

# SHORT STORY BILL SPLITS A LIP

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TO find the beginnings of this story of the queer and sudden transformation of Bill, it is necessary to go back as far as the days when Bill was learning to walk, and hold a fork, dress himself, and run into his mother's pantry when father came home drunk. Few remember these days in their own experience, which is a pity, for if Bill, for example, had remembered them, he might have been able to put right a wrong that happened then. But Bill forgot, like the rest of us, and the fault stayed a fault. All he retained was a vague and formless memory of times that were unaccountably full of that great happiness that comes to all children whether their fathers are boors or Beau Gestes; and of times that were often overwhelmingly full of tears and tension and unpleasantness that is better not recalled too vividly.

He was otherwise quite normal. He had no politics. "All Governments are bad," said Bill, when asked his opinion on anything to do with society. He was not subtle. Far from it. It was not cynicism that made him class humanity as stupid and all the manifestations of humanity's egregious spirit as evil. It was simply acceptance of something which appeared to him to be a fact. These things perhaps had once puzzled him, as they puzzle

everyone. But Bill had resolved his human problems by classing all things as objectionable, except getting brown in summer and keeping warm with strenuous games in winter, and this simple solution of his relationships with other people left him with an entirely uncomplicated attitude to life in general.

But if Bill's philosophy was faultless in this fashion, if his philosophy was based on such a perfect and simple and complete state of disillusion, he still had a chink in his armour, and for that we must blame his father.

AT least his father is most directly to blame. His father was a bit of a swine. For that, no doubt, someone else is to blame, and for someone else we can probably blame someone else; but the direct responsibility for Bill's one glaring fault must lie with his father. His father made his mother's life more or less a hell, and his mother could not therefore devote the necessary quiet and peaceful moments to the education of Bill through the elementary stages of human behaviour.

It is a strange thing that men and women who have been acting in certain fixed ways through all the long ages of their evolution still have to be taught certain essentials.

A bird is born, and can fly when its parents decide that the time has come to push it out of the nest. For animals, simple and natural reactions come without much parental teaching, as far as I can see (although I deny all claims to special knowledge on this matter).

But human beings are decidedly slow in the uptake. People have been using table utensils for long enough, but children are not yet born either with knives or forks in their hands, or with any inherited ability in using them.

Bill was no exception. We have seen that he was a normal person in nearly all respects. Bill had to be taught. His mother managed to teach him most of the essentials. But in one very important matter she failed, poor woman.

She did not teach Bill to breathe through his nose.

On all occasions, awake or asleep, Bill breathed most emphatically through his mouth. It gave him some appearance of vacuity; but he was not vacant. It gave him an appearance of weakness and indecision. In fact he was neither vacant nor weak of mind. He just breathed through his mouth.

PROOF that Bill's mind was fashioned for quick and determined decisions may be found in his behaviour when war was declared last year.

"All Governments are essentially bad," he said again, "but that Government is worse than this Government, so I shall fight for this Government." He did not take much notice of the newspapers when they said he must go and fight for his kith and kin, because his mother was dead and his father should have been; and he did not heed the cries that he should go and fight for his country, for he owned none of it and all his life had worked very hard for the small corner on which he was permitted to

sleep and eat. Bill's mind was decidedly direct. He discounted all these things, partly because they seemed superfluous, and partly because it was the newspapers in which he read them, and partly because he had not ever thought of them himself, things being what they were, and could therefore find no reason for believing very strongly in them. But he made his choice between the two sides and chose his own, having reduced the problem to a simple and regrettably necessary choice between something partly good and something else mostly evil.

SO Bill went off to the war, and it was not longer than usual before he wore wings on his sleeve and drank his beer quite naturally in the private bar out of long glasses, where previously it had seemed an ordinary procedure to have it in the public out of handles.

Bill managed quite well in aeroplanes. He did not have the extra bit of fire necessary for a successful fighter pilot, but there was no cause for him to disprove his ability behind the long nose of a Hurricane. Bill naturally graduated into a bomber squadron, and quite unconcernedly kept his place in the flights each time, quite unassumedly took his turn in the dives on the target, came home with any of the others who were left, and landed at his base with no more excitement in him than the pleasure of anticipating a warm feed.

Time after time he went across with them, and time after time came back. Bill's tactics under pressure were invariably the same and invariably effective. He simply flew straight on, and left his gunners to worry about any-

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