

# BILL SMITH FINDS HIMSELF

## A Story of a Returned Soldier, Hard Times and a Christmas Party.

By M. McIntyre Hood.

### Overseas.

Bill Smith had been a misfit. Everything he had tried to do seemed to have gone wrong. It he kept a job for a month at a stretch he would be a greatly surprised man, but surprises were few and far between. Nothing he did seemed to turn out as he wished. It wasn't that he was lazy or a poor workman. Most of the men who employed him admired his energy for the first week or so, until they came within the range of his bellicose nature, and that was his finish. He had, somehow or other, acquired the habit of driving along in his own sweet way, and woe betide any man who tried to hold him back, or tie him too securely to a definite routine. But three years in the mud and slaughter of France had satisfied his desire for trouble, so that, when he came back to Canada and settled in the big city where he had made his home after he left the farm, an orphan, he had the makings of a good, useful citizen. Still, things did not seem to go right for him, and when his second Christmas out of the trenches came around, and found him out of work, almost penniless and without a friend to whom he could turn, Bill was well-nigh desperate.

Of course, Bill Smith was not his real name. To divulge that would be to reveal the identity of one of the bravest men who ever cursed a Ross rifle or berated Sam Hughes for his dry canteen system at Valcartier Camp. But that is a common name and as good as any, and Bill was just one of the common crowd, and as good a soldier as any. Of course, his regimental crime sheet read like a page from the Arabian Nights, but all the entries, it could be noted, were made while his division was floundering on the morass of Salsbury Plains. His restless nature and dislike of discipline got him into trouble frequently, and if he did at times take a dislike to the physiognomy of his sergeant and proceed to paint it in various hues, and if he more than once went off on a little vacation to escape from the misery of camp life, there was nothing vicious about him. But when his division went to France, Bill was as steady and dependable as the rock of Gibraltar. He came through the bell of the second battle of Ypres unscathed, one of the few who survived that glorious but ghastly episode. Festu- bert and Givenchy found him in the thick of the fight. He wintered at Flogstret with the division, went back into the salient, and at the bloody encounter at Sanctuary Wood he did his share. Bill was still at his post when the regiment went to the somme. His restlessness had caused his superiors many an anxious moment, for his pet diversion was to crawl around no-man's land on his

own in a search for stray Huns. He found a few, too. Twice he had brought in prisoners single-handed. Once he came back with his entrenching tool handle dripping blood and with a few hairs sticking to it, but no one has yet been able to find out what happened on that particular night.

### Bill's First Wound.

It was at the Somme that he received his first wound and went back to Blighty. He had been one of a party detailed to clear out an enemy bombing post, and before the job was completed, he had collected a few pieces of shrapnel in various parts of his anatomy, including one in the fleshy part of his leg which left a gaping hole. A few days in hospital in Boulogne followed, and then Bill was sent to Blighty, to find himself a day later lying in a comfortable bed in a hospital away up in the north of Scotland. Bill's hardy constitution stood him in good stead, and in a very short time he was able to wheel himself around in an invalid chair. His chief delight was to attend the concerts which were given two or three times every week by parties of entertainers from the neighboring city. He had a real love for music, although his hard and tempestuous life previous to the war had somewhat deadened it. It quickly revived, however, as he listened time and again to old Scotch ballads and melodies rendered by those who came to the hospital to play and sing for those wounded, shut-in soldiers.

It was while attending one of these concerts that he met "Meg" Davidson, and from the time of that meeting Bill was a changed man. "Meg" was employed as one of an army of maids in one of the big houses in the city. Her life there was not easy, but she was light-hearted, with a sunny nature, and life passed pleasantly enough for her. She had an intense sympathy for those in suffering, and her whole heart went out in pity for the boys who had been wounded and were in the hospital near where she lived. She had one great gift, inherited from a father who was more fond of his music than he was of earning money. She could play the violin in a way of her own that brought out the whole soul of the music she played. Her style may have shocked a music professor, for she was self-taught, but by steady practice she had almost perfected her art, so that she could make her music sing and talk. She had visions of a musical career, but she knew that would require money for training, so she worked hard and spent little. Her greatest piece of good fortune was when her mistress gave her permission to practice in her own room. Night after night, as soon as

she was free from duty, she crept to her room, took the precious violin, her sole legacy from her father, out of its case, and played until her fingers were numb, no longer follow the music.

