

# Hoodwinked

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**B**IG BILL" WAYLIE had fallen upon evil days. Once a celebrated and daring cracksman, known as one of the most skillful malefactors of his time, age, combined with ten enervating years spent in a black cell in the State penitentiary, had taken their toll of him. Not only had his hand lost its cunning, but his sharp wits, his nerve and confidence, too, had gone from him.

Big Bill had degenerated into a gray-haired, unkempt, shiftless, and slovenly bum. A Bowery lodging house was his home when he possessed the price of a bunk; otherwise he slept along the East River docks when the weather was warm, or in an alley, on a pavement heated by a First Avenue baker's oven, during cold spells.

He picked up a precarious livelihood, begging, resorting to petty thievery when opportunity was his; occasionally selling information regarding the handling and use of "soup," to some crook with aspirations toward safe-blowing. Whatever money he stole, begged, or earned, he promptly squandered in booze purchased in the numerous "blind tigers" of the underworld.

Big Bill lived among the dreams of his past. He never wearied of recounting his exploits to small groups of loafers who listened in respectful silence. It was at such moments that his bent frame straightened, his faded eyes kindled, and his shaking hands grew steady. These, also, were the intervals when he felt like a dethroned king, one who had known the heights before he had sunk into the mire of the depths.

On a cold November evening Big Bill shuffled aimlessly down the Bowery. A keen easterly wind off the river stung him with its chilly fingers, the disreputable old suit he wore affording scant protection. His worn cap was pulled low over his eyes, the collar of his coat was

turned up about his thin neck, and his hands were plunged deep into ragged, holeful pockets. It was a night that sent people hurrying to the kindly glow of stove or radiator, but Big Bill, warmed by his own inner glow, gave no heed to the elements. Some kind-hearted woman had handed him a quarter while he loafed about Cooper Square. He was making haste for the underground taproom of one "Whisky Jake" to spend it, as he always disposed of similar gifts.

At Canal Street he went west, turning into a retail clothing store. This establishment was the main entrance to the den of Whisky Jake, the illicit saloon keeper paying the clothing merchant's monthly rent in return for permission that allowed his clients to obtain entrance through the store.

In the shop Big Bill walked directly to the rear, opened a door, and stepped into a shallow vestibule backed off with another door. This, too, opened quickly. He descended a rusty flight of iron stairs, arriving in a damp, cold courtyard, the encompassing brick walls of which were broken only by small cellar openings no better than dark, miserable rabbit-warrens.

With a familiarity inspired by long association and frequent visits, Big Bill turned into one of these apertures and went down, a number of slippery steps, coming upon a stout door, which, when opened, admitted him into a spacious barroom, blue with the smoke fog made by countless pipes and odoriferous cigarettes. Although the hour was still early Whisky Jake's customers had assembled to warm themselves about a radiant coal stove, set back at some little distance from the long, wet bar. Opposite to this bar were a number of small tables and chairs, relics of a "back room" famous for its crimes.

To one of these tables Big Bill advanced, throwing himself into a chair, feeling in the

reeking air only a grateful, invigorating heat. A waiter with a flattened nose and twisted ear took his order, brought his drink, and left him to his meditations. Big Bill fished the stub of a cigar from a coat pocket, kindled it, and prepared to enjoy to the fullest the sybaritic comfort his twenty-five cents would purchase for him.

His glass at length empty, he glanced idly about, seeking a familiar face, but finding not one. At an adjoining table two evil-faced youths in caps and sweaters conversed together in guarded tones, over foaming schooners of flaccid beer. Their table was set in close to the wall where it jutted off at an angle, and this wall, Big Bill came to know, acted as a natural sounding board, throwing fragments of the conversation of the two to his ears as he discarded the well-smoked butt of the cigar and closed his eyes sleepily.

Presently there intruded upon Big Bill's ruminations fragments and scraps of conversation; then whole sentences as he found himself listening.

"I got it direct from 'Spug' Wales," the first youth said. "It's a cinch, I'm tellin' you! It's just like we breezed up to the front door and found it wide open."

The other interrupted him with a curt laugh.

"In the pig's eye! Spug Wales ain't handin' out stuff like this for any cheap dip to grab ahold of and use! This stuff is either phoney or he dished it out for a reason."

The first speaker laughed coldly.

"Yeah? But Spug was ginned—soused to the ears! When he run into me he thought I was 'Sam the Peddler,' and he was so full of talk it run outa him like water. Of course I didn't get the whole thing at one helpin'. It took time to pump it out, but I got all I wanted. How about it, do you wanna take the job of watchin' Spug while I do the trick, for a quarter of the rake-off, or shall I get some one else?"

