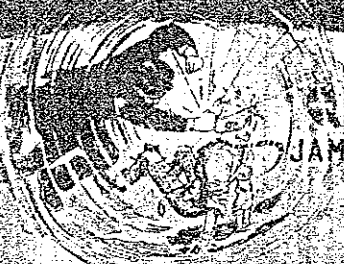


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BILL



By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD



I AM NOT a fighter. Nor am I a coward. If the blood of the old Spartans or savage Barons ever ran in the veins of my forefathers, it did not descend as an inheritance to me. In other words, I do not hunt for trouble, and I evade it when I can. But I do not run. I retreat in good order. When I was a kid, I licked several boys smaller than myself, and was in turn given several glorious wallpings by boys older than myself. But since the day I grew into good sense, I have whipped only one person—and no one has whipped me. The thought of being struck forcibly in the face by a hard fist or choked has always been inherently unpleasant to me. It seems to me that these few facts about myself are a necessary preface to the story of how I chance to be here, in a cell, with steel bars between me and the whitewashed walls outside.

I am twenty-eight, weigh a hundred and fifty pounds, and have always been quite a favorite with the young ladies. I ascribe my downfall to that fact. I might say, also, that this is a rough and rather boisterous city of thirty thousand people, where brawn is more in evidence than brain. I came here three months ago, to accept a position as reporter on a local paper. A month ago I met Grace Hammond. In that moment, when I first looked upon her pretty face, as she sat at her desk typewriting, began the tragedy which has ended in this—for me. I cannot hold myself entirely to blame. She was in another office, across the corridor, and we began by flirting through the open doors. Then I dared to go in. For several days we carried on the flirtation, and on the fourth day—and it was the night before Christmas—we met in a dark end of the corridor. There was a twinkle in her blue eyes. She tempted me—and I kissed her, not only once, but twice—three times. And then I felt the sting of her hand against my face. Her eyes blazed.

"Bill shall hear of this!" she panted, and her voice quivered until it was almost a sob. "I am going to marry him—and he will make you pay for this! He will be waiting for you to-morrow, outside the door, and if he doesn't kill you, I will!"

I was struck speechless. That night the enormity of my act grew on me. I found that I could reach

Miss Hammond by telephone, and I attempted to apologize. She cut me short and hung up the receiver. When I went to bed, I dreamed of Bill. When I awoke, I recalled the fact that a Bill was not like a Percy or a Montague or a Hrbace. That name—Bill—meant business. All the Bills I had ever known had been strappers, most of them with red faces. Now and then I had known a puny chap who might legitimately have gone by that name, but in every instance the weak-kneed inheritors of the name had been called Will—or William. I knew that I was pretty safe in my conjecture that Miss Hammond's Bill worked either in the stove foundry or at the shipyard, and that if he waited for me it would be in the morning. That morning I had an important assignment on hand, so I went in by the back way, half an hour earlier than usual.

From my desk I could see Miss Hammond. She looked at me across the corridor, and even at that distance I could see her blue eyes flash like diamonds and her lips curl with contempt. At last, when I had to go out on my beat, she rose quickly from her desk and intercepted me in the hall.

"You coward!" she hissed. "I didn't know you were as low as that! He waited for you—and you sneaked in the back way. But he'll get you—mark that! Bill will get you if it takes him a month!"

Again I tried to apologize, but she turned away with a taunting laugh. I went down to the lower floor and cautiously looked around before I slipped out. Then it occurred to me that Bill would not know me, unless Miss Hammond was with him to point me out. I returned to the office at eleven o'clock, and, instead of going out to luacheon, I used the telephone to order one of those twenty-five-cent basket lunches that are delivered. At one o'clock, when Miss Hammond returned, she looked in at me, and again there was the taunt on her lips and in her eyes. I didn't need to ask her a question. I knew that Bill had again been waiting. In the middle of the afternoon, a newsboy came up from the street and gave me a note. A cold chill crept up my back as I read it.

"Mr. Henry Shaw—Will you kindly spare a few moments to step down to the street. I am anxious to see you about an important matter.

"Bill Morgan."



As if "Bill" wasn't enough, his last name must be "Morgan"—and surely that piratical combination was sufficient to make any sane person use caution. Bear in mind that I was not afraid—as subsequent events will show. It was merely that the thought of being mussed up, as I surely would be, even though I came off victor, was extremely distasteful to me. Miss Hammond stood in the corridor, and when I looked up she beckoned to me frantically. I went out to her.

"I dare you to go down!" she cried. "I dare you—dare you—dare you!"

I tried to appear calm and dignified.

"If I went down, Miss Hammond," I said, "it is very probable that Bill would not be in a condition to take you to the theater this evening."

For one moment her face froze, and then, in the look of utter contempt and pity with which she regarded me, she told me more of what Bill really was than she could have written in a book.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You hurt my Bill! Why, you little, sniveling coward!"

I shivered at the sound of her laugh as she went back to her work, but I was fully determined now to keep out of Bill's way. The editor of a paper in a neighboring city, fifty miles away, had offered me a position, and it suddenly began to appear as a very bright prospect for me. I reiterate that I am not a coward, but I dislike trouble. The other city was a pleasanter one than the town in which I was then holding a position, and its people were not so crude. All in all, I wondered why I had ever hesitated about accepting the position over there. I made up my mind not to put off the opportunity any longer, and so I went to my editor and verbally resigned. As I never believe in delay, I offered my resignation as taking place then and there.

II.

If the train that night had not been thirty minutes late, the tragedy would never have occurred and it is probable that I would never have met Bill. I was in good time—half an hour early, in fact, for I always believe in being ahead of time. The train was already overdue when, with my suit case in my hand, I came face to face with Grace Hammond. She was eagerly searching for some one, and by her quick breath I knew that she had been almost running. The moment she caught sight of me, her face lighted up with exultation and triumph, and she caught me by the arm.

"We've been hunting for you!" she panted. "We learned you were leaving the city—running away—and we knew we'd catch you here!" She darted quickly to one side and raised her voice. "Bill! Bill! Here he is!"

I repeat that caution is my chief virtue, and I didn't wait for Bill. In a hurried but still not undignified glance over my shoulder, I saw Miss Hammond in the midst of a group of people, and she was excitedly pointing me out to some one near her. I hurried around the

depot, dove into an alley, and came out at the corner of the next block. But Bill had seen me and had run along the street to cut me off. We met, face to face. There was no chance for me to escape unless I actually ran, and I would die before I degenerated to that point. At first I did not know it was Bill who stopped me. The next moment I did, for he reached up like a flash, seized my nose between his thumb and forefinger, and gave it a sharp tweak.

"Take that, you cur, for insulting my fiancée, Miss Hammond!" he cried.

I stared at him—aghast. I dropped my suit case. My jaw fell. For Bill—the terrible Bill—weighed about eighty pounds and was not more than four and a half feet high.

I could have stood for that, but I also saw that he wore a watch on his wrist and a handkerchief tucked up his sleeve!

I repeat again that I boast of none of the savagery of my baron ancestors, but in that moment all the fury of their wild blood fell upon me, and I fell upon Bill. For five minutes I did unto Bill what David did unto Goliath and what Samson did unto the Philistines.

At the end of that five minutes Bill was something like a limp rag, and a policeman had me by the collar. Bill is now in the hospital. Miss Hammond has sworn that for a long time I have premeditated an assault upon Bill and that I jumped upon him without provocation. My editor has promised to get me out on bail this afternoon and offers me a two-dollar-a-week increase in salary if I'll go back to my old job. He says he likes to have men of nerve on the paper.