To the boys in the hospital there was something about her playing that held them spell bound. Every time she appeared a great hush fell upon them, to be broken only by the deafening applause when she had finished. It was about three weeks after Bill arrived at the hospital that a party from the church of which Meg was a member went there to entertain the boys. Meg was in her most happy mood, and her whole heart was aflame with the beauty of the music as she drew her bow across the violin strings. Bill listened for a moment, drinking in the melody; then something seemed to snap in his brain. He was no longer in the hospital, surrounded by sick and suffering comrades. He was away back in his boyhood home in old Ontario, rambling through the woods with his Alredale at his heels.

### The Spell of Music.

The little creek was bubbling and singing as it ran through the wood, the cardinal was whistling its love-song, and the blue-bird piping cheerily. The robins were warbling, and away back near the farmhouse several orioles were talking and chirping at once. The crows were cawing in the trees as he stole through the underbrush and reached the old swimming hole. He was no longer Bill Smith, the steadiest soldier in his company, but he was just "little Billy," carried back to the old farm in the backwoods, a wild, restless, lad with a longing for the freedom and wildness of nature.

Suddenly the music stopped, and Bill came back to reality to see Meg smiling and bowing to the clamorous audience of boys in hospital blue. Half standing in his invalid chair, in spite of the pain of his wounds, he stretched out his hands and pleaded, "More, for the love of heaven, more."

But Meg had finished her playing. The strain had been great and the spell was broken, but from that moment there seemed to Bill to be a new world. The girl had noticed his tense face and his pathetic appeal, and she came and sat down beside him.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "but I couldn't play another note. It was too much for me to think of all you boys had suffered." And her voice was to Bill just as soft and sweet as the singing he had heard in the woods of his fancy.

"That's all right, Madam," he replied, "but that music took me back to my old home in Ontario, and I didn't want to wake up again from my dream."

It was only natural then that he should tell her all about that old Ontario home, and of his life there. To the girl there was something so big and comforting about the way the man talked that made her want to listen for ever, and as he went on to tell of the comrades he had lost and of the brave men who were still fighting over there, her heart filled with a feeling of sympathetic friendship for the wounded soldier. Bill lay

back in his chair and watched her closely as speaking softly and slowly, she told him of her brother who now lay "over there," of her old mother in a lone shieling out on the hillsides, and of her own life and struggles. He could hardly believe that she had suffered so, for to him she was as a magic fairy, and her violin was the wand by which she had carried him back to the happy days before he had been left as an orphan to fight for himself in a land where friends were to him, few and far between.

Their friendship developed rapidly. Meg's leisure moments were spent more and more by his side, and even the violin was neglected. At last, in the spring, Bill was able to walk around, and together they walked by the side of the lake or sat hours by the seashore and listened to the waves lapping on the beach. Their weekly afternoons together when Meg was free were the biggest incidents in Bill's life, and he lived for nothing else.

But finally Bill became well again. He spent a few days in a convalescent home near by, and then orders came that he was to return to his training depot in the south of England. The evening before his departure he walked with Meg along the seashore until they came to their favorite spot on the sands. Then they sat down, but words did not come easily. Each was thinking of the parting on the morrow, so they sat in the silence which comes to lovers at such moments. But when hearts are young and love is new, hopes are high, so he placed the seal of his love on her finger, and went south the next day with an understanding that they were to be married as soon as he could get leave to come north again.

Leave came sooner than expected, and with a significance which had never entered the minds of the two lovers. Men were scarce on the firing line. Bill's old battalion had been sadly depleted in the battle of Vimy and the struggles which succeeded, and in a few days time Bill was warned that he would have to prepare for another spell in the trenches. He was granted six days leave. A heavy letter was despatched to Meg, who read it with joy and yet with trembling. Three days later they were married in a little church on the Scottish hillside near where Meg's mother lived alone.

Bill's six days' leave spell past, days full of a new found happiness. A poignant farewell to his bride, a last kiss, and back he went to his depot. Three days later he crossed to France, his heart heavy, but filled with hope of the new life that lay ahead of him when he returned to his beloved Canada when the war had been won.

