opening extract from

Bill's New Frock

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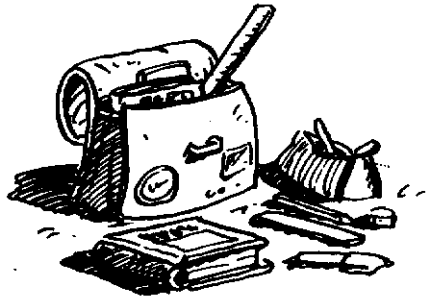
Egmont

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A really awful start



When Bill Simpson woke up on Monday morning, he found he was a girl.

He was still standing staring at himself in the mirror, quite baffled, when his mother swept in.

'Why don't you wear this pretty pink dress?' she said.

'I *never* wear dresses,' Bill burst out.

'I know,' his mother said. 'It's such a pity.'



And, to his astonishment, before he could even begin to argue, she had dropped the dress over his head and zipped up the back.

'I'll leave you to do up the shell buttons,' she said. 'They're a bit fiddly and I'm late for work.'

And she swept out, leaving him staring in dismay at the mirror. In it, a girl with his curly red hair and wearing a pretty pink frock with fiddly shell buttons was staring back at him in equal dismay.

'This can't be true,' Bill Simpson said to himself. 'This cannot be true!'

He stepped out of his bedroom just as his father was rushing past. He, too, was late in getting off to work.

Mr Simpson leaned over and planted a kiss on Bill's cheek.

'Bye, Poppet,' he said, ruffling Bill's curls. 'You look very sweet today. It's not

often we see you in a frock, is it?'

He ran down the stairs and out of the house so quickly he didn't see Bill's scowl, or hear what he muttered savagely under his breath.

Bella the cat didn't seem to notice any difference. She purred and rubbed her soft furry body around his ankles in exactly the same way as she always did.

And Bill found himself spooning up his cornflakes as usual. It was as if he couldn't help it. He left the house at the usual time, too. He didn't seem to have any choice. Things, though odd, were just going on in their own way, as in a dream.

Or it could be a nightmare! For hanging about on the corner was the gang of boys from the other school. Bill recognised the one they called Mean Malcolm in his purple studded jacket.

I think I'll go round the long way

instead, Bill thought to himself. I don't want to be tripped up in one of their nasty scuffles, like last week, when all the scabs were kicked off my ankle.

Then Bill heard the most piercing whistle. He looked around to see where the noise was coming from, then realised Mean Malcolm was whistling at him!

Bill Simpson blushed so pink that all his freckles disappeared. He felt so foolish he forgot to turn off at the next corner to go round the long way. He ended up walking right past the gang.

Mean Malcolm just sprawled against the railings, whistling at Bill as he went by wearing his pretty pink frock with shell buttons.

Bill Simpson thought to himself: I'd rather have the scabs kicked off my ankle!

When he reached the main road, there was an elderly woman with curly grey hair

already standing at the kerb. To feel safe from the gang, he stood at her side.

'Give me your hand, little girl,' she said. 'I'll see us both safely across the road.'

'No, really,' insisted Bill. 'I'm fine, honestly. I cross here every day by myself.'

The woman simply didn't listen. She just reached down and grasped his wrist, hauling him after her across the road.

On the far side, she looked down approvingly as she released him.

'That's such a pretty frock!' she said. 'You mind you keep it nice and clean.'

Rather than say something disagreeable, Bill ran off quickly.

The headteacher was standing at the school gates, holding his watch in the palm of his hand, watching the last few stragglers arrive.

'Get your skates on, Stephen Irwin!' he yelled. And: '*Move*, Tom Warren!'

Another boy charged round the corner and cut in front of Bill.

'Late, Andrew!' the headteacher called out fiercely. 'Late, late, late!'

Then it was Bill's turn to go past.

'That's right,' the headteacher called out encouragingly. 'Hurry along, dear. We don't want to miss assembly, do we?'

And he followed Bill up the path to the school.

Assembly always took place in the main hall. After the hymn, everyone was told to sit on the floor, as usual. Desperately, Bill tried to tuck the pretty pink dress in tightly around his bare legs.

Mrs Collins leaned forward on her canvas chair.

'Stop fidgeting with your frock, dear,' she told him. 'You're getting nasty grubby fingerprints all round the hem.'

Bill glowered all through the rest of

assembly. At the end, everybody stood up as usual.

'Now I need four strong volunteers to carry a table across to the nursery,' announced the headteacher. 'Who wants to go?'

Practically everybody in the hall raised a hand. Everyone liked a trip over the playground. In the nursery they had music and water and sloshy paints and tricycles and bright plastic building blocks. And if you kept your head down and didn't talk too much or too loudly, it might be a good few minutes before anyone realised you were really from one of the other classrooms, and shooed you back.

So the hall was a mass of waving hands.

The headteacher gazed around him.

Then he picked four boys.

On the way out of the hall, Bill Simpson heard Astrid complaining to Mrs Collins:

'It isn't fair! He *always* picks the boys to carry things.'

'Perhaps the table's quite heavy,' soothed Mrs Collins.

'None of the tables in this school are heavy,' said Astrid. 'And I know for a fact that I am stronger than at least two of the boys he picked.'

'It's true,' Bill said. 'Whenever we have a tug of war, everyone wants to have Astrid on their team.'

'Oh, well,' said Mrs Collins. 'It doesn't matter. No need to make such a fuss over nothing. It's only a silly old table.'

And when Astrid and Bill took up arguing again, she told them the subject was closed, rather sharply.

Back in the classroom, everyone settled down at their tables.

'We'll do our writing first, shall we?' said Mrs Collins. 'And after that, we'll

reward ourselves with a story.'

While Mrs Collins handed out the writing books and everyone scrabbled for pencils and rubbers, Bill looked round his table.

He was the only one in a dress.

Flora was wearing trousers and a blue blouse. Kirsty and Nick were both wearing jeans and a shirt. Philip was wearing corduroy slacks and a red jumper, and Talilah wore a bright red satin salwar kameez.

Yes, there was no doubt about it. Talilah looked snazzy enough to go dancing, but Bill was the only one in a frock.

Oh, this was awful! What on earth had happened? Why didn't anybody seem to have noticed? What could he do? When would it end?

Bill Simpson put his head in his hands

and covered his eyes.

'On with your work down there on table five,' warned Mrs Collins promptly.

She meant him. He knew it. So Bill picked up his pen and opened his books. He couldn't help it. He didn't seem to have any choice. Things were still going on in their own way, as in a dream.

He wrote more than he usually did. He wrote it more neatly than usual, too. If you looked back through the last few pages of his work book, you'd see he'd done a really good job, for him.

But you wouldn't have thought so, the way Mrs Collins went on when she saw it.

'Look at this,' she scolded, stabbing her finger down on the page. 'This isn't very neat, is it? Look at this dirty smudge. And the edge of your book looks as if it's been *chewed*!'



She turned to Philip to inspect his book next. It was far messier than Bill's. It was more smudgy and more chewed-looking. The writing was untidy and irregular. Some of the letters were so enormous they looked like giants herding the smaller letters haphazardly across the page.

'Not bad at all, Philip,' she said. 'Keep up the good work.'

Bill could scarcely believe his ears. He was outraged. As soon as she'd moved off, he reached out for Philip's book, laid it beside his own on the table, and compared the two.

'It isn't fair!' he complained bitterly. 'Your page is *much* worse than my page. She didn't say anything nice to *me*.'

Philip just shrugged and said:

'Well, girls are neater.'

Bill felt so cross he had to sit on his hands to stop himself from thumping Philip.