The second youth consumed the balance of his beer and wiped the back of his hands across his lips.

"I'll stick if he's really pickled, but nix if he ain't. That guy's bad when he gets goin'."

"All you have to do is to keep an eye onto him and see he don't send no one up there."

Big Bill, listening attentively, head thrust forward on his chest, eyes still closed, sensed the

quick glance the first speaker shot about the room.

"Here's the dope," the first youth went on, his voice so low Big Bill had to strain his ears to catch what he said. "The maid at the house is to pick up the stuff and turn it over to the bird Spug sends up to cop it. She's to be ready any time after ten o'clock tonight, when she gets the signal on the basement doorbell. Now, here's what cinches it to me. The maid ain't wise to who Spug is sendin'. But she don't care. The arrangement is she's to pick up the sparklers, turn them over to Spug's man, and he's to hand her fifty per cent of his share. Get me?"

The other nodded.

"Sure. I watch Spug, you buzz the bell, and she kicks in with the stones! Er—where did you say the place was at?"

Big Bill still remained motionless, but he tingled with an, odd anticipation—an anticipation not unlike that which he had known in the old days when he soaped a safe door prior to touching off a charge of soup."

"The layout," explained the first speaker, "is uptown. The number is nine hundred and eighty West Eighty-fifth Street. There can't be no mistake, because Spug had it wrote down on a piece of paper and showed it to me twice."

The second youth muttered something unintelligible.

"It's nine o'clock now," the other continued. "The way I'm goin' up won't take over twenty minutes. If I leave at ten sharp I'll be in time. Now, listen; let me hand you the dope on what you're to do with Spug."

A burst of maudlin laughter silenced the words, but Big Bill had heard enough. Imitating perfectly a man awakening from light alcoholic slumbers, he rubbed his eyes, yawned prodigiously, and shambled to the door, through which he passed with never a backward glance.

Three minutes later he emerged into Canal Street and walked west toward the subway.

Overhead, in the cold, inaccessible vault of the heavens, frosty stars glittered, sweeping in brilliant squadrons; the air from the river had become colder; it stung Big Bill like a two-edged sword. But again he gave no heed to it. His mind was on fire with the immensity of what he had overheard; old and senile as he had become, he was still able to comprehend the ingenuity of the

scheme the conspirators spoke together of. The man, Spug Wales, was in league with a maid employed in an upper West Side residence. This maid was to steal something—jewels quite evidently, if the word “sparklers” was to be construed correctly—which was to be turned over to an agent of Wales, via the basement door.

Big Bill felt he understood perfectly. There was only one thing—he did not know the prearranged signal that was to summon the maid. As he plunged into a subway kiosk, thankful ten cents still remained to him from the gift of Cooper Square, he frowned at the thought of the signal, temporarily putting it from his mind.

He was aware that, if he was to supersede the two of the barroom, no time was to be wasted. A half hour at best was his headway, and he intended to make the most of it.

Purchasing a ticket, he scrambled aboard a lighted train that came thundering into the station. He took up a position on the platform as the cars twisted away through subterranean depths, his mind working with a rapidity it had not known since those days when, a prowler of the night, he had stolen forth on similar errands of evil.

As the train rushed through the blackness of its walled passage Big Bill gave himself up to rose-colored dreams, dreams of the future that would be his once he came into possession of his plunder. He would put the metropolis behind him. He would drift to the sunny south lands, where in the languor of lazy days he would pass the remaining years of his life, in undisturbed peace and plenty. Far from this Gargantuan, raucous-voiced city, with its freezing breath, he would settle back and—

The arrival of the train at the station where he must alight abruptly snapped the glittering thread of his ruminations. He left the car hurriedly, glanced at the subway clock, and was reassured when he saw it still lacked some ten minutes of ten o'clock.

Making his way to the street level, Big Bill stepped out upon upper Broadway. Here the avenue stretched quietly north and south, gloomy save for its tall arc lights at fixed intervals. The moon, sardonic and malformed, was hidden behind a thick cloud blanket. Even the chilly stars seemed to have lost their bright reflection.

Walking south a block, Big Bill turned into

Eighty-fifth Street, scanning the house numbers as he shuffled past them, hands again deep in his pockets. The side street was silent and deserted, puddled and maculated with the yellow shine of the street lamps.