His comrades welcomed him back to their ranks with open arms, although few of the old crowd remained. Many had found graves in the cemetery at Levin and on the slopes of Hill Seventy. Then came the slaughter, mud and water of Passchendaele, and Bill again played his part nobly. Time and time again he took part in hand-to-hand tussles with the enemy, and his spirit was dauntless. His crowning effort came when he discovered an officer of an-

other battalion, wounded and in full view of the enemy, and brought him back to a dressing station. He was awarded the military medal and recommended for promotion, but his promotion never came, for he was seriously wounded and once more went to Blighty.

He lay in the hospital for months, with his bride ever near him. But his great constitution again served its useful purpose, so that, a few weeks after the armistice was signed, he was discharged from hospital and sent to Kimmel Camp to wait for transportation to Canada. The events of the winter can be passed over, but Bill through them all lived like a new man. His wife Meg secured rooms near the camp, and many were the happy evenings they spent together in the pretty Welsh hills.

Late in the spring his turn came to go, and Bill, with his Scottish bride by his side, smiled westward to their new home in the west.

### Chap. II.—Home Again.

Meg was a happy girl when she arrived in her new Canadian home. The country delighted her. The summer glory of the parks and the lake near the city filled her heart with pleasure, and once again her violin sang as it did of yore. Bill had quickly been discharged from the army, classified as perfectly fit, and with the back pay which had accumulated to his credit he furnished a little home close to the suburban district of the city. For a time all went well. Bill secured a position which promised to bring him a good weekly wage, for with his payments of war service gratuity coming in regularly for the first six months, their home gradually became a place of beauty and comfort.

Their first winter in their new home came, and then the fate which had dogged the footsteps of Bill before he went to war again came to threaten him. The first stroke of bad luck came when the company with which he was working failed and went out of business in the middle of the winter. Bill was thrown out of his job, and the first little rifts in the lute occurred. Day after day he went out in search of employment, to return with always the same tale of disappointment and bad luck. His enforced idleness and the knowledge that he was not earning any money told on his nerves, and in spite of the loving care and encouragement of his devoted Meg, he gradually drifted back towards his old habits of driving always in his own way.

At times Meg would woo him back from a fit of despondency and ill-temper by playing her violin to him, but gradually his daily contact with the rough spots of humanity in his search for work ate its way into Bill's heart, until he was the old bellicose Bill, ready to pick a quarrel with anyone who dared oppose his will.

Work was farther off than ever when the spring came. Bill secured several positions, but they did not last for long. A quarrel with his foreman, a fit of restlessness which would make him go off for a long tramp into the country, a fight with some of the other men on the job; these helped to make him join time and again the ranks of the unemployed. Gradually Meg's little store of

money dwindled. Bill was earning perhaps one week's wages in every six, and although he returned home each night to spend the evening in reproaches to himself, things did not improve.

### Fate Against Bill.

Poor Meg became almost desperate when she realized that there would soon be another for which to provide, and she urged Bill by every means in her power to make a real effort to break his unruly temper and to settle down to work as he had done during that first summer of their life together in their new home. But as things grew worse, Bill became more unmanageable. Little by little Meg was forced to sell various articles of furniture to supply the daily bread for the house. Then they had to move to another and less attractive part of the city, where they had a small house which was but a shadow of the home to which Bill had brought her when they settled down after his discharge.

Fall came, and with it the period of depression. Bill had done very little work all summer. There was no reserve in the bank, the future looked black, and there was the coming third member of the family to think of. Bill began to get desperate. At last he awoke to a realization of the responsibilities which were upon him, and he earnestly and ceaselessly sought a job. But the result was the same everywhere. Business conditions were bad. Men were being paid off everywhere. There was talk of bread lines and hard times. Their home gradually became denuded of its furnishings, and Meg struggled along, fighting bravely to keep her spirits up for the sake of what was coming, but often weak and discouraged by the thought of the long winter ahead.

Thus it was that, on this Christmas evening, Bill was well-nigh desperate as he trudged the streets in search of anything that might promise employment or some financial reward. His steps led into the wealthier section of the city. He walked along the residential streets, where each house was brightly lit. Through the window screens he could see men, women and children at their games, enjoying to the full the good things of the Christmas season. As he thought of the empty larder at home, and the purse which contained not even a solitary ten cent piece, his soul rose in rebellion. Why should he, who had fought to protect these very homes, have to suffer? Why should his wife, waiting at home in want and pain, have to go without food and clothing while these people had more than they would ever require.

