**The Emancipation of Billy**

O. Henry

In the old, old, square-porticoed mansion, with the wry window-shutters and the paint peeling off in discoloured flakes, lived one of the last of the war governors.

The South has forgotten the enmity of the great conflict, but it refuses to abandon its old traditions and idols. In “Governor” Pemberton, as he was still fondly called, the inhabitants of Elmville saw the relic of their state’s ancient greatness and glory. In his day he had been a man large in the eye of his country. His state had pressed upon him every honour within its gift. And now when he was old, and enjoying a richly merited repose outside the swift current of public affairs, his townsmen loved to do him reverence for the sake of the past.

The Governor’s decaying “mansion” stood upon the main street of Elmville within a few feet of its rickety paling-fence. Every morning the Governor would descend the steps with extreme care and deliberation—on account of his rheumatism—and then the click of his gold-headed cane would be heard as he slowly proceeded up the rugged brick sidewalk. He was now nearly seventy-eight, but he had grown old gracefully and beautifully. His rather long, smooth hair and flowing, parted whiskers were snow-white. His full-skirted frock-croak was always buttoned snugly about his tall, spare figure. He wore a high, well-kept silk hat—known as a “plug” in Elmville—and nearly always gloves. His manners were punctilious, and somewhat overcharged with courtesy.

The Governor’s walks up Lee Avenue, the principal street, developed in their course into a sort of memorial, triumphant procession. Everyone he met saluted him with profound respect. Many would remove their hats. Those who were honoured with his personal friendship would pause to shake hands, and then you would see exemplified the genuine *beau ideal* Southern courtesy.

Upon reaching the corner of the second square from the mansion, the Governor would pause. Another street crossed the venue there, and traffic, to the extent of several farmers’ wagons and a peddler’s cart or two, would rage about the junction. Then the falcon eye of General Deffenbaugh would perceive the situation, and the General would hasten, with ponderous solicitude, from his office in the First National Bank building to the assistance of his old friend.

When the two exchanged greetings the decay of modern manners would become accusingly apparent. The General’s bulky and commanding figure would bend lissomely at a point where you would have regarded its ability to do so with incredulity. The Governor would take the General’s arm and be piloted safely between the hay-wagons and the sprinkling-cart to the other side of the street. Proceeding to the post-office in the care of his friend, the esteemed statesmen would there hold an informal levee among the citizens who were come for their morning mail. Here, gathering two or three prominent in law, politics, or family, the pageant would make a stately progress along the Avenue, stopping at the Palace Hotel, where, perhaps, would be found upon the register the name of some guest deemed worthy of an introduction to the state’s venerable and illustrious son. If any such were found, an hour or two would be spent in recalling the faded glories of the Governor’s long-vanished administration.

On the return march the General would invariably suggest that, His Excellency being no doubt fatigued, it would be wise to recuperate for a few minutes at the Drug Emporium of Mr. Appleby R. Fentress (an elegant gentleman, sir—one of the Chatham County Fentresses—so many of our best-blooded families have had to go into trade, sir, since the war).

Mr. Appleby R. Fentress was a *connoisseur* in fatigue. Indeed, if he had not been, his memory alone should have enabled him to prescribe, for the majestic invasion of his pharmacy was a casual happening that had surprised him almost daily for years. Mr. Fentress knew the formula of, and possessed the skill to compound, a certain potion antagonistic to fatigue, the salient ingredient of which he described (no doubt in pharmaceutical terms) as “genuine old hand-made Clover Leaf ‘59, Private Stock.”

Nor did the ceremony of administering the potion ever vary. Mr. Fentress would first compound two of the celebrated mixtures—one for the Governor, and the other for the General to “sample.” Then the Governor would make this little speech in his high, piping, quavering voice:

“No, sir—not one drop until you have prepared one for yourself and join us, Mr. Fentress. Your father, sir, was one of my most valued supporters and friends during My Administration, and any mark of esteem I can confer upon his son is not only a pleasure but a duty, sir.”

Blushing with delight at the royal condescension, the druggist would obey, and all would drink to the General’s toast: “The prosperity of our grand old state, gentlemen—the memory of her glorious past—the health of her Favourite Son.”

Some one of the Old Guard was always at hand to escort the Governor home. Sometimes the General’s business duties denied him the privilege, and then Judge Broomfield or Colonel Titus, or one of the Ashford County Slaughters would be on hand to perform the rite.

Such were the observances attendant upon the Governor’s morning stroll to the post-office. How much more magnificent, impressive, and spectacular, then, was the scene at public functions when the General would lead forth the silver-haired relic of former greatness, like some rare and fragile waxwork figure, and trumpet his pristine eminence to his fellow citizens!

