

ROBERT QUILLEN 1887 - 1948

LOIS WOODS

Robert Quillen, whose ancestors were a blend of Scotch-Irish and French, was born in the small prairie town of Syracuse, Kansas. He grew up in his father's print shop with the intoxicating smell of printer's ink in his nostrils. At sixteen he had sold pen and ink drawings to a trade journal for \$1.00, and at sixteen he decided to strike out on his own. Three years later, after some strange adventures and much wandering, he landed in Fountain Inn to establish a weekly newspaper. Nobody dreamed that in a relatively short time Robert Quillen would put the sleepy little village on the literary map of the world - that he would be referred to as "Robert Quillen, the Sage of Fountain Inn" and as "The Mark Twain of his Time."

Mr. Quillen was twice married, both times to Fountain Inn women. His first marriage was to Miss Donnie Cox. It was during this union that Louise became a joyful addition to the family. After Miss Donnie's death Mr. Quillen married Miss Marcelle Babb.

The success that Mr. Quillen achieved was not instant nor without effort. For some years he bombarded magazines with material they didn't want. The little news sheet he printed each week did not provide a lucrative income. Despite the rejections Mr. Quillen continued to write and hope. Finally the *Greenville Piedmont* used some of his paragraphs and eventually the *Literary Digest* ran reprints of these. Then there was a request from the *Baltimore Sun*, and one from the *American Magazine*. The *Saturday Evening Post* wrote to ask if he would like to write for them. The answer was that he would - in fact he had been writing without results. Then came an offer from The Publisher Syndicate in Chicago. This was the ultimate. Mr. Quillen said, "From the day I signed with the Syndicate it was the old ball and chain."

The introduction of Mr. Quillen to the Syndicate Newspapers read as follows:

Robert Quillen knows the common man. He has worked among them in ten states. He knows their problems, their point of

view, the things they talk about. He has no crank ideas, no axe to grind, he preaches no private creed. He simply writes entertainingly and sincerely about the things Dad, Mother and the Kids can and do discuss at the supper table.

At the time of his death in 1948 he was writing syndicated editorials which appeared daily in four hundred newspapers in this country, Canada, Manila, Honolulu. His "Aunt Het" and "Little Willie" appeared daily. "Letters from a Bald-Head Dad to His Red-Head Daughter" appeared on Saturday. "Little Willie" was translated as "Pimmie Pimple" in Holland.

The letters to Louise, the red-head daughter, have a special significance to those of us who have had the pleasure of knowing and watching her grow up from an enchanting little girl to a glamorous, warm hearted grandmother. These letters provided guidelines for more daughters than Louise. A young friend of mine told me that her mother read the letters to her with the admonition, "Hear Ye."

Aunt Het could have been anybody's next door neighbor - just a nice motherly type - at times hard-boiled - a pure-in-heart old lady freely speaking her mind. She was a fictional character to "outsiders" but to "Fountain Innners" she was their beloved Aunt Lil Nelson - my landlady. The inspiration for many Aunt Hets came from that household.

Even though his work for the Syndicate was time-consuming, Mr. Quillen never lost his love for the Fountain Inn *Tribune* which he founded. In the beginning it was his bread and butter. After the Syndicate commitment, it became his hobby and Mark Nelson's pride and bread and butter. Mark had been trained by the master publisher and the *Tribune* continued to be meticulously edited under the Quillen watchcare. I remember a sign that hung in the *Tribune* Office. It read:

Published every Thursday by Robert Quillen for his amusement and the entertainment of his friends.

I can assure you that the little paper did entertain and sometimes irritated and often aroused the curiosity of its readers.

An invitation to a dance at his house was worded, "There will be an old-fashioned square dance at my house Friday night and everybody is invited except those who don't like me and those who feel important."

Another item concerned the gates for the front driveway - "The new iron gates for the front drive-way arrived this week and will be put up as soon as Uncle Dick Jones finds time. These are unusually heavy gates, but a three-ton truck driven by a half-wit could crumble them up in accordion style. This therefore is fair warning if and when this happens there will be a new face in the idiots' corner in New Jerusalem."

Many of the articles in the *Tribune* aroused not only the curiosity but the wrath of the natives - particularly when the shoe fit. One such article provoked a call from a prominent citizen, much to Mr. Quillen's amusement. His soft-spoken reply was, "When you shell the woods you often hit a friend."

Mr. Quillen did not soften or attempt to cover up. His headlines were simple and direct. When a close friend of his died the notice read, "John Doe is dead. Liquor killed Him." Then he added, "Why tell a lie about it. John hated a liar." The citizens were not always pleased but they respected his frankness and honesty - the fact that he did not cover up for the big men and expose the little guy.

