

“BILL’S BULLET”

A Short Yarn by Ray Dillon

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“So, then he said, all gruff-like, ‘T’weren’t like that at all. It just sorta turned out.’” Billy continued, “I couldn’t think it.” The ragamuffin huffed this out to his youthful audience, barely able to control his thrill. Through the dirt, their faces glimmered with curiosity; all except for Stitch, who was frowning partly out of habit, but mostly out of annoyance, as the attention was on Billy instead of him.

“Whaddaya mean ‘it just happened’? He shot the varmint, didn’t he? Ya ig’nant mule.” Stitch spat tobacco juice. His kind nature equaled only by his good hygiene.

“Yeah, whaddaya mean, Mule?” repeated Arthur, Stitch’s lapdog.

“Well, of course he shot ‘im.” Billy said, “We all know that—“

“Yeah, I saw the coffin!” Billy’s baby sister, Lily, cut in.

“Oh, ya did not, ya twit. Now, for the last time, git or I’ll--” Stitch jerked like he would hit her and she tripped over an apple crate.

“Did too and leave me alone!” She bared her two new front teeth and a mouth of gums.

“Let her alone, Stitch. Now, listen, ya’ll.” Billy pleaded. “He told me to come back in a tick and he’d finish tellin’ me, so’s I gotta hurry.”

“Alright, mule, get on with it.” Stitch allowed.

“So he says, ‘Now, I ain’t sayin’ I was yella, son, but I wasn’t no Prince of Pistoleers, neither. Not back then.’ He was loadin’ up as he was talkin’. Biggest dern bullets I ever seen. Brand new, too. Then he says, ‘Boy, you remind me a lot of myself at your age. Same name too, look at that.’ he says.” Billy’s smile widened in remembrance.

“Now, hold on. Now I know you’re makin’ it up. Wild Bill Hickok ain’t got nothin’ in common with a runt like—“

“Hey, ain’t that him, Billy?” Lily pointed.

Their heads shot in the direction of her tiny fingers and immediately all the muscles in their backs tensed up. The Marshall, fully clad in black, walked out of the Black Bull Saloon and headed towards the bed and breakfast across the road. The town seemed to whisper a collective “There he goes now.” Then shut up and watched behind their muck-covered windows in safety. The ring of his spurs and scuff of his boots echoed through the dust. Wild Bill Hickok, the living legend, the hero, looked directly at Billy and winked. Then, he aimed his eyes forward, regained his stoic expression, and continued past their view from the alley.

“Did you see that?! I told ya I ain’t lyin’.” Billy said.

“Ah, whatever. That don’t mean nothin’.” Stitch wasn’t giving up that easily. “That could’a been directed at any of us. If you tellin’ the truth,

and your pals with that man, bring back somethin' of his." He crossed his arms and nodded authoritatively.

"Yeah, bring back somethin', Mule." Arthur said, then looked up at Stitch and mimicked his stance.

"Alright, I will—" Billy started.

"Bring back one of them fancy bullets, if they even exist." Stitch said.

"Now, wait a minute, I ain't no knuck. I ain't gonna steal nothin' that nice."

"Just as I thought, yellow-bellied liar. If you was really pals with 'im, he'd give it to ya if'n ya asked."

Billy mulled it over, hesitated, and then, with a grin, said, "Alright. I reckon I can, but if I do you an Arthur gotta do somethin' in return. If I get it, you gotta go into Marge's and snatch one of them blueberry pies of hers."

Stitch put his hands up and took a step back. "No way! My Pa 'bout cleaned my clock last time." Arthur echoed him again and repositioned himself.

"Now, that's the deal. You wanna see one of them bullets or not?" Billy could at least pretend he had the upper hand.

"Yeah, sure. Not like you're gonna get it anyway." Stitch gave away a little unease in his voice, but stuck his chest out to compensate.

"You ain't getting' nothin', Mule." Arthur murmured.

"Alright, I'm headin' back over there. Lily, you head on home, it's gettin' late anyway. I'll save you a piece of that fine, warm blueberry pie these two dirt clods are gonna snatch for me."

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The floorboards creaked as Billy stepped onto the deck of "Blackey's Bed and Breakfast". He shuffled towards the front door, rubbed off the dry windows and peered in. Through the dim, foggy lighting he could barely make out the shape of Hickok sitting in the empty lobby near a window: wide brimmed hat, pitch black mane, and a mustache that reached down to the bottom of his chin. He took a sip from a steamy tin cup and a glint of light bounced towards the lobby doors just as a coach horse let out an inquisitive neigh as he passed behind him. Billy nearly jumped out of his skin.

He sucked back in a few breaths, and then turned the knob of the door. "Uh, Mr. Hickok? It's me. Billy." He exhaled. As his eyes adjusted, he noticed Hickok's hand relax and slide away from his hip and a shocked sigh stumbled out of him.

