

SWATTY STORIES AND OTHERS

By Ellis Parker Butler.

The "Divorce"

WELL, I guess grown folks don't care whether they have a divorce or not, because they are always getting them and so maybe they get used to having them and don't think much about it and are not ashamed to have them, but I guess a kid is always kind of ashamed when his folks get them. We never had one in our family, but we had babies and I guess a kid feels about the same way when there is a divorce in his family as he does when there is a baby. It makes him feel pretty sick and ashamed and miserable.

I guess that's the way it is when you have a divorce at your house. It ain't your fault but you feel like it was and you don't have any of the fun of fighting and getting the divorce, like your folks do; you just have the feel-miserable part.

So this day me and Swatty and Bony went up to Bony's room in Bony's house. It was muddy weather in the spring, and I guess we had been wading in the mud or something, so we knew Bony's mother wouldn't let us go upstairs to his room unless we washed our feet first, unless we sneaked it. So we sneaked it.

The reason we went up was so Bony could prove it that the Victor bicycle his father was buying for him weighed only forty-five pounds. He had a catalogue to prove it with, but it was up in his room, so we went up to get it. It proved it, all right. Swatty said that was pretty light for a bicycle to weigh, and I said it, too. So then we said a lot of more things about a lot of other things, but mostly we talked about the bicycle, because Bony was going to let me and Swatty learn to ride on it when he got it. Swatty bet he could get right on it and ride right off as slick as a whistle because he had an uncle in Derlingport that had a dozen bicycles. So then Bony said he'd like to know why, if Swatty's uncle had that many, he didn't send Swatty one, and Swatty said maybe he would. We just kind of talked and let the mud dry on our feet and crack off onto the floor.

Well, in the floor in one place there was a hole and Bony showed us how he could look through it down into the dining room and see what his mother was putting on the table for dinner whenever she was putting anything on. The hole was about as big around as a stovepipe and it had a tin business in it to keep the floor from catching afire because that was where the stove pipe from the dining room stove came up through the floor to go into a drum to help heat Bony's room when it was winter. So we all looked down into Bony's stove-pipe hole to see if it was like he said. And it was.

Just then Bony's father came into the dining room. He had his hat on, but it wasn't time for dinner or anything, and he didn't come into the dining room as if he was coming for dinner. He came in fast and threw his hat on the floor and pounded on the table twice with his fist. The dishes jumped and a milk pitcher fell over on its side and spilled the milk.

"Mary! Mary!" he shouted.

So Bony's mother came in from the kitchen.

"Why, Henry!" she said: "What's the matter?"

"Matter? Matter?" he shouted. "I'll tell you what's the matter! I'll show you what's the matter! Look at this! Look at this, will you!"

Me and Swatty looked, but Bony kind of drew back from the hole and his mother didn't look. I guess she knew what it was without looking. It was a bill, all right. Me and Swatty could see that, but we didn't know what it was for—whether it was for a hat or a dress or what. So Bony's father threw the bill on the table, and stood with one foot on the edge of the table and the other fist opening and shutting. Bony's mother had been paring potatoes or something, I guess. She wiped her hands on her apron, but she didn't pick up the bill.

"Well?" she said.

"Of all the useless, idiotic, ill-timed, outrageous, unheard-of extravagance ever incurred by any brainless, gad-about, senseless, vain peacock of a woman—" Bony's father said.

"Henry! Stop right there!" Bony's mother said. "This time I will not listen to your abuse. Year after year I have put up with this browbeating. I go in rags, and if I so much as buy—"

"Rags!" Bony's father shouted. "Rags! You in rags? You dare taunt me with that when you crowd enough on your back to support a dozen families? Rags? When from year's end to year's end I do nothing but struggle to pay your eternal bills!"

Well, maybe I haven't got what Bony's father and mother said just the way they said it, but it was like that. So they had a good start and they went right on, and pretty soon Bony's father was walking up and down the room, talking loud and pounding the table every time he passed it, and Bony's mother was sitting with a corner of her apron in each hand and the hands pressed to her cheeks. Her eyes were big and scary. So, then Bony's father stopped in front of her and said a lot, and she didn't talk back. So that made him mad, and he took the tablecloth and jerked it, and all the dishes fell on the floor and broke.