Mr. Quillen's fame as a writer is well known, but only his friends knew the gracious, generous, compassionate Bob Quillen. I have often thought of the depression years when real need and hunger existed and there were no relief agencies. Mr. Quillen's house was the Food Stamp, the Social Security, HEW and DSS all rolled into one. The needy were never turned away (and the office was never in the red or under investigation). Food baskets were sent out weekly from Mr. Holland's grocery store. His generosity transcended race, color and creed. Aunt Sally was black and blind, John was a cripple; one-legged Lonnie kept the Quillen yard combed and brushed. He loved doing this work for "Mr. Bob" and he had reason to love it. He was well paid and received many fringe benefits.

Worthy young people were educated. Doctor bills were paid. During those depression years the doctors welcomed the Quillen patients. That was money they could be sure of. Perhaps some of you can remember those days when the doctor waited for the patient and his money instead of the patient waiting for the doctor. Mr. Quillen made extravagant gifts to churches. The First Baptist Church in Fountain Inn received a fine Stief Baby

Grand piano many years ago. It is still used - a very fine instrument. The local high school received one too and when the school system was reorganized, the piano was moved to Hillcrest High School. His generosity knew no bounds and was bestowed with no desire for praise or publicity.

Many people have the idea that Mr. Quillen was a recluse. Nothing could be further from the truth. Of course he had to reserve time to make a living for his family and extra money for his humanity investments. But after working hours he was read for some socializing.

He and Marcelle walked to the *Tribune* office every afternoon at 2:00 o'clock. They stopped and talked to the friendly folks along the way. At the office they visited with Mark and the "regulars" who dropped in for a coke. The *Tribune* office was the social center of the town.

On a typical evening in the Quillen home you might find a group of friends sitting around engaged in pleasant conversation - or you might find some friends sitting around reading (There was always an abundance of intriguing reading material). Often a spirited game of bridge was in progress - a game Mr. Quillen didn't play but enjoyed from the side lines and often gleaned an Aunt Het or two. She once said, "A hick town is one where the righteous play Rook and the sinners play bridge."

To me and many others the Quillen home was a place of good food, fun, and a wealth of information.

I must mention Christmas morning when everybody was invited for egg-nog made personally by the master of the house. The baker, the butcher, the shoe-maker, banker, doctor, etc. got equal attention. They were the **regular** folks that Bob liked.

When you entered the Quillen home, it seemed to say, "Come in. We are glad to see you," and of course Mr. Quillen and Marcelle always made you feel that you were special.

Alexander Wolcott, Will Rogers, Bernhard Baruch and many other famous people visited the simple brick bungalow in the middle of town.

Alexander Wolcott once said, "I rode a thousand miles to see if I could discover why a genius, Robert Quillen, continued to

live in the middle of the Carolina cotton fields." This inspired Mr. Quillen to write his famous story, "Why I Stick to the Sticks." The title was suggested by his thirteen year old daughter, Louise. *American Magazine* published the story.

The reasons he gave were:

I like being Bob instead of Mister
I do not like crowds
I do not care for fame
I like my simple little house
I like living where the neighbor yells from the back door
wanting to borrow something
I love the friendly people who do not pretend.

Bob Quillen loved his kingdom - a square block in the middle of town. It was surrounded by a fence with rambling ivy and roses. He enjoyed sitting on the lawn with his wife and daughter - sometimes reading, sometimes enjoying watching the blue-birds plead with the jays for a turn at the bird bath. He was happy in Fountain Inn.

Will Rogers and Mr. Quillen were two humorists who enjoyed and appreciated each other's wit.

The Monument to Eve attracted tourists from all over the country. Hardly a day passed, when the highway went through Fountain Inn, that cars didn't stop in front of the Quillen's home to view the unusual monument.

His sentence sermons are amusing and filled with wisdom:

Americanism: Liking what you have until you see somebody with something better.

The act of being hospitable consists in treating people as though they were as important as they think they are.

If he's a mere doctor he treats you for what you got - if he's a specialist you got what he treats you for.

There's no fun sitting down to a feast if there's a chap looking through the window that hasn't had a square meal in a month.

Robert Quillen walked and talked with the greats of his time. He gained fame and fortune, but he never lost the common touch. He was truly clothed in humility, and simplicity was the keynote of his way of life.

Today those of us who knew and loved Bob Quillen borrow from another Bob and say, "Thanks for the Memories."