

THE MANY WORLDS OF BILL HOLDEN

(Continued)

"Stalag 17," no Oscar in '53. No big star."

Success followed success now, and Bill should have been happy and contented. Unfortunately, it wasn't in his nature.

Painter Paul Clemens, one of Bill's few close friends, explains, "He makes much of being poised and calm when he meets you, but he's a worrier when you get to know him. If he has no worries, he creates them. And because he has no enemies I know of, he has to make up one—himself."

The Prankster

Bill's animosity toward himself at times seems like a self-destruction tendency and dates back to his boyhood.

Bill Holden was born William Franklyn Beedle on April 17, 1918, in O'Fallon, Ill., about 20 miles east of St. Louis. His father was a chemist and his mother a schoolteacher. Bill was only four when they moved to Pasadena, where he grew up in middle-class respectability.

Bill was a good kid but a prankster. One night he threw a straw man onto the highway in front of a passing car. It happened to be a police car, so for the next six weeks Bill spent his spare time at the station house, memorizing traffic regulations.

Before long, his escapades became more hazardous. For instance, in Pasadena there is a span known locally as "Suicide Bridge" because so many people have leaped to their death from it. Today it is guarded by a high fence, but as a boy Bill walked the railing 200 feet high—on his hands!

Later, he became one of the few actors who did their own stunts, no matter what the danger. And often he took chances when it wasn't necessary at all, just for the heck of it.

An example occurred at a preproduction conference in New York with Joshua Logan, who was about to direct him in "Picnic." Logan is terrified of heights, so prankster Bill calmly climbed out a window and hung by one arm 10 stories over the street. Logan nearly fainted.

Accidents do Happen

Paradoxically, while he keeps taking unreasonable chances, he's also convinced that he's an inevitable victim of every mishap.

Not long ago an airline hostess walked down a plane aisle toward Bill, carrying hot



Bill and his wife of 20 years, former actress Brenda Marshall, have two sons, Scott, now 13, and Wes, 16, shown here some five years ago.

coffee. Bill turned to the person next to him and said, "When she reaches me, I'll bet I get that coffee in my lap." He did.

And a few months ago, he went big-game hunting in Kenya with his partner Carl Hirschmann. They used a car specially built for cross-country hunting. The one animal they weren't allowed to shoot, because they had no license, was a rhinoceros. About noon, they spotted a 4,000-pound rhino studying them belligerently.

"I bet he's going to charge us," Bill said uneasily.

Both Bill and Carl knew what might happen to their aluminum-protected car if hit by the two-ton hulk. But Carl was more optimistic. "Why should he?"

"Because I'm here."

Sure enough, the rhino turned and charged the car.

The bumpy terrain made it hard to gather speed, and the galloping rhino caught up with them. Its horn was just threatening to butt and overturn the car when a free stretch of road enabled them to speed away!

A Touch of Hypochondria?

While Bill believes the worst is bound to happen to him, he emphatically denies being a hypochondriac, as frequently reported and seemingly supported by the number of vitamin pills he takes.

There's one Holden story which deals with an earthquake that set the windows of his house rattling. Feeling the tremor, he clutched his heart and cried, "I'm having a heart attack!"

Says Bill, "Makes a good conversation piece, but it's exaggerated. I'm no hypochondriac. Sure I've taken vitamins. Lots of them. And I still do because I'm curious. If vitamin pills promise to make me feel better, I try them—just as I've tried monkey brains, octopus, birds' nests, and other things that promised to be tasty, even if they weren't. But how would I find out unless I tried? I'm just a curious character!"

("A curious character"—an apt description of William Holden! Curious, too, are his marriage, finances, and recent move from California to Switzerland—curious but understandable after you read next week's concluding installment of this revealing portrait of a complex man.)



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