

## UNCLE TOM BARKER.

## How He Went to Meeting and Was Converted.

[Published by request.]

Uncle Tom Barker was much of a man. He had been wild and reckless, and feared not God nor regard man, but one day at a camp-meeting, while Bishop Gaston was shaking up the sinners and scorching them over the infernal pit, Tom got alarmed, and before the meeting was over he professed religion and became a zealous, outspoken convert, and declared his intention of going forth into the world and preaching the gospel. He was terribly in earnest, for he said he had lost a power of time and must make it up. Tom was a rough talker, but he was a good one, and knew right smart of "scripture," and a good many of the old-fashioned hymns by heart. The conference thought he was a pretty good fellow to send out into the border country among the settlers; and so Tom straddled his old flea-bitten gray, and in due time was circuit riding in north Mississippi. In course of time Tom acquired a sort of notoriety, and from his strong language and stronger gestures, and his muscular eloquence, they called him "Old Sledge Hammer," and after while, "Old Sledge," for short. Away down in one corner of his territory there was a blacksmith shop and a wagon shop and a whiskey shop and a postoffice at Bill Jones' cross-roads; and Bill kept all of them, and was known far and wide as "Devil Bill Jones," so as to distinguish him from Equire Bill, the magistrate. Devil Bill had sworn that no preacher should ever trot a horse or sing a hymn in the settlement, and if any of the cussed hypocrites ever dared to stop at the crossroads, he'd make him dance a hornpipe and sing a hymn, and whip him besides. And Bill Jones meant just what he said, for he had a mortal hate for the men of God. It was reasonably supposed that Bill could and would do what he said, for his trade at the anvil had made him strong, and everybody knew that he had as much brute courage as was necessary. And so Uncle Tom was advised to take roundness and never tackle the crossroads. He accepted this for a time, and left the people to the bad influence of Devil Bill; but it seemed to him he was not doing the Lord's will and whenever he thought of the women and children living in darkness and growing up in infidelity, he would groan in spirit and exclaim, "What a pity! what a pity!" One night he prayed over it with great earnestness, and vowed to do the Lord's will if the Lord would give him light, and it seemed to him as he rose from his knees that there was no longer any doubt—he must go. Uncle Tom never dallied about anything when his mind was made up. He went right at it like killing snakes; and so next morning as a neighbor passed on his way to Bill Jones's shop, Uncle Tom said:

"My friend, will you please carry a message to Bill Jones for me? Do you tell him that if the Lord is willin', I will be at the crossroads to preach next Saturday at 11 o'clock, and I am shore the Lord is willin'. Tell him to please nortie it in the settlement about and about, and ax the women and children to come. Tell Bill Jones I will stay at his house, God willin', and I'm shore he's willin', and I'll preach Sunday, too, if things git along harmonious."

When Bill Jones got the message he was amazed, astounded, and his indignation knew no bounds. He raved and cursed at the "onsult," as he called it—the "onsulting" message of "Old Sledge," and he swore that he would hunt him up and whip him for he knew that he wouldn't dare to come to the crossroads. But the neighbors whispered it around that "Old Sledge" would come, for he was never known to make an appointment and break it; and there was an old horse thief who used to run with Mark's gang, who said he used to know Tom Barker when he was a sinner and had seen him fight, and he was much of a man. So it spread like wild fire that "Old Sledge" was coming, and Devil Bill was wiled to whip him and make him dance and sing a hymn and treat to a gallon of peach brandy besides. Devil Bill had his enemies, of course, for he was a hard man, and one way or another had got hold up all of the surplus of the neighborhood and had given nothing in exchange but whiskey and these enemies had long hoped for somebodys come and turn him down. They were circulated the astounding news, and without committing themselves to either party, said that he'll would break Jones on Saturday at the cross-roads; and that "Old Sledge," or the devil would have to go under. On Friday the settlers began to drop into the cross-roads and get their business, but really to get the bottom facts of the rumors that were afloat. Devil Bill knew full well what they came for, and he talked

and cussed more furiously than usual, and swore that anybody who would come expecting to see "Old Sledge" to-morrow was an infernal fool, for he wasn't coming. He laid bare his strong arms and shook his long hair, and said he wished the lying, deceiving hypocrite would come, for it had been long on to fourteen years since he had made a preacher dance.

Saturday morning by 9 o'clock the settlers began to gather. They came on foot and on horse-back, and in carts—men, women and children, and before 11 o'clock there were more people at the cross-roads than had ever been there before. Bill Jones was mad at their credulity, but he had an eye to business, and kept behind his counter and sold more whiskey in an hour than he had sold in a month. As the appointed hour drew near the settlers began to look down the long, straight road that "Old Sledge" would come, if he came at all, and every man whose head came in sight just over the rise of the distant hill was closely scrutinized. More than once they said, "Yonder he comes—that's him shore." But no, it wasn't him. Some half a dozen had old bull's eye silver watches, and they compared time, and just at 10:55 o'clock the old horse thief exclaimed: "I see Tom Barker a risin' of the hill. I shain't seed him for eleven years, but gentlemen, that ar' him, or I'm a liar."

And it was him. As he got nearer and nearer, a voice seemed to be coming with him, and some said, "He's talkin' to himself," another said, "He's a talkin' to God Almighty," and another said, "I'll be darned if he ain't a prayin'." But very soon it was decided that he was "singin' of a hymn." Bill Jones was soon advised of all this, and, coming up to the front said: "Darned if he ain't singin' before I axed him, but I'll make him sing another tune till he is tired. I'll pay him for his onsulting message. I'm not a-gwine to kill him, boys. I'll leave him in his rotten old carcass, but that's all. If any of you'n want to hear 'Old Sledge' preach you'll have to go ten miles from the roads to do it."

Slowly and solemnly the preacher came. As he drew near he narrowed down his tune and looked kindly upon the crowd. He was a massive man in frame, and had a heavy suit of dark brown hair; but his face was clean shaved, and showed a nose and lips and chin of firmness and great determination. "Look at him, boys, and mind your eyes," said the horse thief.

"Where will I find my friend, Bill Jones?" inquired "Old Sledge." All round they pointed him to the man. Riding up close, he said: "My friend and brother, the good Lord has sent me to you, and I ask your hospitality for myself and my beast," and he slowly dismounted and faced his foe as though expecting a kind reply. The crisis had come and Bill Jones met it. "You infernal old hypocrite; you cussed old shaved-faced scoundrel; didn't you know that I had sworn an oath that I would make you sing and dance, and whip you besides if you ever dared to pizen these cross-roads with your shoe tracks? Now sing d—n you, sing, and dance as you sing," and he emphasized his command with a ringing slap with his open hand upon the parson's face. "Old Sledge" recoiled with pain and surprise. Recovering in a moment, he said: "Well, Brother Jones, I did not expect so warm a welcome, but if this be your cross-roads manners I suppose I must sing," and as Devil Bill gave him another slap on his other jaw he began with:

"My soul, be on thy guard, And with his long arm suddenly and swiftly gave Devil Bill an open handed that nearly knocked him off his feet, whilst the parson continued to sing in a spasmodic tenor voice.

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