

“BILLY THE BRUSHER”

“BILLY THE BRUSHER” was the hero of Oaktown. He came at an opportune time. The miners all over the Black Country were mourning the loss of pluck, the uprooted stake, the broken rope which had once bounded the arena wherein the fistic champions of Scotland had shown their skill and their stamina. There was not even a prominent football player to whom—metaphorically—they could present the laurel wreath—until “Billy the Brusher” came on the scene. Your miner must have something or someone to admire, to venerate. It’s bred in his bone.

Their faith in Billy was touching to witness. He was not much to look at. He was certainly not modelled on the lines of a Greek god, but, if he lacked the beauty of Adonis, he had a big heart—and bigger feet and fists! Opponents contrived to give him a wide berth, and in the early nineties, when football referees were not the power on the field they are to-day, these knights of the whistle

feared the brushing one, whose notions of emphasising an argument were, not to put too fine a point upon it, the reverse of Parliamentary. "If I canna pit a man aff the ba,' I can pit him aff the field onywey," was Billy's little aphorism, the aptness of which was fully realised by his opponents.

Brushing Billy learned the dribbling code in one of the main streets of our dingy but lovable old town. When the pleasures of his fifteenth birthday were still in reserve I made his acquaintance under circumstances like these: About a dozen ragged callants were intent on a game in a back court. A few dirty rags tied tightly together with string did duty for a ball, and the back window of the shop of a stout old pawnbroker served for the goal at one end, while the broken steps of the tenement opposite were requisitioned for the other.

"Goal!" yelled Billy. "Yer a liar!" cried the opposing custodian. "Eh? If I get ye by the lug, I'll——" "Centre the ba'," interjected the frightened goalkeeper, to whom discretion seemed the better part of valour. The match stopped abruptly—all games did in that back court! It happened this way on that occasion. Bill scattered several opponents, and carefully banged the dirty rags through the broker's window. But he did not wait

to claim this goal, and the teams followed his flight when the angry broker rushed into the court, and the neighbours raised their windows to smile at his discomfiture. For ten-per-cent.-Tam was too well known to be loved.

"I'll jile every yin o' thae young scoondrels," he tearfully exclaimed. "They're fair ruinin' me!"

"Wull ye?" rejoined a faded female from the safety of an upper window. "Ye should ken plenty about the jile yersel', ye auld skinflint."

This allusion to unregenerate days enraged him of the ten-per-cent. Tam had frequently encouraged the same "young scoondrels" to annex trifles from other people, particularly doormats, in which he specialised, reflecting that there was less chance of such petty thefts being detected. But a careless juvenile had been the means of Tam establishing a claim to gratuitous lodgings in a Government establishment, and, stung by a woman's taunt, he hastened after the footballers, vowing vengeance. They, however, had gone in search of fresh fields or, rather, back courts, and, as a witness to the whole scene, I was not sorry to see the boys make good their escape.

Billy's abilities were soon noised abroad, and in

due course a deputation from a Juvenile Club sought his assistance on behalf of their team.

“Whit wull ye gie me?” asked the wary brusher. This rather nonplussed the negotiators, in whose philosophy “professionalism” did not find a place. But their honour was at stake, for were they not going to avenge “that licking frae them west end gentry pups?” A good centre was essential if they were to accomplish their desires. Accordingly there was a hurried consultation, and Billy was offered a “bob” or a knife for his services. He looked contemptuously on the knife, seized the “bob,” tested it carefully between his teeth, and condescended to say, “Richt, I’ll play.”

He did, and the “gentry pups” were humbled. Billy’s promotion was rapid. From juvenile to junior ranks was but a step. He was not an immediate success as a junior. Unaccustomed as he was to luxuries, he did not take kindly to carrying the smart leather Gladstone bag with which the new organisation presented him, and I grieve to say that the jeers of his old associates was one element in a little transaction which subsequently took place at an establishment whose symbol is three gilded balls.

Billy had to travel with the team to Glasgow the

following Saturday, and great was the consternation of the officials when he failed to put in an appearance as arranged five minutes before the train time. Hope gave way to despair, but just as the train was about to leave Billy dashed up, greatly to the relief of the worried Secretary. It was noticed that his "togs" were done up in an old newspaper, and Billy explained casually that he "couldna thole them bags—that jist looked as if a chap wantit to pit on 'side.'"

Billy soon conquered his shyness, and became the success and the pet of the team. Professionalism may not be legal in junior football circles, but it is, and has been, common nevertheless. One morning Billy received a rather vague letter from a flourishing Glasgow club, telling him they'd get him a job if he played for them. Billy's written reply was characteristic and laconic: "Am no gaun to play for naething." He played, and the natural inference was that he got something.

Grave charges of professionalism soon became the theme in junior circles, and an investigation was ordered. Now it happened that the old-time Secretary of Billy's new club had resigned in a rage, carefully carrying with him the letter with the significant intimation. Bill was summoned to

appear, and in a gorgeous new muffler (badge of prosperity in Oaktown), hooker-doon cap, and greasy "bell-mouthed troosers" he entered the "Association" meeting and answered the questions of the Chairman of the Committee, who had his own idea as to how to conduct a cross-examination.