Bony just went to the bed and lay on his face and squeezed his hands in to his ears. I guess he felt pretty mean. He was crying, but we didn't know that then. We found it out afterward.

So then, when all the dishes broke, Bony's mother sort of yelled and jumped up. Swatty said:

"Garsh! What's she going to do?"

But she didn't do anything like we thought she was going to. She bent down and picked up a dish that wasn't all smashed to pieces and put it on the table as easy as could be, and then she untied her apron and folded it up, and laid it over the back of a chair as

neat as a pin. She looked at herself in the mirror in the sideboard, and then walked around Bony's father and went toward the door into the hall.

"Where are you going?" Bony's father asked.

"Going?" she said, or something like that. "I'm going to see if I can't put

thing. Then I thought of something. I said:

"Say! if they get a divorce and Bony goes away we can't learn bicycle riding on his bicycle!"

We hadn't thought of that before and right away we forgot about whether Bony was feeling sick or not. We hadn't stopped to think that a divorce Bony's folks were getting would make a big difference like that to me and Swatty. It kind of brought us right into the divorce ourselves. Swatty looked frightened.

"Garsh! that's so!" he said. "We

"Well, what's that got to do with it?" Swatty asked.

"Well, couldn't we tell him about it and get him to stop the divorce? When Jim Carter wouldn't marry our cook my father told the Catholic priest and he made Jim Carter marry her as easy as pie."

"That's no good," Swatty said. "That was marrying. That's what priests and preachers are for—marrying folks together—they ain't for divorcing them apart again. If it was somebody I wanted to have married together, of course, I'd have thought

thought Swatty would have everything fixed so there wouldn't be any divorce when he came from the judge's room and it disappointed him. So Swatty said:

"Aw! shut up your bellerin'! We ain't going to let your folks get divorced are we? You make me sick, acting like we was. I guess me and George knows what we are going to do, don't we, George?"

So I says:

"Yes; what is it?"

Well, Swatty knew just what we were going to do; and so did I. After he told me. We were going to go to the judge where he was fishing and tell him not to divorce Bony's folks. And that was all right because Bony's mother was afraid of the water and wouldn't ride in a rowboat, and so even if she wanted to get divorced quick she couldn't be until the judge came back from fishing. So then I said:

"Aw! there ain't no fishing when the water is so high in the river!"

"Aw! who told you so much?" Swatty said. "You think you know all the kinds of fishing there is, don't you? Well, I guess you don't! I guess me and the judge knows more kinds of fishing than you do."

So we walked down to the river and Swatty told us. It was buffalo fishing you do with a pitchfork. I guess you know what kind of a fish a buffalo is. At first nobody ate buffalo fish, but pretty soon the fish market men got so they shipped buffalo fish to Chicago and everywhere just like they shipped catfish. But nobody in our town ate them, because they tasted of mud. Maybe the Chicago people liked to taste mud.

Well, anyway, the buffalo fish eat grass or roots or something and in the spring when the river is high and up over the bottoms the buffalo fish swim up to wherever the edge of the river has gone in the grass and weeds and sometimes they swim in so close that their backs stick out of water and they sort of swim on their bellies in the mud—dozens and hundreds of them, big fat fellows. So then the farmers can't plow yet, because it is too muggy in the fields and they get their farm wagons and some pitchforks and drive down to the river. Then they separate apart and wade out and come together again when they are out about waist deep and they wade in toward shore and the buffalo fish are between them and the shore. Then the farmers go with a rush and the buffalo fish get scared. Some of them get so scared they try to swim right up on shore on their bellies and some try to swim out into deep water, but, whatever they try to do, the farmers just pitchfork them up onto shore. Wagonloads of them! So, before the Chicago folks got to like buffalo fish the farmers chopped the buffalo fish into bits and plowed them into the ground to make things grow better, but now they mostly hauled them to town and sold them to the fish market men for one and one-half cents a pound. So that was where the judge was. He was over to a farmer's named Sheberd, in Illinois, because he had never pitchforked buffalo fish before and he wanted to do it once and see what it was like.

