THE MANY WORLDS OF BILL HOLDEN

By PEER J. OPPENHEIMER

He's been called "Golden Boy," after the title of his first picture which catapulted him to stardom, and because he seems to have everything a man can ask for—success, wealth, recognition, a happy family.

He's been called a solid citizen and a playboy, a liberal and a conservative. He's been described as a hypochondriac, a restless, disillusioned man running away from himself and his family because he no longer has an aim in life.

He's been referred to as a lonely man with a mania for self-destruction that led him to drinking and taking unnecessary chances. He has been described as fascinatingly interesting, and exceedingly dull.

In fact, William Holden has been called just about everything—except easy to understand.

Although he's one of the top box-office stars, little has been written about him in the past four years because he's been constantly on the move.

It took me two years to find out about this paradoxical mystery man and begin to understand what makes him behave the way he does. I had to travel to all corners of the world. I talked to his Hong Kong tailor, his coworkers in Hollywood, his Swiss banking partner, Carl Hirschmann, and his old friend and business partner, Texas oil-millionaire Ray Ryan.

I accompanied Bill on a transatlantic flight from Paris to New York, and finally spent a week with him and his wife Ardis (whose screen name was Brenda Marshall) in London, where he was shooting scenes for "The World of Suzie Wong."

I saw him tipsy and sober, gay and depressed, elated and worried. And I got to know him.

In a way, our first lengthy get-together proved to be one of the most informative.

When I joined Bill at Orly Field, Paris, for a transatlantic flight to New York two years ago, I knew him only slightly. There were four of us in the first-class section of the plane—Bill, a public-relations executive, an attorney, and myself.

Getting to Know Him

It was Bill who broke the ice. He was charming, cheerful, and talkative. We discussed everything from hunting lions in Africa to the political situation in various countries.

It was apparent that Bill was vitally interested and fully informed about our foreign relations. While his knowledge was extensive, he rejected then—and still does—any thought of getting into politics himself. "I'm qualified for only one type of work—acting," he told me. "I don't even have the desire to get into such related fields as directing or producing." In his opinion, the best argument for this was a fiasco called "Toward the Unknown," a picture he produced independently for Warner Brothers—and his only one in recent years that lost money.

Holden's talkativeness on that plane was stimulated by Scotch on the rocks, a frequent and heavy indulgence in those days. When he climbed out of his berth the next morning, he could barely steady his hands until he poured down another drink from a plastic container wedged in between bottles of shaving lotion and hair tonic in his travel kit.

"Don't you ever get that stuff mixed up?" I asked him.

His face drew into contortions. "I did once. What an experience!"

A severe case of hepatitis, a liver ailment, ended Bill's heavy drinking. Today he drinks rarely, but that still leaves the question—what drove him to the bottle before?

For one thing, Bill was fighting Paramount to get out of a contract which made a small fortune for the studio but little for him.

He also was torn physically by a love of traveling and the tremendous strain which globe-hopping puts on a man. It kept getting worse. "It used to take me a day to get adjusted after I flew from the United States to Europe," he told me. "Now it takes me a week to get back on my feet."

Flying made him tense—and a couple of drinks helped him relax. And Bill never had an easy time relaxing under the best of circumstances.

Take the night we had dinner together in London and got back to our hotel too early to turn in. Bill asked our whole party to join him in his suite. We listened to jazz music, danced the cha-cha-cha, heard Bill mimic the sounds of lions, zebras, monkeys, and elephants, and play "bones" on a pair of broken hangers.

In fact, Bill was a one-man entertainment committee. He worked harder that night having a "good time" than he had in front of the cameras all week long—and he is considered one of the most conscientious actors in the business!