"Here, Billy, ye may as well tell us the truth—hoo much dae the Rovers gie ye i' the week?"

"As much as ye could see wi' yer een shut," answered Billy. "Whit di ye mean? Don't trifle wi' the Committee!" thundered the pompous Chairman with great assumption of self-righteousness.

"Naething!" was the calm response.

"Ay thocht so!" cried the exultant Chairman, flourishing his trump card in the shape of the incriminating letter. "What dae ye mean by writing to the Rovers' Secretary and saying ye wadna play fur naething, eh? Whit is naething?"

"A bung without a barrel," was the smiling answer. Many of the members of the Committee could scarce forbear to smile at the clever rejoinder, and Billy was allowed to "stand down."

At this juncture the Oaktown Athletic, the favourite senior team of Billy's native place, was in a rather lowly position, and the Scottish ties were at hand. "Get Billy the Brusher," was the advice

of the patrons. "He's yin o' oorsel's, an' he'll be a credit to us a'." Billy was accordingly "approached," and offered a job and a "quid" a week.

"Whit wey should a fella wi' a quid a week work?" asked a great centre in astonishment.

"'Cos it's a fine wey o' keepin' ye in form an' oot o' the pubs. The wey Scotch players are often failures in England is 'cos they dinna work," was the reply.

Billy would very gladly have accepted the twenty shillings a week without the job, and thus lived in idle affluence, but the Committee were firm, and insisted on him taking the job as well. Being assured that it was "a saft crib," under a gaffer who was an enthusiastic member of the club he latterly agreed, and duly "signed on" for the "Oaktown Athletic."

The draw for the first round for the Scottish Cup was waited with bated breath in Oaktown, and when the news came that the Athletic were to meet the Port-Garvel Rovers, their near neighbours and avowed enemies, the Oaktown folk pulled rather long faces, for the match had to be played at Port-Garvel, and the Rovers were going strong! Local rivalry is keen everywhere, but in no place is it

keener than in the localities in which these teams play, and it is not half so bitter anywhere.

"We're in for it," sighed the disconsolate Chairman of the Athletic. "It's 5 to 1 we'll get knocked oot o' the ties. That means nae mair guid 'gates,' and there's that whusky bill fur the last twa seasons no' pey'd yet!"

"But the team's stronger, noo that we've got Brushin' Billy," interposed the Secretary.

"Oh, ay, but he canna play eleeven men," was the doleful answer.

"Leave that to me," was the Secretary's ambiguous retort.

The Secretary's plan was revealed in the Steel Works next day, and anyone who had happened to be present might have overheard this frank conversation :

"What dae you think o' the draw, Billy?"

"Ach! we'll gie them something tae think about if we dinna bate them," coolly said the centre.

"Did ye hear that Rafferty, yon big centre-hauf o' theirs, says he'll make ye look a bigger fule than ye are?"

"Whit?" cried the astonished and very irate Billy, swiftly removing his old clay pipe from his firm jaw.

“Says he’ll make a fitba’ o’ you!” was the explanation, given with emphasis.

Bill advanced towards the Secretary with clenched fists and flashing eyes. “He said that, did he? I’m b——” He did not finish his threat, but the curl of his upper lip and the rapid jerking of his head boded no good for the unsuspecting Rafferty.

“Ay, an’ Tammy M’Phee, the richt back o’ the Rovers—he swears that he’ll lay ye oot for deid five meenits efter the gemme starts.”

Billy’s rage knew no bounds. He didn’t stamp around and vow vengeance there and then, but the astute Secretary saw that the poison was doing its work. Well he knew that Billy the Brusher would go on the field with one fell design, and one only—to deal havoc to the bodies and limbs of Rafferty and M’Phee, the stalwarts, and the best players of the Rovers’ eleven. There was an uncanny glitter in the Brusher’s eyes as the Secretary nodded good-bye and strolled off.

It was certainly a dainty bit plan, and it was arranged and carried out with consummate skill. During the next few days the Oaktown men “in the know” rubbed it into Billy. It may have been a pure coincidence, of course, that when the Brusher

happened to be passing along the street he'd be sure to overhear something like this:

"Ay, an' Rafferty's jist the man to dae it! Puir Billy! I'm thinkin' he'll be cairted aff in the first five meenits"; or "Tammy M'Phee'll settle Billy afore hauf-time!"

Billy's silence was ominous. The only sign he gave was a little tightening of the lips, but that was enough for the astute Secretary and his confederates, who knew a little of Billy's character.

On the eve of the match the Oaktown paper fanned the excitement by declaring that "bar accidents the Port-Garvel Rovers should win." The Port-Garvel paper went one better: "It's all over but the shouting," was its unsportsmanlike comment.

Saturday came at last. Port-Garvel is six miles distant from Oaktown, and trains, brakes, 'buses, and roadside were filled to overflowing by excited supporters with caps decorated with little cards on which were the legends: "Play up, Oaktown!" and "Rovers for ever!"