Me and Swatty and Bony knew where Sheberd's was because when you were over in Illinois you could get a drink of water there.

I guess it was almost a mile across the river and then it was almost five miles back to Sheberd's bottom land cornfield. We got a skiff at the boat-house and me and Swatty and Bony rowed across the river. The water was mighty high and the current was everywhere and not just in one place, and it was strong. Bony sat in the stern and me and Swatty rowed and we had to row almost straight up stream. It was hard work. My wrists swelled up and got hot and tight, but we kept thinking about the divorce we didn't want Bony's folk to get and we kept on rowing. Even with the boat pointed almost straight up stream we were about half a mile below where we started when we reached the Illinois side and rowed among the trees. It was easier there; not so much current.

It was fine rowing through the trees, seeing everything and nothing looking like it usually does. We came to the First Slough and it was just water—like a road of water between the trees—and we kept on rowing and came to the Second Slough and the Third Slough and they were like that, too, and then we came out of the trees and we were in a whole of a lot of water. Bony said "Oh!" and Swatty looked over his shoulder and said "Garsh!" and stopped rowing. It looked like miles and miles of water—water we had never seen before—and all at once you felt little and lost and sort of frightened.

"Garsh!" Swatty said. "I was never here before."

"Where is it?" I asked.

Swatty looked all around.

"I don't know," he said. "I never heard of a place like this."

"Swatty!" I said.

"What?"

"Let's go home!"

I guess I sort of whined it, and so Bony began to cry. Swatty stood up and let his oars rest and looked all around. He looked anxious and when Swatty looked anxious it was time to be frightened. Anyway, I thought so.

When Swatty had looked all around and didn't know any more than he did before he sat down and looked over the edge of the boat at the water. So I did it.

"What do you see, Swatty?" I asked, because I was afraid he saw something to be frightened of. But what he saw was little flecks of leaves and things floating by in the water the way dust floats in the sunlight, and the reason he looked was so he could see which way the current was running because no matter where we were we wanted to row upstream. We had gone into the woods below the bottom road and when the water was as high as it was now the bottom road either made a dam across the bottom or the water came over it like a waterfall or rushed through in a rapids nobody could row up. So Swatty knew we couldn't have passed the bottom road, but must be below it somewhere, and the place we wanted to be at was just where the bottom road hit the hill, so what we had to do—wherever we were then—was to row upstream. So we rowed. We



HE TOOK OFF HIS CLOTHES AND LOWERED HIMSELF OVER THE SIDE OF THE BOAT.

a stop to this sort of thing. I have had enough years of it. I'm going to see Mr. Rascoy."

Well, we knew who he was; he was a lawyer.

"Very well," said Bony's father, "go! I assure you you cannot get a divorce too quickly to suit me!"

I guess that when the loud noise stopped Bony thought the fight was over and listened again. Anyway he was listening now, and he heard what they said.

"I thought that," said Bony's mother. "This is not the first time by many, that I have thought it. You will be glad to be rid of me and I of you. My mother will be glad enough to have me with her. I shall, of course, take the boy."

"As you like!" said Bony's father. "The boy" was Bony, so he began to blubber worse than ever. He was pretty much ashamed and when his folks began to talk quiet-like, without shouting, me and Swatty began to be ashamed, too. We felt the way you feel when there's just been a baby at your house—as if we hadn't ought to be there. So Swatty picked up his hat.

"Come on!" he said. "Let's go. It ain't no fun up here in Bony's room."

"Wait!" Bony whispered, like he was scared to be left there alone, so we waited. He came along with us.

We tiptoed downstairs and outdoors, and I tell you it was good to get outside where there wasn't any divorce, but just good spring mud and things.

Well, we sat down on the grass under the tree and me and Swatty talked pretty loud and fighty because Bony wasn't saying anything at all and was looking so earnest it made us feel sort of ashamed.

