

THE ROWENA O'TOOLE COMPANY

by Ellis Parker Butler

In the Public Domain

WHEN I was a boy, I had kept rabbits, and they burrowed into Mr. Morton's yard and ate his lettuce crop, which annoyed Mr. Morton; and I had had chickens, and they flew over the fence into Mr. Grady's yard and pecked holes in his reddest tomatoes, which displeased Mr. Grady; and so, after I had paid a boy two dollars for a goat, and then paid him fifty cents to take it back because it had eaten to desolation the gardens of both Mr. Morton and Mr. Grady, I consulted those gentlemen as to what manner of animal I had best own next.

The two gentlemen came into my father's back yard by the over-the-fence route. Mr. Grady took a seat on the sawbuck. Mr. Morton leaned against the barn door. Mr. Morton was younger than Mr. Grady, but far more serious. He was studying law, and wore his hair in a broad bang that hung over one eye; and so long I knew him he never smiled. Mr. Grady, on the other hand, was old enough to be young again. He seemed to have no special profession except that of veteran of two fields — Gettysburg and cornfield. He as an ex-soldier and a retired farmer, and as happy by nature as any man could possibly be. I think he lived in cycles of jokes. He would smile all day yesterday thinking of the joke he meant to tell some one; to-day he would tell the joke and smile; and to-morrow he would smile over the manner in which the joke was received. The next day he would begin the cycle again. In this way he kept himself always happy and economized his jokes.

"William," said Mr. Morton, when I had stated my indecision, "this matter is one that deserves more than usual consideration, and I must ask you to retire a few moments while Mr. Grady, my honored friend here, and I consult in private."

I knew that meant I was not wanted, and I went into the house - not especially because it was necessary to retire so far, but because there were fresh doughnuts there. When I returned their consultation was completed.

"It is the sense of the meeting," said Mr. Morton, so solemnly that I felt very important, "that, generally speaking, the confines of a city are conducive to better results in agricultural pursuits than in stock-raising."

"He means," explained Mr. Grady, "that raisin' garden truck is better than raisin' critters."

My face must have shown my disappointment, for Mr. Morton hastened to reassure me.

“However,” he said, “since your nature inclines toward the animal rather than toward the vegetable kingdom, we have made proper concessions, and have decided on a fit and suitable creature upon which you may lavish your care.”

“Very purty words, them,” Mr. Grady asserted.

Mr. Morton wiped back his lock of hair, which had a way of falling into his eye, and proceeded.

“The animal on which we have decided,” he continued, “has been known from the days of great antiquity. It is a gentle beast, — at least in its domestic state, although when wild it is considered dangerous at times, — and it adds to the food supply of the nations. While I may not call it precisely graceful, it is, in its youth, often pleasant to the eye, while with age it assumes a dignity and majesty that are suited to its rotund and weighty form.”

Mr. Grady had been waiting an opportunity to speak, while I stood with my mouth open, taking in the stream of eloquence. Now Mr. Grady took his pipe from his mouth and spoke.

“Why don’t you tell the lad it’s a pig?” he asked.

“A pig!” I exclaimed. “But a pig can’t do anything!”

“To be sure,” said Mr. Grady, “he can’t fly like them chickens you had.”

“Nor can I say I have ever seen one hop like a rabbit,” said Mr. Morton.

“Neither can he climb a tree like a cat, nor swim like a trout; but he is a fine bit of a beast, for all that,” said Mr. Grady.

“But,” I suggested, “pigs cost a great deal, and all my money is gone. I used the last to buy that billy-goat.”

“All of which,” said Mr. Morton, “has been carefully considered; and, in view of your financial distress, Mr. Grady, my honored neighbor, and I have decided to finance the pig. In other words, we will buy him.”

I hesitated.

“I don’t think my father would like to have you do that,” I said.

“But we do not make you a present of him,” said Mr. Morton.

“Wouldn’t he be my pig?” I asked, quite sure I should not care to own a pig that did not belong to me.

“We will make a stock company of him,” said Mr. Morton. “We will divide him into three shares, of which Mr. Grady, my honored neighbor, and I shall each own one, because we supply the pig, while you shall own one, because you will have the sole care and custody of the animal.”

