

THE GUARDIAN SHORT STORY

Blind as a Bat

By Martha McCulloch-Williams

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Bastbrook opened his eyes very wide and caught his breath over the Taunton girl when she swept through it riding cross saddle. To be sure, the town had been reading this long time about the divided skirt, but then the town was also not exactly sure in its mind that riding its streets even upon a proper sidesaddle was not rather bold.

Of course in the country it was different. The very best young women rode there. Moreover, it had come to be a sort of proverb among the plantation folk that the hardest and most reckless riders were town girl visitors. Very few of them had any mercy upon the beasts luckless enough to carry them—this not because they were hard-hearted, but from sheer ignorance and the pure animal delight of finding themselves unfettered for a time. They trotted not a little, these town bred riders, when the country folk checked speed at hills or insisted that a horse should have a chance to blow a bit after a hard gallop.

Possibly envy, the least touch, gave edge to their disapproval of Edith Taunton. Edith had a fortune and three fine saddle horses. As if that were not enough, Billy Drayton fell into a way of sharing her early gallops. Until she came back to the old homestead Billy had not seen a sunnier once a year. It was provokingly significant, this change in him. He had been the despair of the town matchmakers. He was a governor's grandson, rich, good looking, good humored. Further, he was a squire of dames so nobly impartial nobody ever yet had been able to establish a claim to him. The people he regarded most and was readiest to serve were meek old ladies who had known his mother and very little girls.

Edith was, he insisted, only a big little girl, very fine and torn in her big empty house. What he did not say was that he thought her coming back to it something so fine and brave he was bent on helping her fight down the loneliness and make her own social place. This in the beginning—until the town gossip took to crawling the neck, shaking the head and drawing aside the best bits when the girl came among them. Billy saw the head shaking, the drawing back, a long time before she did. She was open and unsuspecting as daylight and had no thought of treading on the corns of town propriety in anything she did. But, being also full of quick intuitions, after awhile she understood.

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And then—then only she really did not set out to horrify the good gentleman. She drove tandem through the middle of the square, sitting up very straight, looking neither to right nor left, but pulling up at the corner by the bank to pick up Billy and take him away with her. Next week it was a card party—wholly masculine in composition, except for Edith herself and the colorless cousin who served as her companion. There were wine and cigars and a supper afterward—a very late supper.

The town thrilled with the horror of it. But not as it did a little later, when everybody knew that thereafter, upon Sunday evenings, Edith meant to be at home to her friends.

If Billy had known in time that never would have come to pass. But he had gone away for a fortnight right after the night at cards, first making Edith promise to have no more such assemblies until he was there to give her countenance and protection.

When he came back and found the mischief done, he was in a sad taking. "I see just one way out of it—you have got to marry me, else you won't have a rag of reputation left," he said, pretending to shake her hard.

Edith made a mutinous mouth at him. "Suppose we try some other sacrificial lamb. Aren't you most too old and tough?" she asked, her eyes dancing wickedly.

Billy grinned cheerfully. "You can have carloads of 'em for the taking, nice white baa lambs, but I don't believe they'd be the least effectual," he said. "You see, what you need, really, is not a sacrifice, but a scapegoat. I'm strong enough to have your sins confessed over my head and thenceforth imputed to me."

"But scapegoats have to be sent away, out into the wilderness. I learned that much at Sunday school, and I can't have you go away," Edith protested. "Besides, I am not doing anything horrid. I shall go to church on the mornings just the same. As for the evenings, you know yourself other girls go to church then, mainly to have somebody see them home and stay all hours afterward making love to them. I really feel like a missionary—the boys can come here and rest or talk or do anything they please. As it is now, they have no choice at all—they must either mope at home or go out and court somebody—and that must be dreadfully wearing."

"It is," Billy said fervently, his eyes reminiscent. "But, my dear girl, you had better give it up. Get a telegram calling you away. I'll send it if your conscience is against fibbing."

"My conscience is not against anything necessary, and you know fibs are necessary," Edith interrupted. "But I have much more conscience against backing out of anything just because I'm afraid of some old tabby cats and young ones."

"Tabby cats have claws," Billy said oracularly. Edith looked at him doubtfully a minute. "I know. They're even to scratch you," she said. And then quickly, her eyes flaming, "They actually came here, three of them, to tell me about your past."