But Bony didn't laugh. He didn't even smile. So Swatty took some mud and stuck it on his nose and pretended it was medicine or something, to make Bony laugh. But Bony didn't laugh. I guess he felt pretty bad. Maybe a kid always feels that way when his folks are going to get divorced. So then Swatty said:

"Hey, George! this is the way I'll ride on Bony's bicycle when he gets it!"

So he pretended he was on a bicycle and he pretended to fall off all sorts of ways and to run into a tree and every-

can't learn to ride on a bicycle that's in another town."

"Well, we've got to stop it!"

"Stop what?" I said.

"The divorce," he said, only he said, "divorce," because that was how he talked. "What is there to stop but the divorce, I'd like to know! That's the only thing to stop, ain't it?"

"Well, how are you going to stop it?"

"If Bony was to get the diptheria, and get it bad, that would stop it," he said.

I saw that was so. If Bony got the diptheria and got it bad they wouldn't let him travel on the train and so his mother couldn't go to his grandmother's, and that would stop it. So I said:

"Yes, and while he was sick we could use his bicycle all the time. How's he going to get diptheria?"

"Why, as easy as pie," Swatty said. "They've got it down at Markses. All he's got to do is to go down there and sneak in and stand around in Billy Markses bedroom until he gets it. Diptheria is one of the easiest things you can get. Anybody can get it!"

It looked like a mighty good plan to me. Me and Swatty went on talking about it and the more we talked the better it was. We talked about how long it would be after Bony got exposed to it before he would really have it, and Swatty said that wouldn't matter. All Bony would have to do would be to go right down to Markses and get exposed and then hurry home and tell his mother. The divorce would stop right away and wouldn't have to wait until he was sick in bed before it stopped. So then I said that, anyway, Bony's father would send for the bicycle right away because fathers always hurry up to get things when their boys are good and sick. It was all bully and fine and me and Swatty felt pretty good about it, but Bony spoke up.

"I ain't going to get diptheria!" he said.

Well, that's the way some fellows are! You go and work your brains all to pieces thinking up things to help them out of their troubles and then the say something like that. We saw it wasn't any use to coax him. If we wanted to stop the divorce we would have to do it another way. I said:

"I know the preacher that Bony's mother goes to the church of."

of a preacher right away. You don't think I'm so dumb as not to have thought of that, do you? But this ain't marrying them together; it's keeping them married together; it's keeping them from divorcing apart." Then, all at once he said: "Garsh!"

"What are you garshing about?" I asked him.

"Garsh!" he said again. "I guess I am dumb! I guess I ought to let a mule kick me! I ought to have thought of it right off!"

"Thought of what, Swatty?"

"Why, the judge! You, talking about preachers and priests and all them and not thinking of the judge! It's a judge that always divorces people apart, ain't it? Well, what we've got to do is see the judge and tell him not to divorce Bony's folks apart!"

"Come on! We'll go see the judge and tell him not to divorce Bony's folks apart!"

Well, I guess we didn't think when we started how we would do it. We just started.

When we got down to the court-house, where the judge stays, I didn't feel so much like doing it and Bony didn't feel like doing it at all.

"Aw, come on," Swatty said. "What are you afraid of?"

I wouldn't have talked out loud like that for anything. His voice came back in echoes: "Aw-waw-come-on-non-non!" Like that. Every word he said said itself over and over that way.

But Swatty, when we didn't come, went down the hall and when he found an open door he went right in. He asked for the judge. We looked into the hall and we saw Swatty come out of the door he had gone in at and we saw him go up the wide stairs and push open the green door at the head of the stairs and go in. After awhile he came out again and came down stairs and out on the porch.

"Did you see him?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I'd ought to have remembered that this was Saturday. Judges don't have court on Saturday; they go fishing."

So then Bony began to cry. He leaned against one of the big pillars and began to snigger like a little kid that's lost, and then he turned his face to the pillar and I guess he bawled to himself. I guess he had sort of