“And when he’s sold, we divvy up fair and square,” said Mr. Grady; “each of us three gettin’ one half of what he sells for.”

The more I considered the matter, the better I liked it. The idea that there would be something to divide when the pig was sold was pleasing; for neither my rabbits nor my chickens had produced a profit, and I considered that even should the pig prove a loss, as in my goat venture, it would be satisfactory to have two partners to help share the deficit. So I accepted the proposal.

As for the officers of the company, we made Mr. Morton president, because — well, because he wasn't the sort of man you could make anything less; but, to balance the dignities, Mr. Grady and I each had two titles. Mr. Grady was made treasurer and board of directors, and I was proudly installed as secretary and general manager.

“And mind you, William,” said Mr. Morton, severely, “you must keep the records of the company honestly and conscientiously.” He said this with great impressiveness, while climbing the fence into the yard.

“Mr. Grady,” I said to that gentleman, “how must I keep the records?”

“Well, now,” said Mr. Grady, “I haven't ever kept records of a pig company myself; but I reckon you'd best get one of these here pocket diaries an' keep it in that. It would be handiest.”

So I got one. My first entry described our first meeting and the formation of the company. It ran: “Mister Morton he climbed over his fence into our yard, and Mister Grady he climbed over his fence into our yard, and we were all met together, because I didn't have to climb into our yard because I was in it,” and so on. You see how conscientiously I kept the records.

To Mr. Grady, who was an expert in pigs, was intrusted the task of procuring our live stock, and it seemed to me he was long at it. At length, however, he told me he had got his eye on a remarkably fine pig, “purty as a picture, an' full o' life as an egg,” which would be delivered as soon as it had a few more days' growth; for, like the wife in the song of “Billy Boy,” it was still “a young thing and could not leave its mother.”

But I had enough to do in the meantime there was the sty to build, and a trough to construct, and no ordinary sty or trough would do. I soon learned the meaning of Mr. Grady's title of board of directors. I found that the general manager was a mere tool in the hands of the board of directors. Every day the smiling “board” would climb over the fence and, comfortably seated on the sawbuck, instruct the general manager.

He not only insisted on the shape and construction of the sty, but he directed me how to hold the saw and hammer, how to hit a nail, and, if I hit my thumb instead, how to tie it up. If our president had tried to direct me, I should have resented it; but Mr. Grady did it in such a good-natured manner that I enjoyed it, and his suggestions were so appropriate that I soon felt the fullest confidence in him.

At length the pig came. It was a beautiful little pink fellow, full of life and appetite, and Mr. Grady predicted that it would make a fine beast in time. I decided **at** once that we must call it Rowena, my favorite name; for I had just read "Ivanhoe" for the first time, and the name, Rowena, greatly pleased my fancy. Of course I had to consult the board of directors on such an important matter, and he immediately objected.

"What sort of a name is Rowena, now?" he asked. "Be it French? Who ever heard of a French pig?"

"I don't think it is French, Mr. Grady," I said doubtfully.

"It's not Irish, anyhow," he declared; "and all my life I've been wishing to name a pig, and there's no name so good for man or beast as the good old Irish names. When I was a boy no bigger than you, I wanted to name a pig, but they were my father's pigs and I durst not name them. And when I grew up I had so many pigs I didn't have time to name them, let alone think of names. But now," said he, "I've got the time, and I've got the pig, an' I've been layin' awake nights thinkin' over names, an' I've decided that O'Toole is the finest name for a pig that ever was. O'Toole it is."

"I don't like O'Toole," I said, for I had set my heart on Rowena. "I don't like O'Toole."

"Then if the general manager and the board of directors disagree," said Mr. Grady, "we'll have to call a meetin' of the stockholders an' vote on it." So a meeting was called.

Mr. Morton climbed over the fence, and when he heard our statements his face became very sober.

"Now, fellow-stockholders," he said gravely, "you have proceeded in this matter regardless of my rights. You have not consulted my preferences in the least. I shall insist that our animal shall be called Empedocles. If ever I have had a great desire, from my callow boyhood upward, it was to see a sweet, pink, porcine animal bearing the musical name of Empedocles. I shall insist on it."

