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Dock Stebbins.



DOCK STEBBINS.

Most everybody liked Dock Stebbins, fur all he wuz the durnedest critter that ever lived to play jokes on folks! Seems like he wuz born jokin' 'nd kep' it up all his life. Ol' Mrs. Stebbins used to tell how when the Dock wuz a baby he use to wake her up haff a dozen times un a night cryin' like he wuz hungry, 'nd when she turnt over in bed to him he wud laff 'nd coo like he wuz sayin', "No, thank ye—I wuz only foolin'!"

His mother allus thought a heap uv the Dock, 'nd she allus put up with his jokes 'nd things without grumblin'; said it warn't his fault that he wuz so full uv tricks 'nd funny business; kind uv took the responsibility uv it onto herself, because, as she allowed, she'd been to a circus jest afore he wuz born.

Nothin' tickled the Dock more 'n to worry folks,—not in a mean way, but jest to sort uv bother 'em. Use to hang round the post-office 'nd pertend to have fits,—sakes alive! but how that scared the women folks. One day who should come along but ol' Sue Perkins; Sue wuz suspicioned of takin' a nip uv likker on the quiet now 'nd then, but nobody had ever ketched her at it. Wall, the Dock he had one uv his fits jest as Sue hove in sight, 'nd Lem Thompson (who stood in with Dock in all his deviltry) leant over Dock while he wuz wallerin' 'nd pretending to foam at the mouth, and Lem cried out: "Nothink will fetch him out'n this turn but a drink uv brandy." Sue, who wuz as kind-hearted a old maid as ever superntended a strawberry festival, whipped a bottle out'n her bag 'nd says: "Here you be, Lem, but don't let him swaller the bottle." Folks bothered Sue a heap 'bout this joke till she moved down into Texas to teach school.

Dock had a piece uv wood 'bout two inches long,—maybe three: it wuz black 'nd stubby 'nd looked jest like the butt uv a cigar. Nobody but Dock wud ever hev thought uv sech a fool thing, but Dock use to go round with that thing in his mouth like it wuz a cigar, and when he'd meet a man who wuz smokin' he'd say: "Excuse me, but will you please to gimme a light?" Then the man wud hand over his cigar, and Dock wud plough that wood stub uv his'n around in the lighted cigar and would pertend to puff away till he had put the real cigar out, 'nd then Dock wud hand the cigar back, sayin', kind uv regretful like: "You don't seem to have much uv a light there; I reckon I'll wait till I kin git a match." You kin imagine how that other feller's cigar tasted when he lighted it agin. Dock tried it on me oncet, 'nd when I lighted up agin seemed like I wuz smokin' a piece uv rope or a liver pad.

One time Dock 'nd Lem Thompson went over to Peory on the railroad, 'nd while they wuz settin' in the car in come two wimmin 'nd set in the seat ahead uv 'em. All uv a suddint Dock nudged Lem and sez, jest loud enuff fur the wimmin to hear: "I didn't git round till after it wuz over, but I never see sech a sight as that baby's ear wuz."

Lem wuz onto Dock's methods, 'nd he knew there wuz sumthin' ahead. So he says: "Tough-lookin' ear, wuz it?"

"Wall, I should remark," says Dock. "You see it wuz like this: the mother had gone out into the back yard to hang some clo'es onto the line, 'nd she laid the baby down in the crib. Baby wan't more 'n six weeks old,—helpless little critter as ever you seen. Wall, all to oncet the mother heerd the baby cryin', but bein' busy with them clo'es she didn't mind much. The baby kep' cryin' 'nd cryin', 'nd at last the mother come back into the house, 'nd there she found a big rat gnawin' at one uv the baby's ears,—had et it nearly off! There lay that helpless little innocent, cryin' 'nd writhin', 'nd there sat that rat with his long tail, nippin' 'nd chewin' at one uv them tiny coral ears—oh, it wuz offul!"

"Jest imagine the feelinks uv the mother!" says Lem, sad like.

"Jest imagine the feelinks uv the *baby*," sez Dock. "How'd you like to be lyin' helpless in a crib with a big rat gnawin' your ear?"

Wall, all this conversation wuz fur from pleasant to those two wimmin in the front seat, fur wimmin love babies 'nd hate rats, you know. It wuz nuts fur Dock 'nd Lem to see the two wimmin squirm, 'nd all the way to Peory they didn't talk about nuthink but snakes 'nd spiders 'nd mice 'nd caterpillars. When the train got to Peory a gentleman met the two wimmin 'nd sez to one uv 'em: "I'm feered the trip haint done you much good, Lizzie," says he. "Sakes alive, John," says she, "it's a wonder we haint dead, for we've been travellin' forty miles with a real live Beadle dime novvell!"

'Nuther trick Dock had wuz to walk 'long the street behind wimmin 'nd tell about how his sister had jest lost one uv her diamond earrings while out walkin'. Jest as soon as the wimmin heerd this they'd clap their han's up to their ears to see if their earrings wuz all right. Dock never laffed nor let on like he wuz jokin', but jest the same this sort uv thing tickled him nearly to deth.

