

The Fights

Written¹ by Benedict Pittman

Characters (in order of appearance):

Johnny Dwyer
Harry Hill
Hugh Reilly
William Dwyer
Bill Dwyer Sr.
Sergeant Booth
Bo Pickett
Steve Taylor
Jimmy Elliott
French-Canadian Announcer (*pre-recorded*)

The play calls for 4 actors.

Actor 1 – Johnny
Actor 2 – Bill/Hill
Actor 3 – William/Bo
Actor 4 – Reilly/Booth/Taylor/Elliott

Time : The Gilded Age (1867 – 1880)

Setting: The set is vaudevillian in style and reflects the Gilded Age in America. Sets include: 1) Harry Hill's dance hall, sporting club and emporium in Manhattan; 2) the Dwyer home in Brooklyn containing a daybed and table with chairs; 3) William's office in Brooklyn with a desk and a window; 4) the prizefight ring in Ontario with a training area and boxing square, including ropes and canvass flooring. Hill's saloon is used for this set piece, only changed slightly to imply Canada.

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Act I, Scene I

The room is dimly lit by a candelabra and oil lamps. The tables form a semi-circle that serves as the fighting square. There is a stage and curtain far upstage. Downstage and parallel to the stage is the bar. To the side is the gymnasium – with a heavy bag, speed bag, dumbbells, a skipping rope and a bench. To the opposite side of the gym is the bar/stage which continues offstage.

Vaudevillian piano music of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” plays as the audience, “the fancy”, enters the room. If there are rows of seating behind the tables, fill the tables first as the fancy are part of the show. The Mayflowers (either mechanical leg-kicking cut-outs or female dancers) enter and dance for the fancy. During the applause Harry Hill enters. He has a short neat beard, neat hair and a fine suit. He has a cigar and a cane. He clears his throat a few times to silence the fancy and taps his cane on the stage.

HILL: To all my patrons here tonight, both familiar faces and friends I’ve yet to meet... my devotion, my masters, my fancy, welcome to Harry Hill’s Dance Hall, Sporting Club and Emporium! My grand saloon is your playground. The wives can have their five-and-dime, the husbands need their place! What say you?

Hill encourages agreement and applause as Reilly stands from the fancy.

REILLY: *(Drunken yell)* Ask anyone Mr. Hill! I see Senator Tweed in the house and Mr. Rockefeller, all that money, they could have any woman in the city and they’re still tippin’ the Mayflowers!

HILL: What other dancing girls can kick their legs higher?

Hill and Reilly encourage applause.

Reilly, can you see Mr. George Law out there? *(Hill peers into the shadowy crowd)* He is an advocate of the prize square and so enjoyed your last um... exhibition fight.

REILLY: *(Looking around)* No Mr. Hill, only me and the fancy out here.

HILL: *(To the fancy)* I believe you all know Mr. Hugh Reilly. He’s an easy drunk *(stares through Reilly for a moment)* but also the newly crowned Brooklyn Ward Champion. A knockout in... what round was it?

REILLY: Forty-two rounds, and my hat did not falter!

Reilly bullies the audience into applause.

HILL: *(Sternly to Reilly)* Reilly.

Reilly sits.

Superb balance on that pugilist, and he trains right here in our modern gymnasium facilities. Perhaps someday one of you could master the manly art, for a mere eight dollars a month, and become a fighting champion.

REILLY: I paid nine!

HILL: You eat more than most!

Reilly is silenced.

Even nine dollars is a small price for a good dose of physic. (*Stutters slightly*) Not for a prize, not here, there're no illegal prizefights on my premises! Those fights can stay where they are, like the west trail leading out of Jersey City towards the old Anderson farm about three miles north of the train depot tomorrow at noon, not too far. Even an early riser could make such an appointment.

The music begins again softly, underscoring Hill.

And for those of you looking for early Christmas presents, take a tour of my unforgettable Emporium. See my new shipment of items for sale and trade – rarities from the opening west, aphrodisiacs and elixirs from the shamans themselves. On my old wooden shelves lie the tribal remedies of the Sioux perhaps sent back by General Custer himself.

Hill seems awed by his own words.