In these few moments Bill came nearer to being a Bolshevik than he had ever been. He began to see red, and a plan formed itself in his mind. These people were having their Christmas dinners while his wife had nothing at all. Their pantries were filled with good things, while his own was empty. Gradually his plan took shape. Chasing away the murmurings of conscience, Bill stole around to the rear of one of the houses in which the front rooms were filled with a happy, laughing party. Surely there would be something in the shape of provisions in the kitchen,

was the thought in his mind as he stealthily climbed the steps leading to the rear entrance. The kitchen was lit, and through the window he saw on the table an array of good things, all ready to be taken to the people who were revelling in their enjoyments in the front of the house. His hunger drove him on. The thought of Meg at home drove the last shred of conscience out of his mind, and he opened the kitchen door.

### Chap. III.—Santa Claus.

With his ears cocked and his eyes glancing furtively around, Bill crept inside. The table was but a few feet away, and on it lay such a display of the things of good cheer of the Christmas season. Three steps more, and that huge goose would be his, and that pudding. That would be enough. One step he took, then another, and then a cheery burst of laughter came from the door at the other end of the kitchen, and a man burst into the room. He was a young man, bright with the exertion of the evening, but Bill noticed at once an empty coat sleeve which hung loosely at his side, and the button which he wore in the lapel of his coat.

The young man rushed forward, and with his one arm seized Bill by the shoulder. Bill turned as if to resist him, but the young fellow shouted,

"By Jove, I thought you were never coming. The kids have been howling for an hour for Santa Claus, and here you have just arrived. Come on upstairs and get dressed up and let's get the fun started."

He dragged Bill up the back stairs to a bedroom on the floor above. Bill followed in a daze. What did it all mean? Who did the fellow think he was? He realized that he was expected to act the part of Santa Claus, and that was all. Bill's mind worked quickly, with all the craftiness which had filled it when he faced the Huns in no-man's land, and he made up his mind at once that he would carry on. He would act the part of Santa Claus. It would be time for explanations when the man whose place he was filling arrived on the scene, or after the party was over. Then perhaps he might be allowed to take home some of the good things for Meg. How fortunate he had been in falling into the hands of this young man who seemed to take it for granted that he was the right Santa Claus.

In a moment he was left alone in the room, with a Santa Claus outfit laid out all ready for him. Mechanically he put it on, and had just adjusted his beard when a knock came at the door. The same young man opened it and entered.

"Fine," he said, when he saw Bill. "The children will go crazy with delight. Come along this way, and we will let you in by the window." Again Bill followed, and went to the splendid front of the mansion. A window opened, and he stepped in.

### The Christmas Tree.

His breath almost choked him as he looked round on the splendour of the scene. In one corner of the splendid room was the largest Christmas tree he had ever seen. It was laden with candies, streamers of red, green

