

# Bill, the Ventriloquial Rooster

Henry Lawson

“When we were up country on the selection, we had a rooster at our place, named Bill,” said Mitchell; “a big mongrel of no particular breed, though the old lady said he was a ‘brammer’—and many an argument she had with the old man about it too; she was just as stubborn and obstinate in her opinion as the governor was in his. But, anyway, we called him Bill, and didn’t take any particular notice of him till a cousin of some of us came from Sydney on a visit to the country, and stayed at our place because it was cheaper than stopping at a pub. Well, somehow this chap got interested in Bill, and studied him for two or three days, and at last he says:

“ ‘Why, that rooster’s a ventriloquist!’

“ ‘A what?’

“ ‘A ventriloquist!’

“ ‘Go along with yer!’

“ ‘But he is. I’ve heard of cases like this before; but this is the first I’ve come across. Bill’s a ventriloquist right enough.’

“Then we remembered that there wasn’t another rooster within five miles —our only neighbour, an Irishman named Page, didn’t have one at the time— and we’d often heard another cock crow, but didn’t think to take any notice of it. We watched Bill, and sure enough he *was* a ventriloquist. The ‘ka-cocka’ would come all right, but the ‘co-ka-koo-oi-oo’ seemed to come from a distance. And sometimes the whole crow would go wrong, and come back like an echo that had been lost for a year. Bill would stand on tiptoe, and hold his elbows out, and curve his neck, and go two or three times as if he was swallowing nest-eggs, and nearly break his neck and burst his gizzard; and then there’d be no sound at all where he was—only a cock crowing in the distance.

“And pretty soon we could see that Bill was in great trouble about it himself. You see, he didn’t know it was himself—thought it was another rooster challenging him, and he wanted badly to find that other bird. He would get up on the wood-heap, and crow and listen—crow and listen again— crow and listen, and then he’d go up to the top of the paddock, and get up on the stack, and crow and listen there. Then down to the other end of the paddock, and get up on a mullock-heap, and crow and listen there. Then across to the other side and up on a log among the saplings, and crow ‘n’ listen some more. He searched all over the place for that other rooster, but, of course, couldn’t find him. Sometimes he’d be out all day crowing and listening all over

the country, and then come home dead tired, and rest and cool off in a hole that the hens had scratched for him in a damp place under the water-cask sledge.

“Well, one day Page brought home a big white rooster, and when he let it go it climbed up on Page’s stack and crowed, to see if there was any more roosters round there. Bill had come home tired; it was a hot day, and he’d rooted out the hens, and was having a spell-oh under the cask when the white rooster crowed. Bill didn’t lose any time getting out and on to the wood-heap, and then he waited till he heard the crow again; then he crowed, and the other rooster crowed again, and they crowed at each other for three days, and called each other all the wretches they could lay their tongues to, and after that they implored each other to come out and be made into chicken soup and feather pillows. But neither’d come. You see, there were *three* crows—there was Bill’s crow, and the ventriloquist crow, and the white rooster’s crow— and each rooster thought that there *was* two roosters in the opposition camp, and that he mightn’t get fair play, and, consequently, both were afraid to put up their hands.

“But at last Bill couldn’t stand it any longer. He made up his mind to go and have it out, even if there was a whole agricultural show of prize and honourable-mention fighting-cocks in Page’s yard. He got down from the wood-heap and started off across the ploughed field, his head down, his elbows out, and his thick awkward legs prodding away at the furrows behind for all they were worth.

“I wanted to go down badly and see the fight, and barrack for Bill. But I daren’t, because I’d been coming up the road late the night before with my brother Joe, and there was about three panels of turkeys roosting along on the top rail of Page’s front fence; and we brushed ’em with a bough, and they got up such a blessed gobbling fuss about it that Page came out in his shirt and saw us running away; and I knew he was laying for us with a bullock whip. Besides, there was friction between the two families on account of a thoroughbred bull that Page borrowed and wouldn’t lend to us, and that got into our paddock on account of me mending a panel in the party fence, and carelessly leaving the top rail down after sundown while our cows was moving round there in the saplings.