"Hey there, kid. Come on in, take a seat," said Hickok. A stool groaned as he scooted it across the floor for Billy.

Billy's nostrils flared as he caught a waft of black coffee, bacon, and syrup, part of the meal on the rickety table before Hickok. His stomach spoke up with a gurgle.

"Ha! You hungry, kid? Here..." and Wild Bill Hickok's steady hands, picked up a sticky pancake and handed it to him. He hesitated and started to say he couldn't, but the man's surprisingly calming eyes told him it was okay.

"Thank ya, Mr. Hickok. I sure am," Billy said and grinned big before annihilating the pancake.

"None of that 'Mister' stuff, kid. I'm just Bill," he said. "Now, where was I before?" He leaned back in his seat and kicked his heels up, a piece of bacon in hand.

Slightly muffled with pancake, Billy started, "You wush tellin' abou' you 'n Tutt," Then excusing himself, "Oh, shorry." He put a hand up to cover his mouth.

"Oh, right, right. So, Tutt and me was playin' a game a poker, you ever play the game, Billy?"

"No, shir,"

"Just Bill," Hickok said. "So, we's playin' and I ain't got a leg to stand on, but I'm bluffin' away like I got a row of kings. I wasn't gonna just let him win on account of my time piece was on the table and all," he leaned forward and Billy's eyes widened, "But, see he ain't shakin' a bit."

"Why's that?" Billy managed; amazed by this situation and noting the soft rhythmic way the famous lawman spoke. He looked just like the drawings.

"Well, see what I didn't know was that he had a flush, of all the darned luck, this plug-ugly blackleg was holdin' all the cards, and me with a pair of fours. He just looks me dead in the eye an' drops his hand with this cheese-eatin' grin." He pauses for a sip of coffee. "Like you said, you heard the version where Tutt stole my watch and so's I challenge him to a duel at high noon the next day, right?" Hickok sipped his coffee and brought his sleeve across his mouth to dry his moustache.

"Yeah, I read that penny book that showed pictures and everything. You hit 'im with both guns at once before he had a chance to move," said Billy.

"Well, shoot, I don't mind people thinkin' that, but heck, I'll tell you how it really went. See, he took my watch, but he won it fair 'n square. Me and him went pretty far back. Not friends or nothin', but not enemies neither. So's I asked him not to go galavantin' around and showin' that off, 'cuz everyone knew that was a prize timepiece of mine." Hickok pulled out a gleaming silver pocket watch and held it up for Billy to see. It had carvings of eagles and mountains on it.

"Wow! That's somethin' alright."

"See, that was specially made as a gift from a friend of mine. So, yeah, I asked him to keep it to himself, even asked to buy it back, but he gets all huffy and says he's got plans to show it off to the whole town. Now,

I'm at sea here, 'cuz I ain't wanna kill the man." Hickok said. He leaned back and rested his rugged boot-covered heels on the windowsill.

"So, what'd you do?" Billy asked.

"Well, I let him off, thinkin' he was just bluffin' me, went about my business. But, sure enough, the next mornin' he was out struttin' around in the square telling the story of how he 'tamed Wild Bill' and all. So's I told him, if'n he didn't lay low, I'd show him a sockdologer to his jaw. That's when it happened.

"He started backin' up, lookin' at me all roudy, holdin' up my piece, and talkin' about, 'This here is your great Wild Bill Hickok. Well, I'll show you how great he is.' Somethin' in his eye looked wrong and he started reaching towards his hip," Hickok sat up and looked off in the distance, transported back to that day. "So, I drew on him!"

There was a blur and the next thing Billy knew, Hickok had his Colt Peacemakers drawn and pointed right at him. "Uh!" Billy gasped.

"And there it was. After all these years, I wonder if he wasn't goin' fer his gun, but maybe was just going to put away my watch. It's the look in his eyes what got me. Put me on edge. Heck, that was a long time ago, but I still wonder, ya know?" Hickok finished and leaned back holding up the watch in the light of the window.

Billy didn't know how to respond. After a nervous pause, he remembered the childish proposition Stitch made, and then spurted, "You sure use awful slick bullets." He immediately felt stupid saying that.

Hickok opened the loading gate of his pistol, took out a single round, and held it up. "See this here, Billy?" He asked, "That's a one of a kind. That's somethin' my Pa gave me when I turned 16. I've always thought it kinda brings luck to me. Silly notion, I reckon, but it's somethin' I do. And see this?" He turned the bullet over to reveal an etching of an eagle. "I keep it in my pistol, but I'm always careful not to shoot it off. I 'spose, if'n I ever need it, it'll be there." He sat it on the table, took a shot of whiskey, and walked over to the bar to returned the bottle. Then—

"Bill, you better get out here!" Deputy Rucker exploded into the lobby doors seconds before a gunshot went off. Billy jumped from his seat and bumped into the rickety little table.