He found nine hundred and eighty to be a four-storied brownstone dwelling on the southerly side of the block. Its pretentious Colonial doorway, its Marie Antoinette lace panels, in the darkened windows, bespoke wealth and affluence, and Big Bill drank in these visible signs with an eager glance.

Too wary to linger, and with fifteen minutes still to be disposed of, he continued on to Riverside Drive, blowing his breath into his blue hands and shrinking back from fresh onslaughts of the night wind. He had no watch, and, in lieu of it, he paced off the minutes, walking quickly, vigorously, to restore his circulation.

The time dragged slowly, so slowly that he made his way to the avenue again to consult a clock in a drug-store window. The hands pointed to five minutes past the hour. He retraced his steps to Eighty-fifth Street, dealing now with the problem of the unknown bell signal. Mentally he decided to ring it in some fantastical manner. If not opened by the maid herself, he could inform whosoever appeared that he wished to converse with that employee of the establishment who knew Mr. Wales. Whether or not this would cast suspicion on the maid, Big Bill cared little.

Reaching the areaway he turned into it, shooting a quick glance down the street, advancing to the latticed gate, peering for the bell in the impenetrable darkness. His fingers stole out to press the button, but as they did so he suddenly stiffened, turning his head to the street, finding a subtle menace in the low, whining purr of a motor, which, wheeling in from the Drive below, slackened speed sufficiently to allow a youth in cap and sweater to swing from tonneau to pavement.

With a muttered curse Big Bill drew swiftly back into the heart of the shadows, huddling against the brownstone walls, shielding the betraying white blur of his face in his coat.

The silken song of the motor died away in the distance. The one who had swung clear of it plunged down into the areaway, hurrying to the gate, flashing for an instant only the white eye of

an electric torch, that he might discover the whereabouts of the bell.

Big Bill cursed with silent vehemence. The momentary glimmer had revealed only too plainly the face of the first speaker at Whisky Jake's.

Laying a finger against the bell the newcomer rang it jerkily and waited. A long interval elapsed. Again he blared out the summons impatiently, and this time, after a minute or two, an inner door opened with extreme caution and a figure fluttered to the latticed gate.

"From Spug Wales," the youth in the sweater whispered sibilantly. "Hurry it up, sister! There's a bull on the avenue who looks ready to poke his nose this way at any moment!"

Out of the gloom came the soft sound of a girl's voice. "But—but that wasn't the signal!"

Big Bill heard a careless laugh.

"Wasn't it? Well, try and give it yourself with a pair of frozen mitts. But come on—less of the chatter! I got to get back to Spug before eleven if he's to make the fence of Philadelphia Mike's. Come through or don't—only hurry up about it."

The gate latch clicked softly, the sound of paper rustled.

"Give him this," the girl said, "and tell him to remember his promise."

Another interval elapsed. Then both gate and inner door shut soundlessly.

Big Bill fell hot anger stab him. Was he to stand idly aside while the youth made off with his ill-gotten gains? Big Bill thrilled with a rage that shook him like a leaf in a wind current. Since he had taken up his stand close to the walls, he had felt something preying under foot, something loose and heavy. Bending, his exploring fingers closed over the object. A surge of happiness shot

through him. He straightened up, holding in one hand a thick, narrow piece of the cement flooring, a formidable weapon. In a trice he sprang across the areaway, summoning all of his strength, hurled himself upon the youth in sweater and cap, and brought down the stone slab on the other's head with a swift and vicious stroke.

His victim fell without a sound, sinking limply to the ground, a paper package he had held falling from his opening fingers. Snatching this up, Big Bill gave vent to a savage chuckle of exultation, and hurried from the archway to the wind-swept Drive.

A song of triumph rose within him. The booty was irretrievably his by right of conquest; all the dreams he had dreamed could have their fulfillment; he had conquered just as he always had conquered in the dead days of the past!

Thirty minutes later, in a deserted section of the Drive, he stepped close to a friendly arc light and drew his prize from beneath his ragged coat. It rattled pleasantly as, with shaking fingers, fingers he made no attempt to steady, he ripped away its paper covering, revealing an ordinary candy box.

With trembling eagerness Big Bill removed the lid and peered in, to step back with an inarticulate cry of rage and dismay. The box contained a number of clothespins and a scrap of paper, on which had been hastily scribbled a few words:

SPUG, WALES: I couldn't get up the courage to make the swipe. I guess I ain't got nerve enough to be a crook.

SUSIE THE MAID.