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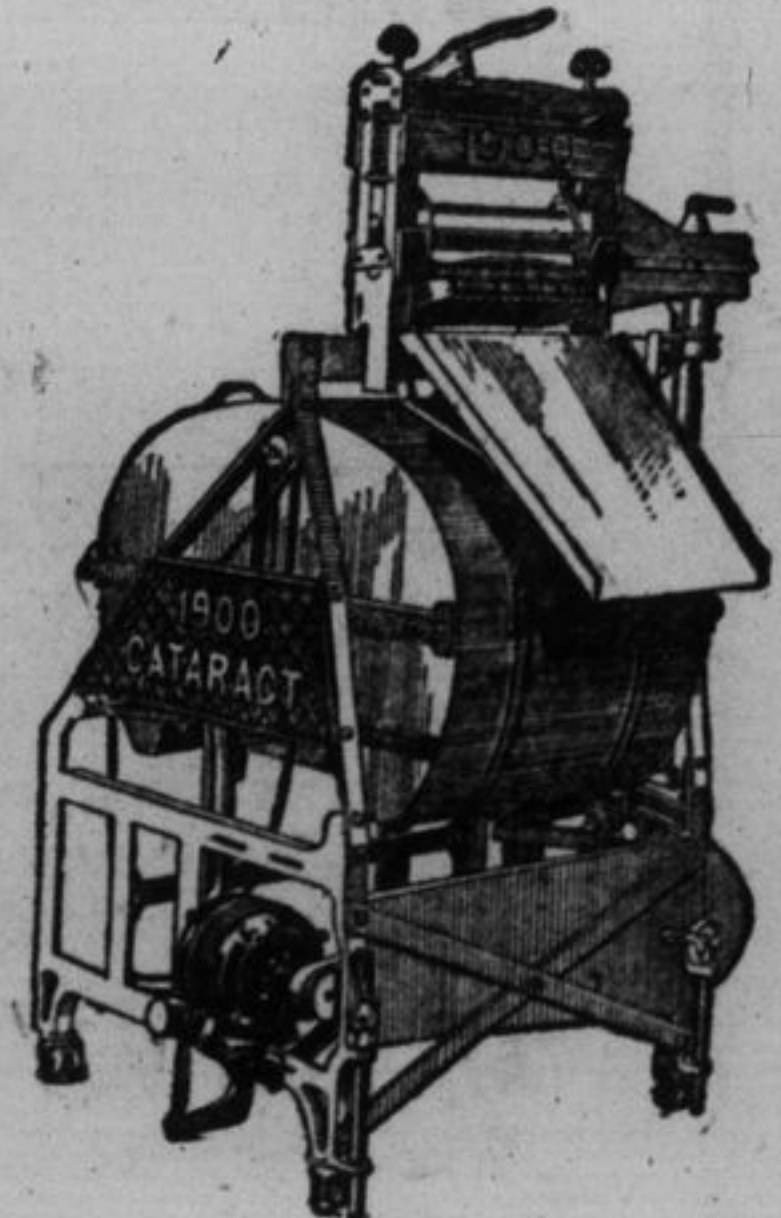
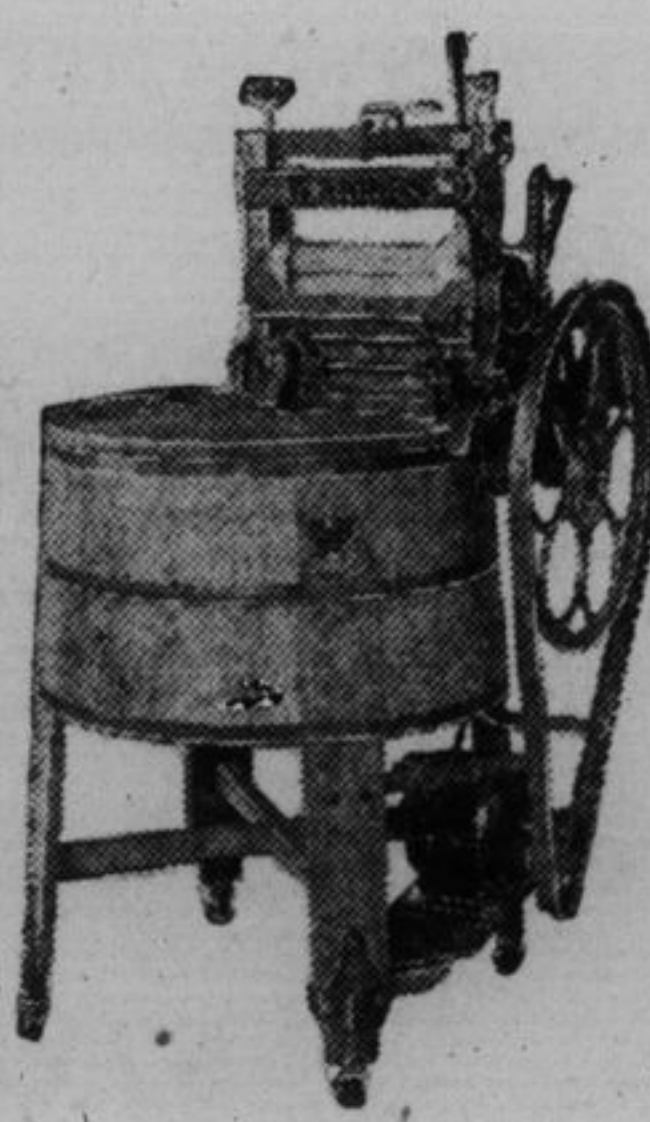
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