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thing not within the immediate frontal range of his vision.

EVERYONE thought that Bill was a bit of a lad. He was in a fair way to making a reputation as an airman of some dash and vigour; which was quite wrong. Bill went off with his load of bombs with the same sensations as came to him at home when he left for work with his papers in an attaché case. He went, and he did the job, and he came back. As a bomber pilot he was perfect, just as he had been the perfect bank clerk. Not hasty, not too slow, deliberate but never dumb, thorough, but not finicky. As a unit in the squadron he was also ideal; just as he had been the ideal citizen of the modern state. Not too dull, but never revolutionary; not uncritical, but never throwing stones at his betters.

Bill, it might have been thought, would go far, for he had a surprising habit of coming back always, and of always landing a bomb on something that mattered to the enemy.

But you and I know his fault, and it was to be his undoing. Bill breathed through his mouth.

HE had been on active service some three months, and remained all that time intact in mind and body, when he found one day, as winter was turning through spring into summer, that his lips were filmed over with dry skin, and that the edges were frayed and ragged. He carefully smeared them with ointment, found himself comfortable once more, and went about his business. The dry spell continued. The weather became warmer. Bill's lower lip cracked. This was where the trouble really started.

Try as he might, Bill could not persuade that crack to close. He tried a softening ointment, but was advised against it by a nurse and tried instead a healing mixture that left a film over the place. This seemed to having effect, and after two weeks of discomfort Bill felt at last that the trouble was under control.

But there are moments when the best of men are caught napping. In the mornings, or in the middle of the night when he might be called at any hour, Bill would blink himself awake, stretch, wriggle in the bunk, and . . . yawn.

And every time he yawned he would feel the little crack in his lip split open once again. He would swear softly at this, paint some more stuff over it, and go about his business slightly worried at the time it was taking to heal. By the middle of the day he might have it half under control again, and then Bill would see a gull fleeing the monstrous bird he piloted, or a submarine ducking to the depths for safety from him, or anti-aircraft bursts puffing white, high and wide from him — and Bill would laugh. He had a quiet sense of humour, had Bill; but he also had a cracked lip, and every time he forgot himself and laughed the lip cracked again.

AFTER a month of it, the trouble began to get under his skin. Never before had anything worried him for so long. External threats affected him not at all. He dismissed them. Internal troubles had never come to him. His lips had cracked before, because he always breathed through his mouth, but never before had they taken more than a couple of days to heal. Days and weeks went by and Bill began to wake up in

the mornings and worry like hell about his lips. The crack was not large, or unpleasant to look at. Bill was in no way disfigured, but *it would not heal*. Nothing had ever really beaten Bill before. Even when he had found, as he was growing up, that society was in general a decidedly unfriendly system, he had decided to ignore it and got along all right as a result. But here was something which defied all his efforts either to remember it, mend it, or forget it.

He lost some of his assurance, and, although no one else noticed it, it became more of an effort for him to plug on through the clouds and pom-poms and searchlights, find his target, drop his cargo, and turn deliberately home.

It all came to a head at high noon on a fine summer's day not long ago.

THEY had been to Hamburg and bombed the devil's own delight out of the oil tanks. Bill felt a little more pleased with himself when they'd banked clear of the flare and smoke of the explosions, and climbed up and away out over the clean sea again. He even looked back, for a change, and under the wings of the 'plane behind him watched the smoke curling lazily up to the blue and wondered with mild satisfaction what sort of inferno they had left below its stately column.

But he did not smile, for he remembered the lip in time.

They were not far clear of the coast when shadows blinked across the sun in the south and Bill looked up to see a flight of the black twin-engined fighters coming at them. They held their flight positions and flew on, a neat, precise echelon, pointed in front and fan-

ning out to a base, with the fighters diving at them and banking off to come again; with their guns spitting at the enemy when he came too close, and their bulky fuselages steady to the sharp tearing bursts of his machine-gun fire. One of the enemy went down, and one of Bill's friends. The Messerschmitts drew off, climbed into the sun again, and came back reinforced two-fold with fresh vultures come for the kill.

Peering back through his glasshouse, Bill saw the trace of bullets from his rear gun rip into the wing of an enemy 'plane, watched it zip along the surface, and hold steady for a split second in an engine housing. The 'plane tipped, wobbled furiously; a spurt of white smoke came from the cowl, a spurt of black. Into the air flew some queer-shaped metal thing, that skied and twisted and finally fell to the sea, and from the gap it made black smoke eddied, and flames, and there was another gone.

Over his nose Bill saw two more fighters dive out of the line of the fire of the 'planes behind him, and he waited for his forward gunner to get them in his sights. From behind him somewhere he felt the 'plane rock and shudder clumsily as cannon shells found a mark; but he steadied her up and watched quietly while the rattle of his own guns announced a threat to the diving brutes in front.

Down they went, and looped unscathed to come up underneath, and Bill felt a splinter in the softness of his calf as their bullets cut through from below. In turn they came under him and let him have it, and in turn they banked at his port wing tip, close enough it seemed for a man to jump across the

small space between them. But the second one had delayed his bank too long, and the rear gunner caught him as his 'plane poised at the top of its flight, wings spread out against the glare of the sun, a perfect target. Every round went home, and Bill, out of the corner of an eye, saw him start to fall, while he watched the other coming on for a frontal attack, with a third following and the sky behind them, so it seemed, black with wings.

A GREAT temptation came to Bill to throw his 'plane into a dive that would thrust them under this arrow-flighted danger from above. He held it back, and was thinking hard thoughts of men and their manners when behind him one of the crew stirred in his place, cursed loudly. "To hell," came the voice, clear above the roar and rattle. "My bloody foot's gone to sleep."

Bill laughed, loud and long and a little viciously, and while he laughed, one after another the enemy 'planes came in and spat fire at them, and below was the sea, blue and smooth and flat like a mirror in a blue-tiled bathroom, and above them the sky and the sun, and the 'planes one after another. And as he laughed Bill's lip cracked suddenly and painfully. For an instant he went blind with anger at himself and the lip, and in that instant he lifted the great bulk of the 'plane straight at the nearest enemy, smothered it in a great flash of exploding petrol and smashing struts, threw it aside, and tossed away into another. "Damn this lip," said Bill, as the world spun round, and the sun went out.

(THE END)

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