"Stay here and get dow!." Hickok ordered Billy who froze before dropping to the floor, face to the ground. Another gunshot. "Ah, heck."

They left the building and Billy lie there hoping that Lily was already home and safe. His head shifted and he saw something golden. His eyes focused and he realized what it was: Hickok's lucky bullet.

His eyes darted for the door, then back to the bullet. He reached for it, picked it up, stared at it for a moment able to smell the gunpowder drifting off of it. Letting out a sigh and glancing back over to the lobby doors, he put it in his shirt pocket. As the sound of Hickok's galloping charger faded away he sat up. He inched his way up to the window, trying to peer out. The roads were surprisingly clear and he saw no signs of Mr.

Bill Hickok. Across the street, he saw Stitch, Arthur, and his sister crouched down in the opposing alley.

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“I got it! See, I got it! Told you I would! That’s even his *lucky* bullet, as he claimed it. Hope you’re ready to get that blueberry pie” Billy said, holding the bullet out boldly to Stitch.

“Gimme that.” Stitch grabbed the bullet away from him. “This ain’t no bullet of his. Where’d you find it?”

“It is too an’ you know it. Now, give it back.” Billy jumped for it as Stitch held it over his head. “Give it back, Stitch. I ain’t playin’!”

“Oh, you ain’t playin’, huh.” Stitch laughed.

“Ooh, he ain’t playin’, Stitch,” Arthur cackled.

“Give it back!” Lily called as her little foot stomped down on the tip of Stitch’s boot. He howled in pain. His hand lowered and Billy grabbed on and pulled. Arthur clutched Lily’s hair and she turned and bit his hand with her two new teeth. Stitch took hold of Billy’s hand with his free one and squeezed.

Their fight was interrupted by a gunshot and the clops of hooves in a full gallop a few feet away from them, in the road. They jumped and turned toward the noise to see a gunman on a horse rear up and collapse from the gunshot. The man rolled off the horse and got up to stand his ground as Hickok and his deputy caught up.

Hickok slowed to a stop, and then got down off his patched-white horse and strolled forward, “You ready to finish this Dale? Like men?”

“You ready to die, Hickok?” Said the dusty, heaving scoundrel standing next to his innocent, bleeding horse, hand shaking at his hip.

“Better men than you have made better threats than that and I’m still here.” Will Bill opened his duster to reveal his pistols and Dale shifted his weight.

Billy looked down at his tight fist and opened it to reveal the golden bullet with the eagle carving. His heart dropped and he looked back up at Hickok terrified.

“Oh, boy, Billy, this is gonna be a good one.” Stitch patted him on the back, “Ain’t a soul alive that can outdraw Hickok on his worst day.” Billy took a step forward, then another, then Stitch grabbed him, “What the heck you think you’re doin’, mule, you gonna get yourself shot.”

Billy looked back at them, down at his sister, and then back out to the road. He shook free of Stitch’s grasp and bolted for Hickok.

“Bill!” He hollered. He heard his sister scream, followed by Stitch and even Arthur ... then a searing pain shot through his shoulder and everything went quiet. As he fell, he saw the scared look on Hickok’s face.

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“Wake up, Billy.”

Tap. Tap.

“Come on, kid.”

Tap. Tap.

Billy’s eye’s crept open and through the blur he could tell was in the infirmary and the legendary Marshall Wild Bill Hickok was sitting on the edge of his bed.

“There you are, kid.” said Hickok. “You had me a might scared. Took quite a hit, didn’t ya?”

“What happened?” Billy muttered then coughed, and pain seared through his left side.

“Land, kid, you were shot! You came runnin’ into the street and liked to scare the late Dale Brogan clean out his boots. I got ‘im, but I cain’t believe he got that shot off.”

Billy stared at Hickok, eyes welled up and, in between sobs, he said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Hickok. It was ‘cause of me. I had your lucky bullet. You left it at the table and I took it. I was gonna show my friend so’s he’d believe me about talkin’ to you.”

“Hey, now. What’d I say ‘bout callin’ me ‘mister’?” Hickok pulled the bullet from his pocket, “You meanin’ this lucky bullet? Yeah, I found it in your hand after you were hit. Shoot-fire, Billy. Ain’t nothin’ to get worked up about. Just good that you alright.

“Now you get some rest. I’ll stop by tomorrow to check on ya. I’ll tell you about the time I killed a bear that was tryin’ to eat me with nothin’ but a buckknife. An’ tell you what ... ” Hickok opened Billy’s left hand, placed the bullet inside and closed his hand again, “Why don’t you hang on to this for me. With your luck, I think you might need it more than I do.” Hickok laughed. He looked towards the window and said, “Hey there, looks like we got some eavesdroppers. I’ll take care of them!” He playfully reached for his guns and the three small heads, with three sets of astonished eyes peeking into the window, screamed and ran in three different directions.

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The next morning, Billy woke up to the smell of Marge’s warm blueberry pie.

The End.

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