

Billy Sunday

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"The wild man went his weary way
To a strange and lonely pump."

The feelings of the Albert Memorial having been wounded by the criticisms of artists, I thought it only kind to bring back a photograph of the City Hall of Philadelphia, on the same principle as the association of Count Guido and Judas by Caponsacchi.

I repaired, accordingly, to the Quaker City for this purpose, and being strayed amid the various nuts, herbacea and other vegetables after which the foxy folk name streets, came suddenly upon a large, low, wooden tabernacle.

Like Blind Bartimayus, I inquired why, in view of the fifteen thousand people then just coming out, there should be fifteen thousand more obviously waiting to go in. My informant replied that it was a preaching. A preaching in my system of metaphysics, postulates a preacher. I asked about the preacher. "Billy Sunday," was the answer, and I felt like the man at Melbourne, who was told that the people were all going to see the race for the cup, and, an instant before his extermination, asked, "What cup?"

But I am not the pride of the Bench, and I did not continue, "Who is Billy Sunday?" For this preacher is certainly the most often discussed man in the United States today. Opinion varies between the widest of extremes. Some think him a grafter and hypocrite like Comstock; others do not hesitate to compare him to the Saviour. Some say his talk is all profanity, blasphemy and slang, and revile his antics. Others, admitting the slang, say that he has to reach his hearers. Booth's ex-

cuse for his brass band, sweat shop, graft game, was the same.

However, I took Hamlet's advice, and went to see for myself. I did not wait in the queue; I went and lunched and came back to find him in full swing on the subject of the Moral Leper. Of course he did not mean that; he meant The Immoral Man, whom I compared with a leper on account of his immorality.

I need hardly say that his text was from the story of Naaman.

Let me describe his person. It will clarify matters. First, one sees a striking resemblance to that other atheist, Charles Bradleugh. But this is facial only. Billy Sunday lacks Bradleugh's "steadfast and intolerable eyes," and his noble brow, and his giant cranium. There is force in the face, but it is only courage, combined with cunning, in the proportions of about 3 to 5. Intellect is obviously altogether lacking. The body is athletic; Sunday being a "converted" baseball player. His enemies say "translated" for "converted." He has some facility of coarse repartee, learned in the bar-room in the old days. If you raise a point in argument, he is apt to reply wittingly, "I can smell the liquor on your breath." He did so reply to someone that afternoon and maybe sincerely thought that he had answered him.

He has also a number of American slang phrases, probably prepared for him by a newspaper man; many of these have some epigrammatic force.

He suits the action to the word, and the word to the action. In saying, "I take my stand on the Bible," he does so with both feet.

His theology is of the crass Evangelical order. He believes that the human race sprang from two people named Adam and Eve. Apparently he has never heard it doubted, except by "rum fiends in delirium tremens" and the like. He would be astounded if one told him the plain fact that the Bible never made itself responsible for so idiotic an hypothesis.

But all this you were prepared to hear. What no American has seen – or could see – is just what I saw. Billy Sunday, for all his extravagances, is just a common Bible-banger of the first class. He does not stand out at all. I tell of what I know; I was brought up in the air of revivals. It is not the preacher, but the crowd that makes the hysteria. I have heard Rowland, Edwards, and my own father addressing larger meetings, getting more enthusiasm, more “conversions,” with far less effort, and not a line in the newspapers. Here Billy Sunday fills columns in half the papers of the district every week. There is no just cause for this. There is not nearly so much hysteria in his audiences as I have seen at Dr. Barnardo’s meetings, and the Salvation Army, and the Children’s Special Service Mission. Billy Sunday is three parts yellow journal fake. I cannot say whether this is spontaneous: I suspect a master mind somewhere with a profit and loss account, and an arm long enough to lever the composer’s stick. For whether one cries “graft” or not – and here every one who gets a dollar at all is called a grafter by the man who grabbed at it and missed – there is, no doubt, a pile of money in the business. It is said that he cleared \$100,000 last year; and the free-will offerings this week-end are expected to reach a similar amount. (P. S. They actually did reach \$57,136.85.) For Billy is going away: he sighs for new worlds to conquer. I understand that the negotiations for his going to New York fell through. I suspect that he knew he could do nothing there, “because of their unbelief.”

After all, the real reason of his success in Philadelphia is this: You can’t buy a drink on the Sabbath. One must be either a Rabelaisian genius or a toad just come out of the Lower Silurian Strata to find anything amusing in Philadelphia between Saturday and Monday. So Sunday is Sunday’s chance to be heard. As the tract of my childhood’s happy days said, “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”

In New York the crowd gapes to be amused as the heart panteth after the water-brooks, but the slightest rustle in the leaves, and it tosses its horns, and is off.

Philadelphia is serious. Philadelphia would turn a lark into a raven in six weeks. People get religion in Philadelphia because there is nothing else to get except dollars – and religion helps to get those! Whenever a Philadelphian thinks of the time when he was somewhere else, and begins to smile, his eye catches the City Hall, and gloom again shrouds him in its nightshade pall.

I am rather in hope that a really great humorist may arise in Philadelphia. Ordinary humorists depend on circumstances; the first-rate man (like Lewis Carroll) must dig it all out of his own mind in the midst of a milieu like "The City of Dreadful Night." And now I come to think of it, perhaps Billy Sunday is the humorist in question. There is a certain unholy joy in getting money from the pious for your piety in proportion to the shamelessness of your blasphemies. Think of the morning when he said to his wife, "My dear, I'll bet you a pair of gloves I smash the chairman's hat over his eyes, and they'll only laugh and cheer." (To illustrate how the devil blinds sinners.) Oh, yes, it is true humor! Think of the Christ revivalist delivering a sermon of Ingersoll's almost verbatim! And that was one of Billy Sunday's jokes. The freethinkers took him seriously, and proceeded to expose him!

Observe: the religious man has always had license to play antics. In fact, the "fool" or "natural" has always been considered inspired. And it has always been the secret joy and power of the religious man to go through some meaningless mummery, and get paid for it. But most religious men have been scholars, and their jokes have had a certain fruity flavor as of ripe old port. Now, deliver that secret into the hands of a professional baseball player, accustomed to the horseplay of the tap-room, and what will he do?

What Billy Sunday is actually doing.