General Deffenbaugh was the Voice of Elmville. Some said he was Elmville. At any rate, he had no competitor as the Mouthpiece. He owned enough stock in the *Daily Banner* to dictate its utterance, enough shares in the First National Bank to be the referee of its loans, and a war record that left him without a rival for first place at barbecues, school commencements, and Decoration Days. Besides these acquirements he was possessed with endowments. His personality was inspiring and triumphant. Undisputed sway had moulded him to the likeness of a fatted Roman emperor. The tones of his voice were not otherwise than clarion. To say that the General was public-spirited would fall short of doing him justice. He had spirit enough for a dozen publics. And as a sure foundation for it all, he had a heart that was big and stanch. Yes; General Deffenbaugh was Elmville.

One little incident that usually occurred during the Governor’s morning walk has had its chronicling delayed by more important matters. The procession was accustomed to halt before a small brick office on the Avenue, fronted by a short flight of steep wooden steps. A modest tin sign over the door bore the words: “Wm. B. Pemberton: Attorney-at-Law.”

Looking inside, the General would roar: “Hello, Billy, my boy.” The less distinguished members of the escort would call: “Morning, Billy.” The Governor would pipe: “Good morning, William.”

Then a patient-looking little man with hair turning gray along the temples would come down the steps and shake hands with each one of the party. All Elmville shook hands when it met.

The formalities concluded, the little man would go back to his table, heaped with law books and papers, while the procession would proceed.

Billy Pemberton was, as his sign declared, a lawyer by profession. By occupation and common consent he was the Son of his Father. This was the shadow in which Billy lived, the pit out of which he had unsuccessfully striven for years to climb and, he had come to believe, the grave in which his ambitions were destined to be buried. Filial respect and duty he paid beyond the habit of most sons, but he aspired to be known and appraised by his own deeds and worth.

After many years of tireless labour he had become known in certain quarters far from Elmville as a master of the principles of the law. Twice he had gone to Washington and argued cases before the highest tribunal with such acute logic and learning that the silken gowns on the bench had rustled from the force of it. His income from his practice had grown until he was able to support his father, in the old family mansion (which neither of them would have thought of abandoning, rickety as it was) in the comfort and almost the luxury of the old extravagant days. Yet, he remained to Elmville as only “Billy” Pemberton, the son of our distinguished and honoured fellow-townsman, “ex-Governor Pemberton.” Thus was he introduced at public gatherings where he sometimes spoke, haltingly and prosily, for his talents were too serious and deep for extempore brilliancy; thus was he presented to strangers and to the lawyers who made the circuit of the courts; and so the *Daily Banner* referred to him in print. To be “the son of” was his doom. What ever he should accomplish would have to be sacrificed upon the altar of this magnificent but fatal parental precedence.

The peculiarity and the saddest thing about Billy’s ambition was that the only world he thirsted to conquer was Elmville. His nature was diffident and unassuming. National or State honours might have oppressed him. But, above all things, he hungered for the appreciation of the friends among whom he had been born and raised. He would not have plucked one leaf from the garlands that were so lavishly bestowed upon his father, he merely rebelled against having his own wreathes woven from those dried and self-same branches. But Elmville “Billied” and “sonned” him to his concealed but lasting chagrin, until at length he grew more reserved and formal and studious than ever.

There came a morning when Billy found among his mail a letter from a very high source, tendering him the appointment to an important judicial position in the new island possessions of our country. The honour was a distinguished one, for the entire nation had discussed the probable recipients of these positions, and had agreed that the situation demanded only men of the highest character, ripe learning, and evenly balanced mind.

Billy could not subdue a certain exultation at this token of the success of his long and arduous labours, but, at the same time, a whimsical smile lingered around his mouth, for he foresaw in which column Elmville would place the credit. “We congratulate Governor Pemberton upon the mark of appreciation conferred upon his son”—“Elmville rejoices with our honoured citizen, Governor Pemberton, at his son’s success”—“Put her there, Billy!”—“Judge Billy Pemberton, sir; son of our State’s war hero and the people’s pride!”—these were the phrases, printed and oral, conjured up by Billy’s prophetic fancy. Grandson of his State, and stepchild to Elmville—thus had fate fixed his kinship to the body politic.

Billy lived with his father in the old mansion. The two and an elderly lady—a distant relative—comprised the family. Perhaps, though, old Jeff, the Governor’s ancient coloured body-servant, should be included. Without doubt, he could have claimed the honour. There were other servants, but Thomas Jefferson Pemberton, sah, was a member of “de fambly.”