“So there was too much friction for me to go down, but I climbed a tree as near the fence as I could and watched. Bill reckoned he’d found that rooster at last. The white rooster wouldn’t come down from the stack, so Bill went up to him, and they fought there till they tumbled down the other side, and I couldn’t see any more. Wasn’t I wild? I’d have given my dog to have seen the rest of the fight. I went down to the far side of Page’s fence and climbed a tree there, but, of course, I couldn’t see anything, so I came home the back way. Just as I got home Page came round to the front and sung out, ‘Insoid there!’ And me and Jim went under the house like snakes and looked out round a pile. But Page was all right—he had a broad grin on his face, and Bill safe under his arm. He put Bill down on the ground very carefully, and says he to the old folks:

“ ‘Yer rooster knocked the stuffin’ out of my rooster, but I bear no malice. ’Twas a grand foight.’

“And then the old man and Page had a yarn, and got pretty friendly after that. And Bill didn’t seem to bother about any more ventriloquism; but the white rooster spent a lot of time looking for that other rooster. Perhaps he thought he’d have better luck with him. But Page was on the look-out all the time to get a rooster that would lick ours. He did nothing else for a month but ride round and enquire about roosters; and at last he borrowed a game-bird in town, left five pounds deposit on him, and brought him home. And Page and the old man agreed to have a match— about the only thing they’d agreed about for five years. And they fixed it up for a Sunday when the old lady and the girls and kids were going on a visit to some relations, about fifteen miles away— to stop all night. The gov’nor made me go with them on horseback; but I knew what was up, and so my pony went lame about a mile along the road, and I had to come back and turn him out in the top paddock, and hide the saddle and bridle in a hollow log, and sneak home and climb up on the roof of the shed. It was a awful hot day, and I had to keep climbing backward and forward over the ridge-pole all the morning to keep out of sight of the old man, for he was moving about a good deal.

“Well, after dinner, the fellows from roundabout began to ride in and hang up their horses round the place till it looked as if there was going to be a funeral. Some of the chaps saw me, of course, but I tipped them the wink, and they gave me the office whenever the old man happened around.

“Well, Page came along with his game-rooster. Its name was Jim. It wasn’t much to look at, and it seemed a good deal smaller and weaker than Bill. Some of the chaps were disgusted, and said it wasn’t a game-rooster at all; Bill’d settle it in one lick, and they wouldn’t have any fun.

“Well, they brought the game one out and put him down near the wood-heap, and roused Bill out from under his cask. He got interested at once. He looked at Jim, and got up on the wood-heap and crowed and looked at Jim again. He reckoned *this* at last was the fowl that had been humbugging him all along. Presently his trouble caught him, and then he’d crow and take a squint at the game ’un, and crow again, and have another squint at gamey, and try to crow and keep his eye on the game-rooster at the same time. But Jim never committed himself, until at last he happened to gape just after Bill’s whole crow went wrong, and Bill spotted him. He reckoned he’d caught him this time, and he got down off that wood-heap and went for the foe. But Jim ran away—and Bill ran after him.

“Round and round the wood-heap they went, and round the shed, and round the house and under it, and back again, and round the wood-heap and over it and round the other way, and kept it up for close on an hour. Bill’s bill was just within an inch or so of the game-

rooster's tail feathers most of the time, but he couldn't get any nearer, do how he liked. And all the time the fellers kept chyackin Page and singing out, 'What price yer game 'un, Page! Go it, Bill! Go it, old cock!' and all that sort of thing. Well, the game-rooster went as if it was a go-as-you-please, and he didn't care if it lasted a year. He didn't seem to take any interest in the business, but Bill got excited, and by-and-by he got mad. He held his head lower and lower and his wings further and further out from his sides, and prodded away harder and harder at the ground behind, but it wasn't any use. Jim seemed to keep ahead without trying. They stuck to the wood-heap towards the last. They went round first one way for a while, and then the other for a change, and now and then they'd go over the top to break the monotony; and the chaps got more interested in the race than they would have been in the fight—and bet on it, too. But Bill was handicapped with his weight. He was done up at last; he slowed down till he couldn't waddle, and then, when he was thoroughly knocked up, that game-rooster turned on him, and gave him the father of a hiding.

“And my father caught me when I'd got down in the excitement, and wasn't thinking, and *he* gave *me* the step-father of a hiding. But he had a lively time with the old lady afterwards, over the cock-fight.

“Bill was so disgusted with himself that he went under the cask and died.”

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