Dock went up to Chicago with Jedge Craig oncet, 'nd when they come back the jedge said he'd never had such an offul time in all his born days. Said that Dock bought a fool Mother Goose book to read in the hoss-cars jest to queer folks; would set in a hoss-car lookin' at the picturs 'nd readin' the verses 'nd laffin' like it wuz all new to him 'nd like he wuz a child. Everybody sized him up for a ejeot, 'nd the wimmin folks shook their heads 'nd said it wuz orful fur so fine a lookin' feller to be such a tom fool. 'Nuther thing Dock did wuz to git hold uv a bad quarter 'nd give it to a beggar, 'nd then foller the beggar into a saloon 'nd git him arrested for tryin' to pass counterfit money. I reckon that if Dock had stayed in Chicago a week he'd have had everybody crazy.

No, I don't know how he come to be a medikil man. He told me oncet that when he found out that he wuzn't good for anythink he concluded he'd be a doctor; but I reckon that wuz one uv his jokes. He didn't have much uv a practice: he wuz too yumorous to suit most invalids 'nd sick folks. We had him tend our boy Sam jest oncet when Sam wuz comin' down with the measles. He looked at Sam's tongue 'nd felt his pulse 'nd said he'd leave a pill for Sam to take afore goin' to bed.

"How shell we administer the pill?" asked my wife.

"Wall," says Dock, "the best way to do is to git the boy down on the floor 'nd hold his mouth open 'nd gag him till he swallers the pill. After the pill gits into his system it will explode in about ten minits, 'nd then the boy will feel better."

This wuz cheerful news for the boy. No human power cud ha' got that pill into Sam. We never solicited Dock's perfeshional services agin.

One time Dock 'nd Lem Thompson drove over to Knoxville to help Dock Parsons cut a man's leg off. About four miles out uv town 'nd right in the middle uv the hot peraroor they met Moses Baker's oldest boy trudgin' along with a basket uf eggs. The Dock whoaed his hoss 'nd called to the boy,—

"Where be you goin' with them eggs?" says he.

"Goin' to town to sell 'em," says the boy.

"How much a dozen?" asked the Dock.

"'Bout ten cents, I reckon," says the boy.

"Putty likely-lookin' eggs," says the Dock; 'nd he handed the lines over to Lem, 'nd got out'n the buggy.

"How many hev you got?" he asked.

"Ten dozen," says the boy.

"Git out!" says Dock. "There haint no ten dozen eggs in that basket!"

"Yes, there is," says the boy, "fur I counted 'em myself."

The Dock allowed that he wuzn't goin' to take nobody's count on eggs; so he got that fool boy to stan' there in the middle uv that hot peraroor, claspin' his two hands together, while he, the Dock, counted them eggs out'n the basket one by one into the boy's arms. Ten dozen eggs is a heap; you kin imagine, maybe, how that boy looked with his arms full uv eggs! When the Dock had got about nine dozen counted out he stopped all uv a suddint 'nd said, "Wall, come to think on 't, I reckon I don't want no eggs to-day, but I'm jest as much obleeged to you fur yer trouble." And so he jumped back into the buggy 'nd drove off.

Now, maybe that fool boy wuzn't in a peck uv trubble! There he stood in the middle uv that hot—that all-fired hot—peraroor with his arms full uv eggs. What wuz there fur him to do? He wuz afraid to move, lest he should break them eggs; yet the longer he stood there the less chance there wuz of the warm weather improvin' the eggs.

Along in the summer of '78 the fever broke out down South, 'nd one day Dock made up his mind that as bizness wuzn't none too good at home he'd go down South 'nd see what he could do there. That wuz jest like one of Dock's fool notions, we all said. But he went. In about six weeks along come a telegraph sayin' that Dock wuz dead,—he'd died uv the fever. The minister went up to the homestead 'nd broke the news gentle like to Dock's mother; but, bless you! she didn't believe it—she wouldn't believe it. She said it wuz one uv Dock's jokes; she didn't blame him, nuther—it wuz *her* fault, she allowed, that Dock wuz allus that way about makin' fun uv life 'nd death. No, sir; she never believed that Dock wuz

dead, but she allus talked like he might come in any minnit; and there wuz allus his old place set fur him at the table 'nd nuthin' was disturbed in his little room upstairs. And so five years slipped by 'nd no Dock come back, 'nd there wuz no tidin's uv him. Uv course, the rest uv us knew; but his mother—oh, no, *she* never would believe it.

At last the old lady fell sick, and the doctor said she couldn't hold out long, she wuz so old 'nd feeble. The minister who wuz there said that she seemed to sleep from the evenin' of this life into the mornin' uv the next. Jest afore the last she kind uv raised up in bed and cried out like she saw sumthin' that she loved, and she held out her arms like there wuz some one standin' in the doorway. Then they asked her what the matter wuz, and she says, joyful like: "He's come back, and there he stan's jest as he use ter: I knew he wuz only jokin'!"

They looked, but they saw nuthin'; 'nd when they went to her she wuz dead.

1888.

[End of *Dock Stebbins* by Eugene Field]