"They did?" Billy's voice was deadly quiet. "And you?"

"I said it did not interest me to know about it; all I was concerned with was your future," Edith answered, her voice trembling a little, although her eyes were brave.

Billy got up and stretched himself. "That settles it," he said. "Name the day, right off, so I can go order wedding cards."

Edith did name the day, but not until she had stood out against him a week. She might not have given in even then but for the ordeal at church. Not only was she cut right and left—the minister preached at her—not by name, of course, but in a fashion more than unmistakable.

Billy was there, across the aisle, gum and furious. After service he half led her out, and walked away with her, his head high. But even that did not hurt like the furtive yet swaggering airs of the three men who called in the evening. There was further something of patronage about them.

Altogether they made Edith hate them, but not as she hated herself. She was full of quick kindness and had not meant hurt or affront to anybody—at least not in the beginning. Dully she wondered why her townfolk would not understand she had come back to them because her interest lay among them and had been eager to help in all good works if only she had been permitted.

But she held up her head and laughed and jested till the latest of her callers took himself away. Then silently she held out her hand to Billy. He understood and announced an early wedding day.

It was a church wedding, with the house jammed to the last inch. After it the newly married settled back into their old ways, going a pace that kept them the talk of the town.

They were very gay and desperately unhappy. Edith could not get away from a sense that Billy had married her wholly out of charity. Billy? Billy was old enough to know better, but he was proving the adage that love, which may make a fool a wise man, may likewise make a wise man a fool. He tormented himself with the thought that he had taken advantage of Edith's extremity. She must know he had loved her from their very first meeting, but she was shy and proud and high with him, notwithstanding she was his dutiful wife.

He left her much to herself and took pains to make her know that she was as free as ever. Edith resented this freedom. Billy ought to understand that she wanted to obey him—make him at least that poor recompense for his services.

Thus they ate out their hearts in cross purposes, cross miscomprehensions, until Ashbel Clara came to visit them. Ashbel was reputed a dangerous person—tall and slight and handsome, with deep seeling eyes. A glamour of romance hung about him. After the first day Billy wondered, with catching breath, if he had been quite wise to fling a man like Ashbel across Edith's path.

She was clearly fascinated by him. They were forever walking about the strip, scrubby garden or along the strip of lawn in full sight of passersby and all the while absorbed in talk. Edith was brighter, too—quite her old, winsome self. Ashbel seemed equally captivated. He roused himself as Billy had not seen him since they were lads together.

So the days went by, mounting into weeks, at last into a month, and Billy was in torment. He had made a grim and mannerly third for the most part of the time. Still he was sure the two had some secret understanding. He had made up his mind to endure to the end. There was no danger of dishonor. Dishonor and Edith could not come together in his mind. But when he was quite sure—if he were quite sure—he would end a way out of it. His father had died a wealthy man. There were ways of setting yourself without making a scandal. He would make an end of himself gladly if only that way lay Edith's happiness.

"Read that! You see I've some decent instincts if I am half a savage." "I see. Everything, great or small, to your wife," Ashbel said, then, with a whimsical, half dreamy smile. "Do you know that she's the most fascinating creature alive?"

"Just what she says of you!" Billy growled, signing his name with a blurred flourish.

Ashbel bent over him, laughing softly. "The perception does credit to her mind," he said. "As for her heart, Billy, you brute, that knows no better than to belong to you wholly, and you won't see it, you blind, blind bat!"

A soft, stifled sob, the patter of swift, light feet, sounded at the door. Billy followed them, caught his wife in his arms and said, with his lips on her forehead: "Darling! Darling! If you really do love me!"

"Hush!" Edith said, with her hand over his lips. "You were a blind bat. Even jealousy could not make you see."

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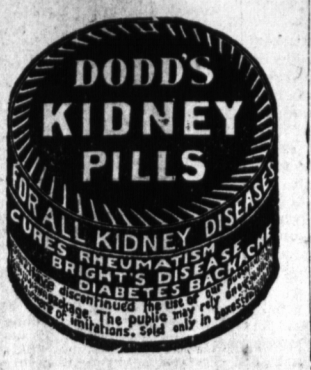
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