"We all insist," said Mr. Grady; "an' if we all insist, fellow-stockholders, I see no way out of it but to fight a duel-a three-sided duel with axes."

"And then," said Mr. Morton, scornfully, "if we are all killed, the pig will be a poor outcast orphan! I propose a ballot."

I eagerly agreed to the proposal. A duel with axes did not appeal to me. So we tore up several pages of Mr. Morton's notebook and voted. The first ballot stood:

For Empedocles I
For O'Toole I
For Rowena I

The succeeding ballots, from the second up to the sixth, stood the same. Just when we were preparing for the next ballot a gentleman called for Mr.

Morton, and this may have broken the deadlock, for we found that the seventh ballot stood:

For O'Toole I

For Rowena I

For Rowena O'Toole. .. I

Mr. Morton then made a neat little speech in which he begged the Pig Company to seek harmony rather than self-interest, and suggested that we unite on Rowena O'Toole. The visiting gentleman applauded the speech, and when the eighth ballot was taken the votes stood:

For Rowena O'Toole . ' 3

Which settled the matter, once for all. The pig received its name with great unconcern.

As the spring advanced it became evident that we were to have a rainy season; and the ground in the pen became very soft and muddy. To my eyes, Rowena O'Toole seemed to enjoy it immensely. She unfailingly chose the softest spots, and stood leg deep in them. But Mr. Grady shook his head."

"'Twon't do," he said. "It's all well enough for country pigs, but city pigs can't stand it. First thing we know, it will catch cold in its head, standin' in the damp, an' lose its appytite, an' a pig without an appytite is a gone pig."

"What would you advise, Mr. Grady?" I asked anxiously.

"We might get it a pair of rubber boots, now," he said thoughtfully; "an' wrap its neck in red flannel; but it would eat the boots, an' I dunno but eatin' rubber boots is worse for a pig than a cold in the head is. What I direct," he said, — and when Mr. Grady directed it was only left for me to carry out his directions,—is that you build a pen for it in the hay-loft. Up there it would be nice and dry and comfortable."

It was not hard to build a pen in the hay-loft, but it was harder to transport Rowena O'Toole to her new home. She had grown considerably, and as Mr. Grady would do nothing but direct, I had a serious time getting the pig up the ladder. Unless you have tried it, you cannot imagine how awkward it is.

It was well along toward the next spring when Mr. Grady decided that Rowena O'Toole was fit in size to be sold, and we bargained with our butcher. He came and looked at Rowena O'Toole, and shook his head.

"She's a thin pig for her age," he said doubtfully, — "the thinnest pig I ever see."

"She's a proud pig," said Mr. Grady; "she lives up to her elegant name. She never was greedy like common pigs."

"Looks to me like she'd had the fat fairly worried off her," said the butcher.

"Not having had it on her," said Mr. Grady, "it couldn't be worried off. I can't imagine why she didn't put on more flesh. She's been tended most carefully. Not a day but she's had her bath."

“Bath !” exclaimed the butcher.

“Bath,” said Mr. Grady, “every day, regular as the calendar, we’ve turned the hose on her.”

“Then I’ll have to offer you two cents a pound below the market rates. It don’t do for pigs to bathe too often. Say every other day, now, might do; but every day is a little too much. It gets them all haughty and proud and uppish, which makes them tough.”

Nor could we persuade him to give the fraction of a cent a pound more.

We had to lower Rowena O’Toole from the hay-loft door by means of a block and tackle, and Mr. Grady directed me to drive her to the butcher’s through the alley. I think now that he was not proud of Rowena O’Toole. She may have looked aristocratic, but she did not look over-fed.

The money we received was not a fortune, but it was, on my part at least, well earned.

When the Rowena O’Toole Company met to declare its final dividend, Mr. Grady asked me if I wished to try a pig again that year; and if not, what animal I had in mind.

I think I squirmed a little on the bench on which I sat. I know I said:

“If you don’t mind, Mr. Grady, I don’t think I’ll try any more animals just now. I think I’ll learn to grow tomatoes, if you don’t mind showing me how.”