

# THE FIVE-CENT GIRL

by

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## CHARACTERS

ANGUS, a barman.

CUSTOMER, a mysterious gentleman with a secret agenda.

SILE (pronounced 'Sheila'), an Irish immigrant, anywhere between 19 and 30.

THE TIME: 1896, spring.

THE PLACE: A corner pub in an Irish slum. This one is the Swampoodle section of Washington, D.C., once notorious for vice, crime, and ignorance ... now long gone.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED :

A run down bar in the Swampoodle section of Washington, D.C. 1896. Angus the barman is on his knees scrubbing the floor, as a well-dressed customer at the bar observes him. He has glass of whisky, his bowler hat beside him.

ANGUS

Not for me to ask about the private lives of my customers, sir. What they do when they leave here is their own business. But this mess---Lord help me. We was closed three days because of it. (beat) But in answer to your question---no. I don't think Bill danced with anyone that night. Though I can't be sure. But I know that captain did. Five cent girls--we got a few in here. Though some will dance just for a pint.

Offstage, Sile (pronounced Sheila) approaches, singing a melancholy drinking song ...

SILE

(off)

Now stick to the craythur, the best thing in nature....

ANGUS

And speak of the devil--

SILE

for sinking your sorrows and raising your joys---

She pauses. Sile has a bowl of apples in her arms, a canvas sack over her shoulder.

SILE (CONT'D)

Angus. Are you a sight for sore eyes!

ANGUS

You got yer nerve comin' in here. After all this--.

He moves to the bar, where he busies himself.

SILE

I can pay. (a beat) Buy an apple. Two fer a penny?

Angus snorts.

( CONTINUED )

CONTINUED: (2)

SILE (CONT'D)

It's an honest livin', I'm here to make, Angus.

ANGUS

That's a first.

He makes no move to pour her a dram.

SILE

(overdramatic)

And how am I to put me achin' heart to rest then? With my poor lad about to swing?

Customer eyes her intently.

ANGUS

If you'd left him alone--he might not be about to swing.

SILE

You think I don't know that? It's all I can think about this last week--I can hardly sleep for thinkin' of it. Oh, Angus, if you'd known what I suffered--

ANGUS

Seems to me, it's that police captain done most a the sufferin'.

SILE

He died so quick. Couldn't a hurt that bad.

ANGUS

Now what drives a man to do that, do you think? What would make a man so angry he'd pump three bullets into another man's skull?

SILE

Could be anything.

ANGUS

Could be. But usually it's one specific thing. Or have you not bothered even to ask?

SILE

How can I ask Bill anything-? They won't let me in to see him. (bitterly) Family only.

The customer taps a coin on the bar.

ANGUS

Another?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Customer indicates Sile.

ANGUS (CONT'D)

(sliding coin back)

We' ain't servin' her tonight. Or any other night.

Customer grabs hold of Angus.

CUSTOMER

(firmly)

She'll have a whisky.

ANGUS

(after a beat)

Fine, sure. It's your funeral.

He frees himself and pours a whisky.

ANGUS (CONT'D)

Piano player comes on at six, if you're int'rested. Five cents gets ye the Fox Trot. (confidentially) Don't ask me what a dime will get ye.

SILE

Go on with ye.

Angus moves away. The customer pushes the glass towards Sile.

SILE (CONT'D)

You're a true gentleman. Unlike some I could name. (lifting the glass) Cheers.

Customer lifts his glass but does not drink. A silence as Sile grows uncomfortable under his gaze.

SILE (CONT'D)

Now don't get the notion I'll do somethin' special for ye. Just because ya bought me a drink. (beat) Truth is, I've suffered a terrible loss. And I ain't in much mood for company.

A beat. He is still looking at her.

SILE (CONT'D)

He loved me, ye see. Though I din't deserve it---he loved me too much and now he's goin' to pay. (A beat) And I'll pay too. (turning to him,) Oh why did ye buy me a drink? Was it a dance ye were wanting? Not sure I can dance no more.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

Customer moves his hat off the bar. Sile takes that as an invitation.

SILE (CONT'D)

But I don't even know yer name.

CUSTOMER

My friends call me J.D.

SILE

J.D.? All right, then J.D. I'll tell ye what, I haven't had a drop in me since the tragic events--- you must know what I mean, it's been in all the papers. The police captain--

CUSTOMER

Shot by his own officer.

SILE

You know the story.

CUSTOMER

I know what happened. What I'd like to know is why.

SILE

Billy ain't sayin'.

CUSTOMER

You mean William.

A beat.

SILE

William, yes. They call him William sometimes----I suppose they called him William down to the precinct house. But he was always just Billy to me. And he was a sweet one, me Billy. Bought me things. Not just a drink now and then--it's only now and then I'd have one, mind ye. But he bought me this.

She pulls a red photograph album from the sack.

SILE (CONT'D)

It's filled with dreams. And last night--when I put it under me pillow--an angel come to me.

Angus snorts quietly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

SILE (CONT'D)

'Twas a dark angel with a dark message. I've laughed me very last, ye see. No more smiles for me. No more joys. Me youth is done. There's a man dead, and I did na pull the trigger, but it's me doin' all the same. 'Cause I killed him with a wish.

ANGUS

(unimpressed)

He really said that did he? Yer youth is done?

SILE

'Twas a lady angel. And yes that's what she said.

ANGUS

That's an odd one to deliver a message a doom, don't you think, Sile? Usually the message a doom comes from a big, burly angel with a sword, swingin' wide--or a blowin' a big loud horn. Repent, repent! Ye sinners!

SILE

She was quieter than that. Whispered to me. Time fer your penance, Sile. Take your penance. (a burst) Well I can't very well do a penance without a pint in me, can I?