Jeff was the one Elmvillian who gave to Billy the gold of approval unmixed with the alloy of paternalism. To him “Mars William” was the greatest man in Talbot County. Beaten upon though he was by the shining light that emanates from an ex-war governor, and loyal as he remained to the old *régime*, his faith and admiration were Billy’s. As valet to a hero, and a member of the family, he may have had superior opportunities for judging.

Jeff was the first one to whom Bill revealed the news. When he reached home for supper Jeff took his “plug” hat and smoothed it before hanging it upon the hall-rack.

“Dar now!” said the old man: “I knowed it was er comin’. I knowed it was gwine ter happen. Er Judge, you says, Mars William? Dem Yankees done made you er judge? It’s high time, sah, dey was doin’ somep’n to make up for dey rascality endurin’ de war. I boun’ dey holds a confab and says: ‘Le’s make Mars William Pemberton er judge, and dat’ll settle it.’ Does you have to go way down to dem Fillypines, Mars William, or kin you judge ’em from here?”

“I’d have to live there most of the time, of course,” said Billy.

“I wonder what de Gubnor gwine say ‘bout dat,” speculated Jeff.

Billy wondered too.

After supper, when the two sat in the library, according to their habit, the Governor smoking his clay pipe and Billy his cigar, the son dutifully confessed to having been tendered the appointment.

For a long time the Governor sat, smoking, without making any comment. Billy reclined in his favourite rocker, waiting, perhaps still flushed with satisfaction over the tender that had come to him, unsolicited, in his dingy little office, above the heads of the intriguing, time-serving, clamorous multitude.

At last the Governor spoke; and, though his words were seemingly irrelevant, they were to the point. His voice had a note of martyrdom running through its senile quaver.

“My rheumatism has been growing steadily worse these past months, William.”

“I am sorry, father,” said Billy, gently.

“And I am nearly seventy-eight. I am getting to be an old man. I can recall the names of but two or three who were in public life during My Administration. What did you say is the nature of this position that is offered you, William?”

“A Federal Judgeship, father. I believe it is considered to be a somewhat flattering tender. It is outside of politics and wire-pulling, you know.”

“No doubt, no doubt. Few of the Pembertons have engaged in professional life for nearly a century. None of them have ever held Federal positions. They have been land-holders, slave-owners, and planters on a large scale. One of two of the Derwents—your mother’s family—were in the law. Have you decided to accept this appointment, William?”

“I am thinking it over,” said Billy, slowly, regarding the ash of his cigar.

“You have been a good son to me,” continued the Governor, stirring his pipe with the handle of a penholder.

“I’ve been your son all my life,” said Billy, darkly.

“I am often gratified,” piped the Governor, betraying a touch of complacency, “by being congratulated upon having a son with such sound and sterling qualities. Especially in this, our native town, is your name linked with mine in the talk of our citizens.”

“I never knew anyone to forget the vindculum,” murmured Billy, unintelligibly.

“Whatever prestige,” pursued the parent, “I may be possessed of, by virtue of my name and services to the state, has been yours to draw upon freely. I have not hesitated to exert it in your behalf whenever opportunity offered. And you have deserved it, William. You’ve been the best of sons. And now this appointment comes to take you away from me. I have but a few years left to live. I am almost dependent upon others now, even in walking and dressing. What would I do without you, my son?”

The Governor’s pipe dropped to the floor. A tear trickled from his eye. His voice had risen, and crumbled to a weakling falsetto, and ceased. He was an old, old man about to be bereft of a son that cherished him.

Billy rose, and laid his hand upon the Governor’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, father,” he said, cheerfully. “I’m not going to accept. Elmville is good enough for me. I’ll write to-night and decline it.”

At the next interchange of devoirs between the Governor and General Deffenbaugh on Lee Avenue, His Excellency, with a comfortable air of self-satisfaction, spoke of the appointment that had been tendered to Billy.

The General whistled.

“That’s a plum for Billy,” he shouted. “Who’d have thought that Billy—but, confound it, it’s been in him all the time. It’s a boost for Elmville. It’ll send real estate up. It’s an honour to our state. It’s a compliment to the South. We’ve all been blind about Billy. When does he leave? We must have a reception. Great Gatlings! that job’s eight thousand a year! There’s been a car-load of lead-pencils worn to stubs figuring on those appointments. Think of it! Our little, wood-sawing, mealy-mouthed Billy! Angel unawares doesn’t begin to express it. Elmville is disgraced forever until she lines up in a hurry for ratification and apology.”

The venerable Moloch smiled fatuously. He carried the fire with which to consume all these tributes to Billy, the smoke of which would ascend as an incense to himself.

“William,” said the Governor, with modest pride, “has declined the appointment. He refuses to leave me in my old age. He is a good son.”