Spend, own, enjoy. Any freeloaders will have to fight Reilly for five rounds.

Reilly stands.

REILLY: Sociable!

Everyone drinks as the Mayflowers return to the stage. Harry moves into the fancy and greets his patrons. After another short musical routine Harry is approached by a young man from the fancy. He is in his early to mid-twenties, clean shaven and bright-eyed. He removes his hat when addressing Hill.

JOHNNY: (*Very polite*) Pardon me Mr. Hill?

HILL: Yes son? Hurry now, what is it?

JOHNNY: (*Reaching into his pocket and handing Hill eight dollars*) Here's my eight dollars sir. I won't need to eat here, if that's fine with you, but I'll pay the nine if you like Mr. Hill.

Hill is confused for a moment.

I'd like to train in the gym sir.

HILL: Of course you would. (*Takes the money and stuffs it in his pocketbook*) Eight's fine but if you bite my bread or my Mayflowers...

JOHNNY: Wouldn't think of it sir!

HILL: You'd better learn to hold your booze if you haven't already.

JOHNNY: Yes sir.

HILL: Be sensible, have a wit in the bottle, and in the square. The ladies love a healthy young man; good for the social standing.

JOHNNY: It's the prizefighting I want sir.

HILL: (*Looking over his shoulder*) Boy there's no prizefighting here!

JOHNNY: No sir.

Beat.

HILL: So you want to be a pugilist?

JOHNNY: Yes sir, more'n anything.

HILL: You're too small.

JOHNNY: I'm tough and fast sir.

HILL: You won't last twenty rounds son. Go find some work in the steelyards.

JOHNNY: I got another job at the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

Hill changes his manner at the mention of the newspaper. Johnny is about to speak again but Hill interrupts him.

HILL: You work at a newspaper?

JOHNNY: Yes sir, well that is when they decide to pay me. I find stories for the gossip column mostly.

Hill rubs his throat and considers Johnny.

Divorces, robberies, but I review prizefights from time to time.

HILL: (*Beat*) My throat is worn out. What was your name?

JOHNNY: Johnny Dwyer sir.

HILL: Every night up on that stage... I should get one of Mr. Edison's bullhorns. (*Hill feels his sore throat again*) I'll waive your gym fees Johnny.

JOHNNY: Pardon me sir?

HILL: If you help me and my joint with your connections at the newspaper.

JOHNNY: I don't see why not. What did you –

HILL: A good trade, that's what we'll have! (*Hill places an arm around Johnny*) You'll announce the fights in the paper.

JOHNNY: – but won't the coppers read it?

HILL: Smart lad, but you know the fights, there's always a leak. Some stool pigeon tells the police the location and they're waiting with guns loaded. The whole lot get arrested and everything's gone to shit.

JOHNNY: Advertise the fights?

HILL: Give enough notice and the fancy will be a thousand strong. How will the coppers arrest the prizefighters if they can't reach them? The mob will keep them in the cheap seats.

JOHNNY: They'll be stuck so far back...

HILL: And my voice is almost gone.

JOHNNY: Bloody foolish it is. Prizefighting ain't a crime.

HILL: But it is and some of my patrons cannot be linked with it. The bloody gossip column reports on my wealthiest customers. Every sip of Senator Tweed's bourbon is documented. Do you think you could keep his name out of print?

JOHNNY: Yes sir.

HILL: The city does not need to know every detail.

JOHNNY: Yes sir.

HILL: So the fight tomorrow...

JOHNNY: Yes sir, outside Jersey City, I think I know the place.

HILL: Good. Well, this is the gym. *(He shows Johnny quickly the gym's items.)*

JOHNNY: Hot dog!

HILL: Have at it.

Hill is about to leave.

JOHNNY: Mr. Hill?

Hill turns back. Johnny slugs away at the heavy bag. Powerful and fast but Hill is not interested.

Perhaps after some proper trainin' I could get a prizefight.

HILL: Train for health Johnny, you're a pressman not a pugilist.

Hill exits to the gambling lounge as Johnny takes off his jacket and starts training. On his first hard punch to the heavy bag lights snap out on the saloon.

End of scene.