The Athletic drove over in a four-in-hand. Billy seated near the driver seemed steeped in contemplation, and there was an anticipatory smile on the Secretary's countenance, which only served to

heighten the gloom of the harassed Chairman, whose thoughts were apparently centred on that heavy unpaid whisky bill. What a crowd there was on the ground of the Port-Garvel Rovers—a surging crowd, seething with excitement! Football crowds are pretty much alike all over the country, but for individuality, red-hot partisanship, and readiness to quarrel and fight, give me a Port-Garvel crowd on a “pey Setterday.”

The proverbial Irishman at the fair, asking for someone to tread on the tail of his coat is, an inoffensive individual compared with a tipsy miner, shouting defiance and breathing stale whisky all round. When the Oaktown supporters rushed into the ground the usual compliments were exchanged in the usual way, and free fights were common all round the enclosure. The place was literally palpitating with excitement. When it leaked out that “Billy meant business,” Oaktown shouted gladly, and Port-Garvel groaned sadly.

An exultant yell greeted the appearance of the Port-Garvel Rovers, who seemed to be in the pink of condition. The Oaktown Athletic followed at their heels, and were welcomed in true Oaktown style. A hush fell on the crowd when the teams lined up. The “Port” right wing quickly got the

ball and rushed up the field, and the local enthusiasts got their fill of yelling what time the Oaktown men held their breath.

“Pass to Wulson, can’t ye, ye fule! Good! Heavens, he’s missed it!” A groan and a curse.

“Wha’s shovin’? Awa’, or I’ll shift yer nose!” “Am no bletheron! I’ve paid ma tanner as well as you!”—thus the people around the ropes.

“Good old Oaktown. Come on, boys!” The boys “came on,” bravely led by Brushing Billy. Rafferty approached to stop him, and a thousand eyes were on them as they raced towards each other. Rafferty finessed a little; Billy did not. He leapt fiercely on his opponent, who bit the dust and rolled over in agony.

“Great heavens!” “Did ye see that, referee?” “Pit him aff. It’s a — shame.” “Ca’ that fit-ba’?” “The coward; kick in his timbers!” (Port-Garvel for ribs!)

The Oaktown people chortled with joy, and applauded vigorously as Billy, steering past his wounded foe, crushed his way out of a crowd of players, and with the speed of a deer raced past the Port backs and baffled the goalkeeper with a shot he hardly saw. Cheers and yells, loud and prolonged, greeted the achievement.

"My bonny lad, Billy," roared a delighted Oaktown publican, but he had reason to be sorry for his paternal claim.

"Your lad!" sneered a grimy-faced "Port" man as he butted the Boniface in the pit of the stomach with his head, and sent him head over heels in the mud. "Awa' hame and pit him on yer sideboard—he's only a — ornament!"

Rafferty was carried to the pavilion, and, judging from the set faces of his comrades, the real struggle was about to begin. The game went on. "Go fur the 'Brusher!'" urged the Portonians. "Ay, knock him oot!" But the advisers were all safe outside the ropes, and those of the players whom they desired to avenge poor Rafferty soon felt the field a trifle too small. Billy was here, there, and everywhere. The referee warned him, but it was no good. Billy kept on in his own sweet way, and half-time came as a decided relief to the Rovers.

The spectators whiled away the ten minutes' interval in the customary fashion. Fights were renewed with added zest, bottles were uncorked, and threats loud and sanguinary filled the air.

The second half began in stirring style. When an Oaktown player did a smart thing his townsmen cheered to the echo; when he did a dirty thing

it was quietly passed over. And the Port-Garvel spectators behaved likewise. The "Port" team played with the desperation of despair, and although they had only ten men they made things lively for their opponents.

"Penalty kick!" was the unanimous yell of the Port people as Billy, lying far back during an anxious time of defence, was seen to make one of the Rovers' forwards perform a cruel somersault within the dreaded line. "Ay, it's a penalty!" was the glad comment of the home supporters as the referee pointed to the line. A pause, a kick, cheers which might have been heard at Glasgow, and the scores were level!

Billy pulled in his belt, and again the game went on. "Oaktown for ever!" was the wild shriek from five hundred throats as the Brusher ploughed through the ranks of his opponents and, shaking off all comers, kicked a second goal amid tumultuous cheers.

"Watch him, Tammy!" "Look out for the Brush-er!" cried the crestfallen "Port" folk a few minutes later, but their advice fell on unconscious ears, for before it was wafted to M'Phee, the right back, he was lying limp beside the goal. Billy was avenged! There was a tremendous flare up. Billy

was ordered off, but he did not go straight to the pavilion. From the midst of a knot of admirers he eagerly watched the closing scenes of the match. The Port made heroic efforts to get level again. Billy craned his neck as they rushed in on the Oaktown goal, and just when it seemed all over with the defence the whistle blew! Oaktown had won—won by Billy's second goal!

Billy was duly suspended, but if he is a poor soldier who cannot show scars, he is a weak footballer whose record does not include one or two such marks of attention as awarded Billy's work that winter's afternoon. All players have their day, and Billy had his. He now keeps a snug little pub.—the last reward of the professional football player.