The General swung round, and laid a large forefinger upon the bosom of his friend. Much of the General’s success had been due to his dexterity in establishing swift lines of communication between cause and effect.

“Governor,” he said, with a keen look in his big, ox-like eyes, “you’ve been complaining to Billy about your rheumatism.”

“My dear General,” replied the Governor, stiffly, “my son is forty-two. He is quite capable of deciding such questions for himself. And I, as his parent, feel it my duty to state that your remark about—er—rheumatism is a mighty poor shot from a very small bore, sir, aimed at a purely personal and private affliction.”

“If you will allow me,” retorted the General, “you’ve afflicted the public with it for some time; and ‘twas no small bore, at that.”

This first tiff between the two old comrades might have grown into something more serious, but for the fortunate interruption caused by the ostentatious approach of Colonel Titus and another one of the court retinue from the right county, to whom the General confided the coddled statesman and went his way.

After Billy had so effectually entombed his ambitions, and taken the veil, so to speak, in a sonnery, he was surprised to discover how much lighter of heart and happier he felt. He realized what a long, restless struggle he had maintained, and how much he had lost by failing to cull the simple but wholesome pleasures by the way. His heart warmed now to Elmville and the friends who had refused to set him upon a pedestal. It was better, he began to think, to be “Billy” and his father’s son, and to be hailed familiarly by cheery neighbours and grown-up playmates, than to be “Your Honour,” and sit among strangers, hearing, maybe, through the arguments of learned counsel, that old man’s feeble voice crying: “What would I do without you, my son?”

Billy began to surprise his acquaintances by whistling as he walked up the street; others he astounded by slapping them disrespectfully upon their backs and raking up old anecdotes he had not had the time to recollect for years. Though he hammered away at his law cases as thoroughly as ever, he found more time for relaxation and the company of his friends. Some of the younger set were actually after him to join the golf club. A striking proof of his abandonment to obscurity was his adoption of a most undignified, rakish, little soft hat, reserving the “plug” for Sundays and state occasions. Billy was beginning to enjoy Elmville, though that irreverent burgh had neglected to crown him with bay and myrtle.

All the while uneventful peace pervaded Elmville. The Governor continued to make his triumphal parades to the post-office with the General as chief marshal, for the slight squall that had rippled their friendship had, to all indications, been forgotten by both.

But one day Elmville woke to sudden excitement. The news had come that a touring presidential party would honour Elmville by a twenty-minute stop. The Executive had promised a five-minute address from the balcony of the Palace Hotel.

Elmville arose as one man—that man being, of course, General Deffenbaugh—to receive becomingly the chieftain of all the clans. The train with the tiny Stars and Stripes fluttering from the engine pilot arrived. Elmville had done her best. There were bands, flowers, carriages, uniforms, banners, and committees without end. High-school girls in white frocks impeded the steps of the party with roses strewn nervously in bunches. The chieftain had seen it all before—scores of times. He could have pictured it exactly in advance, from the Blue-and-Gray speech down to the smallest rosebud. Yet his kindly smile of interest greeted Elmville’s display as if it had been the only and original.

In the upper rotunda of the Palace Hotel the town’s most illustrious were assembled for the honour of being presented to the distinguished guests previous to the expected address. Outside, Elmville’s inglorious but patriotic masses filled the streets.

Here, in the hotel General Deffenbaugh was holding in reserve Elmville’s trump card. Elmville knew; for the trump was a fixed one, and its lead consecrated by archaic custom.

At the proper moment Governor Pemberton, beautifully venerable, magnificently antique, tall, paramount, stepped forward upon the arm of the General.

Elmville watched and harked with bated breath. Never until now—when a Northern President of the United States should clasp hands with ex-war-Governor Pemberton would the breach be entirely closed—would the country be made one and indivisible—no North, not much South, very little East, and no West to speak of. So Elmville excitedly scraped kalsomine from the walls of the Palace Hotel with its Sunday best, and waited for the Voice to speak.

And Billy! We had nearly forgotten Billy. He was cast for Son, and he waited patiently for his cue. He carried his “plug” in his hand, and felt serene. He admired his father’s striking air and pose. After all, it was a great deal to be a son of a man who could so gallantly hold the position of a cynosure for three generations.

General Deffenbaugh cleared his throat. Elmville opened its mouth, and squirmed. The chieftain with the kindly, fateful face was holding out his hand, smiling. Ex-war-Governor Pemberton extended his own across the chasm. But what was this the General was saying?

“Mr. President, allow me to present to you one who has the honour to be the father of our foremost, distinguished citizen, learned and honoured jurist, beloved townsman, and model Southern gentleman—the Honourable William B. Pemberton.”