, many years ago when I was just a young man, only a few years older than you young'uns. I was looking intently at a line of emmets going about their business and wondering what it would be like to be one, when suddenly I found myself marching along with the other emmets. There was a kind of strange music in my head; a bit like a march tune, it was, but not quite right. Then, of course, I had six legs, not two, so marching wouldn't be quite right, would it?”

We just nodded. It was too hot to be doing anything and we thought we might as well listen to Bill, even if he was making it all up, as I suppose he was.

“Then,” he continued, “I kept hearing the word 'TURN' being repeated. I realized all the other emmets were carrying bits of foodstuff back to their nest, and I wasn't. So I turned around and went with the others to collect, before going back.”

“I bet it was fun being an ant,” said one of my friends.

“Oh no it wasn't,” replied Bill. “It was terrible. It was work, work, work all the time. If you stopped to think, you got a sharp pain in your head; and there was this music throbbing in your head all the time and I realized there were words hidden in the music: 'The nest, the nest. We work and die for the nest. We are nothing; the nest is all.' The emmets were just like unthinking machines. I had to get away.”

“And did you?” I asked, rather redundantly because there he was talking to us!

“Yes, young man. I did. I found that if you strayed off the path, the music got fainter and your head clearer. Other emmets hated that and would frantically try to rejoin the rest if they got separated; but it was just what I wanted. One day I got so far away that I could hear nothing; there was just silence in my head.”

“Didn't the others come after you?” asked another of my friends.

"No," said Bill. "I don't suppose they noticed. Anyway, I started thinking for the first time for many days. I thought these emmets are just like machines. Now bees, they are spiritual my old uncle used to tell me. If I have to be an insect, let it be a spiritual one; let me live among the bees. And, do you know what? I found myself flying. Oh, it was lovely flitting from flower to flower, drinking nectar and picking up pollen. Leastways, it was lovely at first."

He paused, then continued: "But by the end of the day I was tired out as I returned to the hive; and I got no rest there. There wasn't the constant throbbing of music in my head, but I soon realized there was nothing spiritual about bees. Next day I saw one do the famous wiggle dance; but there was no thought about it, no intelligence like. They were just like machines with wings - all working to keep the hive going; and they were doing this so some human could take their honey. When I tried to tell them, they turned on me. 'Heretic,' they said, 'heretic, the hive is all. Live for the hive or die.' They were about to sting me to death and I barely escaped with my life! fell exhausted on the ground after my escape and thought I was going to die. Then one of them pharisees came to my rescue."

We knew he meant 'fairies', using the old Sussex double plural 'pharisees.' Some of the old timers confused them with the Pharisees they heard read about in church and took this as biblical authority for the existence of fairies.

But I digress. Let's return to Bill's story.

"I spent a happy time among the pharisees," he said. "There was singing and dancing, feasting and merriment, and such balls under a clear moonlit sky as you can't imagine. But don't go asking me any partic'lars because it's all a bit befuddled in my head now."

There was the odd laugh, but most of us were quiet as we could see the old boy was quite serious.

"Ah," he said, "'tain't my brains going soft. 'Tis all along on account of the pharisees; they didn't want me to remember things clearly when I became a human again. They don't like their secrets being known, you see."

"But if you were happy there, why did you become a human again?" I asked.

"Well, young man," Bill went on, "I had met the most beautiful woman in the world. I fell in love with her and would do anything for her. You young'uns won't rightly understand this now - but one day you will."

"Yes," he continued, "I was smitten. I wanted to marry her, and that meant I could no longer be a pharisee and had to become a human again."

"And did you marry her?" I asked.

"Did I? Of course I did. I've been married to my Ethel more than fifty years now. Best thing that ever happened to me. You know, from the day I married her, all the bewitchment went. Why, you know, I can stare at emmets all day long, just

like you were staring at 'em just now, and I know I shan't suddenly find myself among them."

He chuckled away. We laughed with him.

Just then the opponents came out of the pavilion to take the field and were followed by the village's two opening batsmen.

"Come on," said Bill, "lets see our boys beat their miserable score."

And they did; the village won by four wickets.