ANGUS

Now it's a pint you're wantin'? Ye just had your drop.

SILE

Just because I ain't in widow's weeds--- don't make it any less a grief. To lose the man ye love!

ANGUS

Which was it then?

SILE

What?

ANGUS

The man ye loved. Was it the patrolman or the captain? You never did say.

SILE

Must you torment me so?

ANGUS

You're not the one in the lock-up, Sile. When mornin' comes you'll still be here. While that poor fool is down to tha courthouse for his sentencin'---and that police captain is still rottin' in his grave--

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

SILE

All I did was dance with him!

ANGUS

Aw, ye lyin' tramp---no man in the world shoots another just because of a dance!

Angus is in Sile's face by now---and the customer quietly pulls out a revolver and puts it on the bar.

ANGUS (CONT'D)

Jaysus!

CUSTOMER

I wouldn't speak to her like that.

Angus lets go of Sile and backs away.

ANGUS

You better be careful, flashing that about. Some policeman might see ye.

Customer produces a badge.

CUSTOMER

Sorry I forgot to introduce myself. J.D. Springer. Metropolitan Police.

ANGUS

I already spoke to the police.

CUSTOMER

I'm not here on police business. I'm here because Bill Collier is my friend.

ANGUS

Regards to officer Collier then. But I've nothin' to do with these events. She's the one---lured 'em both ... into an entanglement.

CUSTOMER

Then leave me to my business.

ANGUS

I will that. I want nothin' to do with any a this business.

Angus backs away. He grabs a broom and busies himself cleaning. Sgt. Sprinkle puts his revolver away. A beat.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (7)

SILE

You're the one. (she approaches him) You're the one Billy said was in the army. Fought the Indians. Captured Geronimo.

A beat.

CUSTOMER

Show me the book.

SILE

'Tis a private matter.

CUSTOMER

(intently)

If you cared for him at all. You'll show it to me. (a beat) I can help him.

Another beat. Sile slides the album down the bar. He opens the cover, discovers it is a photograph album.

SILE

Last summer. He'd bought me a little Brownie. But he took most of the pictures. Said I was to keep it all ... for the time when we could be together permanent.

Customer turns a page.

SILE (CONT'D)

This one's me favorite ... we took a drive out into the country for a picnic. Way out into Maryland ... where the fields were comin' in green--and gold. There was a farmer. Sold us some milk. And took the picture of us together. (beat) Oh we live in dreams, don't we? As if Billy and me could ever have been together permanent.

CUSTOMER

You knew about his wife?

SILE

(after a beat)

I knew. Billy never spoke of her ... but I knew.

CUSTOMER

(after a beat)

When did you see him last?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (8)

SILE

Saturday a week. But only for a moment---one awful moment. And I've not seen him since--nor been able to ask his forgiveness.

CUSTOMER

And Captain Matthews? How long were you going about with him?

SILE

I wasn't goin' with him. I only danced with him. And only because he paid.

CUSTOMER

Did you know who he was?

SILE

He never told me his name. But he come in regular. I can't turn down a regular customer.

CUSTOMER

What happened Saturday?

SILE

He come in wantin' his dance. And he danced so rudely too--grabbin' at me in ways I don't dare say. And don't usually tolerate, except--(almost whisper) he promised me extra. Well, I look over and there's Billy--at the bar, starin' at us. Ye have to understand---Billy never come in on Saturday nights. (ashamed) He'd never seen me dance! (a beat) I look back and there's that Captain grinnin' at him---like he'd been expectin' to see him. I told him: That's your last dance with me. And may the devil take ye to an early grave! I never dreamed it would be Billy put him there. (a burst) Oh, I'm the one should be goin' to the gallows, not Bill! (a beat) Will you see him at all? Before he swings?

CUSTOMER

I plan to.

SILE

Can you tell him for me. Because I swear---I loved no other but him---I swear it. On me very soul. I swear it.

CUSTOMER

He can have letters. Why don't you write to him?

SILE

Write to him! (beat) You think a girl like me had ever got to school?

A beat as customer regards her.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (9)

CUSTOMER

Can you make a mark?

She nods. He reaches into his pocket for a pen.  
He turns the photograph over, gives her the pen.

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

Make it here. I'll write your name below it.

She makes an X. He takes the pen back.

SILE

Sile. (as he writes) Can you make it say 'all me love, Sile?'

He writes exactly that, then closes the pen.

SILE (CONT'D)

That's so very kind.

CUSTOMER

I'm not doing this for you. This is for Bill.

He puts the photograph in his pocket, picks up  
his hat and takes the album.

SILE

No---you can na take that. It's all I have left of him.

CUSTOMER

Listen to me, my girl: An act of passion can get a man 20 years to life. A cold blooded murder means the gallows. And he's confessed to murder. (beat) Now, if you care for him as you say you do---then you will give this to me. And let me use it to make a case.

She releases the album to him. Customer starts to go.

SILE

Will ye tell him what I said?

Customer stops. He extends the album to her.

CUSTOMER

Take one. Take your favorite.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (10)

She opens the album and selects a photograph.  
She closes it. He take it, starts to leave again,

SILE

Thank you, officer.

CUSTOMER

If this works, it will mean a trial. And that will mean a scandal. You understand, don't you? That's why he isn't talking.

SILE

To save his poor wife from all that.

CUSTOMER

Or to save you.

He crosses off, leaving Sile with that notion for comfort. A beat. Angus returns to the bar and pours a drink for Sile.

ANGUS

You think he's really done the things they said? Captured Geronimo -- conquered the West--all those wild stories?

SILE

We're all full a stories, Angus.

She lifts the glass as she regards the picture in her hand.

SILE (CONT'D)

All we have are stories.

LIGHTS FADE. END PLAY